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Summary of Constanza-Chock's chapter “Design Values: Hard-Coding Liberation?” (2020).

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Introduction

This summary explores Chapter 1 of *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (Constanza-Chock, 2020), a book that examines how design can be reoriented to be led by marginalized communities, dismantle structural inequalities, and contribute to collective liberation and ecological survival. Drawing on the principles developed by the Design Justice Network, the book is structured around five key questions concerning the values, practices, narratives, sites, and pedagogies that shape design. Chapter 1 addresses the first of these questions: "What values do we encode and reproduce in the objects and systems that we design?"

The chapter opens with the author's experience participating in protests following Donald Trump's election in 2017, reflecting on the role of digital technologies in collective action. While platforms such as Facebook facilitate mobilization through features like events, their design also constrains long-term organizing by limiting organizers' ability to communicate with participants after an event. Although activist-oriented platforms exist, they remain less accessible due to their cost, complexity, and limited adoption. Consequently, social movements often rely on corporate social media platforms whose primary objective is to monetize users' attention rather than support collective organizing. This tension leads Costanza-Chock to ask why we continue designing technologies that reproduce existing systems of power and how design might instead contribute to collective liberation.

Affordances, disaffordances and dysaffordances

To examine exclusion in design, the chapter introduces the concept of affordances, originally developed by psychologist James Gibson (1970) and later popularized within Human-Computer Interaction by Donald Norman (2006). Affordances refer to the properties of an object that indicate the actions users can perform with it. Costanza-Chock (2020) argues that conventional design theory largely overlooks how social inequalities—such as race, gender, class, and disability—shape the perception and accessibility of affordances. The ability to perceive or use an affordance depends on one's position within the matrix of domination, Patricia Hill Collins' (2020) concept describing the interconnected systems of oppression through which power, privilege, and disadvantage are distributed. For example, written instructions may be inaccessible to someone who cannot read the language or to a visually impaired person, while a staircase may be perceptible but unusable for someone with reduced mobility. Affordances are therefore never equally available to everyone.

Building on this idea, the chapter distinguishes between disaffordances and dysaffordances. Design disaffordances refer to actions that are blocked or constrained by a particular artifact; an affordance for one user may simultaneously function as a disaffordance for another. A door handle, for instance, enables access for some users while preventing access for others with limited mobility. Dysaffordances constitute a specific form of disaffordance in which users must misidentify themselves to access a system. Costanza-Chock illustrates this with Joy Buolamwini's experience of facial recognition systems failing to detect her face because of her skin colour, forcing her to wear a white mask to be recognized (Buolamwini & Timnit, 2018).

Intention and impact

The chapter also discusses the relationship between intention and impact. Unequal affordances may result from deliberate exclusion—as illustrated by the deliberately low overpasses built near New York's Rockaway beaches to prevent buses carrying working-class, predominantly Black communities from accessing them (Winner,1980) —or they may emerge unintentionally through design decisions. Regardless of designers' intentions, Design Justice evaluates whether designed systems disproportionately reduce opportunities for already marginalized groups while benefiting dominant ones.

Discriminatory Design

This leads to the concept of discriminatory design, which Ruha Benjamin (2016) defines as the normalization of racial hierarchies within sociotechnical systems. Costanza-Chock (2020) broadens this concept to include all forms of structural inequality embedded within the matrix of domination. Much discriminatory design results from standardization, since many products are developed around a narrow model of the human body that privileges only a small portion of the global population. The chapter illustrates this through early virtual assistants, which could respond to queries about suicide but failed to recognize phrases such as "I've been raped", revealing how the experiences of feminized bodies had been excluded from design processes.

Costanza-Chock (2020) further argues that discriminatory design can be understood as forms of microaggression. Although often unintended, discriminatory design produces countless small but persistent exclusions that accumulate over time, reinforcing the perception among marginalized groups that the world was not designed for them.

Value Sensitive Design, Universal Design, and Inclusive Design

The chapter then situates Design Justice in relation to three existing design approaches: Value Sensitive Design (VSD), Universal Design, and Inclusive Design. VSD, developed by Batya Friedman and Helen Nissenbaum (2002), examines how technologies embed pre-existing, technical, and emergent biases, arguing that “freedom from bias” should be considered a core criterion of good design. Universal Design, strongly influenced by disability activism, advocates designing environments and products that are accessible to the widest possible range of users, as exemplified by audible pedestrian crossing signals. While Costanza-Chock (2020) recognizes its significant contributions, they argue that Universal Design still aims to design for everyone equally, whereas Design Justice explicitly prioritizes those who are systematically disadvantaged. Inclusive Design, particularly as developed by the Inclusive Design Research Centre, similarly rejects universalized users but instead focuses on creating adaptable and flexible systems capable of responding to diverse individual needs.

Design Justice

The chapter concludes by arguing that achieving Design Justice requires fundamentally rethinking design itself. This involves critically examining how designers, design practices, and artifacts reproduce the matrix of domination while simultaneously developing new tools and methods—including intersectional user stories, testing approaches, training datasets, standards, validation processes, and impact assessments—that actively challenge structural inequalities rather than reinforce them.

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