Heller, C. (2018). *The intergalactic design guide: Harnessing the creative potential of social design.* Island Press.

SOCIAL DESIGN IS THE DESIGN OF RELATIONSHIPS, the creation of new social conditions intended to increase agency, health, creativity, equity, social justice, resilience, and connection to nature.

What makes social design universal is humans' common need for social justice and for human and environmental health. Within that, the possibilities for how to create the conditions to deliver on those needs are limitless.

What makes social design different, in addition to the inclusion of human relationships, is that social design always has a higher social purpose. It is incited by a desire for greater good that drives all action in support of it. That means whatever products are developed in the process are part of a larger system or strategy. They are not the end goal, only the means by which the larger objective of a new outcome is reached.

A number of these skills have been part of the designer's art forever, such as synthesizing complex information and making it accessible; visualizing data and invisible systems so that insights and revelations and connections are available to everyone; reframing problems and questions to uncover root causes instead of symptoms; using abductive reasoning and sideways creative thinking; giving ideas physical form or representation and making them desirable— engaging and delighting people with the beauty or functionality of whatever has been created.

Social design is composed of a set of principles, a process for organizing actions that propel progress from one stage to the next, and a specific set of skills required for the successful application of the principles and navigation of the process.

Principles derive from values of equity and mutuality; they set the course toward positive (rather than destructive) change, guiding decisions along the way. Once internalized, the principles become a kind of operating system that acts as a common foundation for all participants.

The process is a sequential list of questions that, when answered thoughtfully, drive action forward toward a specified outcome, each uncovering insights that inform and inspire the next step.

Skills enable facilitators and participants to successfully complete the process, delivering on its intended objectives. They include the expertise required to take the process as deep and far as it needs to go. The requisite skills are sometimes possessed by a single person, but more often they are contributed by multiple members of the community.

This list of eleven principles is a distillation of the values and approaches that define social design and distinguish it from other design domains. Whereas the process is common to many innovative or creative efforts, and many of the skills required are essential to other disciplines as well, these principles contain the distinctive essence of the system.

Three Stages of Prototyping

CONCEPT

A low-fidelity representation of an idea or hypothesis. This can take the form of a definition, a conversation, or any extremely rough representation of the concept. It answers the questions "Does this make sense?"; "Is it relevant and interesting to you?"; and "Does it have potential, and what would make it better?"

SOLUTION

A way to evaluate the function of a design and get reactions to the experience people have in engaging with it. Prototypes at this stage are medium-fidelity. They need to be detailed enough to simulate what the concept will be. The questions answered are "Does this idea work well?"; "What is it like to use it?"; and "How could its function be improved?"

WORKING MODEL

A high-fidelity prototype intended to answer questions that optimize the function of the concept. Prototypes at this stage help refine details, since they are as close to the final experience as possible. They help eliminate "bugs" and are done prior to full production or rollout. They answer questions like "Does this program or product or service work well when you use it?"

The purpose of a prototype is to make an idea tangible so that someone other than its creator can react to it. The benefits of even the simplest prototypes can be enormous. First, a prototype gets ideas out of our heads and off the pages of our notebooks and makes them concrete. That in itself is the biggest first step in testing an idea. If we can't give it form, in words or actions or materials, then it's not an idea that can be shared. We learn about our own ideas while making a prototype. We also learn from the people we hope will use the ideas. Prototypes start conversations; they give people a voice in the outcome. Finally, proto-types allow us to modify our ideas quickly. The expense of production or implementation can be delayed until we are certain that the idea works.

Because social design prioritizes human connection over objects, prototypes can take extremely simple forms. For example, the early verbal expression of an idea is in itself a prototype. Inventors know this well. They try out an explanation of whatever it is they're doing, present it to potential supporters to see what "lands," modify it until heads nod in agreement, and then adjust it to keep pace with the concept as it evolves.

In social design, creativity is derived from collaboration among cohorts of people who ideally, in the aggregate, have a 360-degree view of the system in need of change. Within these cohorts, it is frequently discovered that what needs to happen is already common knowledge.

Communication works in three essential ways: to define an idea or proposition in a manner that conveys it accurately; to create understanding by explaining how some-thing works or what is needed; and to make a proposition desirable or attract people to participate.

The Role Writing Plays in the Practice of Social Design

Nothing brings the need for clarity and specificity home faster than writing. One might think that the primary purpose of putting things into words is to enable others to under-stand them, but that is actually just a fortunate side effect. Writing is the best way for a writer to learn about himself or herself. It is a priceless but free method of self-discovery.

Writing is important at every stage in the social design process. Team members might think they all understand the vision of what they are creating, but until that vision is put into writing, it's likely that everyone will have a slightly different picture of it. Capturing it in words is the only way to know. It's also a great way to check in and get consensus throughout the process. Taking the time to confirm and capture progress in words realigns people, making it easier to focus action and make decisions.

In plain language, the essential design process looks like this: (1) Be broadly curious and learn as much as possible about the context of what you want to change. (2) Make sense of what you have learned, and reframe the problem to be solved. (3) Come up with some ideas—more is better. (4) Test the best concepts to see what works. (5) Measure and evaluate the results, and then figure out what's next.

Social design differs by adding a step in front of the traditional design process. It begins with why you want to change something, not what you want to change. It makes the first order of business to identify the highest-level need. The next step is to map or measure current reality as fully as possible.

A core set of activities are undertaken at each phase of the process, adapted to the work required. These activities are (1) watch, listen, measure; (2) write, visualize, map; (3) think critically, develop insights; (4) communicate, engage, collaborate; (5) experiment, play; and (6) prototype, refine, measure.

Don't rush to answer this first question or assume that the answer is obvious. Try on different "reasons why" to see what increases energy and provokes conversation. The answer to this question must be powerful enough to carry momentum and engagement through periods of difficulty and frustration. Having a clear reason why the process matters is often the best source of unity and purpose.

This is the research and learning phase, also called immersion, and it's often deep and ongoing. Learning comes in many forms—from interviews, ethnographic research, reading about the past and the future. Most important is that listening takes place with an open mind, absent of agendas, and that all those who will be affected by the initiative are included.

This is the place to map the current state or current reality. Capture what is learned from research and translate it into visible form that can be shared. Articulate the system so that it can be recognized by all those who need to engage with it. Show the hidden relationships, processes, and current and potential value. Map user journeys, value given and received, barriers, and opportunities.

What has been learned? What does it mean? What are the commonalities and differences in needs for various stakeholders? How do they align or conflict? Avoid falling back on labels or titles for the information presented; instead, capture what it means. Capture and translate all that is learned from listening to communities, distill it down to insights, and use these to contribute to a vision big enough for everyone to see themselves in, yet specific enough to define the action required to make it real. Find a rhythm for communicating that balances time for input from everyone with the solo act of crafting the words that express the whole.

This is an iterative process that takes multiple rounds of translation, mapping, and refinement to see what the words and images communicate. Try variations, from the expected to the audacious, to see how they connect people.

The map of the system is a prototype, an opportunity to get reactions and refine. Prototype the desired future state as well as the current reality. Find a way to quantify the differences between them. That gap is creative energy.

What are the things we can influence? What can we act on? What is the priority, based on where we want to go? What actions will have a ripple effect on the system, and what is the most efficient path? Who needs to be involved among those who know how to make it happen and those who need to be engaged in order for it to be sustained? This is the time to generate ideas—as many as possible and without restrictions of practicality.

What information, opinions, and expertise are required to determine specific initiatives for implementation toward the goal? What happens when each action is undertaken? What changes or doesn't change? With the desired indicators in mind, how do the actions undertaken create movement toward them?

Define individual objectives, and document activities and plans so they can be understood by all. Create a visual representation of projects in relationship to each other; track schedules, budgets, and activities.

Did it get to the people it was meant for? Did they use it? Did it work for them? Will they continue with it? What needs refinement, what should be eliminated, and what would have been better if done differently? What can be measured over time? How can the community be prepared to become more self-sufficient? What skills, tools, and support do the participants need? In use, what are the responses and how is the uptake or acceptance? What do people say; what do they do? Have they changed their opinion or behavior? Are the people who will determine its success involved? Complete the story.

What is the whole picture so far?

What can be captured for others to see and build upon?

What has been learned?

What does it mean?

How can the learning be shared with the community, and how can it be used to build capacity?

How can it be shared within a larger community for extended use and learning?

What is the best way to communicate a complex and unique story to others? Experiment with different mediums, forms, and stories.

How are results defined? What is completion? What has changed?