AGENTS OF ALTERNATIVES
Re-designing Our Realities

Edited by:
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Anja-Lisa Hirscher
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INTRODUCTION

You hold in your hands a book which is really a manifestation of an evolving vision to link designing with everyday ‘active-ism’ which helps materialise plausible ‘alternatives’ to the global economy and neo-liberal capitalist practices. This was driven by an underlying belief that we need to ‘re-design our realities’ to better reflect and respond to our pressing contingent challenges about our social, ecological and financial condition.

Exploring ‘agents of alternatives’ demands a multidisciplinary dialogue within and between citizens, practitioners and academics who make things happen. So, you will find contributors from diverse fields: design, the arts, architecture, education, politics, economics, urban planning and city administration, social enterprise and the informal sector, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), experts on the commons, and others. We encouraged activists, researchers, educationalists, strategists and facilitators to share their views. In this book we mix the voices of well-known contributors alongside lesser-known active local agents. We look for emergent ways of learning-by-doing, of designing, of manifesting things differently and catalysing positive change, and we present these ways of thinking and practicing so that others might fruitfully experiment with, explore and generate alternatives for themselves.

Agency

Our position is that everyone and everything has agency, that is, the capacity to change what happens next. A position reinforced by certain philosophers – for example, Bruno Latour’s human and non-human ‘actants’; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s ‘social material assemblages’; and Jane Bennett’s ‘vibrant matter’.1 We, and our contributors, also adopt more accepted sociological and anthropological views of agency involving the social structures, systems and rules which bind or break them. Those with agency are actors, stakeholders, shareholders, institutions, organisations, diverse communities and other social groups. We would also invoke ‘political agency’ as a healthy form of disagreement and discourse as part of our civic and human condition, not confined within formalised institutionalised practices of ‘politics’. In this sense we see the political agency of this book and its contributors as a means to re-examine and explore our social relations and our relations with the wider world so that we might, individually and collectively posit or construct alternatives.

The agents

Who are these agents of alternatives? They exhibit some common features: they are independently minded, but share a critical awareness of our social, ecological and economic condition; they have a vision but it is adaptive to changing circumstances; they are open and transparent, showing their processes and sharing their expertise; they start their journey with the (often meagre) resources at their disposal and show perseverance; they believe their voice counts and encourage others to add their voices too; they turn rhetoric into action; and they reveal opportunities and possibilities. Most importantly, all our contributors here are ‘making things happen’; they are active not passive, caring not distant, and different not conformist. Read their voices in the essays, interviews and case studies.

Alternatives

Anyone, or anything, contesting the status quo, societal ‘norms’ or contemporary paradigmatic forces, is, potentially, an ‘alternativ-ist’. To be an alternativ-ist is not a new position but has an illustrious history which embraces daring individuals, collective movements, specialised groups and minorities.2 Here we define our alternatives through a series of imagined worlds -Thinking, Learning, Sharing, Making, Intervening, Working, and Living – worlds which evolved as the content for the book grew (see p.18-19). We see these worlds intertwined, joined by a series of emergent practices (p.462) and expressed through an evolving lexicon (p.22-37). These alternatives are still young, yet they are potentially catalytic and, if scaled-up, can encourage a transition towards more sustainable, equitable and adaptable futures.

We found professionally organised alternatives that try to bridge policy-making and grassroots activism as well as small initiatives that have spread all around the world, because their underlying ideas are so simple, accessible and welcoming to a wide range of people. There are different ways of changing society, and this book tries to have a closer look at the potential of the informal and formal worlds of change makers.

Re-designing

Our shared vision for this book was also underpinned with a belief that the field of design is diffusing out into wider society and is no longer just the primary concern of professionally trained designers, but is actually being practiced by other profes-

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professionals, professional amateurs and citizen designers. We share and update Victor Papanek’s view that ‘all people are designers’; and Joseph Beuys’ political position making all citizens ‘artists’ that shape the ‘social sculpture’ of our society. And, we believe that a sustainable way of designing is to work with what is existent in a ‘locale’ – a diverse array of human, social, public, commercial and natural capitals. In this sense ‘re-designing’ makes more sense than ‘designing’ because it involves re-configuring the potential of what already exists. This might, of course, involve bringing in new ingredients and smartly combining them to create fresh potentialities. The initiatives, projects and ideas collated in this book are representative for a growing global ‘zeitgeist’ (spirit of the time) around openness and sharing. This means making ideas accessible to everyone so that they can be adapted to diverse local conditions. Most of them are open source so individual authorship becomes less important and the positive impacts and potentialities of sharing are emphasised. They bring different communities and places around the world together in a dynamic self-organised and, often, surprising way.

To summarise, it is our hope that this book will stimulate you, the reader, to become an agent of alternatives too...

Editors’ notes: We added editors’ footnotes to interview and case study texts where we thought it would assist the reader. In the essays these are marked as such, to distinguish them from the original contributor’s footnotes.

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5 ‘Locale’ has an etymological root in ‘locus’, Latin for place, and is a French word defining local. More importantly, locale, is a combination of unique ingredients or characteristics which differentiate what it means to be local. Locale is a scalable phenomenon that, like the famous Charles and Ray Eames’ film Powers of Ten, can be felt at many scales from one square metre to a hectare or more. It is also a meeting place of various communities, it is the location of specific human ecologies. So each locale has a unique combination of communities of place, communities of practice, communities of interest and communities of circumstance and other types of communities. Source: Fuad-Luke, A., 2012. Locale. Window874, available at http://window874.com/2012/05/29/locale
The founding principle of this book is that the diverse content provided by the contributors would drive an emergent structure.

We came together in November 2013 in Helsinki to analyse the content we’d already received and to develop the language for the book (Figure 1). We believed, and still believe, that genuine empowerment happens by locating ourselves within an alternative framework, by seeing positive disruptions to the status quo, by repositioning what designing can do, and by focusing on Our Commons (we use ‘our’ not ‘the’ to emphasise that the default ownership is ‘us’ and ‘we’, not ‘them’) and how we can share in better ways for the common good.

In February 2014 the editors came together in Berlin to further explore and understand the content we had already received and do an initial mapping of its relations (Figure 2.). These two meetings led us to create an active vocabulary and initiated a conversation about whether we could analyse and synthesise the content into a more constructive and practical arrangement that would inspire. We understood that people were acting and taking action around different focal areas — we called these areas ‘alternative worlds’ (see next page). They are/were developing [design] practices that help encourage a transition from the existing situation to a preferred situation (to borrow from the words of Herbert Simon1). We analysed these practices and have presented them as ‘Stuff that works’ (p.462). These practices range from those based upon eminent common sense to ingenious ways of encouraging transformation. We hope you will recognise some, and add your own. We also observed that people were talking and writing about their ‘worlds’ and ‘practices’ with new language, so we created an ‘evolving lexicon’ (pp.22-37). We hope that these collated ‘insights’, ‘practices’, ‘emergent words’ and, of course, the detailed content from our contributors, will stimulate you, the reader, to reflect and re-think your own position. We hope that flipping between this synthesis of the content and the actual content will provide its own stimulus. In short, we hope that this extra joining of information at a ‘meta’ level, might provide some magic ingredients to generate, nourish and sustain alternatives.

Map of contributions
Each contribution in this book was assigned to a ‘primary’ world with other worlds as ‘secondary’ influences to see how the different projects, initiatives and philosophies interweave and cluster. The outcome is a ‘map of contributions’ (pp.20-21) which allows a different way of navigating through the book and making sense of its contents. It serves as an addition to the traditional list of contents and invites you, the reader, to experience the book in many different ways: non-linearly, according to chapter, interest, theme, format and so on. Enjoy the journey.

We believe that alternatives are best created and designed together by thinking differently and making those thoughts tangible by taking action. The diversity of contributions in this book highlights that there are many intertwined worlds with which we can engage. We offer working definitions of these worlds, without asserting them to be either final or complete, hoping that you will add your own. We believe that by combining these worlds in different ways, we can ‘re-design our realities’.

**Thinking** - the diverse acts and practices of discursive activities, free association, ideation, inquiring, intuiting, philosophising, reasoning, reflecting, ruminating and synthesising individually and/or collectively as a means to nourish our human, social and other capitals.

**Learning** - the activities of acquiring, giving and exchanging skills, knowledge and experiences by teaching oneself and others, and learning from each other to encourage healthy social discussion, evolution of new wisdoms and activation of hidden capabilities.

**Sharing** - acts, actions or reciprocal relations between individuals, groups and communities to enjoy and enrich something together (time, objects, experiences, etc.) based on respectful mutuality, interdependency, openness and generosity.

**Making** - the act of bringing a form, process, service or experience to life, while realising individual and/or collective creative human potential and capital.

**Intervening** - introducing activities and/or artefacts to engage, by consensus or disruption, to stimulate dialogue and actions towards a common purpose as a means to better our world.

**Working** - modes of being active, of acting, operating, functioning, organising and practicing to achieve something, to earn or make a livelihood, to be a valued contributor to society, its individual members and to oneself.

**Living** - human activities of alive-ness, being-ness, existences, livelihoods and other ways of being that affect our individual and collective condition, our thriving and flourishing, and our natural, spatial, physical, mental, spiritual and other dimensions of being in the world.
MAP OF CONTRIBUTIONS

The initials represent the contributors listed in the contents on p.8 with their respective page numbers.
SHARING

Acts, actions or reciprocal relations between individuals, groups and communities to enjoy and enrich something together (time, objects, experiences, etc.) based on respectful mutuality, interdependency, openness and generosity.
Openwear collaborative clothing is a web-based platform for joint fashion creation, networking and interaction. It is an online community where values, knowledge and practice about sustainable and open fashion design are shared among the members. It promotes the collaboration between local business, educational institutes and independent fashion designers and makers to work towards a new vision of fashion, based on micro-communities and sustainability.

Zoe Romano is currently working on Digital Strategy & Wearables at Arduino. She co-founded Openwear.org and Wefab.it, an initiative for the diffusion of open design and digital fabrication in Italy. She’s been into media activism and political visual art for the past 10 years, working on precarious employment, social production, material and immaterial labour in creative and service industries.

Case Study
OPENWEAR
COLLABORATIVE CLOTHING
by Zoe Romano

Purpose/aim of the project: Openwear’s aim, in short, was to optimize the ability of small producers to compete in the marketplace through collaboration, based on common-based resources and networking.

Names of people/organisations involved: Founder of the project: Zoe Romano; Project Leader: Popet with Ethical Economy; Università degli Studi di Milano; Copenhagen Business School and University of Ljubljana.

Participants contributing to the first collaborative collection: Studio I-GLE, David Luxembourg, Serpica Naro, OLoop, Open Source Pants, Daniela Pais, Pamoyo, and Jure Purgaj.

Key stakeholders: Anyone interested in exploring an alternative model for fashion production such as fashion designers, students, researchers, and universities.

Geographic location: European Union (EU).

Supported by: Life Long Learning Programme of the EU Commission.

Start date/Finish date: September 2009 until September 2012.

Website or other online resource: www.openwear.org

Interview of participants: http://vimeo.com/15654417

Other videos: http://vimeo.com/user4899256/videos

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1 http://www.popet.si
2 Ethical Economy has created the world’s only ethical price index. More: http://openwear.org/info/whoweare
3 http://www.unimi.it
4 http://www.cbs.dk/en
5 http://www.uni-lj.si/eng
6 http://www.i-gle.com
7 http://www.yoad.info
8 http://www.serpicanaro.org
9 http://oloopdesign.com
10 http://www.opensourcepants.net
11 http://www.danielpais.com
12 http://pamoyo.com
13 http://www.jurepurgaj.wordpress.com
What triggered the project?
We were exploring an alternative fashion system based on values like collaboration, open source, community, the commons and distributed manufacturing.

What was your motivation?
We took inspiration from projects in other sectors already working on models based on the above values and tried to bring them into fashion production. I was already in touch with Michel Bauwens, founder of the P2P Foundation and collecting a series of case studies on p2p production. We wanted to experiment something similar in another sector.

Are there similar projects and did these stimulate you and are you linked to them in any way?
Many of the ideas at the core of the project came from the experiments I did with the Italian collectives I co-founded in 2005 called Serpica Naro.

How did the idea evolve?
The idea was conceived within Serpica Naro collective, operating since 2006. We wanted to help stimulate a conversation around the fact that millions of Italy’s young people now work for years without proper pay, and to find ways to confront the situation.

As we studied the fashion system further, we came to realize that it is characterized by an increasing polarization: on the one hand big luxury brands; on the other fast fashion. The luxury brands accumulate wealth by exploiting the creative, production, and sales segments. We wanted to develop an alternative scheme.

We began with the concept of intellectual property. Realizing that there were no examples of liberated trademarks, we worked with lawyers from Creative Commons to write a license for the use of the Serpica Naro brand. This would permit individuals, small producers, and small factories to contact us and use the brand on their clothing.

With the help of Adam Arvidsson, a sociology professor at the University of Milan, I began to develop relationships with European companies and universities. We not only wanted to see if we could build a new brand that would be economically sustainable, but also to bring the ideas that the Serpica Naro experience had engendered into a more institutional setting.

These efforts resulted in EDUfashion, a consortium of two companies and three universities: the Slovenian design studio Poper, Ethical Economy from the U.K., the University of Milan, the Copenhagen Business School, and the Department of Fashion and Textiles at University of Ljubljana. As we researched open design and peer-to-peer fashion, we began prototyping the community that was to become OpenWear in 2010.

What are/were the key organisational aspects and organizational structures?
Consortium composed by three universities and two companies: EDUfashion, Poper as Project Leader, Ethical Economy – UK, Università degli Studi di Milano – IT, Copenhagen Business School – DK, and the University of Ljubljana – SI.

Target audience and network(s)?
Indie fashion, makers, tailors, pattern makers, and students.

What are or were the key activities?
Creating a collaborative collection and maintaining an online platform to share the codes of a series of collaborative collection. All the members of the community could download, manufacture, and sell garments from the collection using the Openwear brand together with their own brand.

What are or were the key approach & methods?
The general idea of the project was to support the development of a new model of fashion production based on local micro businesses with short supply chains networked with a local and international environment of complementary production hubs and educational institutions.

We tried to reconcile two social trends: a new ethical consumer demand and the growing relevance of a self-managed workforce focused on independent, socially engaged, critical and creative production. Additionally, knowledge sharing is stimulated and dissemination of skills and best practices enhanced with the online space where interested parties can introduce their work, share opinions, use the database and explore the e-book with relevant material that defines the new model framework.

15 Taken with permission from Zoe Romano. Source: Transcript from a conference keynote at Parsons School of Design, New York, to be published in the Journal of Design Strategies.
16 http://www.edufashion.org
How did you get people participating?
Invitation, word of mouth, events, and through social networks.

What are/were essential for practical matters?
- The creation of an online public space where small producers and students can present their profiles and work activities on ethical fashion production and knowledge creation, as well as discuss best practices and find common solutions for shared problems.
- An online database for resources and e-books¹⁷ that define the new model framework: relevant materials at one place for the members who want to deepen their knowledge on new forms of work and production in fashion and creative industry.
- Collaborative clothing collection: freely downloadable, replicable, customizable and sellable because licensed under Openwear open source brand.¹⁸ Helps people who want to sell or share their designs to brand their products without putting too much effort and budget into advertising.
- Creation of an open brand identity: this helps constructing a self-representation for our target groups (micro producers, independent fashion workers, creative industries related to ethical fashion, fashion graduates) and public recognition.

Media use and efficacy?
The communication of this new model of production and dissemination of its practices is a complex issue. That’s why we decided to build an open brand, as an ethos, inscribed in the products affected. To varying degrees, the identities and social relations arise around its use. The usual goal of contemporary brand management is to ensure that this particular ethos is reproduced in consumers’ everyday interactions with and around branded products.

An open brand though, is a brand that recognizes the productive role of customer co-production, engages in strategies that aim at redistributing the value produced, and seeks organizational solutions that give co-producing consumers a say in determining the overall governance of the brand.

To start disseminating ideas and involving experts as well as an audience in a virtual conversation we opened up a blog to give visibility to the work in progress. We created a Facebook and Twitter profile to disseminate the initial content. To implement the project plan and start involving stakeholders we organized presentations and open informal debates in educational institutions but also in local creative hubs around Europe.

What are/were the outcomes reference target audience?
The full report of the Openwear project is available online.¹⁹ The EDUFashion project delivered four participant outcomes based on collaborative work (Openwear knowledge portal, Openwear brand, electronic archives, research on labour market and working conditions in fashion) and two deliverable outcomes (EDUFashion website, Openwear collaborative collection of garments, Brand manual booklet, e-book). Other outputs are research (workshops) or dissemination (publications) tools. All outputs are connected with one another.

‘Openwear knowledge portal had 288 subscribers at the end of the EDUFashion project’s European financial scheme. There have been 982 monthly active users on Openwear’s Facebook account, 1,076 likes (and growing)’.²⁰

What are/were the impacts - target audience and wider?
With EDUFashion we managed to bring together a team of complementary partners. The process of confronting these different views, cultures and socio-economic contexts was of great value for the project and ensured that different perspectives were brought into the main tasks. Each partner was able to promote the project outcomes in its country through national channels but there were over 980 active

¹⁸ http://openwear.org/info/license
users each month. We also abroad in other European countries produced an open source manual on how to create an open brand.21

Even though the majority of the research has been based on secondary data analysis, the emergence of the implicit knowledge in daily communication and international meetings has been of a great help. This is particularly true in the understanding of the dichotomy between DIY (do it yourself), ingénue, grassroots design and institutional design. Our work has benefited of the national and international networks of the partners, with a great add value in terms of interdisciplinary and cross-pollination.

For example local network of small designers, micro entrepreneurs and crafters from Milan understood that problems and opportunities for precarious and independent workers were not a local specificity but that they could be considered and managed at a European level.22

REFLECTING & SUSTAINING

How is/was the project sustained?
The project was financed by Life Long Learning Program of EU Commission. It had a plan to become self-sustaining but two years of activity were not enough to reach sustainability.

What kinds of ‘capital’ did you use to sustain the project?
We mainly used human capital, social capital and financial capital.

Are you happy with the project? Would you change anything?
Yes and no. I’m happy we had the chance to experiment new concepts and ideas but probably we were too pioneering for the prevalent designers, the market and consumer mindset. We realised only later that we could not activate a fully collaborative process with online sharing tools for patterns and most of the professionals involved kept working on paper patterns instead of digital ones.

We realised, for example, that people with a fashion background lacked two main approaches:
• The use of digital processes in their work, because the way fashion is taught in school and university is still mostly based on analogue processes.
• The idea that collaboration and sharing is a value to be nurtured because it brings more value in the long run.

Was the project as you expected or did you encounter anything unexpected?
I realised that the fashion sector, even if it works on low levels of intellectual property protection (i.e. patterns are not copyright protected), is based on a culture of secrecy and hiding. This is the worst enemy of collaboration and openness.

Is the project scalable?
Yes. The core ideas of the project are still valuable and could be applied again in another project and with the knowledge of the difficulties encountered.

OUTPUTS & OUTCOMES

What were tangible outputs of the project?
More than 400 people were involved in the community around Europe. We created a collaborative collection, an e-book exploring the concepts and some key findings.

What capacity did you build? How did you change people’s lives?
Many people were inspired by the Openwear approach and became more confident in exploring new business models for their activity of independent fashion making.

Did the project meet the initial purpose and intentions?
Yes. We wanted to experiment on some core concepts and we had the time and resources to do it and also understood what could be improved and how was the reaction of a wider audience to this new approach.

LESSONS LEARNED

What are the lessons learned?
Even if things did not go 100% as planned, doing things for real, enables experiences that are not possible otherwise. It’s totally different when you speculate on some processes and frameworks compared to when you can actually stage them on a real project like Openwear.

What can be given as advice for the readers?
Make your idea or project goal as simple as possible and engage in making it successful. Then, in a second phase, expand its aims and make it more complicated.

21 http://issuu.com/openwear/docs/openwear_brandmanual

Fernando Lusitano - The seeds of the past hybridise with the seeds of the present. Share seeds. Seed the future.