Chapter 11.

Homefullness, design and *problem care*

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Biography
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Biography
Adrià Garcia i Mateu is a designer and activist involved in projects enabling the everyday life of just sustainability transitions. He is a founding member of Holon, a non-profit cooperative advancing the role of design in societal transformations and is work can be found at http://www.laborda.coop + https://holon.cat

Abstract

Addressing complex phenomena such as housing necessitates a reimagining of home ownership and habitation. Beyond architecture, housing intertwines with economics, power dynamics, social norms, climate, and material considerations, making it a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). This chapter captures a dialogue between Adrià Garcia i Mateu, a Catalonian designer-activist, and Laurene Vaughan, a design professor. They explore design as a practice of care rather than merely problem-solving. Garcia i Mateu discusses Holon and La Borda, cooperatives in Barcelona embodying principles of problem care. These cooperatives focus on sustainable transitions and equitable societal impacts through collaborative design practices. The conversation highlights how intertwining personal involvement and community engagement can lead to meaningful and sustainable design practices. By embedding care into design, practitioners

can navigate and address housing's complex challenges, ultimately fostering equitable and sustainable housing solutions. This approach underscores the importance of relational and values-based design in creating just communities.

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Introduction

Complex problems or phenomena such as the provision of housing for everyone require us to transform our approach and our conceptualisation of what is a home, and what it is to own/possess or dwell in a location. Housing is an issue far beyond the mechanisms of architecture and design, it is equally grounded in issues of economics, power, social or cultural norms, in conjunction with issues of climate, the environment, materiality and location. It is for this reason that housing and particularly the lack of it, is framed as a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973) situated within a myriad of associated wicked problems.

This chapter is focused on a conversation between Adrià Garcia i Mateu, a Catalonian designer activist based in Barcelona with a passion for housing and positioning the practice of the cooperative he is part of as being one of *problem care*, and Laurene Vaughan, a professor of design with a passion for us to understand and realise, design as a *practice of care* (2019). In the course of the conversation Adrià refers to 'us or we,' or the cooperative, in this he is referring to *Holon* (2019), a cooperative agency that designs products, services, policies and futures for just and sustainable transitions, and *La Borda,* a housing cooperative in Barcelona. In this conversation rather than focusing on this project and the innovations and methods that were developed in the realisation of *La Borda* (Brysch et al., 2023 the focus is on what it means for a designer to practice in this space and particularly the role of care – whether it is a practice of care or problems of care.

To retain integrity to the exchange between the two authors and their respective positions and experiences the chapter is divided into three sections. Firstly, this brief **Introduction**, followed

by **The Conversation** and finally a **Conclusion** which synthesises the key points in the proposition about the importance of care within design practice and particularly if we are designing opportunities for *Homefullness*.

The Conversation

Laurene:
I'm very interested to explore with you, your framing of problems not in terms of their complexity or what are often referred to as 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Weber, 1973), but as problems of care or your practice as being one of *problem caring*. Can you explain that for me?

Adrià:
I would say we (Holon) explain this through a framework for the practice of design. As students studying design and later being designers we have been bombarded or not bombarded, but there has been a dominant discourse of design as problem solving. This really is the traditional approach to design and professional practice, and it does put a particular focus on what you do and who you work with. However, if you bring that treaty to the practice in a consultancy, or a design agency, you come in and out of problems as they present through projects and client work. When you are in business you just start facing the work through problems, and that is your main role. And that's fine. It's the role that you take within the industry, because you work with these things – these problems as they arise, as opposed, let's say, when you work in public or private business contexts, and you elect to focus on specific problems which are aligned to areas of concern. In this case you elect to stay with the trouble, if you wish.

There is a logic to this 'staying with the trouble' as Donna Haraway (2016) would say. It is a way of framing the logic of design practice, it is what we call, *problem caring*. This is the way in which we've been approaching our practice as a cooperative, it is how we stay with the problem because it is something that we are committed to. It is our problem too. Within the cooperative we care about specific topics, like housing, which is the one that touches this *Homefullness* project, but we are also concerned about energy, food or some other sectors. We have this

approach of looking for a transition approach to addressing complex and longitudinal issues, and we base our work in the losses of transitioning within the frame of concrete challenges in place. For example, housing is a concrete, social, political and social economical paradigm, that is grounded in the capitalist social economy of places.

We position our practice as being one of political agents, if you wish, that is operating in the private sector, in the sense that we are a private entity, that is also not for profit, and we are an actor within the greater system. Our vision for the housing sector is the Public Commons, right through every aspect of housing: a Public Commons in design and in governance.

In each system in which we, Holon, operate, we have this tendency to work from a position of problem care. In recent years this approach is becoming more explicit, and it is something that we have identified as not being the norm in design consultancies. People value the explicit vision that we have for the lived systems and contexts of their concerns. We also have a transition way of working; we are agents in a transition context, where we do interventions with this vision. Therefore, if you operate within this logic and these practices as part of your way of being, it is seen as authentic. It is the basis for our business model, and our client base, afterall it is on this basis that we get funding through our clients. Increasingly we are focusing on projects that have public funding or innovation funding from a variety of sources. This is a necessity as in Catalonia private philanthropies and funding sources are less present. We operate in relation to public calls, which are becoming more and more competitive, and philanthropic funding is less common.

Funding for projects through tenders is another option for us, and accessing this funding has led us to have to be explicit about what we care for and about in order to be competitive. For example, if you work in a healthcare organisation or a hospital or a government department it is assumed that you care about health and the problem that is the focus of the tender without having to be explicit about this. This has had an impact on us and has helped us to clarify our focus and values.

We must tell ourselves ‘we're doing something different,’ ‘we are focusing on problems of care’ – these are issues that we are committed to and are applying our expertise to. We operate outside of a conventional client response model and seek out opportunities for finding work that we care about and are sensitive to. Being sensitive to the problems that we encounter, is core to what we do.

In the case of housing, we started working in the housing space as a response to the broader sustainability transition conversation about lifestyles and their impact. We had the realisation that we want to promote sustainable lifestyles through the proposition that housing is a hub to transform many of these growing concerns. We went to the topic of housing through a professional analysis of how can we support the transitions we need? After a year participating in those community led housing spaces, focusing on service design and sharing practices in conviviality. I personally experienced the precarity of housing. I experienced a silent eviction when I was living in Barcelona because the building had been sold to a Russian business person who bought it and developed flats for tourists.

It was because we had lived experience of the problem as well as a broader understanding of housing challenges, that we were sensitive to the housing situation; and we cared about it. We became aware that what we were doing was something different to having a ‘design savior’ mentality. By this I mean going to a location, designing and delivering a solution, and moving on to the next location and next problem. In our approach we were engaged with the communities that we were working with. This is why a lot of the work we have been doing in cooperative housing has been because we were part of these communities, both as citizens, as professionals, then as citizens, then as professionals, and so the cycle goes. We started our work in housing by being in these spaces as an activist worker and a person in need of housing.

When you work on something within a project like this, you go to the assemblies and the spaces where community are organising around an issue, and you do this as something that is part of your work. In a conventional business development or commercial activity, you would go there deliver and leave, without a personal connection. Then we realised that we were also there as a citizen, also having those needs, and therefore we also were involved in the issue. You/we

weren't just there to find work opportunities but were also there as a citizen seeking a way to address our collective housing needs.

This mix between being personally driven and professionally driven, and realising that you have personal and collective needs related to a project, evidence how the line between personal and professional contexts can be blurred when working on problems of care. In this case it is in relation to concepts of housing, but this happened in parallel or in conjunction with the other people in the cooperative, who are also working in areas that they care about, for instance, Markel with food, Mercè with energy, and then other people in the cooperative. They have focused on these different topics, in the different sectors, and developing this problem caring approach rather than working in more conventional business approaches where designers present as sector experts able to deliver solutions. Our approach is to communicate that we care about the issue, and that we care about bringing a particular agenda, a particular vision, within this context of social transformation, which we frame under just sustainability transitions.

It is in this way that *we stay in the trouble,* and this is because we care. We do problem caring in the sense that we *steward the problem* towards an outcome. We do this by following things and being in those spaces so that when an opportunity for a project comes either through a partner or because we are working on another project and we see some funding. It is both a committed and an opportunistic approach, where we seek to channel any opportunities (future projects and funding) towards the agenda that we have for an issue, as in this case the housing transition, but it could also be energy transition, the food transition, and so on.

Over the past eight years we have been evolving our focus on care, from for example housing to the greater systems of care that are within the particular problem of care.

Laurene:

This is very interesting. For some time I have been exploring the proposition that design is, or should be a practice of care. Whether it is care for materials, care for people, care for systems, care through impact and at a longitudinal scale realising regeneration. Designing across these

scales and contexts of care is about understanding the full range of living and nonliving systems that any design act is part of.

I think a lot of perhaps not so good design is practiced without care. It is driven by other agendas and convictions. I'm interested in exploring the relationship between design expertise and design as care. So far you have talked about problem care as caring *about* something and caring *for* something, and that this is what drives the projects that you do and your methodologies of working through design projects.

If we can position care as a disposition, a way of thinking and being in the world and in relation to others – what is care for you?

Adrià:

If you talk about care you need to talk about feminism in general in society and in design, and that has influenced us, individually and as a collective in our thinking about the way we practice design. For me, the driver has been through social change and the design's role in shaping transitions. Also the role of space, or being rooted, especially in the context of Sants, in Barcelona and overall Catalonia, where we began with these ideas that center on the values of care. This neighbourhood and our country is a bit particular because post-capitalist practices are abounding and explicit in the general social discourse. So yes, our location is important, because we are in the south of Europe. Our context is a bit more precarious in comparison probably to the core of Europe, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. If I think about how care is also expressed in the way we work, what comes to mind is a 2019 article we wrote called 'The Worlds We Make' which was a reflection on the first five years of the cooperative. In this article we summarised what were the questions or conversations that holds us together in these first five years covering different domains or areas of our design agency, or agencies. In a nutshell, these conversations focused on why we think, is key to make explicit our worldviews as change agents, which we loosely defined as being planetary societies. Another discussion was on the worlds we want to contribute making in accordance with our worldview, we called vision and in our case what we mean by ecosocial transitions. We also found ourselves often in conversations on what all this meant for our every day design practice in itself. We were seeing how it was

changing the way we defined our practice based on the process it followed or the results it created to the impact it aimed, thus we framed what we do as transition design. We also found ourselves having conversations as well around us as an organisation and its legal and informal shapes and its impact on the politics of our agency. Finally, another open question we held was about the emerging discussions on the role of our own life projects as individuals and social narratives and lifestyles we held and how that related to all of the above.

It is important to note that if you want to do these kind of values based reflections and framings and bring it into practice in your work and still function as a private organisation you will have to keep this sort of design ethics of care as commitment and opportunity, and keep refining and constantly learning how all these areas co-evolve. It's a meta conversation, which as a cooperative, because we all participate in the general governance of the organisation, that is ongoing, that you can see as a practice of care for our design work.

Laurene:
That's very interesting. I think in many ways you've been addressing the concern that is the focus of this publication, and particularly in this chapter. To design in a manner that will facilitate a transition to *Homefullness* is to practice design with integrity to the issue, the place and the beings that will be part of it. And what you've just been telling me is that it's complex to practice.

Adrià:
This too is an integrated phenomenon for our collective I would say, as the role of the individual to the cooperative working to the community, which may include individuals in the cooperative and the community. It is a kind of systemic relationship, but not necessarily in a conventional systems design kind of idea, though.

Laurene:
Would you work on a project that you didn't care about?

Adrià:

Mmmm, honestly I've been fighting that all my life as an early millennial being educated in the sustainability hegemony. Now, after many years working on projects I care about, I might be starting to be more relativistic of it, but most of the personal stories of *holoners* is the experience of meaningless design jobs and a personal commitment to move away from it. Maybe it's a bit off topic, but the former President of Uruguay, José Mujica (*Interview - URUGUAY - #HUMAN*, 2015.) has an expression – that says something like *you're not paying life with money you're paying life with the time that took you to earn that money*. So, no, so far, I engage in projects I personally care about.

And the truth is that this logic of questioning what you do is central to establishing meaning, and in our experience of what we've seen over the past 10 years is that most of the designers that want to engage with us are because they lacked meaning in what they were doing and how they lived. With more or less success we have been working toward finding meaning in the projects that we do and caring for the project's impacts in the overall world we envision. So I would say this is a pattern in the work that we've been doing, to put it in your frames.

Conclusion

In vernacular conversations we often slip between the use of the terms house or home. They can at times mean the same thing or fundamentally different things. A house may be defined as some form of shelter that could be as rudimentary or complex, possibly even smart, as you can imagine. A home may be such a dwelling, but it might also be a place, a location. Typically, in addition to its physicality there is an affective connection – be it good or bad – by choice or by birth. Institutions of formalised care are also homes.

To not have a home, or a place to call home can be deemed to be careless or a marker of failure or some other 'outsider' social failing. But the reality that many people, across cultures, classes and any other form of classification, are without homes, without houses or even basic shelter not by choice but through life circumstances no matter where we live, means that this is an issue that effects all of us in different ways and different degrees.

In the conversation, Adrià presents how ensuring the provision of fair and equitable housing is a problem of care that he and his colleagues are committed to. And realising this commitment is to situate their practice concerns as being both personal, social, creative and economic. The lines between how they live, how they live with others and how they make 'a living' are blurred. This is a whole person approach to practicing design and working as a cooperative.

Conventionally, design is defined as being a problem solving or solutions orientated field of practice. Where the designer or engineer combines logic, with creativity and material expertise to 'solve' an issue for clients. In this the designer is a deliverer of expertise that is transferable to multiple contexts. At the same time, there is also a growing awareness that design is an ontological practice domain and authors such as Wolfgang Jonas (1993) have challenged the focus on problem solving, questioning how do we define a problem to begin with. What type of problem, how big or for who? The increasing focus on 'wicked problems' has been a means for many designers to talk to the ambiguous and systems nature of problems. Adrià's conceptualisation of problems of care, does not attempt to deny the complexity of problems and their origins, rather it positions the relationship between the designer and the problem that is being addressed. It is about the explicit connection between designer, problem and practice.

The enactment of care, or to practice care, is to participate in an intersubjective exchange between entities. In design as a practice of care – typically this exchange is between a human and something other (human, material, system (Vaughan, 2019). The practice that enables the exchange is relational, is values based and has some form of reciprocity. To practice problem care is to participate in an intersubjective exchange with the problem and all its context. It does not deny design's ambition to address and find solutions but it doesn't assume that this will be based purely on the expertise of the designer. The relational nature of the practice embraces the multiple expertise and inputs from all those engaged in the relationship.

The term *Homefullness* has a certain ring of hopefulness and warmth and connectivity. To design a home, with and for others, is much more than designing housing. The example of the La Border cooperative and their design and realisation not just of a building with numerous

dwellings, or of social and private spaces, but also of ownership and governance models is an example of the codesign of a complex entity that if it is to be successful, has to be one of distributed ownership and contribution. Adrià talks about being embedded in the entire process for the long game, ultimately being a citizen and occupant as well as an expert contributing to its realisation. Problem of Care is the approach that he and colleagues have used to navigate their way through the myriads of challenges that were faced in realising this. It is the longevous and embodied commitment to seeking solutions with others, drawing on all sorts of expertise, that is essential to practicing in this manner. Although this conversation has focussed on La Borda (one of their housing projects) the methodology that is used in that work, and the value system that underpins it, are present in all the projects that Holon undertake across a range of contexts. Their workshop 'Control Wars' methodology is an example of how they practice their social commitment to the value of design in enabling fair and just futures, and how this commitment transitions to a spectrum of projects that are either their own, or they are helping to realise with others. Holon's methodology and projects are an explicit example of design as a practice of care. Positioning an area of focus in a practice as a Problem of Care is to articulate an intention to practice a values-based approach design. In this designer(s) embrace their role as being far more than an objective problem solver delivering a service. Instead we must embrace our personal connection and commitments to realising a project as a person, and not just an expert. This approach will challenge our egos, our certainties and call on our humanity along with our expertise. It is essential if we are to address issues as complex as the provision of just and sustainable housing for individuals and communities. Designing interventions to help realise *Homefullness* for all, or at least many, is an explicit opportunity to adapt Holon's Problem of Care positionality, as a practice.

Of course, it could be argued that this approach to community co-developed housing solutions is not unique or new, but the positioning of this work through a framework of care, is. Housing cooperatives either as communities of separate dwellings or more recent apartment building complexes and even combined public and private housing initiatives have and are occurring globally. In some places they have never changed. Yet despite this, conventional housing developments or the redevelopment of housing as accommodation and asset building is also a global phenomenon and problem. As designers and citizens, acting in the world from a position

of care – care for self and others (in all life forms) with a long term commitment to the value and recognition of the impact of our actions and relationships is essential for fair, just and sustainable transitions.

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