Designs of the Oppressed

Week 4 (03-09/11/2022): Analysis of design practices from a feminist perspective

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Several researches have pointed out that the "universal design" considers the male sectors as reference for creation, especially cis, white, heterosexual men without disabilities, from the urban middle classes and with higher education.

Therefore, some questions can be considered during the analysis of artifacts in order to identify possible social inequalities. For example:

A. Who has **economic access** to the artifact?
B. What **physical skills** are required for people to consume the artifact in question?
C. What **cultural aspects** are required for people to consume the given artifact?
D. Who do you envision **using the artifact** in question? (Think about gender, race, age, class, body, etc.)
E. Who is **excluded** and who **benefits** from this design?

From this, we can see which bodies are taken as a reference for creation and which are not taken into account and question the accesses and interdictions of certain social groups.

In several companies, there are three strategies which are usually employed in the representations of "users" (keep in mind that this term can reduce the perception of people to mere consumers):

1. **Gender Stereotypes;**
2. **Me methodology;**
3. **Participatory design;**

1) Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are often used in many companies when designing products, naturalizing dichotomous and biologizing visions, i.e., as if certain behaviors were naturally feminine or masculine - approaches extensively criticized by feminism. Many designers often make use of media targeted specifically at women such as magazines, books, films, and television programs as sources of inspiration, reinforcing homogenizing perspectives about the female sectors.

Thus, stereotyped ideas about how women "are" and what they "like" usually guide important decisions regarding the design process - a strategy that is possibly also used in the creation of designs for men. By developing products based on supposedly typical women's interests, such companies may reinforce social inequalities rather than challenge them through efforts to highlight gender as a normative construct rather than a biological issue.

2) Me methodology

Regarding the **"Me Methodology"**, the decision making is based on the designers' own preferences, that is, they take themselves as possible users, disregarding the real needs of potential consumers. However, it should be noted that this type of process is not necessarily established by designers. The "me methodology" is problematic, because companies are usually formed mostly by men, and thus products directed to the female audience do not always count on the participation of women, giving rise to unsatisfactory, indifferent and insensitive products.

But the concern with gender issues has led many companies to employ an adapted version of the "me methodology", by composing design teams made up of women designers in order to broaden the understanding of what the female sectors want and need. Such a strategy can be a trap, reinforcing essentialist views, that is the idea that every woman is representative of women in general. For there are many ways of existing, and these are nuanced in terms of social class, sexuality, age, religion, schooling, body, etc. Moreover, as much as female designers resemble potential users, their relationship with the creation of the artifact is crossed by particular interests, making their relationship with the product different from that of consumers.

The essentialist tendency of this approach can be tensioned by designers through the incorporation of studies on intersectionality, which can help us think in a more sensitive, multiple and complex way, avoiding generalizations. Another way is to access the mistakes and successes of previous experiments in order to refine their own understandings.

3) Participatory design

Another way to find out what people need is to use the **participatory design approach.** Such a strategy allows potential users to direct influence the design, so that the design process is not solely dependent on the designers' beliefs. However, such user involvement in the design process seems to be the exception rather than the rule. A general problem related to participatory design concerns the attempt to achieve a reasonable degree of representativeness in order to make the process more sensitive to multiple needs, abilities

and preferences. Nevertheless, this kind of thinking can paradoxically lead to the so-called "universal design", that is, the supposed existence of a design that can encompass the needs of every person on the planet.

4) Considerations

More research and discussion is needed. So overall, the main point is to make designers aware of their worldviews and the effects of such perspectives on society in hopes of building it in a less unequal way. For design is both a verb and a noun. Design, as a verb, refers to the act of designing. Design, as a noun, refers to the artifacts themselves, that is, to the consequences of the project's conditions. Thus, the conjunction of the attributes of design as verb and noun in a single word expresses the idea that they are inseparable and that we, as designers, are responsible for what we put into existance. From this perspective, design can function both as a space of oppression, imposing, privileging and excluding certain perspectives of the world, and as a space of liberation, encompassing greater autonomy of the population in the creative process as well as the knowledge and experiences of minorities, being potentially more democratic.

References

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