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Unpacking dominant design: a critical analysis of power and dominant discourse in design

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This paper reflects on what design can do to address forms of discrimination. It does so by looking at existing efforts through the lenses of dominant design. The starting point is the discussion on how current dominant discourse in design works to promote reductive forms of identity. Subsequently, the paper examines how dominant design operates and how its practice affirms, reproduces, and circulates structures of oppression. The concept of dominant design is presented and explained by outlining its relationship with power structures. Then, three principles that characterize and sustain dominant design are described: institutionalization, universalism, and solutionism. These principles show how when we rethink design practices towards social justice, a profound understanding and engagement with power dynamics is key to prevent the reproduction of oppression and how this should be taken into consideration by those engaged with current efforts.

Keywords: *dominant design; power; discourse; oppression*

1 Introduction

Within the design community, a growing number of scholars have discussed how Design has social shaping qualities that establish, reproduce, and impose certain realities (Escobar-Tello et al., 2021; Mazé, 2019) and, therefore, shape how people experience the world (Fry, 2010). With this, design processes and outcomes inform constructs of identity, such as gender, race, class, ability, ethnicity, and associated forms of oppression (Hamraie, 2016; Perez, 2019; Williams, 2019). This emerges clearly in the work of Criado Perez (2019) who points out the underlying and perpetual systemic discrimination against women that is embedded in design processes, where artifacts and systems are often based on the needs and qualities of a dominant group of people – ‘the default male’.

Crucial to this, is the understanding that embedding constructs of identity and forms of oppression into design processes, practices, and outcomes, often goes unnoticed (Williams, 2019). For instance, in the specific field of Gendered Design, scholars are only now beginning to understand and analyze how binary views of gender are actively or unintentionally encoded in designed artifacts (Maher, 2017)



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and that diverse identities are not considered in their design (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Discussions on the oppressive implications of Design are not limited to gender. Some scholars are identifying instances of racial discrimination (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Costanza-Chock, 2020; Williams, 2019), and ableism (Cachia, 2016; Hamraie, 2016) encoded in designed objects and systems. These discussions point to a large issue – that is one of discrimination and power: Design risks enforcing homologation, reducing diversity, and perpetuating social inequalities when it intentionally or unintentionally favours a dominant narrative. Since dominant narratives are an integral part of mainstream forms of Design, designers might enforce discriminatory practices if the power dynamics that characterize design processes and knowledge are not properly acknowledged by the design community.

Among current efforts done to transform Design in order to address issues of discrimination, it is possible to identify: 1) approaches that challenge power dynamics from the margins; and 2) approaches that are situated within dominant discourse. What is their potential to reduce discriminatory and oppressive practices by Design?

To answer this question, the paper provides an overview of how Dominant Design, and its systems, processes, and tools, act as a discourse of power that upholds systems of oppression and its main principles of operation. Finally, this paper offers reflections on how this understanding is crucial when transforming and rethinking design to prevent dynamics of oppression.

2 Dominant Design and power relations

With the expression Dominant Design, we refer to mainstream design practices, which include all design methods, processes, and tools that are widely accepted as ways of practicing Design over others (Akama & Yee, 2016). It can be argued that current Dominant Design discourse is based on Western foundations of knowledge since by exploring design theories, a handful of names, mostly from the United States and Europe, constantly stand out and their voices have been key in informing and evolving design theories – that is design scholars such as Nigel Cross, Donald Schön, Horst Rittel, Melvin Webber, Bruce Archer, Herbert Simon, and Richard Buchanan, among others. Not only has design theory been shaped by them, but, over time, related approaches also became recognized as being the appropriate way of designing (Akama & Yee, 2016; see also Frankel & Racine, 2010; Schultz et al., 2018). As a result, Dominant Design discourse is not only built on centralized ways of knowing, acting, and seeing (Decolonising Design Group, 2017), but it has also led to the marginalization of alternative ways of knowing and world-making from the development of design theory, the practice of Design, and the definition of design outcomes (Akama & Yee, 2016; Prendeville & Koria, 2022). In other words, those that do not define and fit within the dominant narrative, in this case, both Dominant Design practices and knowledge and the mainstream values and ways of living and being that it brings forward, experience marginalization.

To prevent marginalization and oppression by Design, there is a need to understand and address the way dominant practices of Design maintain and perpetuate power structures (Canli & Martins, 2016; Costanza-Chock, 2020; Martins, 2014); as well as key concepts of power, i.e., power-knowledge and discourse, and how they relate to Design. According to Foucault (1990), power-knowledge is concerned with the correlated and reliant relationship between power and knowledge. Power and knowledge exist in conjunction, therefore, “it is not possible for power to be exercised without

knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault, 1980 as cited in Mills, 2003, p. 69). That is, relations of power rely on knowledge production to sustain and circulate effects of power. In the specific case of Design and oppression, this means that Dominant Design knowledge sustains the exercise of power by those who generated it and, consequently, this produces and feeds forms of oppression. Therefore, the knowledge produced within paradigms of Dominant Design might reinforce certain worldviews that do not consider other cultural perspectives and forms of identity – e.g., indigenous ways of living and being, minority identities, etc.

Power-knowledge operates through discourse, which refers to all statements that form the tangible and intangible systems that inform the way reality is perceived and to the process in which those statements are circulated over others (Mills, 2003). It is important to notice that discourse exists because of “a complex set of practices which keep them in circulation and other practices which try to fence them off from others and keep those other statements out of” (Mills, 2003, p. 53). This means that discourse is less concerned with the ideologies or values in circulation and more concerned with the processes and procedures that enable certain discourse to come into being as dominant forms of knowledge while disregarding and continuously subordinating others. Within Design, this refers to the set of practices in place for Dominant Design ideas to circulate and be considered as the appropriate ones – e.g., academic standards and practices, design curriculum and university rankings, etc.

Based on these conceptualizations, Design is a mechanism of power, since design theory, practice, and materialized outcomes, are not only forms of knowledge but together also act as statements and processes of a discourse that reinforces certain ideas and worldviews above others. In the next section, we will point out the practices and mechanisms that have enabled Dominant Design practices to affirm themselves, as well as the ones that constantly sustain their operation of power and reproduce forms of oppression.

3 Dominant design principles

According to the results of an integrative literature review performed to collect and synthesize relevant academic literature that focused on broader discussions of Dominant Design, power, and oppression, three principles of operation work to sustain and reinforce Dominant Design: (1) institutionalization; (2) universalism; and (3) solutionism (as seen in Figure 1). More specifically, the included literature focused on the institutionalization of mainstream design practices, their oppressive implications, and how Design as a discipline ought to address these issues of power. The Engineering Village and Design & Applied Arts Index databases were used to search across key design journals and conference proceedings such as CoDesign, Design and Culture, and the Participatory Design Conference.

Dominant Design

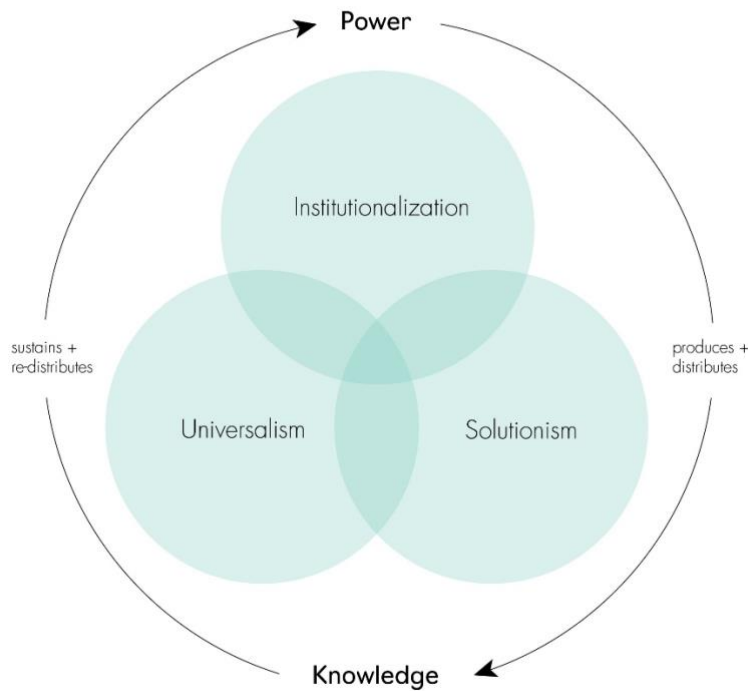


Figure 1. Overview of the operationalization of Dominant Design.

The first principle, institutionalization, refers to the process in which Dominant Design discourse is produced and maintained. The process of the institutionalization of Design works to recognize design knowledge and establish Design as a discipline and accepted practice through a system of knowledge production, institutions, and people in positions of power (Del Gaudio et al., 2021; Foucault, 2014). Therefore, the process of institutionalization inherently engages with relations of power by continuously producing and disseminating certain discourse. As certain discourse (and related artifacts) are established by “expert” knowledge and institutions, they are assumed to be universal, impersonal, and standardized (Escobar, 2018) – values often praised in contemporary society. Due to these values, institutionalized discourse dominates over others, and possible or existing alternatives are disregarded and the institutionalized version is normalized. Historically, institutionalizing design as a practice and discipline enables some design methods, tools, and knowledge, to be widely recognized as best practice. Institutionalized design discourse not only tends to benefit from existing power relations but also enforces and upholds relations of power that strengthen the status quo and result in the manifestation of Dominant Design. As the process ensues, dominant ways of knowing or dominant realities continuously exclude or devalue other possible alternatives.

For processes of institutionalization to succeed, discourse that align with universalizing characteristics are often favoured because they enable them to be widely accepted, therefore maintaining their relevance. Within Design, we can notice that institutionalized design often pushes the relevance of universalism forward, which as a consequence strengthens the dominance of mainstream Design. Mainstream design methods and processes often aspire to align with universalism (Rosner, 2018;

Toppins, 2022). Universalism supports the idea that norms, assumptions, and the knowledge they are based on are generalizable to every situation irrespective of culture or context (Prendeville & Koria, 2022) meaning design knowledge, models, artifacts, methods, or processes may be reproduced and applied to any scenario (Akama et al., 2019). These design practices become powerful tools that may transcend culture, time, places, and people (Akama et al., 2019; Akama & Yee, 2016). As a result, they may be spread and disseminated widely across contexts. Views of universalism in design practice have emerged over time such as the notion of “designing for all”, regardless of gender, ability, culture, class, etc., which emerged as a way to approach accessible design in the built environment (Erkiliç, 2011). Although the intention may be righteous in its attempt to include all people, universalism may erase differences and reinforce exclusionary practices (Costanza-Chock, 2020) since they assume shared experiences and are disconnected from social and political complexities (Akama et al., 2019; Schultz et al., 2018). Consequently, users are often assumed to belong to a homogenized or dominant group of consumers. Bardzell (2010), rejects claims of universalism in Design on the basis that humans are “too rich, too diverse, and too complex a category to bear a universal solution” (Bardzell, 2010, p. 1306). Universal solutions subtly work to eradicate differences and complexities which enforce normative views and eliminate the discovery of possible or alternate ways of being (Hamraie, 2016).

Similar to universalism, another mechanism that supports the process of the institutionalization of Design and the operations of Dominant Design, is solutionism. Dominant Design tends to align with certain aspects of solutionism. The concept of solutionism is based on the Morozov’s ideas (2014) who questions the belief that technological devices and services can be relied upon to solve social and personal problems in society (Cramer, 2014). In the context of modern Western societies and organizations, solutionist thinking is directly linked to a mindset of problem-solving, which works to shape political and social relations by problematizing certain realities over others (Edwards et al., 2021). Similarly, early design theorists and practitioners who attempted to understand the processes and methods of design practice emphasized and idealized design’s problem-solving features (see Dubberly, 2005). For instance, design practice often focuses on changing an existing situation into a desired outcome and developing new or alternative solutions of what ought to be instead of what is (Kimbell, 2015; Simon, 1996). In this sense, Design is often seen as “a means to achieve specific ends”, which has enabled a doctrine of solutionism to spread and become embedded within many processes and practices of Design (Rosner, 2018). Solutionism and its respective features often conform to existing favoured relations of power and therefore may be an appealing strategy to adopt. This may be seen in the popularization of design as innovation. As a problem-solving mindset is adopted, this opens opportunities for fast-paced solutions that can be delivered promptly which is what managerial structures strive for to promote innovation. Innovation often maintains social inequalities and forms of oppression by constantly marginalizing certain people, values, and issues (Pecis & Berglund, 2021). Considering the widespread need for solutions and belief in the potential of technology, this has strengthened the recognized value of Dominant Design practices.

4 Discussion and final considerations

As seen in the previous sections, Dominant Design operates through structures of power and three main principles of operation. The process of the institutionalization of Design uses social institutions and their organizational practices as means to enforce Dominant Design discourse. At the same time, design institutions and those in positions of authority or privilege often encode strategies of

universalism and solutionism in design practices either implicitly or explicitly. Consequently, within design culture and ideology, certain ideas and methods are circulated and idealized over others. This process circulates one understanding of design where, as outlined earlier, forms of discourse act as sites of power that spread certain ideologies while subordinating others. For example, the Double Diamond model, a popular mainstream design process, perpetuates the authority and privilege of a certain community of “experts” and circulates a certain approach to world-making and being (Akama & Yee, 2016) over other potential alternatives through the process of institutionalization and the embodiment of universalism and solutionism. The effects of this may be seen at an individual level since Design shapes how people experience the world (Escobar, 2018; Fry, 2010). For instance, this might mean that an individual experiences discrimination in the form of microaggressions where manifestations of oppression are reproduced by design (Costanza-Chock, 2020). This is because Dominant Design does not consider the social and political complexities of one’s identity and therefore devalues their way of knowing and being.

However, as mentioned in the introduction, given that Design is an instrument of power (Mazé, 2019) and is “both a product and producer of societal values” (Martins, 2014, p. 987), it can therefore not only perpetuate forms of oppression but also challenge and transform dominant practices of Design and address issues of discrimination. This understanding is at the origin of several efforts recently implemented by scholars in Design to redirect it. We can see two main directions emerging: 1) those that challenge power dynamics from the margins; and 2) those that are situated within dominant discourse. In terms of transforming Design from the margins, design researchers have recently questioned dominant constructs of mainstream design knowledge by proposing and highlighting alternative ways of designing (St John & Akama, 2022). These approaches seem to work with practices that tackle mechanisms of Dominant Design, such as the movement to decolonize Design (Schultz et al., 2018). Additionally, in contrast to notions of universalism and solutionism, some design researchers propose principles that oppose universalist and solutionist thinking such as the turn to focus on pluralistic perspectives (Escobar, 2018). These approaches have the potential to tackle issues of oppression since they do not embody all the operationalizing principles of Dominant Design. Though, they both are still niche within the discipline of Design; and they are often immersed in academia or the very spaces of authority that they are trying to challenge (Schultz et al., 2018). The latter presents concerns around the ability to enact change from sites of power. For instance, there is often a tendency for designers and institutions entrenched in structures of power to “make the token gesture” of supporting movements toward social justice rather than implementing the critical and substantial change that is needed (Schultz et al., 2018, p. 82). Therefore, marginalized design approaches that aim to address issues of oppression are presented with challenges of evolving and transforming practices of Design without conforming to existing systems of power that will reproduce processes of Dominant Design.

On the second direction, there is growing awareness of the social responsibility Design holds to address issues of inequity in Dominant Design practices (see for instance IDEO, n.d.). A series of approaches belong to this direction, such as Human-Centred Design practices and Inclusive Design. While these approaches may be seen as a step in the right direction to tackle issues of oppression and injustice, the working of the mechanism of power within and for Dominant Design that we described in the previous sections, shows that solely focusing on strategies that promote inclusivity and diversity without an understanding of power dynamics, presents risks to the process. Specifically, without

understanding the dimensions of power-knowledge and the ways in which design practices are established and circulated – the three principles described above, there is the risk of perpetuating and strengthening the operations of Dominant Design, instead of weakening them. For example, Gendered Design (e.g., Schiebinger et al., 2020), while still an emerging field, so far has been working within the dominant paradigm of Design practices, therefore, with the risk of reproducing the same type of injustices its scholars are attempting to address. If their newly envisioned approaches for more inclusive design processes conform to existing dominant ways of establishing themselves and dominant characteristics, instead of undoing the dynamics of oppression inherent in design processes, they will succumb to reinforcing processes of institutionalization and enforcing doctrines of universalism and solutionism. For instance, this might mean adopting a dominant perspective that presumes a totalizing or universal view of gender, such as focusing on a homogenous view of patriarchy that solely reflects a generalized understanding of gender issues – e.g., White, cisgender, middle-class women from the Global North. Strategies of solutionism would then assume that all issues of gender could be addressed through innovative solutions that disregard contextual variations and complexities concerning gender such as ethnicity, race, class, ability, location, etc. These ideologies and practices would then be circulated, affirmed, and reproduced through institutions and their organizational practices, thereby supporting reductive forms of identity and subsequently participating in the perpetuation of discrimination and marginalization.

All this shows how in response to the challenges of exclusion and oppression inherent in current mainstream ways of practicing Design, a profound understanding of Dominant Design and its mechanisms of operation are essential to prevent the reproduction of systemic injustice and power imbalances. Therefore, the analysis of power and dominant discourse in Design provided by this paper serves as a first and fundamental step in the direction of defining strategies to rethink design knowledge towards design justice.

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