TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF DESIGN EPISTEMOLOGY ON SOCIAL EQUITY

DELINEANDO A EVOLUÇÃO DA EPISTEMOLOGIA DO DESIGN NA EQUIDADE SOCIAL

Aguinaldo dos Santos, PhD (UFPR).

Key Words
Social equity, Social dimension, Design for sustainability

Palavras-chaves
Equidade social, Dimensão social, Design para sustentabilidade

ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to revise the progression of the theme social equity from the point of view of Design contributions throughout history. It shows some of the key constructs around the concept of social equity and presents some key events that have affected the way we understand social equity nowadays. It concludes with a discussion on a new epistemology of Design regarding the social dimension of sustainability.

RESUMO

O presente artigo procura rever a progressão do tema da "equidade social" do ponto de vista das contribuições do Design ao longo da história. Ele mostra algumas das principais construções em torno do conceito de equidade social e apresenta alguns eventos-chave que afetaram a forma como entendemos a equidade social hoje em dia. Conclui-se com uma discussão sobre uma nova epistemologia do Design sobre a dimensão social da sustentabilidade.

1. INTRODUCTION

A definition of equity has been already provided by Aristotle in the Fourteenth chapter of the fifth book of his Nichom Achaean Ethics: ''and this is the nature of the equitable: a correction of law, where law is defective by reason of its universality'' (ARISTOTLE, 1925 apud IKEME, 2003). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary equity is "justice according to natural law or right" and, specifically, "freedom from bias or favoritism".

Presented on this way this principle might sound vague and ambiguous in practice since the meaning of justice itself can be affected by different philosophical views of the world, including different views on the process of getting justice. "Differences of opinion about what is moral or ethical, measurement difficulties and data limitations, and the politics of self interest, will all mitigate against the elevation of one notion of justice over all others" (RIDGLEY, 1996 apud IKEME, 2003). An "individualist" might perceive that social justice is obtained by channeling individual incentives along the right direction and leaving a significant degree o freedom to people develop their own solutions. Meanwhile an "egalitarian" might view social justice as achieved through a distributed and sustainable economy via creative communities (TUKKER et al., 2008).

Ikeme (2003) summarizes different philosophical views of equity gathered on her literature review, each of them with profound different implications on practice:

- The 'no envy' principle: it conveys the ideal of equal opportunity of consumption and defines a situation where every active agent should bear the same cost or enjoy the same gain;
- The 'just deserts' concept: it seeks remedies that are proportionate to the weight of the injustice. So remedies for injustice should not engender a secondary inequity;
- The total equality approach: it argues that everyone should have the same income, i.e. the bottom 10% of the population should receive 10% of the income.
- Meritocracy: inequality is accepted if everyone has had equal opportunity at initial allocation and differentials are only accounted for by difference in effort and hard work. Ikeme (2003) calls attention to the fact that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) understand that "equity does not seek to make equal what nature has made unequal". The same author argues that the ICJ view appears to suggest that it is only situations or circumstances artificially made unequal that falls within the mandate of equitable remediation. The key word here is 'entitled' suggesting a meritocratic basis for equity which would imply that equitable distribution is based on what each agent owns, deserves, or rightfully earned;
- Minimum standard or basic need approach: this is concerned only with the poor in the society and argues that nobody's income should fall below a certain minimum level. It is based on the belief that all humans have the rights to some core basic needs. The Marxist imperative of ''to each according to his needs'' is the most famous slogan of this position. Protection of the weak, the powerless and the poor also provides grounds seeking distributive equity (IKEME, 2003).

A complementary view of equity sees that as defined between present and future generations (inter-generational equity) or just between present generations (intra-generational equity). Alcott (2008) argues that justice through equity is true only if "justice" is meant inter-generationally. A equity distribution on the present is consistent with crassly unsustainable consumption of resources as well as crass disregard for future people. In this sense, leaving to future generations a quantity and quality of resources necessary for life is more or less the same as respecting biophysical constraints in the present (ALCOTT, 2008). It is on this issue that social cohesion contributes to equity.

Cochran & Ray (2008) defend the idea that there is no substitute for a grounded understanding of equity from community perspectives. Without this, the aspirations, and practices of community members cannot be understood, and therefore equity goals might be misunderstood (COCHRAN & RAY, 2008).

2. THE HISTORY OF DESIGN CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL EQUITY

The belief that everyone, by virtue of her or his humanity, is entitled to certain human rights is fairly new and the application of such belief within companies has an even shorter story. Throughout much of human history, people acquired rights and responsibilities through their membership into a group, ranging from his/her family, to an indigenous nation, a religion, a class, community, or state. The Hindu Vedas, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, the Bible, the Quran (Koran), and the Analects of Confucius are examples of ancient written sources which address questions of people's duties, rights, and responsibilities and throughout history they have affected the way of people doing business. In fact, as Flowers (2008) argues, all societies have always had some oral or written system of propriety and justice as well as ways of tending to the health and welfare of their members.

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Figure 1 – Timeline on key influences on our current understanding of Corporate Social Responsibility
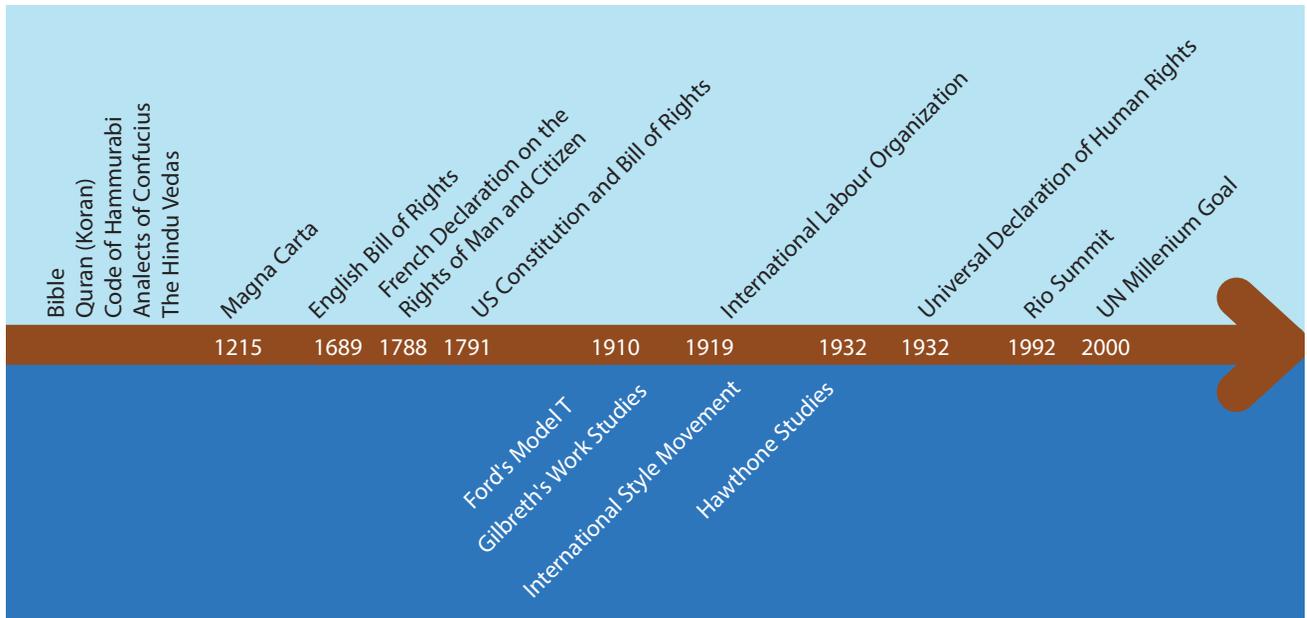
Documents asserting individual rights, such the Magna Carta (1215), the English Bill of Rights (1689), the French Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), and the US Constitution and Bill of Rights (1791) are the written precursors to many of today's human rights instruments. Oppressed people throughout the world have drawn on the principles of these documents express to support revolutions that affect the way business has began to evolve in the direction of social responsibility.

McDonough & Braungart (2002) argues that many early industrialists have had already the assumption that progress of industrialization would result on a more equitable distribution of comfort amongst all social classes. Indeed, with cheaper products, widespread of public transportation, water distribution and sanitation, waste collection, and other conveniences have given people, both rich and poor, what appeared to a more equitable standard of living. This ideal was epitomized on the legendary Model T that Ford dreamed "… so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one" (~1910).

However, WBCSD (1999) argues that these early industrialists did little to tackle the rising dissatisfaction with the most obvious inequalities of the early industrial societies. The resulting disillusion with the excesses of capitalism contributed to the new ideologies of communism and socialism and to states taking greater responsibility for the provision of welfare and infrastructure (WBCSD, 1999).

A more systematic concern on social issues within corporations can be traced on the earlier work studies

that, despite the relentless focus on increasing efficiency, have contributed to effectively improve the quality of the work environment. On that period (~1910) the work of Lilian Gilbreth, one of the pioneers on industrial psychology, shows examples of efforts to improve our understanding about the worker's personalities and needs (Weihrisch & Koontz, 1993).

Taylor himself, one of the founders of the scientific management school, that lead us to high efficient production system, also considering human aspects as an important factor for achieving sustainable improvements in production. He claimed that business and labour should work together to undergo a "complete revolution in mental attitude" and to realise the shared benefits of maximising income through maximisation of output. He believed that when managers and workers shared this common goal it would be easier to eliminate political controversy and make governing an organisation a purely technical matter of finding the "one best way" (Taylor, 1911; Wren, 1994).

However, most factory owners throughout the world on the beginning of the industrial period have relatively little concern with social issues. As the workers began to organize themselves this situation began to change. Collectively they started to restrict output using strikes and demand higher wages (WREN, 1994). During this period, more precisely in 1919, countries established the International Labor Organization (ILO) to oversee treaties protecting workers with respect to their rights, including their health and safety.

By the late 1920's, researchers and practitioners started to experiment on, and write more about, industrial psychology and social theories. In the beginning, such research focused more on helping industry find people whose mental qualities were best suited for their jobs. They also tried to find those psychological conditions that could stimulate and influence workers in such a way as to obtain the best possible results from them (Weihrisch & Koontz, 1993; McFarland, 1979).

The turning point in this human focused research came with the study carried out by Western Electric managers and Harvard University researchers at the Hawthorne works, near Chicago, from 1924 until 1932. Originally, this study sought to confirm Taylor's principle that more lighting in the workplace would result in greater productivity. However, to the amazement of the researchers, the experiment showed productivity rising still further even with a decrease in illumination. The investigation then turned its attention to the relationship between managers and workers, still aiming for the manipulation of workers to maximise the output (Mayo, 1949; Barnes, 1980:283; Wren, 1994; Weihrisch & Koontz, 1993). After a number of experiments, they finally concluded that the improvements in productivity happened almost solely due to social factors such as moral and satisfactory inter-relationships within the production team. The study also showed that just the fact of being chosen for the study motivated workers to continually improve production regardless of the working environment (Mayo, 1949; Wren, 1994; Weihrisch & Koontz, 1993; Lee & Schniederjans, 1994).

During this period the idea of CSR was not in the international policy agenda and discussions on corporate responsibilities largely concentrated on employee rights and internal governance issues. This continued until well after the Second World War, when in Western Europe and Japan, business paid its taxes and the state largely took care of social welfare affairs (WBCSD, 1999).

On December 10, 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the 56 members of the United Nations. That has trigger a revolution in international law changing how governments treat their own citizens, putting this as a matter of legitimate international concern, and not simply a domestic issue (FLOWER, 2008). Adding to this factor, according to WBCSD (1999), the late 1950s saw the beginning of the rise of consumer power as a force to influence corporate behaviour and that could be presented as the genesis of our current understanding on Corporate Social Responsibility.

CSR began to rise to prominence in the 1960s, by directing attention to the interests of other groups in society in contrast to a narrow interest in economic gain through profit maximization (MCKIE, 1975 apud KENT & STONE, 2007). In the early 1970s this movement was joined by environmental concerns and the growth of single-issue pressure groups.

Strictly within the architecture/design community the ideal of equity began to reflect on the development of products and environments that reflect this ideal. Such concerns were mirrored on the International Style Movement since their goals were both social as well as aesthetic. They wanted to globally replace unsanitary and inequitable housing with clean, minimalist, affordable housing without a clear distinction of wealth or class (MCDONOUGH & BRAUNGART (2002). However, many of the good intentions of such initiatives have been deviated throughout time from their original values and end up with a rebound effect on the environment and on the social equity itself.

Since the 1980s, dramatic political and economic changes around the world have brought social responsibility issues to the main front of the business strategies. WBCSD (1999) argues that such phenomenon is associated with the rise of libertarian values in Western politics and the collapse of communism and other ideologies. On that decade, especially in the US and the UK, there was a radical re-think of the respective roles of the state and business in society. The dominant idea at the time was to shrink the role of the state – especially to reduce the cost of state-funded welfare and cultural obligations – and to place greater responsibility on the individual and on business (WBCSD, 1999).

The political view on the role of state is in constant shift as economy floats on various crisis on the 1990s and 2000´s and quite often there resurgence of increase public ownership of private companies of strategic areas. Nevertheless, the demand for an increase role of companies on the promotion of equity and cohesion has remained. Such concern evolved to attempts for strategically manage the social dimension within companies and to develop tools to systematically implement and operate this issue within entire organizations and their sphere of influence (CEC, 2002). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and ILO core conventions provide some of the main fundamental principles for these initiatives (RUDGE, 2008).

Social responsibility is still evolving and there no universal solutions for companies involved on CSR activities. What is certain is that CSR is a moving target that cannot be fully achieved by one-time activities and decisions. It needs to be understood as a continuous process that

requires constant revision and reflection based upon equity and cohesion principles. Businesses should be alert to new issues and considerations (CANADA, 2006).

## 3. A NEW EPISTEMOLOGY OF DESIGN AFTER SOCIAL EQUITY

Design can play a fundamental role in the definition and visualization of alternative scenarios for companies striving to implement CSR initiatives in the direction of sustainability. In order to achieve such goal design has to re-examine its fundamental concepts such as form, function, client, user, and market, as well as the role of technology, aesthetics and the role of designer itself (MANZINI, 1994). It requires that the integration of wider competencies that enable the designer to move from simple end-of-pipe solutions to more complex issues such as equity and cohesion (see illustration on the next figure). On this perspective the designer needs to wider its impact on the real world from mere design of new products to the promotion of new life styles that result in lesser consumption in the case of richer consumers, or the leapfrog on consumption patterns in the case of poor consumers.

According to ICSID (2008) one of the main tasks of design is to seek, discover and assess structural, organizational, functional, expressive and economic relationships, with the task of enhancing global sustainability and environmental protection (global ethics); giving benefits and freedom to the entire human community, individual and collective; final users, producers and market protagonists (social ethics); supporting cultural diversity despite the globalisation of the world (cultural ethics); giving products, services and systems, those forms that are expressive of (semiology) and coherent with (aesthetics) their proper complexity. A search for equity is an underlying principle within this definition of design and one that has far reaching implications on the design practice and theory.

Meurer (2001) argues that design is oriented toward action and action is something more than passive use but an active intervention and creative change on the real world. The same author argues that design should no longer just focus on the object as a form. Seen in this light, design relates to the entire physical and intellectual scope for interaction between people; between people, products, and the life-world; and between products. Meurer (2001) calls for a design that acts responsibly concerning the future, that is critical and analytical, that asks questions and

Figure 2 – Evolution of Design Concerns over Sustainability
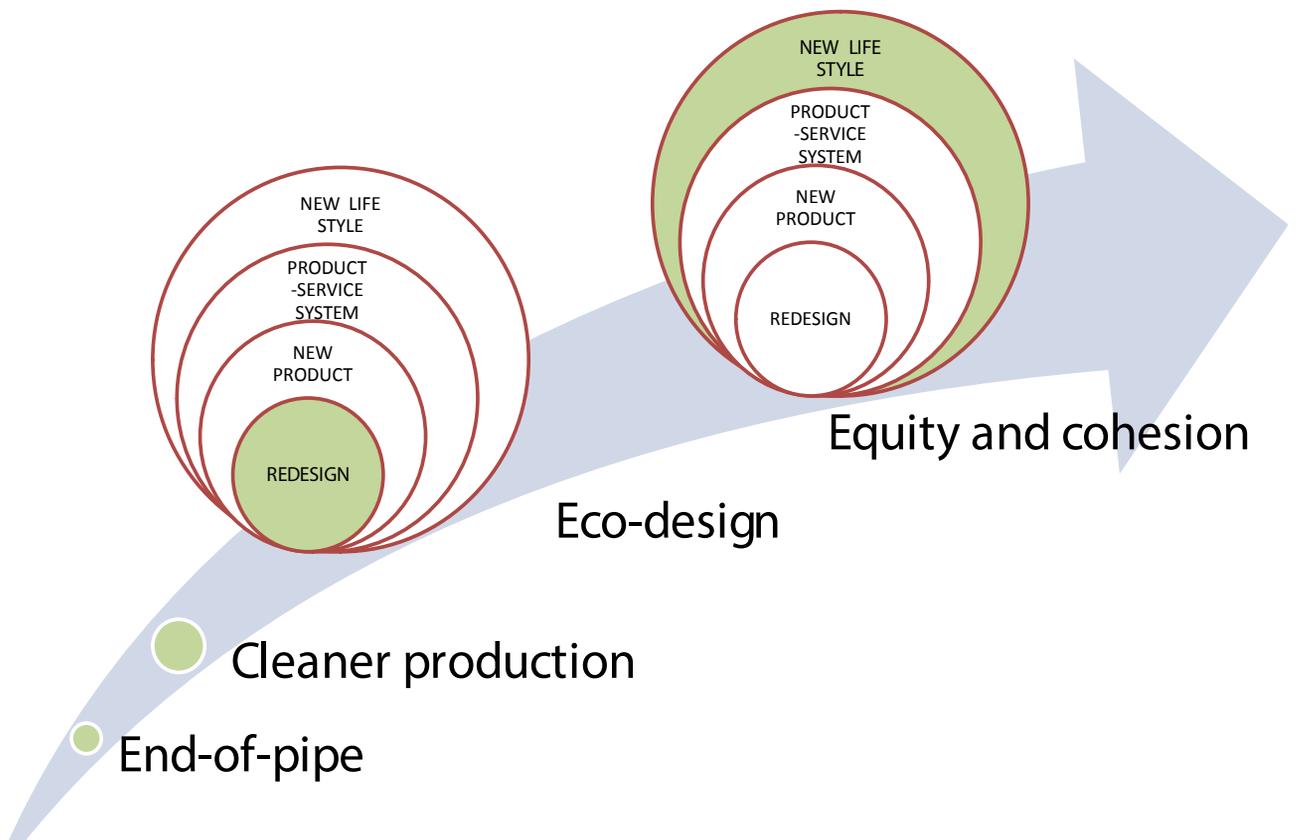
Fonte: Own

develops alternatives, that discovers causes and contexts, and that develops new, comprehensive ways of identifying problems and forms of design. Vezzoli (2007) calls this a move to the design of "satisfaction-systems" since it focuses on the result of the design activity and not on the mere relationship between form and function.

4. CONCLUSION

The urgency of action to change our relationship with the environment and with our fellow beings demands from the designer, as well as from any profession, a role on the process of change. The specialization of professions is a relatively new phenomenon on human history terms and, at the same time that it has created many benefits for mankind, it also has isolated competencies, including the wider civic awareness. There are nowadays professionals specialized on taking care of environment (biologists, environmental engineers, etc) as there are also professionals on the social/cultural field (anthropologists, psychologists, etc). However, the task is so enormous that these professionals alone cannot promote the necessary and with the required speed working by themselves. Design, often pointed as one of the professions that have contributed to the environmental problems we face nowadays, can and must play a positive role on this process of change. Obviously, its contribution beyond the design of products and services will be limited by its strategic role within the system. It could contribute merely with the provision of products that enable equity and social cohesion towards an effectively leading role on the design and implementation of entire sustainable systems.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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