




ACTIVATING ATTITUDE

INTRODUCTION

It's 2019, and the world seems to be stuck in permanent crisis—ecologically, politically and socially. As we live with ever-present images of burning rain forests, melting glaciers, suffocating oceans, raging wars and people drowning in the Mediterranean, we are also confronted with growing ethical complexities. Some of these issues we try to reflect in our lifestyle choices. But mostly we carry on doing what we do, overwhelmed by the general pandemonium of bad news, populist politics and cynical consumerism. What else can we do? Right now, right here?

We tried to tackle this question in early 2016 when many of our design students asked themselves how they could take action in the face of the so-called “refugee crisis,”  with its increase in the numbers of people arriving after having fled the war in Syria. The urgency of the situation seemed to bring home the dilemma of witnessing a crisis in the news and feeling an urge to act to mitigate it. Many students, lecturers and other staff began organising activities to raise awareness, they gave donations or volunteered for relief organisations. Increasingly, this posed the question: how can we activate not just our energies as citizens in such an emergency, but also our skills as designers? And should we do so in an educational setting?

We wanted to recognise the students' need to address this global problem that had become part of their reality. They wanted to do more than just feel overwhelmed by it. The 2016 Design Symposium at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) was dedicated to design activism,  so Antonio Scarponi and I—along with Martin Bölsterli, who joined later—took the opportunity it offered to make a prototype of a course to bring design students to Zurich Oerlikon, where 250 people were living in a trade fair hall that had been converted into temporary housing for refugees. We called this project “Hic et Nunc,” which is a Latin motto meaning “here and now,” i.e. “occurring in the immediate present.” It encapsulated the attitude of our educational format that allowed us to confront bachelor design students with the topical crisis of forced migration. From this initial prototype, and supported by the ZHdK's Arts for Change  initiative, we developed a series of courses and eventually a methodology for teaching social design practice in the design curriculum, which we are still in the process of developing

The terminology and linguistic representation of migration is subject to journalistic and academic debate. See Simon Goodman, Ala Sirriyeh and Simon McMahon, “The evolving (re)categories of refugees throughout the ‘refugee/migrant crisis,’” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 27, no. 2 (2017): 105–114.



FIG. 1
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"Take Action," Design-Symposium 2016, organised by Flurina Gradin and Corina Zuberbühler, Zurich University of the Arts, March 29, 2016, <http://designsymposium16.zhdk.ch>, accessed November 17, 2019.



As this ongoing engagement and research has aligned with the recently renewed discourse about design as a tool for social change, capable of "shaping not only objects, but also relationships," this essay uses Hic et Nunc as a case study to reflect on the implications and outcomes of the proposed methodology. Through close observation of the collective learning experience, I came to reflect on and question more deeply the concept of "attitude." The underlying question here was not what design can do, but what design education can and should do.


WHAT CAN DESIGN DO?





Many designers still believe in "design's power to build a better world." In her recent book *Design as an Attitude*, Alice Rawsthorn reframes László Moholy-Nagy's famous statement that "design is not a profession but an attitude," and takes up "the idea that in whichever form it manifests, good design should be ethically conscious and aspire to be a positive agent of change." Much in the tradition of Victor Papanek's understanding of designers' moral responsibility for the way we live together as a society, Rawsthorn takes up the argument that "thanks to their digital tools today's designers have been liberated to work autonomously in the attitudinal spirit advocated by Moholy-Nagy."

"Arts for Change," Projects, Zurich University for the Arts, accessed November 17, 2019, <http://www.zhdk.ch/international/arts-for-change-6312>.
Museum für Gestaltung Zürich and Angeli Sachs, eds., *Social Design: Participation and Empowerment* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2018).
László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 5th ed. (Chicago, IL: Paul Theobald, 1956), quoted in Alice Rawsthorn, *Design as an Attitude* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2018), 6–7.
Rawsthorn, *Design as an Attitude*, 6–7.
Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, quoted in Rawsthorn, *Design as an Attitude*, 6–7.
Rawsthorn, *Design as an Attitude*, 6–7.
"The designer's [...] social and moral judgment must be brought into play long before he begins to design, since he has to make a judgment, an *a priori* judgment at that, as to whether the products he is asked to design or redesign merit his attention at all. In other words, will his design be on the side of the social good or not." Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985; reprint, 2006), 55.
Rawsthorn, *Design as an Attitude*, 22.



The underlying—admittedly seductive—assumption seems to be that the aspiration to "be a positive agent of change" is intrinsic to designers.


While this might be true of some, it can certainly not be expected as a general attitude from our design students, not least because the different design disciplines within the Department of Design (DDE) at the ZHdK have specialised profiles, while many students are driven by the legitimate desire to simply become good enough at their chosen profession to be able to make a living in the creative economy. 

If design is “not a profession but an attitude,” as refashioned by Alice Rawsthorn, how is “attitude” relevant to today’s design education? Papanek believed in “the role of education as a resource and the potential locus for social change”  and in *Design for the Real World* passionately argued for “a more generalist education for designers  and the need for engagement with community organisations, NGOs, foundations, corporations, and governments, specialists in many other disciplines, and participant designers.”  Design schools have become increasingly aware of the “limited power of products alone to address complex humanitarian crises, and have begun to shift their attention to designing systems, tools, and methods that support social change.” 

This became clear when one of the courses was deemed compulsory as opposed to being an “elective” course, for which students were intrinsically motivated.

Alice Twenlow, “Victor Papanek’s Design Criticism for the Real World,” accessed November 17, 2019, <http://alicetwenlow.com/victor-papaneks-design-criticism-for-the-real-world>. “1/ That man is by nature a generalist, a synthesist and that this heritage is ours from our past as Vikings, sailors & hunters, but that modern education is trying to create specialists and this is wrong, especially for designers. 2/ That all men are designers, question-askers, problem-solvers. 3/ That most of the problems of the world are solvable right now, that the resources exist in abundance but that they must be listed, inventoried and designed for have-nots as well as haves.” Letter from Viktor Papanek to Buckminster Fuller, *Victor Papanek: The Politics of Design*, Vitra Design Museum, September 29, 2018–March 10, 2019.

Twenlow, “Victor Papanek’s Design Criticism for the Real World.” Ibid.

If we commit to an understanding of design as a discipline with social responsibilities and as a tool for social innovation (as defined by Ezio Manzini,  for example), then this should have an impact on design curricula on a practical level. So far, basic design teaching at bachelor level still predominantly implies teaching students the skills specific

to their chosen specialisation within the DDE. Many projects use briefs and case studies in cooperation with commercial or institutional partners representing future clients. However, assignments that are situated in the field of imminent, complex social problems are few in number, or depend on the choices made by the individual student.

PROTOTYPING

Hic et Nunc's overall aim was to prototype an educational model that recontextualises design disciplines and challenges not just the students' expertise, but allows them to experience hands-on what it means to maximise impact with a minimum of resources in a very "real" setting that differs radically from the reality of commercially driven design.

The Hic et Nunc projects at Messehalle 9 started out using a rather straightforward design strategy of "operating with devices, a device being a small intervention, designed to solve a small problem but capable of having an impact on a much wider area of influence. A device should have defined characteristics: reduced in scale, doable at a small budget, replicable in another context," as Antonio Scarponi has summarised the process. Students from all seven specialisations within DDE tackled this brief during intensive workshops, working in predefined teams with a limited budget. We identified our primary goal as being an ensuing change of living space, and referred to this as "space activation" without any formal definition.

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"Design for social innovation is everything that expert design can do to activate, sustain and orient processes of social change towards sustainability." Ezio Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*, trans. Rachel Coad (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 62.

The concept of "activation" became central to the project, as we were activating not just the space, but the social potential of everyone involved. Participative method models were introduced and implemented. In total, three projects took place at Messehalle 9 in Oerlikon during the academic years 2016 and 2017. Between 2018 and 2019, three more courses were held at FOGO in Zurich Altstetten, where the city of Zurich was building a new temporary space consisting of different types of containers that combined housing space for refugees with rental workspaces, subsidised housing for students, and a socially ethical catering concept. The city recognised that "neighborhoods consciously designed to be social can play an important role in facilitating a connected, active community."

FIG. 2
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FIG.1 Messehalle 9, Zurich Oerlikon, March 2016 (Photo: Karin Seiler).

FIG.2 Prototyping a veranda space at Messehalle 9, Hic et Nunc, 2018
(Photo: Antonio Scarponi).







FIG.3 Fogo housing area in Zurich Altstetten, 2019 (Photo: Karin Seiler).

FIG.4 View of the Bundesasylzentrum from the roof terrace of the ZHdK Campus building, 2019 (Photo: Karin Seiler).



From the outset, we worked in close collaboration with AOZ, the organisation responsible for refugees in the city of Zurich.  Over time, we established trust between the institutions as well as between the individual stakeholders who were working together.  With the new location in Altstetten, a new series of courses focused on the very different question of how designers can initiate the social activation of an emerging neighbourhood in which very different stakeholders come together, refugees among them.

For example, Visual Communications, Industrial Design, Game Design, Interaction Design, Knowledge Visualisation, Cast Audiovisual Media, Trends & Identity.

For a documentation of the individual courses see Hic et Nuc, <http://www.hic-et-nunc.me>.

Antonio Scarponi, "Hic et Nuc: What Design Can Do?," internal notes on a possible research structure, Hic et Nuc Archive, December 5, 2016. Max. CHF 200 per project.

See FOGO: Leben am Vulkanplatz, <http://www.fogo.ch>.

Hic et Nuc has been located in a small multi-purpose workspace since early 2019, collaborating with different stakeholders and other partners, such as Architecture for Refugees, <http://architectureforrefugees.ch>





Department of Urban Studies and Planning, *Places in the Making: How Placemaking Builds Places and Communities*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013, 45, accessed January 14, 2020, <http://dusp.mit.edu/sites/dusp.mit.edu/files/attachments/project/mit-dusp-places-in-the-making.pdf>.

The knowledge of context and the building of trust are critical factors for any social design project.

For a comprehensive summary of the project see Meret Ernst, "Doppelt wirksam," *Hochparterre*, December 6, 2017, accessed February 6, 2020, <http://www.hochparterre.ch/diebesten/blog/post/detail/doppelt-wirksam/1512579409>. Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 42.






SOCIAL DESIGN

Most design students are well aware of the challenges of a world that is growing ever more complex, and that "there is design in the organisation of emotional experiences, in family life, in labour relations, in city planning, in working together as civilized human beings and ultimately all problems of design merge into one great problem: 'design for life.'"  They can articulate and point out desired "courses of action to change existing situations into preferred ones"  within a specified brief, and are especially aware of the importance of ecological sustainability, coming up with creative, clever concepts. Moreover, Social Design  and its current revitalised discourse is well established among DDE's faculty thanks to recent projects including the 2018 "Social Design" exhibition and catalogue. 

However, although social design appears as a theoretical concept in a variety of teaching approaches, I would contend that its implications for design

Herbert A. Simon, *Die Wissenschaften vom Künstlichen*, trans. Oskar Wiener (Berlin: Kammerer & Unverzagt, 1999), 95.



In design teaching, we also implicitly or explicitly teach students how to think like a designer: to recognise problems and to solve them—both major and minor—by analysing patterns and behaviours “linking the concept of design to that of the solution of problems and seeing design as a problem solver, an agent for solving problems at all levels, from those in everyday life to those on a global scale.”  Design thinking has evolved as a methodology that is widely and successfully implemented, and is deemed able to solve problems in all kinds of areas. Sometimes it seems as if design could save the world—if only everyone were a design thinker.  And sometimes it seems that thinking without acting is preferable to acting without having thought everything through on a plethora of charts. From an educational point of view, HeN’s activist approach can be seen as an alternative to treating “all kinds of problems as resulting from a lack of creativity and innovation — rather than any sort of, say, underlying social structures,” as it confronts uncomfortable realities as a social and physical experience. 

Manzini differentiates between “Design for social innovation” and “Social Design” mainly on the basis of their different economic premises, while contending that “in contemporary reality this differentiation tends to blur, as the two tend to converge and create areas of objective (and very productive) overlap.” Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs*, 55ff.



BUILDING ATTITUDE

Reflecting on the courses and on the feedback of the students, we continuously explored the complexities of the project’s goals. There were obvious conundrums implicit in the concept: very few of us had had any kind of contact with refugees before (including myself). How were we supposed to face people who had endured journeys about which we knew only from the media? How should we work in a place where people live without intruding on their privacy? How should we communicate without a common language? How might we ensure legitimacy in what we did? Were we perhaps using the refugees to feel better about ourselves? Might



it not have been better to stay in our studios, reading up on post-colonialism before venturing to act? Aren't social workers better qualified to work in a sensitive environment such as temporary housing for refugees? These are but a few of the questions we raised.


Museum für Gestaltung Zürich and Angeli Sachs, eds., *Social Design*.
 Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs*, 34.
 "Design thinkers are a diverse group of high-achieving students who see their career as an opportunity to positively impact the world. Design thinkers cited helping others, being able to create and invent, and making use of their talents and abilities as more important to their career satisfaction. They are systems thinkers who see the interconnectivity of things, not viewing themselves as separate from nature, but a part of it. Design thinkers are concerned and interested in tackling the economic, environmental, and social sustainability challenges our society is facing." Jacquelyn Blizard, "Design Thinkers Can Save the World: How Understanding Their Interests, Goals, and Motivations Can Inform Engineering Educators," abstract (PhD diss., Clemson University, 2013), accessed January 14, 2020, http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_dissertations/1135.
 For a more critical assessment of the popularity of design thinking, see Tim Seitz, "The 'Design Thinking' Delusion," *Jacobin*, October 16, 2018, accessed February 11, 2020, <http://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/10/design-thinking-innovation-consulting-politics>.

Apart from establishing ground rules and working closely with A.O.Z. to adapt our processes in line with our increasing expertise, we also tried to reassure our students by emphasising their design abilities and by actually bringing things into existence that hadn't existed before—such as a library, a charging device that doubled as a bench, or a spatial dictionary. This helped to give the term “contribution” a tangible form and a personal connection. Once they became immersed in their tasks, the degree of assurance among the students proportionally increased as the value of what they did became tangible—both in what they created and in their presence in the space.

Their growing relationship with the space and its inhabitants resulted in a change not just in the reality of that physical, social space, but also in their personal stance. To execute a design task expertly while maintaining an acute awareness of one's position in the physical and social space around one necessarily entails engaging in a dialogue between one's actions and one's critical, internal reflection on it. The students asked many questions at the end of their module that we were unable to answer; but they were all discussed in depth, and they demonstrated how

fear had been replaced by a willingness to confront the complex ethical issues within the context of an activist attitude towards design. I would argue that it was precisely their insecurities and dilemmas that constituted one of the most positive aspects for the students, as it either initiated or deepened a personal position on their part that I shall call “attitude.”

Manzini suggests that the social level of design is linked to (creating) meaning, while the objects themselves belong to the physical realm. When designers act as what he refers to as “place makers,” the “two dimensions of problem-solving and sense-making converge.”  I should like to explore the idea that when designers focus on their physical task while at the same time remaining actively attentive to their social space, this offers an additional dimension to facilitating social interactions. If interaction occurs casually while (useful) things are being designed, then they will be very different from interaction that occurs for the sake of interaction. Engaging with the physical matter becomes the means by which social interaction is facilitated, without actively trying to engage people in an activity designed for that purpose. This means that the ubiquitous paternalistic patterns can to some extent be minimised. 

After one of the courses on FOGO, one student remarked that he believed a teacher’s personal attitude should not be part of their teaching. The remark bothered me, as it seemed the very antithesis of what we had tried to achieve. So later, I met up with him. We had a vigorous discussion that veered increasingly towards personal issues of insecurity, and the general fear of rejection or a lack of approval that students feel when they expose their opinions and perspectives with candour. This in turn strengthened my conviction that it is our responsibility to offer students the opportunity to shape their personal attitude by gently guiding them through the process of creating something of social value. This can promote their independence from any need for our approval, enhance their self-assurance, and help them develop the ability to take a stand for what is important to them as citizens and as designers in the here and now—ultimately “to be bold enough to identify the causes they wish to embrace.”  This is not about

Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs*, 46.
We worked on this hypothesis during the last course, in which we were able to augment our methodology through collaborating with students from Theatre Education and Art Education.
Rawsthorn, *Design as an Attitude*, 22.



The new federal asylum centre (*Bundesasylzentrum*) with accommodation for 350 people, was built opposite the Zurich University of the Arts in Zurich in 2019.



designers saving the world. It is about empowering future designers to speak with authority about the values and processes with which they will contribute to the shape of the world. “Attitude” is thus not the intrinsic engine driving the designer towards noble goals, but rather an ability to define our position and perspective in our profession. Attitude requires courage and self-confidence, but these can be acquired over time. Both should be part of what we call the “occupational qualification” of our students, always keeping in mind the ultimate goal of speaking with authority.

EPILOGUE



Currently, there are three refugee housing projects within a radius of less than two kilometres from the campus of the ZHdK, one of them right across from the ZHdK building.  The people who live there, whether for a shorter or a longer period of time, are indisputably our neighbours, and we are theirs.  We share not just a city, but a space. Our actions as neighbours reflect and express our attitude and our vision as designers: of how to live together, of the authentic role of design, and of future designers’ potential for dealing with the multitude of practical and ethical dilemmas that await us.

FIG. 4
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The ZHdK welcomed the employees of the Federal asylum centre as their neighbours with a small drinks’ ceremony. No mention was made of the inhabitants.



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