

Research in Context

Student number: 2300454

Programme of study: BA Product and Furniture Design

Module: ADAD5003

Tutor: Matthew Archer

Word count: 2,039

Question 4: 'The Future is Ours'

What does the phrase 'Design for Planet' mean to you? Outline your discussion with reference to current environmental, political, or social design issues that urgently require addressing, and discuss the tools and approaches you might use to consider these issues over the duration of your future design/make career.

To design for the planet is to utilize design as a form of active resistance and to provide society with knowledge of the alternative. This requires an interdisciplinary approach, one that marries anthropology, sociology and politics at the intersection of design, and using this perspective to understand the ethnography of designers and how it fluctuates in response to the environment and the demands of the designer. Designers behave like ethnographers in practice by being able to

...craft a design or an ethnography in their work, bringing forth into the world tangible product stemming specifically from putting learned principles and methods into action. (Gunn, 2013, pg.25)

However, design is at a crossroads; how do we truthfully reflect our society, with ever-more knowledgeable consumers creating an environment where there are greater opportunities, but marketing-led organizations and over-consumption are holding us back. Design is "...becoming more flexible, and more adept at understanding users and providing relevant value for today's consumer." (Maciver, 2016, pg.2). Globalisation and immediate communications are leading to a shift in power dynamics, the consumer has more social power, market push, but there is a lack of power behind the 'technology pull', it is in a stagnation due to late-stage capitalism, by which informational capitalism is a product. The culture of extractivism that underpins this society has "...reached hard social and ecological reproduction limits. This seriously undermines its capacity to address the needs of its citizenry." (Stalder, 2023-06, pg.7). Designers have a responsibility, due to intrinsic principles, to answer to society's needs, no matter the cost.

As designers we must understand our modern society so we can inform our predictions of the future that we design for. We are living in a world in interregnum, where the 'old order', neoliberalism, is waning, "Neoliberalism is gradually being pushed out of the door as its political support base collapses in front of our eyes." (Spath, 2025, pg.5). Giving way to a divided society with no clear shape for its future, leaving designers, along with decision-makers, with "... the challenge of crafting a coherent vision for a post neoliberal world." (Spath, 2025, pg.5). In post-cold war society, many philosophers believed the period to be the 'end of history', "That is, the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of western liberal democracy as the final form of government." (Fukuyama, 1989, pg.4). We must move past the pervasive thinking of capitalist realism and think for our future,

...not only do we need an expanded repertoire of possible futures available for public consideration, but that both utopian and dystopian modes of imagination are vital for reinvigorating a futural public sphere. (Goode, Godhe, 2017, pg. 3).

Design can also play in favour of certain structures of thinking and government, encouraging or dissuading inter-group contact, therefore affecting our narratives of the spaces we find ourselves in. In environments that do not encourage continuous urban fabric; interacting with strangers, public spaces, high pavement activity, the lack of "...intergroup contact is the mostly likely mechanism driving the relationship between urban design and sympathy for the far right." (Kent, 2024, pg.6). This shows how design can affect or amplify cultural shifts in thinking and has real consequences in politics. Furthermore, design, in a society that has idolized the spectacle,

...becomes the area that helps to understand the different forms of human relation's, different ways of filling up the space of communication with more or less sophisticated strategies of individual performance (Adamek, 2018, pg.2).

This shows that designers can absolutely define or drive the cultural zeitgeist by designing things that can communicate and answer society's desires, as a consequence such belief requires an approach that encourages society "...to take seriously what the designers themselves take seriously..." (Vangkilde, 2017, pg.1) instead of disregarding the topics designers prioritise, labelling it as 'idealisation' or 'romanticism'. However, it is also important to acknowledge the belief that design is not a science, and I agree to an extent. Science takes satisfaction in knowing something exists, design, as defined by Aicher, "...is a creative activity that does not end with a conclusion but rather a conception built on ideas." (Spitz, Hunter, 2015, pg.8). It is not enough to know something exists, but it is also not enough just to have a 'conception built on ideas', design is not strictly a science nor an art, design knows why something exists and how to create it, a result only possible by

being both an art and a science, one that reacts in tandem to society. To design for the future requires an in depth understanding of critical theory and context, drawing from all perspectives

... to include the past and long-term future to ensure sustainability; and sensitivity to and not least incorporation of the values and perspectives of the people whose worlds are affected by design (Gunn, 2013, pg.26).

When we consider this in modern society, we must take an intersectional stance, not prioritising one area over another, but learning from society and designing as a result.

The climate emergency is a real source of worry for many, with the emission reduction targets not being met and the window for limiting global temperature is closing. This is in the forefront, if not a key principle, of many contemporary designer's practices. Fuller (1969) coined the concept of "spaceship earth" drawing focus to the limits of our planet, arguing that if we did not take care or maintain our planet that the earth's functions would be compromised. Despite this, Design and sustainability only become a focus in design from the 1990's onwards. The initial responses in design in the early 1990's focused on a redesign approach, ensuring that the product had a reduced environmental impact, known as "green design" (Burrall, 1991). Accompanied by a focus on the entire life cycle of the product, eco design, in the later 1990's. As this has developed and become a standard in design, something is still not working. We must design for sustainable behaviour, triggering and supporting this change in our consumers so we can aid shifts in everyday behaviour of consumers. There is an emerging focus on Behaviour centred design, BCD, because this framework "...provides both a theory of change for behaviour and a practical process for designing and evaluating interventions..." (Ceschin, 2020, pg.60) and we must look to communities and ask them how we can design to better support this transition into a sustainable society. Within the Pan-African dialogue, there was a common denominator that united these SIDS, small island developing states, and the global south, including indigenous and native communities, and that was their "...economic conditions, as the multinational companies and industrialized countries raped their natural and human resources." (Swan, 2020, pg.299). This is a sentiment that is increasingly common within the western idealogue as we talk about sustainability within design with Savaş Çekiç defining the issue as "The main source of all these problems is the endless gluttony of capitalism." (Salur, 2022, pg.48) Multi-national companies seem to be the common blame, with many of them relating to technology and investing in AI, and there is a lot of concerns about the ethics of AI as a whole, but specifically sustainability. There is an opportunity to use AI to help streamline our increasing complex and changing global electricity grid

“...optimising energy systems for robustness and reliability is a prime area for AI to have a transformative impact;” (Gordon, 2025, pg.1). However, there is a serious cost along with using AI, with planetary effects and as it expands to commercial use and it is readily available, a lot of our digital networks cannot sustain the AI digital environment, in something known as the AI tax, it “overwhelms the communication mechanism; in particular the storage medium”(Richins, 2021, pg. 24) meaning there is also a push for investment in data and storage centres which are harmful to the environment. There is also increasing concern for AI ethics which, at present, companies who utilise AI have established their own code of ethics, which results in publicity, good or bad, with various benefits to the company such as “...brand equity, consumer adoption, social acceptance, employee satisfaction, investor relations, proactive approach to laws and regulation, market entry and avoiding costly changes in production.”(Hyrnsalmi, 2024, pg.269) resulting in an increasing demand for “IT professionals embedding sustainability in the core of their AI decision making.”(Gordon, 2025, pg.2) with little information available about how this will be enforced, even if at all.

We live in an increasingly digital world where there is an increasing onus placed upon quantification and results and less focus on what cannot be easily found or defined. Which leaves design in a precarious place as a discipline that straddles the line between tacit knowledge which is “...far more heavily based on personal understanding or experience.”(Busch, 2008, pg.25), explicit knowledge as “...obtained from facts, from information...almost always through formal education.”(Maravilhas, 2019,pg.3) and digital knowledge which is a learnt way of interacting with or creating digital environments. Design has readily accepted digital advancements in the name of communication and to increase the efficiency of design processes. However, our human-technology entanglement leads to discourse around social justice and sustainability and “algorithmization”(Scherling, 2024) Contrary to popular opinion, the digitisation of processes is not the concern, but the issue of “...globalisation and the need for decolonization.” (Scherling, 2024, pg.256) which is an increasing sentiment in contemporary designers and educators suggesting that this is the next step for design, but I think this is a short-sighted conclusion to reach. It is on the path towards a new horizon of design, design as world-making that allows for true freedom of possibility. To view design as world-making, our products that shift our relationship with the object, transforming it from an object-function relationship to an object-thought relationship,

In this perspective, the object transforms from an exclusive commodity with normal function into a thing full of meaning and expressive possibility. Such objects

are connected to the individual and the intellectual relationship they establish (Zanella, 2024, p.165).

As a consequence, we must expand upon this understanding of world-making by encouraging designers to see their practice in this context resulting in the understanding of their practice and involvement “in more dimensions of engagement and interaction with the living systems and cultural worlds around them” (Wood, 2022, pg.78) which allows for the space for the practice of decolonisation and moving into a post-neoliberal world. When designers act as facilitators and agitators of multidisciplinary processes of transition supporting

...communities in innovative ways to improve their lives and environment. focussing on the quality of interactions and the overall experience, alongside more inclusive, meaningful and transdisciplinary ways of operating, adds greater social value... (Escobar-Tello, 2021, pg.3.).

This means, in this perspective, designers can help shape society for the betterment of culture. When we consider history, the impetus is on designers to help steer that change by embodying their principles and producing outcomes that serve society.

At present, the future of design for the planet is not under threat of digital evolution, digital evolution is welcome in design, not the exploitation of it or forcefully utilising it when there is no satisfactory infrastructure for it. The ability to design for the future of our planet is uncertain because of society moving into a post neoliberal society where the new order, if any order, will replace what came before. I welcome this transition and trust in my fellow designers to take part in the ongoing postcolonial and decolonial discourse to answer questions about “...how futures have been, or can be, designed with subaltern voices, marginalised and indigenous communities, that have historically been objects or subjects of design and development.”(Smith, 2024, pg.1). Designers must also consider alternatives for design methods, such as participatory design, but not its outdated predecessor that is fit for a neoliberal world but its successor, the radical participatory design which will help model a sustainable society in a post-neoliberal world. Design justice will inform the process of design for the future intertwined with radical participatory design, insisting on “community participation, leadership and accountability throughout a collaborative design process.”(Udoewa, 2022, pg.5). In this framework, Radical Participatory design should be viewed as a meta-methodology to inform our decolonial design process and collaboration with the consumer as a bi-directional relationship that can help shape our future post-neoliberalism.

Bibliography

ADAMEK, P.R. (2018) 'From Relational Space to Engagement—Designers' Ethics and Responsibility in the Light of Empirical Research', Polish sociological review, (201), pp. 95–107.

Burall, P. and Design Council. (1991) Green design. London: Design Council.

Busch, P. (2008) Tacit knowledge in organizational learning. 1st ed. Hershey, PA: IGI Pub.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-59904-501-6>.

Ceschin, F. and Gaziulusoy, İ. (2020) Design for sustainability: a multi-level framework from products to socio-technical systems. Abingdon, England: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.

Escobar-Tello, M.C. et al. (2021) 'Decolonising design in peacebuilding contexts', Design studies, 73. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2021.101001>.

Fukuyama, Francis (1989). "The End Of History?" Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History?" The National Interest, no. 16 (1989): 3–18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>.

Fuller, B. (1969) "Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth"

Goode, Luke and Godhe, M.(2017) 'Beyond Capitalist Realism - Why We Need Critical Future Studies', Culture unbound, 9(1), pp. 109–129. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.1790615>.

Gordon, N. (2025) 'Sustainability and AI: Ethics at the Edge of Innovation', ITNow, 67(4), pp. 10–11. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/itnow/bwaf111>.

Gunn, W. (2013) Design anthropology : theory and practice. 1st ed. London ; Bloomsbury Academic.

Hyrnsalmi, S. et al. (2024) Software Business: 14th International Conference, ICSOB 2023, Lahti, Finland, November 27–29, 2023, Proceedings. 1st edn. Edited by S. Hyrnsalmi et al. Cham: Springer Nature. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-53227-6>.

Kent, J. (2024) 'Does urban design drive sympathy for the far right?', City, culture and society, 36. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2023.100553>.

Maciver, F. (2016) 'Reversing the Design-Marketing Hierarchy: Mapping New Roles and Responsibilities in "Designer-Led" New Product Development', The Design journal, 19(4), pp. 625–646. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2016.1176340>.

Maravilhas, S. and Martins, J. (2019) 'Strategic knowledge management in a digital environment: Tacit and explicit knowledge in Fab Labs', Journal of business research, 94, pp. 353–359. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.01.061>.

Richins, D. et al. (2021) 'AI Tax: The Hidden Cost of AI Data Center Applications', ACM transactions on computer systems, 37(1–4), pp. 1–32. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3440689>.

Salur, N. (2022) 'The Designer's Responsibility for a Sustainable Environment, Using Savaş Çekiç as a Model', Scope. Art [Preprint], (23). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1023011>.

Scherling, L.S. and Scherling (2024) Digital Transformation in Design : Processes and Practices. 1st ed. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839471425>.

Smith, R.C. et al. (2024) 'Towards pluriversality: decolonising design research and practices', CoDesign, 20(1), pp. 1–13. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2024.2379704>.

SPÄTH, JOHANNES (2025) END OF AN ERA: THE DECLINE OF NEOLIBERALISM AND THE EMERGING INTERREGNUM. OIIP - Austrian Institute for International Affairs.

Spitz, R. and Hunter, K. (2015) "'Design is not a Science": Otl Aicher's Constitutional Putsch at the HfG Ulm and His Credo for the Social Responsibility of Designers', Design issues, 31(1), pp. 7–17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI_a_00304.

Stalder, F. (2023) 'Breakdown 2.0? Systemic Blockages in Late-Stage Statism and Late-Stage Liberal Capitalism', The American behavioural scientist (Beverly Hills), 67(7), pp. 872–884. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221092799>.

Swan, Q. (2020) Pauulu's diaspora : Black internationalism and environmental justice. 1st ed. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Udoewa, V. (2022) 'An introduction to radical participatory design: decolonising participatory design processes', Design Science, 8. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/dsj.2022.24>.

Wood, J. (ed.) (2022) Metadesigning designing in the Anthropocene. New York: Routledge.

Vangkilde, K.T. (2017) 'Foretelling the future: The fashion designer as shaman', Anthropology today, 33(2), pp. 15–18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12336>.

Zanella, F. et al. (2024) Multidisciplinary Aspects of Design : Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives. 1st ed. 2024. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-49811-4>.