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How Innovators Wield Power

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“After three weeks of co-design, we felt like we truly made something special.”

As a part of an International Development Design Summit, dozens of designers from over twenty countries flocked to a small village named D’Kar, Botswana, to co-develop appropriate technological products intent on addressing the complicated problems of the local villagers. Our project was to develop a deep sand wheelchair; an endeavor that required three mobility professionals and engagement across the entire D’kar community to be successful.

However, the project didn’t continue exactly as planned. During the final week, the team realized that to ensure the continued development of the wheelchair, it would need technical and economic expertise outside of the community of D’Kar to evolve. To sustain the technology and make sure it could reach as many community members as possible, the intellectual property had to leave the community which birthed the problem.

Although we built some ramps and made some repairs to our client’s wheelchair, we couldn’t help feeling like failures. After four weeks of in-depth work, how much could we really accomplish?

“After six months of fiery community engagement, we reached a breakthrough.”

Navigating the complex issues of the unhoused community in Oakland was, at the time, one of the most difficult tasks our design team had ever accomplished. Decades of complex history and the rightfully combative citizenry who experienced the ups and downs made new design volunteers who just wanted to help step into the middle of a political firestorm.

However, we transitioned that firestorm into opportunity. By holding space for a co-design facilitation workshop that brought together community neighbors, real estate developers, activists, policy members, and created — in the smallest way — a space for healing, recognition, and productive ideation. For the first time, it seemed, these community members came together, generated ideas, and built relationships without cussing each other out!

What happened next? Unfortunately, nothing much. The policymakers who amended the project became interested in other topics to support these community endeavors, and the activists who came to the table had more pressing concerns for the unhoused to keep the project going. The ideas fizzled, and the relationships

weren't solidified enough to make progress on these projects. At first, it seemed like we made progress but then fell into the same cycle.

“Setting up the Pop-up Makerspace was an exercise in building a plane as you catapult into the stratosphere.”

As soon as the core design team drove three hours from Central Arkansas, we spent every waking hour we could to build the space into a useful maker resource. Our team bought old couches at the Salvation Army for \$20 across the street so people could have a place to relax. We visited community centers, museums, even local community markets to learn more about how we could support the local community needs. We built — and rebuilt — classes on entrepreneurship, 3D Printing, ceramic making, laser cutting, drone flying, and much more.

Fortunately, we made an impact we never expected: hundreds of people across the region, from countless identities and with many aspirations, found solace in our pop-up maker shop. One single question told us all we needed to know about how valuable the project was: **‘What’s next?’**

Turns out, we didn't have a say. The organization we worked with didn't sign off on any subsequent project; the entire experience was one of many experiments in community engagement and STEAM-centered support. Over time, the relationships, outcomes, and passion fizzled out.



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What keeps designers from making the change they desire?

These, and so many other stories, haunt me today.

It's taken a while for me to recognize how many design-centered projects tend to fizzle out over time contain the same theme. Many of our projects — even the ones with that with demonstrable community support — have this problem. Why is it that a field which claims to specialize in imagining and implementing new futures *have such a limited understanding* of how social projects sustain themselves?

Every few months, there's a debate in the design+innovation industry that pops up; particularly, about whether, and how, design expertise should have a 'seat at the table'. A couple of years ago, there were countless blog posts, Twitter debates, and conferences that made sure people knew where the deep thinkers on the topic would stand; in many ways, people defined their brands based on how they placed themselves on the topic.

For some reason, the discussion didn't sit right with me. It felt like there was something missing about how designers determined the debate. A couple of years later, I return to the question with a bit of clarity. Designers believe they have valuable insights, methods, and resources to help imagine a better future in their respective industries. That's great. But, there's one variable that many designers forget.

Power.

I mean, if designers are such experts in shaping what the future can look like, then why do so few design tools, resources, and topics have a handle on how to build power towards creating the worlds they imagine? That's why if we want to understand how to make better worlds into a reality, it's clear they have to do one thing: **innovators need to understand how they wield power.**



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“Do you think designers who understand how they use their power will ever explain it to others?” —

Pierce Gordon

“Not at all. Because it’s outside of their self-interest to reveal the game they know well.” — George Aye

Power dynamics affect everything in human society. Technologies, relationships, currency, nationality, privileges people are afforded, even the foods we eat and drink daily.

I was first trained as a physicist and an engineer. So, when people use the word power, my carnal brain reverts back to that training: **a force, exerted over a distance, for a certain amount of time**. It’s measured in watts, like the measure of your light bulb: higher wattage, stronger light.

If we were to translate it into human systems, the metaphor tracks; you can think about power like **influence over other things**: be it land, human, or space.

There are countless methods, tools, communities that discuss, critique, and develop ways to shape power. However, not enough changemakers have productive discussions about how power is used to shape the future. Personally, when I come across a designer who sagely speaks about power, it’s likely because of another related profession they’ve learned from and integrated into their design practice.

Because it’s in Joe Innovator’s self-interest to hide the rules of the game, it’s in our interest to reveal them. To keep innovators accountable, we have to get specific and discuss how the contemporary design culture wields power, and innovators have to recognize specifically *how they wield power in their everyday lives*.

Let’s get started.

Technological Power



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Most people, no matter the field you're a part of, believe one thing about a designer: they know how to make innovative stuff.

In our new world, society recognizes all of the many types of design: we can make graphics, apps, conferences, retreats, policies, books, research methodologies, even entire communities; the value of the work (for better or for worse) is that they considered newer, practical, shiny, and therefore more valuable.

Why does this matter? It's wrapped up in the history of technology as a concept. Ever since the industrial revolution took off, generations of competitions on every scale: entrepreneurs at the person, innovation at the level of nations — competes on its ability to construct new market outcomes with new stuff. Technology remains at the core of our international rat race, and designers are one of the few industries considered to be the magicians suited to alchemize successful progress.

However, it's essential to recognize what this process, normally doesn't do: shift power by itself. Atomic energy, the automobile, social media: there are countless stories about technology being built for an intended common good warped to harm society by the privileged, the self-important — or sometimes worse, the indifferent and apathetic.

Like many industries before it, design and innovation methods work just like the technologies they create: they're used to support this larger system of neoliberal progress, without unpacking who actually benefits from the rat race. Like ICTD scholar Kentaro Toyama unpacks, technology rarely ever is morally good or bad; instead, technology's more likely to amplify existing power dynamics, built to support powerful people who wield it towards their own bidding.

Imaginative Power



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Designers professionally dream in the real world.

Humans, as a whole, are extremely bad at predicting the future. As pattern-searchers, we develop theories, ideas, and hypotheses about the past world the direct our future visions, and the world is much more complex than we think. The methods, mindsets, practices, and activities of designers offer aspiring practitioners the toolkit to strategize about creating the future they think should exist.

What's important about this point is remembering how thinking about the future is a privilege. However, communities at the margins thought future-makers themselves in many rights, experience institutional and systemic oppression that keeps them from imagining their legacy — or putting it into action. Post-traumatic stress disorder, as is stated in The Body Keeps the Score, keeps people trapped in their somatic and physiological fight-or-flight states they experienced for years — even decades — after their experience. Black American kids who don't have sufficient food, dependable places to live, and communities to play and connect with the world keeps them from gaining the foundations necessary to fully dream, evolve their developing brains, and think about what's next past their next meal.

You see, this privilege matters: **When designers do this type of work, they don't just affect people by their creations: they pull them into their own possibilities.** Monika Bielskyte, an advocate for new and emergent ways to think about the future, offers the example of *Minority Report* as the fantasy narrative as a product roadmap. When John, the main protagonist, walks through the mall and interacts with the advertisements, the videos call him by name to sell their product. Today, every social media platform does the exact same thing with curated advertisement content built on highly specific consumer data profiles.

Was the movie the cause? It's hard to tell without sitting in the mind of each designer who built the technologies. However, building the future is an activity largely built of reimagining lessons from the past. It's not just about which stories offer the lessons, it's about who's allowed to set the stage for what the vision looks like. Unfortunately, with every new innovation built in the world, the trend we see is how these designs rarely include how they damage the most marginalized in society.

Space-Making Power



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When I facilitated design workshops, I loved putting chairs, powerpoints, and post-it-notes in the right places. When people filed into the spaces and experienced the generation and collaboration process for the first time, it was heaven making sure that people moved across space and time like a well-oiled machine. It was made doubly useful by the fact that, once the process was over, the people involved would leave with value: new ideas, new relationships, and a new mindset.

However, not every designer is so altruistic. When making something new, designers set their mind towards a new vision of a future (sometimes solid, something amorphous) and set on their work to make the new task. Essential to the process, then— whether they recognize it or not — is whether or not they have the tools, resources, time, and location to accomplish the task. This is the important point: for the normalized human-centered design process, designers recognize the need for **separate spaces to make something innovative**: a space for research, and a space for a generation.

Like hibernating bears, many people take their design work seriously by isolating the process of making from the outside world. Co-designers do something similar; though they might not be the ‘expert’ making the product or service, they bring community members — presumably, with trust, resource, and decision-making power — to a place of mutual creation as well. however, what matters is that the designers prioritize the space they make towards the process of artifact generation.

Making space is a task that few people in the design community think about very seriously, but it’s a very important task. Does a computer programmer expect the same type of space as a woodworker? How about a community organizer, or an in-house DIYer, or a politician? This begs the question: to be a professional designer, how do they control physical space in their work? And, how does that power affect the people, process, and outcomes involved in the design process?

Networking Power



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Designers wield their power through their relationships: by picking and choosing who should be a part of the discussion.

Every successful designer has built a community of support: clients, colleagues, competition, mentors, mentees, and knowledge specialists. Their successful career builds a foundation for other trustworthy relationships: they connect to other clients who want advice, other mentees aiming to enter that space, and colleagues who aim to build an academic, industrial, and/or public community focused on building the world.

Why does this matter? Similar to the knowledge broker role, they connect, channel, and guide innovative possibilities based on their chosen network. In industry, countless design practices (graphic artists, urban planners, organizational experts, experiences) serve as consultants; not only for research, prototyping, and evaluation but in who to trust. How clients envision those changes are based directly on who they learn from and who pays them for their service.

I've experienced this myself. During my dissertation research in Botswana, my bonafides were built largely from who I knew: at first, I used my university, but after I built trust between people in the country, I used their trust to build the bridge to my next connection. In the Equity Design community, my relationship with the Equity Design Collaborative both serves as a guiding light and a way other colleagues can respect and trust my words. By building this local network, designers wield trustworthy relationships to influence the world as they see fit.

Storytelling Power

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Design's power, from research to prototype, is shaped by the stories it tells.

When designers enter a community and learn about which problems they work to address, they gravitate to research in the form of people's stories. When designers learn to shape the problem, and thus the solution spaces, they amalgamating all of the data into a story of their own making. Every time they ideate and prototype a solution to the problem, they create a future story that represents a world changed by their creation. Finally, when they're lucky and hard-working enough to develop an artifact that has an impact they're willing to brag about, they collect all the parts they can remember about the story and present it as their industry legacy — their portfolio.

In many ways, the field of design isn't all that different from other fields that use narrative. Humans are hard-wired to use stories to analyze and catalyze data of all types, so people who can tell a story with vim and vigor have exercised power for time immemorial.

Designers must care about the story, however, because they are endemic to the process of creation. This means it matters how those stories are constructed, who tells them, to whom the story is told, and what is left out of the narrative.

Knowledge Broker Power



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Designers also tend to wield power by acting as the gatekeepers of ‘appropriate’ knowledge.

Each designer is explicitly or implicitly deciding what information is useful to create the new world, and injecting it onto their canvas; whether they're a computer programmer building an Agile foundational Bitcoin app, a community educator informing and building a facilitation session, or a graphic artist drafting a flyer for a virtual concert. In each context, the designer acts as the channel; the curator intended for influence; whether the information is aesthetic, historical, technologic, political, institutional, psychological, and many times vestigial.

More often than not, a designer's success is directly related to this curation capacity. People who work to usher in a new anything — product, design, community space, policy intervention, website — hone the ability to decide which knowledge matters to making the new thing, and which does not. This means it's essential to recognize what information is used — and towards what end — when designing anything.

We have power over a lot of things, friends.

We have the possibility to build and to destroy; to persuade and pressure; to guide and to manipulate with what we build. So how do we frame and understand power in our practical work?

This is a big question. There are countless resources, researchers, and case studies to learn how power moves society in different ways. But we have to start somewhere.

So, let's start with one I love: [the Powercube](#).

The Powercube



Source: powercube.net

After much caution, framing, and discussion, the members of the Power, Participation and Social Change (PPSC) team at the Institute of Development Studies and other colleagues developed a frame to help think about how power works in many various contexts. They call it the PowerCube, of which they outline three dimensions of power visible in almost every context.

Power has different forms: visible, hidden, and invisible. These represent how power is exercised in society. Visible power, for instance, is direct, obvious and blatant, like when your boss at your company tells you to complete a task necessary to keep your job. Hidden power represents indirect, yet still known, ways that power is affected in a context. like if you hated your company you worked for, and you decided to put confidential information on a website to the highest bidder. Invisible power is like influence that doesn't need to be recognized to be followed, like a bathroom no one goes near at your company only available about for executive board members.

Power is wielded in different spaces: closed, invited, and claimed. The statement 'seat at the table' isn't well known for nothing, we implicitly recognize how certain spaces and influence are inseparable. Closed spaces, for instance, represent those meetings where decisions are made where no one else is allowed: a CEO board room or the Oval Office, for instance. An invited space, however, is one where people who aren't traditionally influential are offered space to be a part of influential decisions; such as, a democratic election. what's a claimed space? One that was taken without consent, like when activists hide out in a legislative chamber for weeks on end.

Power is wielded at different levels. This is a conversation about scope; that certain power decisions affect, and are affected by, people at different levels. Some power situations happen at the kitchen table; others happen on the national stage. Many times, there is some interaction between these levels in ways we don't expect; for instance, how 'kitchen table issues' is a consistent talking point for US debates on the municipal, state, or national stage.

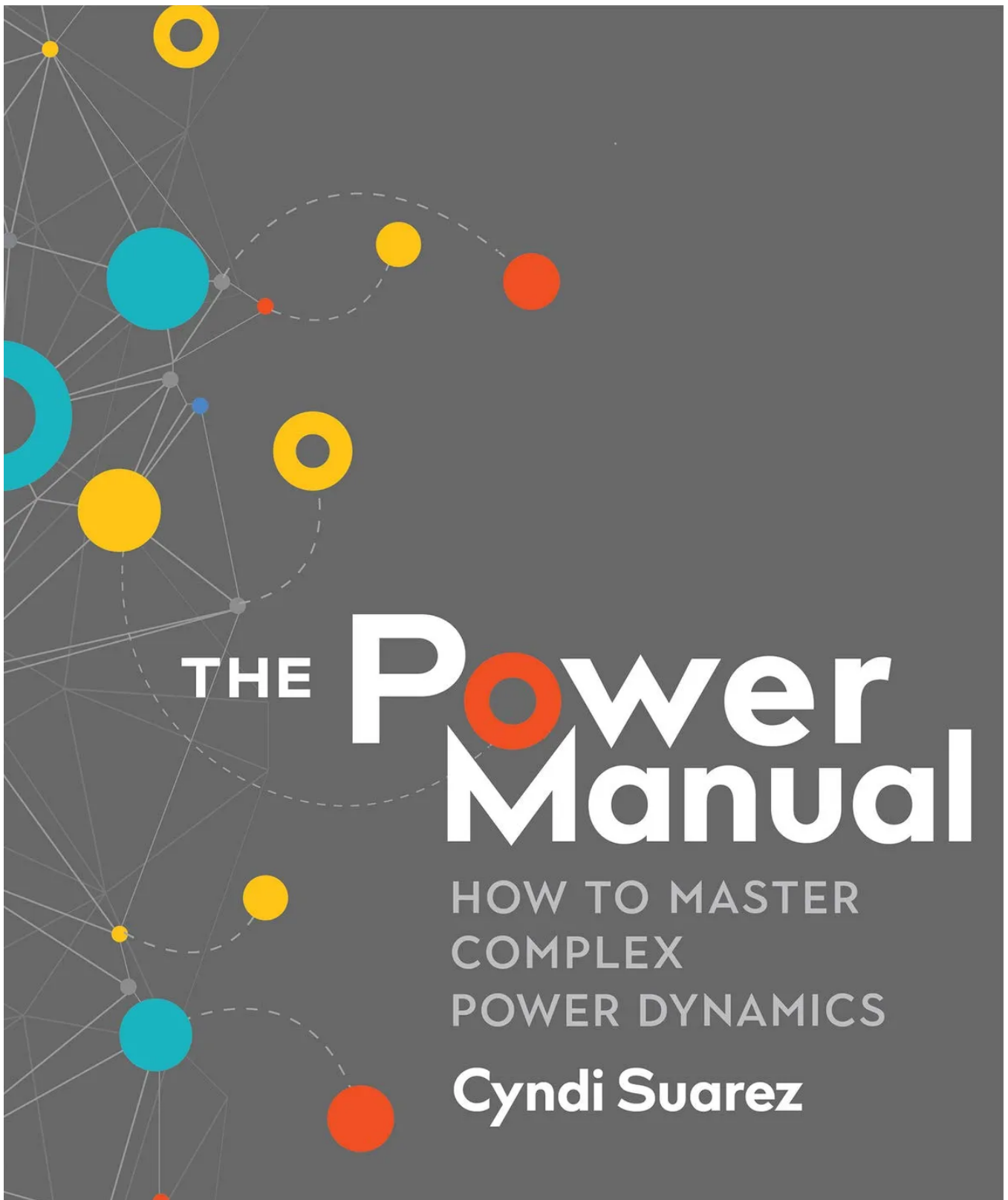
However, the mechanisms of power evolve. How, you might ask?

These mechanisms intersect. In the real world, power shifts from claimed to closed; issues affect global and local contexts and more. Manners of influence rarely stay in the space you find them in.

They might change over time. Power begets power, as the saying goes. As the world changes people might find different ways to influence, exploit, and subvert what can be done in society.

The Power Manual

Here's another: **The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics,**



Cyndi Suarez takes the reader through an in-depth analysis of the topics from interpersonal, intrapersonal, systemic, and global frames of understanding. Of the countless practical frames, questions, and methods the book offers, the tool also offers different patterns people use to wield their power.

Rarely have I imbibed a book that outlines such in-depth concepts with speed and certainty. While you slowly work through each concept (and believe me; you should

take your time), she offers framings for power across the largest and the smallest scopes:

- what it means to wield power in a liberatory or a supremacist manner,
- how dominators, and resistance actors, can wield power,
- where power relationships come from,
- the unpacking of choice as a manifestation of power,
- how people create their own identities and relationships based on power, and
- unique games, steeped in theater, that offer ways to understand and manipulate power in real-life scenarios.

Trust me, there's so much more you can learn. An important point to recognize here is understanding how power relates to everything to human existence; how you were raised, what you believe you can accomplish, how you think the world works, and what goals you'd want to accomplish.

Therefore, it tracks that designers should learn how to model, understand, and shape power dynamics in the systems they're imagining — if they're serious about building new possibilities.



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Actualizing the imagination is a political act.

Power struggles predate human existence. It existed before the industry of design has its golden age, and will survive long after it's past. If designers want to have a role in actually shaping the future, they have to become at least literate in the topic.

Not everything can fit a single blog post. It can't be, because how power shapes the future continues to be shaped by our current society. That's why we'll be writing next on **How Innovators are Manipulated by Power**, and we'd love your input.

How have you seen your own changemaking work manipulated?

What couldn't you accomplish with your social impact work? Why?

How did others use, affect, or wield your creations?

To build how and why power can be wielded to support equitable futures requires honest conversations about how power can be used to organize toward those ends. If you have resources, tools, comments, or questions, this is the place to talk about it. If we share these tools, then innovators might start to understand the role of power in their work. Then, they might get more seats at the table, or building more tables for themselves. Then, what will you do with the power you've gained?

“You're hired bc of your voice, you should be prepared to use it, and you have to be ready for what happens when you do.” — Autumn Brown

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