

## Social Dimension of Design and Design Education

In conversation with  
Galen Cranz

**Amita Sinha**

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**Galen Cranz** received her Ph.D. in Sociology from University of Chicago and taught in Princeton University School of Architecture from 1971-75. Since 1975, she has been teaching in the Department of Architecture, College of Environmental Design, University of California at Berkeley. She is the author of *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (MIT Press, 1982), *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design* (W.W. Norton, 1998), and *Ethnography for Designers* (Routledge, 2016), in addition to numerous journal articles and book chapters. She won the EDRA (Environmental Design Research Association) Achievement Award in 2004 and Career Award in 2011. She is a certified teacher of the body work discipline, Alexander Technique, and holds two US patents for body-conscious bathtub and chair designs. Cranz teaches courses on Body Conscious Design, The Sociology of Taste, Social Theory and Research Methods, and Social and Cultural Factors in Architecture and Urban Design.

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**G**alen Cranz has devoted her academic career to teaching research in the service of design. In her Foreword to *Revisiting "Social Factors": Advancing Research into People and Place* (edited by Georgia Lindsay and Lusi Morhayim, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, xv), she asks, "How do we measure the relationship between humans and their environment? How do we measure the hyphen in person-environment relations?" These questions are answered in her teaching and publications, where her primary focus is understanding human behavior in and experience of places. As a social historian she combines a sociologist's interest in interpreting contemporary social practices and a historian's perspective in longitudinal studies of places. As one of the founding members of the field variously known as 'Social and Cultural Factors', 'Person-environment relations', 'Environmental Psychology', 'Human Factors' among others, she has taught generations of designers that place-based research enhances creativity and can lead to transformations in social attitudes and values. She believes that social research is directly tied to both professional service and cultural criticism. Theoretical frameworks linking space with culture and human behavior should guide the design process, calling into question the designer's untested assumptions about the 'ideal' and 'universal' person s/he is designing for. In this interview, I draw her out on some of these issues.

**SINHA**

**With an academic background in sociology and having taught in Architecture for over four decades, your thoughts on the importance of social factors in the design process?**

**CRANZ**

If architecture is the integration of social purpose, materiality, and aesthetics, then social factors are fundamental to design. Social purpose, behavior, and feelings are not a constraint on artistic freedom, but rather a basis for inspiring new forms or refining traditional ones. Any design that fails to integrate social, technical, and sensory is immature.

**SINHA**

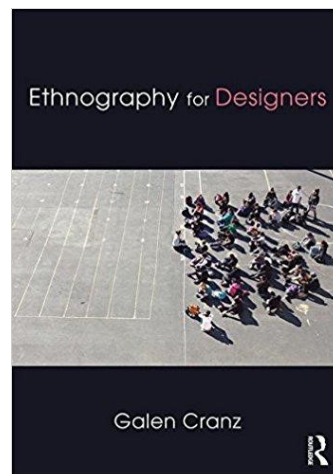
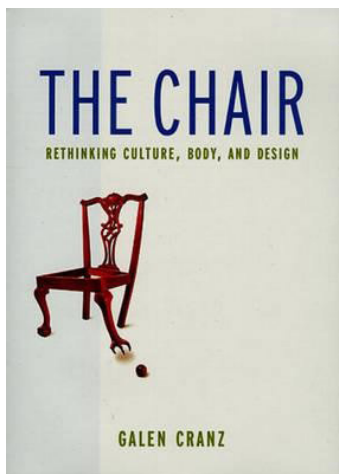
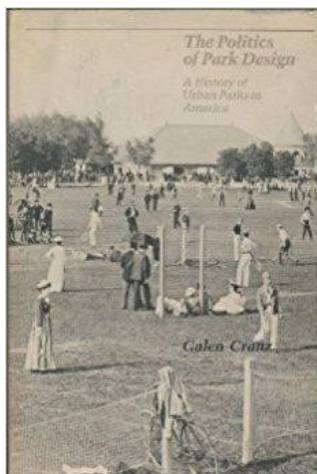
**Architecture can be an instrument for social change. As a social historian, you help designers understand the relevance of social mores and cultural knowledge of the past to contemporary design. Although the ahistorical attitude among modern architects is hard to overcome, good design scholarship can be useful in this regard. Drawing upon your own work, can you share with us some examples of how it can be done?**

**CRANZ**

I used my understanding of the history of urban parks in the US to extrapolate into the present and near future when I entered a series of park design competitions. I created a typology of parks that designers can use today: Pleasure Ground, Reform Park, Recreation Facility, Open Space System, and Sustainable Park. For Spectacle Island in the Boston Inner Harbor I worked with Mary Miss, Susanna Torre and others to merit an honorable mention combining several of the types; for Park La Villette in Paris my sociological and historical perspective enabled me to help Bernard Tschumi's team win first place. I understood that the eclectic program written by social workers intentionally sought to transcend the historic dichotomies between art and science, elite and pop culture, physical and educational in park design, whereas the competitors assumed the program was confused and their designs segregated those activities. I won first place in the St Paul Cityscape competition, building on my understanding of the Open Space System, and moved into sustainable park design in Olympia Fields, outside Chicago, Illinois.

**SINHA**

**Your recent book *Ethnography for Designers* (Routledge, 2016) is an interesting and handy text for teaching qualitative research methods. Can you give us a brief background on your adaptation of an anthropological research tool for design research?**



Books by Prof. Galen Cranz

#### CRANZ

When I started teaching architecture full time at Princeton University, I learned that architects are not drawn to statistics. They prefer to think in terms of qualities. I had learned in graduate school that I too was more interested in qualities and context, so when I encountered James Spradley and David McCurdy, *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society* (1972), I adapted their semantic ethnographic approach to helping architects learn to listen actively to their clients. Students at University of California at Berkeley wanted architectural examples rather than anthropological ones, so I created a workbook with architectural examples that was refined over several decades before finally being published as *Ethnography for Designers*. The ethnography study that undergraduate students produced is memorable; even 45 years later people remember what social scene they had studied and designed.

**SINHA**

Your classic study of park models in North America in *The Politics of Park Design* (MIT Press, 1982) is a guide to studying municipal parks in other parts of the world. Please comment on the fifth model of the sustainable park and its global relevance.

**CRANZ**

The Sustainable Park is self-sufficient regarding materials (especially regarding maintenance), solves environmental problems outside its own borders (e.g., improves aquifer), and models a new landscape aesthetic for other public spaces. It emerged in landscape architecture journals around 1991 and has continued to develop since. Reuse of railyards, railways, and other urban infrastructure (for example, the High Line in New York City) meets the sustainable criteria of not wasting embodied energy. Reducing lawn mowing and other expensive maintenance practices has also promoted more native vegetation. Extending park features (walkways, benches) into city streets helps meet the need for respite and sensory experience throughout a city. New visual and kinaesthetic experiences emerge from the new types of interactive features and walkways and from the use of native plants and plants known for extracting toxins from the air, land, and water.

Obviously, these principles can work around the world. Every city has environmental stresses and challenges, which a sustainable park design could tackle. At Riverside South in New York City I was an urban design juror who saw that the old 19th Century Pleasure Ground idea was being used to compensate for high density. Instead, I proposed that the overflowing sewage treatment plant not be burdened further with the addition of thousands more residential toilets, but rather install a biological waste treatment system with shrimp, fish, plants as an alternative, new type of park, the Sustainable Park. In Mexico, Xochimilco Park turned a land drainage problem into a thriving flower market; in China rice fields at a university campus blur the distinction between landscape of production and consumption/recreation. In the US, sheep once grazed meadows before noisy, polluting (ostensibly labor saving) motorized mowers took over in the 1930s; leaves should be used as mulch, not bagged in plastic for landfill; examples are endless.

**SINHA**

**As a certified Alexander Technique teacher and with first-hand knowledge of other body work disciplines you are an advocate for body-conscious design and have many insights into the design of the near environment. How can design students be made aware of the body as central to experience of the built environment?**

**CRANZ**

First, a conceptual change is needed. Since industrialization, the ideal of the interchangeable part has dominated our cultural thinking. It is efficient to have standardization – even regarding humans. For example, we have one set of ergonomic standards for chairs, desks and table height even though we have huge variation in size. Educators need to acknowledge that product design and interior design especially and also architectural and landscape design need to take physical, psychological, and cultural differences into account.

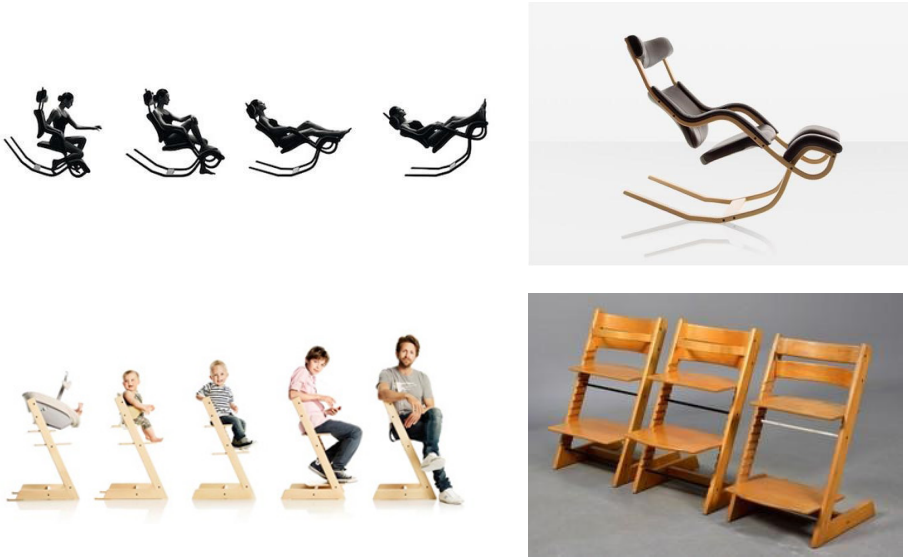
Professors can help students pay attention to their own physical experience. Is the shoe too tight? Does the chair cut the underside of your thighs? Do you get fatigued without movement or without daylight? Simple exercises in awareness are a good start, and I offer one about foot and one about chairs in my book *The Chair*. Once people experience freedom for their feet they want to design shoes differently and the same goes for chairs and rooms.

**SINHA**

**In your book *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design* (W.W. Norton, 1998) you are critical of the conventional chair and its impact on sitting habits that can be deleterious to health. Do new chair designs address the issues you raise in the book?**

**CRANZ**

Yes, several new seating designs address those problems. The Norwegian architect Peter Opsvik has designed a series of chairs that promote movement and adjust to differences in size (the



*Chairs (from top)- 'Gravity', 'Tripp-Trap' and 'Capisco' by Peter Opsvik*

Capisco, the Gravity, the Tripp-Trap). Since then Martin Keen has designed the Focal Upright workstation that offers an active, pivoting seat halfway between sitting and standing, a foot support that actively involves one's feet, and a forward sloping adjustable height work surface. A Finnish inventor, Vessi Jalkanen, has designed a new split seat, called the Salli, that supports each pelvic half separately to promote pelvic health. Steelcase, Hayworth and others now offer sit-stand workstations.

#### **SINHA**

**Professor Craz, your research spans multiple scales—from that of the city to the near environment of the human body. Your work sets the precedent for bridging boundaries between design disciplines of architecture,**



'Focal Upright Workstation' by Martin Keen and 'Salli' by Vessi Jalkanen

landscape architecture, and interior design. You draw upon both social sciences and humanities in developing a unique approach to teaching design research that has inspired many generations of students and made them culturally sensitive and thoughtful design practitioners and educators. ■



**Amita Sinha** is a Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, USA where she has been teaching social and cultural factors in design since 1989. She received her Ph.D. in Architecture from the University of California at Berkeley where she studied with Clare Cooper Marcus and Galen Cranz. She used ethnographic research method in her doctoral dissertation on social and environmental change in housing in Northern India. Her ethnography of a small park in Lucknow was published in *Architecture+Design*, September 2005. Sinha is the author of *Landscapes in India: Forms and Meanings* (University Press of Colorado, 2006; reprinted by Asia Educational Services, 2011) and editor of *Landscape Perception* (Academic Press, 1995) and *Natural Heritage of Delhi* (USIEF and INTACH, 2009). She recently co-edited teaching designers a volume *Studies in Heritage Conservation and Management: Cultural Landscapes and Heritage Conservation in South Asia* (Routledge, 2017). She is currently working on her second book *Cultural Landscapes of India: Imagined, Enacted, and Reclaimed*.

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