

Review of *Introduction to Design Psychology* by Eleni Kalantidou

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Introduction to Design Psychology

by Eleni Kalantidou

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The relationship between design and psychology is complicated. Theories and approaches are routinely borrowed from psychology to support design research and practice. As is often the case in design discourse, these are cited as scientific fact, often regardless of any controversy or uncertainty that surrounded and greeted their emergence and dissemination. A case in point is the adaptation of cognitive psychology to support user-centered design approaches that detach humans' activities from their social and environmental contexts in order to universalize design principles. Despite the extensive critique of this tendency by psychologists as prescriptive,¹ for failing to accommodate users' emotional and social attributes² and for rendering users as passive recipients of design,³ the field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) maintains an allegiance to early conceptions of cognitive psychology premised on the idea of the mind as a computational process. The recent shift toward cognitive neuroscience as a means of explaining human activities is similarly problematic for excluding the brain's interdependence with the body and its environment. It is easy to see how this project has paved the way for the current AI boom: the mind, understood as abstracted computational processes, can be monetized.

Such critical accounts of the design-psychology affair are the bread and butter of *Introduction to Design Psychology*, an important and timely project as we careen toward uncertain, unsustainable, and technocratic futures. The title of this book is a little misleading. Design practitioners and students expecting an introductory account of how psychology is applied in design research and methods will be frustrated, potentially, by a singular lack of basic *how to* advice. To my mind, this is a clever tactic, particularly if readers are intrigued enough by the erudition of the author to read on. This is less an introduction to design psychology than a wholesale critique of predominant conceptions and practices of design and psychology and their *impromptu* (as Kalantidou terms it) collaboration.

Kalantidou, based at Griffith University in Australia, is connected to a school of thought associated with design theorist Tony Fry, which foregrounds the climate crisis as the existential threat that impacts all human thought and activity, including design and psychology.⁴ Fry's influence looms large in this book, with a testimonial on the back cover and in the sense that, like Fry, Kalantidou is unafraid of calling out the assumptions upon which design and psychology are based—as fundamentally unsustainable and poorly conceived for a precarious human (and more-than-human) future. Also, as in Fry's work, there is a tendency toward sweeping pronouncements, for example, in the accounts of European design history post-Enlightenment and post-war participatory design. However, where Kalantidou differs from Fry is in the substantiation of her arguments. With a background in psychology and architecture, Kalantidou is assiduous in documenting and supporting the discourses that she introduces. This has the effect of making this book simultaneously dense and generous.

By way of example, the chapter on the Design Psychology of Urban Environments is an account of how in coastal cities, where extreme weather impacts increasingly dense populations, the dual impact of climate change and gentrification has led to people being designed out of their neighborhoods, giving rise to psychopathologies associated with displacement, the breakdown of social ecologies, eco anxiety, and solastalgia (sense of loss of home). The discussion includes an overview of how housing precarity has impacted urban psychology in different cultures, from the cultural obligation to own homes in Accra to

the PTSD of Syrian asylum-seekers in Sweden to the emotional distress of aging populations in the individualistic society of the USA.

It is in this informative spirit that the book is organized, with abundant referencing and discrete bibliographies for each themed chapter. The introduction clearly outlines the grounds for its critique of the *impromptu* collaboration between the fields of design and psychology, finding them limited by the “Eurocentric, patriarchal and binary gaze”⁵ of their respective historical efforts to scientize. As a counter to *impromptu* design psychology, Kalantidou proposes *intentional* design psychology as a starting point to explore how to reconfigure models of living in precarity. In short, intentional design psychology requires “an emphasis on place-based, lived experience, contrasting the universalizing nature of psychology and design.”⁶

The extended critique of current theories and practices is explicated in chapters 2 and 3, beginning with “Setting the Scene,” a historical account of the efforts to scientize psychology and design, which came at the cost of metaphysical, contextual, emotional, and phenomenological accounts of human living. In Chapter 3, “Opportunity to Change,” Kalantidou takes aim at the uncritical adoption of cognitive and behavioral psychology, despite strong critiques of their one-dimensionality, bias, and tendency to mislead. The account of behavioral science in design processes, which is further developed in subsequent chapters on cities and waste, is particularly unfor- giving, and warrants some discussion.

The need for behavior change is widely recognized as a desirable response to complex design problems ranging from crime prevention to the waste and emissions impacts of consumerism. The emergence of nudge theory with Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein’s 2008 eponymous book⁷ has had a significant impact on design and policy discussions, as evidenced by its adoption by Government departments,⁸ as well as in business and fundraising circles and among healthcare professionals. Nudging, the designing-in of preferred behaviors such as auto-enrolling employees in pension-saving schemes, and incentivizing early payment of parking fines with discounts, also supports preferred sustainable behaviors. Several cities, including London and Sarajevo, have introduced or revitalized a network of public water fountains to reduce the use of disposable plastic water bottles, for example. But critics of nudge theory take issue with its manipulative, paternalistic

flavor, questionable ethics, and short-term impact. Kalantidou is unsparing in her critique of nudge, not only for its paternalism, which she argues “assumes that people lack common sense,”⁹ but also for its fixation on symptoms rather than causes:

“Governments have embraced nudging as an effective way encouraging individuals to adopt environmentally friendly choices such as minimizing energy consumption, making greener food choices, and mindful clothes purchases. However, these have become symptomatic treatments because they do not change people’s perceptions of consumption.”¹⁰

A behaviorist might argue that behavior change, when repeated or made “easy, attractive, social and timely,”¹¹ does in fact grow from individual “tiny habits”¹² to lasting societal change. This is where the debate becomes more philosophical and political than evidence-based, but in support of an interventionist approach, Lorraine Gamman and Adam Thorpe have argued that a fraternal and socially responsive design approach to reducing bicycle theft and bank teller machine muggings was able to implement effective nudges by making their design participatory.¹³ Gamman and Thorpe’s Design Against Crime Lab (DAC) enlisted diverse stakeholders—including former thieves—to develop situated crime prevention strategies such as M-shaped bicycle parking stands to encourage better locking practices (and deter theft). Based on police evidence that petty crime is opportunistic, such interventions potentially nudge thieves toward other opportunities, not necessarily illegal ones. Here the issue is whether nudging or socially responsive design forms part of a larger ecosystem of social strategies to encourage young people in cities to feel there are other options than joining a gang that uses bike theft as an initiation rite.

My use of the term *ecosystem* is a nod to the discourse of transition design, which itself raises an interesting point of departure for Kalantidou’s proposed intentional design psychology, promised throughout the book and detailed in the final chapter, Chapter 7. Whereas transition design approaches such as the EU Pioneer Cities (2012) and Transition Cities (2024) schemes advocated mapping and connecting existing low-carbon initiatives toward larger, long-term change, Kalantidou critiques their overreliance on socio-technical innovations, which often overlook “social practices, individual differences and psychologies”¹⁴ and subscribe to a growth agenda

that overrides stakeholder positions. Unlike transition design, which is aligned with the Green New Deal and a commitment to economic growth, Kalantidou's intentional design psychology proposes a focus on "sustaining and adapting life and resources, irrespective of instrumental city maintenance and economic growth."¹⁵

How, then, does intentional design psychology sidestep the pitfalls of transition design? With a closing manifesto of sorts, *An Introduction to Design Psychology* becomes both academic and zealous. In place of an unexamined fixation on permanence and stability, it advocates "tapping into impermanence as an activating agent."¹⁶ In this spirit, nomadism is celebrated as an ancient and still functional way of life practiced among some communities (such as the reindeer nomads of the Yamal Peninsula) that is premised on impermanence and inherently better prepared for climatic disaster in its detachment from urbanization and fixed infrastructures. Similarly, Walter Benjamin's notion of destruction as a productive condition and Braidotti and Regan's case for disassembling are invoked to support a dismantling of given orthodoxies, such as the current conceits of impromptu design psychology. In place of the pathologized responses to climate change, Kalantidou proposes an embrace of discomfort akin to Haraway's "Staying with the Trouble"¹⁷—a method of enquiry in feminist, critical, and post-colonial pedagogies.

A loose ideological framework for intentional design psychology is diagrammed in the final chapter, including a case for practices of care and "repair solidarities"¹⁸ that approach repair as innovation, as something inseparable from design and sees the exchange of skills and competencies as a commons-building function that not only repairs objects but resources and social ties. The rather handy neologism *fr/agility* brings together the potential for action inherent in precarity and impermanence. And perhaps most importantly, intentional design psychology shifts from individual to community-led behavioral change, shifting the focus to "time and place-generated designs."¹⁹

The promise of a tangible alternative design psychology is ultimately frustrated by the scope of a 200+ page introduction. But one suspects that a Fry-ean strategy is also at work here, which is to ferociously critique current practices as not radical enough, too instrumentalist, and shackled to business-as-usual neoliberal economics, and then to proffer a solution that comes across as almost mystical. In its lack of boots-on-the-ground specificity, *Introduction*

Design Psychology is a tantalizing text, offering inspiration rather than tried-and-tested methods. But as a critical dismantling of current orthodoxies and "a new design paradigm to enable the transition to new psychologies,"²⁰ it is an inspiring book. It is not an easy read and requires some patience and diligence to draw out lessons and actions for how it might be applied to teaching design in the 21st Century. Nonetheless, in its density, it offers great material for further development, and a determined reader will be rewarded with many, many green shoots to nurture and grow.

Notes

- 1 Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, *Understanding Computers and Cognition* (New York: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986), cited in Eleni Kalantidou, *Introduction to Design Psychology* (Abingdon, OX: Routledge, 2025), 108.
- 2 Liam J. Bannon, "From Human Factors to Human Actors: The Role of Psychology and Human-Computer Interaction Studies in System Design," in *Readings in Human-Computer Interaction: Toward the Year 2000*, ed. Ronald M. Baecker et al. (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 1995), 205–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-051574-8.50024-8>, cited in Kalantidou, *Introduction to Design Psychology*, 108.
- 3 Thomas K. Landauer, "Let's Get Real: A Position Paper on the Role of Cognitive Psychology in the Design of Humanly Useful and Usable Systems," in *Readings in Human-Computer Interaction: Toward the Year 2000*, ed. Ronald M. Baecker et al. (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 1995), 659–65, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-051574-8.50067-4>, cited in Kalantidou, *Introduction to Design Psychology*, 108.
- 4 For example, see Tony Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (Randwick, Australia: UNSW Press, 1999).
- 5 Kalantidou, *Introduction to Design Psychology*, 3.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
- 8 UK Prime Minister David Cameron established a Behavioral Insights Team in 2010, and US President Barack Obama announced a Social and Behavioral Science Team at the White House in 2013. Evan Nesterak, "Head of White House 'Nudge Unit' Maya Shankar Speaks about Newly Formed Social and Behavioral Sciences Team," *The Psych Report*, July 13, 2014, available at <https://behavioralscientist.org/head-of-white-house-nudge-unit-maya-shankar-speaks-about-newly-formed-us-social-and-behavioral-sciences-team/>.

- 9 Kalantidou, *Introduction to Design Psychology*, 142.
- 10 Ibid., 146.
- 11 The EAST framework corresponds to the idea that nudge behaviors should be “Easy, Attract, Social and Timely.” See David Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit: How Small Changes Can Make a Big Difference* (London: W. H. Allen, 2015), 60.
- 12 Brian Jeffrey Fogg, *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020).
- 13 Lorraine Gamman and Adam Thorpe, “Is ‘Nudge’ as Good as ‘We Think’ in Designing against Crime? Contrasting Paternalistic and Fraternalistic Approaches to Design for Behaviour Change,” in *Design for Behaviour Change: Theories and Practices of Designing for Change*, ed. Kristina Niedderer et al. (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).
- 14 Kalantidou, *Introduction to Design Psychology*, 84.
- 15 Ibid., 85.
- 16 Ibid., 166.
- 17 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 18 Kalantidou, *Introduction to Design Psychology*, 188.
- 19 Ibid., 193.
- 20 Ibid., 85.