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Alter Design: A clearing where design is revealed as coming full circle to its forgotten origins and dissolved into nondesign

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ABSTRACT

Design for/by the Global South is a field that begins to show itself as constituted by a dialectical tension between design and *alter design*. The latter is a historical *clearing* where design is revealed as coming full circle from its forgotten origins (which were in the transformation of *tékhne* into technique) to finally dissolve itself into *non-design*. Cultivating the recovery of this memory and beginning to display the aforementioned dialectics is of vital importance for the future of humankind, since design is highly implicated in the unfolding of a world order that has become totally unsustainable.

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Alter design; design; clearing; *tékhne*; non-design

The following is a response to Tony Fry's *Design for/by the Global South* in this issue. It comes about as part of a "conversation" that the authors of the present writing have had both personally with Tony, and in particular with Tony's writing. In *Design for/by the Global South* Tony is laying out a path to think about what he calls a field whose shape we are helping to define/constitute in these writings/conversations. What we are saying is that the field begins to show itself as constituted by a dialectical tension between what we call design and *alter design*. The former is the particular perspective Tony has developed in the aforementioned writing. What is presented here is a perspective that emerged from our engagement with the conversation.

The driving forces behind the dialectic and its tensions are different. In one case, they have to do with *defuturing* and *sustainability*; in another with *care*, *dwelling*, and *Sumak Kawsay* (Macas 2010). These two perspectives share a common ground (for instance, through care as a bridge-concept), and the idea of the conversation is to keep the forces in tension as much as possible, rather than to resolve them, the aim being to clear the epochal fog to see the shape of what we name *alter design*. Put simply, *alter design* can be understood as a historical *clearing* for design. In such a clearing, design is revealed to have come full circle from its origins (which were in the transformation of *tékhne* into technique) and thereafter to finally dissolve itself into nondesign. What this means, in Heideggerian terms (Magrini 2013, 39), is that the *destiny* of Design is to participate in the awakening to a future that is as yet indeterminate and historical in the highest degree, but which will be founded on a

re-encounter of humanity with a *care-ful(l)-poietic* mode of existence. Thereafter, the historical role of alter design is to be the *clearing* where such *destiny* will be brought to completion.

Design for/by the Global South

A new phenomenon is emerging from the mist of an epochal fog, a historical condition where the ability to make holistic sense of human existence has been forgotten and consequently so has the ability to sustain a meaning-ful(l) life.

The phenomenon shows itself as a field of study, practice, theory and praxis. It equally shows itself against the “ground” of an unsustainable world, created by a particular way of revealing the present that has contributed to fragmentation and the ensuing loss of holistic meaning of existence¹ to the people of so many cultures.

Design for/by the global South (hereafter called *alter design*) is not just a variation of Design for/by the global North (hereafter called design). While related to design, it is totally different from it. Thus, it needs a new language-thinking *to be*, and to be described. It is related to design insofar as design-thinking is bringing it forth² But in so doing, it finds design brought to the South short of an appropriate language, and hence at risk of distorting the very nature of what it wants to unfold. Our task, therefore, is paradoxical: We need to free *alter design* from design-thinking by means of another design-thinking, so *alter design* can *be* and unfold. We will have to start, then, from design but with an open, critical eye/ear (Reyhner et al. 2000) to identify the traits of *alter design* as we proceed³. Our aim is to start a conversation with Tony Fry’s design for/by the global South. It will not be a normal conversation inasmuch as Tony’s voice will be only slightly heard in the background. Hence, the reader needs to be familiar with Tony’s introductory text in order to make sense of what we are saying.⁴ Let us summarize, before we start, the main outcome of this conversation.

The nature Of *alter design*: A clearing as a work of art

Alter design is a field/historical *clearing* (Heidegger 1971b)⁵ where design is revealed as coming full circle to its forgotten origins (which were in the transformation of *tékhnē* into technique) to finally dissolve itself into nondesign. Cultivating the recovery of this memory is of vital importance for the future of humankind, since design is highly implicated in the unfolding of a world order that has become totally unsustainable (environmentally, politically, economically, socially and spiritually).

The origins of design are related to the historical change of *tékhnē* as a mode of disclosure of being characterized by a respectful, care-ful(l): mediating bringing forth to presence. It is a mode of disclosing driven by a will to control the bringing forth itself. Let us call the latter a *technical disclosure*. Thus, design emerges as the thinking/acting that discloses being in a technical mode. And in so doing, design has unfolded a thinking path and a world propelled by the will to control the bringing forth of existence, the *creative force* of life⁶. In other writings, we have shown how this transformation has come about (López-Garay 2012; López-Garay 2016). Here, we will just focus on the critical field of studies on design arising from within design in the last 20 years or so, and that reflects on the conditions that made design possible. Tony Fry’s *A New Design Philosophy* (1999) may be considered a fundamental book that constitutes this critical field of design. Design for/by the global South is a product of

the field of critical studies. What we are then saying is that this field is drawing the boundaries of design in contrast to, and at the same time drawing the shape of, alter design, in a recursion-constitutive type of cycle, whereby A cannot be without B and B cannot be without A. Following Fuenmayor (1991), we can call this logical form *essential recursiveness* (Escher's *Drawing Hands* is a pictorial representation of this logical form).

Therefore, when design (meaning hereafter its critical form) points out that alter design is concerned with care,

Care so presented is obviously not being viewed in humanistic psycho-emotional terms but rather as the ontological materially, and qualitative characteristic, of a something brought into being by design. Understood in this way, *care arrives as a major issue and object of engagement of 'design for/by the South.'* (Fry 2017, emphasis added)

It follows that alter design is actually contrasting with mainstream design, which is driven by a will to control, not to care. In fact, because the main concern of design is to make designs fulfill, effectively and efficiently, their control function, care can only be seen here at the level of technical function. It is that care, for example, that is put into the making of an atomic bomb (an epitome of intentional brutal destruction of life) or an automobile (another epitome of brutal, though 'sophisticated,' destruction of life). The care we are talking about is 'loving care' as exemplified by the mother paying attention to, and so always ready to feed and serve, her baby, for his/her own good. A careful action is selfless, creates harmony, and leaves no negative trace. There is no interest in controlling anything, but just in caring. The ontological roots of care may be defined in Heideggerian terms thus: *Care* is to be in the world as a homeland, a dwelling-place... To dwell is to be *taken-care-of*... The dweller *cares-for* each thing in its own nature.... The dweller *lets beings be*... *Taking-care-of* is 'something *positive* and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature' (Heidegger 1971a, 147); that is, when we 'set something free into its own presencing' (Heidegger 1971a, 148).

Hence, by identifying care as a major issue in alter design, the mirroring effect for extant design is that it is revealed as uncaring and so defuturing. And so we can say of dwelling. Alter design is concerned with the type of dwelling characterized by *Sumak Kawsay*, not mere human habitation. Again, the mirroring effect that reflects back to display design involved in designing housing, cities, societies – as such it is *not-to-dwell*.

...[T]he impact of modernity (socio-culturally and environmentally) broke the different worlds of *Homo sapiens* habitation; consequently the peoples of the South continue to dwell in ruins of their *oikos*. (Fry 2017)

What has been severely damaged is not just their *oikos* (understood as ecological home), but the capacity to live properly in the world as *home*. We can see that it is exactly happening in the North as well.

The dynamics of this mirroring process begins to be clear. It goes something like this: first, the major issue for alter design is identified. Next, the issue of design is further explored. Some resistance emerges, and so dialectics are established. Alter design then comes to the fore. Consequently, another issue is then revealed, and so on and so forth. Thus, the pieces of a puzzle begin to emerge. What is this mirroring process actually revealing? On the one hand, it is helping to shape/constitute the field of alter design as it identifies and helps to bring to the fore a central issue, one around which others issues start to form a constellation. That central issue is care versus control. Dialectically, the identity of each polar side is initially established. The conversation unfolds. Care and control are in fact at the historic-ontological

origins of design. And those origins are in the fundamental relation of design to art, or rather to *tékhne* (López-Garay 2012). However, contrary to common belief, design is not related to art as is daughter to mother, but rather as master to slave. Design appears to control and be the master of care-ful(l) *poiesis*. *Tékhne* is a care-ful(l) *poiesis* (Heidegger 1977). Thus, critical design, in its efforts to constitute alter design, comes full cycle to encounter its origins.

Alter design, in its efforts to engage both in theory and practice with *care*, from its own perspective (*Sumak Kawsay*) helps to bring forth the issue of the origins of design, and in so doing point to the future of design. It does so because it was born to control care-ful(l) *poiesis*, and in so doing expose an unsustainable world, with its path not only towards destruction, but desolation, the wasteland (Heidegger 1977). It is in its real encounter with 'art' that hope may lay. The work of art (as *tékhne*) is a means to open a 'clearing' for the appearance or disclosing of new worlds (Heidegger 1971b). This is one possible future for design: to cultivate its relation to art, which is to say, help it complete its destiny, its full encounter with non-design. In this sense, we can talk about the dead end of design (as it is).

Alter design can also be seen as a clearing, a disclosing, coming from the other side (from the South). Such a dialectics may, needs to, must, bring forth a future different from one that is defuturing.

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Notes

1. Tony Fry's writings in this journal draw a philosophical account of this context for understanding the phenomenon we are calling here design for/by the global South.
2. Tony's design for/by the global South is an exemplar of what we are calling here design and design-thinking. The reader is warned that we are not talking about design-thinking as understood, for instance, by the d-School of Stanford.
3. The visual has prevailed over the aural in Western thinking. Yet aural thinking opens up the world in ways that are impossible for the visual. In this writing, we will give examples of new words whose sound invites one to see things differently. And vice versa. In this connection, see Reyhner et al. (2000, p. 85–101).

4. The situation is similar to that of a person listening to a telephonic conversation. We can only hear one side of the conversation and guess from that what the other person might be saying.
5. We are using “clearing” in a Heideggerian sense. In his *Origin of the work of art* (Heidegger, 1971b), the work of art is a means to open a “clearing” for the appearance of things in the world, or to disclose their meaning for a people in a particular historical time, and “as part of a holistically structured, pre-interpreted background of meaning” (Johns, 2015, 193).
6. Design and creativity are concepts that are usually associated with one another. For instance, design may be described as creativity deployed to a specific end. Examples of this can be seen in Hollanders and Van Cruysen (2009). We are saying that design is more deeply related to creation, and to the control of the bringing forth of things. Suffice to point out the methodological fads that have permeated design and which look to control the process of innovation all the way from ideation to prototyping and product fabrication.

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