

The
Public



AN INTRODUCTION TO:

Linoblock Printing



The Public is an activist design studio specializing in changing the world.

This zine, a part of our *Creative Resistance How-to Series*, is designed to make our skill sets accessible to the communities with whom we work. We encourage you to copy, share, and adapt it to fit your needs as you change the world for the better, and to share your work with us along the way.

Special thanks to Azza Abbaro for developing this zine on behalf of The Public.

For more information, please visit thepublicstudio.ca.

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Introduction

WHAT IS LINOBLOCK PRINTING?

Linoblock printing is a fun and accessible relief printmaking technique that is a bold, portable and reproducible way to get your message across. It involves carving into a sheet of linoleum, inking your design and repeatedly pressing it onto any surface. The final design can be transferred onto a wall, or to produce banners, posters, shirts, even tote bags!

Originating from woodblock printing, this technique has been refined over time and is often taught to students at an early age as an introduction to printmaking. From fine art to political message-making, linoblock printing is a relatively inexpensive, easy-to-learn and fun way for anyone looking to express themselves through ink.

This zine will cover some of the history of linoblock printing and give you a step-by-step guide to creating your own print. In an age where so much of our communication is digital, it is exciting to craft a handmade design through a slower, more ancient medium. Each sheet of linoblock can only be carved once before the relief surface is compromised,

and the same sheet can be inked and stamped repeatedly. As a result, using this technique for emotional, political or abstract expression channels a welcomed and reflective sense of focus that connects you to your work.



History/Origins

TRACING RELIEF PRINTING THROUGH TIME

The first known relief prints using ink date back thousands of years to 500 BC, when the Ancient Egyptians etched carvings onto wooden blocks and then pressed the inked templates onto fabric. Until the invention of linoleum by Frederick Walton in 1855, wood was the most accessible, and therefore most utilized, medium

to create these templates. Made of solidified linseed oil—among other things—linoleum itself acts as a hard rubber. It comes in various sizes and thicknesses and varies in its difficulty to carve. We will discuss different kinds of linoleum in the “This Is How We Do It” section of this zine (pp 18).

Over time, woodblock printing spread worldwide. In China, for example, it was first used to print character-based Buddhist scripture. Chinese artists also used this method to print religious and scenic imagery onto silks and other fabrics, a craft that spread to India as well. Third Century Chinese artists also used carved wood blocks to stamp personalized signatures onto their works.

It was the crusaders who brought relief printing and paper-making techniques to Europe, where they were also used to produce religious, and eventually secular, imagery from the 12th century

onwards. Block books—whose content was largely religious too—were also printed until the late 15th century. It was around then that printmaking technologies became more sophisticated and efficient in the mass production of books, posters and leaflets through the refinement of Guttenberg’s printing press in the 1400’s. From that time onwards, woodblock printing experienced a slow decline in its popularity as a medium.

In 17th century Japan, however, the tradition of woodblock printing continued with *ukiyo-e* emerging as a genre of printing. The subject matter of these prints included city life, celebrities of the day (including courtesans, sumo wrestlers and actors) and landscapes. The prints were largely popular as those who could not afford to buy expensive paintings could now purchase original prints from well-known *ukiyo-e* artists.



DETAIL OF “TSUNAMI” BY HOKUSAI,
19TH CENTURY (JAPAN)

DIE BRUCKE AND THE LINOBLOCK PRINTING REVIVAL

Woodblock printing (now with the technology of linoleum) experienced a second revival in early 20th century Germany thanks to *Die Brucke*, a group of artists who repeatedly used the medium to produce political art reflecting Germany's tense state amidst the violent context of World Wars I and II. At a time when painting was the most prevalent form of artistic expression, members of *Die Brucke* often produced linoblock prints to express scenes of anguish, despair, and destruction such as the image below. Jagged, crude lines and edges affectedly depict a sense of disillusionment with the harsh reality of warfare. The group, disheartened by their societal state even created a relief-printed political manifesto.



"TWO WOUNDED MEN"
BY ERICH HECKEL, 1915 (GERMANY)



"PROGRAMM DER KÜNSTLERGRUPPE BRÜCKE" BY ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER, 1906 (GERMANY)

"Putting our faith in a new generation of creators and art lovers, we call upon all youth to unite. And being youth, the bearers of the future, we want to wrest from the comfortably established older generation freedom to live and move. Anyone who directly and honestly reproduces that force which impels him to create belongs to us."

- Ernst Ludwid Kershner

The expressive bold marks, the benefit of having a reproducible template and the inexpensiveness of the materials needed to create a linoblock print are a few reasons

why it is well suited for political art. Outside Germany and shortly after World War II, the use of linoblock printing in political art spread like wild-fire.

All over the world, artists began to use linoblock printing to find and use their voices on varying social issues. In 1955, Latin American artist Alberto Beltrán created the dynamic print on top of the next page, depicting the exploitation of Honduran labourers.

Under the Apartheid regime in late 20th century South Africa, artists of African origin had little access to fine art institutions, techniques, or opportunities. Linoblock printing provided an accessible medium for the spreading of resistance and could be taught in underground collectives, at poster workshops, and in galleries that supported Black artists.

Vuyisani Mgijima's linoblock work *Unification* (right) is an example of a work from this period. Gentle and positive in tone, Mgijima's intricate work is divided into sixteen panels and explores themes of togetherness and harmony. In the top panel, a protective figure gathers a group of children in his arms, while the middle panels depicts two township scenes, in which a group of women fetch water as the blazing sun casts their

dark shadows. In the central lowermost panel, the artist depicts a jubilant group of men, women and children. The central panels are flanked on both sides with delicately carved wild animals on the sides. *Unification* is no doubt Mgijima's projection of an idyllic Africa at peace.

Beltran's call to action to support Honduran workers is portrayed in a more straightforward tone (by depicting the workers marching carrying banners and flags), while Mgijima's linoblock is political in a more layered and subtle manner: His print evokes utopic of South Africa, one that certainly did not exist in the shadow of apartheid.



"UNIFICATION" BY VUYISANI MGIJIMA, 1991 (SOUTH AFRICA)



"THE STRIKE OF 50,000 HONDURAN WORKERS EXPLOITED FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS BY THE MONOPOLY OF THE UNITED FRUIT CO." BY ALBERTO BELTRAN, 1955 (HONDURAS)

Linoblock printing and grassroots movements

EXAMPLES OF ARTISTS, COLLECTIVES AND THEIR WORKS

The blending of art and politics shown by these artists continues today, with linoblock printing being used as a medium for collective expression to draw attention to various social justice causes around the world. Here are some examples of artists and collectives that continue to create inspiring resistance-messages:

JUSTSEEDS ARTISTS COOPERATIVE

North America (justseeds.org)

Justseeds is a decentralized collective of 24 artists across North America that formed in the late '90s to create art that takes a radical stance on political, environmental and social issues. The group often allows for their graphics to be downloaded for free from their websites and blogs for use in social movements. Here are a few examples of their work along with explanations by some of the artists:



"MASS INCARCERATION IS A LABOR ISSUE"
BY MEREDITH STERN, (USA)

Meredith Stern: "This is a print that I made for the Justseeds installation in Milwaukee based around Labor Issues. An incarcerated woman in a Department of Corrections uniform sews while in a scene below her a woman interviews for a job. The tethered butterflies symbolize a yearning for freedom for the woman above, while the bars along the bottom represent the barriers which exist for people who seek employment once released from prison. The text reads: "Mass incarceration is a labor issue. Put an end to the war on drugs." While incarcerated people can be paid as little as 23 cents per hour to work for private corporations. Once released, ex felons face discrimination when seeking employment and social services."



"ALTO A LA CRIMINALIZACION DE MIGRANTES (STOP THE CRIMINALIZATION OF MIGRANTS)"
BY SANTIAGO ARMENGOD



Santiago Armengod: "This image was created in 2011 for an Immigrant Know Your Rights Campaign that was put together by organizers here in Mexico and across the border in the US. Part of the purpose of the campaign

was to fundraise for Mexican, Chicaxns, and Spanish speakers from the US to attend the 2011 Allied Media Conference in Detroit, Michigan.

We find it important for latinxs to raise our voice and be heard in the midst of an all out war against our communities and communities of color through out the US. Therefore we put together several workshops at the conference to share tactics and strategies on how to better protect our communities.”

TARANG PADI

Indonesia

Taring Padi (translation “Fang of Rice”) is a community of underground multidisciplinary artists in Yogyakarta, Indonesia that formed during political upheaval after fall of Suharto. Known primarily for their print work, *Taring Padi* are also active in political resistance through music and theatre. The group regularly runs studio workshops and collaborates with international political art groups to create projects. The group is committed to contributing to autonomous culture, democracy, and social justice in Indonesia and addresses issues including land rights for Indigenous peoples, wage hikes for workers and agricultural autonomy.



“NUKLIR MERUSAK ALAM, NUKLAR MERUSAK NAFAS”
(ANTI-NUCLEAR POSTER) BY TARANG PADI, 2000 (INDONESIA)



"BURUH BERSATU (UNITED WORKERS) - BUILD SOLIDARITY BETWEEN THE WORKERS AND OPPRESSED PEOPLE"
BY TARANG PADI, 2008

COLLABORATION

In 2011, Justseeds and *Tarang Padi* joined forces for "We Agree: A Crisis in Common," an exhibition displaying two massive block prints, one made in Portland, the other in Indonesia. The prints address the environmental impact of the exploitation of natural gas on both sides of the Pacific. For more on the project and to purchase prints, visit the project website here: crisis-in-common.blogspot.ca

ASARO

Mexico (asar-oaxaca.blogspot.ca)

Formed in 2006, ASARO, or the Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca is a collective of young artists from Mexico responding to political turmoil in their home country. Like *Tarang Padi*, ASARO also express themselves through

multidisciplinary arts, but they are mostly known for their relief prints and stencils.

This is the group's mission statement, quite similar to that of the *Die Brucke* artists from over half a century ago:

"Pursuit and development of a New and Free art, committed to our people who live in resistance, oppressed and alienated by the individualistic culture, decadent in every sense, that has been imposed on them. We also call for the creation of spaces where our children and youth can develop their artistic creativity."

- ASARO



"WE AGREE: A CRISIS IN COMMON"
BY TARANG PADI & JUSTSEEDS, 2011 (INDONESIA)



OTHERS

The ability to faithfully replicate images over and over makes linoblock printing a fantastic way to create fundraising images. This work by Hannah Skoonberg sold in 2011 raised money for earthquake and tsunami relief efforts in Japan.

Collectives and artists like those mentioned in this zine show the importance of producing art as a way to draw attention to important social justice issues. This kind of creative work is boundless in its ability to inspire viewers, potentially to some kind of positive action. In an age where we are bombarded with commercial

advertising from every direction, linoblock printing provides a fast and accessible medium of resistance, drawing our attention to pressing humanitarian and environmental issues that also deserve our attention (also it's super fun to do)!



DETAIL OF "JAPAN DISASTER RELIEF BOOKMARK" BY HANNAH SKOONBERG, 2011

Planning & Sketching

We've looked at the history of relief printing and seen how linoblock printing is an effective medium for creative resistance. Now its time to create your own print!

There are no "right" or "wrong" ways to come up with an idea for a print. And if this is your first time, it's important to remember with anything, practice makes perfect. Here are some questions to help get you started and to guide your creative process:

GENERATING AN IDEA:

Intent

What is the purpose of your print? What is the purpose of your message? What are you trying to say or draw attention to?

Audience

Who are you creating the print for? Who will see it? How/where can you reproduce it so that it will be most visible?

Content

How are you going to depict what are you trying to say in a print?

TEXT, IMAGERY AND CONSIDERATIONS



"ACTION CURES FEAR" BY ANDREW CASEY, 2003

This example uses only text to get its message across. While using only text allows for more straightforward communication, considerations include what language you're working in, as well as how legible your message will be printed.

Typography

If you're using text, consider how it will affect the tone or voice of your content. Bold fonts are best for linoprints as they're easier to carve. You can find some examples of fonts on page 18.

Number of words

How much text you fit in depends on the content and size of your work. The more elaborate, the harder it may be for viewers to read if the letters are not carved clearly.



Placement of words (Layout)

If you intend for your message to be read, make sure it is positioned clearly and that you use a legible font.

Image tips

The example above print uses no text at all to get its message across. An image can be as or even *more* powerful than text, but can also offer more opportunity for misinterpretation. An image can be as intricate or as basic as you intend, depending on your message and on your comfort level with the medium.

Often, linoblock printers use a combination of text and images, as can be seen in the work of Justseeds and Tarang Padi artists. Whichever route you end up taking, you might get started by

doing a Free Association to come up with your text and/or draw a rough sketch of the layout for your print. (See the next page for more info on how to do Free Association!) We'll learn how to transfer a draft onto your linoblock using carbon paper in the next section.

Because relief printing requires that the template surface only be etched once, this doesn't allow for many ways to get around mistakes. If you're new to linoblock printing, it's very helpful to sketch and layout your ideas on paper first and to try some practice rounds on draft paper before carving into your final linoblock. On the next few pages you will find some fonts and other resources to help you along!

PLANNING SHEET

PROJECT

Budget: _____

HOW MUCH DO YOU HAVE TO SPEND?
A couple of linoblocks, a standard chisel, and a small tube of ink should cost around \$30 at most art stores.

Timeframe: _____

Launch date:

IS THERE AN EVENT OR OCCASION YOU ARE PREPARING THE PRINT FOR?
It's best to leave some time to try the process out and do some drafts before doing your final print.

Goals and objectives:

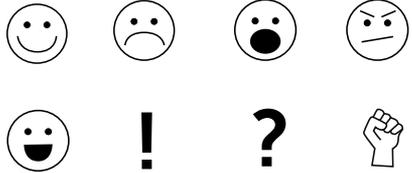
WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACHIEVE?

Target audience and relevant characteristics:

WHO IS YOUR MESSAGE FOR?

Tone:

HOW DO YOU WANT IT TO AFFECT YOUR AUDIENCE?



Other: _____

Explain briefly: _____

Message and content

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY?

Distribution

WHAT IS YOUR OUTLET?

Surfaces to print on:

Where?

FREE ASSOCIATION SPACE

FREE ASSOCIATION!

Free Association is where you allow yourself to write down whatever comes to mind without censoring yourself for a few minutes. Try it!

- 1) Use this page and grab pen, or open up your computer to a blank page where you can type.
- 2) Set a timer up for two minutes.
- 3) Turn on the timer and write/type non-stop without reading what you've written until time's up.

Read back your stream of consciousness and pick out some interesting themes or ideas. This might help you come up with a phrase or something to sketch for your print!

SKETCHING SPACE

Fonts you can use

MUSEO SANS (BOLD)

ABCDEFGHIJKLM
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ
0123456789

!@#\$%^&*()_+

ARIAL BLACK

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN
OPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklm
nopqrstuvwxyz
0123456789

!@#\$%^&*()_+

LINO STAMP

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN
OPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

0123456789 !@#\$% &*()_+

MUSEO SANS (BOLD)

ABCDEFGHIJKLM
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
0123456789!@#\$%^&*()_+

FONTS FOR CARVING

A great alternative to carving freehand is to find a font that works online and use it to create your message! The best fonts for linoblock printing are thicker, bolder, and are sans serif, meaning they are simpler typefaces.

Remember that the mirror image of what you carve is what appears on your final print (so carve text backwards!)

Here are some great font sites to browse through (you can find the fonts on this page on most of these sites)

- dafont.com
- fontsqureel.com
- losttype.com
- 1001fonts.com

If you don't have a printer you can photocopy, enhance, and trace the fonts you find on this page!

This is how we do it

Linoblock printing materials are relatively inexpensive and can be found at most art supply stores. (A quick Google-search will help you locate the stores closest to you!) Here's a list of what you'll need to get printing:

MATERIALS CHECKLIST:

- 1) **Your design**
- 2) **Carbon paper or a blender marker**
- 3) **A pencil**
- 4) **Linoleum sheet** (these come in different consistencies from harder to softer—softer being more easy to carve. See the sidebar for more information on different kinds of lino!)
- 5) **A chisel/V-knife**
- 6) **Block printing ink** (oil or water based)
- 7) **An Inking plate** (you can also use tin foil or any other non absorbant surface)
- 8) **A Roller or Brayer**
- 9) **A Barren** this is a blunt object with a handle that you use to press the inked linoblock onto the final surface
- 10) **A surface to print on**

EXTRAS/OPTIONAL MATERIALS:

- 11) **Clothes** you won't mind getting dirty with ink
- 12) **A hair-dryer** if you buy lino that's hard to carve, holding a blowdryer to it for a few seconds should help soften it up
- 13) **More ink** for the purposes of this exercise we will be using only 1 color, but those interested can also learn about how to use a "reductive" print method to print (using 2 or more colors) by following the link on the "Resources" section at the end of this zine
- 14) **More paper and fabric options:** linoblock printing is a great way to see how images print differently onto different surfaces. If you are creating some kind of campaign, materials (e.g. t-shirts, banners, and posters) is a great and easy way to emphasize your message.



A CHISEL AND SOME GAUGES

TIPS FOR CARVING USING THE CHISEL

If this is your first time using a chisel-knife don't worry, it's not as hard as it looks! Chisels can be found at most art supply stores and come with different attachable gauges or sizes, which carve different widths into the linoleum (standard sizes are 1 inch through 5 inches thick—see the image on the bottom of page 21). Here's how to use the chisel:

- 1) Determine which gauge you want to use and attach it to the handle
- 2) Hold the chisel above the linoblock at a 45° angle with your writing hand, placing the sharp end of the knife onto the linoleum. Depending on the type of chisel you've bought, you will either carve pushing the chisel away from you (more common) or towards you.
- 3) Practice carving lines and shapes with the different gauges to get accustomed to using the chisel. As you get more used to holding and manipulating the chisel, you will learn how to create different effects, like shading.
- 4) If this is your first print, one suggestion is to keep your thinnest "positive space" (or the parts of the linoleum that you do not carve) at least half a centimeter thick for your first print. The "negative space" is the area you are carving out, the same area that will not pick up or transfer ink to paper. If you're not too experienced with the chisel, it's best to try etching a simple pattern or image without too much detail or shading.



"BIRD" BY TANYA ROBERTS



In this linoprint, the body of the bird is considered the "negative space", which is not carved. When inked, it picks up and transfers the ink onto the print surface. The etchings around the bird are considered "positive space" and do not pick up or transfer the ink to paper. The most important thing to remember is that the mirror image of what you carve is what appears on your final print (so carve text backwards!)

Trace /carve/ ink/print!

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO LINOBLOCK PRINTING



By now you've chosen your message as well as what words and/or images you want to use to get it across. So you're ready to carve, ink and imprint! Here's a step-by-step guide to help you through the process of creating your own print:

PREP

- 1) Prepare all your ideas and materials in a suitable workspace. It might be a good idea to lay out newspaper to catch any fallen linoleum shavings/splattered ink

TRACING (OPTIONAL)

- 2) **Using a blender marker:** If you are working from a computer printout or a sheet of paper you've already drawn on, now is the time to transfer your design onto the lino. A simple way to transfer your image onto linoleum is to print it from a computer and use a "blender marker", which can found at most art stores. Simply print your image (the right side up) and place it face down on the linoleum, laying it out where you want the image to show up. Use the pen to go over the ink lines repeatedly until the ink transfers below. Lift the printer sheet and voila, your image should have transferred! You are now ready to carve.



Tracing carbon paper: Alternately you can use carbon paper to transfer images to the linoleum as well. Place your linoblock in front of you and tape on a sheet of carbon paper (ink side down) along the edges so that it does not slip. Place your drawing directly above the carbon paper wherever you want it to appear on the linosheet. Trace over your design using a pencil. Remember not to press too hard as this will cause a break in the surface which will then be imprinted! Once you're finished tracing, remove the carbon paper and you should see your design on the linosheet!

CARVING

3) Using the chisel, carve out your design taking into consideration the tips about how to hold the tool and how to determine which gauges to use. Take your time, and don't worry too much about making mistakes! REMEMBER: the final result is a mirror image of what you carve so make sure to cut any text "backwards".

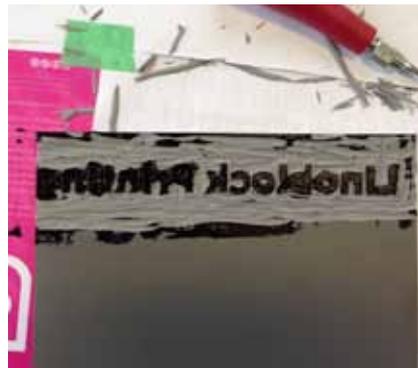


INKING

4) Once you feel you are ready to ink your design, fill the ink tray with a "layer" of ink (not too much and not too little) and pass the roller/brayer over it until ink is evenly dispensed.



5) Transfer the ink onto the linoblock by rolling the brayer on top of it a number of times until it is as uniform as desired. Using too much ink on the print might produce unwanted results in which details are lost due to ink seeping into the carved areas.



PRINTING

- 6) Position the linoblock over your printing surface—by now you have already determined both the surface and where the print will go on this surface.
- 7) Place the linoblock directly onto the surface and uniformly press the back using a baren, the “heel” of a spoon, or any smooth, blunt surface to transfer the ink. If you have access to an actual “press” through a nearby school/ studio, this works also! You can do practice runs on draft or newspaper to see if any ink or cutting related corrections need to be made.



- 8) Slowly and gently pull the lino sheet away to reveal your print!



- 9) Allow the paint to dry while admiring your new creation. Repeat the inking and printing process as many times as the linoblock will allow!

(For tips the “reductive printing method” where you can use more than one color in a single print, please see the “Resources” section on page 26!)

- 10) Clean up tools and area.... you're done!



Printing on Different Surfaces:

A linoblock relief can be stamped onto almost any surface, so long as the appropriate block-printing ink is used! Here are some extra ideas for places to replicate your print!

PAPER

There are tons of paper options ranging from white printer paper, to recycled, to pages already with content on them to create an exciting contrast. Examples include: newspaper, old books/ magazines, photos, postcards, existing paintings, etc. Depending on the size of your print it can be used to produce cards, posters, bookmarks, banners...

Ink: use traditional oil or water-based ink

FABRIC/TEXTILES

So long as you use fabric ink, linoblock prints look fantastic on t-shirts! Be bold and experiment with other wearable (or non-wearable!) surfaces such as sacks, scarves, the sky is the limit.

Ink: use fabric screen-printing ink. For use on cotton, polyester, blends, linen, rayon and other synthetic fibers

WOOD

This could be a wood block sized specifically for your piece, the table, or even a door!

Ink: use traditional oil or water-based ink

WALLS/PAVEMENTOOD

This might be more appropriate for linoblock prints that do not use elaborate carvings, as these details might get lost depending on the textural characteristics of the surface being printed on.



AN EXAMPLE IMPRINTED FABRIC

Walls and pavement might be perfect for simple text and images, but not for meticulous prints.

Ink: use traditional oil or water-based ink

Resources & Inspiration

TUTORIALS:

More detailed guides on how to make linoblock prints:

- » instructables.com/id/How-to-Make-Linoblocks/
- » youtube.com/watch?v=4_AzXfiHUeg

A video on “reductive” (or multi-color) linoblock printing:

- » youtube.com/watch?v=WmLd4O2ROJo

INTERESTING EXHIBITIONS/ARTISTS

Portraying “The Mystery of Unsaid Things”: Colbert Mashile’s vision of South Africa at Sherman Gallery

- » bu.edu/today/2012/portraying-the-mystery-of-unsaid-things/

“The Other Way Exhibition”: Showcasing the work of interfaith/international students in the Middle East from the 1970’s, this travelling exhibition explores the use of art as a means of facilitating tolerance and intercultural dialogue:

- » art-beyond-belief.com/the-other-way/

Jose Guadalupe Pasada: Fantastic Mexican artist and political satirist:

- » en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jos%C3%A9_Guadalupe_Posada

BOOKS

- » *Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960’s to Now* by Dara Greenwald and Josh Macphee (for examples of beautiful political artwork from the late 20th century to now).
- » *The Design Activists Handbook: How to change the world (or at least your part of it) with socially conscious design* by Noah Scalin and Michelle Taute (for fantastic examples and practical advice for socially conscious designers).
- » *Just Design: Socially Conscious Design for Critical Causes* by Christopher Simmons and Michelle Taute (for an in depth look and analysis of real-world socially design projects).



