

Why social justice needs a design studio.

Why Design?

The designer's stance is experimental and proactive. It helps propel us beyond merely addressing existing problems with existing forms into imagining entirely new terrains of possibility. Equally important, design invites widely disparate ways of knowing into a single co-creative practice.

Why a Studio?

The design studio is a form that has evolved to support the imagination of new solutions to unmet needs. Charged with imagining new products, services, or—in our case—new forms of social intervention, design studios are spaces dedicated to supporting this kind of generative thinking. We believe the social justice sector deserves to have its own design studio to support its ability to design new solutions to complex social problems.

How does it work?

Activists, artists, academics and social justice organizations take on complex social problems...

What are complex social problems?

Problems that have been around for a long time
Problems that emerge in several places at the same time
Problems that have multiple moving parts
Problems that resist solutions

Some examples are: social violence, homelessness, global warming, unequal education, health disparities, high incarceration rates, war economy, global water consumption, privatization, etc.

They call us.

"Hey ds4si, what might we do with this? Any ideas?"

Then we...

Tear the problem apart.

Have we framed the problem right?
What is considered "normal" that we should make strange?
Are there site-specific resources and challenges that haven't been brought to bear?
Are these solutions a false-maxima?
Is there an elegant gesture we can use to find an oblique solution?

Consult unlikely advisors.

What would a mythical trickster do to achieve transportation justice? What can an acupuncturist tell us about social violence? How does a clown think about education reform? How would a literary theorist think about food deserts?

Run it through our “Five S” methodology.

Structure By structures we mean the social classifications, physical / spatial / temporal arrangements, shared rules, taboos and rituals that shape the circumstances out of which the problem emerges. In understanding these structures we can better address where the problem is coming from.

System Problems have nonlinear inputs, gestation times, and feedback loops that are not easy to detect. In order to understand the complexities of the problems we intend to address we have to understand how specific dynamics play out to give the problems life.

Scale In order to take on large problems, people frequently tend to focus on the smallest and most directly visible expressions and actors evidencing the problem. Once you see the structures and systems giving life to a problem, you have to come to terms with a much larger scale of the problem and get comfortable with imagining solutions that function at the scale of the deeper, less visible sources of the problem.

Symbol Because we are dealing with people, and because people are caught up on meanings and significance, interventions must find their place within the already situated meanings in which the problem is enmeshed.

Sensation Not paying attention to sensation can mean we design interventions that don't match the intensity of the situation we are intervening in. The feel of the intervention matters. The feel can ruin the attempt or catapult it to great success.

For more information on our “**Five S**” Methodology, click [here](#).

And we deliver:

New test solutions.

Often times when folks come to us with complex problems, they still expect familiar solutions. The Design Studio exists to test and prototype unusual solutions, ones that, by virtue of their very existence, help the system see new options for solving complex problems. We don't assume our solutions are The Solution, but we invite folks to help us test them out and in so doing see what they point us to next.

Creative research and development

Sometimes on the way to a new solution, activists require new data and information to understand the problem. The Design Studio supports activists by providing creative research and development which can illuminate new possibilities.

Examples:



FLIP IT

When Boston youth organizers wanted help taking on the social violence that was sweeping their communities and causing a spike in youth murders, we worked with them to design the “Let’s Flip It” campaign. Based on a deep exploration of the Five S’s, LFI took the symbol of the fitted cap (used by many youth to rep their blocks and therefore the cause of much friction between gangs and crews), and created a youth-to-youth campaign using a blank white fitted. Combined with logo pins and flyers, LFI aimed to address the problem at the scale of the city, creating a direct way for youth to communicate with each other that it was time to “flip Boston”, to stop repping their blocks and start repping living.

Click for more info on [Let’s Flip It](#).



THE PUBLIC KITCHEN

The Public Kitchen is a creative R & D project aimed at problematizing the current degradation (and subsequent privatization) of all things public—schools, parks, water, hospitals, etc. Going in the opposite direction, the Public Kitchen will raise awareness of how making things public can increase access to affordable healthy foods and vibrant social communities. For activists taking on food justice issues, it also provides both a demonstration of a unique intervention and valuable data about what people desire in food and sociality.

Conclusion

Our mission is to change how social justice is imagined, developed and deployed in the United States. For more information on our current work, recent writings or ways you can work with us (or vice versa), please check out <http://www.ds4si.org>.