

Changing Cultures of Design

Identifying roles in a co-creative landscape

Marie Elvik Hagen

Department of Product Design

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

ABSTRACT

The landscape of design is expanding and designers today are moving from expert practice to work with users as partners on increasingly complex issues. This article draws up the lines of the emerging co-creative design practice, and discusses the changing roles of the designer, the user as a partner, and design practice itself. Methods and tools will not be considered, as the roles will be discussed in terms of their relations. The co-design approach breaks down hierarchies and seeks equal participation. Research suggests that the designer needs to be responsive or switch tactics in order to take part in a co-creative environment. A case study exploring co-creative roles complements the theory, and finds that the designer role needs to be flexible even when having equal agency as partners and other stakeholders. Sometimes it is necessary to lead and facilitate as long as it is a collaborative decision. Bringing users in as partners in the process changes the design culture, and this article suggests that Metadesign can be the holistic framework that the design community need in order to understand how the different design practices are connected.

KEYWORDS: Co-design, Co-creativity, Roles in the Design Process, Participatory Design, Metadesign, Cultures of participation, Design Agenda

1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of design is changing. Many designers are now taking a people-centred approach where relationships and human experience matter more than designing user-centred products for businesses [1].

According to Csikszentmihalyi, our creativity is a result of interacting and collaborating with other people [2]. Co-design can be defined as the process where designers, researchers and people who are not trained in design are working together throughout the design process [3]. Co-design is a collaborative process, because different people are working on the same project, however co-design is also a co-creative process as the tasks are not divided but rather creatively and *collectively* addressed by the group [3][4].

This article seeks to examine how the role of the designer, the role of the user and the role of design itself change as collective creativity and generativity replaces individual expertise [1]. The roles will not be discussed in terms of methods, approaches and tools, but we will look at the development of the roles and the relationships between them. We are not going to discuss if co-design is a best practice, however we will look into why this trend is occurring and how this influences the design profession. The culture change of design to incorporate more co-creative practices is not a linear development. We will first look very briefly at the changing landscape in section three, beginning with the historic development of bringing the users into the design process and furthermore looking into the changing scope of design and design disciplines. In section four we will continue to explore how these changes are influencing the

roles of the user, the designer and the design process. In section five we will look at a case study to examine co-creative roles in practice. We will discuss the different aspects in section six to understand how the changing roles affect and are affected by each other, and how this may provide a new dimension and understanding of design as a whole. Finally we give a short conclusion in section seven.

We will focus on roles in relation to co-design and co-creative practices. Verganti asks in his article from 2003 “What role should a corporation envision for designers?” (p.35)[8]. We will not look into specific relationships e.g. with manufacturers or corporations, however his question is interesting because it raises a fundamental inquiry to who defines and envisions the role of designers, the users and the design process itself. There is a growing tendency to adopt co-creative approaches in design and it is therefore important to discuss the implications and consequences of this development [1][9][10][11][12]. Margolin argues that:

Ultimately, we should begin to think about a holistic model of design in society - one that can help us understand how the different design activities fit together within the human environment (p. 16) [6].

Cooper states that the quest to develop a policy and a wider agenda for design is one of the bigger issues of design research today [5]. Morelli claims that the call for a new design agenda should be looking at sustainability from a holistic view with social and cultural aspects taken into the process [7]. Subsequently an underlying research aspect of this paper will be to discuss if a holistic model of design can be developed in the co-creative landscape.

2. METHODS

This article consists mainly of a literature review. A case study is included to get insight from practice [13]. The literature is mostly academic design research literature from the 21st century. Some articles are primary

sources where the author uses her or his own material to discuss co-design and the role of design and designers. A few articles are secondary sources that give reviews of other findings [14]. It has been an aim to include as many perspectives on the on-going discussion around co-creative roles as required to cover the development as a whole. Some older articles are included to give a historic perspective to the topic. The case study was conducted as a student project, and only relevant findings will be discussed in this paper. The goal of the case study was partly to explore roles in a co-creative setting with a social change youth organization, RE:ACT. The results are based on self-reflection.

3. CHANGING LANDSCAPE

3.1 Short history

The user-centred design approach was mainly developed in the United States and was a step away from deciding how users must interact with a design, to research and design *for* the user’s needs and wants [3]. The participatory design approach originates from Scandinavia, and started with a project looking at democratizing the design as well as practices of working with information technology [4][15]. The idea was to avoid making the information technology as easy to use as possible, but rather to make it skill enhancing [16]. The participatory approach allows users to take part in the design process often as experts to reveal their tacit knowledge of a specific design challenge or as a moral proposition to give groups of people who are not often heard a chance to participate and share insights [4][17].

Co-design has emerged as the newest approach to involving users, and takes a step forward from participatory design by empowering people to take part in proposing design alternatives and empowers and requires people to actively participate throughout the design process [18][1]. In some research the co-design approach is still referred to as a development of the

participatory design approach, however in this paper we will distinguish the two by referring to participatory approaches as a design process where users are included in parts of the process – e.g. as experts or to test usability, whereas we will define co-design in terms of users being participants throughout the design process. Lee describes the difference in her paper as “rules to control the design game” versus “a new attitude towards playing the game that will try to change the nature of the game” (p.32) [19].

3.2 Changing scope

In this section we will examine recent aspects that may have influenced the increase of co-creative practices within design. According to Stewart & Hyysaalo, designers have been searching for ways to include users in the process for more than forty years [20]. Co-design methods are used widely in “almost every area of design” (p.41) [21].

Outside of the professional design world we can find evidence of people taking part in ‘designerly’ activities. Fischer states that new media and technologies has led the Internet culture to be followed by Cultures of Participation, allowing everyone to contribute actively [18]. Von Hippel emphasizes that the tools to create are becoming cheaper, requires little training, and makes it easy for people to design even sophisticated products, services, music and art [22]. As ordinary people are getting more trained in framing personally meaningful issues as well as more used to create, we can say that they move towards design activities and thereby strengthen their potential as partners in co-creative processes [18].

According to Fischer, Cultures of participation also frames possibilities to explore the bigger issues in society; including problems of magnitude that individuals cannot address alone, problems of systemic nature that require interdisciplinary collaboration and problems that are difficult to understand without the participation of people within the context [18]. This process requires a range of

stakeholders to be included in the process, and Sanders & Stappers claim that the user-centered approach is insufficient in addressing the complexity of design possibilities we are designing for today [3]. Hence contemporary design extends from the making of products to participating in hybrid networks handling complex issues in interdisciplinary and co-creative teams [11][16]. From designing for users, we are now designing for quality of life and for future experiences of people, for communities and even cultures [3][5].

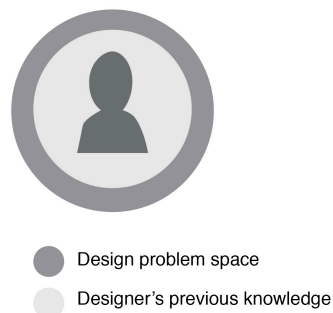


Figure 1: The expert designer dealing with smaller problems of which he/she can tackle more or less alone.

Such complex issues ‘require more knowledge than any single person possesses, [therefore] it is necessary that all involved stakeholders participate, communicate, collaborate and learn from each other’ [23]. Thus the previous expert-mindset is not sufficient in dealing with bigger problems as we can see in figure 1, hence a co-design team as shown in figure 2 gives opportunities to embrace more complex issues in society. Brown and Katz also emphasize that the scalability of design thinking are blurring the relationships between designers and users leading to new forms of collaboration to emerge [11].

Co-production is a similar concept to co-design, which first was proposed by Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom, and has recently developed as a strategy to enhance public services by enhancing co-creation with public service professionals and communities [24] [25]. Findings from such projects may also be relevant to explore co-design roles, however co-production is slightly different as there are

not necessarily designers involved. Anyhow existence of such approaches gives further evidence of the emergence of a collaborative landscape.

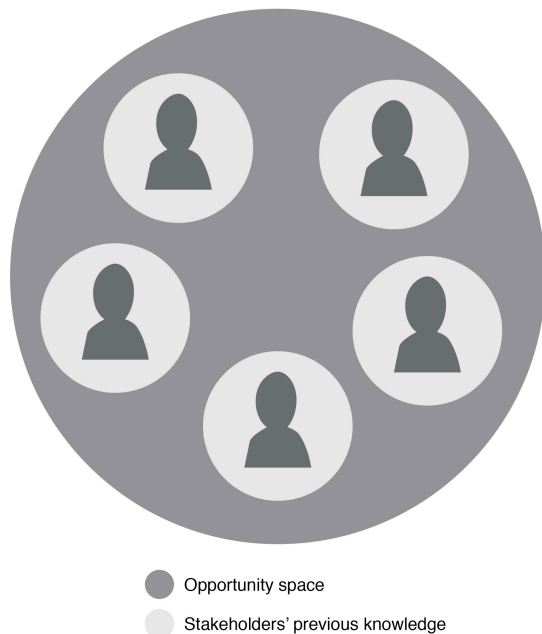


Figure 2: The co-design team consisting of different stakeholders enabling work with more complex issues and access to more diverse knowledge.

Arguably, to summarize, non-designers are becoming more able to take part in a design process with the emerging cultures of participation, and at the same time designers have realized that their skills can be useful to deal with more complex problems, which proposes a need of more collaboration with non-designers.

3.3 Changing design disciplines

Historically, design disciplines tended to increase specialization in addressing new and complex issues [6]. Recently, there has been an increase in frameworks that suggest holistic and systemic approaches.

Metadesign is a holistic framework that extends the design process by “designing for design after design” (p.116)[18]. The end-users are not only included as partners in the development process but are also allowed to contribute and continue to develop the

outcome in use. Metadesigners must therefore allow control to be distributed among all stakeholders in the process [18]. Metadesign is focused on re-thinking or even re-designing design [26]. One of the driving forces of metadesign is the negative development towards a changing climate, extinct species and human disconnect from nature, and co-creativity is one of the core aspects [27]. Giaccardi defines metadesign as “a critical and reflexive thinking about the boundaries and scope of design” (p.2)[28]. She argues that metadesign enlarges creative processes concerning emergence, investigation of design spaces and even “invention of the world” (p.15)[28].

In addition to metadesign we have also seen the emergence of disciplines like design thinking, service design and other holistic approaches. None of these methodologies are suggesting a brand new framework as they integrate several traditional disciplines within them [3]. Arguably the novelty lies in the holistic collection of methods, the inclusion of stakeholders and the broader agenda of design.

4. CHANGING ROLES

4.1 Changing user roles

We are in the midst of a significant change in how we think about the role of consumers in the process of design and development (p.381) [11].

Co-design is a shift away from market-based approaches where products and services were designed to relieve users from everyday tasks [12]. That approach prevented people from holding on to skills and knowledge and consequently the users would be unable to solve similar issues in the future [29]. A passive user without a voice in the process cannot be said to have agency [18]. Less consumption and strengthened conservation is on the political agenda, and a passive user will be less able to act and take critical choices supporting a sustainable development [30]. As described by Hestad, Margolin urged in 1983

that designers should design for 'active users' instead of 'passive consumers' [31]. Today, passive receivers are replaced not only with active users, but also with active co-designers in the design process [6]. Users are recognized as a resource and designers may facilitate processes where people can use all their capabilities to take part in a co-design process and suggest solutions to their own needs [6].

Users are brought into the design process as partners [6][32]. In their paper, Vines et al found that user participation can be very different, ranging from observers to commentators to creators [17]. Ives and Olson recognize that it is not always clear which users that should or are currently involved, from the users who use the output of the system to the users who generate the system inputs or run the system [33]. However with cultures of participation those user roles blends and as all users become more active we cannot divide between those who create inputs and those who use output.

4.2 Changing designer role

The role of the designer is changing as the culture of design processes changes. Sanders & Stappers argue that the new designer role includes the role of a facilitator [3]. According to Brown and Katz the former design role was focused around building on existing solutions, while the new role takes design "out of the studio and unleashes its disruptive, game-changing potential" (p.381)[11]. Badham & Enh suggest that the new role can be termed a *collective designer* when designers recognize "the collective and political character of the design process and takes a humanistic stance in design issues" (p.2) [16]. This relates greatly to design thinking, where the designer role discards design on behalf of people, but rather encourage designers to work *with* people [11][19].

Designers are now, in addition to designing products, co-designing for sustainable development, circular economy, social issues, services, strategies and even public policies [3][8][10]. As designers work more with

complex social issues, Thorpe and Gamman argue that the designer role can create conditions for change, without forcing it [34]. They propose a responsive designer role where the designer is more adaptable and function as a co-actor in the design process - sometimes acting as a facilitator, other times as an expert. This resonates with Enh and Badhams suggestion that designers should "be someone able to switch strategies to suit context" without being "an 'amoral chameleon' or 'pragmatist' but a pragmatic change driver combined with a visionary moralist" (p.6)[16]. A designer of integrity who sometimes does the right thing in compromise of his or her own needs. However, they also mention that the designer sometimes have to compromise with personal views in order to do the right thing. They claim this strategy is a realistic proposal where actions will actually be taken [16].

Sanders suggests that the designer role will revolve less around individual expression and more around constructing generative tools that can be used for co-design. She claims that creativity will still be an important asset for a designer, however that the role of a designer and a design researcher is indistinct, where it is unclear who will create the generative tools and who will analyse the results [1]. Morelli states that the role of the designer will empower people instead of satisfying customers [7].

Lee proposes that the designer should practice and adapt several roles as tactics "in order to avoid tokenism" (p.31)[19]. She emphasizes that tactics are important because of the possibility to be spontaneous and change approaches for the moment, in contrast to strategies that suggest an overall plan. Furthermore Lee introduces three roles to explain possible tactics; firstly the *Design Developer* transforms design processes into co-design processes, secondly the *Design Facilitator* work with people in order to improve their lives and thirdly the *Design Generator* work with professionals to find new opportunities for design thinking [19].

Even though the designer role is described in different words - responsive and adaptable - switching strategies with context - adapting roles as tactics, there seems to be a growing consensus that designers need to take on a more flexible role when working with other stakeholders, and furthermore to blend their role with the design researcher [1][16][19][34].

4.3 Changing design process

As designers are addressing more complex issues together with people, the design briefs are more often ill-defined or revolve around creating mutual trust between stakeholders [23]. Hence, with co-design and complex design problems, the time spent in the 'fuzzy front end' is expanding. As mentioned previously, the participatory approach often includes users e.g. to test usability and prototypes later in the process, however the co-creative approach requires active participation throughout, and the convergence process of the design brief will therefore depend more heavily on the context and multiple and often contrasting stakeholder perspectives [4][34]. The front end informs and gives stakeholders inspiration to explore bigger questions, hence it is called 'fuzzy' as a result of its ambiguity and open character [3]. Schön argues that the open-ended and complex front-end supports creativity as stakeholders will be more likely to experience breakdowns [35]. Fischer highlights that breakdowns give opportunities to reflect and learn to enhance creativity [23].

DiSalvo et al bring attention to the outcome of a design process. They suggest that when the designer takes on new roles the outcome of the process might be the organisation, facilitation and education itself [36]. Thus, perhaps it is not only the front end that can be called 'fuzzy' as the design outcome may be just as ambiguous when it is no longer restricted to a product, or even a service.

5. CASE STUDY

I undertook a practical exploration of roles in collaboration with the social change youth organization RE:ACT Bergen. We tested some design methods over a period of three months with the goal to improve and evaluate the organization's impact. A big amount of the time spent together was through board meetings and bigger events following their regular procedure and after some time I was almost considered as a board member myself. The time spent on everyday activities fostered trust and a flat-structured process where we considered each other to having equal agency. Simpson and Gill argue that "whether it is a formal meeting or a chat over a coffee, a conversation is active in creating the future" (p.48)[37], and so even talking about and around methods, including values and goals, needs to be considered as a part of a co-design process. Furthermore it laid the base to empower the board to embed the design methods as part of the regular activities. This happened to some extent but there were still a distinction and the design process was often referred to as "the design collaboration".

The experience to seek to involve users as equal partners in a co-design process was new for me as a designer. It was reassuring that the partners participated actively with their knowledge and in the creative process. Before our meetings I could not plan other than which method to explore, as I wanted the process to be a collaborative experience and effort without taking the lead unprompted, and it was impossible to know which direction our co-creativity would take. It was harder to be prepared when suddenly the partners wanted me to push or take the lead for a period of time. This shows a need to act as a facilitator and sometimes lead in parts of the process, and previous experience with the methods helped in those situations. Another challenge was time, as my partners were all students with busy schedules. Although passionate about trying new methods the time available to explore was limited. We did the ideation and mapping as partners, and then after our meetings I was working more

traditionally and transferring our insights into an organized and aesthetic version. This resonates with Vines et al.'s view that participation is dynamic and can occur on different degrees of engagement throughout the process [17]. In this project it was evident that we could not participate equally in terms of contributing the same in all stages of the process, however we were equally important in the process, we just contributed differently with our skills and knowledge. Steen et al bring forward that if the designer or researcher initiates a project their knowledge will be leading [4]. Even though my partners were allowed and encouraged to take part in the detailing process it was underlying that they were content with participating actively in the ideation and mapping stages.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Power structures and agencies

Sanders and Stappers state that “embracing participatory thinking flies in the face of the ‘expert’ mindset that is so prevalent in business today” (p.9)[3]. Von Hippel argues that the development towards cultures of participation changes the power structures from a few persons producing and the rest consuming, to a culture that can lead to a strengthened sense of empowerment as a citizen and even democratizing the possibility to create [22][38][39]. When the roles of the designer and the user - or rather ‘co-design partner’ change, the relationships among stakeholders will also change. Designers will lose their individual and leading role in offering a solution to a user, and will rather catalyse change in an interconnected system of stakeholders [12]. In a less hierarchical process with multiple agencies we must question who it is that will initiate the project and thereby whose knowledge that will be leading or framing the process [4]. According to the findings in the case study it is a dynamic process that changes throughout the process, however the question may need to be divided. In the case study I was initiating the project as a designer, and we could therefore then ask

how roles were practiced in a designer-initiated process. Researchers, designers or funders usually initiate co-design projects, thus it could also be interesting to look into projects initiated by other stakeholders [17]. How are agencies distributed in those projects, and how and does it differ from the projects initiated by the designer? These projects may be harder to get a record of, as the designer involved will not be chosen according to a research interest in co-design and roles, but according to the stakeholders’ agenda, and therefore it is not certain that the designer will reflect upon roles and share the findings with the design research community.

In the existing literature it is not always clear in which terms the role of the designer is discussed, and more reflection upon the roles in practice may shed some light on that aspect. Is the focus on how the current mainstream role *is* practiced, or is the discussion acknowledging the current radical designer’s role, which also already exists and may become the mainstream role – or is the discussion conversely based on ideas and suggestions to how the designer role *can* develop or even *should* develop?

Victor Papanek was one of the first to call for a change in design practice, and his quest was therefore a suggestion to a future designer role that at the time, in his opinion, did not exist. He proposed that designers should be more responsible towards the environment and social needs [40]. Thorpe and Gamman argue that the role of design is “moving far beyond the ‘socially useful design’ argument’s raised by Papanek” (p.218)[34]. They argue that the designer is without possibility to have control over all resources, especially in a co-creative process; hence the designer cannot be fully responsible for the outcomes. Consequently they claim that to be responsive rather than responsible “has to be good enough” (p.233)[34]. We can also say that when the designer is working in a co-design process *with* people the creativity and agency is shared. When agency is shared, the responsibility must accordingly be shared among stakeholders.

When the stakeholders are sharing agency it raises the question of how decisions are being made among them. Thorpe and Gamman suggest that multiple agencies does not necessarily mean a democratic decision making process [34]. So how then are ideas decided upon and co-creation enhanced?

It is crucial that enough stakeholders are active and have more demanding roles than previously, for example as contributors, collaborators, designers or meta-designers [38][18]. Fischer argues that participants must be rewarded and motivated to take on the roles that are more demanding [18]. However, rewarded by whom? Is motivation a part of the new role of the designer? Sanders and Stappers state that “All people are creative but not all people become designers”(p.12) [3]. Users can become co-designers in a fitting environment and with the proper tools to express themselves or depending on their level of expertise, passion and creativity [1][3][18]. In business-driven approaches it is assumed that only lead-users can become co-designers [3]. If it is the designer’s role to motivate for more active participation, shall the designer also seek to prompt passion, creativity and bring out the participant’s tacit knowledge? Sometimes it can be a burden or a negative experience for people to be active participants when dealing with personally irrelevant activities, and that further emphasizes the need for designers to be flexible – to facilitate for co-creativity but to be prepared for different levels and different types of engagement by the other stakeholders [18].

6.2 Measure success

If the front end as well as the outcome is fuzzy, how can we measure success of a co-creative process? Can the process be evaluated according to how active and demanding roles the participants took on? Or can it be evaluated according to how

satisfying the outcome is? In that case, is it most important that the outcome is satisfying for the designer or for the participants or a third stakeholder group (e.g. a client)? Or are those aspects always the same? If the stakeholders have different agendas, *transparency* might help in measuring success along the way [17]. However projects are difficult to evaluate and measure success of on a short-term basis [39]. The design researcher gain from the co-creative process by receiving information and prototypes, as well as being able to defend choices as a result of working with co-design partners. Transparency might shed light on these benefits as well as the benefits for the other stakeholders [17].

6.3 Holistic design agenda

When being responsive, switching tactics and adapting to context as a designer, it can still be useful to have a framework to relate to. Otherwise we may risk that roles merge so considerably with other disciplines that the co-creative designer no longer can identify design as a profession. This is why Margolin’s quest to find a holistic agenda for design is so important [6]. And perhaps the framework has already emerged through the framework of Metadesign, which takes into both social as well as environmental aspects. Metadesign stresses the co-creative process by breaking down hierarchies, embracing diversities and seeking for synergies [26]. Lee highlighted in her paper that there is a need for an internal shared understanding within the design community to how roles are collaboratively perceived as well as practiced [19]. This paper echoes her quest as well as linking it to the perceived understanding of design itself. We have shown in this paper that the design process itself changes when roles change. Metadesign is seeking to be responsive just as the co-creative designer role by its suggesting to re-design design.

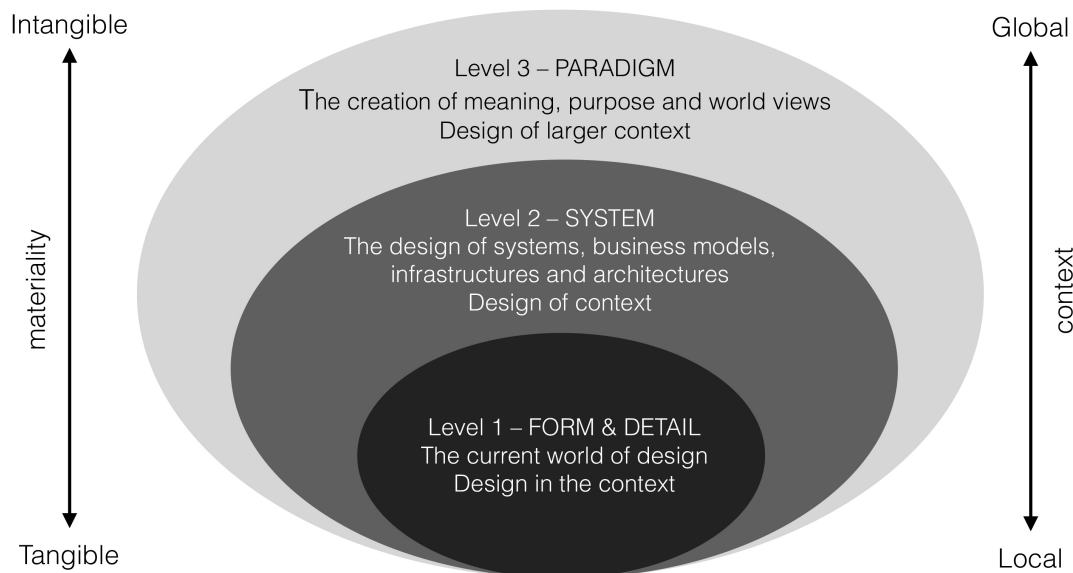


Figure 3: Metadesign “joins up design” by including all levels of context as well as materiality [41].

Perhaps that makes it a sufficiently holistic and adaptive model that can develop together with the co-creative roles. Here, the design community will both need to research if this suggestion can be fruitful, as well as, again, seek an internal collective understanding of why we need a holistic framework. Even if we may need a holistic framework, it is not certain that all designers need to be Metadesigners, especially if designers are working in teams. Figure 3 illustrates how Metadesign takes an even broader approach than e.g. service design, but still incorporates the traditional design activities within, depending on which part of the design process we are working with. Some designers may, knowingly or not, avoid dealing with a global context, a complex issue or an intangible and fuzzy outcome. However, as we have seen, many of these aspects cannot be avoided in a co-creative context, and therefore, designers who follow the development towards co-creative practices will be touching upon all these levels of the holistic design agenda (Figure 3).

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have examined the roles of the designer, the user now known as a partner, and we have touched upon the design practice itself. As the landscape of design is becoming more complex and co-

creative where new roles for the designer is emerging, the design culture itself is changing.

We have highlighted a necessary step internally in the design community to earn a broader shared understanding of how roles are changing as a result of a more complex and collaborative design process. How are roles developed by others, how are future roles envisioned and how are roles actually enacted? We have connected some of the threads in research today, and from a case study as well as based in the theory we have found that the co-creative designer role is dynamic and changing through the process itself. Sometimes actively facilitating, drawing and leading, other times actively ideating with a partner in lead, however always participating, only on different grounds and with different type of inputs. Further research on the practical aspects is needed especially as the roles will keep changing as new aspects emerge.

In 2001, Margolin suggested the need for a holistic design model in order to enhance knowledge and understanding of our design activities. In this paper we have argued that a holistic framework already exists with Metadesign, and that the next challenge will be to explore how the framework can be familiar and useful for design practitioners and if the holistic model can be adapted in future design research.

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