

Josephine Bishop

2103155

Surface Pattern and Textile Design

ADAD5003

Julia Lockheart

What is the role of the designer/maker in the 21st Century and how might this role change in the next 10 years? Discuss your ideas with reference to two of the practitioners or thinkers discussed in your lecture strand.

“...but in the 20th century the sleepers awoke to enter the unsleeping world of the 24hr day and other unending artificialities...and they never returned” (Jones, 2005).

The above quote, though written nearly twenty years ago, still concisely expresses the emotional state of Western consumerist society. As stated by William Morrish (2015), we are living in a “global, hyper-social, digital and interconnected reality” (p. 95). Throughout daily life, one can be connected across the world in seconds, constantly demanded to engage through social media in a form of “micro-contact” (Fisher, 2014, p. 16) that leaves one feeling anxious and tired. Social interactions, however close to reality they may feel through a pixelated screen, are becoming more and more virtual. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people had to construct virtual replicas of their former lives through a digital reality, causing a devastating impact on mental health (Silton, 2022). Within this essay, I will be discussing the connection between emotions and physical space, and the duty of contemporary and future designers to prioritise human well-being.

In *Ghosts of my life: writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures* (2014), Mark Fisher writes that the current century is “oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion” (p. 8). The sense of “finitude” is in reference to the idea that capitalist society will remain forever at its current state. This produces a deep, existential fear; a life of perpetual work and diminishing ecology is necessary for the luxuries that capitalist society provides. There is an extreme feeling of constriction and claustrophobia contained within this statement; the modern person is unable to escape both the ideological system and the physical landscape of late capitalism. There are many external factors that contribute to this feeling, the cruellest of which is the dismissal of need in favour of profit.

Designers of the 21st century are focusing on human desire rather than human need (Kotradyova, 2019). Consumer-led marketing and design relies on the relentless stimulation of desire (Whitely,

1993). Human necessities, such as environmental concerns and mental well-being, are cast aside in favour of profit and efficiency. Advertising uses the viewers emotions to persuade them to buy, to use, to consume (Schwartz, 2003). This contributes to the consumer's feelings of discontent, as explored by Nigel Whiteley (*Design for Society*, 1995). He writes, "the modern consumer's condition is characterized by dissatisfaction and a consequent state of longing" (p. 3) There are multiple negative impacts of keeping a consumer dissatisfied, including the sense of finitude explored by Fisher. If one is always kept dissatisfied, there is no room for contentedness. It is not surprising that many people feel disenfranchised by the 21st century when their wants are exploited, and needs are ignored. Whitely continues to remark on the "amoral" designer (p. 42) who does not think about the harmful production of these desires or the long-term mental consequences. Designers who stand against this way of thinking often do not get successful career positions, limiting the amount of positive, empathetic change they can make.

A present strategy for marketing and advertising has been through technology. It has become necessary in contemporary society to use technology in daily activities such as work, socialising, and buying goods and services. Relying on technology for so many aspects of our lives begins to abstract reality. Barbara Adams (2014) discusses the hybrid climate designers currently find themselves in. She states, "the line between the ephemeral and the solid, between the natural and the artificial, has long since disappeared" (p. 20). As artificial and natural materials are combined in the design of space, interiors and objects, their separate identities begin to blur. Technology has become irreplaceable; this has been necessary in the development of medicine and other important lifesaving fields, but it has also opened a new dimension, where we can embody simulated extensions of being. Mark Fisher (2014) states that the usage of mobile phones has "altered the texture of everyday experience" (p. 9). People have found themselves surrounded by screens, the pull for social contact, the ease and manipulation of consuming goods. As this is a recent development (occurring over the last ten to fifteen years), we are struggling to keep up with the consequences of this altered existence. It is understood that being constantly occupied in virtual

experiences, we become removed from the “gravity of the terrain underfoot” (Morrish, 2014, p. 105). Incorporating these digital elements into a substantial amount of daily life has changed the way people interact with and care for the physical environment. Furthermore, limited contact with the exterior world has great consequences on our physical health, including increased susceptibility to illness (Kotradyova, 2019). It distances us from our environment, the impacts of it on our lives, as well as distancing us from the physicality of our own bodies.

Old forms of consumption are changing rapidly, opting for the efficiency of interactions, and removing the need for decision-making (Chapman, 2005). Simultaneously, this removes the physical interaction between hand and object. Fisher (2014) discusses the want to revisit the “physicality of analogue media in the era of digital ether” (p. 21). There is still a desire in this digital century to utilise items that require our hands, allowing us to engage with the tactile experience of physical objects. Physical objects equally allow us to create meaning and associations with pleasant past experiences. A clear example of the human need for physical object was the increased amount of craft hobbies during the Covid-19 pandemic (Edelkoort, 2020). With the restriction of physical space and social interaction came the human need to make. This gave focus and distraction from the stress of quarantined life. The Covid-19 pandemic similarly made clear how the restriction of space can affect our mental health. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a surge in psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Martín López and Fernández Díaz, 2022) exacerbated by inadequate space that was needed within the home. If this restriction has impact on the smaller scale, it is inevitable that larger restrictions can have similar effects.

In Western capitalist societies, space has become a contested commodity (Fisher, 2014). The freedom of the surrounding environment has further and further eroded over the last thirty years. Within densely populated cities, commercial and corporate buildings have grown steadily taller. The amount of time spent within buildings has increased dramatically, with the majority of people spending about 90% of their time within them (Martin Lopez and Fernandez Diaz, 2022). Our

surrounding environments influence us deeply and can have lasting impacts on our physical and emotional wellbeing (Kotradyova, 2019). The rise of depression, obesity and high blood pressure have all been linked to the development of suburban living (Thorpe, 2022). Mark Fisher (2014) discusses the elimination of public space as a symptom of losing a much larger freedom. "Spaces for wandering are eliminated, making way for shopping malls and soon-to-be-abandoned Olympic stadia." (p. 85) The space that is free – wandering space – is replaced by buildings that require monetary exchange to enter. Shopping malls are filled with advertisements, manipulative and psychological techniques to persuade a consumer to buy. Olympic stadiums similarly require a purchased ticket and have slowly progressed from a site to host a sporting event to a "project of socio-spatial transformation" (Traganou and Tuttle, 2014, p. 116). These types of structures tend to ignore the needs of the local community in favour of architectural design that will represent the countries' interests, style, and wealth. Fisher suggests that not only are public spaces being replaced by privatised ones, but by privatised spaces that falsify a feeling of free access. It allows only a certain kind of public – those with money to spend. As the spaces rely on this public, it intentionally aims toward this group, casting others aside that will not serve the profits interests. There is no thought to the needs of the local community, environmental impacts, or the longevity of that space.

There has also been an increase in the existence of "non-places" (Fisher, 2014). Fisher describes these as "generic zones of transit (retail parks, airports) which will come to increasingly dominate the spaces of late capitalism" (2014, p. 5). Likewise, these are not 'free' spaces as they require a reason to travel through. They are not the destination, only a fleeting moment within a journey. These spaces are owned by private companies who profit from the needs of the people moving through them. It is the act of domination Fisher suggests that calls into question how these spaces are replacing the landscape. The more places that are dominated by privatised buildings, parks, squares, the less that is free for the public to exist in. Furthermore, there is the problem of homogenisation; buildings, spaces and places that are universal and can be found in uncannily similar styles across the world. It is important to maintain individual cultural styles as a way of

reflecting and building our own identities (Kotradyova, 2019). The human being is defined by surrounding environments; they can reach out, accept feedback, reflect on the values, and identify their own. With the increase of globalisation, there has been a loss of originality. The ability of the individual to create a rounded and enriched sense of self is inhibited.



Fig 1. Max Touhey, Hudson Yards in Manhattan, 2018.



Fig 2. Mark Szelistowski. Tokyo Skyline, 2014.

The overall perception of physical space has been drastically altered by the rise of virtual spaces. Perhaps one cannot enter most private buildings, but one can freely enter social media platforms and virtual reality spaces (if you have the technology to do so). These spaces increase accessibility with less time needed for commuting and less money spent on travelling. It also allows those who are ill or have disabilities to access spaces more freely. At the same time, designers cannot lose sight of the inherent human reliance on positive physical surroundings. Human wellbeing, behaviour, and biorhythms rely on the interaction with natural and built environments (Kotradyyova, 2019). Green, natural spaces allow the physical body to adjust and recover, whilst grounding the emotional self.

Through recent research, it is now understood that emotions are a core part of the cognitive and affect systems. The affect system makes quick, unconscious judgements about one's environment, deciding whether it is safe (Norman, 2005). When the affect senses danger, it can produce feelings of unease and limit productive, creative thinking. Designers of architecture and interiors have a drastic impact on the affect experienced by those within a space. Occasionally, it is necessary to produce negative affect for safety – for example, the loud noise of a fire alarm will cause people to leave a potentially dangerous situation faster. However, it is the subtle anxiety (the sort produced by domineering buildings and unempathetic interiors) that is heavily contributing towards the 21st century person's exhaustion, fear, and finitude. Designers need to focus on providing calming, positive spaces for mental wellbeing within daily environments. Producing a positive affect within work, domestic and public spaces can improve people's problem-solving skills, capability of handling disruptions and allows them to focus on the big picture (Norman, 2005). Developing our human wellbeing has positive effects for necessary productivity whilst improving (much more vitally) life satisfaction. The increase in green space would also be helpful toward the environment, providing cleaner air and places for local ecologies to blossom. Similarly, this would have beneficial consequences for designers themselves. Being in a positive mood allows the mind to find more creative solutions, therefore generating a circular system of positive change.

Architectural and interior designers are presently constructing spaces that cater to normal human psychology and necessary functions of a specific space, such as: spaces used for socialisation, experiences for places like hotels and museums, and consumerist spaces within shopping centres and supermarkets (Aljunaidy and Adi, 2021). This is not appropriate for a large portion of the population that suffer with mental illness and stress disorders. There is evidence that the physical environment can trigger or relieve symptoms of mental distress (Aljunaidy and Adi, 2021). For instance, sharp corners and narrow hallways can increase anxiety, whereas interiors that have good quality exposure to natural sunlight can improve low mood. Mental illness and distress have a significant impact on the individual and society at large, emotionally as well as economically. Contemporary society is currently facing a lack of physical environment designs that emphasise reducing stress, which would ultimately aid in the reduction of general emotional dissatisfaction. There is also a gap in understanding of how object, colour, texture factor into improving or diminishing mental stress in interior environments (Martín López, Fernández Díaz, 2022). Aestheticism is promoted above the individuals interests and needs. There has been a popularity trend toward more natural materials (cotton, wood, wool) as people increasingly have interest in preserving the environment. This could also be caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, where people are becoming more aware of their immediate surroundings and wish to engage with tactility to create a calmer, more supportive domestic environment.

In the coming decade, it is vital for designers to begin questioning the current values surrounding space and how this forms a deep connection to the individual, which inevitably impacts the wider society. An interconnected relationship needs to be formed between the needs of the public and the private, maintaining the needs of vulnerable sectors of society above the need for profit making. Spaces must be used to connect, not exclude. The access to public space needs to be a continued focus alongside the conservation of natural spaces. Designers must learn to adapt society to the natural environment, not expect the environment to adapt to it. Technology and virtual space can be harnessed to our advantage for accessibility, although not as a distraction from physical world

problems. There needs to be a significant development in using physical space to promote mental well-being and mitigate stress, anxiety, and depression. It is vital in counteracting the current feelings of finitude and desolation with empathy, understanding, and belonging.

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Figure 1. Max Touhey. Hudson Yards in Manhattan, United States, 2018. Accessed from: <https://ny.curbed.com/2019/12/19/21024869/new-york-city-neighborhoods-photos-before-after> (Accessed: 13th December 2022).

Figure 2. Mark Szelistowski. Tokyo Skyline, 2014. Accessed from: <https://markszelistowski.com/photographing-the-tokyo-skyline/> (Accessed: 13th December 2022).