Where can design have the greatest impact in the next five years? As an educator and researcher active in the emergent field of design for social innovation, this is a question that I often ask myself.

I’d like to put a stake in the ground and offer the concept of implementation as an answer worth considering. Implementation is one of the most crucial stages of social innovation: the phase that often determines whether a new object of design—be it an artifact, service, environment or system—might take hold, becoming widely diffused and adopted to address the previously unmet needs of a community in a sustainable manner.

At their best, designers excel in making ideas concrete, but they also delight in wonder and surprise, and are perfectly at ease at embracing the essential conditions of ambiguity and improvisation that characterize social innovation processes (Michlewski, 2008). In fact, when we consider the growth in complexity and uncertainty that characterizes our 21st century society, significant implications for design as a “reflective” community of practice (Schön, 1983), and as a pluralistic field for inquiry adept at tackling such wicked problems (Rittel & Weber, 1973), emerge. This is a time when we recognize a sense of urgency for change to happen—perhaps at a broader scope than ever before—and with it,
a call for paths creating forms of collaboration and generative modes of intervention that can lead to social innovations. In this context, to be a designer is more than a choice of discipline, but the recognition that creative vision and technical skill have the power to transform lives.

And so we return to the wicked problem of implementation. Somehow, and too often, the powerful contribution of design goes absent, or becomes stifled or arrested by the time a social innovation reaches this critical stage. There are a multitude of explanations for this drop; many can be traced back to ingrained organizational and financial factors that dictate the curve of a design engagement, and/or the expectations for a hand-off by a design team once a project reaches a certain level of “design completion.” What happens when the designers cease to be engaged? The rich perspectives, knowledge sharing and precious human interactions that happened during designing cease to be. They end precisely at the complex juncture of implementation of a social innovation. When those conversations and insights might have mattered the most, design is no longer part of the equation.

Here’s to a change, over the next five years, in how designers devise and embrace implementation as they continue demonstrating the catalytic role of design in society. I’m certain it will be quite powerful to watch the impact that ensues from those longer-term engagements.

REFERENCES


