



Design after design

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OPINION



Design after design

What follows is based on selectively revisiting, revising and adding to much I have written on design in and beyond *Design Philosophy Papers*.

Notwithstanding its economic function, design, in total, has never been less important as a means of affirmative change than it is now—at the very time it needs to be more important as an agent contributing to this change.

This *fact* is increasingly being recognized, but unfortunately largely not by the professional design community, which continues to pander to the market of unrestrained consumerism, reify elegant unsustainable objects, give awards to products that celebrate style and design buildings to be photogenic. Meanwhile academic design research continues to roll out those tired texts of the past that keep researchers inwardly focused—talking amongst themselves and not confronting how design is present in the world, not confronting design as political. Yes, there are a few progressives moving across disciplinary boundaries to develop a post-instrumental mode of design practice, but they are scattered, small in number; they run against the institutional grain and pay the consequences.

Fortunately, the design fraternity does not completely determine design. Design, designing and the designed is now gaining interest from elsewhere. While not arriving in droves, philosophers, anthropologists, literary theorists, sociologists, psychologists and others are opening the field to other concerns, epistemological inquiries and forms of situated analysis. *Design Philosophy Papers* can rightfully claim to have contributed to this opening up. Of course, that other game that is in play is design being etched away by programming. So what is the difference between a programmer into design and a designer into programming? Answer: nothing.

Here is a very different take on what has just been said. Having visited a good few design and architecture schools over recent decades, what is clear is that many, in some disciplines almost all, of the good and best students arrive at the end of the degree course contemptuous of the discipline they have acquired. They know they have been educated for the past, not the future. The best and wisest have educated themselves. But what is a good design education? Well, it is much more than being able to design and to gain and please clients. It is actually to have learnt what design is and does as an endless learning; and to have discovered that the world in which we live (the cultural pluriverse+biosphere+anthropocene) is a complexity beyond our comprehension that we nonetheless have to struggle to understand in general and in terms of the agency of design as implicated in creating vast numbers of problems that constitute the condition of unsustainability, as well as being able to critically view ill-informed practices claimed as ‘sustainable solutions.’

Gathering all the enviro-climatic, geopolitical, politico-social, conflictual and inequitable unstaining defuturing problems of ‘the world’ into one bundle and placing design before it, it should be clear why design is asserted as of less importance. But being in this situation is why it has to be *made* more important. The question is how and by whom?

If there is an answer to this question it cannot arrive instantly, from one person or without a considerable expenditure of time and effort, recognizing that: (i) an idealist answer is no answer; (ii) a pragmatic/instrumental answer is no answer; and (iii) whatever the answer, it will be an accumulation of tested elements. So said, and to indicate thinking not disabled nor disconnected

from the views above, the following is put forward for consideration, contemplation, contestation, for having a go-viral conversation—especially by students.

So here we go.

For our species to get to a future with a future, a huge cluster of interconnected challenges have to be confronted, recognizing that there are problems that can be solved, others that can be adapted to, and those that we have absolutely no means of dealing with. Of this situation, there are three things to say. First, the distinctions between the problems before us are unclear. Second, those problems that can be solved cannot be done so simply by instrumental means. To be able to solve what can be solved and adapt to what can be adapted to require us to climb an imagination mountain like nothing else we have done before. The equation to be faced is:

the sum of problems
the future moment of irreversible criticality

and while the answer cannot be calculated, we can be certain by any measure of our species' time that it will be terrifying. It should be noted here that evolutionary biologists have already announced that the sixth planetary extinction event has already commenced (due to our negative impact on biodiversity), and this is just one of our problems. Now, to continue with business as usual with a few token gestures toward 'sustainability' is frankly a disposition of collective stupidity. No matter how hard or painful, a process of substantial affirmative change is essential. What you hear now is not 'me,' but an echo from scientists and theorists of many stripes globally. Clearly, the sum of design practice, *as it could be*, could make a significant contribution to leading and providing means to change. How?

The designing subject and the subject who is designed

The designer needs to see their self as both—which is to say one designs one's self to design what one identifies as needing to be designed. Making design work for one's self seems an obvious thing for a designer to do. Why then does it not happen? *Habitus*—if you don't get it check it out (Bourdieu's *habitus*, that is, not the design magazine).

Bringing design to oneself is a self-orientation whereby you become your own object in time. This is more than ambition, plan, program; it is being a project with a project, a making that makes. It means discipline is something you create and do, subordinating the intuitive to learning, taking one's lead from situated encounters with the needs of the world of one's dependence. Such remarks require a receptive ear/mind. And that comes down to ontological orientation, and how one is situated, as fixed or fluid. Notionally here are four ontologies (you may wish to add, or revise, but I suggest there is no fewer than four).

- Mainliners—those architects and designers hooked on making it in the mainstream. Their horizon is fixed by unconstrained ambition, the fetishization of the designed object, market success and uncritical cultural recognition. Some become successful cynics, most become cynical failures.
- Political romantics—they are like mainliners but invent a world of delusion, believing their own fantasies about themselves, designing, the designed and their ability to make a difference.
- Liberal reformers—they are critical of design in/and the market place but believe their reformism will make a real difference. 'Sustainability' as the leading edge, mostly (one could argue totally) fails to confront the scale and depth of the unsustainable. Consequently, so

much in the name of sustainability sustains the unsustainable. In the end, liberal reform becomes a weak version of political romanticism.

- Inside outsiders—while there is no outside to hegemonic techno-capitalism, inside outsiders function from a recognized position of alienation and creative contestation. Without nostalgia they view the past as a resource, act beyond their own economic self-interest, and, by degree, embrace risk. Their disposition is affirmative, their ambition, a counter-career, new learning and efficacy.

Design education: a key to change

Current design education, in all incarnations, is a quiet disaster zone (within the wider disaster of higher education) dominantly based on inducting graduates into the labor market. It is an inferior form of education dominated by 'how-to' instrumentalism. Two metrics rule: course/program induction (bums on seats, which directly or indirectly influences institutional income—which drives falling standards and dumbing down); *and* graduates in jobs (which drives instrumentalism and servicing of industry needs). There are small numbers of intelligent, insightful and often world-weary educators, and a lot of time-servers mostly going through the motions and conforming to a culture of compliance. The greater needs of the future are almost totally overlooked.

In response to this disaster, another direction is needed, this based on recognizing contemporary worldly imperatives. It would look something like the following.

1. Re(at)traction—the first move is to make the institutions smaller; fewer students but from a more diverse catchment, with a higher standard of selection. Thereafter, growth would come from a foundation of quality performed by staff and students.
2. A new kind of curriculum based on: (i) process (over object) as socio-politically engaged process (not just design process); and (ii) remaking (over the new). Such a curriculum could be continuous rather than divided into years; it would include, for example:
 - Retrofitting and metrofitting—design practice directed at 'what is' and centered on redi-rective practice (breaking down of existing design disciplines and opening to others so as to create diverse team of learning and inquiry).
 - Situated problem research placement—this based on going to a problem, living and working with it; this could mean remaking or making something new.
 - Intercultural literacy and the philosophy of design—this so graduates can comprehend different cosmologies, modes of being and species futures.
 - Design actor-leaders—rather than service providers, this activity would focus not just on leadership via project creation but how to establish a counter-design practice economy.
 - Project would be central to the whole approach. Some provided in a pool, others invited and included via a selection process. Themes such as 'design in time' (designing back from the future), 'decoloniality' (design in the global shadow of colonialism—including of design), the power of design fiction (in authoring design action), design and conditions of crisis (such as 'unsettlement of mind and bodies'), institutional designed transformation (e.g. prisons), and species transformation (unmaking/remakings of the human).
 - Space and support for counter-courses—students would be prompted and enabled to create their own learning events within the ethos of affirmative change. In addition, the institution would provide 'need-to-know' workshops that respond to practical issues of specific projects.
 - Life in the world picture—social learning has to be part of a new paradigm of design after design education. For example, each day might start with an 'issue-of-the-day discussion'

(proposed or from the news). Reading groups/work reading groups would be a fixture (e.g. Friday afternoon), as would monthly hot-topic workshops on an issue or problem from experience.

- Worknet formation—moving beyond ‘learning how to work in teams’ to establish a whole educational career based on learning and working in a team (as organized individual and collective work) with the potential to extend out to economic, cultural and political life post-graduation. This recognizes the growing precarity of most forms of work, and the unattractiveness of available design employment to critically informed students. The key issue here is working against the break from education to work and the potential of the worknet as a means of transition in time. The coda for this is ‘the band’—bands form, sometimes members change, some stay around for decades, people move between bands, and band/ensembles span a huge range of genres and identities (see Band on the Run <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc-7G2OSsBY>).

The kind of change outlined would require a good deal of divestment of content and people from current programs and institutions—itself a challenge to design the process for it to happen. One implication is that a new kind of professional development would be needed—nothing would change unless the people delivering the new program change (both the newly recruited and the rehired).

Would this work in the form presented? Of course not: it is a sketch of a model that would need research, revision and development. However, it does provide the basis for a conversation that can spark change. Is it idealism? No, because the concept cannot be divided from the creation of the means of its realization—it stands on praxis. Is it pragmatic? No, it is about working back from needs lodged in the future to those encountered in the present.

So where do we go from here?

The Studio at the Edge of the World (a proto Band on the Run), which I initiated, is inviting expressions of interest in an event completely focused on initiating the outlined change process. If there is interest then we will look at where to hold it, how large it will be and how it can be supported. www.thestudioattheedgeoftheworld.com

Am I doing what I say?

For several decades, my own projects, writing and educational work have centered on the creation of change. From my perspective, however bad things looked at the time they now look worse. But there are exceptions, and if this were not so I would stop.

I teach in three very different settings and countries and employ a good deal of the form and content of what I have promoted above. Via refinement over time, the approach works. The kinds of projects I propose echo the kinds of projects that I do.

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