

Introduction to *Diseña 22: Design, Oppression, and Liberation* (2nd issue)

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ABSTRACT

This special edition introduces eight papers at the intersection of design, oppression, and liberation. These papers refer to social structure as a common leverage point to criticize and transform different oppression relations, namely racism, gender, marginalization, epistemic injustice, and colonization. The contributions follow recent moves in social movements and social sciences that recognize that tackling different oppression relations enables seeing oppressive structures more clearly. Nurturing solidarity bonds across different oppression struggles becomes an urgent task in this new field of research we call Oppression Studies of Design. Building upon anti-colonial views on oppression, this field connects design research with the history of changing social structures through liberation struggles.

Design is naïvely described as a deterministic relationship between form and function. In critical definitions (Lefebvre, 1991; van Amstel, 2015), design is a dialectical relationship that preserves and transforms a third element: structure. By recognizing the overcoming movement or *aufheben* (Beckett, 2017), design runs away from the confinement of the object, reaching up to the subjective-objective constitution of human beings in the world (Grohmann, 2016; Vieira Pinto, 1960/2020). In this constitution, design reproduces social structures as much as it changes them.

As a response to our call for papers on Design, Oppression, and Liberation, we received 32 submissions, seven of them already published in the last issue of *Diseña* (21). These papers denounced design's complicity with oppression but also design's solidarity with liberation (van Amstel, Noel, et al., 2022). Now, we introduce eight more papers in this new issue. While handling them throughout the peer-review process, we noticed the underlying concern with social structures.

SOCIAL STRUCTURES IN OPPRESSION STUDIES

Social structures can be defined as a set of durable economic, political, and cultural relations—oppression being just one of the possible relations (Freire, 1974; Vieira Pinto, 1960/2020). Social structures can be embedded in design, but design is always embedded in the structures of the society in which it is created (Vink, 2022). Design is an intentional act to materialize, dismantle, or update the structural relations that give rise to it. In this way, design turns: a) social structures into forms; b) forms into functions; and c) functions back into structures. Each turn is an attempt to twist the socio-material, which pushes back in the opposite way, eventually keeping old relations under new forms and functions.

The social structures themselves are not the oppressors but they can be oppressive, much like the technologies and systems that embody them (Gonzatto & van Amstel, 2017, 2022). Changing oppressive structures requires changing people and not just things, as Paulo Freire (1974, p. 114) reminds us. It is the moral duty of the oppressed to liberate the oppressor, but organizing is hard because the organizing structure is usually already favoring the oppressor.

As in the previous issue, finding at least three reviewers for each paper was challenging due to organizing structures that result in significant unpaid labor from groups of people who can ill afford to give away their time. Even so, the growing articulation of networks for design justice and liberation (Costanza-Chock, 2018; van Amstel et al., 2021) made it precariously viable. Most of our reviewers face a combination of gender (hooks, 2000) and underdevelopment oppression (Vieira Pinto, 1960/2020), since they are socialized in academia as women working in or migrating from nations like Brazil, India, Chile, Mexico, Colombia, and Lebanon. We thank both the reviewers who worked hard to overcome these oppressive structures and the authors who responded so positively to the call for papers.

These collective articulations are laying the ground for what we could call Oppression Studies of Design, an emergent field concerned with criticizing as much as with overcoming oppression in, throughout, and by design. Building upon anti-colonial views on oppression (Fanon, 2007; Freire, 1996; hooks, 2014; Vieira Pinto, 1960/2020), this field takes the materiality of the world as a foundation to analyze human relations (Gonzatto & van Amstel, 2022), and dialogue as a process of reality transformation (Noel et al., 2019): «Dialogue is the encounter between humans, mediated by the world, in order to name the world» (Freire, 1996, p. 88).

By naming the world, humans charge the world with intention and, as a result, the world becomes less natural and more social. Social structure is one among several ways humans name the world without saying it out loud, i.e., by accumulating work in ready-to-hand mediations that seem transparent or

invisible to naïve consciousness (Vieira Pinto, 1960/2020), yet crucial for distinguishing who is human and who is less-than-human in an oppressive relation. The design challenge, in this case, is not just to make social structures visible for the oppressors, but changeable for the oppressed:

The oppressed are not ‘marginals’, are not people living ‘outside’ society. They have always been inside—inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others’. The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’. (Freire, 1996, p. 74)

Other fields in design research are already quite engaged with making visible the invisible social structures we live by (van Amstel, Botter, et al., 2022; Vink, 2022). Oppression Studies of Design connect design research with the history of changing social structures through liberation struggles. When engaging with these struggles, the oppressed in different contexts can realize that, even though they fight against different types of oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, etc.), they also fight to change similar social structures (i.e., the capitalist mode of production), opening up the possibility for insurgent design coalitions based on solidarity bonds (van Amstel et al., 2021).

MAKING SOCIAL STRUCTURES VISIBLE AND CHANGEABLE

The research included in this special issue tackles several oppressive relations: racism (Toppins), gender (Fiadeiro et al., Bartal), marginalization (Batista e Silva), epistemic injustice (Serpa), and colonization (Abdulla and Vieira de Oliveira; Barcham; Torretta et al.). Nevertheless, they all highlight social structures as leverage points for criticizing oppression and enabling liberation.

To make the social structure visible, the authors herein examine the structural conditions of people’s lives (Fiadeiro et al.), unveil the structural issues behind design problems (Batista e Silva), find symbolic power structures embedded in design objects (Bartal), and provide context clues for social critique (Toppins). As for changing social structures, the authors experiment with participatory research processes (Serpa; Batista e Silva; Torretta et al.), welcoming pluriversal forms of participation (Barcham; Torretta et al.), engaging with users as critical actors (Fiadeiro et al.), forming alliances with students (Abdulla and Vieira de Oliveira), nurturing endogenous design practices (Batista e Silva), enacting subversive everyday gestures (Abdulla and Vieira de Oliveira; Torretta et al.; Serpa), developing design tools for decolonizing purposes (Barcham), designing socially-engaged speculative objects (Toppins), and promoting design justice (Bartal). In all of these attempts, it is possible to see the underlying strategy of letting social movements take over design to transform social structures from within.

The growing interest in social structures is a sign that Oppression Studies of Design are going deeper than denouncing the visible manifestations of oppression and announcing liberating forms. Design research is now concerned with social structure, a relational concept that cannot be tamed to a single object or a wicked problem (Saito et al., 2022). To announce liberating structures, design research urgently needs to learn from social movements and knowledge fields that have already tackled structural transformation with courage and rigor. Hopefully, this issue is just the start of a productive dialogue. □

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