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essay

On the Limits of Design

Abstract

Several recent publications in design theory have drawn into question the hope and idealism that often underlie dominant ways of thinking and talking about design. These arguments can be drawn into connection with earlier discussions about how the structural constraints of professional practice limit the ability of designers to enact change. 'Design civil society' and 'infrastructural politics' are suggested as ideas for helping designers to think through action beyond the limits of professional identity.

Keywords
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It is easy to feel dejected by the state of political discourse within design. Not because there isn't anything of interest being said but, rather, because there is a feeling of an ever-widening gap between the seriousness of the challenges we face and the ideas and capacities that we have to work with. While not stated in these terms, it is a mood of this kind that seems to motivate the deflationary tone of some recent publications (Lorusso, 2024; Matos, 2023). These texts contribute to an existing line of thought that suggests not simply that 'ethical' or 'political' design has failed to deliver on its ideals, but that such failure is a structural feature of design itself.

Pessimism about design reflects as much the scale of our problems as the state of design discourse. In the month of writing this, July 2024, the record for the Earth's hottest daily temperature has been broken twice. Earlier this year, a survey of 380 scientists from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that almost 80 percent believe that we will see average temperatures rise to 2.5°C above pre-industrial levels before the year 2100 (Carrington, 2024). Almost half believe we will exceed 3°C. These expert assessments stand in depressing contrast to the stated goal of the 2015 Paris Agreement: hold any temperature increase 'well below 2°C'.

These numbers reflect a condition of failure: a failure of politics and design, but also one of justice. Western states that accumulated their wealth and power by means of conquest, exploitation, and sabotage continue to play an active role in deepening the climate crisis. According to the International Institute for Sustainable Development, for instance, the UK, the US, Canada, Norway, and Australia are together responsible for more than two-thirds of new oil and gas licenses issued since 2020 (Milman et al., 2024). Theorists of de/coloniality argue that coloniality is a structure of power that endures despite the end of formal colonial rule (Mignolo, 2011). Western support for the ongoing genocide of Palestinians underscores the horror of this power, both for what it is capable of now as well as how it is likely to treat growing numbers of displaced and dispensable Others on an increasingly unsettled planet.

Designers are often called upon to view our practice in hopeful terms. Our practice is dedicated to shaping the material and symbolic contexts of everyday existence, and we are explicitly trained in methods of imagining new and previously unthought possibilities. Carleton B. Christensen is correct, however, to observe that this idealistic image overlooks the limits that are imposed upon designers by the commercial realities of professional practice (Christensen, 2006). Whether as employees, contractors, or business owners, designers are everywhere subject to the direct and indirect discipline of market pressures. We may design, but only ever so under conditions of limit and constraint.

These limits of professionalism are political: powerful people and institutions are not going to pay for or approve designs that threaten their power, or at least not in the absence of an even greater countervailing threat. In the face of these limits, our options for action surely require some version of what Christensen suggests—that is, ideas for influencing the contexts and conditions of designing rather than the act of design alone.

Christensen proposes a 'design civil society'. By this, he means the fostering of public discussion and debate about design, in which the objective is to determine a public rather than individual interest. His model for this is the coffee house culture of eighteenth-century Europe. The informal character of the coffee house mattered for the way it provided a generative kind of infrastructure between and beyond the more regulated realms of economics and politics. The critical point for Christensen is not to replicate this model exactly but, rather, to think about the conditions for a specifically public—rather than private (or professional)—discourse on design.

Christensen's argument calls for critical evaluation in light of decolonial theory. The coffee house was the effect of a bourgeois class formation in the metropoles of European imperial states. The image of the 'public' that it supported was based on Eurocentric and patriarchal concepts of human difference and civil virtue. Christensen correctly identifies the limits of professional practice as a problem for designers, as well as the need for politics beyond this form of identification. However, evaluating his argument from the perspective of decolonial politics would require consideration of how the concept of 'civil society' assumes or reproduces colonial concepts of citizenship and legitimacy.

The concept of infrastructure may offer more possibilities for designers to think and act through. Without suggesting that it is ever one thing, for Angela Mitropoulos (2012) infrastructure is what supports the kinds of movement and relation that can challenge dominant categories and assumptions. As she puts it:

> The infra-political builds toilets in homeless encampments in Sacramento; bypasses pre-paid water meters, tickler systems and privatised water piping in Durban; formulates vocabularies of reconfiguration rather than foreclosure and standardisation; delivers health care to no-border protests and undocumented migrants; creates phone apps for evading kettling by police in London; digs tunnels under national boundaries; and more—the infra-political, in other words, revisions activism not as representation but as the provisioning of infrastructure for movement, generating nomadic inventiveness rather than a royal expertise. (Mitropoulos, 2012, p. 117)

As brief as the sketch is, it points us towards a politics of designing beyond the identity of both the designer and the citizen. While Christensen speaks of civil society as a sphere premised on the recognition of rationality, Mitropoulos' infrastructural politics emphasizes mobile and creative responses to questions of provisioning.

If Christensen describes how the idealism of design is invariably undercut by the constraints of commercial practice—a dynamic that not surprisingly gives rise to cynicism and despair—then Mitropoulos helps us to reflect on what it might mean to act beyond a professional identity without, at the same time, falling back onto political concepts that assume much of what we are trying to undo. None of these arguments provide us with any guarantees for overcoming our grim circumstances, but they do provide some avenues of reflection that take seriously the question of structural limits. ◘

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