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Theme - Introduction

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THEME INTRODUCTION

CREATING CITIZEN DESIGNERS

Text by Steve Jarvis

This issue of SIGNED focuses on Social Design, and introduces three organisations that are bringing people together to collectively create better lives.

In a process generations long, governments and corporations have increasingly shaped the boundaries of modern life. However, the prevailing sense of individual powerlessness to effect change to spheres beyond their direct control is now being challenged. We see a rise in organisations addressing local concerns and helping instigate positive actions at the local level. While in many ways it is the most natural of processes: people being involved in the decisions that affect their lives, this is something that requires some structure and direction. Using design principles to empower those directly affected by political, economic and technological change, Social Design is proving an effective approach to tackle deeper problems found in society.

studio-L, the first story, is a Japanese Community Design company working with communities facing changes such as the aftermath of a natural disaster, or issues like ageing or population decline. The second story, City Repair, based in Portland, in the U.S. state of Oregon, is a Placemaking organisation that is re-igniting human interaction by bringing neighbours together to plan and create local art projects and build shared spaces for the community. The final story, Waag, in Amsterdam, is a Social Technology ecosystem that enables Dutch citizens to become familiar with the technologies in their everyday lives, and stimulates them to actively participate in the use and creation of technology that will directly benefit the society as a whole.

Each story introduces an intermediary organisation facilitating community-building activities at different scales and scope of action. Their goals, however, are similar: to help people find and then create solutions to the problems they are facing, and have them take ownership of this process. There are also strong parallels between their approaches, prioritising communication and placing people at the centre of the design process in a structured and systematic way. As we will see in the following pages, a key to getting people involved is to make participation meaningful, fun, engaging, and setting a low bar to participation from as wide a spectrum of people as possible. It is a recipe for powerful design.