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Neocolonialism in Design for Development

... until designers step back and re-examine the profession's language in terms of its neo-colonialist memes, they can talk all they want about saving the world and never get it right. (Stairs 2013)

Introduction

Provoked by an article written in early April 2013 titled 'It's the language dummy', this paper reflects on the above closing comment of the article by the founder of Designers Without Borders, David Stairs. Presented here are the initial stages of an investigation to identify instances of 'design biz-speak' as Stairs refers to it, with the aim of uncovering what it is about the language of the design profession that means designers may 'never get it right'. The paper will ask: is Stairs correct in his premise? Does the language discussed here have the potential to return 'us to the same sort of exploitative mindset, previously known as colonialism, that it took over a century to escape' (Stairs, 2013)? The first section of the paper will put Design for Development into context, drawing on existing written histories and United Nations commissions. Using discourse analysis as a research method, the second section will critically reflect on how revealing the vocabulary and rhetoric of Design for Development is attempting to identify differences in the language used by commercial and non-commercial practices.

An increasing number of writers and commentators on design question if design practised for 'the other' is a new form of imperialism, and whether humanitarian design in particular is being perceived by hosting countries as a form of neo-colonialism. This paper will attempt to illustrate a narrative running alongside design practice, questioning the role designers might play in the development agenda. David Stairs' article (see appendix A) suggests that if we look more critically at the language of the design profession, we may see something a little deeper. This paper will examine to what extent a certain type of language precedes a practice.

Development and design

This first section will outline the evolution of Design for Development as a mode of design practice, positioning it in the context of its relatively recent history, and setting it against the complex and longer history of the wider development agenda. It will also discuss alternative trajectories the design practice might have taken – and possibly could still take – informed by the views of those placing a critical lens on the practice as it stands today. The chapter will delve a little deeper into the numerous forms Design for Development takes and the varied terminology used across the field.

In the experience of the author, Design for Development as a term is less often used to describe a specific design discipline than it is to describe the concept of designers acting explicitly on international development agendas, namely towards the alleviation of poverty and its direct effects. This definition is how the term will be used within this paper. With an increasing amount of different terms appearing over the last decade to refer to slight variations on a theme, Design for Development will be used consistently in an attempt to reduce any misunderstanding. The paper is explicitly referring to design practised with the aim of tackling issues related to poverty, internationally, in nations still referred to in the 2013 *Human Development Report* by the United Nations as 'developing'.

With disciplines such as Social Impact Design, Socially Responsible Design and Design for Social Change – and with newly emerging fields such as Human Computer Interaction for Development (HCI4D), amongst other subsets – we can see that the vast field of what was once referred to wholesale as Design for Development is evolving and diversifying. Following the 2012 Design and Social Impact Summit at the Rockefeller Center in New York, Public Interest Design, an online blog and resource, published a glossary of thirty-two different

terms used to refer to Social Impact Design (Cary 2013), which the conference proceedings uses as an umbrella term (see Lasky, 2013). With so many different variations in the ether, it can be difficult to know whether there is a hierarchy or an overlapping of disciplines, or if in fact they are all the same thing. On the surface, they appear to share a common language, as Public Interest Design would concur; they all occupy a similar space in the world of design and sustainable development.

What does the term ‘development’ mean?

The basic purpose of development is to enlarge people’s choices. In principle, these choices can be infinite and can change over time. People often value achievements that do not show up at all, or not immediately, in income or growth figures: greater access to knowledge, better nutrition and health services, more secure livelihoods, security against crime and physical violence, satisfying leisure hours, political and cultural freedoms and sense of participation in community activities. The objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. (ul Haq 2013)

The critique this paper is investigating is directed towards the language used in the sector rather than its overarching aims and objectives. Krista Donaldson, CEO of Stanford University’s D-Rev, ponders the phrase Design for Development, asking whether ‘design *and* development’ or even ‘development *by* design’ would be more appropriate phrasing, given the amount of projects that could be described as design *for* developing countries as opposed to design *in* developing countries’ (Donaldson 2008). In an article written for *Ambidextrous*, Stanford University’s journal of design, Donaldson muses over the finitudes of the language of development, questioning the use of the word ‘developing’ when referring to the lives of real people. She asks: ‘What makes a society developed?’ and questions whose definition of developed we are working to. “‘Developing country’ seems like a summation of two misnomers considering that the borders of most post-colonial countries are European map carvings with minimal thought to the local people.’ It is interesting to see a professional, who has worked prolifically in development, questioning something as seemingly trivial as the difference between working *for* or working *with*. This, however, is not a new debate; it is a longstanding discussion

that we can trace as far back as Victor Papanek in 1972, which will be discussed later.

§Donaldson is not alone in raising the question of colonial overtones in the language of Design for Development. The impetus for this paper is fuelled by a well-documented and ongoing debate regarding the motivations of global, commercial design firms and how their tacit assumptions and unarticulated motivations may be revealed through the power dynamics in the language they use. Any activity associated with development agendas, broadly defined by Copper and Packard as the ‘processes of social change ... to transform national economies’, is bound to be contentious, for it ‘carries such enormous and variable analytical weight’ (Copper and Packard 1997: 155).

To frame Design for Development as a discipline within a meaningful context, research was conducted for this paper into its recent history. The origins can be traced back to various points ranging over fifty years depending on whose perspective and which definitions you are using. The inexactness of the origin is unsurprising given the various different monikers and therefore connotations of Design for Development we see today. Research suggests it has a formal, documented history of forty years dating back to 1973, when the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) met to discuss the possible role industrial design could play in developing countries. The design at this time was seen as ‘a tool for fostering development by designing products that could be manufactured locally’ (Bonsiepe, 1991: 260). This interest in the role of industrial design in development agendas became more concrete with the United Nations 1979 Ahmedabad Declaration on Industrial Design for Development, a document that Victor Margolin describes as urging ‘governments to create opportunities for design’ (Bonsiepe 1991: 260).

In a paper written in 2007 titled ‘Design for development: Towards a history’, Victor Margolin discusses how significantly the development agenda has moved on from the days where it was synonymous with the outdated post Second World War term ‘third world’. There are two UN sponsored reports cited as being particularly instrumental in shaping the development agenda, the first being *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Commission of 1987. In this report we see the introduction of the term ‘sustainable development’ and a move away ‘from the construction of large-scale industrial projects to ameliorating poverty’ (Margolin, 2007: 112). The second being *Our Creative*

Diversity, a World Commission on Culture and Development report published in 1995, where we saw additional ‘emphasis [placed] on the social and cultural factors of development’. Both of these are pivotal as they mark the steady progression towards more human centred language. In 2013, we saw even greater strides towards human-centred language with a UN Human Development report entitled *The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World*.

In briefly charting the history through official UN reports, conferences and charters, Victor Margolin (1998: 88) forms a solid commentary on how a ‘culture of sustainability’ is being formed. The most crucial observation made from reading several of Margolin’s papers is a comment regarding changes in behaviour following on from changes in attitude. Although he is referring to changes in the attitude of society having an effect on the codification of these official reports, parallels can be drawn between this and what is understood as being David Stairs’ call for a change in attitudes on the ground, with the hope of changes in behaviour and practice to follow.

A common starting point when talking about Design for Development is the highly influential work of Victor Papanek from the early 1970s, namely, his seminal text *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (2000 [1972]). However, Margolin suggests the work of Papanek may actually have acted to limit the scope and impact of Design for Development to the model we see many not-for-profits using today, that of single product interventions, and less systems-based thinking. Margolin suggests Papanek’s work was only one of several possible trajectories for the practice at the time, he goes on to propose those working in Design for Development today readdress the work of Gui Bonsiepe and R. Buckminster Fuller, in order to aid moving the agenda forward in a way that more appropriately addresses the real world issues faced by those in less developed nations. Bonsiepe calls for a broadening of the brief Design for Development is working to, to one more closely aligned with the original intent behind the 1979 Ahmedabad Declaration: an intent that involves design and designers working on a more strategic, planning level, not solely restricted to the creation of physical products. This higher and more instrumental level of involvement in the development process envisaged by Bonsiepe, is illustrated in a five-stage model showing ‘opportunities for design intervention in different sectors of the economy’ (Bonsiepe, 1991: 255).

Papanek proposes four tiers of engagement for designers ‘working for the needs of under-developed and emergent countries’ – to use Papanek’s original wording. These tiers can be summarised as being: (1) design for people from afar, whilst not in situ; (2) design for people whilst in situ; (3) train designers whilst in situ; and (4) train designers to train more designers whilst in situ, with the fourth tier described as being the most desirable (Papanek, 2000[1972]: 84). In his paper ‘Altruism as design methodology’, we see Stairs questioning the distance Margolin was willing to go in defining the ways in which designers could change the rhetoric into something concrete that would be useful to altruistic designers on the ground. It could be argued by those working in Social Impact consultancies in a domestic setting that that is in fact what Papanek did: provide a set of loose but guiding principles that have informed the way they work.

This chapter has briefly outlined some pivotal stages in the complex history of Design for Development, suggesting conversations that have taken place regarding the appropriate and potential role designers can play in development. The question of where designers fit in the wider picture is as old as the development agenda itself. We have seen substantial shifts in the language used in official reports, most notably by the United Nations and connected organisations and groups, a shift that has taken a steady and consistent route towards more human and culture centred language.

‘It’s the language dummy’

This section will ask the question: if language betrays our worldview, what is the language of Design for Development revealing? Examples will be presented to illustrate the type of language identified by David Stairs, and go on to introduce parallels between this discussion and what Edward Said calls ‘Orientalism’. The chapter will close by outlining the progressive and transferable conversations being held amongst the Human Computer Interface for Development community, regarding post-colonial frameworks for design. It will attempt to answer the question: do the imperialist overtones identified belong exclusively to C.K. Prahalad’s *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* (2006) model of Design for Development? If so, how does the language of the non-profit sector differ?

To rewind the story back to July 2010, Bruce Nussbaum sparked a controversial debate when he asked if his perceptions were correct; were the good-willed intentions of humanitarian designers being

perceived negatively ‘through post-colonial eyes as colonialism?’ (Nussbaum, 2010). In his paper titled ‘Is humanitarian design the new imperialism?’ posted on the Fast Company design blog (2010), Nussbaum asks if ‘our desire to help does more harm than good’ – a question that directly echoes an address Ivan Illich gave almost four decades earlier at the Conference on Inter-American Student Projects, where he questioned the unconscious hypocrisy of young would-be volunteers (Illich, 1968). Although the audience was not made up of design professionals and Illich did not refer directly to designers when listing those ‘who define their roles as service’, the speech has long been referred to by those critical of the very nature of Design for Development, a practice inextricably linked to the international aid agenda.

Illich’s famous speech ‘To hell with good intentions’ is as controversial today as it was in 1968. It is a critique of the dangers of paternalism inherent in international voluntary service, particularly by ‘vacationing do-gooders’ who it is said do more harm than good by dropping in on countries they know very little about, for a limited time, and with limited if any sustainable, positive impact on the lives of the people the programmes claim to be helping.

Stairs is calling for a change in the language used by designers when promoting their projects and talking with other designers about the work they do. From research conducted for this paper, an hypothesis was formulated: the language David Stairs is taking issue with is that of the commercial, market-driven model of Design for Development as opposed to what might be referred to as the non-profit sector model, although his closing line appears to be a call to the design profession as a whole.

Stairs’ article, ‘It’s the language dummy’, has focused the initial wider Nussbaum debate to language, citing specific examples he considers to have imperialist overtones, and refers directly to those using it. Although one could argue the controversy surrounding Design for Development has always been entwined with language, inseparable from it in the same way that culture is (Bardzell and Merritt, 2011), we see critical discussions often revolve around what designers call their practice, and whether or not it implies the use of the human-centred, participatory methods many in the industry have come to expect.

What designers call their practice is often under scrutiny, and the ‘design *for* versus design *with*’ discussion is an important and pivotal one, the origins of which are often credited to Victor Papanek’s four-

tier model discussed earlier. However, it is refreshing to see Stairs pick apart public design discourse the way he does, rather than focusing on discipline titles as others have done before and this paper has done to this point. Whether it is Donaldson questioning if ‘development *and* design’ would be more appropriate phrasing, or Maria Popova in her article reacting to Nussbaum, questioning the anthropocentric nature of the term Humanitarian Design, suggesting it ‘fails to recognize ... the complex ecosystem of humanity and nature, society and environment, which are always symbiotically linked to one another’s well-being’ (Popova, 2010).

This kind of discussion is healthy and vital if designers are to shift design culture to one of ‘sustainment’ (Fry, 2011: 4); performing a role outside and above that of consumer culture as Margolin advocates (Margolin, 1998: 83–92). Even the predominant term ‘sustainable development’ itself, the *raison d’être* for many a professional practice, has been etymologically dissected by Tony Fry who talks of a move towards the ‘creation of sustainment’ instead. Arguing that Sustainable Development is a ‘have your cake and eat it strategy’, a strategy he insists is ‘a debilitating contradiction that ... tries, but fails, to conceal’ an awareness of our man-made environmental impact on one hand, whilst the other holds a commitment ‘to global economic expansion’ (Fry, 2011: 4).

The international design and innovation consultancy IDEO, bears the brunt of the aforementioned Stairs blog post. To better understand the location of the ‘land of hegemonic language’ (Stairs 2013) that he refers to, and what exactly is a ‘neo-colonialist meme’, the first port of call was the *Dictionary for Human Geography* (Gregory et al. 2009), for some context and definitions. The dictionary uses an Osterhammel (1997) definition to describe colonialism as ‘an enduring relationship of domination’ whereby the colonisers, in this context the non-native designers, ‘are convinced of their own superiority, pursue their own interests, and exercise power through a mixture of coercion, persuasion, conflict and collaboration’ (p. 94). Gregory et al. go on to comment on a feature of colonialism being a tendency of the West ‘to monopolise and dictate understanding of what counts as right, normal and true’. With these definitions in mind, this becomes more insightful when we look at the definition of hegemony as being a process of developing ‘the capacity to exercise control by means other than coercive force’ and as being the ‘dissemination of the values and cultural practices of the elite’ (Gregory, Derek et al, 2009: 327).

The Tim Brown address to the 2012 Clinton Global Initiative (2012) that David Stairs refers to directly uses overt 'design-biz speak' as Stairs calls it; there is not a great deal of reading between the lines required to see the point he is making. When Linda Tischler reported on the conference, the title '5 reasons global firms should serve the developing world' was used – again, no great need to decipher the meaning. The premise of the address is: 'What's in it for us?' (Tischler 2012); when viewed through the strategic business lens of C.K. Prahalad, co-author of *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* (2002), what Brown is presenting seems like a straightforward business transaction, albeit a controversial one. In the address, Brown refers to developing countries as 'a lab for first world innovations' and the process as 'learning from the edge', at this point one could say it becomes a little uncomfortable. If we move into a deeper analysis and view the language used through the lens of Orientalism, this is particularly the case with Brown's seemingly flippant comment about applying a new banking model IDEO have generated in Jordan, an Arab country in the Middle-East, to markets in China, on the basis that their cultures 'revolve around a family-centered financial system' (Tischler, 2012).

Irani et al. describe this tendency to assume 'individuals have a single cultural background' as problematic to say the least (2010: 1311–20). Although they are writing with reference to Human Computer Interface for Development (HCI4D) in the face of contemporary patterns of globalisation, this observation rings true of how we have become accustomed to referring to 'the other' when we talk about development, a habit Irani et al. assert actually tells us more about ourselves than 'the other'. It is certainly not uncommon to see phrases like 'the poor' when reading about design for development projects. John Thackara responds to a Fast Company article posted in the blogosphere firestorm of 2011 – 'Do designers actually exploit the poor while trying to do good?', by commenting on exactly that; with the simple addition of the word 'the' we turn individuals into a 'dehumanised marketing category' (Thackara, 2012).

It becomes ever more interesting, when you take the observation Stairs makes, that terms like 'thought leaders', 'change makers' and even 'design interventions' and 'social development projects' have clear neo-colonial overtones, and realise that they are essentially used industry wide. Terms so synonymous with Design for Development, in fact, that one could argue they have become invisible.

One need only navigate to the homepage of Acumen Fund (2013) to read of how their next generation of redefined leaders are changing the way the world tackles poverty. If we turn this level of analysis on the most prominent actors, who receive high levels of praise and criticism in equal measure, IDEO, and their non-profit organisation IDEO.org, the results are surprising. Even more so when analysed in light of Edward Said's work on a concept he refers to as Orientalism. This concept, with its history in imperial context, is relevant to the analysis of Design for Development discourse on many levels, as what Said presents as Orientalism is multi-faceted and highly transferable to this agenda.

If we take, without discrimination, the introductory paragraph from the IDEO.org website for example (see Figure 1), we can highlight the language Said refers to as features of Orientalism, revealing some of the colonial overtones David Stairs and Bruce Nussbaum have brought to our attention (shown in bold):

Join IDEO.org in **our mission to bring** human-centred design **to the people who need it most** — those **facing poverty** every day. We're teaming up with nonprofits, social enterprises and foundations to **create solutions** to the world's **most dire poverty-related challenges**. **Imagine** a world without poverty. Now let's create it.

Through Human-Centred Design projects, **we're bringing stability, hope, and dignity** to communities around the world that are **wrestling with poverty**. Along the way, **we're sharing what we learn and accomplish** with everyone—so we're all learning together. And through the IDEO.org Fellowship Program, **we're fostering** a community of future **leaders with expertise in design thinking**, then letting them loose on the world. (IDEO.org, 2013)

The text shows clearly who the dominant power is – IDEO.org – as one might expect, given they are the innovation consultants. However, it also implies they are the party who are able to arrive at the less than ideal situation, with the skills and expertise to analyse and record information regarding the lives of the people in question, who, the passage infers are unstable, hopeless, undignified and in need of leadership. Implying there is no existing capacity for human-centred enterprise in the areas they are planning on working.

This is what Irani et al. refer to as ‘colonial tropes’, whereby certain groups are categorised as ‘in need of civilisation and development’ (Irani et al. 2010: 1312).



Figure 1 IDEO.org website introductory page. Image source: <https://www.ideo.org/about>

The use of the word ‘fostering’ is also interesting as this has all the paternalistic connotations that critics of development as far back as Ivan Illich refer to. Everything this passage proposes will happen in the future, will happen in one direction, that of the previous colonial power. Including the sentence regarding sharing: are they implying they will share in a mutual knowledge exchange, or that they will share in the knowledge they have acquired?

In a documentary on Orientalism, Edward Said explains a feature of the way we acquire knowledge as highly motivated and not at all innocent, it is objective and the end result of a process (Said, 2007). Said also discusses the dominant power relationship at play when one party, assuming the role of the expert, is able to acquire knowledge about the other party. Having a body of information that is not mutually held puts the dominant party in a powerful position of assumed superiority. If we continue and analyse the website of a Frog Design sponsored programme called ‘Design for the disadvantaged’ (see Figure 2), we are able to highlight a feature of colonialist language and Orientalism that Said discusses: that of using large abstract categories to explain people who are different. This is a trait

we see throughout the Design for Development community and is something that has lately become a feature of the communities’ language; Maria Popova is in accordance with this statement in her 2010 paper ‘The language of design imperialism’. In this paper, Popova makes a rallying cry for the design community to ‘invent new ways of writing, talking and thinking about concepts of “humanitarian design”’ she points to a need for a reinvention of design language, one that does not ‘homogenize entire cultures’ (Popova 2010).



Figure 2 Frog Design website: Design for the disadvantaged. Image source: <http://www.frogdesign.com/services/expertise/social-innovation.html>

The opposite end of the Design for Development spectrum is apparent in many respects in international not-for-profit organisations such as Maya Pedal and Motivation, the latter being an organisation ‘who supports people with mobility disabilities around the world’ (Motivation, 2013). The content and the language used in online material is in clear contrast to that of commercial design consultancies, they too are a group of designers and engineers (amongst other professionals) much the same as IDEO, who work across five continents and with groups of people equally as diverse and similar in number to that of IDEO. Yet their approach to explaining who they work with, for example, is to provide personal profiles of individuals, achieving a distinctly individual and a personal story behind the hard facts and figures of development. This makes good headway towards closing the empathy gap; it also avoids using taxonomic subgroups that invoke the idea of ‘here and there’, ‘us and them’. This is a danger Emily Pilloton refers to as being highlighted in the name of the Cooper-Hewitt exhibition ‘Design for the Other 90%’ (see Figure 3). Although well intentioned and well informed, this approach ‘is rooted in an “us-versus-them” mentality’ (Pilloton, 2009: 1–46).

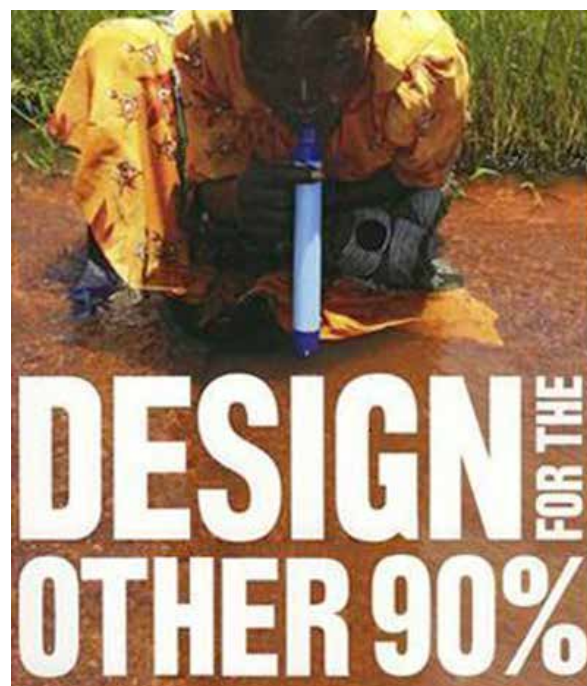


Figure 3 ‘Design for the Other 90%’ website. Image source: <http://shop.cooperhewitt.org/p/1364/Design-for-the-Other-90>

Another discussion would be to construct a visual analysis of the semiotics of the promotional material of Design for Development, Figure 3 being a well-known example that demonstrates features of Orientalism in a visual format.



Figure 4 ‘One laptop per child’ website. Image source: <http://students.purchase.edu/abigail.flynn/organization.html>

There are several burgeoning communities emerging from the depths of globalisation with their roots in the work of Victor Papanek and Donald Norman, notably User Centred Design for International Development (UCD4D), and Human Computer Interface for Development (HCD4D). They are of particular interest to this paper as they are in the midst of crucial conversations regarding the application of post-colonial frameworks for design. Irani et al. cite specific case studies; most relevant to this paper is the infamous ‘One laptop per child project’ (see Figure 4). The way in which Irani et al. critically analyse the project is insightful, highlighting how the project was predicated on many assumptions, the most notable being the overarching framing of developing world problems as being a ‘series of absences, specifically ... the personal computer’ (Irani et al. 2010: 1318). They state something seemingly obvious and yet ill considered; this model implies a commitment to individual ownership and, more specifically, individual

ownership by a child – an arrangement alien to many of the communities the computers are intended for. There are many assumptions laden in this model that are evident from just this brief description alone. The paper calls for a dynamic model of culture, particularly where technology design is being adopted, as current taxonomic models view culture as ‘acquired and internal to the individual – “software for the mind” shared by people of the same nation’ (Irani et al. 2010: 1313). To begin addressing many of the issues faced by those working under the umbrella of HCI4D, this paper clearly suggests what is expressed in its introduction, a shift ‘from “development” to postcolonial discourse’.

Conclusion

This paper presents the early stages of wider reading on the subject of power-laden language and the impact it might have on the practice of humanitarian design. In conclusion, it is a challenge to navigate

through the dense and complex world of the 'largely unresolved relationship between design and social responsibility – one that is constrained by politics and fraught with pitfalls' (Bell, 2011: 100–6). The international, political and multifaceted nature of development with its concurrent and varied components renders the task of piecing together a coherent picture interesting.

It is impossible to separate the politics from the human motivations that inspire us to act, Tony Fry (2009, 2011) comments on how these two are inextricably linked for a reason. A conclusion that was also reached through an insight by Irani et al. is how important it is to remember when praising those in the non-profit sector that 'no design practice takes place outside of a series of economic conditions that make it possible' (Irani et al. 2010: 1311–20).

The work of Edward Said highlights the nuances of professional design language often invisible, yet clearly relevant to any discourse on colonial tropes and imperial overtones: an area of investigation the author would like to take further.

How do designers move forward, using *The Bottom of the Pyramid* approach; capitalising on the benefits this mindset can bring to all involved, but doing so in a way that is not disempowering, that is not offensive and that is not relying on stereotypes to engage people? Is it possible that by being more aware of the language we use, understanding more deeply and from different perspectives what that language betrays to others, we are able to in turn change the way we practise design, in fact – as Margolin cries out for – are we able to change design culture, together?

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Appendix A

David Stairs It's the Language Dummy

Design Altruism Project

Originally posted: Thursday 11 April 2013 (<http://design-altruism-project.org/2013/04/11/its-the-language-dummy/>)

Designers are frequently talking about skills and aesthetics, practice and theory, and these are important topics. But when it comes to politics, man can they get it wrong! I suspect it has more to do with privilege and cultural blindness than purposeful discrimination. And yet ...

In September Co. Design ran a piece highlighting Tim Brown's address at the 2012 Clinton Global Initiative. This made perfect sense, since Linda Tischler of Fast Company Magazine was the other keynoter. Brown, the CEO of IDEO, talked about global firms serving the developing world through social impact projects in which he stated, "But by being embedded, we can get insights to ideas that may lead to products or services that that market may need."

Now, you might think, "Yeah, sounds good to me. What's wrong with helping less fortunate people and benefiting along the way? It's a win-win." And you might be right, but for the not-so-subtle recurrent domination memes salted throughout Brown's presentation. For example, Brown talks about poverty alleviation as a matter of market development. But, while he admits developing world markets don't always behave like those in the West, he fails to address the issue of the fantastic imbalances they have created in places like India, where 600,000,000 live in poverty yet, due to a combination of corruption and wealth concentration, the rich continue getting richer.

Another example, taken from IDEO's work in Kenya, describes the development of a mini-brand by IDEO workers in the field as better than what someone back in San Francisco might have come up with. Yet branding and brand placement do not attack poverty at its root, but only at its leaves. And this, what Brown calls 'embedding,' is what used to be known as living abroad, and yes, it has always been the best way to get to know a place.

The trouble with this design biz-speak is that it returns us to the same sort of exploitative mindset, previously known as colonialism, that it took over a century to escape. This couldn't be clearer than where Brown talks about using the developing world, that sad consortium of failed states and disadvantaged peoples, as "a lab for first world countries' whose solutions 'can often help industrialized countries rethink entrenched products or services."

We're squarely in the Land of Hegemonic Language here, where thought leaders and change makers run

interventions with their social development projects to save or, in this case, serve the poor from/into a fate worse than themselves. Only, I don't know of any disadvantaged people, other than the privileged elites running such countries, who would be fooled by Brown's doublespeak.

What IDEO hopes to do through its social initiatives, so brazenly labelled with a dot org suffix, is to steal as much as they can carry. Ivan Illich observed this years ago when describing an academic from MIT shooting pictures in the barrios of Mexico City to take them home to an incubator. Ultimately, the idea was to repurpose what he'd learned from the disadvantaged about designing within severe constraints to try to sell it back to them with a new patina.

I'm going to be presenting at AIGA's BLUNT conference in Norfolk, Virginia April 13th. There are a lot of papers scheduled to be given by distinguished designers and design educators about a variety of topics ranging from critical theory to contemporary practice. But until designers step back and re-examine the profession's language in terms of its neocolonialist memes, they can talk all they want about saving the world and never get it right.

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