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redesigning designing: a fable on sustainment

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Design, Designing, Designing Designers, and Redesigning Designing: A Fable on Sustainment

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LONG AGO, there was the world **(1)** before the stuff. From the world before the stuff came the world with some stuff. Then came machines and with it, all of a sudden, came the world with a lot of stuff.

In the world with some stuff, some had a lot of stuff and some had little or no stuff. When the machines came to make the world with a lot of stuff, it was promised that

1 'What does "world" mean here? ... World serves here as a name for what is, in its entirety. The name is not limited to the cosmos, to nature. History also belongs to the world. Yet even nature and history, and both interpenetrating in their underlying and transcending of one another, do not exhaust the world. In this designation the ground of the world is meant also, no matter how its relation to the world is thought.'

Heidegger, M. 1977, 'The Age of the World Picture', *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, p.129.

everyone would now have enough stuff. But still, it continued that some people had little or no stuff, while others had even more stuff. **(2)**

When the world with a lot of stuff came to be, all of a sudden, there was more than most people were accustomed to want. In order for the world with a lot of stuff to work, there needed always to be people to want the stuff. So designers came to be.

Designers made the stuff attractive, so people would want the stuff. **(3)** But people also needed to know that stuff existed and that they could buy the stuff. So designers made stuff to let people know about the stuff, so they could buy the stuff. **(4)** And it worked, because all this stuff was new, and this stuff was different from the stuff which existed before the world with a lot of stuff. And the machines kept making more stuff.

In time, this world with a lot of stuff wasn't big enough for all the stuff. If the machines were to keep on making a lot of stuff, we needed a world that would always be big enough to keep all the stuff: *a new world for a new world of stuff*. So designers not only made the stuff attractive and made stuff to let people know they could buy the stuff, they also made a world that would be big enough for all the stuff. **(5)** So designers designed a world that wanted and needed all the stuff.

This world was not the same world that was before the world with a lot of stuff, the world with some stuff, or the world before the stuff. It looked better, especially with all the stuff. It became the world that people knew, and people forgot the world before the stuff. **(6)**

Time passed and stuff happened. It came to be known that the making of all the stuff was making trouble for the world before the stuff. **(7)** This was confusing, because the people were living in the world that wanted and needed stuff, not in the world before the stuff. But it came to be, little by little, that the troubled world before the stuff was beginning to affect this world that people knew, the world that wanted and needed stuff, the one designers designed to make room for all the stuff. Something had to come to pass.

But the people kept on wanting and needing stuff, even though they didn't want anything terrible to happen to the world before the stuff. So they tried to find a way to make stuff in a different way, but in a way that would still keep the world with a lot of stuff. So the designers redesigned the world that wanted and needed stuff, creating a world that could have all the stuff *and* the world before the stuff. This they called the sustainable world. **(8)**

2 Marx, K., & Engels, F. 1848, *The Communist Manifesto*

3 See Adrian Forty's description of the birth of the modern design profession through Wedgwood's hiring of 'applied designers'. Forty, A. 1992, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society Since 1750*, Thames and Hudson, London.

4 Meggs, Philip B. 1998, *A History of Graphic Design*, 3rd edn, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, p.127.

5 Baudrillard, J. 1970, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Originally published as *La société de consommation*, Editions Denoël, Paris.

6 'In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.' Debord, G. 1967, *The Society of the Spectacle*, retrieved 11 November, 2007, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/16>

7 Carson, R. 1962, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin, New York.

8 McDonough, W. & Braungart, M. 2002, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, North Point Press, New York.

AS IT HAPPENED, in the world before the stuff, the ice melted and the winds blew. **(9)** But the designers kept designing the world with a lot of stuff, and the world that wanted and needed stuff, and the world that called itself the sustainable world. *But they couldn't just design a world without stuff.*

More stuff happened, which changed not only the world before the stuff, but also the people who wanted and needed stuff, and the designers who designed the stuff. The world became stuffed: with all the stuff, with all the worlds made for stuff, and with designers who designed all the stuff and the worlds for stuff.

All the worlds then began to creak and moan. This people expected from the world before the stuff, and even from the world with some stuff. But they were surprised that the world that they were living in, the one they called the sustainable world, could creak and moan so. And the people began to think. Even the designers who designed all the stuff and designed all the worlds for the stuff began to think: about *designing*, but not designing stuff or designing worlds for stuff. Designers thought about how they designed a lot of stuff, and then had to design a world that wanted and needed stuff, and then had to design a world that called itself a sustainable world, a world still full of stuff. All this designing of stuff and worlds couldn't hide a world that kept on creaking and moaning. And the world was now stuffed with designers designing stuff, and all the worlds for all the stuff!

This didn't make sense. *Why couldn't they just go back to designing simple stuff?* Something, it seemed, kept making them designing more stuff and more worlds for all the stuff.

IT BEGAN TO DAWN ON DESIGNERS, little by little, that they weren't in control: *stuff happened*, **(10)** and it happened in a way designers couldn't predict. The stuff that was happening was bigger than all the stuff that they had ever designed, even exceeding the worlds that they had designed for all the stuff. This stuff was huge and powerful, and a world unto itself. **(11)** It was more powerful than the designers who first designed the stuff, and the worlds for all the stuff. They didn't know what to do.

Since this world which was stuff was so powerful, it could design stuff and design worlds for stuff too. But when did this begin to happen, designers asked themselves? Like designers sometimes do, they began to take apart, bit by bit, some sample worlds, and some stuff that was made for those worlds. And they always found that stuff had power: sometimes lots of power, especially when it was worlds of stuff; and sometimes only a

9 International Panel on Climate Change 2007, 'Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis; Summary for Policymakers. Retrieved 11 November, 2007, from <http://www.ipcc.ch/SPM2feb07.pdf>.

10 'The question of design is always an ontological question, which is a question of what it does in the ways that it acts.... Design always arrives as the way something acts as, in and on the world, and as a learnt thinking... that informs practices which bring something into being.' Fry, T. 1999, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing*, New South Wales Press, Sydney, p.5.

11 'Design is everywhere as the normality of the made world that is rendered background as soon as "design" becomes an individuated object of focus. There is not a single thing around us which is not designed.... Thus the world of designed objects and processes that are present for us constitute the designing environment. This pre-designed environment over-determines the designing of design processes and the products of design, all of which are deeply embedded in a circular process.' Fry, T. 1999, p.5.

gentle and persistent power, like when it was only one item of stuff. And if stuff had power, then it could design stuff, and design worlds of stuff, and even design designers who design stuff and worlds of stuff. Designers were humbled, and a little frightened.

Designed by stuff! This was the dark truth, and they didn't like it at all. They figured that if they were being designed by stuff, the people who wanted and needed stuff were being designed by stuff too – the designers' stuff. This was important stuff to know, especially in a world where the people who wanted and needed stuff were increasingly frightened by the world which was creaking and moaning. The designers figured, if we can design stuff which designs, and design worlds for stuff which designs, then we can design worlds that don't want and need stuff, at least not all the stuff.

These designers tried and tried, and all they could come up with was more stuff. But their heart was in the right place, hearing from beyond their studio the world which was stuff creak and moan so from all the worlds of stuff and all the designers who designed the worlds of stuff. So they kept trying and kept thinking about designing. A few of them, being sly and crafty designers, decided only to design designing, and simply not design stuff. *But how?*

'WELL,' SAID ONE, 'LET'S DESIGN SUSTAINMENT – that's not stuff.' (12) That was good for him, they all thought, because he seems to know what he means. *But what does it look like?* This was hard, because designers like to know what things look like. And hadn't they *already* designed a world which called itself the sustainable world, and wasn't that world not working? But even if they were simply going to stop designing more stuff, and more worlds of stuff, they still had to design *something*. Maybe instead, they thought, they could redesign designing. So they put Sustainment in brackets, thinking that it might at least come in handy later. 'Let it prove its worth,' they said. They were cynical, because they had designed all this stuff, and all these worlds for stuff and even, already, a world which was called the sustainable world.

Redesigning designing was hard. Everytime they tried, they inevitably came up with stuff. After all, they were trained to design stuff, and worlds for stuff. Meanwhile, the world which was stuff was still creaking and still moaning.

"Okay," they admitted, "we designers who are designed by stuff are having a time of it designing for a world without so much stuff." That made sense to them when put simply, just like that. So instead of redesigning designing, which they hoped to do; or designing Sustainment, which they didn't yet know how to do, some of them decided to *design designers to redesign designing*. They knew how to design, and they knew designers, since they were designers who designed and sometimes redesigned. So maybe, through teaching, they could design designers to redesign designing so the world which was stuff could stop creaking and moaning and all that.

Although it seemed a little weird to be designing designers, they had been humbled and now realized that all the stuff and the worlds they had designed had *already* designed people and were *still* designing people, in ways they hadn't intended. But they had to do *something*, not only because they were designers, but also because the world was creaking even more, and moaning.

Maybe the world – not just the world which was stuff, but every world back to the world before stuff – was ready to explode. (What was happening was that the world could hold only so much stuff with the all the people who wanted and needed stuff. It was simpler to have *only the stuff*, **(13)** without the people who wanted and needed stuff, and certainly without the designers who designed the stuff and the worlds for stuff.)

IN THE WORLD WHICH WAS STUFF, it was hard to design designers to redesign designing for a world without so much stuff. **(14)** But they were determined to try. The students who wanted to be designers didn't know that much about design, so didn't yet know what design had to do with all the creaking and moaning. The world which was stuff still needed designers to design the stuff, and to design worlds for all the stuff, so the students who wanted to be designers thought that was good for them. And although they had been designed to be okay with lots of images and loud sounds, they still were afraid of their world exploding. And these students were too young to know dying, and didn't want that yet either.

So little by little, the designers who wanted to design designers to redesign designing saw an opening and began to teach. They always made sure that there was at least *some* stuff for the students who wanted to be designers to design, to make sure that the designers they would become could do both: design in the world which was stuff *and* design a world with a lot less stuff. Maybe then these designers could become important designers who could redesign designing. **(15)**

There were also some designers who wanted more designing but were unhappy with their place in the world which was stuff. Sometimes they didn't know why, but it hurt. It could have been the creaking and moaning of the world which was stuff, which they had become so accustomed to they hardly heard it or felt it – it became just a dull ache that wouldn't go away. There were also some designers who heard and felt the creaking and moaning and who were scared, or idealistic, or both. None of these designers wanted the world to explode, or for people to go away, or for designers to stop designing. And they all wanted to do something for the world they were realizing was creaking and moaning. So they went back to school, to learn how to redesign designing. **(16)**

13 Weisman, A. 2007, *The World Without Us*, St. Martin's Press, New York.

14 'Above all such learning confronts the designed, manufactured and lived unsustainability of education in error, for unsustainability is not only a product of habit, unthinking, myopia, ill-formed practices and inappropriate methods, but also of misconceived, uncritically adopted and misdirected education.' Fry 1999, p.9.

15 Undergraduate education is tricky, as many students are attracted to study design precisely for the rewards of designing for industry and are worried about finding jobs when graduating. Thus, it is only possible to teach designing for sustainment in the context of professional, institutional, and academic expectations which for the design profession usually mean preparing students to design unsustainably. The most we can do is to plant seeds and hope for future disaffection with the unsustainability that is created by the design industry.

16 Graduate students return to school for a variety of reasons, and design programs provide a variety of approaches from formal and technological innovation to human-centered design. In any case, the increased rigor and theoretical requirements along with the students' desire for additional learning allow for a more substantive encounter with designs' response to unsustainability.

In this place and with teachers who wanted to design designers to redesign designing, they learned *first* how to recognize the creaking and moaning, for sometimes it was so hidden in everything, in all the worlds that designers had designed, that it couldn't be seen and felt. But pretty soon they could see and feel it everywhere. **(17)** They also became less scared, because they felt they were doing something, just by recognizing the creaking and moaning. They were also taught to imagine a world without creaking and moaning. And they were told that the creaking and moaning might never go away, but *by imagining a silent siren song* without creaking and moaning they would know they were going in the right direction when redesigning designing.

AND SO THEY BEGAN to redesign designing, all the while imagining the silent siren song of no creaking and moaning. This was not as simple as it seemed.

They knew that in the past, designers had designed worlds to hide all the creaking and moaning – not only in the world that wanted and needed stuff, but even in the world that called itself the sustainable world. **(18)** This had to be different from that. They had just learned to recognize the creaking and moaning and this made them less afraid and wanting to do something. They had to imagine the silent siren song of no creaking and moaning *at the same time* as they took away all the parts and pieces of all the worlds which hid the creaking and moaning. And they had to design the people to want to recognize the creaking and moaning and want to do something to prevent the world from exploding. This was very, very hard but still they did not stop, even for a second.

First they had to take apart the world which called itself the sustainable world, and show the people how it sustained the unsustainable worlds. **(19)** If they didn't do this and convince the people that it was right, they could go no further. Then they had to take apart both the world which wanted and needed stuff, and finally, the world with a lot of stuff. This too was very difficult. You see, there were machines in the world with a lot of stuff that had, for a very long time, been making stuff – a *wealth* of stuff. And the people didn't really own any of these worlds or the wealth of stuff; rather, they were more *indebted to them* for the lives they lived. **(20)** All the wealth of stuff was owned, by and large, by the

17 'It follows that it is quite impossible to adequately think of, pursue, let alone realize sustainability unless unsustainability is understood and engaged.' Fry 1999, p.9

18 In light of the "tortilla riots" in Mexico caused by a steep rise in the price of tortillas due to a massive conversion of corn agriculture to ethanol production, Jerry Garrett of the New York Times asked, 'How is it more socially and environmentally responsible to starve the poor to run your S.U.V?'. Garrett, J. 'Ethanol and the Tortilla Tax' *The New York Times*, 6 September 2007, retrieved 12 November 2007, <http://wheels.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/09/06/ethanol-and-the-tortilla-tax/>

19 'Crucially, what is being advocated is the acquisition of the means of destruction of that which destroys.' Fry, T. 2003 'The Dialectic of Enlightenment', *Design Philosophy Papers*, Issue 5.

20 '...about 29 percent of low- and middle-income families with credit card debt reported using their credit cards to pay medical expenses – in most cases for major medical problems.... There is an epidemic of personal bankruptcies in the U.S. and medical factors are believed to play a role in as many as half of them.' Herbert, B. 22 January 2007, 'Your MasterCard or Your Life', *The New York Times*, retrieved 12 November 2007; citing Zeldin, C. & Rukavina, M. 2007, *Borrowing to Stay Healthy: How Credit Card Debt is Related to Medical Expenses*, Demos: A Network for Ideas and Action, New York, retrieved 12 November, http://www.demos.org/pubs/healthy_web.pdf

people who owned the machines that made all the stuff. These people had accumulated *way more stuff* **(21)** than the people who were indebted to all the stuff and the people who had little or no stuff. It was all just stuff, but the people with way more stuff liked the stuff and wanted to keep it.

So the people who owned the machines that made all the stuff that people were indebted to kept as much of the wealth of the stuff they could in the stuff called money, which they also liked very much. They knew that this was good, or they thought so, because some philosophers from the world before a lot of stuff wrote it. By keeping the money stuff, the philosophers said, they helped the world from perishing. **(22)** And because of this they were good, and because they were good they had power, and because they had power they were going to make sure that they could keep on making stuff to keep having money stuff so that the world wouldn't perish.

THIS PROBLEM some designers called a *wicked* problem. **(23)** And wicked it was.

All the designers who wanted to redesign designing – the designers who wanted to design designers to redesign designing; the students who wanted to design in the world of stuff and design a world with a lot less stuff; and the designers who were redesigning designing while imagining the silent siren song of no creaking and moaning – *they all realized* that they not only had to redesign the problem of the designing of *stuff*, but they also had to redesign the problem of the *money* stuff. There had been other worlds that tried to redesign the problem of the money stuff. They creaked and then they moaned and they perished. But the problem persisted and it did not perish.

But the designers knew money. They designed stuff for money. The stuff they designed was sold for money. They even helped design a world around money. So, conceivably, they could redesign the problem of the money stuff. They figured that, in order to begin redesigning the problem of the money stuff, they would have to deal with the *people* with the money stuff, the people with power. So they looked at power.

Looking back at all the stuff they designed, and the worlds they designed, they realized that they had power – *lots of power*. **(24)** This feeling of power was different

21 The richest 2% of adults in the world own more than half of global household wealth. Davies, J.B., Sandstrom, S., Shorrocks, A., & Wolff, E.N. 2006, 'The World Distribution of Household Wealth', World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University (UNU-WIDER), Helsinki, retrieved 12 November 2007

22 'And thus *came in the use of money*, some lasting thing that men might keep without spoiling, and that by mutual consent men would take in exchange for the truly useful, but perishable supports of life. Locke, J. 1690, 'On Property,' Second Treatise on Government, retrieved 12 November 2007, <http://www.constitution.org/jl/2ndtr05.htm>

23 A wicked problem, in brief, is a problem for which each attempt to solve it changes the understanding of the problem. The term was originally proposed in a treatise on social planning. Rittel, H. & Webber, M. 1973, Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning, *Policy Sciences* 4, Amsterdam, pp.155–169

24 The American Institute of Graphic Design (AIGA) held its 2002 national conference, *The Power of Design*, in Vancouver, Canada. Two years later, Canadian designer Bruce Mau and the Institute Without Boundaries organized the seminal exhibition *Massive Change* at the Vancouver Art Gallery exploring the immense power design has in shaping the world. See <http://powerofdesign.aiga.org/>, and <http://massivechange.com/>, both accessed 12 December 2007

than the feeling of power they had experienced before they were humbled. Sure, they then had the power to design stuff and worlds for stuff, but they always felt they were designing for the people who owned the machines which made the stuff, and who had the *real* power. Once they had been humbled and began to redesign designing to the silent siren song of no creaking and moaning, they began to see another world – one which they didn't know they created but they did – the money stuff world. That held all the power. All the designers who designed all the other worlds and all the stuff that filled all those worlds were only really designing the money stuff world. They hadn't even known it. *And it had all the power!*

THEY KNEW THEN AND THERE that it wasn't just a question of redesigning designing, but redesigning the money stuff world, which was designing power. So they rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

When they got to work, the first thing they figured was that some people have money and thus power and some people don't. Some people have lots of money and thus power and use it, and some people have no money and thus no power and are thus used by those that have the money and the power. That worked for worlds too, worlds with money and thus power using those worlds with no money and thus no power. And worlds which used the ones with no money and thus no power. **(25)** And inside the creaking and inside the moaning could be heard all the effects of this difference of power.

And precisely *just then*, all of the designers who wanted to redesign designing – the designers who wanted to redesign designing, the designers who wanted to design designers to redesign designing; the students who wanted to design in the world of stuff and design a world with a lot less stuff; and the designers who were redesigning designing while also designing the silent siren song of no creaking and moaning – *witnessed the silent siren song of no creaking and moaning taking on new resonance and new power.*

This made them realize *the power of knowing power*, and the *knowing* of the workings of power. **(26)** This kind of knowing was different than what they came to know through all the designing they used to do – through the designing of stuff and designing of worlds for stuff, for example. That knowing was a knowing of stuff, a knowing of all the worlds for the stuff, and a knowing of the world which wanted and needed stuff. Now, their knowing was of the power of power, and the power of making worlds for power, and the power of taking away power, and of making worlds where some had power and others had little or no power. So now they knew how to design power, and redesign power, and design a world which held truth to power rather than designing worlds which only resembled truth for the benefit of those with power. The designers who were redesigning designing felt that if they designed this kind of world, the people would like that world better anyway. *And once again they witnessed the silent siren song of no creaking and moaning taking on new resonance and new power.*

25 Galeano, E. 1973 *Open Veins of Latin America*, Monthly Review Press, New York. See also Klein, N. 2007 *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Metropolitan Books, New York.

26 '...in a society such as ours...there are manifold relations of power that permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.' 1980 Foucault, M. 'Two Lectures', *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, Pantheon, New York, p.93

WHAT THEY WOULD DO NEXT was anyone's guess, but now they knew they had a powerful tool in the silent siren song of no creaking and moaning. Because they were designers, they had a process for redesigning designing which was listening to the silent siren song of no creaking and moaning while redesigning power and designing worlds which held truth to power.

MAYBE BY DOING THAT, they thought, taking away the brackets, the work they would do would be leading to Sustainment.

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