Applying Equity Design to Address Oakland’s Homelessness Human Rights Crisis

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In this case study, we present a project of Reflex Design Collective, an experimental social equity design consultancy based in Oakland, California. Since founding Reflex Design Collective four years ago, we have reimagined the role of “designers” to transform relationships structured by oppression. To illustrate this reimagination, we present a case study of our work as ecosystem-shifters. In 2017, we facilitated a co-design innovation summit where unhoused Oakland residents led collaborative efforts to alleviate the burdens of homelessness, with city staff and housed residents serving as allies instead of experts. Our approach to design facilitation differs from a typical design thinking process by pairing our clients with those on the front-lines of social inequity in a collaborative design process. Specifically, we elevate the importance of democratized design teams, contextualized design challenges, and ongoing reflection in a design process. We highlight successes of our design facilitation approach in the Oakland homelessness summit, including outcomes and areas for improvement. We then draw higher-level key learnings from our work that are translatable to designers and managers at large. We believe our approach to equity design will provide managers and designers an alternative mindset aimed to amplify the voices of marginalized groups and stakeholders.

Keywords: Social equity, homelessness, design, detoxify, liberation

Introduction

Reflex Design Collective is an equity design consultancy in Oakland, California. We help clients partner with beneficiaries in mutually empowering ways. Instead of a typical design thinking process led by a small team of “expert designers” who design for passive “users,” we facilitate a co-creative design thinking process pairing clients with those on the front-lines of marginalization to build solutions that address social inequities. By positioning technical experts and experts with lived experience as peers, solutions emerge from transformed relationships between institutions and the communities they serve.

In this paper, we present a case study of our equity design approach. We discuss how we worked as design facilitators to detoxify the fraught relationship between unhoused residents in Oakland and the city government that represents these residents.

Theory of Change

Design is a flexible, transdisciplinary approach to create unique solutions in complex environments (DiRusso, 2016). Applications of design are not limited to financial market-driven topics; institutions have leveraged design towards various social issues, including international development (IDEO.org, n.d.), youth empowerment (YLabs, n.d.), global health (D-Rev, n.d.), and more.
In this latter class of applications, however, there are often fundamental flaws in the approach of designers working for “social good.” Within “social innovation,” it is generally the power of design tools themselves — practices of empathy, creativity, prototyping -- that is celebrated as the change-making force (Brown and Wyatt, 2010). However, Timothy Mitchell (2002) and Tania Murray Li (2007) note that complex social ills, like poverty, have as much to do with social power dynamics as they do with technical problems that can be solved with technical expertise alone. The practice of presenting technical tools as the sole remedy for systemic ills -- which are fundamentally generated by differences in structural power -- limits the effectiveness of social design, at best. At worst, this mismatch of problem and approach contributes to the invisibilization of privilege and oppression, which serves to protect the inequitable status quo (Janzer and Weinstein, 2014; Booth, 2015).

In response to these critiques, there are movements of designers shifting their practices to align with holistic, power-aware frameworks for social change. The Design Justice Network, for example, has developed principles that interrogate the definition, role, and positionality of the “designer” in ways that challenge Western colonialist hegemonic knowledge and expertise, which delegitimizes the experience of those on the front-lines of oppression (Design Justice Network, n.d.; Costanza-Chock, 2018). These principles demand an intentional subversion of oppressive power dynamics, including centering the agency of structurally-disempowered communities, to facilitate a shift towards liberation (Design Justice Network, n.d).

Reflex Design Collective was founded in alignment with these perspectives. Our theory of change holds that designers have greater potential to affect the roots of complex social issues working from the role of the facilitator, rather than as the lead creative expert. Design facilitators bring stakeholders together to engage in collaborative design processes. As facilitators, we leverage design to transform power dynamics between marginalized communities and influential institutional partners (Staton et al., 2016).

adrienne maree brown (2017) offers a natural analogy to illustrate the impact facilitators can have as transformative, connective tissue. brown observes that community-building lessons can be gleaned from mycelium, a fungus that consumes toxins, converts them to nutrients, and connects organisms to create supportive networks. Like mycelium, facilitative designers may enter contentious spaces and use generative tools of creative problem-solving to transform toxic relationships into collaborative connections. If trust is formed between influential stakeholders and grassroots communities, the former group may benefit from added “nutrients” such as increased perspective, and the latter may gain access to social capital, credibility in influential circles, and tangible resources to support their work. Through facilitated design efforts, all parties move closer to equity and liberation through radical collaboration.

In the spirit of Paulo Freire’s notion of praxis (2000), Reflex Design Collective’s equity design approach connects theory and practice to sustain the work of radical design facilitation. We draw on our professional experiences in design and civic engagement and our lived perspectives as women, people of color, and queer people to develop tools and skills to foster radical collaboration. To structure subversive design engagements, our core practices include: building upon pre-existing work of grassroots innovators, prioritizing decision-making power of those closest to the problem, and framing design challenges around oppressive systems that generate social problems. We distill our adaptations of traditional design thinking to three spaces: democratization, contextualization, and reflection throughout the equity design process. The following case study demonstrates this approach.

**Context and Opportunity Area**

In Fall 2017, we launched an initiative with an Oakland City Councilmember to address the homelessness emergency within District 3. The San Francisco Bay Area is in a housing affordability crisis (UC Berkeley’s Urban Displacement Project, 2019). Oakland has experienced dramatic increases in housing prices following the 2008 financial recession. Between 2012 and 2017, median rent increased 51.1% -- the second highest increase of any city nationwide (Weidner, 2018) -- to $2,950 per month. With a median household income of just $63,251 from 2013 to 2017, it is easy to see why many Oaklanders have experienced burdensome housing costs and outright displacement as a region-wide housing policy has not kept pace with the booming tech economy in the surrounding Bay Area.

Predictably, this housing crisis has played out similarly to historical trends of structural racism, disproportionately affecting communities of color. UC Berkeley’s Urban Displacement Project (2019) found that a “30% tract-level increase in median rent (inflation-adjusted) was associated with a 28% decrease in low-
income households of color” while “there was no significant relationship between rent increases and losses of low-income White households.”

Conservative estimates indicated a 39% rise in homelessness in Oakland from 2015 to 2017 (EveryoneHome et al., 2016; EveryoneHome, 2017). This phenomenon became increasingly visible on Oakland’s streets in the form of makeshift shelters on sidewalks and in parks. These settlements, called “encampments” by city officials and “curbside communities” by local activists, have been a source of political and social tension (Figure 1). Unhoused residents of these communities have protested subhuman living conditions and forced removals without suitable housing alternatives, while housed neighbors, local business owners, and the city itself have raised concerns to public health and safety attributed to the presence of these settlements (Roth, 2017; Villalon, 2019). In lieu of alternatives, activists have advocated for curbside communities to be sanctioned and provided with sanitation services. The contentious situation persists today, despite a flurry of activism (Brinkley, 2017; Drummond, 2017), legal challenges (BondGraham, 2018; Veklerov, 2018), government action (AB-932, 2017; Katayama, 2017), and a United Nations report condemning Oakland for inadequately addressing human rights violations presented by the living conditions in curbside communities (United Nations Secretary-General, 2018).

Figure 1. A 2017 “curbside community” or “encampment” in Oakland. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The District 3 Councilmember shared a vision with Reflex Design Collective to bring creative minds together for a “hackathon” design sprint to devise short-term solutions to suffering in curbside communities. “Hackathons” are typically gatherings of technologists who rapidly plan, build, and test solutions to a challenge over a matter of days. This conversation created an opportunity for us to share our alternative vision of equity design that centered the needs and agency of those most directly impacted by the problem: in this case, unhoused Oaklanders.

The Narrative

Instead of a “hackathon,” Reflex Design Collective engaged in a five-month process to build relationships, learn about sociopolitical context, and host an innovation summit to develop creative solutions to the homelessness emergency impacting District 3. We sought to foster equitable partnerships between front-line leaders and influential stakeholders to create solutions to human rights violations in curbside communities.

Democratization

We began our work by partnering with community organizers and unhoused leaders. Our first attempt at forming these relationships involved hosting two meetings at City Hall, but this proved inappropriate and ineffective. Fortunately, through connections to a local Homeless Advocacy Working Group and with the guidance of two seasoned activists, Genevieve Wilson and Talya Husbands-Hankin, we were able to better build relationships by meeting unhoused people on their terms. This included months of 1-1 meetings with
community leaders and guided visits to curbside communities to connect with unhoused folks, provide support during forced removals, and learn about opportunities for allyship.

Instead of approaching front-line experts to simply learn from them, we presented our opportunity to participate in an innovation summit and asked how, or if, our resources could support their movement. We took a stand for grassroots power by holding ourselves accountable to their invitation and consent: if they were to have no interest, we would have abandoned the project. By honoring their agency, committing to transparency, and following through, we established trust via reciprocity rather than extraction.

Our grassroots partners were co-designers of the outreach and innovation summit planning process. Their perspectives provided an understanding of historical and political dynamics that we leveraged to facilitate a multi-stakeholder design engagement tailored to the needs of unhoused residents. Their input informed who we brought into our co-design process, how they should be included, how we framed the challenge, and how we co-developed solutions.

**Contextualization**

Although we were tasked by the Councilmember with hosting a design summit, our outreach and our partners indicated the need for the event to fill a different role to add value to unhoused folks, given their pressing day-to-day survival needs. At their direction, we leveraged our summit as a resource drive, which resulted in donations of over 160 mylar sleeping bags.

The City of Oakland and community organizers held highly contentious relationships: at open city meetings, city staff and organizers would occasionally engage in public shouting matches. Misunderstandings were commonplace, and controversial decisions were made by city officials that significantly harmed unhoused residents. For example, earlier in 2017, a self-governing village of unhoused folks living in tiny homes and receiving community-sourced services was evicted via bulldozer from an unused plot of public land due to enforcement of city regulations.

To foster collaboration between groups, we needed to design a space that was responsive to past harms and distrust, building a foundation for new relationships. This was accomplished using multiple tactics, including kicking off the weekend-long innovation summit with dinner at a church in District 3. Participants shared stories, discussed the pain and challenges of being unhoused, and learned about how folks survive on the streets. This set the foundation for more trusting interactions the next day when organizers, city staff, unhoused and housed residents, developers and nonprofit workers came together for an interactive co-design process.

Trauma-informed facilitation allowed harms to be addressed, and our acknowledgement of systemic violence created an affirming environment for unhoused leaders to vulnerably share their wisdom. With help from a community organizer who provided 1:1 emotional support, we created space for trauma and healing. These strategies proved essential for bringing people together across divisions and would not have been possible without our community partnerships and contextual understanding.

**Reflection**

We began our equity design process during the innovation summit by guiding participants to understand their positionality and how to foster authentic connections rather than status quo power dynamics. During a guided personal reflection exercise using the Paseo Protocol (School Reform Initiative, 2017), participants identified elements of their identity that either benefit from or are harmed by systems of oppression. They then unpacked in pairs how their identities could create barriers for connection with others, and what they might do to counteract this.

We leveraged systems thinking (Meadows, 2008) to allow participants to reflect on the connections between power, policy, and the material realities of homelessness. Therefore, participants identified leverage points for subversive and reflective, rather than superficial, intervention.
Co-Design

During the innovation summit, after participants reflected on their identities and the systemic nature of the problem, we guided them through a co-design process to collaboratively develop ideas to address challenges of homelessness.

We led a power mapping activity to acknowledge and subvert oppressive relational dynamics. Participants worked in teams to map out who has relative institutional power and who does not. They considered who is harmed and who benefits from the homelessness crisis. By visualizing these power dynamics, participants were able to identify who is exploited and has lived experience in the homelessness crisis. Equipped with this understanding, participants could identify who they needed to be designing with outside of the summit, and they created a plan to continue co-designing after the summit.

As participants began exploring generative possibilities for solutions, they engaged in a resource-sharing activity that surfaced the resources present in the room, whether they be social connections, specialized expertise, or physical assets. Equipped with this knowledge, participants tailored their solutions to leverage the resources they now had access to.

Outcomes

The summit resulted in nine proposals for the Councilmember, ranging from tactical solutions (e.g., Figure 2) to community building programs.

Figure 2. A participant in the innovation summit shares an idea for a schedule for folks in curbside communities to safely take showers. Source: Reflex Design Collective.

Each proposal was a comprehensive vision complete with physical prototypes, logistical details, roles for multiple stakeholders, and next steps for expansion. For example, one group created a program for local businesses to provide passports to up to four unhoused neighbors to use their restroom facilities, along with a sticker campaign publicizing those contributions on participating store fronts and elsewhere.

Beyond the solutions, participants reflected positively on the collaborative dynamics achieved within the room; following the summit, one unhoused participant partnered with the Senior Policy Director in District 3 for a number of months to co-develop supportive programming for unhoused residents.

The Key Learnings

This case study has several key learnings for the broader design community:
• We must look inwards to examine how we can shift our organization to embody the change we seek to bring to our clients’ ecosystems;
• We must view institutions as embodiments of their values;
• We must work to address roots instead of symptoms of problems.

**Look Inwards to Understand Transformative Change**

How organizations operate is dependent on the values built into the organization, whether these operational tendencies are intended or unintended. In this case study, our ability to create equitable outcomes was dependent on our organization first functioning internally in an equitable manner.

While designing and presenting the summit, we leveraged our internal non-hierarchical structure to make logistical and organizational decisions, to collaborate on research and summit development, and to facilitate the summit. By implementing our organizational priorities of honest collaboration, leveraging capacities, and democratic decision-making, we developed psychologically-safe spaces for members of our team to contribute on concrete parts of the summit, instead of establishing rigid hierarchies that extinguish voices and recreate privileged experiences.

**To Build Equity on the Ground, Shift Institutions from the Inside**

We know that not all institutions share our values or vision. In pitching the “hackathon,” the Councilmember emphasized a tabula rasa approach to developing housing solutions. Instead, we dove deeper to find out what had been done before and what tensions existed. This deep dive emphasized prior work of the unhoused community instead of brushing it aside.

For better or worse, institutions like city governments embody societal values that reveal themselves as implicit and explicit culture, policies, and financial decisions. Therefore, we focus our energies on understanding how we can shift internal values so institutions can develop community partnerships more equitably. Like mycelium, we infiltrate toxic networks and transform their internal workings, in turn transforming their external engagements.

Shifting institutions from the inside is a difficult, yet essential task towards building long-term change. When we enter a project, we must examine how clients may be embodying inequitable values that will prevent them from continuing to form equitable partnerships after the project ends. We are learning how to transform the different layers of an institution to explicitly embody anti-oppressive values, understanding that these explorations will be essential in understanding how our organization can create sustainable change.

**Systemic versus Symptomatic Issues**

We choose to address the underlying roots of problems instead of focusing on visible symptoms of these problems. When we started the project, the Councilmember intended to “hack homelessness,” attempting to leverage the hackathon movement for innovative new ideas. As we conducted community outreach, two insights were revealed: (1) unhoused residents were offended and exhausted at interventionists bringing solutions without their voice, experience, or power; and (2) communities already had innovative solutions ready to implement in Oakland. Instead of hosting a design sprint, we developed a space that recognized stakeholders’ dynamic complexities, healed existing tensions, and productively collaborated towards holistic solutions.

**Conclusion**

In this case study, we presented Reflex Design Collective’s work with an Oakland City Councilmember, including the role we played as design facilitators, our successes and areas of improvement, and our key learnings.

We share our case study because we believe the design community can learn from how we have reimagined the role of designers. To design for social change and rectify oppressive systems, we must interrogate design practices to ensure we are not unintentionally deepening inequity. Instead of centering one’s own creativity, we call for designers to create collaborative connections with people on the front-lines of oppression so that power, creativity, and equitable outcomes can be built and shared by many. In our Oakland innovation
summit, we functioned as facilitators rather than lead designers, allowing us to create space for collaborative innovation between unhoused folks and city officials.

We call for designers to critically examine design briefs they are given, and direct their efforts towards creating relationships and processes that center the agency of historically-underinvested folks with lived experience in oppression. We call for the design industry to apply critical thought into how design can contribute to grassroots movements, and identify what radical shifts must take place in design practice to avoid perpetuating oppression.

By shifting our collective understanding of what design is, we can begin to transform oppressive relationships, mindsets, policies, and systems. Our equity design approach of including space in the design process for democratization, contextualization, and reflection is one way to begin transforming these systemic and marginalizing systems.

References


