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Ontological Design Has Become Influential In Design Academia – But What Is It?

How a previously obscure academic theory became a way for educators to understand design's relationship to contemporary crises

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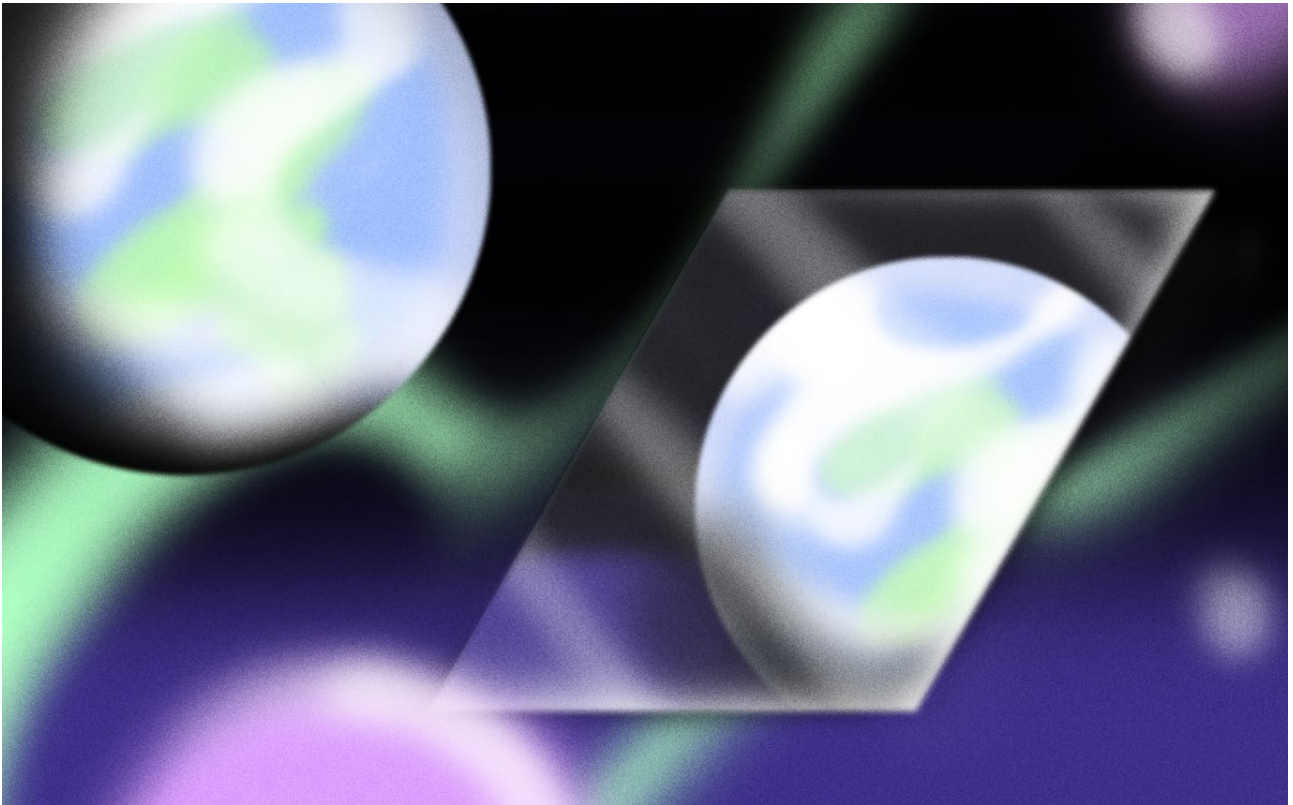


Illustration by Beatrice Sala

Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds — Anthropologist Arturo Escobar’s powerful argument for reimagining design to bring about social and environmental justice — has become a key reference within design theory recently. The pluriverse describes “a world where many worlds fit”, a phrase Escobar borrows from the revolutionary Zapatista social movement in Mexico, and can be understood in opposition to the “one-world world” of neoliberal globalization, remorselessly driven by the pursuit of profit, whatever the disastrous consequences to peoples and places. This “one-world world” has been engendered in part through the destructive practices of modern design, and in advocating for pluriversal — as opposed to ‘universal’ (ie: Eurocentric) — forms of design Escobar aims to demonstrate how alternative worlds can be constructed through and by design.

One of the main foundations for the book's argument is the theory of "ontological design" which proposes — according to one of its leading proponents Anne-Marie Willis — that "we design our world, while our world acts back on us and designs us". Though ontological design theory has evolved over several decades, its current salience in academia is timely, if not simply borne of necessity. Design educators are currently grappling with the vexing task of teaching design amidst the escalation of various overlapping global crises: racism, poverty, precarious employment, mental health, climate change, to name just a few, all compounded by the effects of the global pandemic. Whatever theories existed for guiding designers in the 21st century, they appear not only to have come up short in providing meaningful responses to these crises, but there is a growing recognition of how central modern design has been in their creation in the first place. The theory of ontological design appears to have the potential to address these issues at a more fundamental level, moving the discipline's focus away from its superficial preoccupation with stylistic and technological development and towards asking what kinds of worlds are being created through design and whether these worlds are actually viable for the sustainment of life on earth.

One definition of *ontology* is the philosophical inquiry into "what it means for something or someone to exist". The theory of *ontological* design, then, asks — on a fundamental level — what *is* design and what does design *do*? Since most design textbooks open by defining what design is and does without ever mentioning ontology, the italics here are intended to stress how ontological design theory presses us to think again about what such seemingly simple words like "is" and "do" might mean (which may involve being skeptical about what many designers — usually focussed on "getting the job done" for their clients — think about what it is that they are doing).

In the 2006 article *Ontological Designing*, Anne-Marie Willis — a former editor of the now defunct *Design Philosophy Papers*, a key site for the development of ontological design theory — writes that the act of "designing is fundamental to being human" and that "design is something far more pervasive and profound" than most textbooks present it as. Further, such typical accounts of design neglect to properly consider how "we are designed...by that which we have designed". The argument here is that although most would agree that design is everywhere and serves particular purposes, we often fail to consider how profoundly design structures the possibilities for existence in the world. In many cases, countering this issue would mean paying much closer attention to the unforeseen and often problematic consequences of design, and further: seeing those unintended outcomes as a fundamental aspect of what design *is* and *does*, rather than as negligible side effects. For example, Willis elsewhere discusses the ontological significance of smartphone touchscreen designers unwittingly normalizing the phenomenon of "infinite distractibility" while trying to solve the problem of creating an intuitive user interface.

The concept of ontological design was first formulated in the 1986 book *Understanding Computers and Cognition* by American computer scientist Terry Winograd and Chilean engineer and politician Fernando Flores. Flores was granted political asylum in the US following imprisonment for serving in socialist president Salvador Allende's government, which was overthrown by a military coup in 1973. Having identified shared interests with Winograd about language and philosophy, the pair collaborated to formulate "new theoretical foundations for the design of computer technologies", utilizing a synthesis of ideas drawn, in particular, from Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana and German philosopher Martin Heidegger. They were interested in "how a society engenders inventions whose existence in

turns alters that society” and from there proposed the idea that “in designing tools we are designing ways of being”. Writing in 1986 — prior to the development of the internet — the idea that computers might change what it means to exist as a human being in the world would have seemed implausible to many, though this is clearly no longer the case — not least at the moment where for many people, work, school, and social life are all being mediated entirely through them.

Heidegger has exerted a dominant influence on the field of ontology and a key impact within ontological design theory can be found in his concept of “being-in-the-world”. The hyphenation is employed to emphasize how “being” is always situated “in the world”. A human being cannot exist independently of its surrounding environment — it is not possible to *be* without *being-in-the-world*. Being, then, is always relational: with everything that surrounds us, including the full complexity of the completely designed worlds that we inhabit. This point is crucial for ontological design theorists: design doesn’t just perform certain functions — a car transports you from A to B, a poster displays information, etc. — the interrelated totality of designs construct the world through which humans are brought into being and come to be defined through. Human beings, in turn, design the world, which, in turn, designs them...and so on. The process is circular, like an endless loop.

Complicating matters is the fact that we are firmly lodged in this loop before we have even developed any awareness of it, if we ever do. Just as we have no memory of how we acquired language and began to use and be shaped by it, we have no memory of how we began to use and be shaped by design. This makes it extremely difficult to imagine how things could be otherwise, which is why proposals for designing alternatives to the dominant modes of being in the world are often scoffed at — *that’s just not how the world “is”*. This situation is clear to see in the torturous pace of governmental action on climate change, where even the most modest proposals to ensure the reduction of carbon emissions are dismissed as too radical (even by supposedly progressive politicians). Though the issue of the environmental crisis is acknowledged as important, even an alleged *emergency*, fundamental change is nevertheless regarded as something that must be resisted for the sake of securing the stable continuation of existing — structurally unsustainable —ways of being in the world.

Unsustainability is a core theme in the work of Tony Fry, an extraordinarily prolific author on the subject of design, politics and the environment since the late 1980s. One of the most vocal proponents of ontological design theory, much of his output has focused on the dialectical agency of design as both a “futuring” activity — that extends possibilities for the prospering of life on earth — and a “defuturing” one — that instead reduces those prospects by causing severe social and environmental harm, thus “taking the future away”. As the climate crisis grows, the latter position appears to be dominating the dialectical struggle, as predicted in *Defuturing: A New Design Philosophy*. Now over twenty years old, the book’s recent republication amidst belated widespread recognition of environmental collapse suggests that audiences might now be ready to listen. Fry argues forcefully that key moments in design history — such as the development of streamlining in the US in the 1930s, to name just one example — cemented human propensity toward unsustainability, laying the ontological foundation for the environmental catastrophe that we are in the midst of, and move ever more toward. For Fry, standard accounts of design history are “dysfunctional areas of knowledge” that continually

misrepresent how design acts in the world. Furthermore, historians and designers alike have misunderstood the fact that the “past” as represented in design history *is* the future, because “whatever is designed goes on designing”.

Ontological design theorists are critical of design discourse that separates the disciplines (architecture, UI, etc.) into categories, preferring to refer to the totality of design as a kind of meta-discipline, better able to encompass the relational complexity of how it operates. For designers who are used to blindly thinking about their practices in a vacuum, disciplinary or otherwise (see any design conference), an engagement with it would ensure encounters with a much wider range of reference points, as Escobar’s book — through its complex synthesis of design, feminist, decolonial, post-development and environmental theory — so insightfully illustrates. This in turn should stimulate taking a much wider view of the meaning of design, whereby it must be interpreted as part of an infinitely complex evolving system of objects, processes and practices.

One welcome outcome of an embrace of ontological design theory would be the death of the individualism that has plagued the design profession — “iconic” designs, individual designers, celebrated in isolation as they usually are in design publications — don’t make any sense in this context. Thinking about what Escobar calls the “radical interdependence” of all things — human and non-human — is key: every design and designer constitutes part of a dynamic set of relations with innumerable others, making and unmaking the world, sustaining and unsustaining, or, as Fry would put it, futuring and defuturing. By moving from consideration of the individual designer or design toward the larger structures of possibility for existence — or being — formed through design, it becomes easier to perceive the impacts of design within different contexts.

Consider branding, as one of the most thriving sectors of the design industry today. Typical analyses of branding focus on how the design of a brand aided or failed in helping a company achieve particular business objectives — *what was the brand’s problem? How did or didn’t design solve it?* This repeated narrative forms the basis of the commonly shared meaning of what branding is and does. Thinking about the ontology of branding — what it means for branding to exist — would take designers away from such narrow understandings to reflect on what it means to live in a world saturated in brands, to the point where individuals are even encouraged to think of themselves *as* a brand. It’s telling that some of the best books on branding in the last few decades — written by authors like Celia Lury, Adam Arvidsson, or Sarah Banet-Weiser — have all been written from outside the field of design, examining complex questions about how brands mediate the global economy, encourage consumers to labour on their behalf, or organise social relations. These authors don’t discuss ontology, necessarily, but it seems they are much more attuned to the world making agency of design than most designers or design historians writing about branding. They are concerned with how design is embedded in and constructs the worlds that we are, in turn, formed within.

Willis has stated that the way that “design designs us” should be general knowledge. Yet it seems that for now, and especially as a result of the climate crisis, most mainstream discussion about the transformative agency of design is limited to instrumental solutionism — *how can this product be repackaged to use less plastic?* From the point of view of ontological design, the question is not *can* the world be transformed through design – the world and its peoples

are *always already* being transformed by design. The real question is what these transformations will continue to look like, whether there are any prospects for just or (really existing) sustainable futures. The recently published *Design in Crisis: New Worlds, Philosophies and Practices*, co-edited by Fry, and featuring Escobar and Willis, as well as authors like Cameron Tonkinwise, Shana Agid, Alfredo Gutiérrez and Decolonising Design's Ahmed Ansari, examines these questions in further detail, while Sasha Constanza-Chock's *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the World We Need* has recently taken inspiration from Escobar's work to explore the question of how marginalized communities can use design to challenge structural inequalities.

The bigger picture abstraction required to interpret ontological design theory is not without its challenges. It's probably easier to intuit how a certain type of housing structure designs the person living in it, than it is to figure out the ontological status of the 130,000 typefaces on MyFonts. Nevertheless, the question of what kinds of worlds are being constructed through design only grows in urgency, and for ontological design theorists, recognition of this is the only way that design can be redirected towards futuring.