

# THE FUTURE OF DESIGN: A DESIGN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

The future of design is a series of reflections from a design anthropological perspective. My job has often been to unveil truths for my clients. I have always said that there is no one truth, that in any argument - both sides are correct - partially. But there is one truth: the world is changing and will continue to change. We are part of this change as long as we breathe on this planet. While we often speak of the positive effects of our work and the pride in relation to user experience and design, we neglect to articulate negative consequences of our work and how this affects the world we live in. With this in mind, what should our focus be in the next ten years and how can we incorporate this in the education of designers as well as in the practice of design?

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## KEYNOTE

I am a practitioner. As a practitioner, my job has often been to unveil truths for my clients. I have always said that there is no one truth, that in any argument, both sides are correct, but only partially. Context and culture at any given moment, of course, plays a role in what is seen as truth <sup>{Berger, 1967 #1153}</sup>.

But there is actually one truth: the world is changing and will continue to change and we are part of that change as long as we breathe on this planet. I have tried to keep up with the fast pace of change, I have tried to make sense of the world we live in and I have tried to connect some of the dots. I thank you all for allowing me to present these connections and reflections as they relate very much to the future of design and very much to how we can avoid an apocalypse. These reflections are based on what I am seeing and not seeing in design and engineering consultancies, corporations, organizations and within academia around the world. It is my belief, as educators and practitioners, that we are responsible for guiding and facilitating reflected change for the good of our people, our communities, our nations and our planet {Bias, 2005 #1155}.

I am not going to waste time talking about the positive effects of our work. Anyone can do that, and we have reason to be proud of the work we do in design and as designers. What I want to talk about are two things which are interwoven: 1) the negative consequences of our work and 2) areas design has neglected. To begin at the end of this talk: These two things are what we, as educators and practitioners need to focus more on, now and in the future. You may not agree with what I have to say, but remember that there might just be a partial truth to what I have to say. I hope you will reflect on it. The reason I am here today is that I have a fundamental belief in humanity---the goodness and light in each and every human being. If we had some way to collect on this, some way to merge all of this incredible goodness---we can and will avoid the looming apocalypse and fall of humanity. Before I go further, let me first walk you through a simplified definition of design. Most of us recognize how design is understood outside of our field, that Design is related to both form and function. These are some of my random favorites:

- The Model 302 Telephone from 1932 manufactured in the United States by Western Electric.
- The Chemex Coffeemaker, a manual, pour-over style glass-container coffeemaker that Peter Schlumbohm invented in 1941, and which continues to be manufactured by the Chemex Corporation in Chicopee, Massachusetts.

- The John Deere Tractor, the company who makes them has been devoted to quality all the way back to 1837.
- The Classic Coca Cola bottle from 1916, perhaps the most successful brand recognition in the world.
- The Red Telephone Box designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in 1926.
- And the only thing I fought over in my divorce 15 years ago---the triptrapp stool launched in 1972 designed by Peter Opsvik for his son Tor.

All of these designs represent designing FOR a use or FOR people. And we can discuss about why they became iconic, why they are deemed aesthetically pleasing or how they have a perfect balance between form and function. Design is still about form and function, but it is about so much more than that.

DESIGN has increasingly been understood as simply a tool for both problem solving and opening up for opportunities to make change that is meaningful, relevant useful and desirable for individuals, groups of individuals, local communities, nations and even the world. How do we create a service for a starving tribe in Karamoja in the northern part of Uganda? Karamojan people are nomadic warriors whose pride was to raid cattle. They had their weapons removed by the government and suddenly they were only farmers. The World Food Program moved from giving them rice to a Cash for Work program which proved difficult. Design without Borders worked on understanding the problems from the Karamojan perspective and finding solutions that were relevant to their context, together with them. The result was a financial literacy kit because the Karamojans struggled with moving from the understanding of cattle as a resource to cash as a resource.

The example of Karamoja shows how we have moved from designing FOR people to designing together WITH the people we serve. What this means is that we go where the people are and we involve them in the design process. But beware. Designing WITH the people we serve is not just a workshop with users so we can check off that we have involved them, it means that we fundamentally change our mindset and practice by 1) accepting that people are experts in their own lives and 2) involving these very people in the making of things. This leads to the project's shared success.

- We, as designers, can work with them to uncover both articulated and unarticulated needs. One of our most important tools is how we reframe the questions and challenges that come our way.
- We as designers continue to work with the people we serve to test out ideas, to gather their ideas and to visualize our understandings so that we can validate our results and shared solutions to their challenges.
- We as designers must move from designing FOR people (which limits the potential for success because it requires a mastery of the one designer, the genius, who may in fact not be a genius at all), to designing together WITH the people we serve (which maximizes the potential of success).
- Designing WITH the people we serve means we go where the people are and we involve them in the design process {Kirah, 2009 #1156}.

Here our job requires not only the understanding of a perspective other than our own and being humble to how our differences can give room for new and unknown solutions, but to facilitate the verbalization of tacit knowledge. This idea is far from new, it was in my curriculum when I was a student {Goffman, 1959 #1152}. Are we as educators equipped with the right tools to teach this?

Design and design education must evolve further. I am arguing here that design CAN and MUST explicitly be used as a tool for change, for facilitating change and creating a world of design thinkers. I will come back to some examples at the end of my talk, but right now let's take a look at why this is so important. Why? Because changes are happening at an exponential rate that we as human beings cannot even begin to comprehend it, our brains cannot compute it. In 2001, Kurzweil {Kurzweil, 2001 #1157} expressed the following: "We won't experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century—it will be more like 20,000 years of progress (at today's rate)." If we look back 20,000 years we are talking about a time before we had wheels, where we just were beginning with civilization!

Just stop and think: Most of us in this room did not grow up with the mobile phone or the internet! This exponential growth has consequences {Bell, 2006 #1154}. What we don't talk enough about is that Technology is both a blessing and curse. What are the consequences of social media? What are the consequences of being digital? Do we stop and reflect about this? Is Kahnemans book, Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow, on our curriculum? What about the post factual {Flood, 2016 #1158} world we live in today? Where is critical thinking? We have some big challenges:

## **The Balance Between Technology and Humanity**

Let me give you an example. We are talking more and more about welfare technologies to keep people at home longer and longer. Really? I mean really?

If you ask an old lady today, honey would you like to stay at home as long as possible or would you like to go to a home for the elderly. What is she going to say? She is going to say----stay at home as long as possible. This question is a stupid question. The more important question is to ask her why she wants to stay at home? The option today is a sad depressing home and institution for the elderly. We should instead be thinking about tools and places for quality of life in our final years, not tools and places for dying. How do we educate designers to think beyond the now?

## **Healthcare**

We have a healthcare crisis and we have to face the aging population needs of now and the future. How do we sustain our rapidly growing population on this planet?

## **Globalization**

With globalization we have not only refugees from war, we have refugees from economic crisis and we are going to see an increase in refugees from global environmental catastrophes. In addition, we have polarization happening EVERYWHERE because the level of globalization is unprecedented. How do we educate the use of design and design thinking to deal with these effects of globalization? How do we design for group behavior, communities and nations to resist the urge for facism, a natural consequence of fear and rapid change?

## **Environment**

Our globe is on the verge of environmental catastrophe. We are not making the necessary judgments focused on saving our planet. We have our heads in the sand or rather fixated on making money or keeping up our standard of living. There is talk of the 6<sup>th</sup> mass extinction, the decline of animal species is happening at alarming rates and this may have a detrimental impact humanity {Jordan, 2017 #1160}. The Norwegian government is talking about taking the subsidy away for electrical cars because we have reached critical mass. This is insane! It means the people who were rich enough to switch will have an advantage and the rest of us are going to have to pay for it. We should be restricting all use of cars except for electrical cars and we should all be allowed the subsidy just once...to buy our first electric car and not to become a Tesla bully.

Design and design thinking needs to infiltrate policy making, design must be involved in government, in all aspects of our social fabric! After all, we are problem solvers.

If we are going to save the world, if we are going to solve the challenges facing our planet, we need everyone to be practitioners of design and design thinking. DESIGN IS FAR TOO IMPORTANT TO LEAVE TO DESIGNERS. This brings me to how I believe design is already evolving and will continue to evolve in the future. We are evolving to facilitate change and to transfer knowledge and practices to everyday people in their everyday lives, to governments and their officials, to civil servants in the public sectors, to entrepreneurship, to small, medium, large and enterprise companies.

To save the world, we need everyone to become design thinkers. This changes our role as designers from being the ones to come up with the solutions, to acknowledging that through visualization we can help communicate both challenges and solutions in new ways, to facilitating the possibilities. Design can and must explicitly be used as a tool for change, for facilitating change and creating a world of design thinkers. And it can be done, one step at a time.

I would like to focus on two projects to exemplify this:

### **Oslo Airport**

The service design project at the Oslo Airport was not really about designing services. It was about changing antiquated mindsets first...to move from designing services for passengers to designing services with passengers and employees. But more important---the question was how can design facilitate a collective change in the organization to have a passenger focus, and to create services that are meaningful relevant useful and desirable for the people the airport serves? And this is why it is so important not only to involve the customer but also the employees of the organizations we work with--they need to become service designers---we need to facilitate and lead the change. The same goes if it is product design---if you involve all the beneficiaries of a service or a product in the process, the result is a far more meaningful relevant and useful solution----and it fills the required needs of efficiency, cost saving because you get it right the first time, more for less and so on.

### **Adjumani Youth Design Challenge**

The second case is the is the Adjumani Youth Design Challenge. Uganda has over 1,2 million refugees with as many as 2-5 thousand refugees coming over the border each day. The problem is that refugees and host communities struggle with lack of resources The UN does not have the resources even for emergency aid and its of utmost importance that the entrepreneurial spirit be engaged so that the refugees become active participants in their own lives. With the United Nations, Design without Borders instigated a design challenge mixing refugee youth and host community youth. We facilitated design thinking and had the participants discover their own problems and solve their own problems. The participants went through a design process and came up with ways to earn money or to help the community in some way.

In essence the designers moved from designing for the people, they moved from designing with the people, they moved to facilitating the people's ability to design for themselves. This way of thinking is eye opening not only for the aide world, but also right here at home. How can design facilitate passivity, how can design help the state and municipalities to empower their citizens to take ownership over their own lives as much as they can? I will be talking about this project and its impact when presenting the paper from Design without Borders at this conference. The future of our planet rests on our shoulders. Design has a place here. I believe the answer lies in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. I encourage designers and non-designers to read through these 17 goals and understand them. How can we ensure that these goals are accounted for in our design practice and in our design educations?

To avoid an apocalypse, we need to educate designers with the following traits:

- Courage to fail forward
- Trust in the people they serve
- Patience to be an active listener
- A strong sense of ethics. We need to think through our solutions and correct when we see unfortunate results. We need a louder voice when we see abuse or misuse of design.
- Belief that each and every one of us can make a difference.

I call design in the future a people-centered approach, perhaps most of all because I am passionate for maintaining a balance between humanity and technology. A people-centered approach is part of the problem-solving tool kit. It feels like a beautiful tango. When you watch tango dancers, it looks so

easy, but it requires hard work and even the best of us step on toes while dancing. And even the best of us have to continue practices. Design must focus on creating solutions that are meaningful and relevant to the people we serve, and by doing so, we create a sustainable future for ourselves, our families and friends, our communities, our nations and our world.

Design for the future is about becoming aware and making a difference.

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