Existential Design Applied in Universal Design Settings

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Abstract. The critical design method aims to discuss ways of opening up the (design) brief when planning, designing, building, operating and maintaining the future of the built environment – public as well as private, indoor as well as outdoor. Focusing on "designials" (fundamental forms of design being), the methodology intends to illustrate the fact that objects; including buildings, parks, transportation systems, etc. may directly encroach upon certain "existentials" (fundamental forms of human being) – thus shed light on how a design process is normally conducted, and furthermore, how that affects people's existential well-being.

Keywords. existential design, critical design, Universal Design, industrial design, architecture, the build environment, existential well-being

1. Introduction

Universal Design is all about producing buildings, environments, technology, products, services, etc. that are inherently accessible to everyone. In fact, UN made a convention ten years ago about the matter: stating that parties to the convention are required "to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities" [1]. No matter the various parties' attempt to comply with their obligations, it only takes a brief conversation with a person who are dyslectic, or someone having trouble with walking – in any of the UN member states – to discover that this is not yet true.

2. Existential Design

Let us go back to the late 19th- and 20th-century, when the existentialist stated that for human beings "existence precedes essence" [2], and furthermore that the essence of what an object – such as a bench – will be, exists before the actual bench itself. Now consider an automatic soap-dispenser, and the inevitable fact that human beings in a certain way or fashion produce it. That is, the soap-dispenser has its own method of construction; it comes with an outline saying that its essence, in functional terms, is for example to give someone a small portion of soap without using touch input. This 'fundamental nature' [3, pp. 28] is given even before the soap-dispenser exists, so that

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designers can bring another copy into life by making it according to this specific plan. However, there is a dilemma with this way of thinking: since none of us really knows "*when*, *where*, *why*, by *whom* and most importantly, *how*" [ibid] the soap-dispenser is going to be used, its designer will not be able to fully determine its intended use, purpose and goals in any situations concerning human beings (if any at all). In other words, there is no way to prevent for example a blind person from experiencing that his/her sweater sleeves get half soaked in water just because the automatic soap-dispenser is placed – somewhere – next to the automatic water faucet sensor in the public toilet, right?

> *How do soap-dispensers exist as (universal) design; in fact, how can anything be fundamentally universal, inclusive and "for all", if not so intendedly designed?*

This is where existential design comes in, i.e. "to have an existential outlook on the design work" [ibid, pp. 21], thus demonstrate the paradox of (universal) design. The existential designial analysis (EDA) was developed as a tool for designers, architects, engineers, etc. to better ensure the existential well-being [4] of humans undergoing care in future hospitals and prisons. Instead of analysing the functionality of a design in use, e.g. by performing a functional analysis, the EDA enables designers to shift focus and so analyse "the form of being human that a design in use defines" [3, pp. 30]. To make a long story short, the EDA is shaped and formed into a critical design method (CDM), which in turn is defined and illustrated in a functional design manual – ready for use.

3. Critical Design Method

To criticise something in order to make change happen may seem absurd and much like an upside-down way of looking at things; especially regarding the "problem solving" approach typical for designers, architects, etc. but as Karlström points out we treat this way of thinking as the only option and therefore "We stand to lose meaning and commitment, and find ourselves in a passionless, reflective way of being" [5]. Dunne & Raby, who coined the term 'critical design' back in 1999 [Hertzian Tales], claim there are two categories used to describe design: 'affirmative design' and 'critical design'. Affirmative design, which fits most design, "reinforces how things are now, it conforms to cultural, social, technical, and economic expectations" – while as the latter term "rejects how things are now as being the only possibility, it provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical or economic values" [6]. Existential design belongs to the latter category.

The CDM consists of three steps [3, pp. 31] and results in critical design examples [Ibid, pp. 21], i.e. artefacts that embody critique or commentary on current paradigms, and furthermore "challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens about the role products play in everyday life" [7]. The critical design examples have its functions primarily towards the prospectors, but by implementing the method per se already in the initiation phase of a product and/or system development project, the involved, i.e. facility planners, architects, engineers, designers, etc. is somewhat enforced to adopt user focus.

When executed correctly, this way of thinking design evokes reflection, discussion and promotes critical awareness in everyone involved – and down the road "affect an improvement in the 'way things are'" [8] to quote Bowen. Just as with critical- design research, or architecture, etc. the intention with the CDM is to question the unknown;

enable people to take on a critical point of view and so comply with Gaver and Dunne's Cultural Probes and "shift current perceptions of technology functionally, aesthetically, culturally and even politically" [9]. Putting the CDM to work would, indeed, oblige us to always stay on our toes and never stop asking critical questions, thus stimulate a non-stop debate about what does it mean to be human in the built environment? [3, pp. 31].

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