

On the Politics of Design Framing Practices

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Introduction

Designers have been described as “material-semiotic storytellers” whose material practices normalize past and present values into the future.¹ From this standpoint, design can be understood as a set of practices and capabilities to interpret social systems and facilitate socio-material outcomes that have long-term structuring effects on society. Design is historically contingent, and by virtue of its structuring—or “forming” in Clive Dilnot’s words—it is both sociomaterially conditioned and conditioning.² With this understanding, design is invariably political.

At the same time, framing has become a foundational concept in design theory, and the effects and contribution of scholarly work on this topic on the design field cannot be overstated. This body of work emerges from interpretive and phenomenological epistemologies; it builds on planning literature, and a key proposition is that it argues for the superior abilities of designers and their skills to problem-solve and indeed “problem-frame.”³ Meanwhile, wide-ranging theories of and debates on the sociology of framing and frames—originating from anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s work in the 1950s on framing—warrants greater attention in design literature.⁴ Framing as understood in social movement studies, communications, and institutional and political theory provides new and different viewpoints of framing from those currently understood in design. In this broader literature, social frames are conceptualized as sociological phenomena, meaning that frames are concepts that animate social processes. This distinction relates specifically to how frames are necessarily about taking a position, whether “symbolic,” “material,” or “social”⁵; they produce and reproduce ideology in context.⁶ In addition, possibilities of dissent arise from the use of or within a given frame.⁷ Thus, social movement framing displays dynamic characteristics in relation to societal processes of change.

- 1 Matt Ward and Alex Wilkie, “Made in Criticalland: Designing Matters of Concern,” in *Networks of Design: Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society (UK)*, eds. Fiona Hackney, Jonathon Glynn, and Viv Minton (Brown Walker Press, 2009), 118–124.
- 2 Clive Dilnot, “Design as a Socially Significant Activity,” *Design Studies* 3, no. 3 (1982): 139–46.
- 3 Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer, “Problem Framing Expertise in Public and Social Innovation,” *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 5, no. 1 (2019): 29–43, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2019.01.003>.
- 4 Gregory Bateson, *Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 191–97.
- 5 Marcos Ancelevici, “Bourdieu in Movement: Toward a Field Theory of Contentious Politics,” *Social Movement Studies* 20, no. 2 (2021): 155–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1637727>.
- 6 David Snow and Robert Benford, “Ideology in the Study of Social Movements,” *Mobilization* 5, no. 2 (2000): 55–60, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03634529609379059>.
- 7 John A. Noakes and Hank Johnston, “Frames of Protest: A Road Map to a Perspective,” in *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective* (Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005), 1–30.

As such, following Dilnot, we approach frames as historically constituted and as enacted sociomaterially—thus outside and beyond the discrete “problem frames” that are observable in design project contexts. On this basis, the political implied in this approach is about how frames condition, foreclose, direct, or open-up social processes and outcomes and, in doing so, suppress or reveal dissensus. These principles have important implications for design processes and practices in general and specifically for design spheres characterized by dissension, such as critical and socially and politically engaged design. Therefore, we consider this new understanding of frames and framing within the specific context of social movements, collective action, and grassroots organizing, to ground our arguments and critiques.

In this conceptual article, our intention is to revitalize the conceptualization of design framing and establish its essentially political nature. On this basis, we first present the current literature on framing and design. Second, we reinterpret this literature by drawing on existing scholarship on distinct yet interlinked social theories of frames: 1) agentic, subjective, or cognitive frames; 2) collective action frames; and 3) institutionalized frames. Third, we develop a specific line of inquiry through our concept of counter-framing design within the context of socially and politically engaged design practices. Fourth, we elaborate on this concept through two illustrative examples, in which we articulate practices of designing as conceived through social movements theory, in combination with institutional theories of framing.⁸ The examples focus on collectives and activist groups within which designers play active and generative community mobilization roles. The article demonstrates the positionality inherent within frames, insofar as frames articulate subordinated or dominant status, or express normative understandings until challenged. With this demonstration, we build a conceptualization of the political foundations of design framing practices and their implications for those contexts within which design operates. Consequently, we argue for dissensual counter-framing design practices that unsettle institutionalized norms and ideologies played out within frames, and through which a form of political agency is sociomaterially enacted.

On Framing Theory in Design

The literature on design framing builds on the works of key scholars that, taken together, establish the designer’s framing activity as a “deliberate strategy” involving an approach to meaning and sensemaking intended to make complex social situations understandable and from which to develop actions.⁹ According to

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- 8 From social movement studies, see Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Second (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2014); and Pamela E. Oliver and Hank Johnston, “What a Good Idea! Frames and Ideologies in Social Movement Research,” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (2000): 37–54, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0703993104>. From institutional theory, see Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, “Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields,” *Sociological Theory* 29, no. 1 (2011): 1–26.
- 9 These works include Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Temple Smith, 1983); Donald Schön and Martin Rein, *Frame Reflection: Towards the Resolution of Intractable Policy Problems* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Nigel Cross, “Creativity in the Design Process: Co-Evolution of Problem Solution,” *Design Studies* 22, no. 5 (2001): 425–37, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X\(01\)00009-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X(01)00009-6); and Nigel Cross, *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (London: Springer-Verlag, 2006). For “deliberate strategies,” see Kees Dorst, “The Core of ‘Design Thinking’ and Its Application,” *Design Studies* 32 (2011): 521–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2011.07.006>.

- 10 Dorst, "The Core of 'Design Thinking.'"
- 11 For the former, see Nigel Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline versus Design Science," *Design Issues* 17, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 49–55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511801>; and Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*. For the latter, see Kees Dorst, *Frame Innovation: Create New Thinking By Designing*, ed. Ken Friedman and Erik Stolterman (Cambridge, MA; London, England: MIT Press, 2015), 77.
- 12 Merlijn Van Hulst and Dvora Yanow, "From Policy 'Frames' to 'Framing': Theorizing a More Dynamic, Political Approach," 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/027507401453142>.
- 13 For framing and complexity, see Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer, "Problem Framing Expertise in Public and Social Innovation," *She Ji* 5, no. 1 (2019): 29–43, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2019.01.003>. For the "solutions space," see Dorst, *Frame Innovation*, 59. For narrative methods see Zurlo and Cautela, "Design Strategies in Different Narrative Frames," *Design Issues* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 19–35, https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI_a_00246. And, for cognitive interfaces, see Elzbieta T. Kazmierczak, "Design as Meaning Making: From Making Things to the Design of Thinking," *Design Issues* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 45–59, <https://doi.org/10.1162/074793603765201406>.
- 14 Van der Bijl-Brouwer, "Problem Framing Expertise."
- 15 Jung-Joo Lee, "Frame Failures and Reframing Dialogues in the Public Sector Design Projects" 14, no. 1 (2020): 81–94. See also Peter Vermaas et al., "Framing in Design: A Formal Analysis and Failure Modes," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Engineering Design*, ICED 3, no. DS 80-03 (2015): 133–42.
- 16 Zurlo and Cautela, "Design Strategies in Different Narrative Frames."
- 17 Lee, "Frame Failures and Reframing Dialogues."
- 18 Van der Bijl-Brouwer, "Problem Framing Expertise"; and Dorst and Cross, "Creativity in the Design Process."
- 19 See Darren Umney and Peter Lloyd, "Designing Frames: The Use of Precedents in Parliamentary Debate," *Design Studies* 54 (2018): 201–18, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2017>.

Kees Dorst, framing is "the creation of a (novel) standpoint from which a problematic situation can be tackled."¹⁰ This work is developed from positions of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology/hermeneutics.¹¹ Together, they "position... intersubjective meaning-making front and center, resting on the interactive processes entailed in working out definitions-of-situations."¹² As such, entering, engaging with, and framing a context or "situation" is the process by which meaning is constructed.

These strands of work contribute to an extensive area of research in design. This includes studies on the processes and relations of framing and complexity, on frames as practices that redefine the "solution space," which create a narrative for engaging with the project, or to construct cognitive interfaces.¹³ Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer focuses on systemic design through public and social innovation organizations in the context of complex policy-making processes.¹⁴ Similarly, Jung-Joo Lee's study on "frame failures," which draws on the work of Peter Vermaas, Dorst, and Clementine Thurgood, develops knowledge on situations in which a frame cannot achieve an intended project goal or outcome, the process of presenting "new frames" to clients, and how designers might better sensitize clients in this process.¹⁵ Similarly, Francesco Zurlo and Cabirio Cautela use the concept of "narrative frames" as a time device to articulate designers' engagement in a process.¹⁶ In these studies, "framing and reframing" happens in situ, in dialogue with relevant actors, and occurs within the timebound constraints of a given project, where clients may "agree on a new frame."¹⁷

Furthermore, framing as a practice is understood as highly dependent on design skill¹⁸; here, framing and reframing lead to transformative insight, and many studies of framing processes focus on organizational project contexts.¹⁹ As Dorst writes, "frame creation is a design-based practice... developed from the working methods of expert designers."²⁰ Similarly, design framing practices are understood as discrete activities, exemplified in practices such as thematic analysis and frame creation workshops.²¹ In such practices, the "designer's view of the design problem" constructs the frame through cycles of learning to redefine the "solution space."²² A design frame is a constructed problem statement that is both about "a new way of looking" and about "acting within" the problem situation (i.e., during the timeline of a project) to realize a solution.²³ As such, framing is a purposeful activity—an approach and element of practice for innovative outcomes.

Recently, in an evolution of Dorst's work, Louise Møller Haase and Linda Nhu Laursen distinguish two conceptualizations of design frames. Alongside Dorst's "problem frame" reasoning process, they identify the "meaning frame," which is the process

by which designers create “shared understandings... of relevant issues, important values and goals in the project, and criteria for evaluation”; the meaning frame is “the entirety of knowledge and belief structures associated with the design.”²⁴ Their study foregrounds how designers create desirability, identity, and legitimacy by embedding narratives associated with certain values, ideologies, and worldviews.²⁵ Furthermore, Dorst’s most recent text on “frame innovation” elaborates on his “frame creation” concepts and methods through his extensive practitioner experience of working on frame creation processes. Cameron Tonkinwise finds that, in this work, Dorst is implicitly political, addressing the hard problems of society by questioning the “roles, norms, and values” within a given social order.²⁶ Nevertheless, questions remain about how design frames correlate with sociological phenomena in context; for example, how do frames play out processes of subjectivization, whereby people become subjected to certain modes of self-expression and identity portrayal in particular situations or institutional environments?²⁷ Thus, new questions arise that are relevant for design research and practice. In recent work, Dorst nods to this necessity, touching on Bourdieu’s field theory.²⁸

In summary, design framing is understood as a meaning and sensemaking practice directed to build consensus between project beneficiaries about a given issue or a “seemingly intractable” problem²⁹; it does so through purposefully constructed problem frames or meaning frames that predominantly occur within discrete, time-bound processes of innovation. Framing is understood as intrinsic to and inseparable from the design activity; thus far, it is focused on the individual subject and rooted in the humanistic capacities of the expert designer, deployed to situations to interpret the “socio-emotional aspects of life.”³⁰ This focus points to how the philosophies of knowledge underpinning framing theories are consequential to how frames manifest in design theory and practice: Framing, as understood in policy, is predicated on individuals’ engagement with situated problems, and it is unconcerned with frames as a means to organize collective opposition to challenge power relations or to unsettle normative understandings of issues, as in social movement studies.³¹

Frame Theory: Agentic, Collective Action, and Institutionally Embedded

In this section, we turn to disciplines of media and communication studies, social movement studies, psychology, philosophy, and political and institutional theory to sketch out the foundational framing concepts and key scholars and theories of frames and framing from outside of design theory. The origins of framing theory can be traced to Bateson’s work on meta-communication and to later work

10.008. See also Louise Møller Haase and Linda Nhu Laursen, “Meaning Frames: The Structure of Problem Frames and Solution Frames,” *Design Issues* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2067804>; Lee, “Frame Failures and Reframing Dialogues”; and van der Bijl-Brouwer, “Problem Framing Expertise.”

20 Dorst, *Frame Innovation*, 161.

21 Jos P. Van Leeuwen et al., “Thematic Research in the Frame Creation Process,” in *Proceedings of ServDes 2016* (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2016), 352–64; and Bijl-Brouwer, “Problem Framing Expertise in Public and Social Innovation.”

22 Dorst, *Frame Innovation*, 183–85.

23 Dorst, *Frame Innovation*, 53.

24 Møller Haase and Nhu Laursen, “Meaning Frames,” 24.

25 Guy Julier, *The Culture of Design*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2014), 4–5.

26 Cameron Tonkinwise, “Committing to the Political Values of Post-Thing-Centered Designing (Teaching Designers How to Design How to Live Collaboratively),” *Design and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2016): 139–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2016.1142355>.

27 Edward Finegan, “Subjectivity and Subjectivisation: An Introduction,” in *Subjectivity and Subjectivisation: Linguistic Perspectives*, ed. Dieter Stein and Susan Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–15, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511554469.001>.

28 Dorst, *Frame Innovation*, 76–77.

29 Dorst, “The Core of ‘Design Thinking’ and Its Application.”

30 Van Leeuwen et al., “Thematic Research in the Frame Creation Process,” 352.

31 Hulst and Yanow, “From Policy ‘Frames’ to ‘Framing.’”

Table 1 | Social Theories of Frames and their Implications for the Politics of Design Framing

Frame Theory	Implications for the Politics of Design Framing
Agentic, Subjective, Cognitive Frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reproduce cognitive biases and prejudices, and social/symbolic positions. • Legitimize/de-legitimize different people, cultures, race, gender. • Promote individual worldviews/hegemonic epistemologies. • Engender agency (stronger/weaker, individual/collective).
Strategic and Collective Action Frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reveal ideological nature of frames and associated strategies and actions. • De-institutionalize institutionalized norms, values, practices. • Legitimize social groups outside norm-making institutions and re-articulate positions.
Institutional Frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce world polities, and their associated agency, power, political principles, and ideologies. • Use semiotic front to disavow coercive (material) realities. • View material conditions as historical phenomena.

32 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chandler Publications, 1972); and Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986). These two works are internalized within the design literature by the design theorists who originated work on design frames.

33 Hulst and Yanow, "From Policy 'Frames' to 'Framing.'"

34 Hulst and Yanow, "From Policy 'Frames' to 'Framing.'"; Joep P. Cornelissen and Mirjam D. Werner, "Putting Framing in Perspective: A Review of Framing and Frame Analysis Across the Management and Organizational Literature," *Academy of Management Annals* 8, no. 1 (2014): 181–235, <https://doi.org/10.1080/194116520.2014.875669>; Barbara Gray et al., "From Interactions to Institutions: Micro-processes of Framing and Mechanisms for the Structuring of Institutional Fields," *Academy of Management Review* 40, no. 1 (2015): 115–43, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2013.0299>; Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea!"; and Snow and Benford, "Ideology in the Study of Social Movements."

35 Hulst and Yanow, "From Policy 'Frames' to 'Framing.'"; Gray et al., "From Interactions to Institutions."

36 Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 611–39, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>; Robert Benford,

by sociologist Erving Goffman.³² Each one's work led to the uptake of the theory in different ways in these fields.³³ Several extensive reviews on frame theory demonstrate its widespread use across the social sciences and articulate distinct positions within what is a broad conceptual approach.³⁴

Our overall intention is to establish that design framing practices are essentially political. To develop our arguments, we draw selectively on this literature on frame theory. Following Merlijn van Hulst and Dvora Yanow, as well as Barbara Gray and colleagues,³⁵ we structure our arguments on frame theory according to agentic, subjective, and cognitive frames; strategic and collective action frames; and institutional frames; we evolve this analytical scheme in correspondence with design theory (see Table 1). The work of social movement scholars David Benford and Robert Snow and of Pamela Oliver and Hank Johnston on collective action frames, is particularly relevant for our conceptualization of counter-framing design.³⁶ Although these frameworks are useful for organizing our arguments and explicating our analysis, they also are artificially constructed frameworks that "bypass the reality of social relations," which rather are intersecting, dialogic, and playing out in the everyday.³⁷

Cognitive, Agentic, Subjective Frames (Micro)

This understanding of frames is derived from cognition theory, psychology, linguistics, and communications. Management scholars Joep Cornelissen and Mirjam Werner define micro-frames as "knowledge structure[s] that direct and guide information processing."³⁸ In these cognitive processes, "humans live by inference."³⁹ Here, frames are individuals' "frames of reference" that create cognitive biases, understood to relate to larger discursive forces and knowledge systems in society (i.e., institutional frames). Within the "framing effect," people assess situations through a process of

"Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant," *Mobilization: An International Journal* 1, no. 1 (1988): 197-217; and Snow and Benford, "Ideology in the Study of Social Movements." John A. Noakes and Hank Johnston, "Frames of Protest: A Road Map to a Perspective," in *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective* (Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005) 1–30.

- 37 Klaus Eder, "Social Movements in Social Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 41.
- 38 Cornelissen and Werner, "Putting Framing in Perspective," 184.
- 39 Ibid., 188.
- 40 Ibid., 184.
- 41 Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Framing Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (June 2007): 103–26, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054>.
- 42 Rhys H. Williams, "The Cultural Contexts of Collective Action: Constraints, Opportunities, and the Symbolic Life of Social Movements," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspieter Kriesi (Malden, USA: Wiley Online Books, 2004), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999103.ch5>.
- 43 Cornelissen and Werner, "Putting Framing in Perspective," 192.
- 44 Christopher Wolsko, et al., "Red, White, and Blue Enough to Be Green: Effects of Moral Framing on Climate Change Attitudes and Conservation Behaviors," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 65 (2016): 7–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2016.02.005>.
- 45 Christopher Le Dantec, *Designing Publics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 23.
- 46 Williams, "The Cultural Contexts of Collective Action."
- 47 Raffaele Marchetti, "The Conditions for Civil Society Participation in International Decision-Making," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, edited by Donatella Della Porta, Mario Diani, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 757.
- 48 Cornelissen and Werner, "Putting Framing in Perspective."
- 49 Goffman, *Frame Analysis*.
- 50 Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*.

internal comparison to a legitimate point of reference or baseline.⁴⁰ This point directly relates to automatic cognition processes and affects how people react to an issue—for example, depending on whether it is presented and perceived as a loss or a gain.⁴¹ In their review, Cornelissen and Werner highlight that better understanding is warranted of these subjective and agentic (i.e., as defined by Rhys Williams as the degree to which action is engendered⁴²) micro-frames, and their "attendant biases."⁴³

Cognitive biases, such as the framing effect, are central to understanding the link between perception, moral values, and actions. For example, a study conducted on liberal and conservative attitudes towards climate change in the United States revealed that although liberals' attitudes did not generally differ across conditions, conservatives' attitudes shifted substantially toward the pro-environmental direction when the issue was presented within their binding moral frame—that is, when it was framed as a matter of obeying authority, defending nature's purity, and demonstrating patriotism to the United States.⁴⁴ The attitude shift toward a positive view related directly to the fact that the appeal was perceived as congruent with their cognitive frame and conservative ideology. This understanding of the agentic as constitutive of cause and effect has led to design theory's tendency to objectify frames as stable points of view.⁴⁵ These stable views consequently are neutralized from more foundational forms of agency, such as affect, and from soliciting action or thought that is critical of dominant positions.⁴⁶ Consequently, effectively framing an issue so that it is perceived as sufficiently problematic by a particular group is a form of "information politics" that has the capacity to stir social action.⁴⁷

Strategic and Collective Action Frames (Meso)

In social movement studies, collective action frames or strategic frames are meso-level group-framing practices.⁴⁸ Here, frames are "schemata of interpretation," emphasizing elements of an (unfolding) issue to determine how that issue is perceived and understood.⁴⁹ Frames manifest by assigning meaning to issues through generative and active exchange processes between actors.⁵⁰ They are not individual but instead are established through a "productive" process that mobilizes actors within a movement.⁵¹ As frames are established through processes of frame alignment or frame expansion, the collective action framing involves a process of "dynamic" exchange between actors, where framing is linked to the

- 51 Robert Benford and David Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (August 2000), 611–39, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>.
- 52 Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*.
- 53 Noakes and Johnston, "Frames of Protest," 21.
- 54 Marchetti, "The Conditions for Civil Society Participation."
- 55 Oliver and Johnston reject the static abstraction of the master frame, on the basis that it loses the interactive and process-oriented nature of the frame's conceptualization. They posit this view within a more substantive critique of the tendency to conflate frames and ideologies. The latter, they argue, is constitutive of enmeshed systems of ideas, values, and theories that have variable implications for social and political action. Further, these can only be understood by appreciating the historical interrelationships between these complex dimensions, a consideration lacking in frame theory, which is more focused on process over content. Consequently, they find that frames also lack explanatory power. Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea!"
- 56 Marchetti, "The Conditions for Civil Society Participation," 761.
- 57 Dennis Chong and James Druckman, "Strategies of Counter-Framing" (August 2011), SSRN 1912083, DOI:10.2139/ssrn.1912083.
- 58 Michaël Aklin and Johannes Urpelainen, "Debating Clean Energy: Frames, Counter Frames, and Audiences," *Global Environmental Change* 23, no. 5 (2013): 1225–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.03.007>.
- 59 Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 79.
- 60 Sharon Prendeville and Pandora Syperek, "Counter-Framing Design: Politics of the New Normal," in *Nordes: Matters of Scale, Proceedings of the 9th Nordic Design Research Conference*, ed. Eva Brandt, et al. (Kolding, Denmark: NORDES, 2021), 104–13, <https://conference2021.nordes.org/>.
- 61 Cornelissen and Werner, "Putting Framing in Perspective."

culture of a given context and its institutions.⁵² John Noakes and Hank Johnston argue both that "political structure can shape movement framing" and that, at the same time, "movement framing can cause openings or closing in political opportunities"; thus, they point to how frames both are conditioned by wider social contexts and condition them.⁵³ As "un-institutionalized actors" strive for legitimacy for different social groups, new forms of "political agency" are enacted that, at the very least, make possible the process of deconstructing institutionalized norms in the global polity.⁵⁴

Social movement studies also has produced the (disputed) concept of master frames. These frames are enduring collective action frames that re-emerge in different forms through cycles of action. For example, the justice master frame has pertained to environmental, climate, and social justice, and the "rights" master frame has variously pertained to civil, womens', and gay rights.⁵⁵ Raffaele Marchetti refers to these master frames as readings across a "world polity"—a "cosmopolitanism, localism, neoliberalism, civilisationism" within which different ideologies, political arrangements, power, and agency are at work.⁵⁶

Collective action frames involve social group formation around counter-frame positions, which are constructed to gain the power to influence socio-political processes—for example, through public debate, protest, and policy analysis—and to challenge institutionalized frames. Counter-frames are "frames that oppose earlier effective frames"⁵⁷; they arise competitively between opponents involved in political debates. Examples can be seen in studies of energy policy, among others.⁵⁸ Furthermore, this literature establishes the relationship between frames and other political theories and concepts by setting out how frames can both originate from and effect ideologies.⁵⁹ Elsewhere, we develop the concept of counter-framing design in tandem with ideology, discourse, and epistemology, and consequently propose the concept's usefulness for design for social movements.⁶⁰

Institutional/Field Frames (Macro)

Emerging from institutional theory, institutional frames are those "taken-for-granted realities" that "structure expectations and script behaviours," and which form "enduring meaning structures" as the basis for social and economic change within an institution.⁶¹ As cognitive linguist and philosopher George Lakoff states,

“institutionalised frames” manifest through the cultural practices and discourses of a given social context and its institutions.⁶² Such frames “lay claim to reality” in a given social order.⁶³

Institutionalization leads to legitimization of previously illegitimate norms, values, and practices⁶⁴; it happens through “ongoing processes” of contention between social movements and political authorities—through which the foundational institutions of society are formed. Institutional frames necessitate approaches that are both “symbolic and material” for two purposes: to achieve an understanding of how such frames are produced and reproduced, and to allow for subsequent theorization on the development and modes of organizing new institutions, practices, norms, and knowledge systems.⁶⁵ Lakoff points to “environmental inaction” linked to the perceived “natural and moral” liberal frame of a “let-the-market-decide” ideology.⁶⁶ This ideology translates to failed (design) efforts at resource efficiency and “zero-waste circularity.”⁶⁷ Institutional frames allow for observing hegemonic social orders, as well as potential sites of contestation. In design theory, Liesbeth Huybrechts and colleagues elaborate on the concept of “institutioning,” through which they seek to loosen the strictures of embedded institutionalized frames.⁶⁸

The Political Foundations of Design Framing Practices

Elzbieta Kazmierczak argues that designers historically have not had adequate tools to bridge the gap between meaning construction and design decisions at the level of design framing.⁶⁹ In sociology, frame theory also has been critiqued as a surface concept that is reducible to a linguistic form of “politics as marketing”; it muddies the clarity that other concepts, such as ideology, may bring when it is used interchangeably or in place of such terms.⁷⁰ Renowned Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson pans Goffman’s schematic conceptualization of frames as self-contradictory in its articulation of the relationship between individual and collective: It is “only apparently about social life,” insofar as it is willfully absent of “content,” says Jameson. This absent content involves issues of power and history, such that frames constitute a “historical residuality” that is “an after image of the real.”⁷¹ Jameson’s perspective points to the breadth of interpretations, critiques, and elaborations yet to be unpacked in design theory.

Correspondingly, these considerations and issues are yet to be understood in relation to Dorst’s “problem frame” or Haase and Laursen’s “meaning frame.” Following Marchetti and Oliver and

- 62 George Lakoff, “Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment,” *Environmental Communication* 4, no. 1 (2010): 70–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524030903529749>.
- 63 Mikko Laamanen and Per Skållén, “Collective–Conflictual Value Co-Creation: A Strategic Action Field Approach,” *Marketing Theory* 15, no. 3 (2015): 381–400, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593114564905>.
- 64 Michael Lounsbury, “Institutional Variation in the Evolution of Social Movements: Competing Logics and the Spread of Recycling Advocacy Groups,” in *Social Movements and Organization Theory*, eds. Gerald F. Davis, Doug McAdam, Richard Scott, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 73–95. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791000.006>.
- 65 Stephen Wulff et al., “Collective Identity, Multi-Institutional Politics and Emotions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 114.
- 66 Lakoff, “Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment.”
- 67 Francisco Valenzuela and Steffen Böhm, “Against Wasted Politics: A Critique of the Circular Economy,” *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 17, no. 1 (2017): 23–60, http://ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/contribution/17-1_valenzuelabohm.pdf.
- 68 Liesbeth Huybrechts et al., “Institutioning: Participatory Design, Co-Design and the Public Realm,” *CoDesign* 13, no. 3 (2017): 148–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2017.1355006>.
- 69 Kazmierczak, “Design as Meaning Making.”
- 70 Oliver and Johnston, “What a Good Ideal!”
- 71 Frederick Jameson, “On Goffman’s Frame Analysis,” *Theory and Society* 3, no. 1 (1976): 119–33.

Johnston, we might ask: Which values, practices, and norms are espoused and promoted within a given meaning frame?⁷² What ideologies are being asserted by design and how, within a given polity? How are values, practices, and norms de- and re-institutionalized by design? These are some of the critical questions that sociologists and critical theorists address through frame deconstruction and analysis, seeking to uncover normalized power relationships within institutionalized frames and associated ideologies.

Shana Agid, as well as Mahmoud Keshavarz and Ramia Mazé, question the absence of the social and the political in design's historical and predominant conceptualization of framing practices.⁷³ Agid mounts a critique of subjective frames, returning to Donald Schön's work on reflective practices and questioning the "prescriptive frames... [and] constrictions of the worldviews of the designers themselves," which are the determining factors of what is reflected back.⁷⁴ As Umney and colleagues state, frames "carry the values of the frame's creator or borrow values from a normative narrative to which the designer may subscribe or aspire."⁷⁵ Similarly, Lauren Williams identifies ill-defined "frames," claiming that "relying on empathy as the point of departure effectively privatizes its frame of reference, rendering the problems of [for example] systemic racism... as one to be solved by 'walking a mile in a person's shoes.'"⁷⁶ Implicit in this critique is an argument against the uncritical subjectivist approaches that currently underpin design frame theory, whereby frames reproduce biases of identities, gender, race, citizenship, and beliefs. In contrast, articulating frames as bound up in wider social phenomena allows for acknowledging the systemic nature of social injustices, or drawing on critical theories of frames points to fundamental deficiencies in the essence of the concept, thus far absent in design framing theory.

If Agid's view is a micropolitical critique, Huybrechts and colleagues' "institutioning" is a macropolitical one that articulates the reciprocal processes between institutions that have stakes in participatory design work and the institutions themselves.⁷⁷ Institutions are historically enacted social orders that condition the possibilities of design—and these possibilities are "radically limited" by the material infrastructures and norms they legitimize.⁷⁸ Relatedly, Umney and Lloyd's textual analysis of a political debate on a major U.K. infrastructure project notes that project "precedents" have implications for the ways in which design reframing occurs in practice.⁷⁹ Similarly, views from practice lament the tokenistic nature of participation in contentious contexts. This

72 Marchetti, "The Conditions for Civil Society Participation"; and Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea!"

73 Shana Agid, "World Making: Working Through Theory/Practice in Design," *Design and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2012): 27–54, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175470812X13176523285110>. Mahmoud Keshavarz and Ramia Mazé, "Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research," *Design Philosophy Papers* 11, no. 1 (2013): 7–29, <https://doi.org/10.2752/089279313X13968799815994>.

74 Agid, "World Making," 48.

75 Darren Umney et al., "Political Debate as Design Process : A Frame Analysis," in *Design's Big Debates Proceedings of the Biannual Conference of the Design Research Society*, eds., Yoon-kyung et al., (Design Research Society: 2014): 772.

76 Lauren Williams, "The Co-Constitutive Nature of Neoliberalism, Design, and Racism," *Design and Culture* 11, no. 3 (2019): 301–21, (314). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2019.1656901>.

77 Huybrechts et al., "Institutioning."

78 Clive Dilnot, "The Matter of Design," *Design Philosophy Papers* 13, no. 2 (2015): 115–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14487136.2015.1133137>.

79 Umney and Lloyd, "Designing Frames." Umney's study uses a naturally occurring dataset in the form of a transcription of a parliamentary debate. As such, the data correspond to institutionalized frames in this study. The authors state clearly that this study is not an analysis of the whole process of infrastructure development.

tokenism is established under the auspices of participation, whereby the coercive role of design plays out a “dishonest frame” through apparatuses (e.g., visualizations, maps, design workshops) that solicit public consent for and legitimacy of certain infrastructures; but they do so under false pretenses that obfuscate controversial aspects of the project.⁸⁰

In summary, critically re-interpreting design framing offers insights into its relationship to bias, legitimization, values, positionality, and ideology. Again, Table 1 summarizes the implications of this analysis for understanding the political foundations of design framing.

Toward Counter-Framing Design

In this section, we elaborate on and synthesize the politics of design framing in practice, as well as the relevance to design of the social theories introduced in the previous section. Our conceptualization of “counter-framing design” argues for the complex, conflictual, and processual nature of frames and counter-frames and their importance for understanding design in general as a socio-political practice.⁸¹ Here, we present two illustrative examples that, through the construction of counter-frames of collective action to contest institutionalized frames, foreground counter-framing design as political dissent.

In this article, design is understood to be a set of capabilities that relate social systems to socio-material outcomes that have long-term structuring effects on society. In this design process, practices of design framing lead to the generation of “design concepts” that constitute cultural and material infrastructures and their related “purposes, relationships, identities, politics,” according to Adam Drazin.⁸² Drazin cites the example of mobility infrastructure as a cause of rural inequality and isolation. His problem frame relates the historical absence and presence of material infrastructure to the ways in which the problem is belatedly understood, which in turn leads to the creation of design concepts, new interfaces, and technologies that integrate the social and the material.

Centering the materiality of design frames, as Drazin and others do, helps in two ways: First, it challenges conceptions of human-centered individual agency within frames; and second, it challenges excessively discursive forms of social analysis that result in “an allergy to ‘the real.’”⁸³ In these ways, it favors more relational understandings of embodied and collective agentic capacities. Similarly, Noortje Marres contests the sub-politics interpretation of material participation as “below” discourse and metaphor, instead emphasizing the empirical bent of material politics as distinct from

80 Shannon Mattern, “Post-It Note City,” *Places Journal* (2020), <https://placesjournal.org/article/post-it-note-city/> (accessed May 12, 2020).

81 Predeville and Syperek, “Counter-Framing Design.”

82 Adam Drazin, “The Social Life of Concepts in Design Anthropology,” in *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, eds. Wendy Gunn, Tonn Otto, and Rachel Charlotte Smith (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 40.

83 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms, Ontology, Agency, Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392996-001>.

more idea-centered or discursive understandings.⁸⁴ In tandem with Jameson, Oliver, and Johnston, Marres points to the surface effect that frames can have when they are understood as ephemeral statements, beyond which deeper and more consequential questions are found, in view of the material. This critical stance is productive for overcoming the linguistic conception of framing as sloganeering, in both its practice and its criticism, thus revealing the important role that design can play vis-à-vis the socio-material aspects of frames.

Drazin's example serves to illustrate; it requires acknowledgement of the historically constituted nature of the socio-material object through which frames are enacted, thereby demonstrating the substance of frames, over and above linguistic interpretations of problems.⁸⁵ Equally, the construction of an "erroneous frame" in the context of a U.K. shooting incident is illuminating: the location of the incident, the material objects (e.g., surveillance camera photographs), and the physical movements observed serve as physical signals that correspond with linguistic cues in frame formation.⁸⁶ This correspondence further underscores the possibilities of revising our understandings of design framing—because frames in design are understood as intimately related to linguistics and metaphor.⁸⁷

Our conceptualization of counter-framing design is rooted in the understanding that counter-frames contest problematic institutionalized frames through socio-political processes of change. Hegemonic perspectives and values embodied in institutionalized frames are continuously contested by emergent counter-publics and counter-institutional actors who form or gather around counter-frame positions that embody and organize alternatives.⁸⁸ Returning to Marchetti, we can consider the means for legitimacy claims by "un-institutionalised actors" to foster new forms of "political agency."⁸⁹ Counter-frames engender oppositional forces to upend institutional norms and to organize counter-publics.

We assert that socio-materially generative design practices involve both the production and re-production of frames and counter-frames in these activist contexts. Frames are concordant with values and positions that stem variously from education, beliefs, and access to resources, which may be continuously contested and reformed by dissenting groups. Furthermore, based on the very fact that counter-frames may be designed to contest institutionalized frames observed in contexts of mainstream design, we posit that our re-articulation of design framing is also relevant to these same mainstream design contexts.

84 Noortje Marres, *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 101–03.

85 Drazin, "The Social Life of Concepts."

86 Joep P. Cornelissen et al., "The Contraction of Meaning: The Combined Effect of Communication, Emotions, and Materiality on Sensemaking in the Stockwell Shooting," *Journal of Management Studies* 51, no. 5 (2014): 699–736, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12073>.

87 Klaus Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design* (CRC/Taylor & Francis, 2006).

88 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter-Publics*, 4th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2014).

89 Marchetti, "The Conditions for Civil Society Participation," 755–56.

Illustration 1: Open Source Circular Economy Collective

The Open Source Circular Economy Days (OSCE) collective was founded on a mission to develop “open source practices to create, socialise, and distribute solutions globally to build local circular economies.”⁹⁰ It was set up in 2014 by a coalition of activists from (eco-, social-) design, art, open source hardware, policy, and business backgrounds, and the “open source” term denoted its mobilizing counter-frame and oppositional position. The OSCE was a direct response to the institutionalized sustainability frame based on the eco-modernist discourse, which was understood by the collective to perpetuate the positions of privileged corporate actors and market-based solutions that are predicated on technical fix frames of resource efficiency. According to the OSCE, this discourse manifested in reductive approaches to the material practices of eco-design and sustainable design. To this end, the collective’s practices were conceived through the design of a counter-frame position to “reactivate politics... to tailor new and distinct counter-frames on waste and sustainability for subjects to identify with,” against the institutionalized “dominant wasteful growth frame.”⁹¹ Its oppositional stance was fostered on values and practices of commons and social justice, through open source, peer-to-peer, and participatory design methods (e.g., participatory budgeting, open hardware) that materially manifested “the potential for people to participate in a new economic frame.” The collective sought to construct positions and spaces for action outside of the prevailing discourse on circular economy.⁹²

Illustration 2: Transition Network

The Transition Network (TN) defines itself as “a movement of communities coming together to reimagine and rebuild our world”; its goal is to enable low-carbon lifestyles by building resilient and self-sufficient communities beyond a fossil fuel-dependent economy.⁹³ The TN was founded in 2005, in response to an institutionalized frame of “green consumerism” and environmentalist discourse that emerged when governments, corporations, and the media popularized superficial, individualistic, and elite practices of sustainability. Nevertheless, this mainstreaming of green consumerism intensified after the U.K. government commissioned the publication of The Stern Review by Nicholas Stern, which focused attention on the environmental and economic threats of climate change, despite attempting to foster early action on policy-change.⁹⁴ This institutionalized “green consumerism” constituted a process of co-opting “eco-conscious” consumers into status quo systems of consump-

90 “OSCEdays Framework Development, OSCEdays, Last modified February 2018, <https://community.oscedays.org/t/oscedays-framework-development-2017/5702/28>.

91 Valenzuela and Böhm, “Against Wasted Politics,” 32–33.

92 OSCEdays, “Project New Diagram for Open Source Circular Economy, OSCEdays,” <https://community.oscedays.org/t/project-new-diagram-for-open-source-circular-economy/6267/7>.

93 Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (Totnes, England: Green Books, 2008).

94 The Stern Review was a milestone study undertaken in 2006 that was instrumental in public perceptions of inaction on the climate crisis. Nicolas Stern, “The Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change (UK HM Treasury, 2006), https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20100407172811/https://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/stern_review_report.htm (accessed July 20, 2020).

tion, in which both the producer and consumer commodify climate issues at the behest of meaningful policy action.⁹⁵ Framing and reframing, as currently understood within design, fosters this form of blinkered, counterproductive, and ultimately damaging responses to the ecological crisis by emphasizing individual actors and projects and consensual processes.

Counter to this individualistic frame, TN promotes resilience, interdependence, and self-sufficiency positions through new economic models that “transform their local economies... to establish and maintain livelihoods and enterprise that enhance wellbeing and respect environmental limits.”⁹⁶ Its “REconomy” mindset stands for a redefinition of worth and degrowth that sparks entrepreneurship, re-skilling, growing food, generating energy, rethinking transport, and engendering alternative currencies, shared ownership of land and working spaces, development of platforms that enable self-organization, and sharing and distributing resources within the locality; in this space, designers are deeply involved through practices such as peer-to-peer and open source design.⁹⁷

Conditioning the Possibilities for Political Agency

In this conceptual article, our intention has been to critique widely accepted theories on design frames that overlook the ideological and positional dimensions. We propose a revitalized view of design frame theory using social theories of framing, which reveal the political dimensions of design framing practices. These dimensions cannot be disentangled from processes of subjectivization, and when uninterrogated, they involve assumptions about social positions (of power, status, material, and economic standing) in a covert and implicit, rather than open and intentional, manner. We make the case that subjective and institutional frames reproduce and materialize certain ideologies and worldviews and show how they are in dialogue with conceptions and practices of design. Further, we elaborate on how *counter-framing*, from a socio-material lens, is an effective strategy that designers can use to organize dissensus, casting it in relation to how activists and social movements overthrow such frames.

We elucidate this new understanding of frames by conceptualizing several practices of “counter-framing design.” We highlight the role of material culture in collective action and the ways in which design is implicated in formations of agency in social movements and their respective counter-frames. Material objects inculcate activists into a given collective frame that, through representation and mobilization, seeks a social order countering

95 Lewis Akenji, “Consumer scapegoatism and limits to green consumerism,” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 63 (2014): 13–23.

96 Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Companion: Making Your Community More Resilient in Uncertain Times*, eBook (Totnes, England: Green Books, 2011), n.p.

97 TN also has inspired new disciplinary directions (e.g., Transition Design, <https://design.cmu.edu/content/design%E2%80%99s-terry-irwin-developing-transition-design-institute>), that apply a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of social, economic, and natural systems and that begin to integrate political aspects into design theory (accessed July 10, 2020).

institutionalized socio-material conditions. As Gavin Grindon says, “disobedient objects... appropriate their context or situations, ... unlocking them to reframe a situation or produce new relationships.”⁹⁸ The historically contingent and conditioning sociomaterial practices of design relate to, enact, produce, and reproduce frame constructions—positions that themselves co-evolve over time through a web of agency.⁹⁹

Taken together, this work allows us to demonstrate the nature of politics in motion within a given design frame—that is, how counter-frames are made and remade in processes that adopt, produce, reproduce, or challenge social positions. Design practices of framing are the source and site of relational exchange between political agency and social structures that foster collective action. By foregrounding materiality in our reconception of frames, we simultaneously recenter both the content of frames on the basis of material practices, context, and cultures and the historical and social nature of the frames.

With this understanding, we wish to indicate possibilities in which design can rearticulate and critique its conceptualization of frames. Further work is warranted on the politics of epistemology that underpin frame theory, especially in relation to its genesis in white, male, Western scholarship. Such work must reveal when frames obfuscate other ways of theorizing the politics of design and where alternative concepts may be more meaningful. The widespread use of frame theory in design might be leveraged to instill critical practices in the discipline, by opening a pathway between practice and concepts of master-frames or ideology. How such practices can be generative demands analysis, in light of the knowledge that certain frames are continuously (re-)institutionalized and need to be countered in practice.¹⁰⁰ Equally, the substantive critiques of framing theory outside of design pertain to deficiencies in how social theorists determine the correspondence between linguistic frames and material contexts and cultures, as well as how the apparent formalism of frames is in tension with praxis. Both are areas in which design, as a materially generative practice, has the potential to respond.

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98 Gavin Grindon, “Disobedient Objects,” in *Design & Activism*, ed. Tom Bieling (International: Mimesis, 2019), 69–85.

99 Coole and Frost, “*Introducing the New Materialisms*.”

100 Anne-Marie Willis, “Design, Change and Politics,” *Design Philosophy Papers* 11882, no. 3 (2012): 12–13; and Agid, “World Making.”