Viewpoint

Design age: Towards a participatory transformation of images of ageing

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More than forty years after Victor Papanek's (1971) early call for design diversity, the demographic reality is hardly reflected by design initiatives and products on the market. There is no widespread uptake of inclusive design for consumer goods or advanced aesthetics in assistive technology. This position paper asserts that design has not yet succeeded because it does not address the most fundamental topic: persisting images of ageing based on models of deficiency. Design should use post-industrial skills exploited in design anthropology, participatory and speculative design to support a transformation of preconceptions on ageing and old age. In this view, design can address the multidimensional nature of ageing merely by a bricolage of design methodology combining foresight, inquiry and implementation.

Low fertility, low immigration, and long lives are seen as the main reasons for countries' ever increasing percentages of older people. One encouraging assertion is that 'very long lives are not the distant privilege of remote future generations — very long lives are the destiny of most people alive now in developed countries' (Christensen, Doblhammer, Rau, & Vaupel, 2009: p 1206). Christensen et al. assert that in the North/West every second person born in the year 2000 will reach their centenary. But we are not only expected to live longer, we are also expected to experience less disability and fewer functional limitations. Significantly longer and healthier lives also suggest new life course approaches. Thus, while 'traditionally, man [sic] has three major periods of life: childhood, adulthood and old age,' Christensen et al. assert, 'Old age is now evolving into two segments, a third age (young old) and a fourth age (oldest old)' (Christensen et al., 2009: p 1205). This is also known as advanced old age.

This 'fresh map of life' (Laslett, 1991) holds the promise for radically novel and re-shuffled archetypes of work and leisure, family and education, offering new opportunities and potentialities to the older person and consequently for society as a whole. Qualitative bottom-up research also appears to offer more nuanced exploratory models of older age. Health scientist Ann Bowling, for example, in her studies of what older people themselves consider as aspects of active ageing, remarks that lay people's definitions were more dynamic than health science's classifications of quality of life. These bottom-up definitions included physical health, fitness, and exercise as well as psychological factors with social roles, independence and enablers (Bowling, 2007). In short, '(…) research shows that older people

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consider themselves to have aged successfully, but classifications based on traditional medical models do not' (Bowling, 2007: p 263).

People over 65 today live longer and healthier and address the consumer market differently than elderly cohorts in the past. While movies and fashion increasingly address age diversity, we still do not see widespread up-take of inclusive design for consumer goods or advanced aesthetics in assistive technology. The main purpose of this paper therefore is to examine the idea of changing the perception of ageing, by a change of people's agency. This is done so from a design vantage point where a systemic, rather than a product-centric approach, has become the leading conceptualisation of the discipline. I approach selected players and sectors in design age from both angles, that of design research as well as that of design practice. This position paper points to the value of outlining relations between the contextualised practices of ageing and its material culture. It thus argues for a design practice that facilitates a heightened reflexivity on ageing across many sectors of society with foresight, inquiry and engagement as three means that tackle the persisting image of ageing towards cross-generational debate.

1 *The social construct of ageing*

Although ageing in the twenty-first century differs from a century ago, the gap between selective media portrayal of a lucrative market segment of agile baby boomers and a widespread discouraging reflection in the wider public, remains vast. Ageing is a social construct and the persisting paradigm is pessimistic.[1] In a recent publication about the effects of the economic crisis on long-term care, Jongen, Burazeri, and Brand (2015) note that ageing is discussed '(…) primarily as a burden to society,' and they point to potential actions asserting, '(…) aging should be approached much more as a challenge, thereby stressing, for example, interventions aimed at promoting social participation of older people (…) rather than merely care needs' (Jongen et al., 2015: p 177).

The inclusive design advocate Roger Coleman also recently claimed, 'I do not conform to the many stereotypes of ageing (…). Not only are these parodies wrong, they are deeply insulting and a gross misinterpretation of an important, valuable and rapidly growing sector of the population.' And he continues: '(…) preconceptions about ageing are decidedly out of phase with reality and social attitudes have a lot of catching up to do' (Coleman, 2015: pp 36−37).

There are several motives, why such negative social attitudes as explored by Jongen et al. and Coleman endured and have influenced design briefs perpetuating undesirable age paradigms. Gerontology's exploratory models of ageing that have long been dominated by positivism and biomedicine give one line of explanation. 'Disengagement theory', for example, which was popular in the 1970s, argues that in a preface of death, ageing includes a compulsory separation from society. Other formative discourses include biomedical or decline theories that define successful ageing as the optimisation of life expectancy, while minimising physical and mental deterioration as some authors suggest (Baltes, Rudolph, & Bal, 2012; Baltes & Smith, 2003; Fries, 1980, 1990, 2003; Vita, Terry, Hubert, & Fries, 1998).[2] This perspective fostered a binary view, perceiving youth as connected with development and growth and older age as associated with a decrease of prospects, a view that is continuously upheld by popular culture. At present, a pessimistic discourse continues to nurture a persistent image of ageing as a state of deficiency. In design, this led to an overemphasise of cognitive and physical ageing as starting points for 'design for older people' while more holistic growth approached are used to a lesser extent. Balancing ideas of decline and growth within the process of getting older, critical gerontology today represents a more nuanced, albeit little acknowledged, exception to the prevalent social image of ageing. Walker and Iwarsson (2013), for instance, call for new frameworks for active and healthy ageing such