Inclusive design and making in practice: Bringing bodily experience into closer contact with making

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This paper develops our understanding of the nature of inclusive design, first through critique of controversies that to some degree downplay inclusive design as a distinct design movement. Attentive of these criticisms we then observe designer-making practices in two cases, which respect individual difference and encourage a more material mode of participation. By bringing the bodily experience of people with (dis)abilities more closely into their own design processes we see positive characteristics and advantage in inclusive design’s closer connections with making. This research advocates the expansion of inclusive design into a more material, inclusive designer-making movement, to acknowledge the universal problem of designing for everyone’s unique difference.

Keywords: design process, inclusive design, making, social design, participatory design

Recent more critical and political interest in design has ignited debate on whether there are different kinds of design. The call to designers and researchers to ‘just design’ (Tonkinwise, 2015) prompts the reflexive question, what are we doing when we qualify ‘design’ with another term? This act draws attention to what design practice routinely does not do. This action can highlight problems in society for design to address (Manzini, 2015), to identify the social causes and problems that motivate design work (Koskinen, 2016). It is, however, precisely this critical attention that the inclusive design movement aims to provoke, that is, to shed light on what design should routinely address but currently does not do well. Through this research we seek out ways to improve (to re-configure and raise awareness of) inclusive design processes and practices.

The inclusive design movement aims to bring about change, to redress through design the many situations in everyday life that do not accommodate the diverse capabilities of people with (dis)abilities. In this paper we will examine what this means for design (researchers and designers) in more depth and what it might involve in designer-making practices. In contrast with ‘the design community’ which has not produced its own arguments about what kinds
of change it would like to see’ (Margolin, 2007) the inclusive design movement, as we will see, has been vocal and active in several ways. It is by inspecting the nature of inclusive design, its conceptual foundations, processes and situated practices that a future, more material inclusive design movement is proposed.

1 What kind of thing is inclusive design?

Roger Coleman, the first Director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre states that ‘Inclusive design is not a new type of design but an intentional project that sets out to include significant sectors of society that are all too frequently ignored or overlooked’ (Coleman et al., 2003). He identifies the design intent to include an overlooked niche market but does not mark this out as a different kind of design. Indeed, its difference is again downplayed, ‘inclusive design is neither an entirely new genre of design nor a separate specialism. It is framed with a more generalist approach to designing … products and services [to] address the needs of the widest possible audience, irrespective of age or ability. Inclusive design … is a complex field incorporating many different facets and viewpoints’ (Morris, 2003: p viii). Coleman and Morris both emphasise the inclusion of broader groups of the population in the design of products, services and environments and consider that inclusive design should not be separate from ‘good design’, a point that is further scrutinised by Heylighen and Bianchin (2013). These characterisations of inclusive design are insightful, however vague in their description of what designing in this way might involve. This challenge is taken up in this paper.

Inclusive design is both routine, part of the everyday backdrop to our lives, and also embraces the exceptional situations and circumstances that people encounter but are these positions in tension? What are the characteristics of inclusive design, how are these paradox manifest in everyday situations and how might design methods, processes and practices respond? These questions require further attention. Another problem is, when we speak of inclusive design are we always describing the same thing? The first purpose of this paper therefore is to advance our understanding of the nature of inclusive design (a project started by Heylighen, 2014), to provide further clarity and explore how inclusive design can be routine and at the same time exceptional. This is approached through critique of the controversies and paradox in the conceptual foundations of inclusive design, which position inclusion amongst other social design concerns. Then, we examine two cases to see how the individual capabilities of these people were met by their makers. The position this research aims to develop, and that these cases illustrate, is that inclusive design’s potential is yet to be fully realised. It is through stronger alignment with the maker movement (low-volume modes of production, sometimes referred to as post-industrial, batch size one) that designer-makers can offer personalised processes to participate in the design of unique things (see for example Coons & Ratto, 2015). This research provides a reasoned argument for the re-
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