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A Designer's Manifesto: Designing in a Complex World

Ankita Roy

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By Ankita Roy

Design today is going through a period of huge transformation. As a practice, it is being redefined. Designers are formally being invited to contribute to conversations and projects they had previously only marginally (if indeed ever) been a part of—for instance, to improve aesthetics. Today, it is not uncommon to find designers alongside leaders of multinational organizations, in government positions with policy makers, or with principals at schools experimenting with larger strategic roles. More than ever, design is in the spotlight, and non-design fields are looking to the practice to understand some of their most complex problems.

It is a fascinating thing to be involved in design at this pivotal point in time. There is no shortage of wicked problems to tackle; with all the advances we have made as a civilization, it is perplexing and overwhelming to consider the vastness of certain issues that currently exist. Today, there are more slaves in the world than in any point in history.¹ And in the same world, we have offices filled to the

brim with highly educated, considerably middle-class people who are bored out of their minds, feeling disempowered and disconnected from their jobs.

The status quo is broken. The way in which we operate in the world—the way our governments are run and our organizations are structured—all rely too heavily on the methods and models mastered during the industrial era. When established, these models were driven by a quest for productivity and efficiency through scale. These were not incorrect goals, but our relentless push for such attributes has created an environment that is neither efficient nor productive. Collectively, we have arrived at a point in which the world is too big, rigid, complex, and compartmentalized—preventing us from making meaningful progress altogether.²

It helps to think of it as diseconomies of scale. Ubiquitous in the economist's worldview, economies of scale is a concept used to demonstrate the way in which increasing the unit of output results in a lower cost of production (hence, why bulk items tend to be a better value for the money.) However, this cannot go on forever. At a certain point, we enter a new paradigm, diseconomies of scale, in which we see increasing production costs following an increase in output. In other words, overindulging in one thing—even if it's a good thing—doesn't always yield positive outcomes. Moderation, as we all know, is key.

Theoretically, this makes sense, yet its practical application in how the real world operates is bleak. One could perhaps argue confidently that most large institutions around the world, both public and private, are operating to some degree—if not all—on diseconomies of scale. In particular, the fixation on becoming bigger and operating on larger scales has led to complexity and diminishing returns. The greatest irony in all of this is that our establishments have become so inflated that they are far removed from the very people they set out to serve.

Thinking forward to the upcoming decades, I am positive design will play a strategic role in understanding issues that have traditionally been excluded from

the designer's realm. However, I assert that it is far too simplistic to claim that one particular thing is going to improve the world. I do not wish to imply that design is the end-all solution to everything. Instead, I advocate that design has the potential to encourage and instill within our societies fundamental mindset shifts, which will consequently drive more thoughtful action. We have to change the way in which we think in order to unlearn our damaging inclinations to solve problems by adding more layers to that problem. When we do this, we only add complexity, ultimately leading toward diseconomies of scale. The unlearning happens with the designer, who plays a key role in facilitating this shift.

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The following changes must occur for design to make a positive change in the near future. The designer must:

1. Consider multiple narratives: It is our responsibility to make a concerted effort to learn multiple sides of the same story. We have become accustomed to seeing our world with tunnel vision. I am moved by Sadie Plant's words in *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn, and Other Anomalies from the Dark Side of Digital Culture*, in which she writes, “Viruses are largely judged in negative terms... And yet it is clear that they can often have extremely productive and creative effect.”³ With this, she nods to the messiness of the world—that things don't just have a good or bad side, but rather that multiple narratives are constantly at play. Moving forward, we must become cognizant of this more so than we currently are. We must also strive to understand the multiple consequences of our decisions.

2. Accept the limitations of our knowledge: Orit Halpern writes in her article “Test-Bed Urbanism,” “The present is not known, and the future is not already here.”⁴ This statement feels liberating. To me, it is an acknowledgement of the limitations of our knowledge. Part of the reason we are in our current state of the world is due to our obsession with control and desire to feel dominant. Our lives are data driven, and because of this, it is easy to feel as if we know everything. Halpern’s words come as a gentle reminder that perhaps we don’t. This helps us start from a place of humility. When we begin by accepting that our knowledge is limited, we liberate ourselves from the artificial expectations of perfection. This, I believe, is required for the way we design in the future, which must embrace prototyping and iterative techniques instead of polished and packaged solutions.

3. Embrace death and failure: Humans fear death (in nature, animals, and people all the same). Death and failure have a strong relationship to each other. The idea of death alludes to a failure of life. At the BarnRaise conference organized by Illinois Institute of Technology, Institute of Design, I learned that palliative care nurses were referred to as “doctor death.”⁵ This speaks to widespread negative perception in our society of what it means for something to die, or be near death. Furthermore, in Joseph Tainter’s writing about the collapse of civilizations, it becomes evident that we as a species are uncomfortable with the idea of our modern civilization ever collapsing (i.e. dying).⁶ I challenge this notion entirely and push to live in a world where we embrace the vulnerability of life and accept that it comes to an end.

With all this being said, I believe now is an exciting time to be in design. Taking these beliefs on board, I present the following values I want to echo in my work as a designer:

1. Practice radical collaboration: In the design world, we are on the right trajectory with encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration. This is just the beginning, and we have started to scratch at the surface of the value that can be derived from collaborative efforts. Looking ahead to the next few decades, we must move into radical collaboration between different institutions, agencies, businesses, and so forth. Current modes of working are driven by a silo mentality. This behavior has not been sustainable; the interconnectedness of the world and the growing scale of societal, economical, environmental, and political problems require a fundamental shift in how we work together. This is where radical collaboration comes in, which looks to encouraging unprecedented partnerships with an outward-focused priority to shift the needle on some of the most pressing issues of our time.

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2. Focus on and learn from hyper-local communities: Small is beautiful. During a time when everyone seems to want to discuss globalization, I will assert that there is tremendous wisdom and knowledge to be acquired from scaling our perspectives to hyper-local communities. Behind the clash, conflict, and confusion in our world lies misunderstanding and miscommunication. As we become fixated on addressing issues at large scales and taking on a macro perspective in designing solutions, we forget to account for the significance of local nuances. Our neglect and trivialization of hyper-local communities leads to a vast underutilization of an incredible set of resources that rest within smaller populations (such as the value of relationships, informal histories, a sense of belonging, and collective identity). These are the factors that are not represented in aggregate data sets and rigid models—the very tools

decision-makers have traditionally relied on. As a designer, I vouch to take a stand against this and, instead, create thoughtful solutions one community at a time.

3. Address uncomfortable issues: History is full of leaders who were bold enough to speak about issues that made people uncomfortable. Too many issues are deemed “sensitive” or “unpopular” for general discussion—these are the topics that get swept under the rug for fear of disrupting values and belief systems. There are consequences to this. Many of these taboo topics affect those existing on the fringes of society. Digging deeper into these issues, we often realize that it is not the topic itself but rather an accrued list of underlying factors, misunderstandings, and skewed perceptions that contribute to the stigma and sensitivities. I see the designer’s role as being crucial in tackling uncomfortable issues, for I believe that to design is in fact to communicate.

It is indeed a challenging time in the world right now. Complexity is everywhere. This opens up the space for designers to step in and contribute at a systemic and strategic level, in a way they have never done before. This is an exciting prospect for the practice, and to take full advantage of it requires certain beliefs and values. The values I have listed above are simply a start. They will help me stay grounded and focus on what I intrinsically believe to be important. This manifesto therefore acts as a compass for my behavior, decision-making, and action as I design in a world full of complexity.

Endnotes

1. "Slavery is Everywhere," *Free the Slaves*, <http://www.freetheslaves.net/about-slavery/slavery-today/>.
 2. Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
 3. Sadie Plant, foreword to *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn, and Other Anomalies from the Dark Side of Digital Culture*, ed. Jussi Parikka and Tony D. Sampson (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2011).
 4. Orit Halpern, Jesse LeCavalier, Nerea Calvillo, and Wolfgang Pietsch, "Test-Bed Urbanism," *Public Culture*, 25:2 (2013): 272-306.
 5. "BarnRaise 2015: Designing for Improved Access to Care," *BarnRaise*, <http://www.idbarnraise.com/>.
 6. Tainter, *The Collapse*.
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