Un-designing apathy: designs for systems of caring

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We may have found a cure for most evils; but we have found no remedy for the worst of them all, the apathy of human beings.

♦ Helen Keller

This past weekend, I went with family and friends to see the film 12 Years a Slave. As the only African-American in a group of Australians, Europeans (Dutch Jewish), and Africans, everyone turned to me for my reaction after the film. Truthfully, I left the movie feeling emotionally and intellectually shell-shocked. It was one of the rare times when I had to completely emotionally shut down.

When I allowed myself to feel again, 24 hours later, I realised what had most disturbed me about the film was its unrelenting portrayal of slavery as a system of apathy to the suffering of others. Everyone in the film (e.g. blacks, whites, men and women, young and old) had moments of apathy to the suffering of others. As described by the director Steve McQueen, the hanging scene in the movie captured this in the most visceral way.

Video discussion of the Hanging Scene at the Los Angeles Times Envelope Screening Series in Association with EPIX.

Most disturbing for me is that this apathy is the one thing that has not changed since the days of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Yet, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, which was the dominant global economic system for 300 years, did end through the great efforts of many people.

That end was only possible because people were able to combat the apathy of others. For this week’s Un-Design article, I explore the design of systems of caring that combat apathy. How does design translate the value of caring into tangible social experiences?

Values: caring versus empathy

When describing the value of caring as related to design, one needs to be very clear. Human-centred design, especially in its design thinking form, talks a lot about empathy as the antidote to apathy. Tim Brown of IDEO states, "Empathy is the heart of design. Without the understanding of what others see, feel, and experience, design is a pointless task".

This is true, but empathy is not the same as caring. Scholars in the biomedical ethics field, such as Saul J. Weiner and Simon Austerb, are clear about the distinctions between the two:

Empathy, whether cognitive, affective, or both, does not necessarily involve caring. Just because I say, “I feel your pain,” does not mean I am strongly motivated to do anything about it. Nor does it mean I will react in a way that is responsive to your needs, rather than to my own discomfort … Caring, in contrast, is a sustained emotional investment in an individual’s well being, characterised by a desire to take actions that will benefit that person.

Design anthropology seeks to design from a position of caring, rather than just empathy. The scholarship of critical anthropology has taught the field the great fallacy of assuming one can accurately “see, feel, and experience” as others. Yet, it knows that one should not use the fallacy as an excuse to not take actions that will benefit others nor to not listen deeply and respect how others might approach the design of their world.
Contemporary Designs for Systems of Caring

One of my favourite examples of a design for a system of caring was created by Bill Strickland, an African American social entrepreneur who is the President and CEO of the Manchester Bidwell Corporation (MBC) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. I became familiar with his work at the 2005 national conference of AIGA, a US professional association for design. His work might be familiar to Australians through the ABC Radio National interview conducted with Mr Strickland in April 2012.

Related to the legacy of slavery in the USA, the context for Mr Strickland’s work is one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas of Pittsburgh, PA. When he developed the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild in 1968 as an after-school arts program, Pittsburgh had just experienced riots that plunged many predominately African-American communities deeper into crime and poverty.

When he took over the leadership of Bidwell Training Center in 1971, the declining steel industry had left tens of thousands unemployed. In general, business and government were apathetic to the needs of these communities. Mr Strickland sought to demonstrate through the Manchester Bidwell Center his care for the community but also to engage others in caring:

I’m talking about respect, about common sense and decency, about the dictate that our best hopes must always be acted upon, that all people everywhere possess an innate hunger for, and right to, what is sustaining, good, and beautiful.

Manchester Bidwell Corporation PSA.

According to the Manchester Bidwell website, the corporation has three guiding principles:

1. Environment shapes people’s lives.
2. People are assets.
3. Creativity fuels enterprise.

The MBC environment is designed to demonstrate caring through its beauty. In his ABC Radio interview, Mr. Strickland said, “Beautiful environments create beautiful people.” Inspired by the experience of seeing Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater house as a teenager, Mr Strickland ensured that the design of the MBC building contained water fountains inside, natural lighting, artwork on the walls, and flowers grown from its own 40,000 square foot greenhouse.

According to Mr Strickland, the result of creating an aesthetically pleasing environment in one of the most difficult areas of Pittsburgh is that the MBC has not had an “… incident of violence, or drugs, or theft, or racial incidents in 26 years of operations.”

The MBC programs treat people as assets. The Adult Career Training program offers seven majors from Culinary Arts to Pharmacy Technician. The Arts Education program trains high school aged students and at risk youth in ceramics, design arts, digital arts, photography, and jazz music education.

The MBC’s social enterprises in jazz, horticulture, gift shop, facility rental, and office building enable the creativity of its students and staff to contribute to the generation of income that supports the Corporation’s activities.

Testimonials from the MBC’s Stories of Success indicate the transformative nature of this system of caring:

Bidwell not only trained me in a prosperous career, but they also taught me how to eat healthier and provide better for my children. – Dionna Morris
The fact that the MBC has replicated its model in other US cities and plans to take the model global indicates that Mr. Strickland has designed a successful system of caring that overcomes human apathy.

An Australian model might be the Centre for Appropriate Technology in Alice Springs. What the MBC highlights is how one can create a system of caring by design.