



Faculty of Design

2023

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Suggested citation:

MacLoud, Emily and West, Ashleigh (2023) Futuring: Toward a more inclusive and empathetic approach. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design Volume: RSD12, 06-20 Oct 2023. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4911/>

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Futuring: Toward A More Inclusive And Empathetic Approach

Ashleigh West and Emily MacLoud

Abstract:

In a world marked by rapid and constant change, societies are grappling with transitions like never before. Designers are often at the forefront of this change, navigating ethical implications and confronting uncomfortable truths while interacting with individuals who hold differing opinions to drive meaningful change.

This article delves into the designer's responsibility to be self-aware and their position in "design defuturing," meaning their influence on negating certain futures. To demonstrate how designers defuture, the authors provide experiences of narrowing the scope in design projects through speculative scenarios and reflect on the implications of this practice. The article offers the potential of mindfulness and Buddhist frameworks to guide designers toward creating futures and producing design fictions that are egoless, detached from outcomes, and recognise impermanence and the interdependence of all beings. These practices help designers to enact "contra-innovation" and challenge the dominant narratives and actions of innovation that defuture.

The concept of non-self challenges designers to go beyond their individual perspectives and ego-driven design approaches. It helps designers to step outside of themselves and better connect with the people and planet they are designing with and for. This encourages a more inclusive, adaptable, and empathetic approach that aligns with human-centred and sustainable design principles.

KEYWORDS: Futuring and Defuturing, Speculative design, Buddhism, Mindfulness, Design Practice

RSD TOPIC(S): Entanglements of Policy and Power

Introduction

As designers navigate the world of rapid and constant change, they are tasked with transforming systems and crafting futures. On design projects, they are often thrust to the forefront of ethical challenges, trying to balance competing interests and find alignment between stakeholders who may hold vastly different perspectives. In a world of dualities, where every opinion has a contradicting one, designers are often the ones who are tasked with making the decisions themselves or helping others make the decisions between these opposing views. In these settings, it is important for designers to be aware of their character and how their actions influence. At every moment of the design process, designers are biasing the outcome and laying the foundations on which futures are built. They are, what has been called, “defuturing” (Fry, 1999). That is, they are negating certain futures in favour of others.

This article explores the authors' experiences with defuturing and narrowing the scope in design projects through speculative scenarios. It delves into the impacts this can have on project outcomes and on the designer's themselves. Design fiction and speculative design have emerged as valuable methodologies for critiquing the status quo and envisioning the possible, highlighting the social, cultural, and ethical dimensions of new technologies and systems. Yet, these projects, by necessity, typically focus on one *thing*. This narrowing is crucial in order to progress projects forward and make them manageable. However, this practice can lead to situations where certain futures are critiqued and denied from flourishing in favour of others. This can cause designers ongoing stress as they take on the responsibility for steering the project towards certain futures over others.

Mindfulness and Buddhist frameworks are offered as a way of reframing the designers role in futuring. These practices encourage self-awareness, helping designers recognise and scrutinise their own perspectives. They can play an effective role in guiding designers toward creating futures and producing design fictions that are ego-less, detached from outcomes and help designers to recognise the impermanence and interdependence of all beings. These practices can help designers to enact

“contra-innovation”. They can help designers to see the “othered” (Perera and Fry, 2022, p. 15) and challenge the dominant narratives and actions of innovation that defuture.

This article argues that designers should develop self-awareness practices and question their own view. It is encouraging designers to take an inclusive and empathetic approach to futuring, that avoids overemphasising their own personal importance, especially in the context of problem-solving. It aims to expose how these practices can help designers move beyond their individual perspectives and ego-driven design approaches and better connect with the people and planet they are designing with and for. It encourages designers to embrace the fluid nature of their own identities. Understanding oneself is not a mere self-indulgent exercise, but a critical prerequisite for designers to tackle complex problems.

The designer's environment

The world we live in today is rife with systemic challenges that affect us all. Increasingly, designers are being tasked with navigating these challenges and transforming systems, not just solving wicked problems. Shaped by macro forces, the designer’s environment is often subject to major uncontrollable external forces which generally cannot be altered by the singular actions of a designer, nor the organisation they are working with. (Encyclopedia of Management, 2023). As the impact of natural disasters is increasing and social issues that were once pushed aside become impossible to ignore, designers are stepping up and using their tools to craft new systems and new futures. As Orsucci (2023) describes, design is being used to manage complexities, create positive incentive systems, and ideate whole new systems to ultimately improve human life. From designing new transportation systems and national social services and policy programs, through to ideating economic paradigms, urban design, and sustainable transitions, designers are being tasked to imagine some very far-fetched futures. As philosophied by Fry (1999) and again reiterated by Perera (2022), as these futures are created, others are destroyed.

As designers grapple with these challenging briefs and the weight of “defuturing”, they are met with a series of ethical conundrums. As Weinstein (2019) observes, innovation within these settings is inescapably intertwined with power. Notably, within government services, procurement processes mean that designers are often afforded power over the way projects are scoped, who is engaged and how the project is carried out. Even

with the best intentions, because of the power dynamics at play, designers may end up making decisions based on unfounded assumptions or biased evidence. Making the invisible visible and acknowledging this power imbalance is a good place to start. One approach is to use reflexive toolkits, which can provide a framework for designers to reflect on their own biases and assumptions. However, these toolkits are often only surface-level. That is, they don't address the worldviews held by the designers who are in these positions of power. They also don't provide a consistent and comprehensive framework that support designers when they are met with other challenges.

Designers in these settings must also face the reality of interacting with people whose values may not align with their own. In order to achieve meaningful change, stakeholders with differing opinions must be engaged. Even though designers may sometimes feel challenged by things that are shared in interviews or workshops, they must suppress their desire to discount or discredit these views. Designers must also remain open-minded and receptive to feedback from stakeholders. They must be willing to adjust their designs in response to criticism and incorporate new ideas into their work.

Within this environment, it's the designer's responsibility to be self-aware and how they are interacting with their context. This is the designer's challenge.

The designer's challenge

For designers who are tasked with designing futures within the challenging environment described above, knowing how one's biases, blind-spots and triggers affect their perspectives and stances is especially pertinent. This section outlines two of the most significant challenges facing designers: bias and cognitive bypassing. It frames the problems that the guides described later in the article aim to address. Knowing oneself is challenging and a life-long endeavour. For designers, recognising what is within their locus of control enables them to take proactive steps and can act as a protective layer against the challenging environment that surrounds them.

With regards to recognising bias, although humans have a natural ability to detect bias in others, we tend to have far less developed abilities when it comes to recognising bias in ourselves (Pronin, Lin and Ross, 2002). Contributing to this discrepancy is our tendency to rationalise our actions and attribute them to external factors. For designers

who are required to make decisions that can have significant impact, it is important to remain alert to these tendencies and actively strive to identify and address bias when it surfaces.

As part of understanding their own biases, designers may find it challenging to maintain fresh perspectives on design problems. A diminishing viewpoint could be a potential consequence, and if they overlook the systemic interactions around them, they could risk misinterpreting the potential implications of decisions they and their stakeholders make.

Cognitive bypassing is another challenging behaviour that can plague designers. Cognitive bypassing can be seen as a coping mechanism, a safety valve of sorts, where a person chooses to mentally bypass the emotional impact of a situation until their mind and body feels safe and secure enough to process their emotional response (Hanson and Hanson, 2023). The result of bypassing is communicating in a dissociated way and reporting back circumstances rather than understanding the impact on the whole self and fully processing the impact (van der Kolk, 2014). This societal construct can encourage rumination, causing a disconnect from the full experience of the present moment. For designers experiencing vicarious trauma, this can often be the only tool that they can deploy in order to get through the work.

Collectively, these challenges can be reframed as opportunities that we will use to frame the rest of the discussion:

- How might we support designers to move beyond surface-level frameworks and reflexive toolkits so they are ready for whatever challenge they face?
- How might we encourage designers to be open-minded and receptive to new ideas, and be less ego-driven and attached to their outputs?
- How can we help designers become self-aware and recognise and address their own biases in real-time?
- How might we help designers dealing with vicarious trauma better process their emotions and avoid cognitive bypassing?

The designer's experience

The challenges described in the preceding sections can often feel paralysing. To cope with this, designers lean into experimentation and adopt a mindset of convergence. By doing so, they narrow the scope of work. It is often this process of narrowing where defuturing happens. They influence the negation of certain futures. The concept of a neutral designer is fiction. Designers shape the brief, choose who to engage, facilitate workshops and steer the discussion, filter the findings, craft the insights, produce design concepts, and make suggestions for the next steps. At each of those moments, the designer is biasing the outcome. They are laying the foundations on which futures are built. It's important for designers to understand the environment that they are in but equally how they are showing up and the influence of their behaviour on shaping the futures they are designing.

On a recent project, we experienced the narrowing of scope by introducing several speculative scenarios. Speculative design was used to explore possible and desirable futures. The term speculative design was first coined by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, two British design theorists, in 2001. The two popularised the concept in their book, *Speculative Everything: Design, Dreaming, and Social Dreaming*. Speculative design differs from design thinking in the way it handles artefacts at the prototyping stage. Artefacts developed as part of speculative design are designed not to fix things, but rather to unfix them. The outputs of speculative design are created to make future possibilities tangible and to call into question aspects of the here and now. When these outputs are done well, they have the potential to make the impact of the future possibilities compelling in a way that no amount of data can. Designers who dabble in speculative design may propose concepts that lie beyond the boundaries of reality or dominant paradigms and venture into the imagination, but they do so with an eye on critiquing aspects about the present state (Perry-Kessaris, 2021). Provocations on the project were designed so that they did not look finished and could engage those with no prior involvement in previous engagements, be reused across different stakeholder groups, and as far as possible, provoke discussion without leading (Bruce, 2019). Stakeholders were invited to engage in idea generation in a way that wasn't daunting. By providing a range of ideas, from the most ambitious to the least, the design team

was able to determine what people desired and over several iterations, details about how the design concepts would address nuanced needs became clearer.

The implications of narrowing the focus and scope of a project incrementally through speculative scenarios were significant. It meant that stakeholders' imaginations were limited to the scenarios we focused on. While the scenarios were based on research, there were many assumptions made in order for the future to feel realistic. This potentially led to bias, which had the potential to lead to negative outcomes as the scenarios may not have fully captured the perspectives and needs of all stakeholders. Getting people to imagine the future when they're not ready can also lead to scenarios where stakeholders don't feel comfortable sharing their opinions, as the authorising environment isn't clear. This lack of clarity can create a communication barrier that can persist throughout the project development process, leading to subpar results. It is important for designers to be aware of these implications and take steps to mitigate them. Designers must remain mindful of the power dynamics at play and strive to create futures that are egoless, and detached from outcomes.

Map of design fields

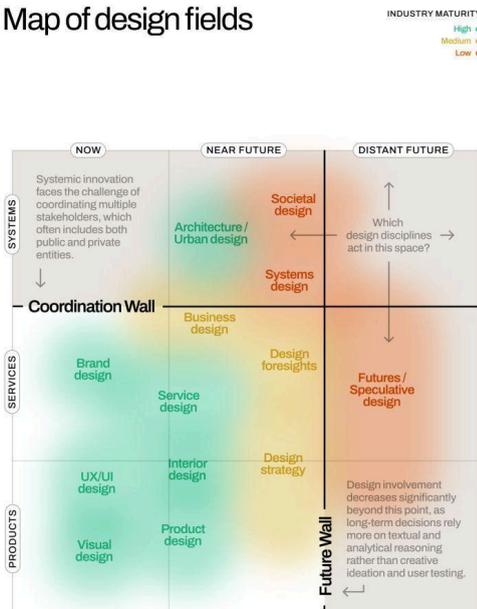


Image 1: Map of design fields (Orscussi, 2023)

Speculative design isn't the only methodology with possible negative implications and which requires designers to be mindful of their bias and cognitive bypassing. As the diagram shows, as designers challenge their craft and they shape their thinking, they may move more to the right, yet they may be operating in environments which are more on the left. (Orscussi, 2023) If one is working with the mindset of speculative design, but you're working with clients who are in the now, conflicts can happen. This can be termed 'hitting the wall', where there may be a wall which exists which represents the limits of an individual or a person's thinking. When two people have different walls, and there's a difference in expectations, comfort level and ability to engage with different types of problems, issues can occur (Orscussi, 2023). These experiences highlight the importance of taking an open approach to futuring and ensuring that one is both self-aware, flexible, open and alive to the implications of their decisions.

The designer's guide and impact

One significant way designers can improve their resilience and safeguard their well-being is by enhancing their self-awareness, developing a practice of challenging their perspectives, and incorporating mindfulness practices into their daily routine. While various approaches can achieve this, we will explore a powerful method through the philosophies of Buddhism. Buddhism fosters self-reflection and promotes deeper understanding and compassion for oneself and the world. Concepts like Anatta, the Buddhist idea of a non-fixed self, can help overcome hurdles and foster greater empathy and collaborative creativity.

In this context, Buddhism's ideas and practices can help designers develop deeper awareness of their perspectives and enhance cognitive flexibility. One such core Buddhist principle is Anatta, or non-self, which suggests there's no such thing as a fixed or permanent self. This idea challenges our fixed perceptions and biases, and instead emphasises that we are in a state of constant flux. The philosophy of Anatta also highlights the interconnectedness between self and others, offering a valuable framework for designers to better understand themselves and improve their approach to critical design.

Anatta encourages us to view ourselves as a collection of continuously evolving experiences and reactions, rather than as fixed entities. This heightened awareness empowers designers to reshape situations, craft new narratives, and discover innovative solutions to the challenges they face. Such self-awareness leads to a deeper understanding of how their perspectives influence the contexts they interact with.

It is critical for designers to take into account how their background, environment, culture, and experiences can influence them. Without an understanding of how these factors impact them personally, significant biases or blind spots may surface when they grapple with diverse challenges. If designers lack the ability to shift their perspective and comprehend their position within various societal, cultural, and global contexts, their capacity to effectively promote or critique potential scenarios could be compromised. This means their capacity to understand how they are defuturing projects is also compromised.

This introspection is not a one-time activity; rather, it is a continuous process. As the world changes, so do our experiences and perceptions. Regular self-assessment, guided by concepts like Anatta, encourages ongoing growth and adaptation, ensuring that designers are always primed to contribute effectively, empathetically, and innovatively to their respective fields.

On an individual level, it's crucial for designers to acknowledge how their perceptions and actions impact their work. Over time, various factors, such as the constraints of different environments, personal characteristics, and life experiences, shape how designers perceive and engage with their work. Extended exposure to the same environment can limit cognitive flexibility, making it challenging to accept diverse perspectives or constructive criticism.

In such scenarios, it's essential for the designer to cultivate self-awareness to identify how their viewpoint might be compromised. When they can recognise how the environment and situation impact them, they may then shift their perspective to find

mitigation strategies. This could involve engaging with others to help adjust their viewpoint, or employing mental techniques that help with perspective-shifting.

One way to facilitate this shift is to practice decoupling oneself from the situation and the project, essentially 'zooming out' to see the situation and context from different angles. An example of this is the 1977 Eames short film, "The Powers of Ten", where a couple is presented sitting in a park on a picnic blanket. Over the course of nine minutes, the video zooms in and out of the scenario, showing the micro atomic level, and then zooms out to take a macro perspective until the couple is no longer visible, and the scenario can be seen from space.

When one starts to develop this kind of mental flexibility, they cultivate the capacity to see their role and how it fits within a project from both macro and micro perspectives. When they combine these perspective shifts with concepts like Anatta, they can detach their ego from the scenario, opening up further avenues for action and additional potential solutions to problems. This approach also benefits the designer by allowing them to let go of the outcomes and burdens associated with directing projects in certain ways, enabling them to be more responsive to changes, rather than need to totally control the direction projects take. Over time, when one develops this mental flexibility through ongoing practices like meditation, they begin to develop the capacity to shift their perspective on a moment-to-moment basis when required.

In such complex situations, it's essential not to inflate personal importance, particularly when tackling problems. Overemphasising self-importance can obstruct cognitive flexibility and prevent us from recognising different perspectives. Being overly engrossed in our own viewpoints may cause us to unconsciously ignore or dismiss alternative solutions that could yield better results. On the other hand, entirely dismissing our 'self' or 'ego' can devalue the significance and potential influence of our existence within a system or context. It's vital to acknowledge our personal thoughts and biases, as they are an integral part of our interaction with and understanding of the world around us.

By viewing themselves as a collection of constantly changing physical and mental components, designers liberate themselves to question their own perspectives. This mindset not only protects them, but also opens up possibilities for alternative solutions. The ability to reduce personal identification with their work alleviates the burden of insuring a specific outcome, and fosters resilience to persist when repeatedly confronted with demanding challenges. This helps designers find they are triggered or impacted by the circumstances of projects, and can also help designers process the vicarious trauma which can arise within projects.

Therefore, when attempting to view a project from multiple perspectives, it's crucial to maintain a balanced sense of self—acknowledging it but not being overpowered by it. This outlook enables us to remain open-minded, respond critically, and explore diverse aspects of a problem, thereby promoting effective problem-solving and decision-making. This perspective also rejuvenates our mindset when operating in similar environments and facing recurring challenges, as we learn to reframe and reposition ourselves within different situations.

Embracing concepts like Anatta can also aid designers in recognising the interconnectedness of systems and human experiences. By facilitating the development of mental flexibility, allowing designers to step outside their own experiences, Anatta promotes greater empathy, understanding, and inclusivity. It helps designers gain deeper insights into social issues, conflicts, or cultural dynamics, particularly those beyond their lived experiences. This not only enriches the design process, but also makes it more sustainable, as it fosters a deeper understanding of the context in which design solutions are implemented. In this way, designers can create solutions that are not just innovative, but also thoughtful and inclusive, catering to a wide range of needs and experiences.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, designers have the opportunity to enhance their practice and make a meaningful impact by embracing additional knowledge and skills beyond their field. Incorporating practices such as Buddhist mindfulness and the philosophy of Anatta enables designers to gain a fresh perspective and critically evaluate their design process, leading to new outcomes and solutions that are more inclusive. By acknowledging personal biases and limitations, designers can shape projects that resonate with users and stakeholders on a deeper level. Understanding one's position within the broader context fosters collaboration and enables designers to engage with diverse perspectives, as well as mitigate biases and cognitive bypasses. This allows them to better understand how they, their practice, their environment, and their stakeholders are simultaneously driving and defuturing their projects. Taking a holistic approach to design promotes a more inclusive, sustainable, and empathetic future, while empowering designers to protect themselves and maintain stamina in challenging environments. By embracing adaptability and letting go of outcomes, designers can navigate complex scenarios more effectively. Through self-understanding and mindful practice, designers have the power to shape a better world for all.

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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, who are the traditional custodians of the land where the authors work and play. We pay our respects to all Elders past and present and to the children of today who are the Elders of our future.