Moral Design

Z. Bryant

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They constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect
that no one will need to be good.
But the man that is will shadow
The man that pretends to be.

T.S. Eliot, “The Rock”

The word “studio” is derived from “study.” Our object is not to know the answers before we do the work. It’s to know them after we do it.

Bruce Mau
“Design Principal” in *Fast Company*

Introduction

In the time I've been working as a designer, the seeds of modernism have borne much fruit.

The tools of design are now free and ubiquitous. Design language has become the language of business. We make costly decisions based on subjective critique from complete strangers on such platforms as Amazon and Airbnb.

Everything is designed.

Such seemingly disparate disciplines as marketing, data science, medicine, urban planning, agriculture, sociology, energy, and education are converging in astonishing ways. And in the minds of many, the Rosetta Stone for understanding and translating these concerns is *design*.

But this emerging language is not neutral in the ways mid-century modernists might have asserted.

The questions we ask as designers and the potential answers that we, along with our clients and collaborators, choose have consequences.

Do we have a means of observing, evaluating, and changing current systems and processes for our collective good? Those proffering solutions abound: The academy promotes ever-better research; Silicon Valley regards itself as the pattern to emulate; governments become more and more ambitious.

Meanwhile, a growing number of public intellectuals implore us to slow down and apprehend—perhaps fearfully—the incalculable connections between, well, everything. What, if any, is the role of the designer in this rapidly expanding universe of ideas and information?

The creative community loves to hold up "good design" as a sort of cardinal virtue. An incoming tide that lifts all boats. The prevailing paradigm for criticism seems to be one of clever solutions to endless challenges. If you ask working designers, we don't often conceive of ourselves as meaning makers, communicators, artists, or arbiters. Instead, we identify most strongly as "problem solvers"—and solving problems is an unalloyed good. We don't

even like the word "criticism," much preferring "thought leadership." It can seem like the modifier has become a foregone conclusion; as if design is, by its very nature, "good."

But I believe this is a dangerously unaccountable way of thinking about our work.

We must move beyond simplistic notions of good design and begin talking about something like moral design. Here, I'm using "moral" to mean concerned with the principles of right and wrong behavior and the goodness or badness of human character and "design" to mean the purpose, planning, or intention that exist behind an action, fact, or material object.

You may wonder why I've chosen to call this framework "moral design" as opposed to ethical or responsible design. It's a good question, especially since there's such a deep well of established thinking around the ethics of design, and the word "moral" comes with baggage for many of us.

Here's why: Lately, I've been sensing that *ethics* has become mostly a way of establishing a shared baseline for acceptable behavior. We can talk about the ethics of business, finances, or sex. It involves

Explanations exist; they have existed for all time; there is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.

H.L. Mencken
“The Divine Afflatus” in *New York Evening Mail*

the very important work of drawing a line between what is ethical and what is not.

At the other end of this spectrum is the pursuit of something far beyond merely acceptable. It is concerned with something genuinely good for humans in a restless and comprehensive way. I suspect it is more of a bearing than a destination.

If design tells us something about ourselves and our world, it seems plausible that those messages are either constructive or destructive. Can we, as designers, assume responsibility for the moral trajectory of our work?

Doing so would ask us to confront the possibility that some of our work—even when our intentions are good—is doing real damage. It would ask us to be far more serious about challenge and critique. It would push us into questions of right and wrong, a sort of whole-cost accounting of our own decision making. And it would require that we contend with and become proponents of truth.

Recently, I was appreciating the work of a young designer who'd created a lovely sustainability report for an outdoor apparel company. His approach

was fresh and he'd perfectly balanced the company's careful positioning between conservation and consumerism. I asked him how he was thinking about sourcing, printing, and delivering the books in ways that would live up to the ideals he'd so meticulously typeset. His brow furrowed. He had not imagined that such a thing was his to consider.

I'm certainly not suggesting that this designer was behaving *immorally*, only that such a narrow focus allowed for blind spots. I would suggest that it would be more moral for him to have a fuller imagination for his vocation as a designer.

The pursuit of moral design asks us to cultivate at least three things within ourselves and our practice:

1. true affection, rooted in respect, experience, and specific knowledge;

2. empathetic boldness to confront deep-rooted, complex failures in other designers' work; and

3. genuine humility in an industry that seems to celebrate hubris and seeing what we can "get away with."

And so it seems to me we must begin with honesty. Our work as designers must always be honest about its intentions, production, limitations, and—perhaps most crucially—its outcomes.

I differ from many of my colleagues in that I remain skeptical of central planning. I don't think we have need of new solutions from smaller numbers of smarter people farther away. I believe the principle of *subsidiarity* should be foundational to design thinking: that matters are best handled by the smallest, lowest, and most decentralized competent authority.

My vision is that designers become partnered with, and embedded within, clients, communities, and causes everywhere. That moral design is not a thing we do, but the ideal to which we aspire as a profession. The affection, boldness, and humility required to continue moving toward moral design happens in long-term relationships with high levels of accountability.

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.

John Muir
in *My First Summer in the Sierra*

Intentions

By and large, the designers I know are kindly people. We care deeply about the world and the humans in it. As a professional class, designers are some of my favorite people. We're thoughtful, curious, and sensitive.

We also make a lot of assumptions. Our optimism can make us gullible. Our idealism can, over time, cause us to tune out dissent. "Look, I'm just here to solve problems and make beautiful things," we explain. "I don't need that noise." The same sensitivity that informs our work can be crippling in the face of the most difficult sorts of challenges.

It's easy for us to express acute concern for the contained suffering of perfect strangers thousands of miles away and all the while show a callous indifference to the mess just around the corner—or in the

mirror. Designers' good taste and creativity can give us a bit of a superiority complex, undermining our ability to know and serve others.

A valid criticism of the design profession is that we, along with our clients, are often far too hurried at the beginning of a project to honestly articulate our intentions.

What is the purpose of what we're setting out to make? Who is it for? What are they like? What is good for them? We shouldn't just ask these questions to uncover strategic insights or check a box but to further our own accountability and growth—as individuals, and as a profession. How can we pursue moral design if we can't compare our plans with our products?

Looking seriously at what we intend has the potential to completely recast our imagination for projects, our process, and even our vocation. When Adam Werbach, then-president of the Sierra Club, drilled into his true intentions, he quit preaching to the choir and went to work for Walmart.

"I thought they were the devil," he recalls. But what he found were good-hearted humans working with-

in one of the world's largest design systems. "I was training a million people on what green is, on what a carbon footprint is, on energy conservation. It was unheard of, and they loved it."

What is the intention behind the design of Google? Why did they set out to index the world's information? We know Zuckerberg's design is to sell personal information to empower marketers. But is it okay that "Designed by Apple in Cupertino" really means mined in Cerro Rico and assembled in Foxconn City?

Are we crafting glossy layouts to make people long for a life they'll never have? To expand a hollowness our client's product can temporarily fill? Do we as designers have any culpability in our growing discontentment? Are we designing mobile applications to be increasingly addictive? To pull "users" deeper into a world in which we can manipulate them? Do we share any responsibility for our generation's loss of focus and impulse control? Does your app distract me from my kids? Was that your intention?

The need for honesty about intentions certainly isn't limited to magazine spreads and mobile apps. My own tiny city of Charlottesville, Virginia, is

The opposite of love is
not hate, it's indifference.
The opposite of art is not
ugliness, it's indifference.
The opposite of faith is not
heresy, it's indifference.
And the opposite of life is
not death, it's indifference.

Elie Wiesel
in *US News & World Report*

experiencing a modest tech boom. As host to the University of Virginia, we enjoy a disproportionate share of entrepreneurialism and investment.

Local companies have the wonderful problem of needing to grow, and I'm privy to many conversations about new offices and rounds of fundraising and the attendant hiring and importing of talent. Designers intend to create vast fortunes for owners and shareholders. But unfortunately, I hear almost nothing about the carrying capacity of the actual place: Charlottesville.

There can appear to be a willful ignorance about the ecological, cultural, and social costs of such rapid growth.

Of course, we start with what we believe to be good intentions, but we know where that road leads. It's easy to get excited about a vague direction and just move ahead. In my experience, though, the forced discipline of honest articulation often leads the team to adjust what we intend.

The moral designer writes her intentions in permanent ink and returns to them often. A few easy questions to ask: Who stands to benefit most if this

The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design.

Friedrich Hayek
in *The Fatal Conceit*

design is successful? At what cost? Who is willing to sponsor or fund this project? Where did their money come from? What stories are we telling about people? Are we intimately involved in creating the problems we'll be hired to solve tomorrow? Quite often, I hear professional designers lamenting that they aren't taken seriously within their organizations. They suspect they may be pawns in some game, designing beautiful cogs for hideous machines. When we decline to be honest about intentions, we reduce our ability to be serious about our work. Any small fiction—an idealized persona or carefully manicured statistic—sends us down the path of designer-as-decorator.

We convince ourselves that the aesthetic or functional value we create outweighs the intended purpose, whatever it might be. That the form somehow excuses the content. This is toxic. To be taken seriously, start treating design like the serious work it is.

What shadowy corners exist in our design practices? Let's talk about putting our individual talents to work asking the harder why questions. Let's be a thorn in the side of indifference. Let's scale our attention to our actual influence.

A clever person solves a problem. A wise person avoids it.

Attributed to **Albert Einstein**

Production

How many years of sunlight did it take to create this little book? Do you feel any obligation to consider those costs? And do I owe the Earth anything in the quality of these words?

Upon being invited to give the 2012 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, Wendell Berry delivered what may well be my favorite bit of prose. In it, Berry makes a case that the only sustainable medium for morality is affection—and moreover, he introduces a language for affection that is *informed*, *practical*, and *practiced*.

As designers, what if we adopted a similar framework? Permaculture design, and more broadly the world of land-use that Berry inhabits, is committed to identifying and honoring the carrying capacity of particular places.

It is essential, above all, that in making history we do not forget to learn by history, to see our mistakes as well as our successes, our weaknesses as well as our strengths.

Eleanor Roosevelt
in *Tomorrow Is Now*

In service of this idea, we use the common language of inputs and outputs, appreciating the land itself as the medium for production and that any notion of productivity must be bound up in its rightful use. It is always a question of patience and balance, and it always defies mechanical and industrial models.

What if we thought of humans and the things we design for them in this same way?

Design that is honest about its production is *informed* design. A moral designer is never satisfied with her current understanding of paper, inks, printing, and glues—not to mention the tree farms, mills, mines, wells, and refineries implicated in her practice. The myriad decisions she makes and influences require a relentless appetite for information, yielding a process that generates less and less waste.

To be clear, I'm not talking about efficiency for its own sake. Because of our affection for order and beauty, designers ought to be the loudest and most insistent proponents for discovering new and better ways to produce goods and services. The deep, focused, informed creativity that uses the whole sheet or shaves off a few kilobytes or requires less water is truly beautiful.

Thrift is poetic because it is creative; waste is unpoetic because it is waste.

G.K Chesterton
in *What’s Wrong with the World*

Much of current fashion, born in affluence and the ignorance it can afford, revels in its own impracticality. Why is it that the most narcissistic cultures always elevate consumer goods that are rare and absurd to produce? We delight in excess in our electronics, our outfits, our automobiles, and our homes.

The Shaker communities of the 18th and 19th centuries—celebrated for their design of both architecture and furniture—had a mantra: *Don't make something unless it is both necessary and useful; but if it is both necessary and useful, don't hesitate to make it beautiful.* This is such a refreshing counterpoint to the barrage of speculative and banal design flooding our eyes, minds, and marketplaces. What if every would-be designer first asked themselves: Is this necessary? Is it useful?

Design that is honest about its production is *practical* design. It is critical of the superfluous and extraneous. Like the Shakers, it has a strong bias toward an aesthetic that is simple and elegant and desires quality in the way that it is made. It dispenses with the entire notion of planned obsolescence as a ruse created to serve irresponsible manufacturers and obscure shoddy design.

There is no dignity quite so impressive, and no independence quite so important, as living within your means.

Calvin Coolidge
in *Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*

Thirdly, Berry gives us the idea of an affection—and, I think, a design—that is *practiced*. How should we model the perpetual evaluation of production in our own lives?

If data centers waste close to 90 percent of the electricity they use to power the internet, and I listen to a streaming music service throughout my workday (easily transferring a gig of data for my own personal, on-demand soundtrack), am I participating in perhaps the most egregious frittering away of non-renewable resources in human history?

Most designers like the idea of sustainability, but it is another thing altogether to turn this awareness and philosophy on ourselves.

How can we practice design that considers production? A simple way to start is to be more thoughtful about the images we select. They're powerful. Over a century of blindly helping corporations achieve greater market share, we imprinted the public mind with all sorts of unnatural and—I would argue—harmful images: You should acquire and discard clothing at a rate that ignores the way garments are manufactured and their actual rate of deterioration.

It’s curious that we never apply what we know to how we actually live.

Bill Mollison
in *Permaculture: A Quiet Revolution*

At each meal, you should ingest a massive portion of protein, preferably boneless and skinless, and it should be as cheap as possible. If you have a yard, it should be populated with a single plant species cut down to within an inch of its life. And if any other seeds dare to germinate, you should douse them with chemical herbicides.

The images designers choose shape desires that become reality. Start small. Push back.

A moral design practice reduces abstraction across the board—and especially in production. We want to know how things are made and where the materials came from. What's in the stuffing? What makes it turn that color? What happens to the battery once it no longer holds a charge? Then, we weigh those production costs against the benefits in real human terms—the true, transparent benefit.

There is radicalism in all getting, and conservatism in all keeping. Lovemaking is radical, while marriage is conservative. So, too, get-rich-quick capitalism is radical, while a capitalism intent solely on keeping what it already has is conservative.

Eric Hoffer
in *The Passionate State of Mind*

Limitations

Designers *love* constraints: material constraints, schedule constraints, budget constraints. Far from holding us back, these quickly lend form to any desired function. They fence the field of possibility. They frame our work.

We are far less fond of the mopey cousin of constraints: limitations. Rather, we meticulously avoid the edges of our expertise. But if we are to soberly contend with design as a framework for understanding human advancement, we must be honest about ways in which the very practice of design is inept.

And by design limitations, I do not simply mean bad design. Every discrete application of design has its own means of evaluating success. Poor typography yields a confusing sign. A lack of alt attributes means a less accessible website. A brittle component reveals short-sighted industrial design. These are good examples of bad design, but where does design itself fail?

If we accept the thesis that design is the best method for improving our condition in an ever-expanding universe of disparate data, then we would do well to quickly identify and disclose the shortcomings of this method. And as with everything, balance is key.

What desires limit our affection and attention? Which blind spots prevent us from pursuing moral design as practice? I would suggest two overlapping and paradoxical lenses through which to consider limitations: *intimacy* and *progress*.

Since the dawn of the Industrial Age, our culture has presumed that progress is incompatible with intimacy. We move between projects, clients, and jobs quickly. We relocate. We take on more and do it faster. Our very lives are increasingly autonomous and mediated—virtual, even. We don't take time to know ourselves, much less our families and neighbors. But design, in the end, consists of making decisions for other people. And intimate knowledge of those people should be the first job of the designer.

Here, I think we might return to the idea of subsidiarity—to a sort of obstinate localism. Within a design context, this is the obvious, yet elusive, idea

that the people best equipped to solve any given problem in a durable way are those most familiar with the full complexity of the problem—and those who will (or will not) enact, sustain, and benefit from the designed solution.

We sanitize this messy part of our work, labeling it “inclusion,” “stakeholder management,” and “governance,” but what we mean is: We really need real humans. And individual humans and the communities they inhabit are very different from one another.

It is antithetical to moral design that a preponderance of design still happens in California, New York City, and Washington, D.C. It is also problematic that designers are often among the first to decamp when the going gets tough. Our current fixation on finding “creative community”—homogenous collectives of orthodox designer-friends—belies this need. Here again, I believe our idealism undermines our effectiveness.

In the introduction to a recent excoriation titled “Design Thinking Is Fundamentally Conservative and Preserves the Status Quo,” Natasha Iskander declares that “[design thinking] is, at its core, a

Once conform, once do what other people do because they do it, and a lethargy steals over all the finer nerves and faculties of the soul. She becomes all outer show and inward emptiness; dull, callous, and indifferent.

Virginia Woolf
in *Common Reader*

strategy to preserve and defend the status quo — and an old strategy at that. Design thinking privileges the designer above the people she serves, and in doing so limits participation in the design process."

I'm no great fan of the sorts of design thinking Iskander finds so distasteful. This caricature strongly resembles thinly veiled paternalism wearing pricey consultant's clothing. Her alternative—what she calls "interpretive engagement"—is essentially an open-ended cycle of broad ownership and practical, accountable experimentation. I think that's right, but let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The label is fine; it's the singularity that's problematic.

Iskander seems to think there is but one single *status quo* and that it should be altered as quickly as possible by way of something called design. This is a miscalculation, I believe, predicated on a lack of intimacy. It may be the case that there are actually hundreds of thousands of local realities, myriad nuanced, interdependent problems that design can, and should, solve. But what is required (as a starting point) is a deep, personal, and abiding respect for specific communities of humans and the systems they've developed.

In short: We must be as devoted to a diversity of outcomes as we are to a diversity of inputs. Furthermore, those various status quos (even with their flaws) are the products of millennia of distilled human experience. Lots of hunger. Lots of war. Lots of chaos. Only the most successful ideas have made it to us. Conservative, a word Iskander gags on, might also be understood in this context as *conservation*. Moral design is slower and smaller than the markets want it to be. It is more careful and plodding than the universities and the politicians want it to be. Sadly, we are not without case studies.

With the benefit of hindsight, I would have much preferred a vigorous defense of traditional agricultural methods around the middle of the last century. Ironically, it was academics and entrepreneurs even then who clamored for faster adoption of new technologies. The same brilliant minds that helped the Allies defeat the Axis turned their energies toward winning the war on hunger.

The enormous design failure we are only now beginning to comprehend is that those brilliant central planners, by and large, had no knowledge of particular places, their ecologies, or economies. As

researchers and designers, they were well-versed in the art of innovation but not the humans or places they purported to serve. Techniques developed at universities and in laboratories were assumed to be applicable to the single status quo.

Turning their attention from the battlefield to the cornfield, so-called experts engineered new chemicals and machinery and exchanged future productivity for exponential growth in current production. Yield skyrocketed. Backs were slapped. Kudos were given. And now we have a dead zone the size of New Jersey in the Gulf of Mexico.

Acknowledging that a lack of intimacy paired with a desire for progress can lead to devastating side effects, a moral design practice retains a strong bias toward conservation. Our ancestors were right about some of this stuff.

Anyone who's worked in the design industry will be quick to raise a reasonable counterpoint. Well, what about objectivity? What about perspective gained through distance? I think this question points us to a bit of a paradox. Design is certainly limited by a lack of intimacy but also by too much.

The most essential prerequisite to understanding is to be able to admit when you don’t understand something.

Richard Saul Wurman
in *Information Anxiety 2*

I doubt design teams working at Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google have much time to seriously contend with what functional consumerism, data mining, and mass objectification mean for humanity. They are so familiar with and so personally invested in the features that they cannot perceive the bugs. Similarly, a designer working at Dow Chemical Company in the 1940s—with a unique mastery of the characteristics of specific compounds and potential applications—could not have been aware of the irreparable costs of their innovations.

All designers wish to be responsible, but responsible to whom? Customers? Employees? Shareholders? Investors? It’s very easy to leap straight into working out of a deep specialization with the tools, clients, and brands without ever pausing to reflect on all that we don’t know. When we let the creative brief dictate the scope of our concern, we’ve abdicated our truest role within the companies and institutions we serve.

Designers should recommit themselves to being faithful skeptics dedicated to thoughtful probing and self-directed research. And they should be embedded as agents of thoughtful advancement everywhere.

Moral design may also be inhibited by our own ideas of progress. I don't think we're looking for short-cuts, but designers do have a strong bias toward action and a deep need to show something that looks like progress. That impulse can get us into trouble. Here, I think designers can learn from the scientific community. We must be reminded that when an idea doesn't work, it is not failure; it is information. Emphasis on *formation*.

The scientific method is, at root, a process for inquiry into the natural world using empirical evidence to slow down human hubris (in the form of hypothesis) through a series of tests and proofs.

Similarly, we might think of design method as a process for inquiry into the purposes, plans, and intentions behind what humans make and do. We are actively shaping tomorrow's anthropologies. But problematically, I think, we tend to rush on to the next thing without ever allowing for something like our own equivalent of peer-review.

If something appears to be trending it quickly becomes ubiquitous. We often operate strictly within the sphere of markets, conveniently ignoring the entire sphere of morality (virtue, esteem, status, etc.).

Designers of all sorts, including those designing science experiments, must balance the two. We get so caught up in "making progress" that we adopt increasingly standardized workflows, tools, and techniques without doing the work of evaluating appropriateness for our local context. Many of us don't feel that we even have a local context. We're more at home on our laptop or at some faraway conference than we are with our own neighbors and colleagues.

For an idealistic person, say a 30-something graphic designer working in a large public institution, all of this is utterly exhausting. She desires for things to be better. She is finding, absorbing, and implementing new ideas all the time, yet nothing changes. She is being formed by a global design community obsessed with progress yet incapable of defining what it would look like in her work.

For all the good our digital tools have wrought, they're on their way to undermining anything resembling vernacular design, which I would define as functional design for ordinary people rooted in a local economy and culture. As evidence, I offer the delightful artifact of the regional design annual. When I was at university, I'd spend long hours poring over the unique aesthetic sensibilities of

design communities in San Diego, Seattle, Chicago, or Atlanta. Today, they are indistinguishable. Likewise, architecture has become more and more fraudulent without a place and people to reflect.

Our insistence on vague and fleeting notions of progress leaves actual designers sitting in actual offices in actual towns thoughtfully improving life for actual humans feeling as if their work is meaningless.

And again, somewhat paradoxically, design also seems to be limited by our lack of progress. Contemporary designers have seen time and again how quickly the landscape can and will shift beneath our sketchbooks.

If we are designing consumer goods or digital applications, we're keenly aware of limitations like planned obsolescence and progressive enhancement. Automotive designers would rightly point to rapid advances in sensors, computers, fuel economy, lightbulbs, emissions, and airbags as just a few of the reasons they design 10-year, 100,000-mile cars. Anything that lasts longer could be considered irresponsible.

To state the obvious: Design is always limited by what we know right now. And we (perhaps now more than ever) know that there's far more change to come. We must cultivate the sort of curiosity that isn't afraid to be limited. Intimacy, but not blind devotion. Progress, but not hubris. Moral design conserves more than it disrupts. It is careful, not clever. It is cultural, not viral.

Unlike the caricature Natasha Iskander dismantles, moral design thinking has roots and a soul. Its practitioner might lack the sophisticated snark and luxe accoutrements of design celebrities from Los Angeles and New York. But, she knows and is known by real people.

She is as skilled at place-making as she is at sketching. She deals in stories as often as schematics. She is honest about the limitations of her chosen craft. And yet, she remains convinced that thoughtful, accountable, and inclusive design is the best path toward positive and durable change.

There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.

Wendell Berry
in *Given*

Outcomes

A freelance fashion designer in Chelsea stares at a computer screen. He's making final adjustments to color swatches for a clothing line two seasons hence. The traditional hues of pink and yellow in the design are just so... boring. He gazes idly at markers and pens strewn beside his desk lamp and his eyes find a wayward highlighter. Eureka! Design inspiration strikes.

Several months later, the eye-popping textiles are manufactured, but not in U.S. mills as they have been in past seasons. Because of the hot colors—chosen on a computer by a man who has never set foot in a textile mill—the line is being produced in Shandong province in China, where lax regulations allow for a greater variety of toxic chemicals to be used.

Over the next decade, multiple major river systems are destroyed, contracts are canceled, workers are

fired, mills are closed, and entire communities in my native Virginia collapse.

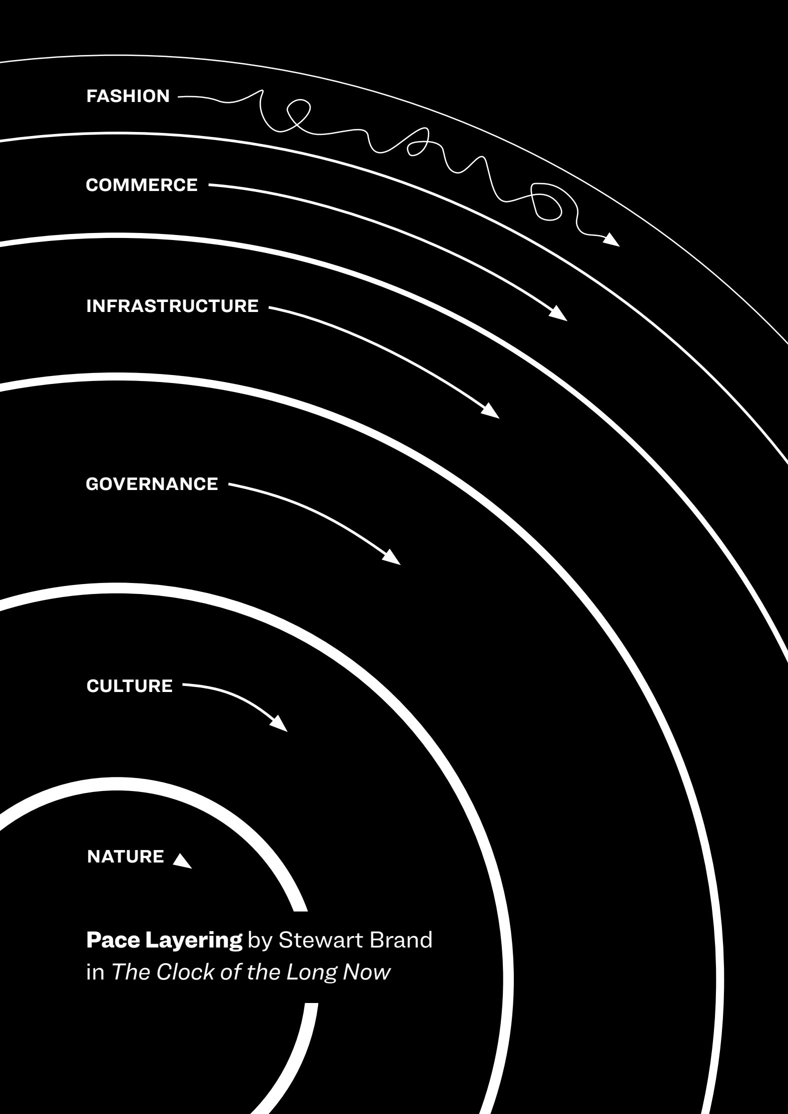
Sadly, stories of our *déformation professionnelle* are easy to find. Real estate developers and homeowners associations work with designers to minimize unsightly forest management practices in northern California with catastrophic results. A heartbreaking rise in rates of depression and suicide among teenage girls correlates with designers at web-based social platforms creating new channels for comparing, ostracizing, and bullying. We're eager to throw away "old" technology for its replacement, willfully ignorant of the costs—both human and material—for the upgrade we've "earned." I suspect that a great many people working in design professions do not wish to see these connections to their work. I can understand that. Often, we'd prefer to be bit players—speaking up about aesthetics and not much else. If we as designers specialize in form, perhaps we can wash our hands of everything upstream and downstream of our singular contribution. But design is not simply a means for expressing an idea or an emotion. Nor is it to be understood as a marketing discipline. Design is not, as modern maestro Massimo Vignelli might have reminded us, merely styling.

In response to the new American Airlines brand identity, Vignelli stated, “As you know, one of the great things about American Airlines was that the planes were unpainted. The paint adds so much weight that brings an incredible amount of fuel consumption. For some reason, they decided to paint the plane. The fact is, weight is weight. Design is much more profound. Styling is very much emotional. Good design isn’t—it’s good forever. It’s part of our environment and culture.”

Whether or not he’s right about the economics of painting jets, you can hear Vignelli pleading for moral design—for a holistic approach. He is advocating for honesty. It is not enough for him only to conjure emotion and sell tickets.

Moral design requires far more of us. What do we intend and how will it be evaluated? How will it be produced and at what cost? What are the known limitations of our solution, and how will we design for what we don’t know? How will we, as designers, understand the full outcome of our work? And how will we ever learn if we don’t?

Here’s some good news: The same industrial forces that make it fearfully possible for a seemingly


FASHION
COMMERCE
INFRASTRUCTURE
GOVERNANCE
CULTURE
NATURE
Pace Layering by Stewart Brand
in *The Clock of the Long Now*

innocent decision upstream to wreak havoc downstream also work in the other direction. The democratization of process and proliferation of tools enable hundreds of small, local design decisions to have an immediate and outsized impact. When something works in one place, it can be quickly copied, tailored, and applied in other contexts.

How can designers adjust their habits and focus—and really, their imagination for their work—given the seemingly high stakes of working in a fast-paced, interconnected system? Where to begin?

A charming Irish web developer named Jeremy Keith recently introduced me to Stewart Brand's concept of pace layering. He was using it in relation to emergent web technologies, but this 20-year-old idea has also lent helpful form to this conversation about moral design.

In *The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility,* Brand argues: "Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span. The trend might be coming from the acceleration of technology, the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economics, the next-election perspective of democracies, or the distractions of personal multitasking.

The nature of moral judgments depends on our capacity for paying attention — a capacity that, inevitably, has its limits but whose limits can be stretched.

Susan Sontag
in *At the Same Time*

"All are on the increase. Some sort of balancing corrective to the short-sightedness is needed—some mechanism or myth that encourages the long view and the taking of long-term responsibility, where 'the long term' is measured at least in centuries."

Many designers are actively fueling this pathologically short attention span, but we can also be part of the balancing corrective. Could moral design expand into the "mechanism or myth" Brand longs for?

One further insight from *The Clock of the Long Now* speaks to the need for designers to finally shake off the modern animosity toward inherited wisdom: "Starting anew with a clean slate has been one of the most harmful ideas in history. It treats previous knowledge as an impediment and imagines that only present knowledge deployed in theoretical purity can make real the wondrous new vision."

Design and designers are not objective. Instead, we are agents of memory and metaphor—both highly subjective. And while we can offer much-needed perspective in any context, so-called design thinking must always remain rooted in conservation and care.

I would suggest that the principal work of the moral design practice is to perpetually move between pace layers with the objective of better aligning what is honestly good for culture and nature with what is explored in fashion and commerce. This means cultivating a deep understanding of each layer and then doing our most important work through the mediating layers of governance and infrastructure. It means focusing on exchanges—on *relationships*.

Medicine and manufacturing increasingly mimic nature. Communities debate their own local cultures. Institutions try to make sense of big data and disruptive tech. Companies want to be seen as responsible. Designers—trained to understand and accept the moral weight of making decisions for others—must be deeply embedded in each of these conversations.

If you're a young designer getting started and trying to find your niche, look up the chamber of commerce and ask about the institutional patterns in your local economy. What courses are they offering at the community college? What are farmers and factories producing? You can make a meaningful dent as a designer just by understanding as much as you can about each layer and facilitating meaningful exchanges between them.

Imagine for a moment that our "hot color" designer had lived in Henry County, Virginia, instead of Manhattan. What if he'd been friends with master craftsmen whose families had worked in textile mills for generations? And imagine if, together with shareholders, manufacturers, conservationists, labels, and retailers, he'd used his career to coordinate a resilient design vernacular for textiles in that place. Over decades, he could have designed in ways that reduced costs by understanding the economic and ecologic heritage of his home.

Too far-fetched? OK. So, even if he still lived in Chelsea, imagine if he'd picked up the phone and asked a question.

Pursuing moral design means cultivating *true affection*, rooted in respect, experience, and specific knowledge. This means belonging to a place and its people. It means developing *empathetic boldness* to confront deep-rooted, complex failures in other designers' work and *genuine humility* to acknowledge and attend to the many failures in our own.

To design is to make decisions for others. Because it involves an exchange of power, however slight, design is best understood as a *moral* pursuit.

And now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good.

John Steinbeck
in *East of Eden*

We design systems in which people live their lives. We design research that produces data they trust. We design stories they believe, tools they use, and industries in which they work. We broker their attention. We amplify their desires and their fears. We implicate people in supply chains and opaque markets, often without their consent.

It is time to embrace a new design criticism rooted in whole-cost accounting. We must slow down and stay put. We must know and be known. Only then, when our diverse design practices are situated within and accountable to the broader narrative of human progress, can we begin to pursue moral design.