ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DESIGN
A Place for Discursive Design in Design Education

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PREFACE: BRIEF DEFINITION OF DISCURSIVE DESIGN

In order to properly understand the topics of this paper, discursive design should be briefly defined. Discursive design is a genre of design practice which includes subcategories of speculative design, critical design, design fiction, and many others. Uniting these subcategories is the common principal goal of exploring and communicating ideas. Whereas the usual methods of design (grouped under the umbrella term "affirmative design") embrace the status-quo, discursive design projects call the status-quo into question. These projects are often not commercially viable, and so these practices remain principally within the scope of academics and will manifest as exhibitions, print work, research, prototype artefacts, and more.

INTRODUCTION

In today's academic design institutions, discursive design is normally seen as a fringe sub-discipline of design academia, rarely explored by the average student. However, discursive design has the potential to fill a gap in design education that has been left untreated. This gap is that of the moral consciousness of the student designer, which is becoming increasingly necessary in order to adapt design practice to the complex issues of contemporary society. This paper aims to stress the importance of moral education for the future of design curricula and proposes discursive design practice as a concrete method of proposing social/ethical discourse to students.

This paper expands on a research project titled "Prometheus Enlightened" conducted at the University of Montreal by Alain Findeli which sought to investigate the need for design ethics within educational institutions. The three main conclusions from the study are as follows:

1. In order to be able to define professional responsibility (i.e., not only competence), a discussion on the **purpose** of design is necessary.
2. Priority should be given to the reform of design **education**.
3. There can be no responsible design without a responsible designer, i.e., education should be directed to the development of an **individualistic ethics**. (Findeli, 2001, p. 13)

These three conclusions on the goals of moral education within design constitute the central points from which the arguments of this paper originate. With the current path of design practice, I argue that the currently accepted design methodology is too simple for the complexity of wicked problems arising today. Environmental degradation, for example, is a problem so vicious and deeply intertwined with modern design practice that industrial designers have little hope of making meaningful change without a drastic complexification of the design process (Findeli, 2001). Above that, problems of social or cultural concern are also often too abstract to be properly addressed by the standard problem-solution model of design. Because of this, education should be addressing the fundamental ethical framework of industrial design in order to direct the industry in a sustainably viable direction.

MARKET FORCES AND INDIVIDUAL ETHICS

> Higher education institutions bear a profound moral responsibility to increase the awareness, knowledge, skills and values needed to create a just and sustainable future. These institutions have the mandate and potential to develop the intellectual and conceptual framework for achieving this goal. [...] They have the unique freedom to develop new ideas, comment on society, and engage in bold experimentation, as well as contribute to the creation of new knowledge (Cortese, 1992, p. 5).

Findeli notes that his third conclusion, that of the importance of education on individualistic ethics, is a necessary starting point since the development of individualistic ethics lays the groundwork for further conversation on ethics, morals, etc. (Findeli, 2001). Student designers who are beginning to grasp the design process are taught values and ideals that they can use to position their understanding of the field. Broad values such as 'useability' and 'sustainability' are encouraged, allowing budding designers to begin to distinguish 'good design' from 'bad design'. Considering the subjective nature of design interpretation, it is essential for design students to be shown a framework of values with which to base their developing ideas. The values that define "good" and "bad" design come from two sources: either the market or ethics. Market values include aspects of product design that judge success based on the market performance of the product. Aspects of aesthetics, user needs, and manufacturing feasibility are just a few examples of market-driven values as they are assessed for adequacy based on the market's appreciation of the product outcome (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Contrarily, ethical values are based on the effect design has on the world, as interpreted by an individual framework of values. With a developed ideal of society, a student designer can judge objects on whether or not they support their ethical ideals regardless of any market success. Whereas market-values are largely homogenous between designers working within the same market, ethical values vary from one individual to another. This makes ethical value development essential for promoting a necessary diversity of thought within our field. As Dunne and Raby put it: "we need more pluralism in design, not of style but of ideology and values" (2013, p. 9).

For student designers to explore their ideological values, they need to be made distinct from market-driven values. A method to achieve this separation is through the practice and analysis of discursive design projects. These projects have the principal purpose of making statements, and so are not required to be financially profitable to be considered a success. With this, discursive design practices are free from the pressures of the market and so are judged purely based on ideological values. Among the many sub-genres of discursive design, the field of speculative design shows potential for this goal because of its unique relationship with the future. Speculative design is a discursive design sub-discipline that is defined by the practice of designing objects for a speculated future scenario (Caudwell & Galloway, 2018). The likelihood of the chosen future scenario is of no importance, as long as the scenario is possible within the bounds of physics. The visualization of future cones (Figure 1) is useful for understanding the mindset guiding speculative design.

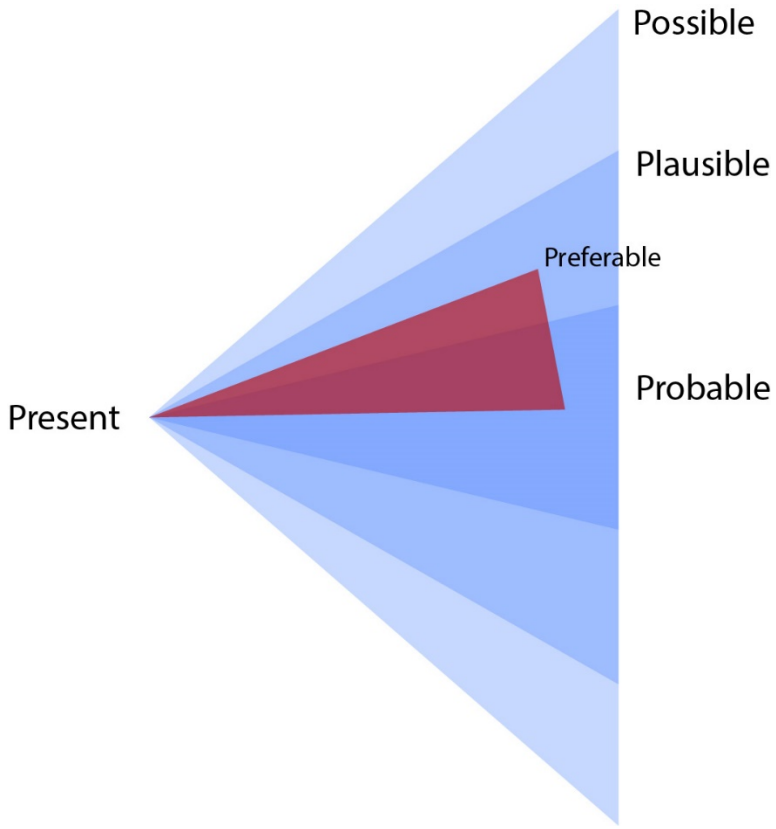

Figure 1. Future Cones.
Reproduced from "Speculative Everything," by A. Dunne and F. Raby, 2013, p. 5

The illustrated cones represent future scenarios, stemming from the present on the left towards all possible futures that widen over the horizontal time axis to the right. The vertical axis represents difference from the norm, with every point within the cones representing a possible future scenario that is either similar to the current situation (near the horizontal axis) or drastically different (far from the horizontal axis). While usual design practice (i.e., affirmative design) makes assumptions based on scenarios within the probable future cone, speculative design treats all possible future scenarios as equally valid environments for design exploration.

The practice and analysis of speculative design projects allow students to explore a broad range of future scenarios. The visual language of design facilitates the student's ability to engage with these fictional scenarios and generate developed opinions on these realities. Multiple experiences probing these possible futures will allow the student to begin to identify the boundaries of the range of futures they find preferable. An individual's preferable future cone is defined by their personal social and ethical values, and so clarifying the bounds of this future is a useful exercise in developing well-elaborated individualistic ethics.

An example of speculative design for critical conversation is Dunne and Raby's *Huggable Atomic Mushrooms* from the collection "Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times" (2004-2005). The project is series of plush atomic mushroom clouds that range in size (see figure 2). The purpose of this

collection was to design speculative products that address the needs of users as complex existential beings. In their own words:

> […] the project focused on irrational but real anxieties such as the fear of alien abduction or nuclear annihilation. Rather than ignoring them, as most design does, or amplifying them to create paranoia, we treated the phobias as though they were perfectly reasonable and designed objects to humour their owners. (Dunne and Raby, N.D.)

Figure 2. Huggable Atomic Mushroom
Dunne and Raby, 2004-2005

The intention of the project is not to truly create this product to propose to the market. Rather, the intention is to put this object on display to incite viewers to ask questions. Viewers that approach from a user's point of view may ask questions such as: Do I have this fear? Would I purchase a product to appease my fear? Viewers approaching from a designer's perspective may ask: Is it okay to humour the needs of consumers even if these needs are irrational? Is it justified to superficially appease users' needs without addressing the cause? These are only a few examples of directions of exploration students might be inspired to explore, however there is no incorrect path for the conceptual exploration of a discursive project such as this one.

One of the elements of this project that make it successful as a catalyst for critical ideation is it's use of what is described by J. Auger as the "perceptual bridge" (2013). The perceptual bridge represents the link that connects the viewer's perception of their own world and their perception of the speculative world of the project on display. In the case of *Huggable Atomic Mushrooms,* the projects grim and unusual subject matter is delivered through means of familiar and approachable product design. By managing the elements of foreign and familiar in the project, the viewer can relate the project with their prior

knowledge while also acknowledging that the project exists in a distinctly different reality from their own. This well managed balance is essential for stimulating productive reflective thought, since if the project capitalizes too strongly on the foreign it may be interpreted as a trivial piece of fiction. On the other hand, if the project relies too heavily on the familiar, it may not appear radical enough to challenge the status quo.

From this example, it can be noted that speculative design shares many similarities with art. So, analysis and practice of art should also have the potential to create similar critical discussion. As with speculative design, contemporary art is, for the most part, free of market-driven constraints. A study exposing industrial design students to contemporary art history courses conducted by C. Pazarbasi found notable effects on the students' awareness of the meaning of their design practice and the associated responsibilities (2017). They were also able to practice thinking critically about social and environmental issues in a way that was not exercised in traditional design classes (Pazarbasi, 2017). This is a single case study with 48 participants, but the results point optimistically towards the potential conceptual education can have for the critical thinking skills of industrial design students. Moreover, I hypothesize that analysis of speculative design may capitalize on the same educational benefits as contemporary art while utilizing a design language more familiar to industrial design students, thus leading to a more effective learning experience.

BEYOND ECO-DESIGN

Findeli's second conclusion states that priority should be placed on the reform of design education. Lately, modern design institutions are reforming their curriculums with the integration of ecological values into their courses and studios. A study surveying academics from 12 industrial design schools across Australia found that sustainable development was just beginning to gain ground in the curriculums, with 12 of every 100 credit points earned containing sustainability-related content (Ramirez, 2006). However, the topics that were taught are better defined as 'EcoDesign' rather than sustainable design. EcoDesign defines product design that considers environmental impacts, whereas complete sustainable design also includes social and ethical considerations (see figure 3). The economic, environmental, and social-ethical are three necessary building blocks for a sustainable society, and so EcoDesign education alone will not be sufficient for productive curriculum reform (Cowan, 2009; Ramirez, 2006). Nonetheless, going beyond EcoDesign in design education is a difficult undertaking. One of the challenges of engaging design students with conceptual social issues in class is placing these issues within their "sphere of influence" (Lofthouse, 2013). Considering issues that are outside of their skill set or potential to control is likely to leave the designers feeling powerless and discouraged. However, if applied to the correct social issues, design has the potential to create enormous change. As it is now, there is no consensus on which sorts of social issues are most applicable to industrial designers (Lofthouse, 2013). As previously mentioned, practice and analysis of speculative design and contemporary art appear to be promising catalysts of critical social-ethical conversation, and so could be used as potential vehicles for going beyond EcoDesign.

Figure 3. Layers of design interest.
Adapted from (Tischner et al., 2000)

WHAT IS A DESIGNER?

Findeli's first conclusion addresses the need for the discussion of design's purpose in order to define what are the professional responsibilities associated with the practice of design. With the integration of more advanced social/ethical value exploration in design curricula, classrooms will contain a more diverse variety of views regarding the purpose of design. To understand the current perception of industrial design, we can look to the accepted definitions and frameworks. The definition of industrial design currently accepted by the WDO is "[…] a strategic problem-solving process that drives innovation, builds business success, and leads to a better quality of life through innovative products, systems, services, and experiences" (WDO, 2015). In terms of frameworks for applying design, the Double Diamond framework proposed by the Design Council in 2004 is one of the most widely used in design education (Findeli, 2018). Both this definition and this framework have strengths and weaknesses in terms of defining the nature of design. However, more concerning than the shortcomings of these interpretations is the lack of alternatives in design education. Without valid alternatives to these design interpretations, students do not have the ability to place their understanding of the field in relation to others. With more advanced critical thinking about the implied values supporting the practice, students will find themselves associating with a wider variety of interpretations. To illustrate this, this essay will present possible new directions of questioning that students could explore through discursive design education.

One concept that can be extrapolated from the WDO definition is that the designer is an individual actor in creation, and they produce novel and innovative creations. Yet, another viable interpretation of the role of the designer is as a participant in a supra-individual process of redesign. Jan Michl states that: "the concept of redesign underlines the fact that – both as process and product – design always contains a collective and evolutionary dimension" (2002, para. 6). This view shifts credit away from the unique designer and towards the continuum of existing artefacts and ideas that precede the design.

Furthermore, the Double Diamond framework seems to address only the creative (i.e., additive) aspect of design. Yet, the actions of designers have a very significant destructive effect on the world which is often unrecognized. When designers target a product to 'make better', that entails the destruction of the existing product. This destruction can be literal, like the disposal of a product made obsolete by a new technology,

or manifest more abstractly as the ideational destruction of an object so that a designer may justify its replacement (Tonkinwise, 2018). Design destroys not only objects but also behaviours and habits, because introducing new actions that consume time and thought must necessarily replace some other alternative (Tonkinwise, 2018). The term 'destruction' holds some negative implications, but the destructive effect of design is not inherently undesirable; in fact, it can be an important tool in the designer's quest to change the world. To achieve this new perspective, Tonkinwise asserts that "[...] designers must be public intellectuals (Tonkinwise 2016), who creatively but forcefully criticize existing products and systems as well as the practices enabled by them" (2018, p. 80). Tonkinwise, like Findeli, asserts that the practice of criticism should be better taught in design schools and goes on to propose speculative design as a method of sparking critical discourses (2018).

To encourage a larger diversity of accepted design interpretations also entails a complexification of the field. A more neutral logical structure of design could present a more suitable starting point to nurture this diversity of interpretations. Findeli proposes the following structure as an alternative to the problem-solution model:

1. "Instead of a problem, we have: state A of a system;
2. Instead of a solution, we have: state B of the system; and
3. The designer and the user are part of the system (stakeholders)" (Findeli, 2001, p. 10)

The goal then is for the designer to influence the system so that state A becomes state B, while acknowledging that the designer is within the system and that the state B of the system is transitory as opposed to a final solution state (Findeli, 2001). Using this interpretation of the process shows many distinct differences from the original definition. First, it discourages the fetishization of the object as it is no longer the solution to a problem. Second, it removes the heroic aspect of the designer as one who solves problems, and places them rather as one who changes situations. These new views support the appreciation of design as re-design, as the status of the designer as a part of an existing system is undeniable. Moreover, the repositioning of the designer from a maker towards an actor influencing a system reduces the importance of material creation. With this, the designer's job is not primarily to make but rather to use their abilities to act on a system, and in this case choosing to not make is also a valid action. Appreciation of the destructive potential of making further justifies the validity of not-making as an act of design, for not-making the new entails not-destroying the current.

What is important is that the conversations about these new perspectives on design should, as Findeli hopes, reframe the purpose of design in new ways and allow for the definition of a more accurate professional responsibility.

CONCLUSION

In order to progress towards a truly sustainable future, the designers of the world need to be taught a more rigorous logical basis on which to cement their contributions to society. All design is inherently ideological, as the values and ideas built into objects are not from natural origin but are man-made (Dunne, 2006, p. 22). Making this fact more apparent to the designers should reveal both the potential and responsibilities that designers inherit, as well as the effects they have on the world on levels beyond the economic and practical; that is the social, ethical, and environmental. Engaging with conceptual topics through discursive design practice is a possible avenue for sparking these discussions throughout design curricula of the future. However, other possibilities exist (like the previously mentioned art history study

by Pazarbasi) and the bottom line is to encourage a focus on education reform towards the ethical and ideological building blocks of our industry. If this is done, our industry could shift from a reactive practice to a proactive one (Findeli, 2001). In other worlds, we may go from designing to solve the problems we have to avoiding creating problems in the first place.

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