

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.

Student Name: Ross Downie

P Number: 2312833

Programme of study: Product & Furniture Design

Module: ADAD4023/C

Word Count: 2289

Tutor's Name: Julia Lockheart

The Designer's Role in the 21st Century: Current Challenges and Future Directions

Introduction

“Design is a world-shaping force, it makes us human. In many ways, we all design.” (Fry, 2008).

The role of a designer has undergone a radical shift in the 21st century. Designers are no longer limited to aesthetics and function; designers are now solving the most complex issues of the future. The designer's role has never been so dynamic. Similarly, advancements in neighbouring fields like architecture are a testament to how sustainability is being integrated into the built environment. They echo ideas from McDonough and Braungart in *Cradle to Cradle* (2019), where they advocate for human activities to be aligned with the natural world. Design is an intersect of creativity, science, psychology, and technology and has always had a massive effect on society. Influencing behavioural patterns and society's views. The need for good design has never been greater as global issues like climate change, rapid social change, and huge leaps in technology are ever growing.

This essay is going to explore the current role of designers and how it will change in the next 10 years. By looking at designers as problem-solvers, collaborators, curators, psychologists. Fry, in *Design Futuring* (2008), empathises the need for good practice that anticipates the long-term effect on society.

Current Role of Designers

Designers and the art of design can be applied elsewhere than what we think of as traditional mediums. Contribution to fields beyond design like healthcare, urban planning, technology and education have all been strived for.

The case of the ‘Embrace Infant Warmer’ is a great example of understanding the true nature of a problem and redesigning the initial brief. The brief redesign the neonatal incubator. “An estimated 3.6 million neonatal deaths occur worldwide each year, almost 99% of these in low and middle-income countries” (Belizán et al., 2012). From these findings, it seems that there is a simple solution. A low cost, energy efficient incubator for use at the hospitals in low and middle-income countries. The team to design the solution were electrical engineers, computer scientists, and MBA students. The obvious solution arose of a standard incubator made with cheaper parts and removing unnecessary components. The truth after one member of the team visited multiple Nepalese hospitals was that the prenatal babies were dead before arriving to the hospital as they were from rural areas. The team realised they needed to reframe their goals after gaining a deeper understanding of the end-users' needs. Instead of an altered incubator they needed something that did not require electricity and be used by the parents at home. (Kelley and Kelley, 2013). A designer's ability to research and

recontextualise a problem allowed them to make a real difference to thousands of lives and become an inspiration to designers in healthcare.

Design is seldom a solo endeavour. Designers must bridge disciplines to collaborate on projects to deliver the best possible results. Designers must collaborate with policy makers, marketers, engineers creating actionable and feasible concepts through specialised knowledge from all parties. For example, in urban planning a designer must work with an ecologist to properly consider heat islands and the importance of green space, not just from an aesthetic standpoint but from a technical perspective too. With the rise and popularity of information technology UX/UI design has become one of the most important areas of design to consider. Driven by software engineers, a designer must work with the constraints and respect the expertise of the engineers. The software engineer must work with the designer to push the boundaries and get the best result possible. Tools like Figma have become more widely used and allow the designer to effectively convey their vision. These tools have made it easier to focus on the users' needs and ensure that the product is accessible.

Designers have an important choice to make, to put ethics at the forefront of their craft or have it as an afterthought. Designers have a wealth of responsibility when it comes to designing a product. Environmental sustainability, ethical production, inclusivity, and alignment societal values. Unfortunately, a lot of 'ethical' efforts are shallow and are to improve the image of who they are associated with. They rarely address the problem at the source and are damage limitation. As (Braungart and McDonough, 2019) said "being less bad is not being good." Fast fashion is a majorly unsustainable industry producing "92 million tonnes of textiles waste is produced every year" (Earth.org, 2023).



Fig. 1

Consumers put the ecological impacts to the back of their consciousness and focus on the cheap prices and wide selection of goods. Ethical design practices are gaining traction as designers are embracing 'slow fashion' and circular models to reduce waste. Patagonia are a brand who are committed to the environment with several of their

policies. They have a repair program on their website that empowers the consumer to repair their products. The 'Worn Wear' program allows consumers to send their old Patagonia gear that is in disrepair to be recycled for credit against new products. With this material they integrate it into new product. Proving sustainability and profitability can coexist.

The rise of AI has brought a lot of ethical questions to the forefront. Who is the creator, the person who writes the prompt or the algorithm that produces the output? The transparency of design is already key, but will it always be?

Storytelling within design is massively important as it helps users and consumers connect emotionally with the brand. Consumers will buy a brand because of the lifestyle it represents rather than the product itself. "Designed objects and experiences provide a tangible means for us to engage with the world" (Chapman, 2005, p. 32). Storytelling is a critical part of design in its modern world. Objects that we collect are how we want the world to perceive us. A viral moment or a celebrity endorsement can do wonders for a product regardless of quality or merit.

However, on social media it can make or break your product, your image, or even your brand. Brands often 'jump onto' viral trends to be deemed 'uncool' and not desirable. A designer must curate masterfully to get something to stick online. Charli XCX's sixth album Brat was released earlier this year and quickly took social media by storm and the BRAT summer trend started. Her team put out simple marketing of a green square with 'brat' written in black lowercase (see Fig. 2). Along with the image she was projected as well as the sound resonated with her large following and was everywhere online. That's when brands got involved. Brands that had nothing to do with her image like Jansport (see Fig. 3) made their own brat album artworks to advertise with. Some brands were praised for joining in the fun and others slated for not capturing the essence of the trend. Designers must be clinical when it comes to curating an image that is authentic as social media will see through thinly veiled attempts by brands for free advertising.



Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Challenges Designers Face Today

Designers today operate in a fast-paced, ever-changing environment and are faced with challenges from technological disruption, climate change and the mounting ethical considerations. These challenges require a deep understanding of the role design takes in our society and the consequences of the designers' actions. Deliberate and measured actions are necessary to battle these challenges with good design.

As advancements in Artificial Intelligence are made, they continue to reshape what is possible with design. For the first time human creativity may not be at the forefront of design as these tools are being used to generate logos, ideas, layouts, and even whole concepts. These tools are great for efficiency but they raise important questions about the future of the profession. Designers must juggle learning and utilising these new tools while still working as they always have. A precedent needs to be set by the design community.

The challenges of design are compounded by ethical considerations. Designers are architects of societal norms through user experiences. Behaviours, good or bad, can be taught through design. With great influence comes great responsibility, especially in the age of misinformation, personalised algorithms and routine building interfaces. What is best for the user is not always best for the business and that is where a designer's code of ethics is important. Designers must balance business targets and user well-being. Designing to promote user engagement without being addictive is a hard and deliberate choice. Massive data sets are collected while users use the apps, all to be fed into algorithms and sold. Data privacy is a huge issue and is *the* business model of big tech. Designers must grapple with the implications of their work on such systems.

Climate change offers a challenge for designers as sustainability is being brought to the forefront of the industry. An importance placed on product life cycle, material usage,

waste minimisation and lower energy consumption in production. The burden of environmental responsibility weighs heavy. Sustainable resources and the high related cost limit the ability for wholly ecofriendly solutions. Drastic change is needed in how things are designed and produced but the current infrastructure was not designed for it. "Einstein once stated that a problem could not be solved from within the mindset that created it." (Chapman, 2005, p. 24). Profit being the main driving force ensures that a true breakthrough in sustainability cannot be achieved without an overhaul in our priorities as a society.

Each challenge individually is a problem for the designer but compounded it creates an uncertain environment. The pressure to innovate quickly can often come at the expense of long-term sustainability or ethics. Profitability and speed are often prioritized over refined design thinking.

Meaningful impact is still possible. Designers must embrace sustainable practices, advocate ethical standards, and harness technology responsibly. Maintaining a principled approach while adapting to today's complex world will define the designers that thrive in this era.

The Evolving Role in the Next Decade

"The word 'ecology' is taken from the Greek *oikos*, meaning house or household: the immediate human environment." (Chapman, 2005, p. 21). Designers need to place that emphasis on the natural world being our home in the next decade. Sustainable practices are only going to be more important as the natural world regresses and more value is placed on the ecological world. An emphasis on circular design and a repairing culture will be paramount. Humans will not stop consuming, it is simply what we do.

Consumption is not a way of life, it is life. It provides an invaluable vehicle for processing and interacting with an evolving world, facilitating both learning and social interaction through the continual intake of new, fresh experiences. (Chapman, 2005, p.29)

As Chapman says consumption is integral to the human experience and psyche. Consumption is not necessarily the problem but in which the way we consume. Designers will have to find a way to encourage users to keep hold of what they have and find a way to gain meaning from their relationships with objects. Designers must stray away from the planned obsolescence that has plagued this era of design and enter a new era where objects are designed to be repaired easily. Designers could take inspiration from the 'Repair Manifesto' (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4

Repairing obviously produces less waste than discarding the old and buying the new, but also strengthens the bond the user has with their object. Repair can also be empowering for the object and add character via visual change.

“Mending work builds on what is left behind. It’s not replacing, or remaking, or cutting apart and putting back together, instead it is slow work that makes things better... In textiles, the act of mending wear-and-tear, thinning cloth or accidental damage builds on what already exists.” (Pym, 2022).

Pym puts her spin on mending in textiles by looking at the story of the holes that she repairs. Each garment she repairs has far more worth than the physical as it embodies memories and a certain time for the wearer. Society needs to become sentimental again and that’s the designers’ job. Not just with textiles but with everyday objects. Like Chapman mentions in Emotionally Durable Design, most objects that have sentimentality about them are low intelligence items like a door handle. It is in the designers’ best interest to find a way to make technocratic design sentimental. If that means producing modular and interchangeable technology so be it. It is a change that needs to be made.

Artificial intelligence will no longer be a tool but a collaborator enabling designers to produce work with professional grade precision faster than ever before. Designers are going to have to get better controlling and harnessing AI’s power. Everyone will have

access to AI, so it is vital that designers familiarise themselves with it to maximise its output. Putting focus on retaining the human element in design work will be a new measure of skill. The role of designer will not exist as it does now, and the new designer will have new emphasis on strategy and curation. High-level conceptual thinking, leaving the tasks to AI. With technology improving AI will be vital in generation in VR and AR environments.

Conclusion

In conclusion society is poised for an exciting evolution over the next decade due to the radical changes in the world of designers. By embracing AI, responding to global crises, and championing circular design, designers will drive meaningful change. The challenges ahead are complex, but they offer boundless impact for the good if tackled the right way. Designers who rise to meet these challenges will shape a future that is not only beautiful but also equitable, sustainable, and deeply human.

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