

**Design as Common Good /**  
**Framing Design through**  
**Pluralism and Social Values**

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# Designing Beyond the Common Good – an Evolutionary Process between Speculation and Reality

**Keywords:** Beyond Common Good, Design Practice, Mediating Plurality, Interactive Social Research, Evolutionary Design, Ambiguity, Appropriation, Speculative Design.

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To what extent can designers direct their professional practices towards serving the common good? Design constitutes itself anew with every project. Each project is both conditioned and made possible through a unique constellation of actors, timeframes, objectives, skills, etc. which arise from both social values and political agendas. We discuss the different approaches of two selected design projects by the authors, and the respective strategies and methods. While the designers' ambition in both projects was certainly to change an existing situation into a preferred one – the first by the means of interactive user engagement, the second through the idea of semi-finished product semantics – we emphasize on the challenges and ambiguities arising from the evolutionary process of design, aiming at the common good. Eventually we conclude that design processes can serve as a tool to *debate* rather than *create* the common good.

## 1 Introduction

While hardly any designer would claim not to be concerned about the common good, very few seem to declare it as an essential objective of their design agenda; and it is to be questioned whether this circumstance can actually be considered a negligence of social responsibility. Communicating to direct one's work towards the common good is one thing, trying to 'realise' the common good through design is another. Either way a certain restraint and modesty might be appropriate. While Paola Antonelli once demanded that designers should just like doctors take a Hippocratic Oath (Antonelli, 2013) as a promise to serve humanity, designers might break that vow upon picking up a pencil. The manifold factors and circumstances that constitute a professional design project also frame a scope of action, within which a designer has to learn to navigate. Thrown in a landscape of obstacles, it is due to the designer's experience, ability and vision which ways are found to speculate, negotiate and form alliances throughout the process, and by that reshape the initial scope of action. Therefore, making 'wicked problems' (Rittel et al., 2012), such as the common good, social justice or sustainability, a design objective is a complex matter. We would like to argue that it is a misconception of both design as well as democratic processes that something like a common good exists as a unifiable goal, or that it might arise from common sense and shared values. Rather than trying to satisfy one's need for harmony, finding ways of dealing with the inevitable ambiguities (Bauer, 2018) and conflicts of interest that most likely occur during design processes becomes a necessity in both design and public decision-making.

## 2 Two Approaches

In the following, we will share insights into two design projects. The selected projects differ in terms of actor constellation, cultural context, objectives, methods, timeframe and levels of user engagement. While neither had the common good as its declared goal, in both cases it was certainly the designers' ambition to devise „courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones“ (Simon, 1981, p.129). As designers we always find ourselves trapped between the hope that our interventions will lead to some kind of betterment and the awareness that we always change more than we seek to change. In the following, we will show that the initial framings that made the two projects possible, in each case have led to unique design approaches and ways of reasoning. However, the here presented approaches are neither dichotomous nor complementary to each other. They should rather be seen as part of a pluralism of approaches that characterises design as a profession. Although the selection of the two projects may seem eclectic, it is no less arbitrary than the variety of projects designers encounter in their everyday professional reality.

Making design decisions explicit and reflecting on the forces that shape design processes and their outcome – “which can only be supplied by the primary designer” (Agnew, 1993, p.129) is impor-

tant in order to establish a deeper understanding of design as a professional activity. However, “[t]here is seldom much meaningful documentation and therefore little evidence of the deeper objectives of the design or the many and complex ways it is connected to its operational and economic environment” (Agnew, 1993, p.121). The two projects, which are both described from a personal perspective as they originate from the author’s design practices, reveal the complex interdependencies between what conditions design and what can be designed. At first, Simon Meienberg will elaborate on the potential and consequences of participatory design and interactive user engagement within the project *Redesigning Migration Information Centres in The Gambia*. Subsequently, Dustin Jessen will reflect on the evolutionary process of *Designing a Table Trestle for the Folkwang University of the Arts*. This will be followed by a discussion on the general observations that can be drawn from these two design projects about design as a profession, and its potential to deal with the abstract concept of the common good.

## 2.1 Redesigning Migration Information Centres in The Gambia

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Designers:        | Simon Magnfält & Simon Meienberg   |
| Project duration: | August 2019 – December 2020, ongoing renovation until January 2021                           |
| Places:           | Soma and Basse, The Gambia   |
| Commissioned by:  | International Organization for Migration (IOM)<br>National Youth Council of The Gambia (NYC) |

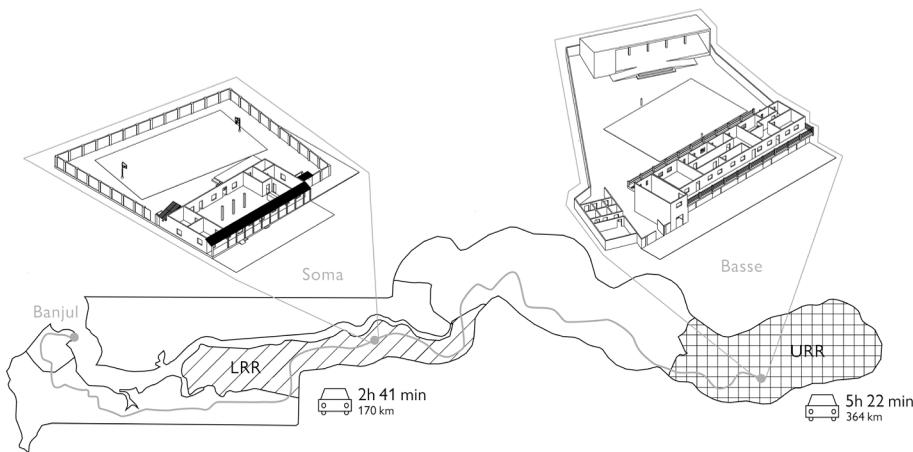


Fig. 1: The location and spaces of the two youth centres in Soma (left) and Basse (right).



At the beginning of 2019, IOM partnered with the Gambian National Youth Council (NYC) to create Migration Information Centres (MIC) within existing youth centres over the country. The idea behind creating these MICs is to empower young Gambians to make better-informed migration decisions and to advocate returned migrants for safe migration alternatives. At the MICs, staff answers questions of young people regarding migration while raising awareness among communities on irregular migration as well as existing reintegration mechanisms for returnees (Meienberg & Putteman, 2019, p.3).

From August to September 2019, I was commissioned as a design consultant by IOM The Gambia to explore new ways to promote safe migration within the EU-IOM pilot project *Redesigning Migration Information Centres in The Gambia* (fig.1). In order to capture an integrated picture of the complex processes, forces and environments at play, I opted for a Mixed Methods Design (Pole, 2007) with elements of Participatory Action Research (Fals-Borda, 1987, p.330). The four weeks of human-centred design research at two youth centres in the cities of Soma and Basse consisted of four phases and small-scale interventions that had a youth takeover at its core. The main research objective was the creation of an in-depth analysis of the challenges of the local youth and their needs and aspirations. This was complemented by uncovering and tracing local potential and knowledge, by identifying pull factors and local resources and, finally, by developing, co-creating and testing small-scale interventions with the youth at the MICs. Research activities included daily interactions, mapping of local dynamics and surroundings, and observational learning (Meienberg & Putteman, 2019, p.7).



Fig. 2: Young Gambians drawing their future vision for the MIC in Soma.

Prototyping and testing ideas with young Gambians allowed us to identify inter-locking processes between different socialities and spaces. Finally, we summarised our findings within 20 speculative future scenarios for the redesign of the socio-spatial entanglement at the MICs (fig.2). Subsequently, they served as a tool, a common ground for discussion between IOM and NYC. In January 2020, after several months of negotiation, they gave green light to enter the development phase of selected scenarios.

In the follow up, I partnered with Simon Magnfält, a local architect who had prior experience in building with sustainable resources and vernacular architecture. Together we tried to set-up an interactive user engagement driven design process, which would enable us to work closely with local builders, artisans and youth to transcend ideas into reality (fig.3). “This is particularly important when faced with the complexity that sustainability challenges present, which requires analytical and normative input from diverse actors” (Talwar et al., 2011, p.382).



Fig. 3: *Jointly inquiring the wishes and needs of youth at the youth centre in Basse.*

As designers, our main challenge was to frame, manage and facilitate interactive decision-making processes among the different actors involved. Unlike Unidirectional Social Research (USR), which is characterized by one-way communication with the main objective of information extraction or decision support, our form of Interactive Social Research (ISR) was structured around the components of dialogue, joint building and mutual learning. Thus, our user engagement enabled two-way exchange in order “for the users [to] become integral to the shaping and execution of the research” (Talwar et al., 2011, p.382).

When we first introduced our vision of building together with the local community, we hardly met any opposition. There was a shared excitement about the involvement of youth and communi-

ties in the design process. Upon further inquiry, however, we encountered a variety of contrasting ideas, motivations and objectives behind the facade of common understanding. While the main goal of IOM was to promote safe migration at the MICs, the youth aimed for having a safe space, a place to play, discuss and study and express their creativity. The NYC was foregrounding the importance of revenue making through a business approach. Whereas, the local basketball team would like to see the court behind the building renovated to host tournaments.

While each of these perspectives would possibly add value to the youth centres, we felt that prioritising interventions benefiting young people was paramount. After numerous formal and informal discussions with the actors, we finally found common ground in the following four principles forming a process-based approach:

- *Co-creation*: organising design workshops with the local youth and the community.
- *Sustainability*: working with locally available materials, knowledge and traditional-modern techniques.
- *Capacity building*: enabling mutual learning between workers, artisans and us.
- *Openness to appropriation*: designing spaces for a multitude of activities and use.

Under the constraints of a tight schedule and budget, we had to find ways to translate these premises into viable design interventions. In standard renovation and building projects, meticulous planning beforehand is paramount to seamlessly coordinate between designers/architects, builders and construction workers on site. Such processes are based on hierarchy, where the architect's instructions are passed down and each deviation from the plan will cause delay. We soon understood that this traditional approach would not give us the flexibility to engage users and respond to unforeseeable developments in the process.

For soft changes, we engaged youth in co-creation workshops on selected interventions e.g. Mural Artists (fig.4), Weld Champions (fig.5), etc. These small-scale interventions did not require any prior knowledge or expertise and presented a low barrier for participation in a well guided process of learning by doing. The decision-making power of the voluntary participants was limited to certain interventions and timeframes.



Fig. 4: Mural Artists workshop facilitated by Simon Magnfält (left) at the youth centre in Basse.

Fig. 5: A local welder man is giving the final touches to a Bantaba (garden pavilion) co-created by youth during the Weld Champions workshop in Soma.

Fig. 6: The first intervention of Building Together was to create a connection between the study café and the basketball court at the youth centre in Basse.

For structural changes and renovations, we collaborated with local artisans and builders on a daily basis. They received more responsibility and decision-making power due to their expertise in their respective fields (fig.6).

Although, at the beginning of the project our aim was the application of a strong interactive social research where our users were fully engaged “in all parts of the research process including problem definition and designing a research strategy”, we were not always able “to balance the multi-faceted power relations, ownership, accountability etc. between researchers and users” (Talwar et al., 2011, p.383). Our main obstacles were the limits of time, the diverse schedules of the involved participants, the different expectations of the outcome, and lengthy procurement procedures. Throughout our design process, we were therefore oscillating between different levels of participation (Arnstein, 2019, p.26) and intensities of user engagement (Talwar et al., 2011, p.382) (fig.7).

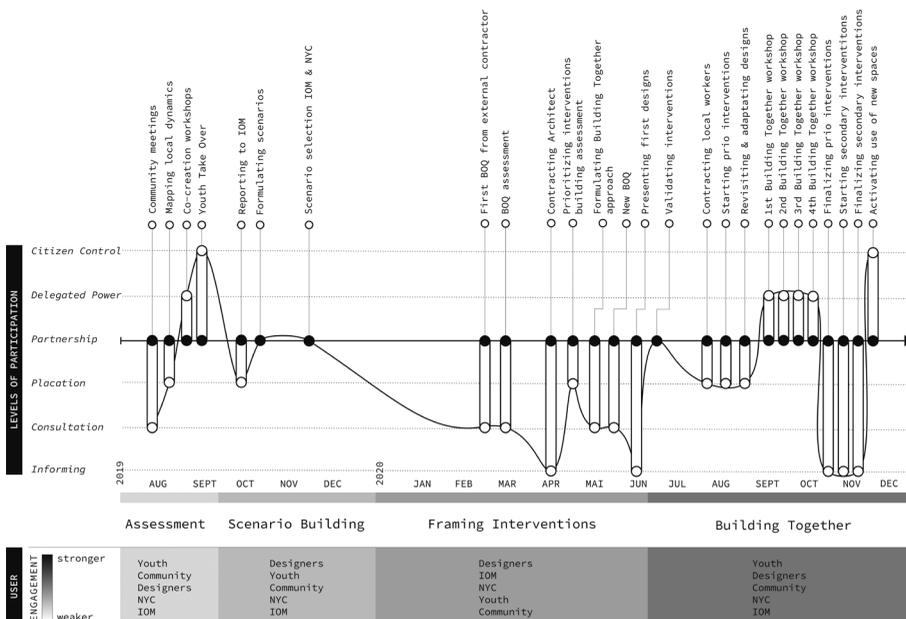


Fig. 7: Our design process displays changing levels of participation and intensities of user engagement in analogy to Arnsteins’ “Ladder of citizen participation” and the “Typology of user engagement in research” by Talwar et al.

While the architect and I took responsibility over the implementation of the chosen interventions, we deliberately inscribed a certain vagueness into our proposals in order to enable interpretation. Thanks to this strategic measure, many design processes took shape in the exchange with the community, e.g. through the sharing of hand-drawings and smartphone photographs of local solutions. On the building site, we would then discuss the idea with our workers and test different approaches. Later we translated them via CAD-software to add exact measurements, well knowing that there would be deviations as our construction workers and artisans will interpret the technical drawings and add their personal 'handwriting' to it. We often found ourselves retroactively adapting the plans to a built reality. Thus, the finalized interventions can be described as unpredicted outcomes of an evolutionary process. The deviations from our plans and speculations initiated a dialog between different cultures, values, meanings and understandings of the common good (fig.8).



Fig. 8: Preparations for a community dialogue at the youth centre in Basse.

## 2.2 Designing a Table Trestle for the Folkwang University of the Arts

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Designers:        | Philipp Hermes & Dustin Jessen                          |
| Project duration: | 2015 – 2017 (design phase),<br>since late 2017 in use   |
| Places:           | Essen (place of use) & Stendal (production),<br>Germany |
| Commissioned by:  | Folkwang University of the Arts                         |



Fig. 9: The new building of the design department of the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen.

In October 2017, the design department of the Folkwang University of the Arts moved into a new building on the UNESCO world heritage site Zeche Zollverein in Essen (fig.9). A couple of years before, the dean of the design department came up with the idea to develop a custom solution of a table trestle, which would allow a versatile use of the future seminar rooms. In analogy to the famous

'Ulmer Hocker' designed by Max Bill and Hans Gugelot in 1954 for the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, the Folkwang University of the Arts should also get its own iconic furniture. A design competition was organised, and about 20 design students submitted their entries. Despite its high iconicity the winning proposal, which was inspired by an anti-tank barrier, did eventually not prove to be a technically feasible solution. So when Philipp Hermes and I were asked in 2015 to create a new proposal, the project already had a history. This helped us to understand what was not desired – 20 rejected proposals –, but also meant that the project was biased by some of the decision-makers. The subsequent design process was therefore not only characterised by finding a technical solution to the challenge of a table trestle, but above all by negotiation tactics within the social construct of the university. Us being alumni of the B.A. Industrial Design program was both an advantage and a challenge at times. During the numerous presentations in front of a planning committee consisting of professors, students and staff, it was always important to take the various ideas and objections seriously while at the same time to carefully reason why not everything can be implemented.



**Fig. 10:** *This concept, which was ultimately discarded, envisaged the production of large boxes made of expanded polypropylene, which, in addition to their function as table trestles, could also be used for storage.*

After we realised that we would not get a majority for a rather speculative concept of giant black boxes (fig.10) made of expanded polypropylene, we quickly abandoned this idea, although we had pursued it for almost one and a half years. While this felt like a failure at the time, it was incredibly insightful in order to find a better fit for the situation. In this particular case, our final proposal, which was presented only a few months before the opening, can be seen as a 'lucky punch' of a fighter who is in danger of losing on points in the last round of the fight. What seemed to be fortunate though, was actually the result of a long research process characterised by perpetual materialised speculations of a future reality; revealing the designability of the situation. The numerous rejected iterations paved the way for the success of the project. One might draw the conclusion that design processes are

always processes of constant failure until the best possible compromise is found – “Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (Glanville, 2007).



Fig. 11: Depending on their size the seminar rooms were equipped with 12 to 76 trestles.

Even though the design of our CNC-bent steel tube trestle (fig.11), of which more than 500 units were eventually produced, meets the initial briefing that basically asked for a “sturdy and stackable” table trestle, it would be inaccurate to consider it a direct answer to these rudimentary requirements. Over the course of the project new requirements and challenges emerged as a result of design rather than design providing immediate answers to preconceived conditions. For example, the requirement to provide the greatest possible legroom under the table arose during a presentation of a prototype that took up exactly this room. The same prototype also made apparent that the conversational dynamics in teaching situations often require that two persons are able to sit and talk across a corner of a table. Requirements and constraints evolved along the evolving artefact (cf. Jonas, 2007, p.195), and so did our own ambitions as designers. We wanted our piece of furniture to not only enable its users to build a table, but to inspire the creation of further spatial arrangements. Instead of dictating concrete possibilities of use, our table trestle should trigger its own appropriation and reinterpretation, what can be considered an inescapable reality of design anyway, as “[t]ools are born as challenges to existing concepts of utility” (Colomina & Wigley, 2016, p.52). In order to provoke this, we deliberately designed it in such a way that it does not clearly communicate what it should be used for. Its ambiguity (Gaver et al., 2003) makes it flexible and adaptable. The thought of a semi-finished product, that is provoking its own appropriation for purposes that are still to be discovered by its users, became a leading principle in all further design decisions. Although the targeted budget of 50 euros per unit was probably the most significant constraint, most decisions cannot be explained in a linear fashion or based exclusively on one single criterion (Komar, 2008, p.54), but are the result of weighing up a wide range of aspects.

The tube diameter, for instance, was already narrowed down due to the required stability of the trestle, but the decision to use an exactly 32 mm thick tube was also based on the fact that there are standardised electrical installation pipes of the same diameter available in every DIY store. These plastic pipes come with a large number of fastening solutions, like clamps, connectors and other add-ons, which can be utilised for our table trestle as well. Our artefact would thus literally be ‘connected’ to a whole range of already existing artefacts. As it became clear that the company L&C Stendal, which already produced the original furniture for the Bauhaus Dessau, would be commissioned to produce the table trestles, the dimensions also had to be compatible with the moulding tools and manufacturing capabilities of this project partner. In addition, the diameter of 32 mm proved to be comfortable to hold in



Fig. 12: The table trestle and the facade of the new building share the same surface coating.

the hand which potentially enhances the portability of the object.

The hot-dip galvanized surface of the steel tube is a direct reference to the facade of the new building, which is clad with hot-dip galvanized steel panels (fig.12). As a purely formal reference, this would certainly be a rather superficial argument, but in the course of the project this argument proved to be quite convincing, as the demand for memorability and iconicity of the product was thereby satisfied. Apart from the fact that this decision had advantages in the context of the project dynamics, from our point of view it had the benefit that a zinc coated table trestle is potentially less squeamish in use. As it is a surface coating that is commonly used outdoors for reasons of corrosion protection, there is no need to be overly careful with the object and it can be turned on its side without fear of damaging its surface. Thus, the choice of this particular surface coating potentially increases the appropriation of the object.

As a research assistant at the Folkwang University of the Arts, I have not only seen the trestles move into the new building (and some of them already mysteriously move out again), but I have now had the opportunity for more than three years to observe if the daily use of the table trestles meets our previous speculations about it. This gave me some valuable insights on how the product is *actually* used and adapted. It is a rather rare occasion that a product designer is able to make this kind of close-up and long-term observation as the use of one's products often happens in an unattainable private context. Seeing the consequences of my design work can be both a blessing and a curse, but is above all a great opportunity for design research. A main observation is that hardly any table trestle is still in the spot where it was originally placed as they are constantly being moved through the building. It is as if the table trestles became a 'common good' for all the students, teachers and staff of the university, who collectively reconfigure and re-define their working environment by appropriating an undefined object. This object is, of course, often used as table trestle (fig.13) or exhibition furniture (fig.14), but apart from this core application one also finds it being used in plenty of other ways "created out of necessity, convenience and play" (Brandes & Erlhoff, 2006), which could be described as 'Non-Intentional Design'. Albeit it was not foreseeable it was certainly *intended* that our table trestle would be used as a barrier (fig.15, 16), to create a ping-pong table (fig.17) or a football goal (fig.18).



Fig. 13: In seminar rooms, the table trestles allow flexible rearrangement of the teaching situation.



Fig. 14: By placing the table trestles on their sides, flat pedestals can be built for exhibition purposes.



Fig. re 15, 16: The table trestles are often used to erect barriers.



Fig. re 17, 18: On various festive occasions, the table trestles were used to build sporting equipment to enable activities like ping-pong and football on campus.

When the project was presented to the Resources Commission at the German Environment Agency in 2018, the first question was whether we were aware of how difficult it is to recycle zinc once it has been applied as a surface coating. While we had thought about the ecological impact of our product, issues of recyclability have, admittedly, played a subordinate role in the course of the project. George Nelson once said: "We all tend to see in terms of what we know, or believe" (Nelson et al., 2017, p.13), and there was simply no party involved that looks at material flows from a perspective

like the German Environment Agency. Considering the recyclability of materials alone, an untreated surface might have been the more ecological choice, but this decision might also have caused the whole project to end as yet another unrealized speculation. Moving beyond the eco-political paradigm of sustainability (Blühdorn, 2017) and questions of material choice, it still remains questionable whether or not we have served the common good with our intervention.

### 3 Discussion

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From the very beginning, the project *Redesigning Migration Information Centres in The Gambia* aimed to engage with the various actors and their diverse demands by democratically involving them in the design process. The design process of the project *Designing a Table Trestle for the Folkwang University of the Arts* was certainly less driven by the involvement of all actors, but more directed towards a certain outcome. In short, one could say that the first project focused more on *how* to design, while the second project focused more on *what* to design. While the first project followed a participatory design approach, the second project's focus was mainly on the potential usage of the final product. Nevertheless, in both projects the expected outcome for the designer was to deliver some kind of materialized intervention. Can we now conclude that one of the approaches is superior when it comes to addressing the common good? Is a focus on a certain process necessarily more targeted on the common good than a focus on a certain product typology? Is a higher level of user engagement and participation or a bigger focus on the use phase a more legitimate strategy towards the common good? Have the projects succeeded with their intention to change an existing situation into a preferred one? An appropriate answer to these questions was already formulated by Rittel:

“Fortunately for all of us, most designers don't succeed in shaping the world their way. Design takes place in a *social context*. Virtually all plans affect many people in different ways. Plan-making aims at the distribution of advantages and disadvantages. No plan has ever been beneficial to everybody. Therefore, many persons with varying, often contradictory interests and ideas are or want to be involved in plan-making. The resulting plans are usually compromises resulting from negotiation and the application of power. The designer is party in these processes; he takes sides. Designing entails political commitment – although many designers would rather see themselves as neutral, impartial, benevolent experts who serve the abstraction of ‘the common good’” (Rittel, 1987, p.6).

Resonating on Rittel, it is nonsense to define a set of criteria, which has to be fulfilled, or use a ‘toolbox’, which can be used in every possible situation in order to achieve the common good, as the evaluation of such abstract goals is inevitably bound to changing values and contradictory interests. This would only lead to a deceptive sense of unanimity. In commissioned project settings, it

is often the (political) agenda of a client that defines the values and parameters, which are inscribed into a design project from the start. Within design processes, these have a certain elasticity and can – to some extent – be reformulated among the involved actors by the means of iterations and critical inquiry. Hereby, the social, political and economic forces that shape a design project become both constraints and opportunities.

“Design has been both the greatest emancipator and implicitly supported the exploitation of communities around the world, at times improving the lives of citizens and at times subjecting them to the interests of the dominant economic and political forces” (Badano et al., 2020, p.24).

What is considered to be changeable, and what is considered to be untouchable, or simply accepted without reflecting about it, depends on a huge variety of internal and external factors. Certain skills, specialist knowledge or situational possibilities might lead some designer to question other things than some other designer. Traditions of how things should be done, expectations of supervisors, personal goals, technical feasibilities or simply the factor of time and timing might all affect the design task at hand. One might say that *design constitutes itself anew with every occurrence*. Broadly speaking, design becomes possible when contingency appears. Realizing that something is contingent, meaning that it is not necessary the way it is, and that it could be done differently (Geiger, 2018), opens the door for change. However, what we consider to be changeable is affected by various institutional, situational, and personal factors. We believe, one should not start a project with a pre-defined idea of the common good, but *suspend judgment* for a moment, and consider design a form of inquiry, rather than a way to solve a problem.

If there is one design strategy that could actually be drawn from both projects it is the value of vagueness and ambiguity (Bauer, 2018). An ambiguous formulation can have great benefits and empower people – whether it is a technical drawing that can be interpreted by local craftsmen (project 1) or a product that enables flexible use due to its polysemic appearance (project 2).

#### 4 Conclusion

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Even if the common good was seemingly identifiable in consensus, it remains challenging to foretell or anticipate (Simon, 1981, p.187) whether a design intervention – no matter how noble its intentions are – will eventually lead towards this objective. In contrast to dreamy world-saving aspirations, a more realistic and modest position would be to reconfigure design processes in ways that the development of common good becomes a likely possibility (Fezer & Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg, 2016). This involves a better understanding of the complex relationships between human and non-human agents (Latour, 2019) but also moving “from

clinging to notions of total control to a relaxed acceptance of letting go" (Till, 2013, p.151), and acknowledging that the "human is permanently suspended between being the cause and the effect, between designing living systems and being designed by them" (Colomina and Wigley 2016, p.56–57). It means designing – as Susan Leigh Star frames it in her concept of the 'boundary object' – in order to facilitate the collaboration between different commitments of participants from different social worlds, allowing the exchange of information and different interpretations and perspectives on a common thing of interest (Star, 2017).

It is the mediation of plurality of differentiating visions, ideas and socio-cultural values which remains challenging. Consensus might be overrated, dissent and conflict can be drivers for novel approaches on complex problems (Miessen, 2012). In making the common good the ultimate *goal* of design one might more often fail than achieve it. Therefore, we should rather consider the common good as a possible *result* or a *consequence* of the design process – neither working against nor for, but *beyond* the common good. Thus, designing *beyond* the common good means enabling a critical debate (Draser & Liedtke, 2019, p.69) about the common good and keeping it alive.

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