

# TAKING THE PULSE OF RESPONSIBLE DESIGN; EXHIBITIONS AS A CRITICAL DISCOURSE VENUE

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## ABSTRACT

While there are examples of public discourse around responsible innovation in science, technology, and engineering, less exists on public discussion in the field of responsible design. Without creating space for this to happen, how can design educators stay abreast of the contemporary perspectives of the societies they wish their students to serve?

Using a single case study methodology, we describe a snapshot safari activity which convened a multidisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners to reflect on and discuss design exhibits and their relation to social innovation. We propose this activity as a conceptual model for convening new forms of publics around exhibited work, enabling critical discourse on different responsible design perspectives. We believe this model could form the basis of further active research ultimately supporting universities to stay contemporary in their relationship with society through a better understanding how others understand responsible design and helping design pedagogy nurture the responsible designers the modern world needs.

*Keywords: Design show, exhibitions, publics, responsible design*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This position paper suggests that to teach responsible design effectively it is critical for universities to stay current with how this is understood from different contexts, scales, and perspectives, through dialogue with diverse groups of people. We propose that the creation of new forms of publics could provide an opportunity for vital multidisciplinary discourse and this paper offers one model for achieving this around exhibition materials. A review of literature situates this research within the context of responsible design, and we explore how designers currently engage with diverse groups to understand modern societal perspectives.

We highlight how an activity around a degree show created a vibrant space for discourse on social innovation. Based on this we outline a conceptual model which we speculate could be used to reconceptualise how we might use exhibitions in the future. We propose that using this model, exhibitions could become spaces to convene new forms of publics, enabling critical discourse on responsible design through specific and relevant lenses. We believe this type of discourse is essential in enabling responsible design pedagogy to stay relevant, and meaningful. The study contributes a means of achieving this vital discourse through the proposed model. This qualitative, participatory case study draws on auto-ethnographic reflections on the experience of a snapshot safari activity (described further in the companion paper to this work [1]) without being underpinned by a previously constructed hypothesis. Future data gathering will allow for further inductive theory building.

## 2 BACKGROUNDS

The European Commission highlight the importance of “engagement of all societal actors; researchers, industry, policymakers and civil society” [2] in the research and innovation process. The practice of design-led responsible innovation generally takes this wide perspective, engaging with society broadly in assessing the potential implications of new technological or scientific proposals and Stilgoe et al., [3] propose four dimensions to support good practice in doing this; anticipation, reflexivity, inclusion, and responsiveness.

In their 2020 report the Design Council reflect on the need for responsible designers, stating: “Rather than a focus on individual user needs, we need to make sure we’re thinking about wider societal and environmental needs” [4]. Responsible design practice, however, often focusses more narrowly on the needs and values of specific communities and user groups, engaging with these limited stakeholders throughout the design process [5]. In his call for a new social agenda for designers, Papanek, described responsible design as “Design for people’s needs not for their wants” [6]. Salamanca et al., go on to suggest that responsible design is “Intentional action that deals with the design, reification, and maintenance of positive, equitable, and meaningful futures desired by sustainable networks of human and non-human actors” [7]. We find ourselves asking; how well we understand the needs of others, and particularly within a design school how are we engaging more widely with diverse groups of people as hybrid communities [8]? In what ways are we convening new forms of publics in spaces of shared reflexivity and learning to challenge hegemonic and dominant narratives? How might engaging in these spaces help new designers improve their sensitivity to current societal values and perspectives, allowing them to contribute to a more ‘social model’ of design [9]?

In their exploration of different forms of public dialogue Chilvers, [10] notes the increasing importance of informal, bottom-up types of participation in invited spaces of micro-engagement. Our case study describes a space where individuals were invited into a loosely structured space to share their personal perspectives around a specific theme of interest in a new form of publics. Warner, [11] describes publics as a temporary and self-organised groups of strangers bounded by an event or shared space and through reflexivity and discourse. Agonistic spaces that facilitate feedback have been used for some time in participatory design, sometimes described as design events [12] or design devices [13] they have involved design objects as probes or triggers to elicit critical responses on the feasibility or desirability of a domain. Dunne, [14] explains how speculative design exhibits created by Royal College of Art students in response to ‘what if’ scenarios are used to inspire, raise awareness, and provoke debate. However, the creation of design events around already curated exhibitions for exploratory discourse on responsible design is not widely discussed and this paper responds to this gap.

### **3 POSITIONS**

Design educators are known to include stakeholders and users in the design process on specific projects, during research phases, co-creation, and participatory design and in the testing and critique of products and services. These engagements tend to include carefully selected groups, those who it is anticipated may be impacted by the interventions being designed. The authors suggest there are opportunities to engage with people in new forms of publics around a broader scope, outside of individual design projects to understand the contexts in which future projects might sit. We propose that even short micro-engagements as participatory design events could enable design educators to hear diverse perspectives which might begin to dismantle dominant narratives, build a more-rounded understanding of responsible design, and gather contemporary insights on how design is interpreted and shaped by society. New models of public discourse like this, leveraging the final degree show, could provide a forum to convene these publics.

### **4 RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT**

In summer 2022 a UK university design school hosted a conference around ‘Design for Social Innovation’. The event (designed and hosted by the Authors), brought together nine visiting academics holding teaching and research roles in different disciplines, connected through membership of a European research network, nineteen local academics, many belonging to the university’s responsible design practice research group, and eleven practitioners from organisations including charities, social enterprises, small businesses and independent consultants working on projects to further social justice, all with existing links to the university (Table 1). Delegates fell into three of the four main roles frequently found in sustainable public dialogue forums [10]; those studying, coordinating, and practicing.

Table 1. Participants

Visiting Academics	Disciplines	Countries
	Economics & Management, Economic & Natural Resources, Environmental Education, Governance Law & Society, Industrial Design, Marketing, Organisational Culture, Social Enterprise.	Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Israel, Malta, Poland, Romania
Local Academics	Disciplines	Positions
	Developmental Psychology, Design, Innovation & Global Development, Design Innovation & transnational education, Design & Social Innovation, Fashion Communication & Research Design, Fashion Design, Human Computer Interaction, Interdisciplinary technology, Multidisciplinary Innovation, Fashion Design, Industrial Design	3 Post-Graduate Students 3 Doctoral Students 10 Teaching/Research Academics 3 Researchers
Local Practitioners	Position and Sector or Organisation	
	Director of Social Design Agency, Independent Researcher, Evaluator, Advisor & Facilitator, Independent Consultant (Third and Not-for-Profit sector), Chief Executive of Regional Charity, Director of a Mental Health & Performance Coaching Organisation, Research Consultant, Managing Director of Social Enterprise School, Manager of Charity and Arts Venue, Social Innovator, Director of Opportunities for a National Charity	

The two-day conference included talks, workshops, ‘walkshops’ and a snapshot safari activity, designed to provide different spaces for people to share and discuss their experience of and ideas around design for social innovation.

## 5 CASE STUDY

The snapshot safari activity was designed to provide a space for multidisciplinary discourse on social innovation. It took place around the 2022 final degree show [15] across the University’s faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences. The exhibition was described as a celebration of students’ creative practice and covered the work of students of Interior Design, 3D Design, Design for Industry, Interaction Design, Graphic Design, Fashion Design, Fashion Design & Marketing, Fashion Communication and Architecture & the Built Environment. Provided with a map of the show galleries, participants were asked to work individually for ninety minutes, responding to the following questions, and considering what social innovation meant to them:

- What is the shape and size of design in different social innovation contexts?
- Where and what is designed?
- How has design been used?
- What might have been learned through the design process?
- Might your photo communicate an idea that words cannot?

Through a written brief, people were invited to explore exhibits, taking six photos of things which brought to life their thoughts on social innovation. Local academics accompanied people around the show and helped with queries. Informal conversation between participants took place, sometimes including visiting public, exhibiting students, or teaching staff. After a break, small groups of participants convened for two hours to share and discuss their photos which had by then been printed. People were asked to incorporate their photos into annotated group posters responding to the question “How should we live?”. The following morning, posters were displayed, and each group presented their poster which stimulated discussion within the wider group, on different and shared perspectives on design for social innovation.

## 6 RESEARCH DATA

Data on this case study was collected through Auto-ethnographic observations (as designers of/participants in the activity), an audio transcription of group discussion during the poster exhibition, photos of the safari process and the exhibition posters created.

## 7 FINDINGS

Participants engaged enthusiastically throughout the individual work and during the small-group and whole-group discussions which were rich and stimulating. People described the experience as pleasurable, enjoyable, and even awesome. While many participants commented on how overwhelming the task felt due to the scale of the design show and the range of exhibits, they felt that the brief helped to set a clear focus. One participant reflected *“Yesterday we had a task. So, my mind was ‘listen, I have to choose six photos on a simple criteria’, I was automatically skipping those that didn’t sync with my filter”*.

Participants described being attracted by exhibits with relevance to their own work or interests, and one expressed how the process had made them reflect on their work from a more critical lens as they explored the show. People found it surprising that there were academics and students facilitating the show, not just exhibits on display. Some students were not particularly eloquent or not in a position to explain specific exhibits, whereas others really helped to bring them to life for the participants, this dynamic impacted people’s experiences of different parts of the exhibition and the photos they took. The structure of the activity provided different ways for participants to take part, and it was noted that some people engaged more actively in one-to-one conversations, whereas others preferred group discussions. The dialogue evolved as participants moved from considering their individual perspectives to hearing that of others. The posters created by the groups highlighted a range of perspectives on responsible design for social innovation including the importance of ensuring multi-generational discourse and focussing locally for global benefit. Participants asked how we might respond to hidden issues through design, whether discrete design can help to destigmatise and if unfinished designs can help explore possible futures. Summarising the event, a participant said, *“This was interesting, like a mini handbook, of how to actually start a new conversation[...]*creating a new space to start new conversation by bringing together actors that wouldn’t have come together[...]*”*.

## 8 LIMITATIONS

This preliminary piece of research considers a single case study, where a diverse group of people already connected through previous collaborations and with shared interests came together to discuss an area of joint concern. Publics convened of people not previously known to each other or from vastly different backgrounds may experience different outcomes. The authors acknowledge that the term diverse has a plurality of definitions and we have a responsibility to consider what communities and narratives need to be included when more consciously convening people. The model proposed in this paper highlights the opportunity for this to be explored and improved through further research.

## 9 CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Publics are convened through this conceptual model which is composed of and animated through eight connected elements: Place, People, Perspective, Prompts, Process, Pace, Practice and Philosophy. *Place* – The snapshot safari activity can start anywhere materials are being exhibited. An exhibition does not need to be established for the purposes of this activity and any show can be repurposed. *People* – The model can be scaled for use with different sizes of group providing group discussions are appropriately facilitated. Further research might consider including students explaining their exhibits or participating as part of their learning experience. *Perspective* – Participants should be invited to view exhibits from a specific perspective or ‘subject of conversation’ [13] to stimulate reaction and interaction. *Prompts* – Participants should be provided with questions to set a foundation for the activity and help frame their thinking while exploring the exhibition. These questions should be tailored to the specific perspective of interest. *Process* – The activity should follow the three distinct steps in order. In step 1, people should be given the opportunity to take agency over and understand their own interpretations of the brief through taking photos with the option to discuss with others. In step 2, participants should move on to poster-making and discussion in small groups. Step 3 involves discussing the posters as a whole group. These steps acknowledge and accommodate the spectrum of introversion and extroversion that may exist across a group. The use of photos is a key feature of the model, as having physical evidence early in the process encourages people share their individual perspectives rather than default to groupthink [16]. Different levels of structuring are possible within this aspect of the model. *Pace* – As a micro-engagement the pace and rapidity of the model is important in helping participants focus on the key points and encourage them to summarise their complex thoughts so they can be quickly distilled into

poster format. *Practice* – The snapshot safari utilises show exhibits as ‘boundary objects’ [17] becoming ‘tools for conversation’ [11] which help gather people for focussed discourse. During this activity the shared space itself becomes a ‘design Thing’ [18] a socio-material assembly, with participants together shaping an understanding on an aspect of responsible meta-design [19] through their discourse and contributions. *Philosophy* – Designed to create an inclusive, collaborative, and enjoyable learning environment, the activity should have an informal aesthetic with materials written in simple language. It should allow room for creative exploration without setting any expectations on outcomes.

## 10 PROPOSITIONS

The case study described in this paper demonstrates the potential value of reconceptualised public exhibitions for convening new forms of publics. This paper proposes a model which could be used to convene diverse groups in micro-engagements, around existing boundary objects for critical discourse on aspects of responsible design. Using this model could create space to explore different perspectives on non-dominant narratives such as feminist, anti-ableist, bio-centrist, or post-colonialist practice. Facilitating publics for discourse using this model and incorporating it into pedagogy could enable universities to stay contemporary in their relationship with society and help responsible design teaching stay relevant and meaningful to nurture the future designers the modern world needs.

While this micro-engagement ‘takes the pulse’ of responsible design, it does not seek to replace the infrastructuring work of long-term stakeholder engagement and attachment forming which are key to enabling deeper discussions on responsible design practice and education. The authors are keen to understand how academics might take the role of orchestrator [10] in these publics, reflecting on what is being shared and using it for greater impact through changes in how responsible design is understood and taught. We believe it would be valuable to carry out further research on how this model might be replicated across exhibitions in other parts of the world, and we are keen to understand what comparative studies might reveal about responsible design in different contexts.

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