Faculty of Design

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Mapping Future Oriented Design Practices

Tekogul, Irem

Mapping future-oriented design practices

Irem Tekogul, PhD Candidate

Institute of Design | Illinois Institute of Technology

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RSD11

IIT Institute of Design

Precarity
as global vulnerability

Precariousness is a profound and objective uncertainty over the future to the extent that "there will be no future" becomes a dominant vision (Pulcini 2020).

Precarity
as global vulnerability

"Defuturing as our condition forces the generation of a new philosophy of design."

Tony Fry (1999, 10)
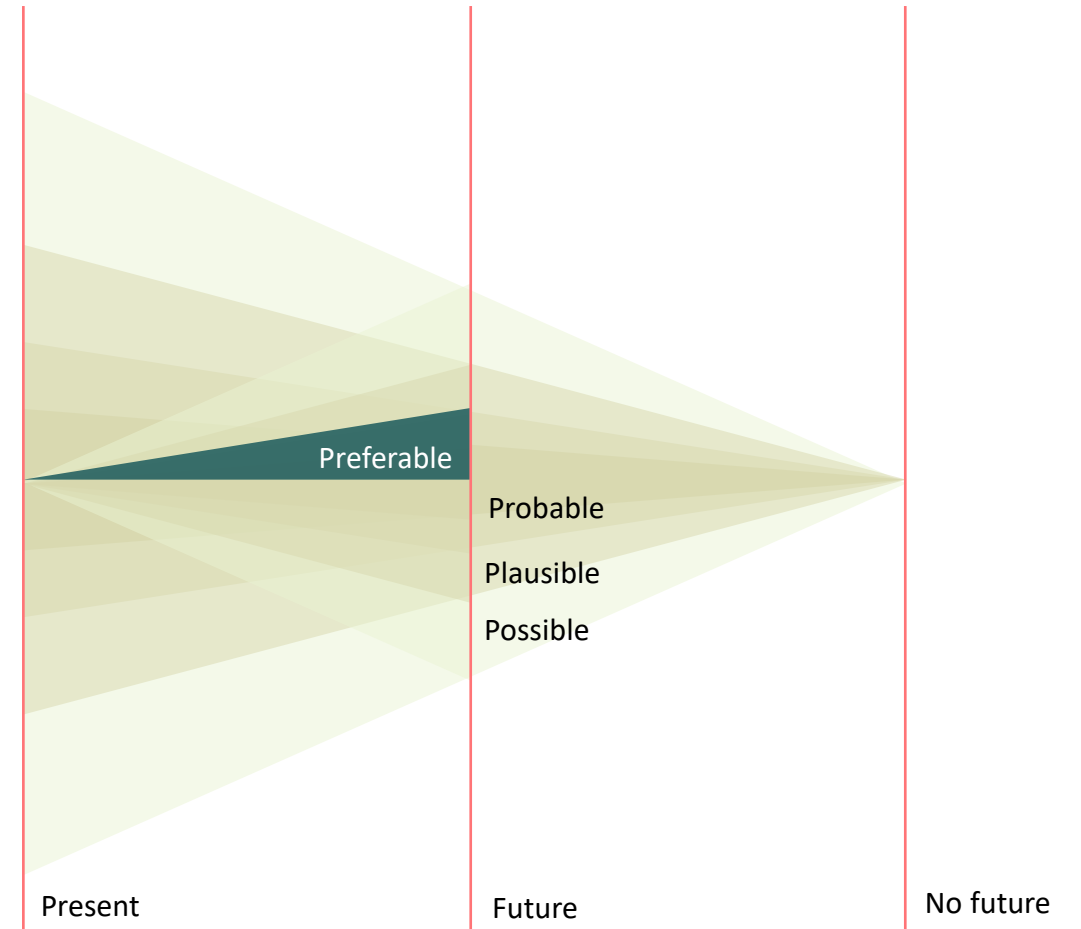
Fig. 1. "No futures". This graph depicts designers tunnel vision
Adapted from Redstrom, J. (2017). Making design theory. MIT Press.

"We are all designers, and we are all designed; hence, we must take responsibility for the worlds we co-create. Design/ing emerges as a praxis of healing the web of life, a sketch/ a stich/ a loop. A meme. An action at a time, collectively, anytime, anywhere."

Arturo Escobar (2020)

Feminist care ethics

Care is "… everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."

Joan Tronto (1993, 103)

Feminist care ethics

"Care is everything that is done to maintain, continue, and repair "the world" so that all can live in it as well as possible. That world includes . . . all that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."

María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 161)

Expanding scope of design/ing

- Orientation towards complex large-scale challenges

- Blurring boundaries of "things"

- Decentering the human
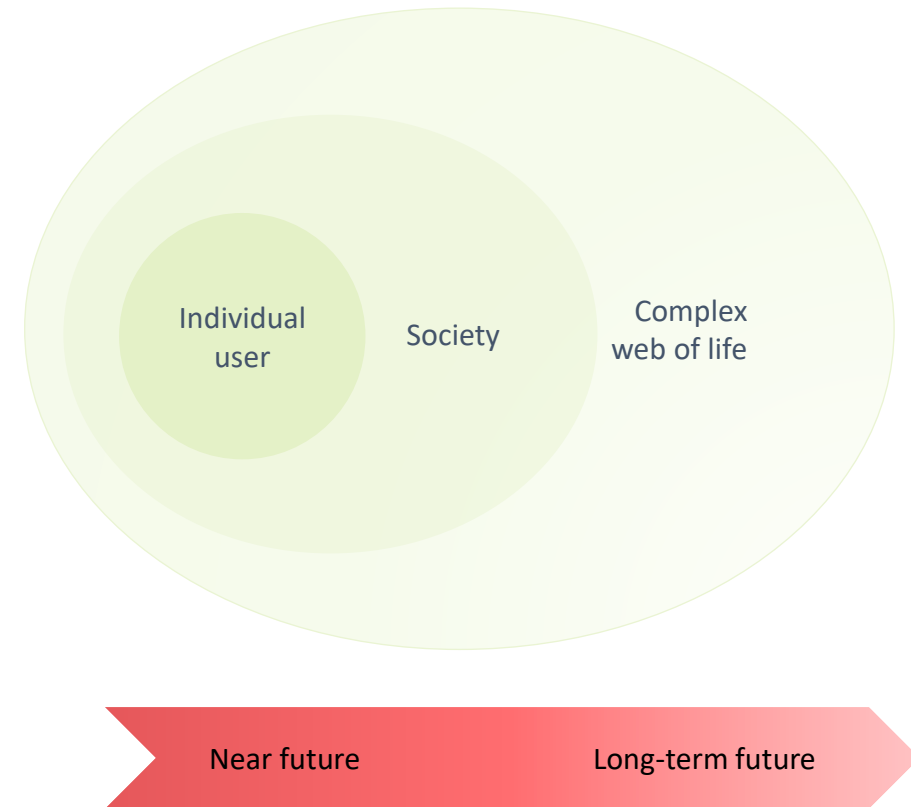
Fig. 2. Expansion of design beyond individual user and near-term future

Future-oriented responsibility

Design is seen as giving form to futures (Mazé, 2016). Recognizing precarity as the condition of global vulnerability and uncertainty that designers are implicated in (Light et al., 2017), helps us extend our responsibility beyond the human and the present. I argue that the conceptualization of 'care' provides a lens to develop a framework for future-oriented responsibility in design.
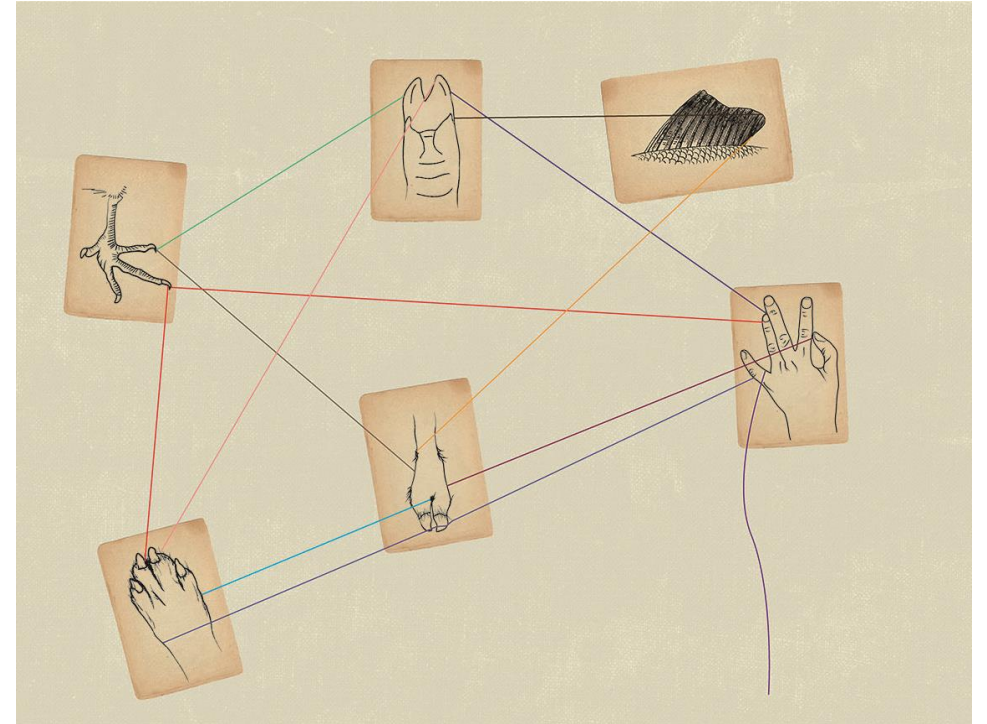
Fig. 3. Multispecies Cat's Cradle" by Nassir Mufti (2011).

How can we design
with/*through*/*for* care?

How can we design
with/*through*/*for* care?

How can emerging technologies be designed with care?
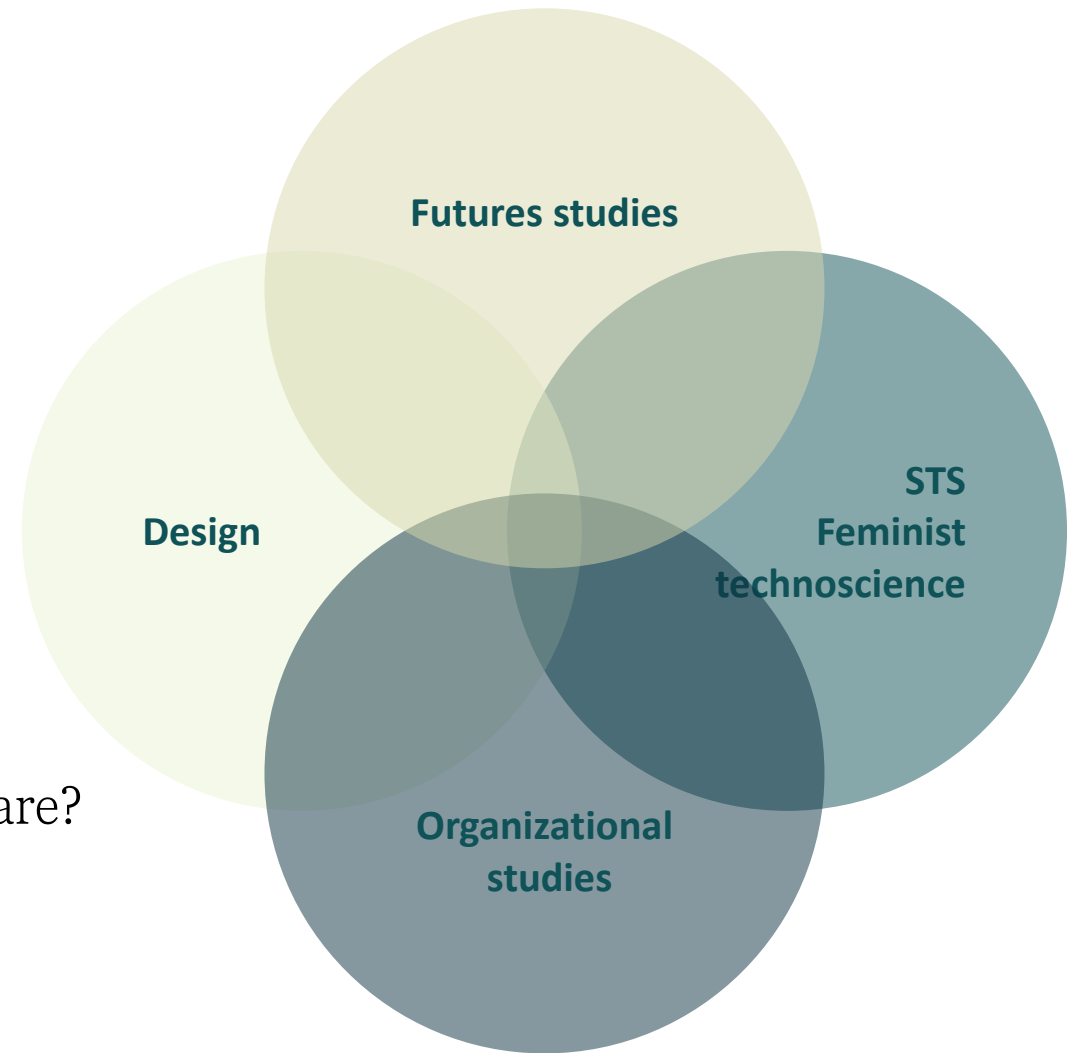
Methodology

18-month participant observation at the Silicon Valley R&D division of a multi-national technology company

Qualitative interviews with R&D researchers and managers

Exploratory case study approach for understanding "how" and "what" of the future-oriented emerging design practices

Fig. 4. Graphic representation of spiral case study. Adapted from Gherardi, S. (2019). *How to conduct a practice-based study: Problems and methods*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Field site context

Four major organizational shifts influence the emergence of new design practices.

1. Product economy to solution economy

2. Technical innovation to social innovation

3. Traditional R&D to R&D+

4. Individual user to *society* as the user

Changing R&D strategy to expand the scope of their offering to include comprehensive solutions to foster systems-level change rather than advancing discrete technologies

scale

Ecosystem design

Co-creation

System integration

time
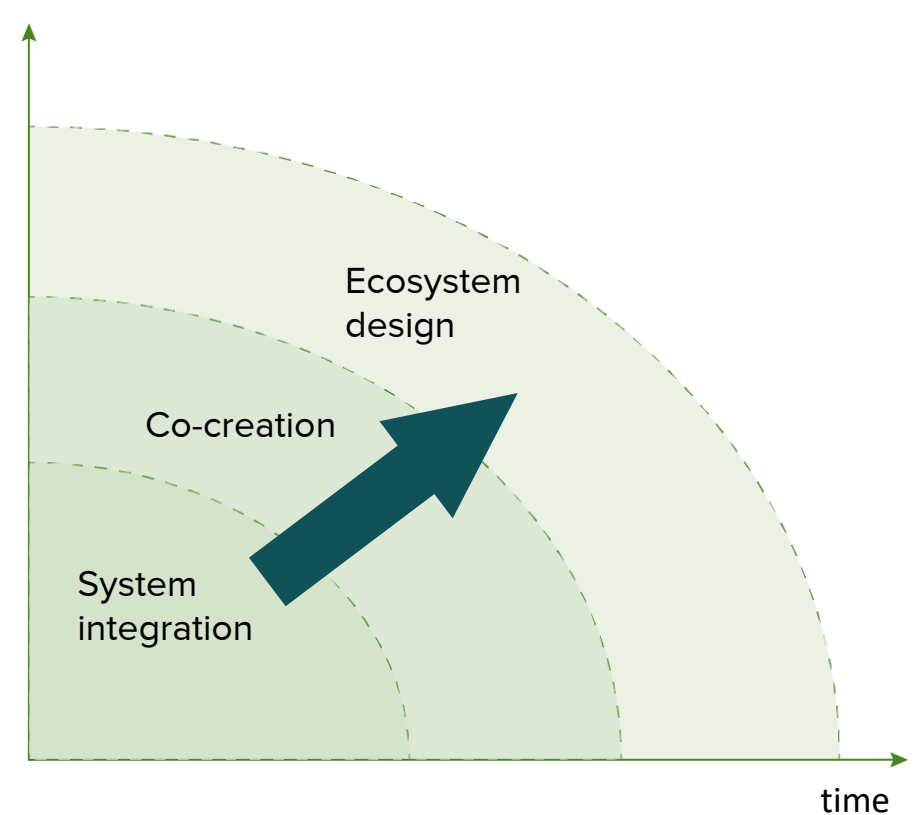
Fig. 5. Illustration of changing focus of R&D strategy

How corporate futures are made

Deterministic approaches view the future as singular and as an extension of the present which unfolds in predictable ways based solely techno-scientific trajectories on the past, which could be exploited and colonized (Adam and Groves 2011). However, how we relate to our futures is laden with complex ethico-political concerns.

Innovation *Creates* **Tomorrow**

"Because it is clear the future belongs to the data-driven."

Fig. 6. Examples of corporate messaging

Mapping practices

Approaches such as speculative and critical design, design fiction, experiential futures offer tools and methods to catch a glimpse of an "otherwise" future. Yet, the integration of such approaches to innovation practices in technology organizations have been limited. Mapping design practices highlight the limited capacity to embed care into organizational practices.

Preliminary findings

- Foresight as generative critique
- Futures-thinking as highly specialized knowledge
- New forms of organizing

Mapping practices

Foresight as generative critique

Foresight aims to help building reflexive capacity to foster open-ended exploration of plural futures through speculative scenarios and prompts, and to challenge assumptions about the future.
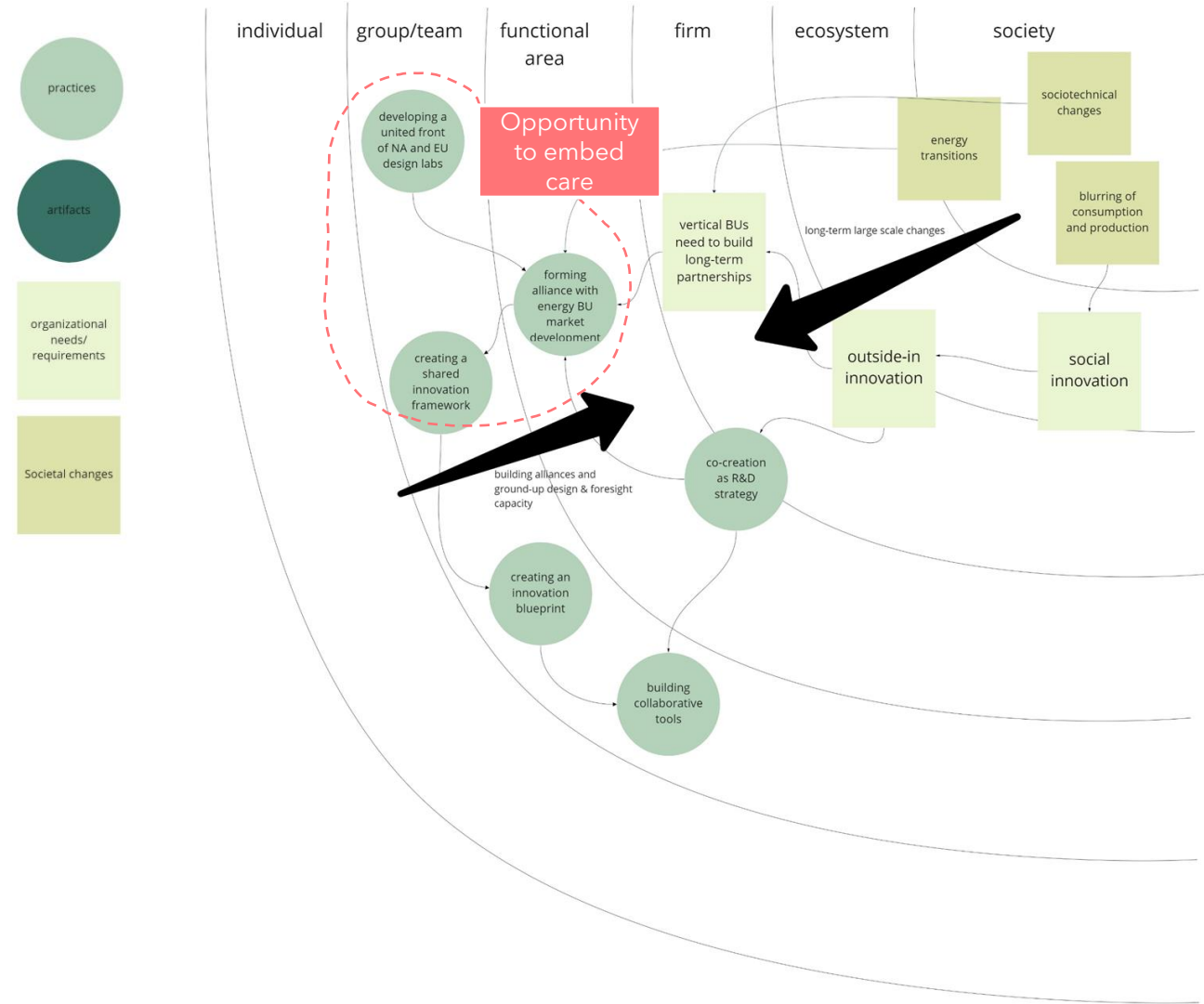
Mapping practices

Futures-thinking as highly specialized knowledge work

Design teams seek to capitalize on futures-thinking as competence. While Covid-19 pandemic catalyzed the increasing salience of futures-thinking in the industry, several other organizational changes led design team to pursue honing on futures work as a highly technical expertise.

practices

artifacts

organizational needs/ requirements

Societal changes

individual group/team functional area firm ecosystem society

developing a united front of NA and EU design labs

Opportunity to embed care

forming alliance with energy BU market development

creating a shared innovation framework

vertical BUs need to build long-term partnerships

long-term large scale changes

energy transitions

sociotechnical changes

blurring of consumption and production

building alliances and ground-up design & foresight capacity

co-creation as R&D strategy

outside-in innovation

social innovation

creating an innovation blueprint

building collaborative tools

Mapping practices

New forms of organizing

Emerging future-oriented practices are influencing new modes of organizing. New alliances are built, new knowledge flows are formed, and new collaboration opportunities are identified based on futures making practices. Some of these started out as informal and unstable networks, and became solidified.

practices

artifacts

organizational needs/ requirements

Societal changes

individual | group/team | functional area | firm | ecosystem | society

developing a united front of NA and EU design labs

barriers to working with horizontal BUs

creating a shared organizational model

vertical BUs need to build long-term partnerships

sociotechnical changes

long-term large scale changes

blurring of consumption and production

creating a vision-led shared innovation framework

building alliances and ground-up design & foresight capacity

outside-in innovation

social innovation

co-creation as R&D strategy

Opportunity to embed care

creating an innovation blueprint

building collaborative tools

Fostering *vital futures*

Case studies show that care-oriented design practices that engage with futures critically and generatively are already emerging, albeit in the margins. The impact of these practices is limited in scale, yet they can be powerful to mobilize action.

Building on feminist care ethics, I propose that in order to address precarity design practitioners in technology organizations should embrace what I term "vital futures" that center care as an ethico-political commitment to "maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible".

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Thank you!

Irem Tekogul

itekogul@id.iit.edu

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