

Negotiating the Value(s) of Design(ing)

An Organisational Inquiry

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Organisations are increasingly calling upon design as a strategic asset to generate innovation as part of a wider fascination with ‘design thinking’ in business. Recent scholarship has tended to emphasise design’s many contributions to business and society, playing a part in the growing recognition and expansion of design as an idea. However, scant attention has so far been given to the valorisation of design as a study phenomenon in its own right. How is the idea of design made valuable and strategic in organisations? This ethnographic study explores such question by attending to the practices of in-house designers who undertake efforts to ‘sell’ design and become strategic actors at a Swedish multi-national manufacturing company, Volvo Group.

This research follows the tradition of other ANT-inspired studies that explore strategising and organisational change as the building and unbuilding of networks. Specifically, the study draws attention to the role of valuation in the politics of strategy practice by focusing on controversies where different conceptions of value were at play. This research conceptualises value(s) neither as a subjective preference nor as an intrinsic quality of things, but as the outcome of ongoing practices of valuation that shape reality.

The study reveals how, despite careful planning involving the enrolment of consultants, staged demonstrations, and the circulation of a report, designers failed to get their strategic authority institutionalised through a top-down decision. In fact, their calculated efforts to valorise design(ing) worked to undermine their original aspiration.

The study puts on display how designers deployed a valuation device that allowed them to quantitatively express and assess their contributions in controversial situations. Rather than accentuating their otherness, designers chose to adapt and imitate the dominant valuation regime of quantities and numbers, repressing the articulation of values related to notions of style and aesthetics, in an attempt to look rational and reliable.

The study shows how designers weaved webs of ‘soft contracts’ and engaged in efforts to co-design solutions with non-designers, which produced valorising effects, changing some people’s perceptions around the idea of design(ing). Designers’ efforts to demonstrate worth were more effective when they invested themselves in fluidly coping with localised concerns and obstacles in the flow of everyday practice, than when they sought to impose themselves through a top-down decision.

The study demonstrates that the valorisation of design(ing) does not primarily rest on the rhetorical abilities of designers but on the material arrangements and systems of measurement that they mobilise, as well as the practices of engagement and participation through which non-designers experience design(ing).

Key words: strategy, practice, design, valuation, power, value, agency

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