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Silverman, Howard

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**Relating Systems Thinking and Design
2022 Symposium
University of Brighton, Brighton, UK,
October 13-16, 2022**

Design For/In/Of Time

Howard Silverman

Pacific Northwest College of Art, Willamette University

As a future-focused activity, design is always about time. In this talk, I distinguish temporal stances and explore them through a three-part framework: design for, in, and of time. I contemplate this for/in/of framework as follows. To design for time is to aim for a particular temporal experience as a desired outcome or emergent facility of one's design efforts. Artefacts like clocks and cathedrals, for example, each anchor human activity systems that constrain and afford temporal awareness, with very different results. Meanwhile, service and user experience designs often aim for temporal values such as convenience and efficiency. Next, given that each of us lives in time, I describe an appreciation of one's design-in-time stance as cultivating a reflexive awareness of one's temporal positionalities, perhaps thereby avoiding presumptive pitfalls of individual and socio-cultural temporocentrism, such as Eurocentric historical periodisations. Third, with a design-of-time approach, one focuses attention on time itself, that is, on the potential variety and malleability of temporal compositions, perhaps by facilitating self-reflective examinations of temporal experiences, metaphors, and values. In exploring these stances and their interrelationships, I aim to elicit questions and ruminations on time-design and on how one's design for/in/of time might contribute to one's purposes and presences; however, they are conceived and expressed.

KEYWORDS: temporality, futures, cybernetics, preposition play

RSD: Society & Culture

Presentation description

This presentation is part of a broader enquiry in which I explore the hypothesis that significant social change requires an accompanying change in how time itself is socially composed (DeLoria, 1972/1994; Milojević, 2008; Phillips, 2017/2018). To illustrate, recall various pronouncements that we live in a time between worlds, a transitory phase, and then consider the reverse proposition: We also live in a world between times. That is, from the vantage point of today's transitory world, perhaps a principal distinction between past and future might be described as how people living in these different eras construe time differently.

"[A]t last it came to me that time was suspect," reflected an elderly Albert Einstein (Ermarth, 1992). That time bears interrogating is an insight that still reverberates (Dator, 2017/2019; Christophilopoulos, 2021). As RSD11 organisers have recognised, "design over time" is a critical area of focus for the systemic design community.

A principal challenge of temporal investigations is that, being in time, presuppositions about time are not easily surfaced, let alone shed. "[T]he basic problem in futures research is that the 'present' is all-consuming" (Inayatullah, 1993). "Every time we try to think outside the box, we're probably reproducing the box in a different way" (Andreotti, 2020).

One way of engaging with presuppositions is to play with prepositions, a technique I associate with cybernetics. Ranulph Glanville (2005) described preposition play as offering the possibility of "shock[ing] us into new insights." Larry Richards (2017) described the cybernetician as "a potential craftsman in and with time." Adopting this prepositional word craft, I explore temporal relationships through a trio of stances: design for/in/of time, as described in the abstract.

Using this framework as a lens on the voluminous and varied literature about time, I seek to contribute to the development of a distinctively designerly approach. Three ways this framework might prove illuminating are as follows. Retrospectively, given the dominant design of time as regularly punctuated and metaphorically marching on, one might examine how powerful actors designed temporal arrangements for particular purposes. Analogically, researching indigenous, feminist, Afrofuturist, and non-Western cosmologies, one might consider how perhaps unfamiliar designs of time are instantiated in arrangements for time, giving rise to experiences of being in time. Prospectively, one might experiment with ways of engendering fresh explorations of time-design.

Throughout this talk, I seek to navigate fundamental complexities of design. Given the scientific groundings that underlie temporal understandings, I aim to distinguish between discovery and invention (von Foerster, 1984/2003). Also, given the self-organising patterns that emerge from or perhaps irrespective of our designs, I aim to distinguish such patterns from designerly purposes and plans (Kurtz, 2021).

This presentation builds on work with students Ameenah Carroll, Inbar Sharon, and Madeline Silberger-Franek in the 2021 Strategy+Foresight class in the Collaborative Design MFA / Design Systems MA programs at Pacific Northwest College of Art, Willamette University. There, we took Fred Polak's (1955/1973) "image of the future" as a starting point for our investigations. That work will be presented at the Anticipation 2022 Conference under the title "Decolonizing the Image."

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