

Preface

To say that design has always struggled with ethics is not an overstatement. This isn't because design has no ethics or that it doesn't perform ethical acts – far from it. Positive deeds abound in multidisciplinary fields like social design, and there's every reason to believe that ethical design is evident when designers work with marginalized communities; when they co-design systems that make life bearable for the sick and vulnerable; when they participate in grassroots activism; or when they struggle alongside community members to shape public policy for affordable housing. In these instances and many others, it seems clear that designers are acting ethically, and that design may even be more ethical today than it's ever been.

Instead, the observation that design struggles with ethics is meant to underscore that the meaning, scope, and application of ethics to design is neither explicit nor straightforward. Unlike bioethics or legal ethics, for example, whose genealogical and discursive boundaries are more or less discernable, design ethics, by contrast, doesn't share the same kind of clarity. To many, the ethical and moral concerns of a profession like design call to mind

norms and obligations that operate like a balance sheet to determine, through an agreed upon procedure, what is and is not *ethical*. In this scenario, the language of *ought* can too often feel like a straitjacket constraining the creative process, inhibiting rather than enabling original design. It's perhaps for this reason that ethics, when it's engaged at all, functions more like a nebulous horizon than a domain of research practice with a clear remit. This dubious relation to ethics is nowhere more evident than in design fields whose stated goal is to promote *social good* and *well-being*; here, the ethical value of an action tends to be an assumed rather than an explicit objective. It's as if generalities such as goodness and well-being are agreed upon values that more or less take care of themselves.

Despite the ease with which certain fields parade their commitment to acting or designing ethically, goodness and well-being are not objective givens – they are themselves produced. Indeed, what's meant by *social good* is generated by shifting historical and political conditions, and design is embedded in the social and material fabric that reproduces these values. Design, whether the field acknowledges it or not, is always already engaged in ethical decision-making: it proposes *how one might live* (to invoke Aristotle).

From graphic design to architecture and urban planning, design shapes, guides, and even prohibits ways of living, modes or community engagement, and ultimately, what one ought to value. This is precisely why Michel Foucault's works on normativity and the processes of normalization become powerful genealogical and diagnostic tools: they unearth how design institutes and normalizes certain value systems (Foucault, 2007).

With some notable exceptions, the failure to interrogate the history of these normalizing practices has rendered design vulnerable to reproducing value systems that marginalize, exploit, and extract from humans and nonhumans alike.

Fortunately, in the last few decades, designers have begun to wake up to the fact that for much of the twentieth century, design has been complicit in reproducing the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system, and that the decolonization of design practices, theories, and histories is desperately needed (Escobar, 2020; Fry and Nocek, 2021). What's more, some argue that colonial modernity

is itself a global design, which means that designing is as much a political and economic project as it is a professional one (Mignolo, 2011; Fry, 2011). Still, even with this reckoning, and the promised, if yet to be realized, shift in the discourse and practice of design, the ethics underlying this transition remain elusive. While the *Political* figures prominently in these discussions, the ethical dimensions of the project are largely left unanswered, and deferred yet again.

Turning to ethics would mean inquiring into the value systems and obligations that design commits itself to. What, specifically, is it undermining – the universal human subject (Sylvia Wynter, 2015)? And if so, how? What normative frameworks, if any, does it promote in its place? And how does the political project overlap, support, or even conflict with the ethical one? The Algerian-born French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, criticized Immanuel Kant for reducing the ethical to the political, insofar as the latter saw no objective conflict between our moral obligations and what's politically possible (Kant, 2006). For Derrida, however, Kant fails to recognize that the political is always already an imperfect realization of the obligation to be hospitable to the Other qua Other before any (political) designation is given (Derrida, 1999). In this context, it's worth thinking about whether *pluriversality* serves a similar function: Does the pluriversal become the new (and at the same time, ancestral) value system that underlies the decolonial political project (see Dunford, 2017)? And if so, is this the proper remit of design ethics – to promote pluriversality as a value? This would certainly give design ethics a distinct objective, but is this the goal? If it is, then this would also entail redesigning the very institutions and curricular structures that produce designers in the image of dominant values.

For all these reasons, the present volume represents an important transition in design research. What stands out about the essays included here is that they engage with what so many others dismiss or ignore: namely, the ethics of a multidisciplinary design field that aims, on the one hand, to be maximally inclusive, but on the other, does not reduce or explain away alterity of the other. In fact, the otherness of the Other figures centrally in the volume, and plays out in various ways across the disparate essays. Indeed, where other edited collections and research projects might remain content with

the idea that designing for public and social systems announces its moral worth unproblematically, this volume does not fall into this trap. And for good reason: in another context, Guy Julier and Lucy Kimbell show convincingly how social design emerges in the wake of austerity measures and serves to prop up neoliberal values (Julier and Kimbell, 2019). Which means that any assumption of ethics on the part of social designers, even when good intentions abound, needs to be recast in light of the neoliberal values the field unwittingly reproduces. The essays that follow seem keenly aware of criticisms like this, and do everything in their power to resituate the field in explicitly ethical terms, replacing individualism and universality with relationality and pluriversality.

To cast the net a bit wider, this reframing of design ethics also presents a unique opportunity for multi- and trans-disciplinary research in the future. Not only does raising the question of ethics in design shift the needle in the right direction by making explicit what's remained implicit for far too long, but it also crosses over into a rich history of ethics in the tradition of continental philosophy. For its part, continental philosophy is no stranger to design and architecture, but it's typically encountered in ontological design (or adjacent fields *à la* Heidegger), or else in the heyday of deconstructive architecture (Eisenman, Tsumi *et al.*). Rarely, however, does this tradition of philosophical inquiry make its way into social and public design practice, and certainly not in the context of ethics. This volume is an exception to this rule, and paves the way for others to follow. Concerns over how the otherness of the Other affects the stability of the designer (as an autonomous subject) abound in this book, and are framed in terms that Emmanuel Lévinas, Hans Jonas, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and many others working in this tradition of philosophy have carefully and rigorously articulated. It still remains to be seen what long-term impact such a *turn to ethics* will have on research-practice, but there's little doubt that the questions raised in this volume will catalyze a new, and much-needed wave of interest in the ethics of design for public and social systems.

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