Problems with theming in Decidim

Decidim v0.13.1
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Background

At Mainio Tech (www.mainiotech.fi) we have developed a participation platform for City of Helsinki on top of Decidim that is currently live at:
https://osallistu.hel.fi/

In the initial version, we integrated whole Decidim's UI to the City of Helsinki's own UI framework that is built on top of the Bootstrap 3 UI framework.

More information about City of Helsinki Bootstrap 3 theme can be found at:
https://city-of-helsinki.github.io/hel-bootstrap-3/

Problems caused by the approach

In the early stages this worked well, we got the benefits of both worlds:

1. We now had all Decidim's functionality available that is branded accordingly to the Helsinki branding guidelines.

2. We got access to easy updates for the City of Helsinki UI framework.

The problems that arised after the integration was done:

- We ended up with over 100 customized view files (views and partials) in the application which did not even contain all Decidim's components (only the essential ones in our case).

  - During every Decidim update we would have to go through all of these and test each UI component.

  - During every Decidim update we would have to create new ones when new components are introduced.

- We needed to fork the whole "decidim-comments" component's React application in order to do the necessary UI customizations to its view layers.

- We needed to customize few helpers and

The bottom line was that Decidim updates after the UI customizations would cause real pain.

The current situation

The current situation is that the theme has been reverted back to Decidim's own Foundation based UI framework. This made updating the Decidim core a breeze.

A couple of problems that this has or will arise:

- Decidim's layout has to be separately maintained from the City of Helsinki's own UI framework. This causes extra work every time Helsinki decides to make changes to their UI framework or styling. However, currently it seems this work will be less than keeping Decidim up to date with the Bootstrap theme.

- The layout is not 100% in line with the City of Helsinki Bootstrap 3 theme. The Helsinki UX developer is unwilling to double his work doing the same layout for two separate UI frameworks.

Solution: Make Decidim themable

We suggest that Decidim should be more easily themable. The technicalities for this are still open but in case some other people also see the need for this, we can talk about the technical approach.