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Towards Relational Design Practices: De-centering design through lessons from community organising

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Increasingly, designers seek to design in ways that more deeply involve those who are impacted by the very systems that design aims to repair, improve, or transform. Yet, despite its good intentions, the legacies of design practice often uphold entrenched systems of oppression. Fundamental components of systems change tend to be absent from most design training and practice: including the elements of power, relationships, and ownership in motivating and sustaining equitable change. Community organisers know what designers may not – that change happens through networks of relationships in a process of collective power building. This paper discusses systemic design’s current positionality and establishes an understanding of community organising principles, and finally translates several key principles for designers of systems-level change. It calls for designers to learn from principles and practices of community organising to adopt relational approaches that can sustain the promise that systemic design envisions and enables.

KEYWORDS: community organising, relational design, power, design justice, transition design

RSD TOPICS: Cases & Practice, Learning & Education, Methods & Methodology

Introduction

Community organisers know what designers may not, that change happens through relationships that build collective power through distributed leadership and over time. These organised relationships are centred around the needs and resources of those most affected by the issues being tackled and towards the change they collectively seek. Community organising is based on the belief and aspiration that those who are marginalised and hold little power within a system can improve their lives by 1) putting their resources together to, 2) build the power they need, 3) to get the change they want (Alinsky, 1972; Ganz, 2019). In this approach, the sought-after change is not designed by an external purveyor of ideas; it is collectively designed by the community based on their experience and research. Allies can contribute to that process by invitation, but the ownership of the decision is unequivocal with the community. If designers of systems-level change are to confront legacies of oppression through their design work, they will need to develop a more explicit and relational understanding of how to build and shift collective power within a system and find their appropriate role in that process. We posit that designers who aim for positive systemic change will greatly benefit from learning about the history of community organising, its methods, and its aims.

Designers, like all professions, are ideally in a constant state of learning. Systemic design and other fields, such as participatory design, transition design, and design justice, signal the way in which designers are gaining skills to design with and for communities towards social change (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Irwin, 2015; Tuck, 2015). Design is learning from itself and increasingly needs to learn from other established fields of social change work, including community organising. In this paper, we address our motivations for engaging in systemic change work. We discuss observations about the shortcomings of systemic design to address legacies of oppression. By offering historical context and some principles of community organising, we nudge designers to become students of collective power building and offer related prompts to engage in that work. We believe systemic design can play a role in confronting legacies of oppression. We hope this offering can help designers live up to their potential to make things far better than if they had never intervened in the first place.

Positionality through public narrative

When people come together in a community organising effort, they start by sharing their stories, values and goals in a way that invites others to do the same. This type of sharing is referred to as one-on-ones or initial house meetings in organising and is an uncommon practice in design settings. Positionality statements can serve to reveal not only the intention behind a designer's actions but also their life experience, which positions them to engage with communities in change processes (hooks, 1991; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Wallace, 2019). One form of this style of introduction in community organising is called Public Narrative, and it includes the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now (Ganz, 2008). When people share their personal journeys, if interests, values, and experiences align, they can commit to taking action together (Carey et al., 2022). This is precisely how this paper came about and why we encourage designers to engage more often in sharing their positionality within the change work they seek.

As we shared our stories when we first met through the Alfred Landecker Democracy Fellowship, we realised we had an alignment of values. As authors, we were brought together through a deep respect for the places and people we grew up with, a commitment to improving our collective well-being, and a vision for more agency within our communities. Both of us are white women, one from a sprawling and auto-oriented US suburb and the other from a low-income, immigrant suburb in France. We had both grown up with a certain amount of privilege in diverse communities that suffered from inequity and resulting marginalisation. We had access to education and resources that gave us the tools to understand and do something about the inequalities we had witnessed, and we were trying to do just that.

But we also shared one concern with our fields of systemic design and community organising. Although the underpinnings and training in design and organising are very different, their aspirations are merging. In the aftermath of the internationally broadcasted murder of George Floyd, more people were called to work on system-level change for social justice. Centring the voices and needs of the most marginalised became the norm on paper, but much less so in practice. Who are we, as organisers and

designers, accountable to? And how do we make sure the answer to that question is “to the communities we work for and with”?

We believe that whether you are an organiser or a designer, this is a question with which you have grappled. Community organising and design practices are becoming more inclusive and mindful of systemic and intersectional oppression. We believe it is essential to build explicit structures and norms that can uphold our values and cut through our biases, blind spots, or vanity metrics that can fool us into believing we are resisting systems of oppression when we might actually be reinforcing them.

Blindspots in design’s shift to systemic

Increasingly, designers seek to design in ways that more deeply involve those who are impacted by the very systems that design aims to repair, improve, or transform (Carey et al., 2022; Chilisa, 2019; Costanza-Chock, 2020). Yet, despite its good intentions, the legacies of design practice often uphold entrenched systems of oppression (Carey, 2020; Ortiz-Guzman, 2017). In this section, we discuss design’s shift from material to systemic, and how going forward, designers can work in ways that reduce structural inequities. To do so, we offer a relational lens through which designers can embark on community-led change processes (Blauvelt, 2008; Carey et al., 2022; Fathallah et al., 2021).

Outdated design practices might have encouraged designers to be the primary facilitators of change as opposed to designing for collective stewardship of change (Bosch-Gomez et al., 2022; Costanza-Chock, 2020). However, participatory design, transition design, design justice, and others have evolved design towards community-led approaches, considering longer time horizons while aiming to advance equity and sustainability in the process. Design as a field is moving away from expert-led interventions towards community stewardship (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Irwin, 2015; Tuck, 2015).

Designers are becoming increasingly interested and called into social justice spaces through system-level design of services and even policies (Dorn & Vaz, 2022). Many designers today are trained to examine systemic circumstances as essential to avoid

unintended consequences and create better worlds (Irwin, 2015; Sevaldson, 2019). Design-thinking has developed the capacity for designers to make attempts at empathy building, participatory action research (PAR) further emphasises community ownership of design processes, transition design urges mapping of wicked problems and stakeholder relationships, design Justice aims to co-liberate (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Irwin, 2015; Tuck, 2009). These are all important advances in the design profession to become more community-led and to build better worlds.

However, the agency to design in today's world is not evenly distributed (Ansari, 2019; Chilisa, 2019). Many people who are attributed and paid for their title as designers, rarely come from the most marginalised communities (Ansari, 2019; Gomez et al., 2022). Historical systems of oppression ensure that often the act and privilege of changemaking has deeply entrenched power imbalances (Friere, 1968). Marginalised communities, often Black and brown, indigenous, and immigrant communities, lack the resources needed to gain power in the system (Alinsky, 1972; Kendi, 2020; Salami, 2020). Disparities are fueled by dominant patriarchal, mechanistic systems that reproduce racism and white supremacy, ableism, colonialism, transphobia and more (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Salami, 2020). These legacies of oppression are a result of accrued imbalances of power that are very often violent (Jones, 2016).

A form of rigidity is baked into design processes, while what is needed is to embrace more emergent and relational practices (brown, 2019). The legacy of design as a profession and process by which trained professionals materialise artificiality at various scales and temporalities remains deeply entrenched (Saito et al., 2022; Simon, 1988). Alongside this, systemic design is often unable to fully disembed itself from product and profit-driven capitalist systems in order to become more aware of its blindspots that prohibit more just futures (Guzman, 2017; Wizinsky, 2022). A primacy of profit in design rarely examines the extractive sources of capital it depends on nor questions its limits to growth (Giridharadas, 2019). To confront legacies of oppression, those who hold power must question how it was gained and how it can be distributed (Chilisa, 2019; Friere, 1968; Guzman, 2017).

Power structures are often upheld by carrying out a design process without embeddedness and commitment to lifetime horizons in design processes (Dorn, 2019; Tuck, 2009). Instead of asserting a pre-meditated design process, designers can help generate creativity and ownership through long-term relationship building within communities in an effort to understand how best to support their efforts to enact the change they need. We posit that when those who are most proximate to an issue because of their embeddedness within the experiential context are able to envision and design a change process, the more iterable, predictable, and preferred outcomes (Carey et al. 2022). To be embedded requires longer-term relational approaches within the design practice.

Towards relational practices in design

Relationality can be understood as ancient indigenous knowledge of an innate human characteristic by which we interact and co-create in ways that are fundamentally interdependent, even when we do not recognise this understanding (Goodchild, 2021; Escobar, 2018). In contrast, mechanistic, cartesian-style thinking has resulted in an operating paradigm in which we become individual units, rarely considering our actions at the level of a community (Scary, 2011). As designers begin to embody a deeper understanding of relationality and interdependence for mutual benefit, a greater skill by which to co-design liberatory systems is developed (Escobar, 2018; Friere, 1968). In this pursuit of co-liberation, designers can play a significant role in designing networks of cooperation.

For designers to adopt relational approaches, longer-term commitments to places and projects become important. Relationship-first ethics promotes designers to be embedded in a network, along with other actors who can steward change together. In this way, designers can be capacity builders for local networks by bringing their design skills to bear alongside a collection of other capacities (Kelly, 2012; Manzini, 2015). Through this process, designers can grow a capacity for relationality as a precursor to design actions (Dorn, 2019; Escobar, 2018). Though there are many approaches to developing relationality, community organising as a proximate field to systemic design offers practical applications.

Community organising works through an understanding that long-term systemic change requires an explicit design of relationship building as a first principle (Alinsky, 1971). The following section gives an overview of a few common principles and practices from organising as an offer to systemic designers. We believe that taking up the mantle of community organising principles in design is important to opening up other gateways to relational practices that support transformative and sustained change.

Community organising: understanding the basics for designers

People have been organising to rise up against oppressive forces since the beginning of time (Alinsky, 1971). Organisers draw from these ancient lessons to build power and negotiate change using basic principles. Today's widely practised community organising methods are often attributed to sociologist Saul Alinsky (Alinsky, 1971). His approach stemmed from an observation that disenfranchised people had no chance at building the power they needed to get the changes they wanted without strategically and creatively using their existing resources (Alinsky, 1971). However, there are many schools and legacies of organising that stem from movements like the Black liberation movement, civil rights movements, and labour organising (Han et al., 2021). Many organising methods are consistent in all of these movements and practices, while some are more intentional in designing structures and teams that create accountability to and within the community (Dickman, 2020).

Here we cover many of the principles that we think can benefit systemic design education. We have distilled eight principles, drawing primarily from the Alinsky method, Marshall Ganz, and from the experience and training of Tara Dickman, one of the authors of this paper (Alinsky, 1971; Ganz, 2010; Dickman, 2020). The eight principles for effective community organising can be understood as follows.

1. Power: understanding when we have built the ability to move others towards an action aligned with our purpose and when we have not.
2. Realism: building from the world as it is and not as you wish it would be.
3. Self Interest: taking into account what drives each person's decisions and actions to build strategy and roles they can commit to.

4. Relationships: constantly engaging in relational processes of aligning shared values, interests and actions.
5. Ownership: decisions are made, distributed, and managed within the community.
6. Roles: are based on a shared strategy, explicit and circumstantial.
7. Agitation: a culture of learning, coaching, and accountability creates more effective actions.
8. Creativity: leveraging individual and collective creativity and expression is essential for an effective change process.

In the following section, we discuss many of these principles and how they work together to create change, thus emphasising the importance of the capacities which we believe designers of systems-level change can develop.

From powerless alone to powerful through relationality

In organising, there is no product; instead, there is a process to build the collective power needed to get the changes a community seeks (Ganz et al., 2018). Power in an organising context is understood as having two sources; 1) organised money and 2) organised people; people can represent power in numbers, skills, assets or even forms of privilege (Alinsky; 1971; Hackman & Wageman, 2005). The quality of relationships is therefore an organiser's currency, not as a list or a mass of people to mobilise, but as people to listen to and with whom to build strategy (Ganz, 2012). Organisers understand that power can come from organised people but also that people operate out of self-interest (Alinsky, 1973). As a result, relationship-building processes are central to the organiser's activity; one-on-one conversations are utilised to get a better understanding of each person's values, concerns and goals, alongside small and large group meetings to share stories and build community around shared values and goals (Ganz, 2018; Nohria & Khurana, 2010).

The simple diagram (Figure 1) is a revised version of an iconic poster that promotes the notion of community organising. The image prompts designers to shift from an empathy stance, where designers are the ones gaining information to design a solution, towards an organising, relational approach. In a relational approach, designers become part of a larger community-led effort within which they have a specific and time-bound role that has been determined with or by the collective in accordance with their goals (Dickman, 2020).

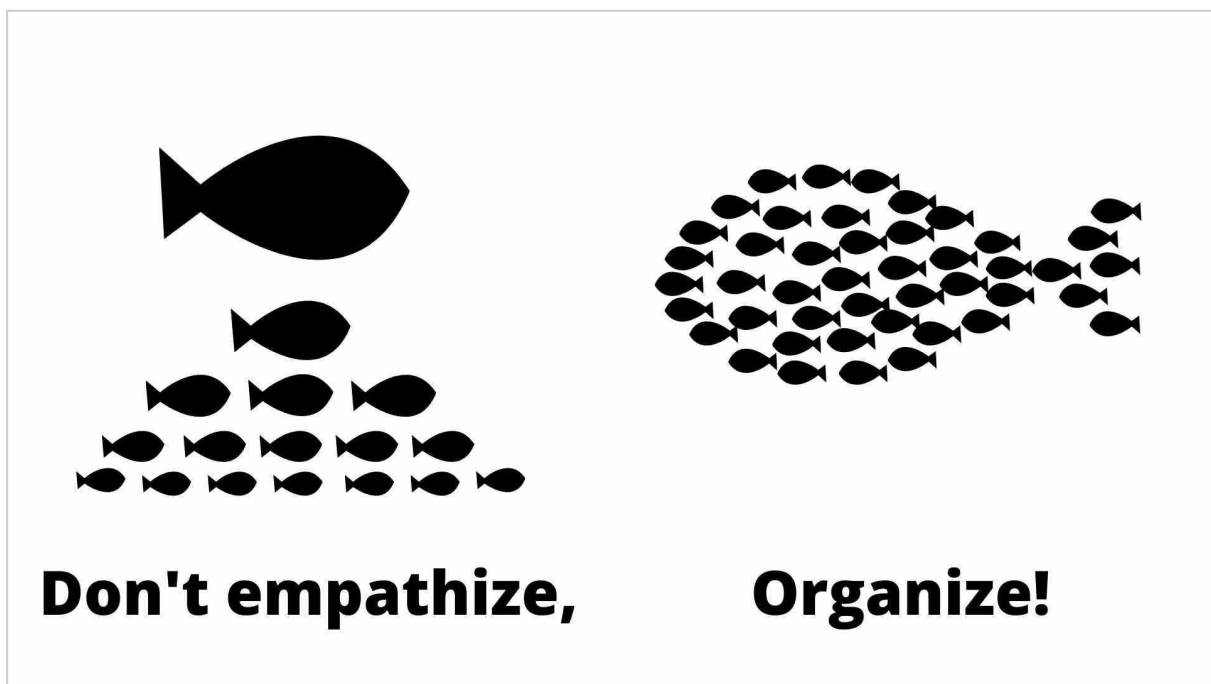


Figure 1. Variation of classic design poster, prompting a decentering of design (Dorn, 2022)

Ownership, roles, and accountability: how everyone can play their part

According to community organising principles, no matter how big the problem, it is always something that can eventually be overcome as the result of collective action and a large number of people taking small actions within a shared strategy (Alinsky, 1989; Ganz, 2009; Schumacher, 1989). In this way, organising can be effective at confronting oppression by and for communities most impacted in ways that shift the paradigm entirely (Ganz, 2010; McAleve, 2016).

Organisers understand that lasting change relies on distributed leadership and ownership models (Ganz, 2010; Han et al., 2021). Distributed leadership happens when organisers work through interdependent leadership teams in which individuals can bring complementary strengths to bear on solving a common and complex problem. Through shared ownership structures, no one person can celebrate a victory nor take responsibility for failure since the strategy was not their singular responsibility. Instead, an entire constituency can tap into its own collective resources and cultural references to build a strategy (Dickman, 2022). To that effect, organisers learn that to build agency and develop leaders, never do for others what they can do themselves (Alinsky, 1973; Ganz, 2008). Community organiser and activist Ella Baker taught that, “what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people” (Baker, 1972).

Distributed leadership, however, does not equate to leaderless movements or anarchy (Freeman, 1972). Quite the opposite, it means explicit values, structure, leadership roles, norms and rules to which each can be held accountable. The work of Marshall Ganz, Ruth Wageman and Robert Hackman on team design are particularly helpful, and they echo the principles of group-centred organising designed by Ella Baker (Chachage et al., 2010; Ganz, 2010; Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Roles can rotate, be paid or unpaid, but teams are bound, and stable for a given period of time, based on what a unique organising strategy requires at that moment. They are distinct from identities or professions: they are what one does in a given setting rather than who one is (Ganz,

2008). The explicit structure provides clarity for regular evaluation, peer coaching, feedback and course correcting before lasting damage is done (Ganz et al., 2018).

These principles are applied within a sequence of actions, which are taught differently depending on the schools of organising. Although the steps are not always linear, the idea of designing a strategy with tactics and moving to action before evaluation and adjustment as a process each time creates an emergent rhythm (Dickman, 2020). The flexibility and fluidity of the process allow leadership teams to learn from experience, hold each other accountable, and grow individually and as a team (Hackman & Wageman, 2015). Evaluation in organising reflects the goal of building power with a distributed leadership model. Teams will ask: did we achieve our strategic goal? Did we build capacity as a group? Did each person grow in the process? Organised people are key to building power, and power is necessary to achieve the change sought; individual and collective growth, therefore, cannot be overlooked.

We posit that building a value-based structure with matching principles, norms, and accountability measures provides a safeguarding process that, if absent, overlooked, or rushed, fails to address essential questions in both organising and design. Who, fundamentally, is the project serving? Who owns it, and how is that reflected in the people involved in the decision-making process, the timing, the funding, and the strategy itself? Overlooking such a process ignores the major risk, in both organising and design, to decide for — or diminish the voices of — those most affected by the issue being tackled rather than putting skills and resources at their service within an interdependent and community-led structure.

Applying principles of community organising to systems-level design

To apply community organising principles to design, we first must decenter the designer from the overall change-making process. In an organising context, a trained designer is just one of many people whose lived experience and related capacities can be brought to bear on a change-making process. An important principle in community organising involves a “people first, program later” orientation (Alinsky, 1971), one that we urge designers aimed at sustainable systems-level change to adopt. When community

resources are organised in unexpected, creative ways, they can be leveraged to gain power that can negotiate new terms of existence (Alinsky, 1971). A designer must recognise that they are powerless without the power of many. As systemic design aims to confront the legacies of oppression, there are many key questions that must be answered (Carey et al., 2022; Dickman, 2020).

Specifically, If a designer has not been affected by the issue they are called to address – but even if they are – before starting with an idea for a particular process or outcome, they must gain clarity about who and what authorises their participation. Designers might start by asking themselves:

- What is my relationship to this group of people? Do I understand their issues? How so?
- What experiences, values, and interests do we share that align us to this work together on the issue they are facing?
- Are they interested in us working together? How do I know? How can I find out?

If any of this is unclear, then it is worth reflecting until clear responses can be verbalised; try working backwards:

- What is the series of events that have brought me to this specific moment?
- What is my broader self-interest, my goal, which is attracting me to this initiative?
- Does the community have ownership and agency in our potential collaboration or even in the project itself?

From an organiser's perspective, answering these questions helps establish clarity to make ethical and informed decisions as to the next steps — which include co-creating a set of agreements with a community (Chilisa, 2019; Dickman, 2020).

If and when the responses to these questions lead a designer to understand that the context is appropriate for them to work on the project, then further questions related to structure and leadership must also be addressed collectively, with all parties involved (Ganz, 2018).

- What are our values as a group?
- What are we trying to achieve together?
- What values and agreements are we going to uphold in the way we work?
- What roles does that entail, based on what skills and experiences?
- Do we have the resources to make sure we can distribute roles according to our principles and values?
- What norms and accountability mechanisms can we create so culture and decision-making are clear and explicit? How can we make sure the decision-making power is in the hands of those most affected by the issue we are trying to solve?

Moving forward, responses to the following prompts that are included in training courses taught by Marshall Ganz ought to be explicitly formulated (Ganz, 2018):

- Who is the constituency of the project?
- What is the issue?
- What would be different if the issue were solved?
- Why has the issue been unresolved previously?
- What change is needed?
- What would need to happen for there to be progress on this issue?
- What resources does the community hold?? Why have these resources been so far untapped?
- Can we achieve change by simply organising our resources differently, or does someone else hold some of the resources we need?
- What is the ecosystem of actors and relationships we have to work with?
- How can we collaborate to use our resources in new ways to achieve our goal?

Based on these responses, the designer becomes part of a team and may be authorised to contribute to defining a shared theory of change. A theory of change can be understood as a hypothesis about how resources could be used to achieve the change needed, along with a strategic goal, tactics, and timeline. A theory of change also encompasses clarity on how success will be measured, when it will be evaluated, and how decisions will be made throughout (Carey et al., 2022). Defining a theory of change

ought to be considered an important part of a design process, a process that resists immediate intervention to instead prioritise community-led systemic change over longer time horizons (Carey et al., 2022; Irwin, 2015).

Conclusion

Imperfect design, imperfect organising

All people can design for the same reasons that all people can organise; to make life better, under the terms one or many deem necessary (Alinsky, 1971; Manzini, 2015). Community organising, like design, is a tool that can be wielded towards many aims. Community organising can play a role in outcomes like the supreme court overturning *Roe vs Wade*, or it can build movements like the Movement for Black Lives. Community organising is prey to many of the same default modes of upholding systems of oppression that design can, even while attempting to pursue the opposite. Rather than putting the practice of community organising on a pedestal, we instead are shining a light on some of what we believe to be its most useful yet sometimes overlooked practices, which we think can also strengthen systemic design practice.

Absent an understanding of power and relationship building, design remains abstracted from the contextual experience needed to confront legacies oppression. As an antidote, a key discipline in organising is taking the world as it is and strategising from there, and not one might wish it would be (Alinsky, 1971). Community organising emerges from communities that seek to create systemic change for themselves, whereas design has a history of solving the problems of others (Ansari, 2019; Costanza-Chock, 2020). Understanding organising can help address legacies of oppression that design has historically been untrained and unable to address. Community organising holds knowledge about power that has often been left out of design education but is essential for a good design ethic today. When designers begin to learn more from community organisers, it can lead down a path that supports designers to be more effective in resisting systems of oppression. We urge designers to go down that road.

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