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# **Design and Democracy**

doctoral dissertation

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## Theses

- (1) The discourse on the relationship between design and democracy has been present – albeit to a lesser extent – throughout the history of design since the industrial revolution, linked to the emergence and spread of mass production and mass consumption.
- (2) The discourse of design and democracy is dominated by the role of design in relation to mass production and mass consumption, and thus its impact on mass audiences, but the plurality of interpretations of both design and democracy means that the relationship between design and democracy can be found in many different areas, and thus the conceptualisation, starting point and purpose of the sources are fragmented.
- (3) The discourse of design in relation to democracy is (not exclusively, but) strongly linked to the ethical aspects of design. The authors reiterate again and again that design is characterized by two sides. The precise characters of the sides vary, but design for democracy, with democratic aspirations, is always an activity associated with the “good” side: it solves people's real problems, not just whips up their desires or satisfies their perceived needs; it offers not superficial but profound, long-term solutions, not only for the individual but also for the community, for society, and thus actually makes the world a better place.
- (4) The reference to the notion of democracy – based on the examples studied so far and in the present historical moment and geographical location – indicates morality, ethical aims and intentions to the public, customers, users – regardless of whether the activity behind the label is actually democratic and ethical. Thus, in the field of design, we can observe the phenomenon of “democracy washing”: the labeling as democracy of products and phenomena whose democratization is debatable, but which nevertheless win people's sympathy and trust. This is neither compatible with democratic values nor with the ethical practice of design.
- (5) The discourse of design and democracy in Design Culture Studies is dominated by the view of the world and the phenomenon from the designer's point of view and the attribution of full agency and responsibility to the designer. However, in the field of design and democracy, it is very clear that the designer's agency is limited.
- (6) Both the moral issues of design, democracy washing and misconceived agency can be traced back to the idealism of both designers and the public. Embedded in the political context, it is particularly important, but useful in all fields, to bring this idealism into contact with reality, to develop the ability to navigate the network of human and social games played by designers and non-designers.
- (7) As design has historically been professionalized in the for-profit sector and is predominantly used there in contemporary design, it can add value in the public sector, but its methods and objectives need to be audited and aligned with democratic values, procedures and goals.