



Mariana Amatullo

Co-Founder and Vice President of Designmatters

Mariana Amatullo co-founded Designmatters, Art Center College of Design's award-winning social innovation department, in 2001. She is responsible for the strategic leadership of a dynamic portfolio of global and national educational projects, research collaborations, and publications at the intersection of art and design education and social innovation. Amatullo lectures internationally and serves on a variety of advisory and executive boards of organizations engaged in the arts, design education, and social impact, including ideo.org and Cumulus: the International Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media. She is the recipient of the inaugural 2012 DELL Social Innovation Education award for outstanding leadership in teaching and supporting student social innovators; she has been recognized as one of *Fast Company's* Co.Design 50 Designers Shaping the Future, and was also recognized as one of Public Interest Design's Design 100. Amatullo is a doctoral fellow in design and innovation/non-profit management at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, where her research focuses on design and social innovation. She holds an MA in art history and museum studies from the University of Southern California and a Licence en Lettres degree from the Sorbonne University, Paris.

How do you define social innovation?

In my educational practice, as well as in my doctoral research, social innovation is tied to *design for social innovation*—the practical implementation of products, services, processes, and systems that simultaneously generate novelty and meet a social need (more effectively than an existing solution), leading to new or improved capabilities and relationships that enhance society's capacity to act. The field is emergent and characterized by experimentation and a pluralism of methods and approaches where the design process is spread among diverse participating stakeholders and competences.

Where has design made the most effective interventions (with the fewest unintended consequences) in complex challenges?

I believe we have neither valid qualitative or quantitative metrics to measure nor the data to point to one single sector (healthcare, education, public policy, environment, and so forth) where design interventions have been uniformly bulletproof—especially if we want to account for replicability or scalability. However, in considering a broad range of design interventions that create positive value in the context of problems that are defined by diffused boundaries, there are a number of recurrent factors that surface. One multidimensional concept that is consistently important to positive outcomes is *user participation*. There is much discussion about co-creation and participatory design in our field, and if you dig deeper in any effective design intervention that has a fundamental aspiration for social change, and that has proven itself over time, you are likely to discover that the design team behind it made user participation truly

matter in distinct and various ways. From a theoretical standpoint, four dimensions of user participation are well established. In practice, we can observe them in fairly clear-cut ways:

- 1) Emphasis on communication with users at key junctures before a proposition is completely coherent or final
- 2) Hands-on joint activities in the conceptual development, prototyping, and testing process of the intervention
- 3) The recognition of users' influential role throughout
- 4) Users' responsibility for the concrete outcomes that ensue from a design brief—that is, enough ownership of the intervention (product or system) to adopt or adapt it as necessary. When 1 and 2 occur, we see a dynamic of shared knowledge exchange shape up; and in situations where 3 and 4 are present, design assumptions are generally kept in check and a systemic enough long view can take hold to ensure success.

What does it take to succeed in these complex situations, given the number of constituents and organizations with a stake in the outcome?

In the social sphere, common sense dictates that pathways to change are not linear and are rarely developed by one singular design vision that goes untouched by multiple strands of expertise. The best-devised courses of action tend to be informed by a process that may have benefited from a pluralism of perspectives and veered from predetermined plans in ways that can be messy and hard to make sense of, especially when one is immersed in the complexity of real-time. This is a context in which the question “What does success look like?” may not only be the primary starting point of the design brief, but might also remain unanswered

for a long period of time. In these circumstances, success often demands integrity of character—with honesty, tenacity, and a good degree of ingenuity proving particularly helpful in terms of enabling the design team to negotiate a way through obstacles, as well as keep a purposeful determination to persevere in order to uncover opportunities. What I see in the current quantitative research I am conducting measuring the impact of design attitude in social innovation design-led projects is that three well-established dimensions in the empirical literature of designer’s cognitive capabilities—empathy, connecting multiple perspectives, and tolerance of ambiguity—are strongly correlated with positive outcomes.

Tell us your best story of social innovation. What was the turning point that really delivered broad value?

In our ongoing Designmatters’s Safe Agua initiative, Art Center faculty and students work collaboratively with communities in informal settlements, and with non-profit and government agencies, to design products and services that address the lack of safe water access in these settings. One of the most successful project outcomes to date is GiraDora, a manually powered washer and dryer, loosely based on a salad-spinner mechanism. The turning point in that product’s development was arriving at the combination of washer and dryer. The dual feature is at the core of the innovation the product proposes and was made possible by an agile and generative process of iteration and co-creation with the community during field-testing.

How effective are corporate initiatives to support their communities and causes?

If we embrace the vision for sustainable



GIRADORA

GiraDora (designed by Alex Cabunoc and Ji A You, and field-tested in Lima, Peru with Mariana Prieto) is a human-powered washer and spin dryer—a boon for people who don’t have access to running water.
Photos: Courtesy of Designmatters at Art Center College of Design.

business, and with it an understanding of business as a societal institution with purpose, tasks, and responsibilities beyond short-term economic performance, we can start appreciating how essential a role corporations have in integrating profitability with social value, and contributing to the framework conditions for a world worth living in. Today, 200 major corporations account for approximately 23 percent of the GDP, and 51 percent of the top world

economies are actually corporations. The conditions of interdependence are such that failing to leverage the stewardship corporate initiatives can bring to long-term sustainable development amounts to robbing society of an indispensable set of assets. The best corporate leaders recognize this in fundamental ways and take the time to ground corporate initiatives that support communities and causes not only in shared value principles, but also with aspirations

Mariana Amatullo (continued)



PROXIMITY DESIGNS

Proximity Designs creates income-boosting products and systems that address some of the most pressing needs of rural families in Myanmar. Their line of affordable irrigation products are meant to replace the back-breaking and time-consuming work of hauling water.

Photo: Courtesy of Proximity Designs

for progress that is economic, social, environmental, and cultural.

Are there examples of corporations taking the lead and really making a difference in your field?

Unilever is one of the largest consumer goods companies in the world, with an impressive commitment to social innovation. About a year ago, I was privileged to study up close the work of a small team in their global innovation unit that was responsible in propelling forward the Clean Team urban sanitation social business that operates in the Kumasi slum in Ghana. Clean Team drew upon

the strategic design expertise and human-centered design mandate of IDEO.org and the deep sanitation know-how of the award-winning organization Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) to create a solution that hits all the marks: smart aspirational product, savvy brand, the right price point, and a fully-thought-through service that is addressing a critical need in the community.

Is there one single aspect of design for social innovation projects that inspires you most?

The human experience that this work celebrates never ceases to provoke



profound wonder. Debbie Aug Din, one of the founders of the award-winning social enterprise Proximity Designs, in Myanmar, where one of our former Designmatters fellows now works, shared a story when we first met years ago that captures the spirit of transformation that can be involved in successful social innovations.

Proximity designs and delivers income-boosting products and systems that address some of the most pressing needs of rural families in Myanmar. Their line of affordable irrigation products are especially catalytic and often replace the back-breaking and time-consuming work of hauling water in heavy cans from the well to the field. Their sales staff typically travels to thousands of villages to introduce these products during the cropping season. They set up demonstrations for groups of farmers and let people test-drive them, and Debbie recently reminded me of one such experience.

“One day, in Upper Myanmar, the dry zone of the country, the staff had set up

an installation and demonstration of our treadle (foot) pump in a village to which many farmers from nearby came. Each of the farmers took turns getting on the pump and trying it out to see how much water came out from the pond, and how easy it was to treadle. So this one farmer was on the pump, treading away and not getting off to allow others a turn. When the others told him they wanted a turn to test the pump, he replied, ‘Don’t bother me, I’m dreaming.’

“It turns out he was a landless farm laborer. Upon discovering a pump that costs as little as \$25, he realized he would now be able to afford to farm and irrigate his own plot of land. He could never afford the \$250 diesel-engine pump that was in the market, but here was something within his financial reach! So he was busy dreaming how his new small plot would look next season, seeing where he would place the rows of long beans, radishes, and eggplants. It would be the first time in his life that he could farm his own plot of land (that he would

CLEAN TEAM

Some one billion city dwellers worldwide lack adequate sanitation facilities in their homes. Clean Team was started in Kumasi, Ghana, a city of 2.5 million people, less than 20 percent of whom have in-home sanitation. Customers receive a portable in-home toilet, which is serviced three times a week; families are allowed to pay for the service on an incremental basis. Since launch in October 2012, the Clean Team service has reached more than 3,500 individuals and has installed more than 500 in-home toilets.

Photos: Courtesy of ideo.org

lease for \$10 for the season) because now he had found an irrigation pump that was perfect for the plot and affordable.”

It is stories like these—and there are many—that at once inspire and reward those of us who work in this important sphere. ■