

Abstract

The master in design for emergent futures is a degree which enables students to think about the current state of the world in which they experience, evaluate those reflections with a critical perspective, and challenge those issues that surface with innovative, forward-thinking, and radical approaches through design. During the second term, students are encouraged to begin to define what design means to them by rediscovering connections with the aid of discussions with professionals and other classmates. In this paper, I will be exploring my thoughts and views as a self-proclaimed designer. While I have been developing these viewpoints for some time, they are being strengthened as I have been thrust into the world of design to a much more speculative and transformative degree than I had experienced before. Design is essentially any human decision to create or change something in order to render a part of life more efficient, beautiful, useful, or desired by the designer themselves. This broad definition is framed by understanding design primarily as a decision-making tool and form of innate human desire to create control from chaos. However much we shape the natural world we live in through designing its built physical infrastructure, it is important to remember that nature is intrinsically the primordial designer of life as we know it. Design, depending on the way it is conducted, can produce results that span from good, to bad, to *almost* evil. I choose to say almost solely because I would like to believe, perhaps with a dash of naivety, that bad, or almost evil design, simply comes from a place of rashness. It is with this belief that I strive to be a designer for good. This can be done to the best of my ability by focusing on being a designer who is conscious of their design decisions, their implications and outcomes, and what they not only become, but how they will shape the future. Thoughtful designers who take accountability will not only have the chance to correct problems of the past, but make less mistakes through design for a future that is aimed at long-termism beyond tomorrow, and beyond the next ten billion seconds. Designers must seek to understand that they are but individual players in a complex web of systems that are intertwined and impossible to separate. Taking an interdisciplinary, open, distributed approach to design can push society forward in a collaborative manner which is essential in a globalized world which is so often crippled by capitalistic systems. In order to shape more gentle and just futures as conscious designers, and firstly, productive members of society, we must learn to approach expectations of systems and interactions through a new lens. This lens is still not fully clear, but the emerging group of designers around me I choose to be a part of will prove how design can change the world – again – but this time for good.

I

As part of the master's in design for emergent futures, we are asked to participate in a class entitled "Making Sense and Meaning". The catch is, the class itself isn't intended to *teach* what sense and meaning is, but rather to push students to establish it for themselves. Through a series of readings, discussions with professionals, and debates with other students, participants are encouraged to think critically about how to make sense of the world around them through the frame of design, and make meaning of that for their personal lives and professional

development as a designer. From the course objectives, written and led by Tomas Diez, the class facilitates this “through questioning students’ decisions and choices during their project development, these sessions aim to rebuild the connection with the driving forces that operate within ourselves and to establish new dialogues with authors, researchers, thinkers, and makers that can contribute and enrich the Masters’ projects”. Though a class like this can encourage myself, along with my peers, to reflect on and encourage us to make sense and meaning of the world around us, it is a process that does not begin and certainly does not end with the course.

II

The emotionally charged, vague, colorful, powerful, broad, elitist, misunderstood, glamorized, world and word of what we call design. Design is in fact more than a word, but more rightfully a world. A word & world that is used by so many different people in different ways. One way to simplify it is to add another word before it. Industrial design. Product design. Interior design. Fashion design. Environmental design. But what is design in the truest sense of the word without any descriptor? At its basis, from the way I see it, design is making, and above all decision making.

Practically anything can be seen as design, even if it is not done in a traditional way or by a designer in a firm. I believe we are all designers in ways we are not aware of. Even those that do not deem themselves as creative minds. Perhaps it starts when we are kids and put together a set of blocks in a certain way. Then, the way we drag our colorful markers along white, purple, green, or maybe black paper, and the shapes and patterns they make. The way someone lays their toothbrush on the counter in a cup, on a shelf, or in a cabinet. Why put the blocks, the lines of color, or the toothbrush where it is and not somewhere else? These decisions, I believe, are small and seemingly insignificant acts of design. However, any design decision starts off small and perhaps insignificant. However, the sum of all these collective decisions, by every player involved, cumulates to form the world as we know it. Design is both conscious and unconscious choosing of this or that, here or there. These choices impact not only the designer themselves, but the communities around them in a ripple effect that reaches beyond what we see.

Design as control is a part of human nature. Most people, when it comes to their lives and how they want things, are not passive beings. We want to have our hands on things. We want to manage, manipulate, and make the world into how we think we individually think it should be (which is when conflict arises). Admittedly, I hate that this control is such a vital aspect of human action and interaction. Through design, people are able to have a sense of domination over their surrounding environment which naturally puts people more at ease. This feeling is the reason why design has always been a marker and piece of identity in societies and civilizations throughout time from cave paintings and the great pyramids to the size of the chips in our billions of smartphones held worldwide.

Though design as control is a central part of human nature, it is impossible to recognize design as only human-made. Doing so would be so very human-centric of us. Nature may not design in

ways we would consider as conscious, but so too are many of the ways we design. All creatures design. Evolution has forced them to do it in ways that are much more efficient than anything humans would take decades if not centuries to design. Is the way a blue-jay puts together her nest design or survival? While one may argue that it is quite simply survival in the way of reproduction, I argue that it is a form of design, whether it be survival or not. After all, design is constantly trying to make things in life easier, more efficient, smarter, or more pleasurable. The bird's nest perched at the top of the tree becomes all of these things by the arrangement of sticks done by the blue-jay. Not only are creatures designers, but part of all living things. Bright flowers use their attractive colors to draw in pollinators which are integral to their life cycles. Have the petals themselves made a conscious choice to be red with a yellow pistil? Maybe not, maybe it is survival. But it is survival but design.

Though nature designs itself, we then choose the way it should be designed for us. Nature is just a small part of the world we have designed. The societies we live in are constantly shaped and designed, whether it be by the masses or by a few individuals. We would be naive to think that the political structures we exist in are not in and of themselves designed. Or that our entire infrastructures in which we depend on. In my opinion, the single biggest factor and example in physical design and how we conduct ourselves is the structure of our built environment and the modifications we made to our living environment. 55% of the population, a number that is constantly rising, is living in urban areas. This portion of the population that lives in urban areas (and rural areas as well) lives in an almost fully human-made constructed and created reality. It is absurd to think about how much of our daily lives are dictated by this environmental design. The homes we live in, how we get from point A to point B, the way we navigate through streets and sidewalks, are all designed. It is this fact that makes me question how much free will we as humans really have.

III

My first experience being a designer in a named sense that society agrees upon, besides what I outlined in the section above as acts of design in every moment since childhood, is my schooling in landscape architecture. I received my undergraduate degree in this field after five years of studies. People would always ask me; what exactly is landscape architecture? By the end of the fifth year, I had nailed down an answer which seemed to satisfy the crowd: all design of the built environment outside of buildings. After the first year of the degree, the biggest thing I had realized is what I was really doing as a designer of landscapes. I was fundamentally shaping the land, and therefore the ways in which people interact with themselves, others, and their surrounding environment. I remember this being a shock to me in so many ways. I almost felt lied to, that I had never come to this realization before and that I had been going about my whole life living in spaces without questioning them, accepting them for what they were and not considering how or in what ways they could be different. Understanding this led me to see design as having aspects of good, bad, and near evil. In order to stay optimistic about the role of design, which is a viewpoint I do in fact hold, I will highlight that in the later section IV. I do want to explore, however, the opposing side. There are definitely ways design can be used with bad outcomes. Even good design can turn bad overtime. For example, designing for a car-centric

world seemed like a good idea at some point, but now is a mess of roads we can't undo and have built cities that are not human scale or walkable. Most designers don't have intentions of making bad design. However, mistakes are easily made or not thought through and bad design is made. Some aspects of design can even be said to be evil. The way capitalist products are designed and packaged in a way that hides all of the people, systems, networks, and environmental damage behind them can be evil in some ways.

People ask me what I study here in Barcelona, and to some people I simply answer with "design". Some accept the answer, but others ask more questions. I myself even find it hard to define what I study in the master of design for emergent futures. I suppose my role as a designer under this title is one that shapes futures. But shaping futures is broad. Shaping futures can mean anything, and everyone is doing so at all times. We are, as designers of emergent futures, attempting to design in ways that provide for constructed futures that we see as more just for people and planet. It is important to remember though, that the futures (plural) we deem desirable and want to see may not be the same for everyone. As a developing designer, I have the opportunity to decide what my role really is. I desire to make that role that I design for good. I hope to be a part of a wave of designers that thinks in new ways. The traditional way of designing things or ways of thinking in the past is not good enough or forward thinking enough to solve anthropogenic problems through design. I am aware that as a designer, I am constantly shaping things for myself and others. Knowing this, my main focus is to design responsibly. This means, primarily, thinking before acting. Thinking of what implications my design decisions might have. My strong desire to be aware and conscious as part of my everyday life gets carried into the way I want to design. There is no possible way to know about everything going on around you, and much less understand it. However, knowing this is the first thing to note. I want to be sensitive to problems, and to the impacts my decisions make. It is not realistic to think that we will be able to predict the future or plan how our designs might act in the world, once taken in by others. Yet, it is important to try to think about implications and outcomes past the infrastructure of the design itself, and instead think about and consider its entire lifecycle. I want to be constantly questioning; who will benefit from my design? Who or what may potentially be jeopardized in the process? Selfish design has led society into big problems. Being selfless through design is a way to ensure that outcomes are not desirable just for one person.

IV

As much as bad, or rather thoughtless, design has hurt the world, it holds the power to help fix problems of the past and forge better emergent futures. The weak signals, indicators of change, found around us must be taken into account. Design must be thought of in terms of long-termism. Too many design decisions in the past have been short-sighted and led us into these problems we can only pray to fix with design. In order to do this, I believe designers should think more holistically. The way that Ron Wakkary puts this, which I wholeheartedly agree with, is designing *with*: designing past a human-centered frame of reference in more than human worlds. Wakkary imagines this in tangent with creating narratives for design. By turning projects and decisions into biographies, we are able to take greater accountability, and

understand scale in the past, present, and future. This echoes Kevin Slavin's thoughts in the article *Design As Participation*. As designers, we are but one player in a bigger system. By designing for all participants and as a system instead of as users, a more fair balance can be restored. Slavin states that "the designer is one of many influences and directives in the system with their own hopes and plans. But mushrooms also have plans. The people who dance inside them have plans. And of course the natural carbon cycle has plans as well". As much as designers aim to control all aspects of the micro-worlds they produce, the reality is that they are just one player in a web of interconnected and often invisible interactions. Conscious design has the power to change the world. Without it, we will head towards a dark future. The way forward is approaching design with an interdisciplinary lens. There is no sense in creating so many binaries and separations that simply aren't there. We need design to be open, to be distributed. With enabling a broader audience to become designers, the needs and desires of the many can be more realistically met instead of a select few. Creating a network between people, and between ecosystems, irrespective of borders or constructed job descriptions and divisions of human and non-human, must be the way design in the future looks.

As a designer, no matter what that entails, I want to be a force for positive change. My main aim is to use design to help mitigate anthropogenic damage to the climate and find new ways to design that are less harmful to the environment due to the climate crisis we are currently in. There is no time to design otherwise. I want to be able to co-create with the species and landforms around us. To do this, we need to rethink the way we view our relationship with the earth. As Aldo Leopold states in *A Sand County Almanac*, "a land ethic changes the role of homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such". I want to foster co-creation between species and come from a place of respect rather than domination in design. Looking to nature as the world's first and best designer is often overlooked more than I think it should be, and I think working with or at least acknowledging natural processes and factors along the way is essential. Through responsible design, I believe we can reshape this relationship. This relationship can also only be changed by rethinking our ways of living and our expectations of systems and how we interact with the world. Again as Leopold states, "obligations have no meaning without conscience, and the problem we face is the extension of the social conscience from people to land. No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions". In order to implement this new ethic that considers nature in design, habits must be changed, beginning with my own. We need to design systems in ways that challenge how we interact with everyday objects, what we expect from them, and understand their material ecology. As people, we are able to set certain courses of action into existence. As designers, we have a responsibility to ensure those courses of action promote healthy relationships between people and the planet they inhabit.