

Redesign of Society 2014-2015

Description / 4.8.2014 / Kari-Hans Kommonen

Redesign of Society is a course and study project at the Media Lab of Aalto University, which gathers a multidisciplinary and multicultural group of MA and PhD students from several universities to study the design and redesign of society. It is taught by Kari-Hans Kommonen and members of the Arki research group, with visiting lecturers.

The idea is to develop a design oriented approach to thinking about at the tremendous changes and challenges in society. We will attempt to understand what kinds of designs and design ecosystems there are in society and what kinds of forces are at work; this is a certain kind of redesign process in society that is taking place whether we participate in it actively or not. At the same time, we will attempt to develop ideas of desirable future society, and consider what would it mean to develop a more proactive design stance towards making such desirable developments possible.

Examples of the topics we will be discussing:

- the state and future of the global digital environment (intelligence agencies etc. hacking and spying, corporate platform dominance, growing complexity and unsustainability of digital ecosystems)
- the growing inequality and societal unrest, future of jobs, degradation and depletion of environment and natural resources vs sustainable society, climate change
- how to evolve the business, financial and economical systems towards greater social responsibility
- the problems with intellectual property, and the need to preserve and strengthen the cultural and technological commons of humankind
- critical review and envisioning of future predictions and scenarios (robots, singularity, surveillance,...), creating design propositions and making them visible and tangible for societal debate

The theme is very broad and requires us to become familiar with many topics from a large variety of disciplines. The work is divided into two stages: an intensive introduction stage of 2 weeks, and a project stage that begins after the introduction and runs for several months after that.

In the introduction stage, we will

- study materials from many disciplines that will inform our work
- exercise design analysis of society, culture and social systems
- study history, evaluate trends and speculate future developments
- develop scenarios of everyday life in future society

In the project stage, students will form groups around more focused topics and engage in deeper research and Design Fiction development, over several months. The project teams will have regular joint meetings as well as tutoring sessions throughout the several months, and will create productions that will be presented in the end of the project in a seminar and exhibition.

Format

The course will consist of two periods, the first intensive period between the 10th and 24th of September in 2014, where the topics are introduced, and a second project work period, running from October 2014 to May 2015.

Students can participate in the course by joining both periods or by participating only in the introductory intensive period in September 2014, and will receive credits in proportion to their confirmed participation and accepted contributions.

The introductory stage is still being developed, and a comprehensive plan and schedule is not yet available. The first introductory stage is very intensive but since it takes place during a very short period, all important topics can not be treated very deeply, and students do not have time to study them independently either. However, the aim of this period is to raise the interest and motivation of the students to engage in the following project stage, which then requires them to focus on a selected project theme and study their own topic much deeper.

Topics

Examples of the topics and fields of knowledge that will be touched within the course are:

- evolution, e.g. cosmic, chemical, geological, biological, cultural
- design, e.g. design analysis, institutional design, social systems design, technology design, design ecosystems,...
- history
- economics, inequality, financial system, free trade, globalization
- technology, digitalization, robotics, AI
- politics, democracy, governance
- law, property, intellectual property, commons
- ecology, climate change, resource depletion, sustainability
- psychology
- sociology
- anthropology

One of the central methods we will employ and develop during the project is Design Fiction: we will build informed future scenarios of desirable and undesirable futures, in order to make it easier to have informed discussions about futures, and to support informed decisionmaking and design of our future.

GCL participation

GCL students are welcome to join the intensive first stage of the course in Helsinki, taking place between September 10th and 24th. There will also be the Media Lab's 20th anniversary celebration and seminar on the 25th of September, which the Todai participants are invited to join. We will be happy to assist with the arrangements of the students' visit. We suggest that it would be interesting and beneficial for future collaborations if some faculty members would also join the visit and the project.

After this introduction stage, GCL students can continue with the second stage through online collaboration, either as participants in mixed groups with Finnish participants, or as Japanese project groups. Kari-Hans Kommonen will come to Japan several times during 2014-2015, and can tutor the students while he is in Japan. Tutoring can also be arranged in collaboration with Todai faculty members, and through Skype meetings. Details of this will be agreed later.

We expect and hope that many of the Finnish students will develop a project that will turn into a deeper research topic, for example for their PhD work. In the same way, this project offers the visiting Japanese students the possibility to develop a relationship with researchers in Finland that may be fruitful for future PhD collaborations.