

Amplifying the politics in Service Design

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Abstract

Witnessing the speed of growth and reach in demand for service design (SD) confronts us to ask what neoliberal forces are behind this acceleration? Are services, systems and structures *really* improving at this velocity, and what are we eroding and ignoring in turn? Pausing to ask about the direction and effect of change is critical to recognising SD's implication in the status quo. This paper presents a methodology of noticing precedents that are quotidian and dystopian to show how dominant logics of SD are commodifying social practices of relating and organising. By slowing down to attend, listen and reflect, our approaches reveal existing rituals, values, nuances and commitments that teach us what an apolitical SD fails to see. We contribute a methodology for amplifying the political in SD, arguing for an ethical path of resistance and reorientation to support ethical, transformative, self-determined practices of design, education and research.

Keywords: Politics, power, ethics, feminism, anthropology, reflexivity

Exposing unsettling politics

Service Design (SD) as a field, practice and industry has ballooned rapidly. *LinkedIn* (2020) ranked SD among the top 15 in future employment, and the demand for 'better' designed digital experience is sky-rocketing since the pandemic (Forbes, 2021). For many of us invested in meaningful change through holistic, collaborative and transdisciplinary approaches, pausing to ask about the direction and impact of this growth is critical. SD is implicated in many fields where major systemic change would be welcomed – including healthcare, sustainability, civic services and community-led issues (e.g. Balezdrova et al., 2020; Duque et al., 2020; Lomba & dos Santos, 2020) – but can be expected to be slow and complicated to effect. This begs

the question as to whether anything worth caring about can, or should, happen *this* quickly.

SD's mission to solve problems rapidly through designing 'alternatives', often with insufficient regard for complex socio-political contexts or long-term effects, is both an ideological and pragmatic legacy of its disciplinary parent, which Akama (2021) has called *Dominant Design*. Dominant Design is a phenomenon that centralizes power through the modern 'one-world-world' hegemony (Escobar, 2018) by following and facilitating economic capital and colonial forces (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Stern & Siegelbaum, 2019). Rails of free market capitalism have been deeply sunk into global structures that, first, created Dominant Design and, then, helped SD to accelerate. We can look at the Service Blueprint, invented by Shostack (1984, p.134) to instill the importance of rational management techniques because "[b]etter service design provides the *key to market success*, and more important, to *growth*" (our italics). She gives an example of 'better' services: "McDonald's formula for fast-food service" is "the product of genius – a brilliant flash that can never be duplicated" (p. 133). The Blueprint was designed for the systematic replication of such 'ingenious' services. This is McDonaldization, to seamlessly design how workers should follow commands of the system and customer responses (Julier, 2017). Service Dominant Logic from service marketing and operations management has been a foundational theory, practice and expansion of SD, and its 'co-creation of value' (Vargo & Lush, 2015) is firmly within a capitalist market frame. These theories carry the baggage of rigidity, rationality, universality and individualism (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2020). If we pause to study the origins and effect of these ubiquitous methods and logics, we can see that they bequeath neoliberal values to products, systems, structures and experiences, designing the world through its design. From hereon, we refer to mainstream and hegemonic SD as *Dominant SD*, to allude to its parentage *Dominant Design*.

This type of growth is a construct of the Enlightenment, along with such concepts as 'progress' and 'development', which have steered us towards the unsustainable mess we are in (Kallis et al., 2015). Historically, to be of service was to be a servant and subservient to a master. Given this class structure, we ought to be concerned with why power literacy remains so inadequate in SD (Goodwill et al., 2021). If we consider the dynamic, intersectional positionalities of those involved in social change, including the designer-researchers themselves, analysis is failing. The pervasive absence of substantive ethical or political questions in practice and in theory is a critical shortfall. This paper asks the SD community to confront our complicities in serving the already-powerful forces of neoliberalism, and the scarcity of political engagement, responding to the urgent calls we heard as *Tensions, Paradoxes* and *Plurality* at *ServDes.2020*. Extending this through the themes of *ServDes.2023*, we



suggest a concerted vigilance for worldviews and practices that are being threatened by the apolitical tendencies in SD. We also ask how people's entanglements with power, space and one another that are everywhere *outside* SD might rework the established theories and practices *of* SD. This aligns with weighty discourses such as Respectful Design (Moran et al., 2018); pluriversality (e.g. Botero et al., 2018;

Escobar, 2018), decolonizing (e.g. Schultz et al., 2018), design justice (e.g. Design Justice Network) and Transition Design (Irwin et al., 2020), towards a much-needed 'redesign of design' (Light, 2019).

Political contribution and methodology

Our contribution is a reflexive methodology for amplifying the political in SD, generated through a series of questions as our way of committing to an ethical practice. These aim to be in conversation with those who can recognise their own participation in Dominant SD, and to those who are trying to 'do good'. Reflexively asking critical questions is a start in attending to shifting asymmetries in relation to the often complex positionalities of participants (including the designer-researcher) nested within dynamic socio-economic structures. These questions could include, for example: 'What and when is a service? As defined by whom?' and 'How are your design practice and designed outcomes engaging with power, including your own?' Our approach is informed by feminist anthropology, humanities and social science research that engages with systems of power and relation (Hartman, 2008; Gordon, 1997; 2018). It is a 'how' of engaging critically with disciplinary practices in SD. Through this methodology, we offer a path of resistance to (and reorientation from following) Dominant SD.

The co-authors have selected noteworthy examples from their collaborations and localities to propose attention to the nuances of connecting, sharing and organising: neighbourly relations, hosting and greeting guests, and organising around shared experiences and needs, all of which are increasingly subject to designing services. There have always been various and informal ways of doing things – what Gutiérrez Borrero (2015; 2020) calls *diseños con otros nombres*: 'designs with other names'. We focus on these small movements as a way of showing what socio-cultural obligations, assets and structures have been altered and flattened when the bulldozer of Dominant SD comes through. We note that community organizers have been working with design by another name for many years as part of the diversity of everyday orchestrating that people do to get things done (Agid, 2021; Light & Miskelly 2008; Courpasson, 2017). These sit alongside professional approaches like civic SD (eg. Lam et al. 2015), relational SD (eg. Cipolla 2012; Neuhoff et al. 2022),



community-based SD (eg. Pahk et al., 2018), and social innovation (eg. Ferreira & Botero 2021; Kim 2018).

In showing lived experiences that exceed or precede the presumed ‘expertise’ of Dominant SD, we aim to disrupt SD’s overt pragmatism. However, recognising and revaluing quotidian *designs with other names* is a double-edged sword. We heed caution by Gutiérrez (2020) of a blinkered focus on ‘innovation’ and ‘ingenuity’ within everyday practices, to systematise, operationalise, and enhance ‘service quality’. The mantra of ‘user-’ or ‘customer-centred’ from businesses, organisational management and public institutions sounds hollow when it privileges those already privileged and visible, coming at the expense of many other peoples, values and ecologies. This is the cruel ‘line of visibility’ of Service Blueprinting that deliberately conceals gendered, racialised, class-based service labourers off-stage (Akama, Schultz & Sosa, forthcoming; Brody, 2016). We argue that it is unethical to base ‘service quality’ on customer loyalty and satisfaction alone (e.g. Vashishth et al, 2021). We invite the SD community to step into the politics of refusal, because *not to carry on designing this way is also an ethical choice we can all make* (Agid, 2022). In many ways, our methodological proposals are a form of slowing down to pause and reflect on the trouble in which we are implicated (after Haraway’s 2016 “staying with the trouble”). It is a call to avoid promoting the apolitical status-quo.

The sections that follow take up varying politics through examples selected across three continents and described by each author: respectively Ann in the UK, Yoko from Japan, and Shana in the US.

Fostering and protecting relational assets

Platform capitalism (Liang et al., 2022; Srnicek, 2016) involves the provision of services in a race to the bottom, competing to erode worker pay and protections. Platforms support people to rate and choose competitive services by abusing the absence of labour laws and worker protections in the precarious gig-economy. What is regularly and persuasively described as ‘offering flexibility’ in employment, masks the underbelly of market-led algorithms that control and commodify people and resources to maximise profit for the few (Irani, 2019). Despite window-dressing that suggests a noble ‘idealism’ (Codagnone & Martens, 2016), these narratives are a veneer.

Services exploit underutilised assets (e.g. beds, cars, skills, time, etc.), but this ostensible environmental ‘good’ involves would-be monopolies creating externalities that are profoundly destructive. For instance, *AirBnB* has listings in more than 81,000 cities and half-a-billion users. What might have begun as a shared, spontaneous



activity between hosts and guests has scaled up globally through a model of monetization. The seamless, end-to-end customer journey is taken as a hallmark of SD, but at the cost of hollowing out communities by inflating rents, limiting long-term lets, increasing homelessness in cities despite thousands of apartments to rent. This in turn is driving social isolation and disconnection by privileging the users (mainly tourists) “who display scant interest in courtesy to their temporary neighbours” (Sherwood, 2019). The marketing of ‘experiences’ on *AirBnB* also commodifies, making adventures more standard and predictable, and less about unexpected discovery. It’s as if the quality of a journey can be bought and planned in, making a profit for *AirBnB* at each instance of take-up.

Erosion of cultural fabrics, neighbourly connections and social isolation has been a widespread concern for many decades (e.g. Putnam, 2000), and undoubtedly online technologies have further exacerbated individualism and isolation (e.g. Turkle, 2017). Personal negotiations are removed through digital platforms to spare social awkwardness. In examining how such platforms erode the social fibre that allows people to come together to make sustainable neighbourhood change, Light and Miskelly (2015, p. 8) question the implications of lessening “barriers of use” if it means that “people do not have to practice many of the cooperative tasks that were formerly essential to community life.” They discuss how “relational assets” emerge in neighbourhoods where there are multiple collaborative care initiatives, contributing to people wanting to live in the area (see also Bardzell et al., 2021). Relational assets are collective rather than individual; linking communities within a neighbourhood (Light & Miskelly, 2015; 2019). They emerge through the repetition of sharing resources and the exercise of goodwill. Even a collective vision can be a relational asset, changing imaginaries and aspirations for a locale (ibid.). The virtuous spiral promotes agency and pro-social values.

AirBnB is known for attempting to commodify pro-social values (Frenken & Schor 2017; Shareable 2018). It is not the only platform that seeks to exploit relationships with home and neighbourhood.

Nextdoor (2022) gathers streets and localities into an app where everyday life can be mediated online. It is not a generic tool like *Facebook* and *Whatsapp*, which are now ubiquitously used for local groups, from brewing to scavenging. It is dedicated to assembling neighbours, seeking to capitalize on people’s appreciation for local connection and support.

Nextdoor is where you connect to the neighborhoods that matter to you so you can belong. Neighbors around the world turn to Nextdoor daily to receive trusted information, give and get help, get things done, and build real-world connections with those nearby — neighbors, businesses, and public services (ibid).



Nextdoor aims to exploit the very fabric that makes a place desirable, trading on an area's relational assets and acting as 'a goldmine for [local] businesses' (<https://tech.co/digital-marketing/advertising-nextdoor-business>) who advertise and provide *Nextdoor*'s income.

The offer to increase trust and connection uses the growth ploy of sending out welcoming letters to everyone in a locality in the name of each new recruit, encouraging others to join. In many cases, this happens without the recruit's awareness, because, unless people read the fine print (where they can opt out), they will not know it is happening. It uses what looks like a real stamp and hand-written font to feign authenticity. We might see this as deploying covert strategies and touchpoints, in SD parlance. Needless to say, to find you have spammed the neighbours with letters purporting to come from you and promoting a service you are trying out (maybe only briefly) is not popular, especially without active consent. It draws on very different values from those alleged to be the point, a tension revealed in *faking* real neighbourly contact.

Ann speaks from personal experience: When I first saw one of these letters from a street not-so-close-by to where I live, I was intrigued that someone should go to the trouble of contacting me. I speculated it would have cost a small fortune if she were to have contacted everyone in the surrounding streets. When I realised that it had probably come without her knowledge, I went to have another look. 'Who writes these letters?', I wondered. 'Are they made as piecemeal, farmed out to a developing region, or was some kind of automation involved?' It looked very much like someone's actual handwriting, but it did not read as such. The cheery style was bland.

Nextdoor has become the mockery of *Twitter* for its pettiness and squabbles (see, for instance, <https://twitter.com/bestofnextdoor>). There is no direct translation between commodifying engagement with or between local people and a tendency to irrelevance and bad feeling, but in other "community pages" local facilitators work hard to make inclusive and pleasant environments for everyone (e.g. Rossitto et al., 2021). We might see this as the equivalent of working out the right ground rules for the use of a community hall and then bringing in and continuing to water some plants to keep it a welcoming space.

Looking at *Nextdoor* through the *Dominant SD* logic, their strategy ticks all the right boxes: scaling up localised interactions so the pattern can be replicated elsewhere. The platform is active in 11 countries at time of writing. They have used 'warm' touchpoints to initiate neighbourly connections. The effort is carried by the platform in creating seamless experiences and convenience, so residents don't need to act, but just 'belong', benefitting from a service that has taken the time, hassle and social



awkwardness from connecting with neighbours. And the platform is free of financial costs, even to the extent of inviting others.

However, when we compare the effort of a local community organizer and a platform, we are reminded that if we want to foster care, we have to spend time and effort nurturing it. Further, doing so is itself an environmental good (Light & Miskelly, 2019; Light & Seravalli, 2019). A sense of mass-production or, worse, fakeness demeans the sentiments of community-building as does a sense that someone is doing this for just their own gain. While there is a general ethic that people *should* be paid for their efforts, there are competing ethics of exchange here. It cannot be assumed that making money out of opportunity is a shared value; it can taint actions taken for prosocial reasons (Warneken & Tomasello, 2008). For example, if I am paid to help someone, I miss out on the happiness of shared burden – I get few to none of the reward endorphins that committing to doing a good turn can stimulate. Paying people for performing a task is not wrong, but it can change an offer of care into a mere transaction.

The most sustainable pattern in eco-social terms is that people are willing to make an effort for each other and build something more than individual relations. This trust is a significant part of relational assets: and, like trust in trust (Luhmann, 1979), these assets can embody a virtuous cycle – where the more you give, the more you ‘get’.

Relational assets do not belong to a person or company. They exist between those people and between those organisations evincing a quality that Ann (Light, 2022) calls “steadfastness or the desire for steadfastness” related to trust in one another. It is this belief in each other that cannot be simulated, though it can be inspired. It exists only through the *work of building trust between*. Some people can benefit more from developing this culture than others and awareness of this dynamic is needed to help address inequalities. *But trust cannot be sold and bought*. Relational assets cannot be ‘owned’ by an entity like a platform: they only exist relationally, in-between, as a rising confidence that initiatives can be fruitful. Qualities or values that can only exist in-between will invariably change when they are taken outside that relationship. Commodification is a symptom of seeing those qualities as movable, as if trust and reliance can be transplanted elsewhere, without the relational conditions, time and work that nurtured them in the first place.

Dominant SD is geared to scale social value by scaling up business. But social value does not scale; it varies by culture. It operates locally and even its meaningful boundaries and patterns of inclusion are idiosyncratic. (A large road is often a class divider, so that nearby houses as the crow flies share no resources at all.)

Taking the tools for making social value out of local hands reduces pro-social impact, in and of itself. Light and Miskelly (2019) tell of ‘unmaking’ a platform set up for



selling local, well-made craft items to address consumerist shopping patterns. The founders eventually took away the financial ‘selling’ platform that they had seen as essential to inspiring trust, realising that the trust that had grown was all vested in the area, the people and the local knowledge and change they had created. Trust existed in knowing the same streets and sharing materials. It was not reliant on third-party payment systems or touchpoints linked to reviews, validation tools and star-ratings. Instead, the work the founders did around the platform – of meeting makers, running festivals and fairs, holding social events, getting to know and ally with other key actors in the area – was essential to building both local trust and a viable local service (ibid).

In aiming to step more reflexively into complexities and particularities of building relationships, we ask; *What is visible and invisible to you as markers of trust and care in relationships? How is authenticity of engagement valued? and What alterations to the socio-cultural fabric are being proposed by your designs?* Our hope is to avoid a lethal failure in the solidarity needed to address global phenomena like climate change. If we want to care for ourselves and our planet, faking it is not enough.

Respecting socio-cultural customs

Expanding on relational assets, Yoko, in first person, gives examples of hosting, respecting and serving that arise out of kindness and generosity in Japan.

I have lived away from Japan most of my life, so it's wonderful to arrive home to immerse in customs of greeting and gifting as practices of hospitality. A hot or cold hand towel is offered, depending on the weather, at a café to clean and refresh my hands before eating. Tips are never expected. Where train conductors in the UK or US might police and penalise passengers with the wrong ticket, in Japan, conductors walk through the carriages to help by anticipating how passengers might change destinations mid-way or are confused by the complex rail system. These are examples and extensions of *omotenashi*, a cultural hospitality, discussed by scholars as a ritual connected to *cha-no-yu* (tea ceremony) that demonstrates sensitive consideration for the guests, to foster friendly relationships and ensure a convivial atmosphere during the encounter (Horiuchi, 2013). These social exchanges are heightened, especially when the hosts greet guests, visitors and strangers, because the degree of unfamiliarity intensifies the anticipation of their needs, concerns or wishes.

The Japan National Tourism Organization (n.d.) has taken to both celebrating and preparing tourists for this cultural engagement with guests and visitors:



...there is a deep-rooted culture, which comes from *sado* (tea ceremony), called *omotenashi*, meaning to wholeheartedly look after guests. The term is a microcosm of the country itself, representing the Japanese mindset of hospitality centring around care rather than expectation. That incredible sense of hospitality begins at every doorway. As you enter stores or restaurants, expect to hear the bellowing welcome of '*irasshaimase*' as you step inside. A polite nod or smile is all you need to offer in return – there is no cultural expectation that this friendly welcome will be reciprocated.... As you make your journey across Japan, you will find *omotenashi* everywhere. From the attentive care of retailers to the shinkansen cleaners who bow to the boarding passengers, *omotenashi* is present.

While such countless, everyday acts of *omotenashi* are invisible and everywhere, thickening and enduring in regional towns and communities, promoting this (as they do in a tourism website) is a precarious act. Tourism promotion is a form of advertising that lures visitors with constructed imaginaries and expectations. What may have been a heartfelt hospitality and the genuine encounter of a cultural ritual will undoubtedly 'cheapen' by mere association. Visitors may be misled to interpret such practices of welcoming as a part of 'customer service'. Indeed, we already witness these becoming *sābisu* (the English 'service' imported into Japanese language), which further mistranslates them into capitalism and cultural imperialism to make them more 'accessible' and 'consistent' as an international experience in businesses (Belal et al., 2013). To frame these as services fundamentally changes their nature towards universal and generic expectation, flattening personal warmth into a mere transaction. This is akin to how care and delight of an encounter can sour through tipping or a star-rating, shifting the power between the actors involved. This commodifies acts that are, and need to be, priceless.

We see this in SD where commodification through scripting gestures, emotional expressions and states of being can quickly become harmful practices, creating role stress (Wetzels et al., 1999). Remember those inauthentic smiles we've seen that required staff to perform the human 'touchpoint' of a brand experience? Penin and Tonkinwise (2009), very early, critiqued this emotional labour as a forced performance and professional constraint imposed on the service worker. Here, customers – often framed as the human 'center' of SD value propositions – are placed as superior to the host. This upturns the socio-cultural hierarchies of respect, such that customers are conditioned to expect and demand a service, which can then lead to abuse. A poster campaign on the human rights of service labourers in South Korea raises issues of gendered 'servitude': "the staff you are talking to is someone else's daughter" (ServDes.2020). We could argue that Dominant SD is participating and accelerating this world of simulacra and widening intersectional disadvantages.



If smiles and gestures are already altered by scripts and commodification, gift-giving is made more precarious by the fact that gifts are already monetised. How often have we intuited what is lost or altered when we resort to an impersonal gift-voucher as a default present for someone we care about? Tapping into this memory is a useful, reflexive device. Potawatomi author Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) warns that certain acts cannot be paid for, not because it is not affordable but because this changes the very nature of such acts. "...the nature of an object ... is so changed by the way it has come into your hands, as a gift or as a commodity" (p. 26). Robin compares a pair of knitted socks bought at a store with another gifted by her grandmother. She describes how there is no inherent obligation or relationship in the former pair of socks because politeness and reciprocity are contained within the exchange of payment with the staff. Here, the price has predetermined parity – what is deemed fair as an exchange. However, with the latter socks, the gift obligates an ongoing relationship. She talks about the care to thank the grandmother with a note, or wearing them especially when meeting her to show appreciation. "A gift is something for nothing, except that certain obligations are attached" (ibid). I find resonances in her descriptions, underscoring how *omotenashi* – the attendance to guests by hosts – is an 'obligation' and commitment to care. This hospitality circulates and endures through everyday participating, much like how Kimmerer describes a gift moving: "their value increases with their passage ... the more something is shared, the greater its value becomes" (p.27). This creates an abundance greater than the momentary encounter or the cost of supplying hot or cold towels.

By remembering what inauthenticity and distancing can feel like in a gesture, these triggers can accompany questions to sharpen attention, like, *what might become corroded when designed into a 'service' and what are underlying as values of your own designing? How does your mindset, values and worldviews contrast with the sites you are entering into?*

We turn last to the politics in people's everyday experiences of systems and how these might suggest *other* orientations to 'value', through Shana's work on participating in organized forms of social struggle.

Intervening and reconfiguring structures

Narratives and categories of understanding are always political but the politics of how designer-researchers frame, ignore or attend to existing contexts is often unaccounted for in SD. Histories of social movements evidence what we might call *service designs* 'by other names' (following Gutiérrez Borrero 2015; 2020). These practices are also everywhere in people's everyday work to sustain the full lives of



loved ones and community, in mundane and extraordinary ways (Bordowitz, 2004; Lorde, 1984). In other words, when read through the lens of SD, these stories demonstrate systems ‘designed’ and shaped by political imperative, experiential knowledge, theories of systemic power and fights for resources.

For example, sociologist Nelson (2011) offers an investigation of the emergence, context, and organization of the Black Panther Party’s (BPP) People’s Free Medical Clinics (PFMCs) around the United States. The need for Black-run, free, communitybased clinics emerged through political organizing for self-determination to undo, counteract, and remake a racist, classist, and sexist health care system. The PFMCs were one part of the Party’s “survival programs” (ibid., p. 52), which provided community-based care and were spaces for political organizing. The work of the PFMCs included a range of services, broadly speaking: provision of basic health care; advocacy and accompaniment to hospitals and doctors outside the clinics; neighborhood-based health information fairs; as well as ground-breaking medical research about sickle-cell anemia, which was under-researched by (white) mainstream medicine but presented a persistent threat to Black people’s well-being. To build and maintain these services, volunteer medical practitioners trained community members in skills to support the provision of healthcare, building broader capacity through *sharing knowledge*, itself a key political principle. These service designs ‘by other names’ emerged from the political mobilization and experiential knowledge of people who regularly encountered medical racism, sexism, and elitism and were determined to challenge them, as part of confronting white supremacy and anti-Blackness. In examples like these, the domain of ‘expert’ knowledge about making systems shifts beyond the traditional purview of SD. The story of the PFMCs highlights the importance of engaging with the politics that are always already embedded in systems.

What can we look for in practices that emerge through people’s experiences and through social movements against systems of domination? These practices are often themselves strategies for making systems, services, and spaces grounded in solidarity and in commitments to create capacities for living ‘beyond survival’ (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). Emerging from everyday conditions of oppression and violence, these community-focused systems and ‘services’ are not habitually instrumentalized for individual gain. They are typically shaped through what people make for themselves, over time and often across generations. With this in mind, how might non-neutral approaches to designing services, informed by commitments or politics, guide *how* people make things? In community-based making what gets made from experience and strategy in this way is also shared, theorized, taught and woven into individual and community practices over time (Kaba, 2021; Kaba & Richie, 2022). How can learning with and from such histories of self-determination,



along with addressing directly the generational impacts of violent and oppressive systems of control, also create grounds for refusing Dominant SD methods in the design of services?

In the system-building work of social movements and practices, people engage in what, in Participatory Design, is called 'infrastructuring'. Infrastructuring refers to working with an amalgam of practices, materials, relationships, and resources people use to build, maintain, and make changes to infrastructures in their lives, including those within and outside their control (see Karasti, 2014). Seen this way, infrastructuring is also a critical, and long-standing, practice of community-organizing and -building. It is grounded in what people care to make and maintain, for and beyond survival, creating systems that sustain their lives and the lives of loved ones, while circumventing and fighting those that produce harm (Agid, 2018). Incorporating such discourses - and an active focus on the ongoing, situated nature of people's experiences with service systems - will pave important shifts away from Dominant SD toward more nuanced capacities for social and political participation and solidarity practices.

Recognizing, with humility, that designing systems and services is not the domain of SD exclusively opens up possibilities for learning with and from people's own practices, while minding the political and ethical imperative to be aware of what and how much we can contribute, and when. As Blomberg and Durrah (2014, p.127) suggest, all (service) systems are embedded in and constitutive of other, interrelated systems and practices. They note that, "service systems often are described as existing in the world waiting to be discovered by service researchers. Their reification often brings with it an assumption of a bounded entity... where do service systems come from; why are they conceptualized as wholes, why are some components (entities) of the service system called out and others for all practical purposes remain invisible?" For service designers, learning to recognise (not arrogantly 'discover') systems that exist and are made knowable *outside Dominant SD* is fundamental to transforming SD, acknowledging its limits and being useful to people in their work, rather than asserting claims over that work.

Could we politicise SD as one particular way, *among many*, to build knowledge through shared commitments with others? What questions, and orientations would this require? In a long-term research engagement with organizers working to end the harms of policing in their city, *questions* were a primary outcome of our collective work for my design practice. These included, for example: *What is at stake, according to whom?; What have we learned together?; Is this a way to make selfdetermination? To fight the prison industrial complex, racism, sexism, borders? To make power? Action? Theory?.* I also asked: *How do I understand the work?; How do I understand it in relationship to what I believe, imagine, desire, hope for?;*



*What am I afraid of?; What space have I been offered and how have I occupied it?
How have I been accountable?; What risks am I taking, asking them to take?*

Focusing from the outset on politicizing the idea of 'service design', opens up multiple avenues to frame considerations for practice and to bring critical questions to the center and foundation of our own work, even and especially when it makes us more vulnerable and less certain. How might we understand our position, or take risks with our 'expertise', as part of our work? To re-think what SD has to contribute to the ongoing work of world-making undertaken for generations by people around the world, we can begin to grapple with what self-determination might mean with our partners. This requires paying attention to experiential knowledge we bring and being available and present for the work, learning how these might meet the goals at hand. From here, we can commit to building capacity for listening for the nuances of existing and designed systems, infrastructures, obstacles, and possibilities, and begin the long process and hard work of making otherwise.

Questions to amplify the political

In proposing to amplify the political in SD work, we have argued above for the necessity for ethical, political understandings of SD to expand the range of practices, knowledges, and outcomes that shape and sustain systems in support of people and broader ecologies. We now reflect on what our cases have taught us and offer some questions as a reflexive methodology.

In showing how and where Dominant SD has impacted through examples by Ann, we suggest what *not* to aim for and what *shouldn't* be done. Platforms are not intrinsically destructive, but we highlight what has been or will continue being violated by *Dominant SD* as it persists in shamming, cheapening and weakening the connective tissues of trust in communities. Asking about *what is visible and invisible to you, about authenticity and what alterations to the socio-cultural fabric are being proposed by your designs?* may be useful handbrakes. We must also be vigilant of logics that reify and isolate particular phenomena and occlude the deeper entanglements of services in social life (Blomberg & Durrah 2014). This is illustrated by Yoko, showing that a greeting enacts a socio-cultural practice that also permeates places of work. The trap with Dominant SD is to see only the relevance of the worker's smile as a customer service touchpoint, without recognizing that it is also *much more than that*. Questions are welcome here, like, *what might become corroded as it becomes a 'service' and what is underlying the values of your own designing? How does your mindset, values and worldviews contrast or connect with the sites you are entering into, and how do you know?*



In the example from Shana, they ask what ‘outsider’ designers might consider, and learn, in order to recognise, engage and enter existing practices and relationships. They point to the political commitment of considering well-honed practices that resist dominant, oppressive, exclusionary forces. They propose asking ourselves: *What is my own political position and understanding, and what commitment am I making? How might we approach designing services with people drawing on a commitment to self-determination?* In all, there are plenty of quotidian practices around to learn from, but not in the usual places that SD tends to look. This amplifies the politics of respecting, recognising and learning from the wisdoms inherent in these situations.

All together, we need to ask *what the methods, frameworks, theories and methodologies we use enable and disable, reveal and omit?* We have attempted to show the logics and bias hidden within the apparatuses frequently used in SD: scaling up social interactions, routinizing human relationships, prioritizing customer experiences and business bottom-lines as critical knowledge for making ‘good’ services. In doing so, we can begin to break away from the presumption of neutrality and ideologies of universality that occlude the underlying values that nonetheless manifest through designed systems and services. We can reflect on possible impacts before it is too late to change our plans meaningfully.

Redrawing lines

This paper has asked questions to help us sit with the complexities that arise out of SD’s interventions. It joins with the work of other scholars who have expressed frustration with how insufficiently the cultural, temporal and structural changes that accompany SD are addressed (Bomberg & Darrah, 2014), especially those that are not clearly visible. Vink and Koskela-Huotari (2021) examine institutional structures, like rules, roles, norms and beliefs, by involving participants with divergent backgrounds as a means to heighten sensitivity to these. Relatedly, Agid and Akama (2018) challenge emphasis on individualised agency and fixed positionalities that ignore relational constraints and idiosyncrasies. All these are important concerns and reminders that motives, behaviours and experiences can never be clear or explainable, and are governed by interpersonal dynamics as well as structural conditions of power, despite what Customer Journey Maps might have us believe.

It is difficult to rationalise conflicting, contradictory or divergent accounts. Yet, people, in their desires and needs are always messy and contradictory (Gordon, 1997). All categories, methods and methodologies are leaky, partial and sterile (Law, 2004). Overlooking this complexity in the service of one, linear (designable) story is the classic shortfall about which feminist anthropologists (Haraway, 2016; Suchman,



2002) have taught us to be vigilant, so as not to neuter the vibrancy and incongruence of life (Bennett, 2010). We need to constantly question the politics of what is noticed and ignored, and the ethics of acting upon what we thought we knew.

The ethical lines need to be drawn to emphasize that human experiences, behaviours and relationships are not to be 'designed'. By ensuring that ethical questions always accompany SD practice, we can resist the neo-liberal, paternal, white-saviour foundations of Dominant Design (see Markussen, 2017). We need to keep asking what is being changed, and why, when interventions are made. The impacts to complex dynamic systems cannot be known before we act. So, this is an intercontinental invitation to work together, in all our places, to deepen the inquiry and practice of SD, especially where there is excitement to reimagine and remake systems and services that sustain relationships of care, wellbeing, and social justice.

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