

the Utrecht manifesto

This is the testament of Utrecht Manifest, the legacy of five biennials for social design.

The concepts of Modernism were a source of inspiration for Utrecht Manifest and guided the programming for the five biennials. This source has become discredited in the past decades. If humankind and society were a central concern for early Modernism, today the focus has narrowed to consumption and economic gain. As a consequence, designers are expected to first and foremost raise the commercial value of products and services. But products are futile and senseless if they only answer to the laws of the market and ignore the social environments in which they acquire meaning.

We hold that this must and can change. Based on the views and experiences of our guests from around the world – designers and experts in a vast range of disciplines who contributed to a long series of lectures, debates, practical experiments, design proposals, essays and exhibitions – we are convinced that designers have gained a new

role and a greater social responsibility. Design's entitlement is grounded in its contribution to the creation of 'the good society.' A society that ensures that everyone has access to the goods and services needed for a decent existence. 'The good society' is a dream of a world that is fair and just, a utopian concept, which provides direction and enables us to join forces.

By virtue of their powers of imagination and expertise, designers are well placed for expressing this dream of 'the good society' in an appealing way and to help translate it into practice.

From this vantage point we have articulated ten theses, which can serve as an action frame for a design practice grounded in collaboration with society.

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The ten theses of the Utrecht manifesto are based on the themes and programs of the five biennials for Social Design between 2005 and 2015, and on quotes by authors and interviewees in the book "Design for the Good Society," which was published in April 2015 as the intellectual legacy of Utrecht Manifest.

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engage with society

The designer is not the only one who determines what a design means to its users. Users are partners with whom the designer collaborates in developing a good product or successful service. Designers who venture beyond the constraints of technological and economic conditions for production can empower users and give a tremendous boost to social innovation.

1

design socially

Each design contributes to social interactions between users, to how people deal with each other. Analyzing these interactions, and the often invisible social structures in which they are embedded, is an underestimated but crucial task of designers and a precondition for shaping the quality of the social environment.

2

act sustainably

Each designer faces the choice of contributing to – or frustrating – our capacity to manage our natural resources and human potential in a sustainable way. Designing socially contributes to a sustainable use of available resources and a strengthening of human resilience toward the inevitable changes in nature and society.

3

connect ethics and aesthetics

In their use, products provoke specific behaviors that mirror the ethics of designer and user. The product's morals are expressed in its form. The beauty of a product reinforces the bond with its user and thus its inherent ethics. Designers who disregard this are operating in an immoral manner.

4

aim for commit- ment

A design that through its usage elicits loving commitment and identification, extends the product's life span and thus contributes to the development of 'the good society.'

5

be critical

Design exerts its influence on an ever-expanding field of human activities and human relations, among citizens and between citizens and institutions. Therefore, designers increasingly share the responsibility for facilitating an open and just society. In this context, the designer's own critical stance is essential.

6

be trans- parent

A product that masks the conditions, technical processes and choice of materials that conditioned its making, is deceitful. Transparency is required: the designer not only showcases the product's success, but also expresses what can be bettered. A design that is open to criticism, and actively addresses that criticism, is a social design.

7

be supportive and modest

Thousands of initiatives worldwide are intent on bettering people's living conditions, from providing the most basic of amenities to facilitating sophisticated structures for the democratic control of power. In this, the designer is a vital partner. Modestly serving such processes, rather than world-renowned authorship, is one of the greatest goals a designer can aspire to.

8

be persistently radical

Designers are well equipped to radically re-imagine the contours of society. Designers can devote their powers of imagination and expertise to stimulate the discourse and practice of 'the good society.' A socially engaged designer staunchly investigates reality and persistently improves the solutions found.

9

take responsi- bility together

The international network of design professionals, and particularly the network of design schools, can serve as a catalyst for new visions on the social role of design. Few settings are better suited to proposing projects that experimentally outline 'the good society.' Such experiments can be produced in collaboration with others and further developed outside academia.

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