

'REALIST'  
STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS  
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The term 'stakeholder' is now applied almost ubiquitously in Western society, often serving to provide legitimation for a multiplicity of agendas. For designers there are profound implications for ethical conduct attached to the veracity of stakeholder consultation from which major schemes are often born. Too often stakeholder analysis does not go far enough, restricted to accounts of the 'self-evident' or 'presenting' surface activity of individuals or groups. The paper develops a rationale for reflexivity in effective design research that remains alive to empirical realities, reflecting constantly upon the interplay between the actors in a particular stakeholder discourse. Objective stakeholder analysis is then discussed as a potential practical application of realist theory. This short paper makes a call for the evaluation of proposed design interventions based on a representation of stakeholders that recognizes the 'inconvenient' social realities as well as the purported technical rational arguments that, at the worst extreme, can be exploited as a tool to maintain hegemonic regimes.

## THE CASE FOR SOCIAL REALISM IN DESIGN RESEARCH

On one level 'design' might be performed by anyone, anywhere and on a number of levels; decorating a Christmas tree or perhaps icing a cake.

This paper, however, is predicated upon an assumption that design at the 'professional' level is characterized, in part, by decision making on behalf of others which holds potentially significant consequences for individuals and (or) groups of individuals in (an increasingly global) society. Designers should be and in many cases will be, alert to the responsibilities vested in them by clients, consumers and a whole panoply of interest groups. Being aware of the need for inclusivity, democracy and social justice in design practice, while honorable, does not, however, amount to an instrument for ethical conduct. Here we suggest one possible approach to gaining a 'realist' perspective on the landscape for design which considers the concept of 'stakeholder analysis' as an instrument which holds the capacity to gain a true picture of the interest groups which might be affected by design intervention. We also suggest that stakeholder analysis can be used as a selective tool, consulting with particular groups in order to gain the necessary responses to provide apparent legitimacy for schemes constructed by those wishing to realize their own agendas.

The term stakeholder suggests an individual or group of individuals with something to win or lose in a transaction (in this case a design intervention). Some who fall into this category may be unaware that they are stakeholders, or tacit in the process of consultation, but nevertheless affected by its outcome. Realist research attempts to factor in the needs of these groups as well as recognizing the power agendas held by those who inhabit the 'locus of control.'

The term 'stakeholder' is now applied almost ubiquitously in Western society, often serving to provide legitimization for a multiplicity of agendas. While this short paper recognizes the important role which this social construct can play in attempting to satisfy the needs of a range of individuals and interest groups, I also consider the naïve, indeed, sometimes cynical exploitative use of the term for personal or organizational gain.

It is asserted here that stakeholder consultation can be selective, partial and ideologically driven. The very use of the term intones inclusivity and cross sectional representation, while, in reality, stakeholder consultation is often superficial, descriptive (as opposed to analytical) and designed to provide a 'right of passage' for schemes that serve to propel agendas for capital accumulation or political power. For designers there are profound implications for ethical conduct attached to the veracity of consultative outcomes from which major schemes are often born. Here we suggest a paradigm

which if applied might help to bring some order to the further analysis of a 'hunch' or inference that all might not be as it seems in the pronounced outcome of a consultative process. This might also provide an instrument through which designers might conduct their own analyses of 'real' stakeholder needs.

Indeed stakeholder analysis can provide an excellent tool for characterizing individuals, groups and their interactions in order to establish the existence of social realities. Realist stakeholder analysis extends beyond a superficial appraisal of events, enunciated positions, group exhortation and eulogy, in support of a pronounced (design) intervention.

In the context of this paper the term 'realist' does not refer to 'naive realism'—roughly the view that the world as it appears to us is the world' (Shwandt, 1997, 35). Rather it recognizes that beneath a 'surface realism'; the world as it is seen, there exist realities of a more complex nature. The human interactions, transactions and covert agendas which take place beneath this surface reality, are considered here to be equally 'real'. Indeed, these relations within and between interest groups might be seen as the basis from which the surface reality becomes manifest. The realist approach recognizes that within a social research undertaking (such as significant design activity) there are likely to exist a range of opinions, attitudes and perceptions, often associated with assumed consequences, held by interest groups and individual actors.

Roy Bhaskar is still considered to be one of the foremost exponents of critical realism. Corson (1999) captures the essence of Bhaskar's argument (1986 and 1989) for critical realism as a 'theory of being' (ontology):

*This theory of being includes as real entities the properties of the social world—especially the reasons and accounts that people use or offer, to direct or effect social or individual behaviour or change. In line with other accounts of scientific realism, Bhaskar (1986) asserts that people's reasons and accounts are 'real' in the sense that their existence and activity as objects of scientific inquiry are absolutely or relatively independent of the inquiry of which they are the objects. They are an emergent or objective aspect of his ontology. The twin tasks of research are to show the existence and then to detail the operation of these mechanisms: to show the hypothetical reasons or accounts to be genuine indicators of the structures that affect people's lives. Bhaskar's critical realism insists that we will only be able to understand and change the social world if we can identify the structures at work that generate those special interests (1989) (Corson 1999, 71 cited in Swann and Pratt, 1999).*

Bhaskar's thinking is adapted here to suggest a potential paradigm for realist stakeholder analysis in design, not only at the level of functionality, but also with regard to the underlying determinants of change and the 'structures at work' within relevant interest groups.

Too often stakeholder analysis does not go far enough, restricted to accounts of the 'self-evident' or 'presenting' surface activity of individuals or groups. In this paper stakeholder analysis is considered to be a practical application of realist theory. The key stakeholders are not regarded simply as independent informants, or necessarily accurate in their singular perceptions of events. Indeed, it might be unrealistic to expect an individual or interest group (for example end users of design output) to possess the practical wherewithal to reflect on events or interrelations occurring within a proposed consumer community and other affected parties.

The realist approach to (design) research must analyze perspectives from representatives of interest groups whose opinions and interests do not necessarily coincide. At one level, in the case of design activity, these interest groups could be said to include anybody and everybody. The key stakeholders, however, are considered to be:

- designers
- end users (who are not necessarily the same as 'clients' and might range from specific individuals and groups to a 'global' audience)
- the government and its subsidiaries
- contracted service providers
- society (the parameters of which would need to be identified in each 'case')
- organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971)

As Burgoyne (1994) reminds us, we must consider the extent to which 'powerful groups' (perhaps comprising policy entrepreneurs/organic intellectuals) and 'taken for granted' must be questioned. We must also remain alert to the potential dangers of accepting a particular version of 'common sense' as articulated by individuals and interest groups attempting to legitimize agendas for action or the maintenance of a particular set of conditions. Hall (1996, 431) reminds us that:

*It is the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses is actually formed. It is the already formed and taken for granted terrain, on which more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery.*

Stakeholders may take the offensive, or be defensive, seeking to protect their ideas, beliefs and values from perceived threat; or conciliatory, attempting to reconcile their concerns and needs with those of other stakeholders. Stakeholders are characterized within this work, not simply in terms of 'role definition,' but as carriers of ideological positions and material interests. Ideologies do not exist independently, but originate from the interests or problems attached to particular groups, carrying behavioral imperatives; practical measures to maintain established values and beliefs (both offensively and defensively). In some cases individuals will apply 'judgmental rationality' (Archer, et al., 2004), publicly making claims in support of a preferred construction of 'reality.' Consequently the analysis of values, beliefs and behaviors of design stakeholders should not end at the level of the 'self evident'. Burgoyne's interpretation of stakeholder analysis can be seen as a suitable approach in activities of this kind which are:

*...continuously doubtful of factual, non-controversial data, since these can often be constructions of powerful groups of stakeholders which exclude others. It is questioning these 'taken for granted' that can lead to the identification of other stakeholders and interests (Burgoyne, 1994, 193).*

## REFLEXIVITY IN RESEARCH

The previous section introduced the concept of realism in research and stakeholder analysis as its practical instrument. For stakeholder analysis to achieve more than a surface appreciation of events and their human dimension an external perspective is required, which is both reflective and reflexive; the researcher. From the analysis of socially oriented research, various agendas, meanings and covert ideological and political inferences may be drawn. In relation to design research undertakings, reflexivity allows the researcher to recognize her/his 'situated character' in relation to the project and to address the research questions from 'that' position. The realist, reflexive, approach might be seen as consistent with a project seeking to analyze a set of events presented variously by different stakeholders (e.g., the government, employers, target audiences). Where surface realities do not coincide, the reflexive researcher might probe further, alive to empirical realities and reflecting constantly upon the interplay between the actors in the discourse. Shacklock and Smyth agree that the location of the research, and the situation of the researcher within it, should be honestly addressed:

*...the process of reflexivity is an attempt to identify, do something about, and acknowledge the limitations of the research: its location, its subjects, its process, its theoretical context, its data, its analysis, and how accounts recognize that the construction of knowledge takes place in the world not apart from it. Indeed, reflexivity in 'critical' research work is important in honestly addressing issues concerning the validation of research findings, as well as those ethical questions which arise from relations between the researcher and the researched that are implicit to the research agenda and the research methods (Shacklock and Smyth, 1998, 7).*

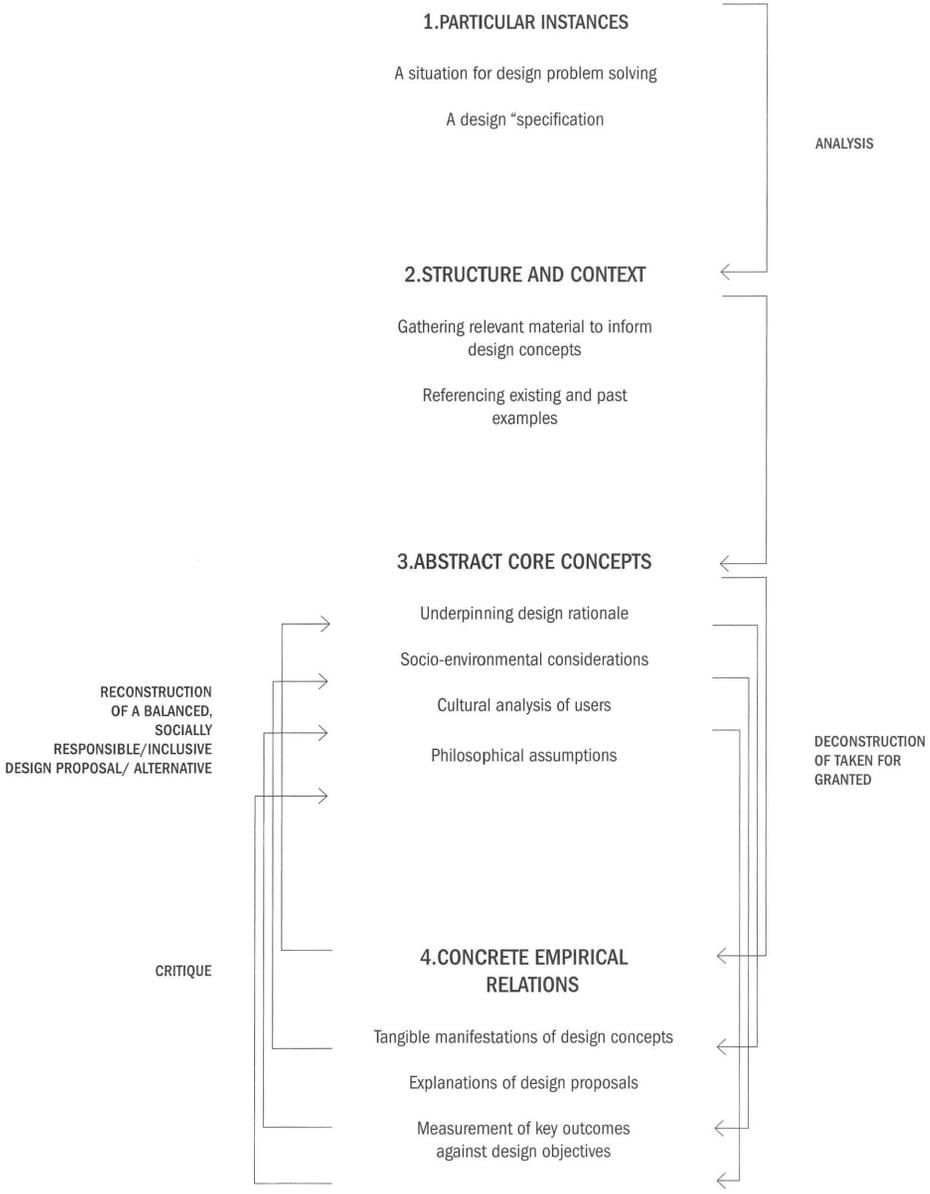
The following diagram is adapted, for use in the design context, from that provided by Harvey (1990) and cited in Shacklock and Smyth (1998) who suggest that reflexive research involves:

*...a constant shuttling backwards and forwards between abstract concept and concrete data; between social totalities and particular phenomena; between current structures and historical development; between surface appearance and essence; between reflection and practice (Harvey, 1990, 4).*

This thesis also holds that any attempt to 'cleanse' (Shacklock and Smyth, 1998) the inherent human dimension of (design) research would be to reduce it to a series of factual accounts. Indeed initiatives supposedly based solely upon pronounced 'fact' are too often allowed to proceed unchallenged. This paper agrees that:

*...being reflexive in doing research is part of being honest and ethically mature in research practice that requires researchers to 'stop being "shamens" of objectivity' (Ruby, 1980, 154). To not acknowledge the interests implicit in a critical agenda for the research, or to assume value-free positions of neutrality, is to assume 'an obscene and dishonest position' (Shacklock and Smyth, 1998, 7).*

This study agrees with Shacklock and Smyth; a (design) researcher must have a position; an opinion or perception from which questions arise, in turn a degree of reflexivity provides a capacity to dig deeper, find out more, capitalizing on new discoveries and relating to fresh events within the discourse.



That which is outlined here suggests a theoretical model with the potentiality for practical application. At the same time it is recognized that not all design opportunities afford the time or resources to enable engagement in detailed theoretical analysis. This paradigm ('realist' stakeholder analysis) might, however serve to provide one potential 'lens' through which reflective design practice may be conducted. Thus, 'realist' stakeholder analysis might constitute one of the many components of critical reasoning in design, which may remain implicit or made explicit, according to personal preference, professional context and availability of resources.

This short paper makes a call for the evaluation of proposed design interventions based on a representation of stakeholders that recognizes the inconvenient social realities as well as the purported technical rational arguments, which too often provide a 'right of passage' for non-inclusive initiatives. At the extremes stakeholder analysis can be exploited as a tool to maintain hegemonic regimes or conversely to scratch beneath the 'surface presentation' of conditions in an attempt to gain an appreciation of the potential effects of significant design activity on those beyond the immediate designer/client transaction.

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## AUTHOR NOTE

Dr Mike Doherty is Head of the Centre for Design Innovation (CDI) and Course Leader of the MA programme Design Context and Practice at University Campus Suffolk. Emerging from a 3-dimensional design background, Mike has developed a particular interest in designing through convergent new media, reflected in having developed the Centre for Design Innovation, established in 2007, that provides an environment for the generation of innovative design content and content analysis. His PhD research explored education, training and associated social factors in design. Through the lens of 'Realist Stakeholder Analysis' Mike asks BA and postgraduate students alike to question the real effects and consequences of design intervention on an increasingly global stakeholder audience.

