FUTURING DESIGN EDUCATION FOR A FUTURE

Tony Fry

Abstract
For design to realise its potential and meet the needs of a contemporary world in crisis the agenda of design education has to be transformed. This article identifies the origins of design’s current condition of limitation as service provision in the development of the teaching of design, specifically at The Open University. It proposes six premises to achieve change that address questions of ethics and restrictive practices. They recommend an expanded and more strategic approach to the form and content of design education, openness to unlearn in order to enable new learning, progressive leadership, and willingness to establish autonomous design practices.

Keywords: education, design, Anthropocene, ethics, unlearning, crisis, change, leadership

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Biographical note
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Design education does not have a single or predetermined future. Its form will arrive at the intersection of varied forces in different worldly contexts in which it is already implicated, or which are about to arrive. For example, the still deepening global and relationally complex crisis of unsustainability indicates that design has to go beyond forms of sustainability that sustain the unsustainable of a hyper-consumptive defuturing global economy. Design, likewise, has to understand its relation to technology in the increasing fragmentation of our ‘species being’. What this means, at one extreme, is the abandonment huge number of people displaced by conflict and climate change impacts, while at the other, it marks the rise of modes of the posthuman. Design also has to understand its implication in those activities that contribute to the loss of biodiversity that directly connects to the commencement of the sixth global extinction event (Quammen, 2012). What these three examples indicate is the disjuncture between design education and practice as it now is and how it needs to be. The notion of design for climate change or whatever, is going nowhere.

The imperative is the elevation and remaking of design in the coming decades so that it can contribute to the creation of a future in which our species has a future. The true importance of design screams out to be acknowledged beyond the way it now sees 'itself'.

Acknowledging where design education has come from since the arrival of The Open University in 1969 has a direct relation to where it has gone and in part is still going. In particular, the appointment of John Chris Jones as professor of design in the founding moment of the department, and his work and publications on design methods set a research direction that has continued. Likewise, and overlapping, in the early years Nigel Cross and Robin Roy established a not new, but stronger, relation between design and technology. In a different direction, but also influential was a course addressing the history of architecture and design, with contributions from Tim Benton, Stefan Muthesius, Stephen Bayley, Reyner Banham, and others. This course, retrospectively viewed, added momentum to the rise of design history as an emergent discipline.

So, without question, the OU played an important part in the development of design education as well as its condition of limitation. As such, in advancing the discipline of design it increased a division of knowledge that added to a schism between the study and practice of design and the omnipotent presence in the world as independent futural force beyond the control of the designer and ‘the design process’. Another division is that between ‘design history’ and the agency of design within history. From a contemporary perspective, albeit characterised in a very shorthanded way and in common with almost all design education to date, the condition of limitation is that it remains: (i) anthropocentric (human-centred design is its current expression), (ii) Eurocentric (the construction of design in the world via an imposed epistemological characterisation that excludes how other cosmologies understood/understand the propensity to prefigure), and (iii) mostly uncritically bonded to service provision (which predominantly means that so often the most important design decisions are made before the designer arrives on the scene). In the complexity of the world in which we now all live, design and design education, as will be indicated, needs to go beyond these conditions of limitation.

It just so happens that my own history intersects with the history I outlined. My professional career as a designer started in a studio of a film company in London’s Soho in 1969 with six years of work experience as a designer, a semester as a visiting designer in a US design school, as well as study and travel in Latin America. A decade later, with a design degree and industry experience, I gained a place at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, to undertake a Master’s degree and thereafter a PhD. The five years I spent at the CCCS changed my relation to knowledge, learning, design, and the world. In 1985, a year after graduating, I gained a position as a Lecturer at the Power Institute at Sydney University. I was hired to teach design history and theory. By 1988 I had written and published Design History Australia, the first and Eurocentrically critical text on design studies in Australia. Many books have followed, but what I want to make clear is that I have always retained a relation to design practice, working on projects in Australia (as director of the EcoDesign Foundation 1992-2002), the USA, Timor-Leste, Colombia, and Hong Kong. The critical position is indivisibly theoretically, practically, and politically informed.
Introduction
Design education’s plural trajectory in this period in the global North is denoted by an uneven passage from craft education in further education institutions to its induction into higher education and universities, with degrees displacing diplomas. In the UK, the Diploma in Art and Design established in 1960 was replaced by a degree in 1974 awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards. During the same period, art and design schools became incorporated into polytechnics and universities. Initially little changed, but the humanities started to arrive in design education under the aegis of terms like ‘general studies’, which often included art history and communications studies. By the mid- to late 1970s this started to be displaced by design history, mostly delivered from an art historical perspective. This tension resulted in a break, and design history gaining an independent status. The OU was one of the key actors of this moment, not least by the creation of course on the ‘History of Architecture and Design’ and the circulation of its course material well beyond the university. Alongside this, ‘Design Methods’ (directed at ‘how-to’ design) started to emerge, as did Design Research (directed at design process, design practice and design object function and qualities). Design Studies (the study of the history and theory of design) developed in the early 1980s, as design history methodologically broke away from art history. Bringing design history and theory together, it aimed to elevate itself in its own right as an academic discipline among disciplinary design (communication design, industrial design, interior design, fashion and more). All this happened, with difference, and at different rates, in various parts of the world. The scene was thus set in three respects: an Eurocentric model was globalised, the number of design programmes increased globally, and design as service provision became more professionalised.

Design education
What has been sketched, very briefly and lacking nuances, is the foundation upon which the status quo of design education has been built. But its future cannot be constituted out of them. This is because multiple critiques are exposing the weaknesses and limits of design education, albeit in its global difference, to adequately and appropriately meet the challenges of the age. These are relationally complex and include a geopolitical reconfiguration of power in the world as well as major enviro-climatic crises stemming from climate change, including conflict and rapid technological change with significant consequences for some groups of our species (Fry, 2020). Played through design, the professional practice is instrumentally bonded to serving the needs of an economy and provided by design education, and predicated upon growth and unrestrained hyper-consumption that combine to produce material and social impacts that are inherently unsustainable and thus negate the future (Fry, 2009). In this situation a double bind has become clear: the created dependence on this economy produces crises but is appealed to resolve crisis. The example of COVID-19 makes the point. Causally, it has been linked to the relation between loss of biodiversity, rapid urban development, and changes in non-domestic animal behaviour (Quammen, 2012) establishing the condition in which a global pandemic emerged that in turn created a worldwide economic crisis while the revitalisation of the unsustainable economy is posited as the solution.

Design’s articulation to serving this economy is not merely a structural problem but equally on ontological one intrinsic to the habitus of almost every designer – which is to say, it is part of a thinking which is taken for granted, and so un-thought. At the most general level, what this means is that the relations and practices of service are simply taken as the reality of the world in which they function. So framed, design education and practice are dislocated from the omnipresence and omnipotence of design. What this means is that design, as the designed, has constituted the historical and contemporary form of the ‘world-within-the-world’ that our species made and inhabits. Its vast and complex relationality is the consequence of design as integral to artifice (and event – the ongoing designing of the designed) in general and to the conscious practice of designing in the past and present. There is thus a vast gulf between the worldly present of design and the restrictive way in which design created as a division of knowledge and how it is practised, taught, presented, viewed, and so often trivialised (especially as characterised as ‘style’ and ‘object’). Consider: no matter who or where we are, our species lives in a world of human fabrication within the world. Neither design education nor practice situates their understanding of design in this complexity. Moreover, all design service provision that receives and acts upon a given brief – which means the most fundamental design decisions are already predetermined. Consequently, designers act in conditions of ethical disempowerment. While not new, contemporary circumstances have rendered this condition of limitation critical. This is especially evident in the defuting impetus of unsustainability that is negating the very possibility of life. The announcement that the sixth planetary extinction has now commenced and that life is now
lived in the age of the Anthropocene, are shorthand, if problematic, ways of naming of this moment. We live in the end times – which means that life is lived, by millions of people, who know or feel that life, as it has been known, has no future.

Technology is implicated in this situation in two contradictory ways. It is taken to be the saving power, and as such the means by which the problems that threaten will be solved. Yet, it is deeply implicated in the creation of these problems. The unsustainable arrived, and still arrives, by design and technology (Fry, 2009). But its effects are not just worldly; they impact upon ‘us’ and further fragment the species. This is to say, the divide between the technologically rich and poor (well beyond a digital divide) is not just a cultural and economic difference but an increasingly an ontological one. The still unfolding debate on the posthuman evidences this, with its exposure that at its most basic, as a species, we are fragmenting (Roden, 2015). The extreme end-times registration of this is the Singularity’ (a complete giving over to artificial intelligence) and ‘planetary abandonment’ (see Mars as the desired future).

Obviously, there are very many designers and design educators deeply concerned about ‘the state of the world’ who attach themselves to a quasi-design politics: sustainable design, design against climate change, transitional design, the decolonisation of design, and so on. But design as it is, lacks the agency, the power, to be a real change agent. For actual transformative change to occur, for design to become futural, the very practice itself has to be changed, as does design education. Naivety has to be made present and then abandoned. There are two qualifications to be made on this statement. It is not made lightly. It comes from a history of working through, and investing in, design ‘progressivism’ over decades – from design for alternative technology, green/ecodesign, design for sustainability, design and the global South, in projects and education institutions in Europe, the Asia Pacific, and the Americas. My experience has shown me that there is so much more to learn and that making design political is not a choice but essential. Second, such change cannot happen quickly, but the process has to begin now. What follows is very clipped overview of what this could look like.

**Agenda setting from the outside to the inside**

There are six basic premises of futural design education to be posed, each with a starting point. All of them are modifiable by conjunctural differences – there can be no universal model of design education that flattens cultural and situated difference (which has been the case with the epistemological colonialism of the Eurocentric export of design education).

**Premise One.** The agenda of design education has to come from the ethical, worldly imperatives as they arrive in the specificity of place. Understanding how to research, and learning how to read the agency of ‘design in the world’, thus becomes a fundamental educational element. The key point here is that the economic and practice pragmatics of design need to be subordinated to this knowledge. This implies directional changes: designers working commercially need to gain and develop a redirecive capability; they, and aspiring designers, need to learn how to acquire the means to become independent, while developing a career that economically sustains them.

**Premise Two.** Disciplinary disobedience has to be a primary feature of design education and practice. The restrictive practice of the discipline and practice is a condition of limitation that has been built over many decades. It is a major obstacle to the advancement of design and needs to be broken. Design’s presence in the world is unbounded, the discourse of design negates a recognition of this: design gets reduced to object, style, method, or process. Design gets disengaged from: history (by design history as it disarticulates design as a historical actor), its embedded presence in practices of making (by exclusive specialism), and, from being an integral ontological characteristic of our being (by being claimed as a gift of the gifted). The implication is that design education now needs to become dialogically transdisciplinary, which means being more informed by, and informing, other disciplines.

**Premise Three.** Design education, as already implied, has to be a far more substantial education, and certainly go well beyond what is still dominantly a ‘how-to’ approach. Currently designers do not learn how to understand design’s agency in the world, as world-making. To do this means grasping design is process, not product; everything designed goes on designing – and this directly links to understanding ‘design in time’ (that is, design in the medium of time and design(ers) acting with strategic knowledge and urgency in the face of defuturing forces). There can be no real design responsibility until this view of design is understood.

In this respect, education on the agency of design needs to be seen as absolutely critical and elemental to education at large.

**Premise Four.** Directed unlearning design is a precondition for new learning. As has been suggested for design to gain its now appropriate agency for a planet and species (us) in crisis, it has to be redirected and remade. For this to happen a clearing, an unlearning, of the extant habitus of the designer, and their
understanding of design, has to happen. By implication, this has to start with design educators. Unevenly, this varies between being recognised by a few progressives, and being completely overlooked by the majority. Change threatens, especially when it undercuts the knowledge upon which careers are built. This means a milieu has to be created, transition programmed and support given, in professional development. All this is a design process and project of incremental development over time and in its own right.

Premise Five. Transformative design leadership: there are only few leaders of this ilk inside and outside of design who recognise that there is a crisis in design because design is negatively situated in a planetary and bio-human crisis (Fry & Nocek, 2020). Leadership in this context is not about directing or guiding design students, educators, or professionals toward a pre-given solution. Rather, it is about enabling ‘the concerned’ to commence the kind of process outlined. What is recognised here is that this will be a minority, albeit a significant one. Their actual leadership significance will arrive in a still indeterminant moment of breakdown, the signs of which have already arrived. COVID-19 was not an aberrant event but a consequence of worsening conditions reducing biodiversity (Quammen, 2012). The bush fires in Australia in late 2019 and early 2020 that killed over a billion native animals, destroyed 20% of the nation’s forests and produced a plume of smoke that encircled the globe was not a one-off event but part of an ongoing pattern, and the crisis of ever-reducing biodiversity is not going to stop. These are but three examples of the much larger environ-climatic and geopolitical crisis that has now predestined breakdown. What is on the other side of this will, in part, be decided by design, and the efficacy of design in this context is being decided now and in the not-too-distant future.

Premise Six. Autonomous design and the autonomous designer will be, and need to be, an important part of design education and practice (Escobar, 2017). In short, what this means is communities exercising design power, in their own right, and independent designers authoring futural projects of significance that are economically viable. To do this requires new knowledge, skills, and a sensibility that fully comprehends that a paradigmatic transformation of design is inevitable, albeit its form being uncertain. What is clear is that design educators and designers need a far more critical and comprehensive understanding of the worlds in which design arrives and acts, especially in the context of the enormous challenges facing humanity. It is this understanding that directs the transformation of design and designing.

Further elaboration of these six premises will be necessary to fully evaluate them. Defenders of the status quo will recoil from them; progressives will think them over and by degrees embrace them and recognise that they all beg more consideration and development. Ultimately, these premises pose a question to The Open University: will the progressive leadership that made design a domain of study and practice in the past be displayed again by taking design into the uncertain future?

Bibliography