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Design Processes *and* Tools *as* Oppression? Rethinking our Design Practice *for* more Just Design Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Our design processes and tools matter, as our design is always shaped by the processes and tools that we use. Context necessarily shapes the content of our design processes and tools. But, without paying attention to the content emerging from that context, the use of these tools and processes may become oppressive. In the wake of colonialism, the un-reflexive use of design tools and processes underpinned by Western conceptual ideas and schema can lead to oppression for design with non-Western or Indigenous peoples. Even tools and processes designed with a supposedly liberatory intent, such as promoting democratic practice or equality, can lead to oppression in their un-reflexive use. Looking at two experiences from my design practice with my own *hapū* (clan), this article explores the ways in which ideas of democratic participation and equality raised in these two design spaces could function in an oppressive way to cause a form of violence against our traditional lifeworld. This article proposes some ways in which this aspect of design might be modified to help lead to more just design outcomes, through a more reflective and intentional approach when choosing and applying the design tools and processes we use in our design practice.

Keywords
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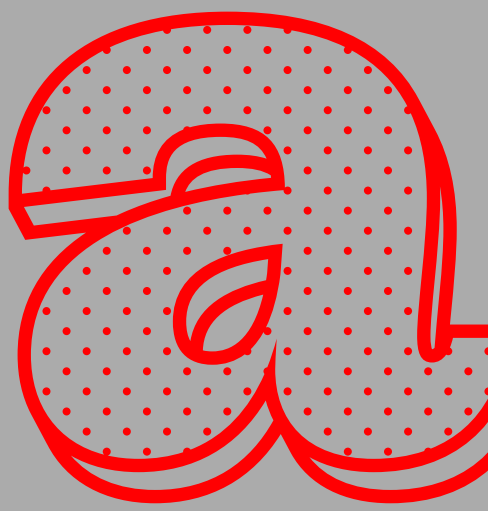

Design Processes and Tools as Oppression? Rethinking our Design Practice for more Just Design Outcomes

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INTRODUCTION: DESIGN PROCESSES AND TOOLS LEADING TO OPPRESSION?

Design processes and tools matter. Our designs, and our designing, are always shaped by the processes and tools that we use (Liao & Huebner, 2021). Their use, however, can sometimes lead to oppression—even if only unintentionally. This can occur because all our design tools and processes are necessarily produced within a specific sociocultural context and, as a result of that process, retain echoes of the ways of knowing and being of the context from which they emerged (Ingold, 2013). And so, in the wake of the colonial encounter, design tools and processes emerging from the West may not be best suited to design with and by non-Western and Indigenous peoples. This is because in their operation they may prioritize certain ways of knowing and being in the world over others, even if only inadvertently. And it is in this space that opportunities for oppression can emerge. It is important to note that all design tools and processes are open to this burden. As this article will show, even tools and processes designed with a supposedly liberatory intent such as promoting democratic practice or equality can, in their use, actually lead to oppression. So, what is to be done? This article proposes some ways in which this aspect of design might be modified to help lead to more just design outcomes (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Starting with a review of the ways in which design tools and processes may be linked to oppression, the article then explores a couple of concrete examples of these ideas through the discussion of two specific design experiences with my own *hapū* (clan), to later discuss ways in which these issues may be resolved. In doing so, these theoretical ideas around oppression are explored through specific examples of actual design practice, in order to begin to think concretely about the ways through which we may be able to combat these forms of oppression through reflective liberatory practices.

THINKING INTENTIONALLY ABOUT OUR DESIGN PROCESSES AND TOOLS

The design processes and techniques we use are an integral part of our design practice. Importantly though, they do not just act as an extension of ourselves in order to manifest our ideas in practice but they also, through their use, actually shape our design practice and the products of our acts of designing (Willis, 2006). The reason behind this is that all design tools, techniques, and processes are the result of the various particular socio-cultural contexts from which they emerge (Ingold, 2013). All design—and the processes, tools, and techniques through which it is crafted—comes from somewhere. There is no universalized abstraction of design, like Plato's *forms*, which act as a framework of neutral meta-design (Barcham, 2021, p. 4). In fact, that precise way of thinking can be seen as a product of a particular socio-cultural milieu—a colonialist mindset—which separated the cosmos into two spheres of existence: the modern West, which is the future to which all humanity was inevitably heading, and everything else in existence, which merely represented an earlier stage of human development (Quijano, 1991, p. 13). This colonialist mindset was oppressive in that it set up structures of power that subjugated people(s) through processes of hierarchization, exclusion, and violence (Fanon, 1961). In order to not perpetuate these forms of oppression, we actively need to move into spaces of active liberation, which I define, following Paulo Freire (2014, p. 79), as a form of intentional praxis whereby we act upon the world to transform it.

A corollary of this idea in the realm of design is that design processes and tools, just like material artifacts, can "materialize oppression, meaning they can reflect past oppression, do the work of oppression in the present day, and carry oppression into the future" (Liao & Carbonell, 2022, p. 2). Even concepts often seen by many as being almost universally liberatory, such as equality and democratic participation, can be oppressive in their inappropriate application. Indeed, the very idea that something might be universally applicable could be seen as an example of the oppressive colonialist mindset outlined above whereby, following Paulo Freire's (2014, p. 152) conceptual schema, oppressed groups sometimes take on the very ideas of their oppressors as their own through a form of cultural invasion. In this way, ideas conceived elsewhere may take on a universalism, being incorporated locally in an un-reflexive way. We need to be aware then, that the use of design tools and processes emerging from a universalist approach can act erasing the agency of certain groups of people, creating spaces of oppression. In order to avoid this, we need to particularize the processes and tools in our design. In Freirean terms (Freire, 2014, p. 152) we need to transform the way in which we approach our design methods to ensure that they become more inclusive and appropriate for the different worlds within which, and across which, we design,

and for us, as designers, to be more intentional and reflexive when we use certain tools, including understanding the culturally-specific ideas that underpin them.

The realization that we need to particularize our processes and tools in our design is not necessarily new. Indeed, it was almost forty years ago that Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores made it abundantly clear that "we encounter the deep question of design when we recognize that in designing tools [and other things] we are designing ways of being" (1986, p. xi). What is new, and something we are witnessing now across the world, are professional designers, design academics, and communities actively taking up these ideas to change the way in which they engage with, and practice, design. One possible reason for this shift is that the last ten or so years have been witnesses to the emergence of a myriad of new ways of approaching design: pluriversal (Escobar, 2020), decolonizing (Tlostanova, 2017), decolonial (Taboada et al., 2020), and many more approaches. And, importantly in terms of understanding why this shift may be helping bring about a change in design practice, is that all these approaches are underpinned by a sensitivity to the heterogeneity of the worlds within which we live, and the epistemological and ontological consequences of that for our design practice.

Thus, there is a need to relook at the processes and techniques that we use in our design practice with the understanding that these may need to be reworked or retired as their use might, even unintentionally, be leading to forms of oppression and domination for those with whom we design. In doing this, we are well advised to take seriously Audre Lorde's powerful claim that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (1983, p. 27). In this respect, this article provides concrete evidence of what these shifts might look like in practice following Paulo Freire's (2014, p. 153) understanding that it is not enough to merely denounce oppression, but we need to actively work towards liberation.

In the following section I explore how these ideas are put into practice through the frame of two design experiences with my own *hapū* in New Zealand. These experiences are explored as part of an autoethnographic research methodology that allows me to push back against 'normalized' ways of 'doing' research in academia which, like the design processes and tools discussed in this article, emerge from a particular socio-cultural context and can constrain other ways of 'doing' research and inhibit other pathways of knowledge creation (Bishop, 2021). This methodology breaks away from hegemonic Western research paradigms and presents an alternative way to explore the issues experienced by those who design with our communities. In doing this I align myself and this article with a broader shift around decolonizing methodologies with Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012). A key issue here is an increased focus on the use of situated design

methodologies. This is not something particular to decolonizing methodologies, as early discussions of this form of methodology include work by Haraway (1988) and Suchman (2002), but work by Indigenous theorists has brought attention to this issue to the fore—particularly the need to ensure the use of methodologies that are appropriate to the lifeworlds of those with whom we work (Kovach, 2009). And, more specifically, this article is positioned as part of the emergent literature on decolonizing design methodologies (Barcham, 2022) following a liberatory direction. An important point to note here then is my own positionality. I grew up on the traditional territory of my *hapū* and am fully bilingual in English and Māori. I have successfully navigated through the Western education system, including obtaining a PhD from an Australian university almost twenty years ago. For almost thirty years now I have practiced as a professional designer and taught at universities across the Asia-Pacific and North America. In my particular lineage within our *hapū*, I am the most senior knowledge holder of our language and traditions.[1]

RETHINKING DESIGN PROCESSES AND TOOLS IN PRACTICE

I grew up on the traditional lands of my grandmother, and our *hapū* Ngāti Hori are the traditional custodians of an area of land in what is known by many as Hawke's Bay, which is a Province on the East Coast of the North Island of New Zealand. As for many other Indigenous peoples around the world, the colonial experience has led to many hardships and privations, which have included the loss of the majority of our traditional land base and a general breakdown in the inter-generational transmission of knowledge for many of the *whānau* (extended families) that make up our *hapū*—which has included the loss for many of the ability to converse in our language. As part of an active process of Indigenous resurgence (Corntassel, 2012) as a *hapū* we have been undertaking a range of activities for a number of years to both rebuild what was lost in terms of our own internal socio-cultural practices, and to re-set and re-situate the terms of engagement in how we relate to settlers who now occupy our traditional lands. We are using design processes as part of this shift, but their use is not unproblematic. There is a need for us to actively reshape these tools for both our internal processes as well as when we engage with external stakeholders. Two recent experiences help provide a greater understanding of what this shift entails. Methodologically, both cases discussed below are drawn from my own notes taken during each of these two design processes. In choosing these cases specifically, I looked through my case notes for examples of tensions in the design process, in terms of the broader design process used and the specific elements included in the process that were at odds with our traditional life world.

1 This is uncomfortable for me to say, as a well known proverbial saying in our language translates as "the sweet potato does not talk about its own sweetness" and so, it is culturally inappropriate for me to talk about myself in this way. I include this section though at the urging of my anonymous reviewers for this article, to help the reader better understand my positionality qua my *hapū*, as well as Western forms of design knowledge.

PARTICIPATORY BUT NOT DEMOCRATIC

The first design encounter emerged as we explored the use of various modern technologies to support several of the traditional roles and activities that our *hapū* is charged traditionally with undertaking. Specifically, a key issue we were interested in, was caring for our natural environment and ensuring the transmission of our *hapū* knowledge base over successive generations. This is something that we have pursued through the build-out of a wiki as a shared repository of our *hapū* knowledge. In moving forward with this process, we held several participatory co-design workshops for our *hapū* to articulate design specifications for the wiki. As the organizing committee within the *hapū*, we chose a participatory approach as we felt it would provide the best option for collecting a broad body of evidence, as well as a culturally appropriate mechanism to use for this process, since a strand of our traditional decision-making has always been participatory and consensus-based.[2] As we met with our *hapū* to begin to build out this codesign process, and as the senior designer in the meeting, I noted that certain voices would be prioritized over others in this participatory process. When I did that, some of our younger *hapū* members wanted clarification about what I meant when we explicitly called this out—as to their thinking that would be undemocratic and, as part of the training that they had received in their work for government agencies around participatory design processes, they had been told that a key value underpinning successful participatory design processes was that they were democratic.

Using this as a learning process for our *hapū*, as other members became more acquainted with design processes, I explained that for us, as Ngāti Hori, participatory and democratic processes were not necessarily aligned. In arguing this, I was building on the understanding of democratic processes held by our youth—common in liberal democracies—that democratic processes were based on the principle of 'one person, one vote' (Kolodny, 2014, p. 196). A key point is that for Ngāti Hori, as for many other Māori groups, knowledge is not freely available for all. Instead, as individuals move through their life, they hold different roles and responsibilities, and certain individuals are prepared to hold different roles within the *hapū* over time, some linked to lineage, so the available knowledge is different depending on the role that they play within the community. In this way, our *kaumātua* (elders) had a greater voice in the design of our *hapū* wiki as a repository of our knowledge base, as their voice was more important in this sphere of expertise than that of others in the room. This is a decidedly non-democratic approach—in terms of the 'one person, one vote' often seen as defining democratic processes—but it is in alignment with our Ngāti Hori lifeworld. It does not make the process of our design practice any less participatory—it is merely differently participatory, and in a way that is more aligned with a Māori worldview. And, importantly to note for the arguments of this article, to impose this

2 The ideas discussed here are drawn from the initial planning process as a *hapū* about what type of codesign process we would use for this particular project moving forward.

form of democratic lens or viewpoint on our codesign processes would be to cause violence to our process by bringing in a way of being at odds with our traditional value system. This would be an example of the form of oppression noted by Fanon (1961), whereby our traditional conceptual universe was situated within a hierarchy of knowledge beneath Western conceptual forms. Opposing this colonialist mindset requires actively opposing, in a liberatory sense, the non-reflexive use of introduced concepts such as democracy in our design processes, which do not necessarily match our Ngāti Hori lifeworld.

EQUAL BUT NOT EQUITABLE

The second design encounter occurred in a participatory co-design workshop convened by a government agency with a range of local stakeholders around the management of the Karamū stream.[3] Running through our traditional lands, this river has been an important source of nourishment and well-being for us as a *hapū* and we have had a reciprocal relationship of care for it. In convening the meeting, local stakeholder groups including farmers, orchardists, and recreational users of the river were invited to participate in a codesign session to explore various options for managing issues related to noxious weed build-up on the river. I attended as a senior member of our *hapū* and as someone who could represent it in governmental discussions as local *tāngata whenua* representatives.[4]

In opening the session, the government facilitator wanted to ensure that we all understood that although we represented different interests around the management of the river, all of our respective views would be heard, as our voices were "equally as important" in their codesign process. Asking if there were any questions, I conferred quickly with our other *hapū* representatives, and then stood up and questioned that view, as we Ngāti Hori were Treaty partners with the government and we had a particular relationship with the river which was different—and pre-dated—to that of all the others present at the workshop. This resulted in some grumbling and low mutterings by non-Māori. The facilitator responded that they understood our role as Treaty partners with the government, but they needed to ensure that everybody's view was treated equally as it was the "fair thing to do". I replied that this approach to fairness had ignored our Indigenous views on the river for years while other viewpoints, specifically those linked to economic development, seemed to be prioritized. I then asked if there was a process whereby our role as *kaitieki* (traditional guardians) of the river could be centered. They answered that this would not be possible as they were not able to prioritize some peoples' views over others, since that would not be "fair or equal" to others. My response was that in moving forward with their approach, we would do nothing more than keeping existing power structures in place—that is, we would be participating in an equally inequitable process. There was a need, I argued, for

3 This meeting was convened and hosted by a central government agency. The points were raised here as the convenor of the codesign session was explaining the parameters of the workshop to the participants—which included myself and two other members of our *hapū*. For completeness' sake, the workshop was designed to use a combination of brainstorming methods and card sorting exercises to come up with an initial understanding of the participants´ understanding of the values that the river provided to their community.

4 Literally 'people of the land' but a term which, in this case, can be glossed as traditional land owners.

the use of an equitable design process, not an equal process, as the pre-existing power relationships in the room were definitely not equal—something that almost two hundred years of colonialist rule made clear. The tangible tension resulting from my questioning of the facilitator's equality-first approach in this participatory design process made the resulting workshop awkward for some—particularly, it seemed, for the facilitators. But this was, unfortunately, a natural result of utilizing a design process not adapted to the particular circumstances of the project at hand, or of not thinking through the implications of using certain design processes over others in this context.

IDEAS MOVING FORWARD

These two experiences bring up a few issues for consideration in terms of broader discussions around the role that design can play in the oppression and liberation of different groups. Interesting and useful work around the ways in which our processes and tools shape our design in possibly oppressive ways has emerged over the last decade or so (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2010). However, we are now increasingly in a space where the growing density of design approaches which take seriously the existence of the heterogenous worlds in which we live (Gutiérrez Borrero, 2015, p. 120), means that we have the analytic capacity and support to push for broader changes in design practice, to help address these issues. The novel aspect of this article, then, is the contextualization of these ideas in concrete design practice and the resulting partial mechanisms that the analysis of these cases provides for action moving forward. In looking analytically at the material discussed above as examples of this process, three key issues emerge.

Awareness of the Cultural-loading of Design Processes and Tools

One issue that we need to be aware of as designers is the cultural content necessarily contained within our design processes and tools (Walker et al., 2018). They are never neutral or value-free. This content can also never be entirely removed—but like other design materials, it can be reshaped and worked with. However, this requires ensuring in both design education and design practice that people understand the cultural weighted-ness or positionality of all design tools and processes. This is not to say that design tools and processes from one place cannot be successfully utilized in another, but rather to make the more subtle argument that we need to be aware of the cultural loading that we may be bringing to our design encounters with those with whom we design when we use specific design processes and tools derived from elsewhere. Indeed, as the example above has shown, while the broad concept of participatory design has a broad space of application, we need to be careful that we do not load into our design practice particular cultural aspects —such as the use of a democratic conceptual lens—which

are neither a necessary part of a process being participatory nor culturally neutral. New Zealand is a nominally liberal democratic country, but this does not mean that Māori—the indigenous peoples of that land—have not been oppressed systemically and systematically by successive democratically elected governments (Mutu, 2015). So too, to use nominally democratic design tools and techniques is not to say that they do not oppress and dominate different groups in their practice.

Equitable versus Equal

Equal participation and equitable participation are not the same (Minow, 2021, pp. 170–179) and so we should not confuse the two. Equitable participation is a more nuanced and contextualized approach that depends on the social-cultural and historical milieux of those engaging in a process (Blessett et al., 2019, p. 294). Equal participation, on the other hand, is often a more procedural approach that need not take account of the historical context within which certain spaces have emerged and, as such, can even act to maintain and actually exacerbate existing power imbalances (Saunders, 2010, pp. 116–119). Equality is not necessarily a panacea for liberation and, indeed, can be oppressive in its application if it maintains introduced colonialist hierarchies of power. For example, in a design process where all groups are said to have an equal right to participate, the pre-existing historical standing of the groups in relation to one another may mean that these pre-existing power relations might be maintained in the process, leading to unjust outcomes for some participants. In this type of space, a focus on equity may be a more just and liberatory approach to how we structure our design processes.

In the case outlined above, the long-term historical dispossession of Ngāti Hori of our traditional lands and waters by successive colonialist governments has meant that our ability to contribute to environmental management issues has been severely constrained, as our voice has almost always been outnumbered by other non-Māori interests in the room. And, in spaces where equality was prioritized due to a perceived need for fairness, we generally did not have the opportunity to have our legitimate concerns adequately addressed or taken care of, with our voices often drowned out by the majority in public forums. As an Indigenous minority, we have often been denied justice and fairness on our own traditional lands through the operation of processes of equality and equal engagement ("Mcguire and Makea v Hastings District Council and the Maori Land Court of New Zealand," 2002). Like other oppressed groups, we have been systematically inhibited in our ability to develop and exercise our capacity for development due to unequal power relations in our society (Coulthard, 2014). We need to work to ensure that these same issues around equality are not replicated again in the design processes and tools that we use or are used in work with us.

Embracing a Multiplicity of Viewpoints

The other issue at hand is that much of the current work around oppressive design practices is predicated on external designers coming to work with vulnerable communities. What we are beginning to find, and my hope is that this is part of a much broader shift, is that members of these communities are increasingly leading these design processes themselves. And, in saying this I do not mean they are leading as community partners but rather, as in the case of my example, as professional designers who are members of these communities. In many respects, the material shared in this article is a concrete example of this process. The design experiences discussed here are all drawn from my concrete design practice as a professional Interaction Designer with, and as part of, my own *hapū*. This is not to idealize my role or value as a cultural insider in this type of work above and beyond the value of others. Instead, it is rather to open up the dialogue on the different values that different designers—cultural insiders and those from other places, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and others too—can exercise in bringing about robust design outcomes which are built on the different views and experiences that they bring with them to their design practice. The key though is to ensure that the processes and tools that are used in this work are built on a design that "works to bring into being worlds, which are respectful and welcoming of difference and interconnectedness without subsuming one world by another" (Barcham, 2021, p. 11).

To help remove some possible conceptual ambiguity around this approach, we need to ensure that in general, in so much as this is possible, the processes and tools that we use in our design practice are internally consistent with the worlds within which our design practice is embedded. And so, to return to the example discussed above, a participatory design process that is based on democratic ideals may not be the most appropriate tool to use when undertaking participatory design with a Māori *hapū*. Instead, a participatory process based on cultural practices within that *hapū* may be more well-suited to that particular cultural milieux, having a lower chance of inflicting a form of colonialist violence by assuming that democratic participation is a universalist good. In this respect, our design processes and tools need to be modified in a way that ensures that they are appropriate for the task at hand based on epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2018), and embodying and materializing respectful engagement of other ways of knowing and being (Sheehan, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Oppression through design is real (van Amstel et al., 2022). But we have the agency and ability to limit some of the oppressive aspects of design practice. One point of leverage is through the design processes and tools that we use. The colonial

experience subjugated peoples around the world through processes of hierarchization, exclusion, and violence (Fanon, 1961) which placed non-Western peoples and their knowledge and practices in a place of inferiority. The un-reflexive use of design tools and processes drawn from the Western tradition may act to maintain these systems of oppression. Because of this, design processes and tools are important considerations if we are to overcome systems of oppression through design. Unfortunately, as this article has helped demonstrate, even design tools and processes with a supposedly liberatory intent, may be working to maintain current systems of oppression. This is because while the ideas underlying these tools and processes may be liberatory in the space in which they originally emerged, they may, in other spaces, instead be processes that lead to oppression as they are in "congruence with an oppressive system" (Liao & Huebner, 2021, p. 94). To put it bluntly, ideas taken from the Western political tradition may not be particularly liberatory for people colonized by the West.

In avoiding this, we need to be very intentional in choosing the design processes and tools that we use or actively modify design tools and processes that we might want to use to minimize—or eliminate if possible—the forms of epistemological or ontological oppression that can occur through their use. While this realization is not in and of itself new, the novel contribution that this article makes is to take the next step and situate these ideas within specific design experiences, and propose possible mechanisms moving forward to change this ongoing dynamic of oppression. In this respect, this article poses a challenge for those of us who design, and those with whom we design: to begin to think reflectively about the design tools and processes we use in order to transform them in a liberatory sense, through a process of intentional praxis (Freire, 2014, p. 79), into mechanisms of justice for the different groups with whom we work and belong. **D**

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