

Flight path for a design practice

As the final waves of [La Pile](#) wash back from the shores, and treasures in the shape of an [expo](#), an [energy community](#) and a [brochure on renovation](#) stay behind for beachcombers to discover, we become lyrical. But we also prepare for our next adventure. Wondering how in complex and congested cities food makes its way from farm to fork or clothes go from weavers to wardrobes, we embark on a journey into the wonderful world of urban logistics. Yet, before we do, we take a step back to look at the flight path City Mine(d) is following, and the directions of travel this could lead us into. And is this path particular to us, are others flying similar routes, are they using the same maps?

We move in cities that confront us with *economic* uncertainty and an increasing divide between wealthy and low-income communities, heightened *political* polarisation and fragmentation, rapid *technological* change, vulnerabilities in the *health* system and (lack of) recognition of mental health issues, *migration*, shifts in *cultural* norms and values and *public awareness* and activism around issues of race, gender, LGBTQ+, disability and the environment.

Though strongly sensitive to these issues, and even emboldened by them, they are not the subject of our work. We believe it is not up to a design practice like ours to address these issues head-on. Other institutions deal with them in ways much more sophisticated than we can ever do. Think of *researchers* who describe and (sometimes prescribe), *social workers* who remedy or mitigate, *activists* who denounce or resist or *civil servants* who facilitate the functioning of the state. As designers we tend to side with those who explore, who invent and experiment.

The economic, political, technological, sanitary and cultural issues we face today have many causes. Some go beyond us, like the *shrinking of the state*, the *primacy of the free market* or the rise of *hyper-individualisation*. Other recurrent factors have to do with the design (or lack thereof) of processes, systems and even object or equipment. And THAT is what our experiments aspire to deal with.

The exclusion of final users from the conception, development or production of goods or services is proving to be a major and recurrent flaw in design. When the final user is a consumer, the product does not work properly; when s/he is a local resident, planning and regulation misses its objectives. Research shows that the lack of involving final users causes three types of problems: the proposed solutions are *misaligned* – they are inefficient, wasteful, harm the environment or exacerbate inequalities-, there is *inadequate feedback* – the proposal lacks a holistic perspective or there is no iterative improvement possible-, or there is a *lack of accountability* – it is difficult to hold a producer of the product or service accountable for their environmental, social or cultural impact as both product and its production processes are closed boxes.

Over the past decades, design thinking and human-centred design have been advocating an alternative to the top-down approach. Concepts like participation, co-creation and consumer engagement have become widely adopted, even if they can remain lip service. City Mine(d) considers itself an early adopter of open and inclusive forms of design. In processes from Limite Limite in 1999 to La Pile in 2024, the community of users is involved from inception. As such, a *shared vision* leads to *common objectives* which in turn define *what is to be created* and *how*. The insights that emerge from these processes have been captured in articles, for instance about [participatory platforms](#) in 2007, and have found their way into academia, like the Oxford Brookesled 5 year-research in Co-Creation, leading to an article about [collective action](#).

In her book 'The Design of Everyday Life', British sociologist Elizabeth Shove argues that designers embed certain assumptions about how life should be lived into the objects and systems they create. In doing so, they reinforce existing practices or encourage new ways of living. Energy policy provides us with a stark and topical example of disconnected design. The

ambitions are stellar, and policymakers do not shy away from hyperbole such as “revolution” or “moon-shot”. Yet, the policies they propose are very remote from the way citizens experience and use energy in their daily lives. In other words, they are based in assumptions about how lives SHOULD be lived, not the way they ARE currently lived. This leads to a wide gap between energy (consumption reduction) ambitions, and what happens on the ground. A problem that a financially hamstrung government can not even subsidise away. In the same book Shove argues that users play an active role by adapting, modifying and even subverting design objects to fit their own needs and contexts. This is almost funny in the Belgian context, in which resistance to new legislation (or even more so to taxation) is often quite limited, but where evading and subverting such new laws is a national sport.

Italian designer Ezio Manzini sees human-centred and participatory design as a way to address complex social challenges relating to sustainable development, also referred to as social innovation. Manzini identifies four roles for designers in a participatory process. They can be *facilitators*, supporting ongoing initiatives; *triggers*, making new things happen; *members of a co-design team*, collaborating with the final users; but also *design activists*, launching meaningful design initiatives. Or all of the above.

With its propensity to autonomy, City Mine(d) recognises itself most in the role of design activist. Though *facilitating* projects of others, *initiating* and *collaborating* closely with final users are crucial parts of it, what the work does (practically and politically) remains paramount. The reason is that in addition to creating a pilot or prototype of a more inclusive or robust solution, there is also the ambition to beta-test the current status quo. By this, we mean, creating things that reveal the flaws or inequalities beneath the surface of the current situation, and which have negative ramifications at a systemic level. It is where the DIY-community’s Can-Do spirit meets the social justice agenda.

City Mine(d)’s projects are of a modest scale: limited to one urban system at a time in a single often underserved neighbourhood for a limited period of a few years. Particularly compared to the challenges it engages with, like clean water, affordable energy or a fairer local economy. Yet, it aims not to describe a problem and solve it. It is about understanding a system, identify the levers and feedback loops, and designing interventions that action these levers and loops. In and of themselves, the interventions also are small in scale, yet gather the crucial stakeholders, develop proposals that bend development in a more sustainable direction, and happen in the real world. What Manzini described as projects that have a ripple effect which can lead to systemic change.

Which brings us back to City Mine(d)’s flight path. We have demonstrated in different systems that we are able to bring disparate actors together, design alternatives, reveal the hidden flaws, and bring the groups that emerge from this process to full functioning personal and collective autonomy. But in what way can this become more radical, disruptive or impactful. How does it proliferate or scale? In other words, how can we go from the current position of showing that the emperor has no clothes and hint at remedies to that nudity, to one in which design activists can do more. How can the ripple resonate?

For now, our flight radar shows only a few datapoints. In addition to *design* and the actual making of things, other cardinal points are the *transition of systems* towards a more sustainable future, and challenging *social inequality*. And even those are territories that to us remain firmly uncharted. To plot our road ahead, and possibly that of others who recognise themselves in this, we want to hear how others see what the future holds in stall. How will tomorrow’s cultural, political and social landscape shape what we do? Will this require robust and streamlined organisations, or rather ecosystems of mutually supporting initiatives? How will these practices thrive and create a ripple effect?

What remains important for City Mine(d) is that the practice retains a human-centred approach, ensures that all voices, especially the marginalised, are heard, and that it continues to explore, invent and experiment with the aim of making systems more just. Because that is where our design practice's true north lies.