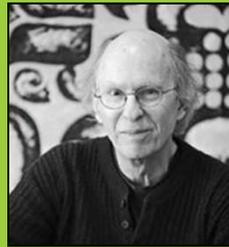# Interaction Design, Society and the Public Sector
Ethics and Responsibility: *Globalism*

Jon Kolko

ac4d

Globalism

[1B] Emily Pilloton

Somewhat paradoxically, however, the majority of social impact projects are focused on demographics in the developing world (and rightfully so, given that the most socio-economically disadvantaged citizens often reside in developing countries), oceans away from the designers' offices.

By its nature, designing for communities tens of thousands of miles away makes it nearly impossible to truly understand the intricacies of a problem well enough to even propose potential solutions.

What is the paradox? Where did it come from?

[1B] Emily Pilloton

For design within communities, we must genuinely identify with the community and consider ourselves part of it in order to produce solutions that are informed and long lasting in their impact. Through such empathy, our actions become inherently collective, making more permanent impact.

This power of collective action was beautifully described in a 1994 white paper published by the South African Government's Rural Development Program committee: '…The people must together shape their own future. Development is not about the delivery of goods to a passive citizenry. It is about active involvement and growing empowerment.'

Can you truly empathize with someone in a developing country?

Emily Pilloton

Because social issues are systemic, our community-based work must not only be local and long-term, but also widespread and pervasive, occurring at varying scales, for multiple programs, and for a variety of clients. (You may find this contradictory to my suggestion to sit still and do one thing, but in fact our "one thing," design or economic-development or healthcare work, can and must be directed toward multiple venues and clients.)

Instead of building only houses, we can apply design and building skills to construct homes, schools, public plazas, and healthcare centers.

[1B] Emily Pilloton

Lasting involvement requires three characteristics:

- *Proximity – simply being there, in the place you seek to design with and for*
- *Empathetic investment – a personal and emotional stake in collective prosperity*
- *Pervasiveness – the opposite of scattershot, involvement that has impact at multiple scales*

Emily Pilloton

To take it one step further, you can't design effective solutions for people unless you make your clients or end users part of the design process—cocreating systems that will work for and be owned by them. To do either of these things, you simply have to be there, present in a place, and part of the community.
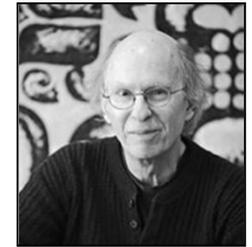
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[1B] Emily Pilloton

To be invested means to allocate time and talent toward a group or endeavor we wish to see succeed. For design within communities, we must genuinely identify with the community and consider ourselves part of it in order to produce solutions that are informed and long lasting in their impact.

Victor Margolin

We have a desire to help

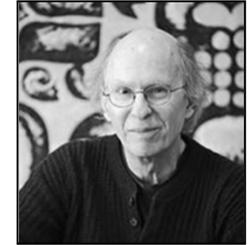Our experiences are framed in a value structure unique to our country

We try to drive change in a geographic area

We inadvertently (or explicitly) export our value structure

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[1B] Victor Margolin

The upheaval is a response to a world situation which itself is in turmoil. It can be characterized according to Horst Rittel's definition of a 'wicked problem' as a "class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing.

[1B] Victor Margolin
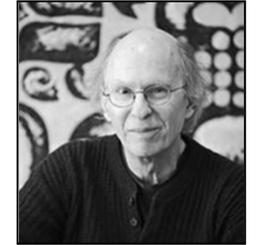
For designers to participate in sorting out these problems and inventing productive courses of action, they will have to move from second domain design, where product design has been located since the nineteenth century, to fourth domain design... exploring the role of design in sustaining, developing, and integrating human beings into broader ecological and cultural environments.

[1B] Victor Margolin
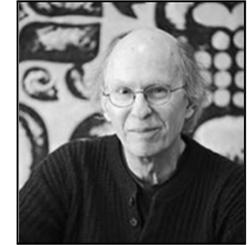
The equilibrium model:

The premise of this model is that the world is a system of ecological checks and balances which consists of finite resources. If the elements of this system are damaged or thrown out of balance or if essential resources are depleted, the system will suffer severe damage and possibly collapse.
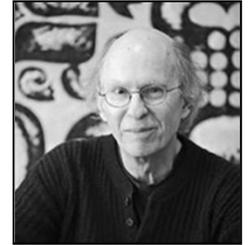
The expansion model:

According to this model, the world consists of markets rather than nations, societies, or cultures. Products function in these markets as tokens of economic exchange. They attract capital which is either recycled back into more production or becomes part of the accumulation of private or corporate wealth.

Which do we have?

Which is better?

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Victor Margolin

The differing agendas for social development that are central to the equilibrium model and the expansion model are not only in conflict, they are on a collision course that has already led to considerable fallout.

This is evident in the widening gaps between rich and poor in both global and local terms, the development of an information infrastructure that privileges some and excludes others, and an array of precarious environmental situations that are beginning to permanently damage the planet. The tension between these two models is extreme and must be addressed if we are to overcome the unattractive aspects of both.

[1B] Victor Margolin
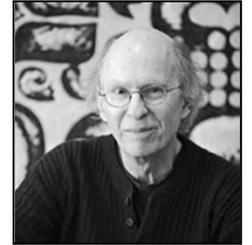
Another way the expansion model operates is through the creation of markets for new products where none existed before. Today, the number of objects people in the industrialized countries live with is growing rather than declining because actions which people once performed themselves or had no need to perform are now being done by products, particularly smart ones
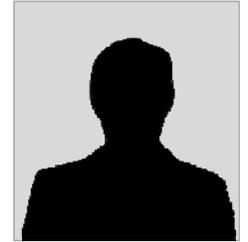
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[1B] Victor Margolin
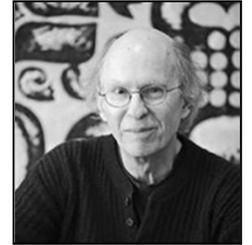
Design research as I see it has two functions; one is increase our knowledge of how to make products and what, in fact, might be made and the other is to improve our understanding of how products function as part of the social world.

[1B] Michael Hobbes

It seemed like such a good idea at the time: A merry-go-round hooked up to a water pump. In rural sub-Saharan Africa, where children are plentiful but clean water is scarce, the PlayPump harnessed one to provide the other. Every time the kids spun around on the big colorful wheel, water filled an elevated tank a few yards away, providing fresh, clean water anyone in the village could use all day.

In 2010, "Frontline" returned to the schools where they had filmed children laughing on the merry-go-rounds, splashing each other with water. They discovered pumps rusting, billboards unsold, women stooping to turn the wheel in pairs. Many of the villages hadn't even been asked if they wanted a PlayPump, they just got one, sometimes replacing the handpumps they already had. In one community, adults were paying children to operate the pump.

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Michael Hobbes
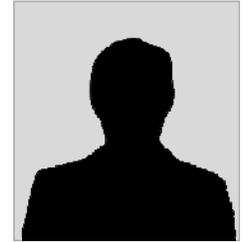
But wait a minute. Just because something works for 30,000 students in Kenya doesn't mean it will work for millions of them across Africa or India. Deworm the World's website talks a lot about its "evidence-based" approach. Yet the primary evidence that deworming improves education outcomes is from Kremer's single Kenya case and a post-hoc analysis of deworming initiatives in the American South in 1910...

I keep thinking I'm missing something really obvious, that I'm looking at the wrong part of their website. So I call up Evidence Action and ask: Are you guys really not testing how deworming affects education anymore?

"We don't measure the effects on school attendance and school performance," says Alix Zwane, Evidence Action's executive director. At the scale they're going for in India, entire states at a time, splitting into control and treatment groups simply wouldn't be feasible.

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[1B] Michael Hobbes
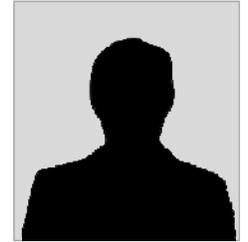
Kenya, it turns out, is a uniquely terrible place to hand out textbooks to kids and expect better academic performance. When Kremer reported that textbooks had no overall effect, he also noted that they did actually improve test scores for the kids who were already at the top of the class. The main problem, it seems, was that the textbooks were in English, the second or third language for most of the kids. Of the third-graders given textbooks, only 15 percent could even read them.

[1B] Michael Hobbes
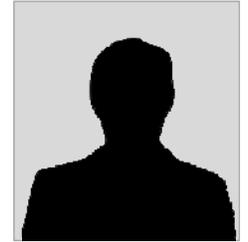
The repeated "success, scale, fail" experience of the last 20 years of development practice suggests something super boring: Development projects thrive or tank according to the specific dynamics of the place in which they're applied. It's not that you test something in one place, then scale it up to 50. It's that you test it in one place, then test it in another, then another. No one will ever be invited to explain that in a TED talk.

Michael Hobbes
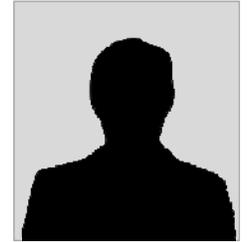
This is the paradox: When you improve something, you change it in ways you couldn't have expected. You can find examples of this in every corner of development practice. A project in Kenya that gave kids free uniforms, textbooks, and classroom materials increased enrollment by 50 percent, swamping the teachers and reducing the quality of education for everyone. Communities in India cut off their own water supply so they could be classified as "slums" and be eligible for slum-upgrading funding. I've worked in places where as soon as a company sets up a health clinic or an education program, the local government disappears—why should they spend money on primary schools when a rich company is ready to take on the responsibility?

[1B] Michael Hobbes
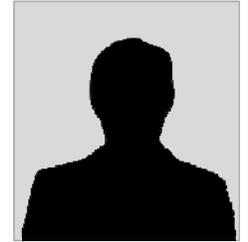
The ability of international development projects to speed up this process is limited. Remember how I said the deworming project had a 60-to-1 ratio between the price of the pills and the increase in wages for the kids who got them? The increase was $30. Not $30 per year. The kids earned $30 more over their lifetimes as a result of the deworming treatment. You find this a lot in the development literature: Even the most wildly successful projects decrease maternal mortality by a few percent here, add an extra year or two of life expectancy there.

This isn't a criticism of the projects themselves. This is how social policy works, in baby steps and trial-and-error and tweaks, not in game changers. Leave the leaps and bounds to computing power. If a 49-cent deworming treatment really does produce a $30 increase in wages for some of the poorest people on Earth, we are assholes for not spending it.

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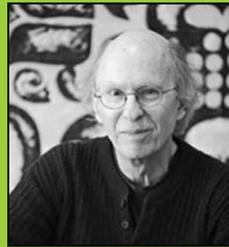
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In groups of two or three, synthesize these readings into a single cogent argument of no more than five sentences. [Fifteen Minutes]