DESIGN WEEK

Means to an end

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What happens when end-users become involved in design? How does it affect the design process, and what effect does it have on sustainability? Clare Dowdy explores the concept of co-design, which sees designers adopting a participatory approach

Community design, inclusive design, design participation, co-creation, co-production. They are all various terms for what the design community is coming to know as co-design - a phenomenon that is creeping up the design agenda.

1The Design Council's Bikeoff research resulted in this 'safer bike stand',

2The Helen Hamlyn Centre at the Royal College of Art acted as the inclusive

3Ideo developed this mobile blood-donating unit for the American Red Cross

Jeremy Myerson, director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre at the Royal College of Art, describes it simply as 'a product of companies wanting innovation and finding that conventional routes are not getting them into the unusual spaces'.

So, designers are actually designing with the end-user - or allowing the end-user to become the designer.

It is particularly popular in service design, and often in the public sector, because services there are rendered in real time. For example, patients and medical professionals work together to come up with the best treatments.

Consultancies working in this field include Ideo, Engine and LiveWork. Recent examples are the Design Council's Bikeoff research - which resulted in a safer bike stand being piloted in London's Camden - and HHC's role as the inclusive design adviser for a new £35m park in Cornwall, called Heartlands (where it worked with architect Dransfield Owens de Silva and landscape architect Land Use Consultants). Ideo's healthcare experience includes working with the NHS and developing a mobile unit to encourage blood donations for the American Red Cross.

Describing some designers' attitudes to co-design, Factory Design co-founder Adam White says, 'It is interesting to compare the difference between getting opinions during the creative process, which is embraced and glamorously called co-design, with getting opinions afterwards, which is called research and is often considered a pain in the arse by designers.'

This might suggest something of the quandary that designers can find themselves in with this topic. This was highlighted at the Audi Design Foundation's annual debate in April, called Where Do We Draw the Line in Co-design?

Those in the conventional design industry say there's a touch of the Emperor's New Clothes about some of this. 'A tried-and-tested insight technique is to get leading-edge consumers to devise their own design. Added Value did some work with design students, who noticed that denim never did as it was told but tended to twist - hence twisted jeans,' says Brand Legacy managing partner Lucy Richardson.

But there is no doubt that co-design's stipulation for designers to hand over the reins to the person on the street has difficulties. 'It requires the designer to get out of the expert mindset and in to a participatory mindset, and to treat users as partners,' says Myerson.

Design Council chief design officer Andrea Siodmok claims that 'Designers spend a lot of time in their studios, not in a real-life context. End-users know their product inside out.'

However, a good designer should be able to empathise. 'We often get our design inspiration from our response as users - designers are consumers too,' says White. Another issue is that 'stuck-in-the-mud designers think your average Jo Bloggs doesn't have taste, and doesn't know what he wants', says Siodmok.

But design by committee can pander to the lowest common denominator. Would we have the iPod if Jonathan Ive hadn't been left to do his own thing? Ideo partner Mat Hunter expands on this, saying, 'The perception of the design industry is that the purest ideas come from the purest minds and processes.'

What's more, co-design has practical issues that clients and designers have to tackle. As Yanki Lee, research fellow at HHC, says, 'It's very process-driven. You need to put in a lot of time and energy, and there's no guarantee of output.'

And then at the end of all this collaboration, whose design is it anyway? As Sir Christopher Frayling, Rector of the RCA, pointed out at the Audi debate, 'What we are talking about is a process of design and innovation, where there really isn't a designer in the sense of an author who is there to take credit for, or to sanction the final idea or product that emerges.'

Once designers (and their clients) sort these things out, there are genuine benefits to be had, Siodmok believes. 'There will be a real speed of change, not just a small number of people solving problems and designing - the wisdom and the power of crowds. The mad thing is that, at the moment, users work for free.'

If co-design takes off in the way that many believe it will, it has tangible implications for conventional design consultancies. 'Consultancies would be more networked, would collaborate and listen,' suggests Hunter. 'They would have to be able to do the human factors, like connecting with people who can't speak in their (design) language. The ego, the language and the techniques will change.' l