We-design: Community Design and Research as an Embedded Collective Social Process

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how design, as an embedded socio-cultural process, is an inherent part of an emerging social network paradigm of community and how this social network design process is influencing new concepts, forms and meanings of design, community and constructed environments. An integrative theory approach is taken to understanding this social design process, which connects network theory with constructivist perspectives of social learning. The concept of ‘social entrepreneurship’ is highlighted as a design-process which enables interconnections among ‘place’, social behavior, social capital and values-based lifestyle choices through networks of creative agents which results in new forms of community design and meaning in local contexts.

Keywords: design research, social networks, community design, social entrepreneurship

COMMUNICATION, COMMUNITY AND DESIGN

The notion of ‘we-design’ reflects Leadbeater’s (2008) “We-Think” approach to re-establishing the inherent social context for information sharing and social creativity facilitated through the proliferation of communication technologies.

The institutionalized and professional practice of design in North America has served to disconnect design from its social and cultural context. Despite the acknowledgement of design theorists (such as Buchanan and Margolin) that design is an embedded socio-cultural process; little is known about the operational dynamics of design as a non-professional embedded social process. This is especially true for ‘community’ design and critical at this time because the concept of ‘community’ is rapidly evolving due to the global-local dynamics of social communication as reflected by Castell’s [1] idea of ‘glocalization’ and Bauman’s [2] notion of ‘liquid modernity’. The conventional definitions of ‘community’ as social bonds and stable hierarchical relations such as work, family and neighborhood economic and social interdependencies is being re-framed in the context of technologically mediated diverse forms of social interweaving [3]). The rise of digitally enabled and increasingly complex social networking is changing traditional hierarchical organizational forms. Benkler [4:16] identifies these emerging ‘social networks’ as “… more adept at fulfilling some of the same emotional and context-generating functions that have traditionally been associated with the importance of community”. As such, community and community design in the context of social networks provides an integrative framework for exploring the mutual influence of individual agency and social structure in understanding how ‘social capital’ can be created and supported by specific patterns of collective behavior including design.

New technologically enabled forms of community, characterized by ‘porous’ group membership, offer individuals a broader range and more accessible choices of outlets for social-identification [3]. Benkler [4:16] identifies these emerging ‘social
networks’ as “… more adept at fulfilling some of the same emotional and context-generating functions that have traditionally been associated with the importance of community”. These networked communities and their “structured aggregation of individual interests [5:229]” correspond more to emergent distributed dynamical network systems which requires a conceptual shift to a dynamic process-oriented view of organizations with consideration for both decentralized individual agency and the behavior of the collective. The conceptual tools of network theory, which address the emergent patterns and process of self-organization, apply to the study of social emergence and social network processes [6]. Network theory demonstrates how interacting agents, composed of low-level complex adaptive relationships, exhibit a propensity toward certain non-linear structures in organization and can be defined by their patterns of behavior [7]. These patterns are intertwined with identity building which relates agency and structure in suggesting how social value arises in systems.

Such re-conceptualized thinking about ‘community’ as social network risks critique from popular concerns about the decline of the traditional understanding of ‘community” in terms of conventional types of social bonds and stable hierarchical relations and social interdependencies (work, family, and neighborhood). However, these traditional views, often from structuralist accounts of community, tend to regard human agency as constrained, if not determined by, static organizational forms and reflect an industrial tradition of organization of information production which are discordant with the increasingly dynamic forms of new digitally enabled interpersonal networks. The rise of the ‘information economy’ and its associated structural shifts in how we produce and exchange knowledge demonstrates emerging collaborative patterns of interaction and a surge in user-generated content. Such a participatory design ‘culture’ demonstrates creativity as a “consequence of a social system actors [8 448]” and is highly connected to our ability to share ideas [9]. Sharing and collaboration are the modalities of exchange in social networks and these cohere to diverse social motivations and patterns of behavior. There is an experiential dimension to the production of content in so far as meaning and value come from interactive communication and information exchanges Participation contextualizes meaning because there are intrinsic rewards within social exchange. In the case of creative production, “labor itself has meaning” [10 :181]. Therefore, network dynamics can serve to ‘put the social back’ into the context of creative production and provide a template for conditions in which knowledge, creativity, and ultimately meaning, are generated and embedded in social relations [11].

Therefore, by placing community design in a social ‘network’ context, the purpose of this paper is to explore design as an embedded collective social process capable of producing new forms and meaning in both social and socially constructed environments. In this context, design is viewed as a socio-cultural process or ‘fluid’ characterizations of social capital creation and cooperative relations. As such, social entrepreneurship is a social design process which generates creativity and production through social relationships.

**DESIGN AS SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Social networks in the context of network theory, have implications for design. The dynamic nature of interactions in social networks, consistent with constructivist perspectives on learning and knowledge, challenge the assumption that knowledge can be separated from doing which emphasizes the socially constructed and dynamic nature of knowledge. Knowledge creation as experiential learning and is a dialectic process actively constructed (and reconstructed) through direct engagement with the environment and one another. As such, learning is experiential and contextual and “profoundly connected to the conditions in which it is learned” [12 :48]. Seeing the interrelationships within social networks as the context for social learning is similar to Wenger’s [13] theory of situated learning within communities of practice. Wenger uses the concept of
‘community’ to convey how knowledge and meaning are socially generated through practices held in common and which act as modes of relating (through diverse social bonds) and identity formation. Thus communal learning generates a “common context of meaning” [11] which could be described as the culture of practice. From an ethnographic perspective, ‘culture’ refers to systems of social relationships of shared values, language, attitudes and beliefs. As such, communities of practice have a cultural dimension arising from their social dynamics which gives rise to shared behavior/meaning and common ways of thinking and doing. Meaning is essentially mediated through the shared experience of culture [14] and because experience is dynamic and adaptive; meaning is continually negotiated, modified, sustained, and/or recreated. Both the emergence of meaning and innovation is a product of day-to-day social activities and relationships.

Design as a social process is inherent to such cultural-environmental interrelationships as a form of social practice which uses both tacit and practice-based knowledge. Tacit knowledge involves processes of assimilation, requiring the ability to engage in practice rather than simply acquiring information [12]. As such, design is a part of the construction of meaning in network communities and cannot be thought of as separate from situated cultural action. Design as a social process is more than simply a response to the environment, it is embedded in collaborative, socially developed processes in which groups inherently problem solve and seek out new ways of doing and producing. Hence, as a socio-cultural process, design is subject to feedback loops and an ongoing active process of organizing space and knowledge. In order to better understand this process, it is important to identify social groups that are seen as transforming their physical environments to reflect their social and informational networking relationships. Social entrepreneurship is one mechanism that connects the value-based choices of network ‘communities’ with opportunities in their operating environment. Like design, social entrepreneurship is a collective phenomenon embedded in the process and context of its formation. It is shaped by the interdependence of networks, their environments and shared meaning (both existing and projected) which draws on the existence of a social space of common processes, values, and concerns [15].

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION

In the modernist tradition of objectivity and reductionism, ‘space’ as it relates to design is typically de-contextualized and viewed as fixed and independent from social experience. This de-contextualizing of space denies the idea that “meaning is always inherited from the context of use” (Brown 33). Space, like knowledge, is socially constructed. Its categories and objective reality are produced through social interaction which is in a continual process of revision or reproduction. For example, Milgrom considers social space as both a product of and a precondition for social processes. Accepting that space is produced primarily by social relationships, it is important to consider the cultural context of the process of producing space. Specifically, in North America, the production of space is typically mediated through rational processes of architecture and planning and for the most part these professions are still working within a modernist epistemology that reifies space. Social space is directly connected to the practice of social learning. Therefore, emerging social network technologies provide an opportunity to move away from this tradition of ‘abstracting’ space and enable the social production of meaningful space through social engagement.

Socioeconomic networks give a context within which environmental transformation and therefore, social design processes take place. As such, socioeconomic networks become the socio-spatial unit of community design. In this context, design is socially motivated, ongoing, and engaged with place. The thesis in Kotkin’s [17] book, The New Geography, and in Florida’s [18]The Rise of the Creative Class, is that the “knowledge value” and social capital associated with the emerging
information economy are transforming social space both conceptually and spatially. There is a clear need to understand how these networks, which are fundamental to social capital, develop spatially and socially and operate in local context to build social capital. Current design research in no way address the workings of social networks in order to understand how people create meaning, spatially organize and mobilize resources to support productive behavior.

The idea that social capital involves territoriality is not new, but space has traditionally been viewed simply as the ‘container’ for such processes rather than essential to its formation. Florida [18] suggests that creative communities seek environments that allow them to flourish. A desire for the opportunity to shape and co-create space as needed is evidenced in the spatially and economically transformative activities of creative groups. [17, 20]. They use their environment to create and maintain their function as a “social device that provides a platform for communication and coordination [1]”. Following a process-oriented view of design, the organization of space is produced in and through the simultaneous production of social relations and ‘environment’ is inherently both a product and a process which is “both shaped by and shaping the lives of inhabitants[1: 4]”. As illustrated by Kotkin and Florida, we should explore the ‘space of practice’ that creative and cooperative communities occupy in order to rediscover connections between social practice and space.

We can explore these communities’ spatial organization of ‘place’ through the social behavior and social interrelationships for adapting it as their social design processes. Both Kotkin and Florida suggest that the geographic clustering of new lifestyle and creative communities is because creative social processes are “based largely on the exchange of information” and the “dependence on the need to congregate and network [17 :15]”. This need for social proximity illustrates the need for informational interaction in the work practices and organizational forms of social entrepreneurs. ‘Clustering’ supports a networked social fabric and economic cooperation to a certain degree, as evidenced in the intentional cultivation of social practice within these new communities and “the vital role of public space to enable communication with other bohemians: coffee houses, pubs, gin palaces and restaurants [22 :236]”. This also seems to speak to the collective social nature of creativity and design in the same way that the web 2.0 is facilitating human desire to interact and participate meaningfully [9-10].

The complex patterns of communication and social flexibility offered by digital technology is increasingly reflected in values-based lifestyles - a structuring process of identity in self-actualized socioeconomic communities. Today lifestyles play an increasingly important role in people’s identity formation [22], as people want more choice and flexibility with respect to their activities, their environments, and ultimately their social identities. The geographic and locational preferences of socially entrepreneurial and creative communities communicate individual and collective aspirations for social meaning. As Florida [18: 13] suggests, creative people “increasingly demand a lifestyle built around creative experiences.” Such lifestyle choices and creative experience of social entrepreneurs corresponds to networking structures in two specific ways: individual agency in a social context and social economic integration.

The emerging decentralized, non-market and peer-generated patterns of cultural production enabled by information technologies illustrate the capacity of networks to support social creativity and how such operational dynamics underlie social processes including knowledge creation [11]. Writers such as Shirky [5] Howe [10] and Leadbeater [9] consider this bourgeoning social creativity to be related to the opportunity for more people to directly participate and share in content production while the mutability in network organizations allows people to share information laterally and the freedom to self-identify tasks in the development and implementation of peer-production. Explanations for the success of user-led innovation highlight the importance of individual agency which identifies
people as having the freedom to negotiate or modify the conditions of their common context in a social process. Howe [10: 180] notes that networks of production are “composed of people with a deep and ongoing commitment to their craft and, most important, to one another.” Similarly, the lifestyles found in physical social networks appear to support creative agency (individual self-fulfillment), but within the context of collective practices (belonging to a social milieu). Significant is the ability for and the increasing number of new forms of self-employment and “micro entrepreneurs in arts and culture” [23 :4]. New ‘lifestyle communities’ illustrate how the characteristics of their work practices are highly connected to their collective identity. Because this identity is inextricably intertwined with production; there is a tendency to work in fluid, informal, self-managing networks [22].

Equally important in networks is the emergence and evolution of cooperative behaviors that facilitate social creativity and the production of content. This qualitative dimension to human action inherently plays a role in structuring these systems and is maintained through social relations. The social ‘value’ of which, also referred to as social capital, is generally acknowledged as also having economic consequences, especially within the knowledge economy. The shift to modalities of collaboration and sharing in the networked environment is clearly changing the way people produce goods, services, ideas and design. This is specifically supported by Benkler’s [4] observations of productive behavior within social networks: the importance of non-proprietary strategies; an increase in non-market production; and, an increase in large scale cooperative efforts. This suggests there is a significant difference in defining people as social beings rather than solely as market actors.

Viewing people as creative agents shares an outlook found in socio-technical systems such as ‘open-source design’ in which “… each one of us possesses a far broader, more complex range of talents than we can currently express within current economic structures [10 :14]”. The lifestyles of social entrepreneurs as social designers are shaped by both social values and profit enterprises [20, 22] but, social entrepreneurs show the need to express creative, social dimensions beyond those characterized by market values alone. Social entrepreneurs fit the description as those “who do not follow prescribed standards but try out their own combinations and assert themselves on the market and in society [23 :4]”. Their propensity toward “freelance cultures” appears consistent with their preference to self-manage (free from controls) their own creative production and to individually and collectively shape through social design the communities and clusters of social space they choose to inhabit.

COMMUNITY DESIGN AS SOCIAL SPACE AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Social-identification through increasingly technologically enabled social networks is creating complex social interweaving and new ‘fluid’ forms of ‘community’. These social dynamics support a rising salience of creative peer-based collaboration, an important phenomenon exhibiting the collective nature of production and creativity. These social network dynamics have the capacity to support the re-contextualization of space and community design consistent within social patterns of collaborative behavior and open source cultural production systems. Based on the success of on-line productivity, we suggest that not only has the production of knowledge and culture through communal relations (as opposed to market relations) [4] been achieved - but the production of new forms of built environments can be achieved.

The identification of alternative self-actualized communities and their spatial and socio-cultural characteristics and development processes [17-18] illustrates the physical manifestation of these new and technologically enabled socioeconomic networks and their ‘situational’ expression which serves to critically shape and sustain their embedded social network interrelationships.
This presents a way to reconnect design to social practice, embedded in the social space of meaningful community relationships which contribute to shared meanings in both physically and socially constructed ‘productive’ environments.

REFERENCES