

Draft 2: Written Proposal: [META]Physical: XR & Motion Beyond Binaries

Thesis Statement

[META]Physical: XR & Motion Beyond Binaries explores the intersection of Extended Reality (XR) and lesbian sensuality through an Augmented Motion Graphic Short Film. The project challenges traditional notions of physicality, showcasing how marginalized communities, particularly queer individuals, bring innovation to tech. Through immersive visuals and narratives, the film illustrates how human experience transcends space, time, and the physical body, emphasizing the need for inclusivity and diversity in XR.

Influences

1. **Jacolby Satterwhite** – His innovative use of 3D animation and digital media in surreal narratives has inspired the visual style of my motion graphic short film, particularly the use of vibrant, fluid, and symbolic imagery.
2. **Wayne Coyne's "The Kings Mouth" Installation** – This immersive experience that combines sound, sculpture, and narrative parallels my goal of creating a multi-sensory experience where the viewer is enveloped in both the digital and physical worlds.
3. **Aubrey Heichemer's "Corpus Misty"** – This XR Coven collective work directly influences my exploration of metaphysical themes, queer identity, and the blending of digital and lived realities.

Context (Historical + Cultural + Personal)

From profound, transformational experiences such as DMT ceremonies to lesbian sensuality, my life has often existed in a realm beyond physicality. My unique perspective on reality, grounded in queer identity and metaphysics, has been shaped by both personal experiences and broader cultural discourses on identity, spirituality, and innovation. This project connects deeply to my personal journey as a multi-marginalized individual, navigating both academia and professional spaces while confronting fears of ostracization and judgment. I aim to bring queer realities into the larger conversation of tech innovation, advocating for inclusivity and rethinking the boundaries of human connection. Culturally, this project speaks to the broader discussion around diversity in technology, particularly in XR, where marginalized voices are underrepresented.

Conceptual + Creative Direction

Core Idea: This project explores how human connection transcends the physical body through Motion Design, XR and lesbian sensuality. The narrative is built around three scenarios that highlight profound metaphysical experiences, challenging mainstream views of physicality and sensuality. The film visually represents these ideas through shapeshifting sapphic 3D characters interacting in real-world landscapes, from forests to cityscapes.

Deliverables

1. **Motion Graphic Short Film:** A 3-7 minute piece utilizing XR techniques, blending real-world footage with digital 3D animation.
2. **Installation:** A geodesic dome or tent structure where the film is projected, providing an immersive viewing experience.
3. **Facilitated Q&A:** A dialogue between the audience and myself, exploring the themes of the project.
4. A booklet designed to encapsulate the experience for viewers to take home.

The short film will be created using Cinema 4d and Adobe After Effects for 3D animation, Adobe Aero for XR integration, and real-world footage shot in various night-time outdoor locations. The installation will involve a 360-degree projection inside the dome, creating a fully immersive experience. The estimated

timeline for production spans Fall and Spring Semester of 2024, with a budget focused on 3D software, XR equipment, and installation materials (all freely accessible at PNCA).

Narrative Structure:

- Scenario 1: Two characters awaken from a shared dream, revealing deep metaphysical connections.
- Scenario 2: A synchronized climax occurs without physical contact, symbolizing transcendence through metaphysical practices like reiki.
- Scenario 3: Characters communicate telepathically, illustrating the transcendence of sensual experiences beyond the physical.

Symbols & Motifs: Key symbols include fluid, abstract forms representing telepathy and queer sensuality, juxtaposed with real-life landscapes symbolizing the boundless nature of experience.

Audience: The project primarily targets individuals within the queer community and advocates for greater inclusivity in the tech industry. It also appeals to those interested in metaphysical practices, design and technology as a whole.

Creative Vision: The tone is ethereal, transcendent, and vibrantly colorful, with 4-dimensional characters set against the vastness of black outer space. The visual language merges the organic and digital, symbolizing the interconnectedness of physical and metaphysical realms.

Technical Plan Timeline and Milestones:

- Fall Semester 2024:
 - Develop initial storyboards, animatics, and previsualization.
 - Start 3D character modeling and animation tests.
 - Capture night-time real-world footage.
- Spring Semester 2025:
 - Finalize 3D animation and compositing with Cinema 4D & After Effects.
 - Begin XR testing and integration with Adobe Aero.
 - Construct the geodesic dome and test projection mapping.
- April 2025: Full setup and testing of the installation, Q&A facilitation plan, and booklet design completion using documentation from the thesis creation journey described above.
- Plan B: Project onto a large, flat wall if unable to secure geodesic dome.

Your Work

This project is a natural evolution of my lifelong work, which spans visual arts, design, and interdisciplinary studies & practices from performance art to drumming and electronic music making. My creative journey, which includes residencies, a feature in National Geographic, and collaborations across Europe, reflects my ongoing exploration of innovation, metaphysics, queerness, and identity. As my portfolio continues to grow, this project marks a pivotal moment in my progression from graphic design into motion and XR, setting the stage for a future in creative technology. My work has always pushed boundaries, and this project will further solidify my commitment to innovation and diversity in tech.

Conclusion

The [META]Physical project highlights the transformative potential of Motion Design and XR, illustrating how marginalized perspectives can revolutionize our understanding of reality. By challenging traditional views on physicality and connection, this project not only contributes to the tech field but also offers a glimpse into new realms of human experience. As I move forward in my career, this project serves as a powerful testament to the importance of diversity in technology and the necessity of creating spaces where all identities can thrive and innovate.

Silver X

Artist Statement

PNCA | Spring 2025 | GD 444-01-25/SP

Silver X (birth name: Tashia 'Tazha' Williams) is a designer, creative, philosopher, and advocate who thrives at the intersections of art, design, social impact, and technology. Their work challenges traditional structures and embraces interdisciplinary, multidimensional, and intersectional ways of thinking. Whether designing for brands, crafting motion graphics, exploring extended reality, or facilitating conversations around identity and justice, Silver's work is deeply rooted in authenticity, empathy, and the pursuit of a more just and expansive world.

From the moment they could hold a crayon, design found them. Their parents recall a red squiggly line, drawn continuously across several walls of their childhood home—an early sign of their innate need to make a mark. Encouraged by family, Silver's passion for visual expression flourished, leading them to performing arts schools and, ultimately, to a lifelong commitment to creative exploration. Over time, their design practice evolved beyond aesthetics into a philosophy—one that understands art and design as tools for social transformation.

Silver believes design is more than just form and function; it is a reflection of the world's complexities—race, gender, privilege, and access all play a role in shaping opportunities. They reject the notion that success is determined solely by talent or dedication, instead advocating for systemic change within creative industries. Their work invites critical thought and radical imagination, ensuring that every project—whether self-initiated or collaborative—carries a deeper purpose.

As an artist and designer, Silver has always existed outside of conventional paths. Their approach is deeply intuitive yet intellectually rigorous, combining research, speculative thinking, and storytelling. They have worked across disciplines, from branding and motion design to UX and XR, collaborating with businesses, creatives, and free thinkers who share a commitment to pushing boundaries. Their projects often center on humanitarian and social justice themes, making space for marginalized perspectives and reimagining a future where creativity is expansive and liberating.

People who know Silver describe them as uncompromisingly authentic—someone whose work and presence refuse to be confined. They are a philosopher as much as they are a designer, an artist as much as they are a researcher. Their ability to see patterns across disciplines, cultures, and histories makes them a true 'World-Bridger'—a term they coined as part of their solo brand project, Silver Chalice Studio—creating work that resonates on multiple levels.

At their core, Silver is a creator with a deep respect for Afro-/Indigenous knowledge systems, a commitment to fighting for the underdog, and an unshakable belief in always speaking truth to power. They don't just design; they challenge, question, and transform.

Silver

PNCA Spring 2025

Thesis Abstract and Project Statement

20 Word Version:

This thesis posits that an equitable, efficient, and holistic design industry—and world—is vital, denouncing Western design as canon.

Full Thesis Statement / Abstract:

“The Future of Design (and of the World) Is Holistic: Examining & Transcending Western Design Pedagogy, Practice & Paradigm” is a digital thesis booklet that positions design as a world-building force and posits that an equitable, efficient, and holistic design industry—and world—is vital, denouncing Western design as canon. Drawing from global pre-colonial design histories, contemporary critique, and speculative frameworks, it presents a compelling case for reorienting design education, industry standards, and everyday applications—advocating for design in service of the collective good.

Project Title: *The Future of Design (and of the World) Is Holistic*

Subtitle: Examining & Transcending Western Design Pedagogy, Practice & Paradigm

Author: Silver X

30-Minute Oral Defense Speech: "The Future of Design (and of the World) Is Holistic"

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for being here. My name is Silver X, and today I am proud to present my thesis, titled "*The Future of Design (and of the World) Is Holistic*," with the subtitle "*Examining & Transcending Western Design Pedagogy, Practice & Paradigm*." This project is the culmination of years of lived experience, cultural study, design practice, and interdisciplinary research, and it represents both a critique and a proposal.

My Initial Thesis Title, Project and Statement seamlessly evolved into what you see here. The creative process is a wild journey which I appreciate and I'm sure you all do as well - after all, I am speaking to an audience of Creatives. As I iterated my project as a Motion Design Short Film, it eventually became clear to me: I have too much text! Too much copy. So much to say that this would be better formatted as a digital book. As I began writing, it was almost as if I entered state of channeling, a manifesto flowed out of my fingers faster than I could write and evolved into an entire - not just thesis project - but thesis - well I would sa essay, but apparently now, it is as long as a book :)

Those of you who have been on this journey with me for a white will see how the expression of my initial vision manifested seamlessly into this most fitting form.

PREFACE / MANIFESTO Let me begin with the heart of the work: the manifesto. This thesis repositions design as a world-building force. It posits that an equitable, efficient, and holistic design industry—and world—is vital to our collective future. Rather than treating design as simply visual, marketable, or utilitarian, I argue that design must be understood as a philosophical, political, and social practice.

Design, in its current dominant paradigm, sustains inadequate Western frameworks. My work denounces Western design's status as canon and interrogates how pedagogical, practical, and paradigmatic norms replicate exclusivity, inequity, and epistemic erasure.

00. THESIS STATEMENT & ABSTRACT In a world facing climate collapse, mass displacement, racial injustice, and epistemological crisis, design cannot afford to remain neutral. This thesis draws from global pre-colonial design histories, contemporary critique, and speculative frameworks to reframe design as a relational, systemic, and justice-oriented discipline. The abstract, as presented in the book, outlines this trajectory and prepares the reader for a non-linear but intentionally layered unfolding.

01. DESIGN PEDAGOGY We begin with pedagogy. Design education doesn't just teach students how to make things—it teaches what counts, what matters, and who gets to be seen

as a designer. The chapter opens with a critique of how Euro-American design histories are treated as canon, while global and ancestral design lineages are often omitted, tokenized, or treated as folklore.

The curriculum remains ahistorical, reducing design to form and software while erasing context, philosophy, and ethics. We emphasize technical skill over cultural fluency. Neutrality is still praised. I argue that pedagogy must instead become a site of political awakening. I offer pathways toward an anti-colonial, culturally fluent, and truly interdisciplinary model of design education.

02. DESIGN PRACTICE Next, we turn to practice. Practice is how theory becomes real. And yet, our everyday design practices still operate within corporate, ableist, and white supremacist systems. From how "users" are defined in research to how "diversity" is included only as an afterthought—we continue to tokenize and extract without reciprocity.

In this chapter, I critically analyze frameworks such as human-centered design, personas, empathy mapping, and accessibility. I argue for co-designed, community-centered approaches that embed care, nuance, and mutual benefit at every step of the process.

03. DESIGN PARADIGM Design is not just process and practice—it is paradigm. This chapter investigates the values, assumptions, and beliefs that undergird our design systems. Why is product valued over experience? Why is specialization rewarded more than hybrid thinking? Why is "good design" assumed to be universal?

Here, I propose that paradigms must shift. We must move beyond capital, prestige, and linear success. Instead, design must center cultural specificity, localized meaning, and regenerative values. This chapter names the water we swim in and invites readers to begin swimming differently.

04. A MORE HOLISTIC TIMELINE OF GLOBAL DESIGN HISTORY This chapter reconstructs design history. Through rigorous interdisciplinary research, I map a timeline that integrates overlooked contributions from Africa, Asia, Indigenous America, and the Global South. From the Lebombo bone to the Garima Gospels, from fractal architecture in Cameroon to typographic traditions in Korea—this timeline confronts the idea that design began in Europe.

It reframes history not to replace one canon with another, but to reveal that there has never been a singular canon. This chapter illustrates how timelines, too, are designed—and how we can design them better.

05. WHAT'S AT STAKE IF NOTHING TRANSCENDS What happens if we don't change? This chapter reflects on the stakes. If pedagogy, practice, and paradigm remain unchanged, design will continue to serve the few at the expense of the many. It will remain complicit in extractive capitalism, environmental degradation, and epistemic violence.

Here, I include speculative and real-world consequences: inaccessible infrastructure, exclusionary public systems, extractive visual narratives, and the ongoing marginalization of global majority cultures. It becomes clear that design has never been neutral—and cannot remain passive.

06. THE SHIFT | Toward a New Design Ethos This chapter offers a proposal. Not just critique, but vision. I define what a new design ethos could be: relational, intersectional, participatory, and systems-oriented. Drawing from Indigenous knowledge systems, diasporic aesthetics, and speculative design practices, I outline key principles for a more holistic design future.

I suggest pedagogical shifts, new modes of authorship, and models for reciprocity. I call for a return to the body, to the land, and to imagination as core design tools.

07. THE FUTURE | Final Reflections In closing, I reflect on the process of making this work. This is not just a thesis—it is a commitment. It is informed by a decade of interdisciplinary design, by my own experience as a Black and queer creative, and by a longing for a world where design is not a tool of power but a practice of care.

I do not offer a neat conclusion, because this work is ongoing. Instead, I extend an invitation: to teach differently, to practice differently, and to imagine more expansively. The future of design is not fixed. It is up to us.

08. LEXICON / 09. INFLUENCES & REFERENCES The lexicon in this book defines key philosophical and design terms not just by dictionary standards, but through a lens of cultural critique. The references reflect a wide range of sources: from Saki Mafundikwa to bell hooks, from fractal theory to feminist pedagogy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / ABOUT THE AUTHOR This work is deeply personal. I close by honoring the people, mentors, ancestors, and communities that made this project possible. My name is Silver X, and I thank you for joining me in this exploration.

I welcome your questions.

Silver

PNCA Spring 2025

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THESIS

PROJECT TITLE

The Future of Design (and of the World) Is Holistic

SUBTITLE

Examining & Transcending Western Design Pedagogy, Practice & Paradigm

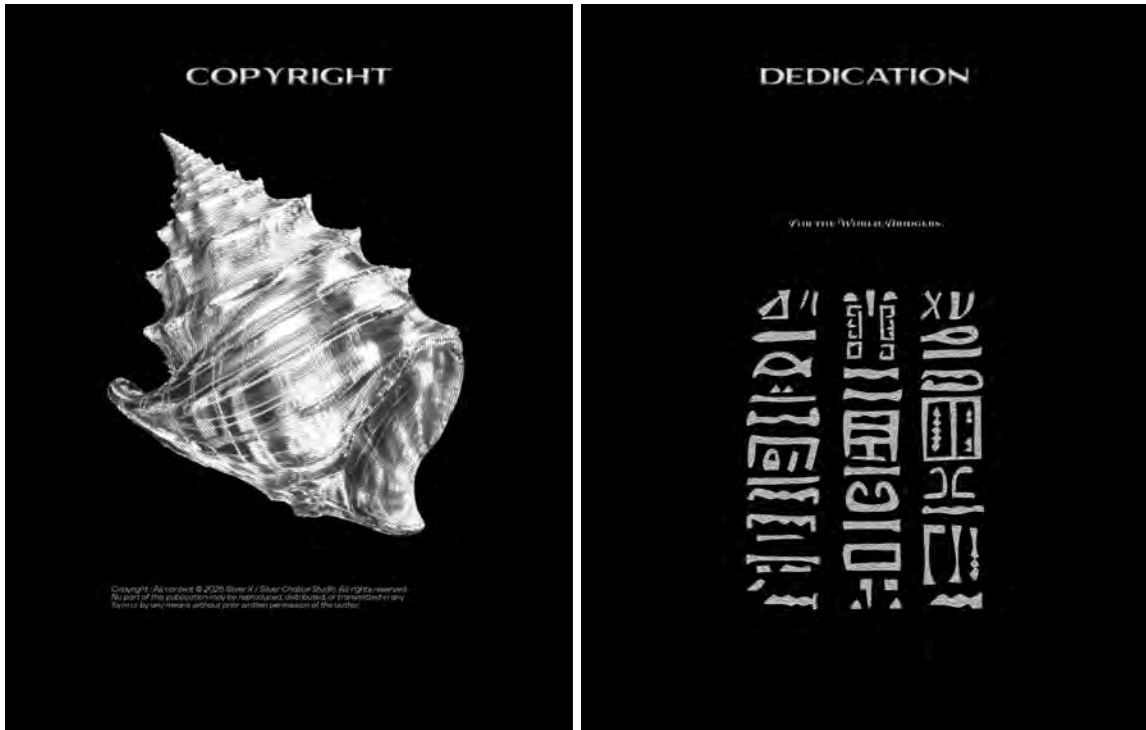
AUTHOR

Silver X (Birth Name : Tashia “Tazha” Williams)

THE FUTURE OF DESIGN (AND OF THE WORLD) IS HOLISTIC

EXAMINING & TRANSCENDING WESTERN DESIGN
PEDAGOGY, PRACTICE & PARADIGM

BFA DESIGN THESIS BY SILVER X



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DEDICATION

“For the World-Bridgers” - Silver X

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my Mom and Dad.

To the Earth.

To my Family.

To my Ancestors.

To My Former Teachers, Mentors, Professors who truly saw my light,

mirrored it back & amplified it.

To my Chosen Family.

To the World-Bridgers across the Universe.

The Future of Design (and of the World) Is Holistic

A MANIFESTO

On Holism

Ah, yes, circles. Remember wholeness? Infinity (∞) is one way to express it—the notion of continuum, of spectrum. These are foundational concepts that suggest we all exist somewhere within them (across a myriad of dimensions). Any spectrum, any continuum that could ever exist, by definition, includes all. To design, communicate, or understand anything without contextual awareness is to work with a fractured lens. Context may not be everything, but it is fundamental to any act of making, knowing, or relating. It is fundamental to every design solution, to every dimension of human life.

On Binaries

Binaries, in themselves, are not inherently harmful. They are not the enemy. The issue lies in how they are wielded—particularly in Western thought, where binaries are often treated as endpoints or absolutes rather than flexible points along a broader spectrum. We are rarely invited to zoom out and consider binaries as part of a larger, interconnected reality. They are a narrow tool of categorization that often fails to reflect the complexity of perception, experience, and being.

And yet, binaries serve specific purposes—language, code, computation—all depend on them. Their usefulness is real, but it is contextual. When we mistake that limited usefulness for

universal truth, we forfeit nuance. So the mandate becomes clear: zoom out. Always.
Contextualize.

On Hierarchies

Western design has long held an infatuation with hierarchy—often arbitrary, frequently unexamined. And like binaries, hierarchies can serve a purpose—if applied with precision and context. Take the example of red being used for stop signs: within the visible spectrum, red triggers strong visual and psychological responses in many people. In this context, hierarchy is functional—it supports clarity and safety.

But the problem arises when such logic is applied broadly and without critique—to people, aesthetics, values, and cultures. That’s not functionality—it’s control. It’s erasure disguised as order. We must acknowledge that not everyone responds to “red” the same way. Colorblindness, cultural symbolism, and personal meaning all shift perception. Which brings us again to the necessity of nuance. Binary thinking and hierarchical logic become harmful when assumed to be universal. There is rarely one right and one wrong. We must design accordingly.

On Practicality

Design often differentiates itself from art through the mantra “form follows function,” asserting a commitment to utility, clarity, and objectivity. But let’s interrogate that. First, the assumption that something is “not functional” simply because it is unfamiliar or misunderstood is flawed. Lack of understanding does not negate purpose. Second, to observe someone else’s behavior—particularly across cultural or experiential difference—and claim objectivity is, at

best, presumptuous. A system may be operating above the surface that you are unequipped to perceive. That does not make it any less “real.”

Take a simple example: someone wears long pants in extreme heat. Rather than assuming they are making an impractical choice, consider that they may be protecting their skin due to a medical condition, engaging a cultural practice, or responding to environmental needs you do not understand. “Function” is not universally legible.

And consider this: even if two designers with identical credentials are given the same brief, they will almost certainly produce different (yet equally effective) outcomes. Why? Because design is not a neutral process. It exists within the context of personality, culture, experience, aesthetic sensibility, etc. “Form meets function” does not erase the role of the designer’s humanness—the entire context of their being. It never has. And that is not “bad.” Let’s start acting accordingly.

On Linearity

Time does not move in a straight line. It spirals, it echoes, it folds in on itself. Indigenous and African conceptions of time have long affirmed this—acknowledging cyclical patterns, ancestral returns, and sacred simultaneity. Spiral time resists the capitalist compulsion toward perpetual productivity and forward motion. It asks us instead to return, to remember, to re-enter the present with deeper consciousness. Western design’s obsession with timelines, deadlines, and progress charts is not neutral—it is structured around extraction, acceleration, and empire. When time becomes a tool of capital, it ceases to serve life. Reorienting our relationship to time is not a poetic suggestion; it is a necessary act of design justice. We must design with rhythms that hold space for breath, memory, and nonlinear becoming.

On Being / Essence

Essence precedes language. It emerges before naming, before framing. It is not superior to articulation, but it does not rely on it to exist. Western design education and critique often privilege the visible, the verbal, the justified. But there is a kind of knowing that does not announce itself—a knowing that moves in silence, in intuition, in presence. To design holistically is to design not only from concept, but from essence. It is to recognize that what something is is not always equal to what it is said to be. The question is not simply how does it work, but what is it being? What is its presence, its weight, its hum? If we do not train ourselves to sense this, we are designing for surfaces, not for souls.

On Material "Reality" / Dimensionality

To acknowledge that we live in a three-dimensional space-time continuum is to accept that dimensionality is not theoretical—it is experiential. Dimensionality is not limited to what we perceive best. Physics affirms what many of us already know: the world is not made of parts, but of layers. Zero-dimension: the point, the origin. One-dimension: the line, the path. Two: the plane, the pattern. Three: the cube, the body, the spatial. Four: the tesseract, the fold, the interrelation of time and mass. And beyond: vibrational, energetic, ancestral, metaphysical planes we move through whether or not we name them. To reduce reality to the visible is not objectivity—it is limitation. Those of us who feel more than one layer at a time, who sense the edge of form before it forms, are not imagining things. We are remembering them. Design, when done well, holds all of this—not as metaphor, but as structure. (I'll save the rest of this for my future graduate thesis. But know this: it is entirely part of the work you are holding in your hands now. Stay tuned. Follow the unfolding.)

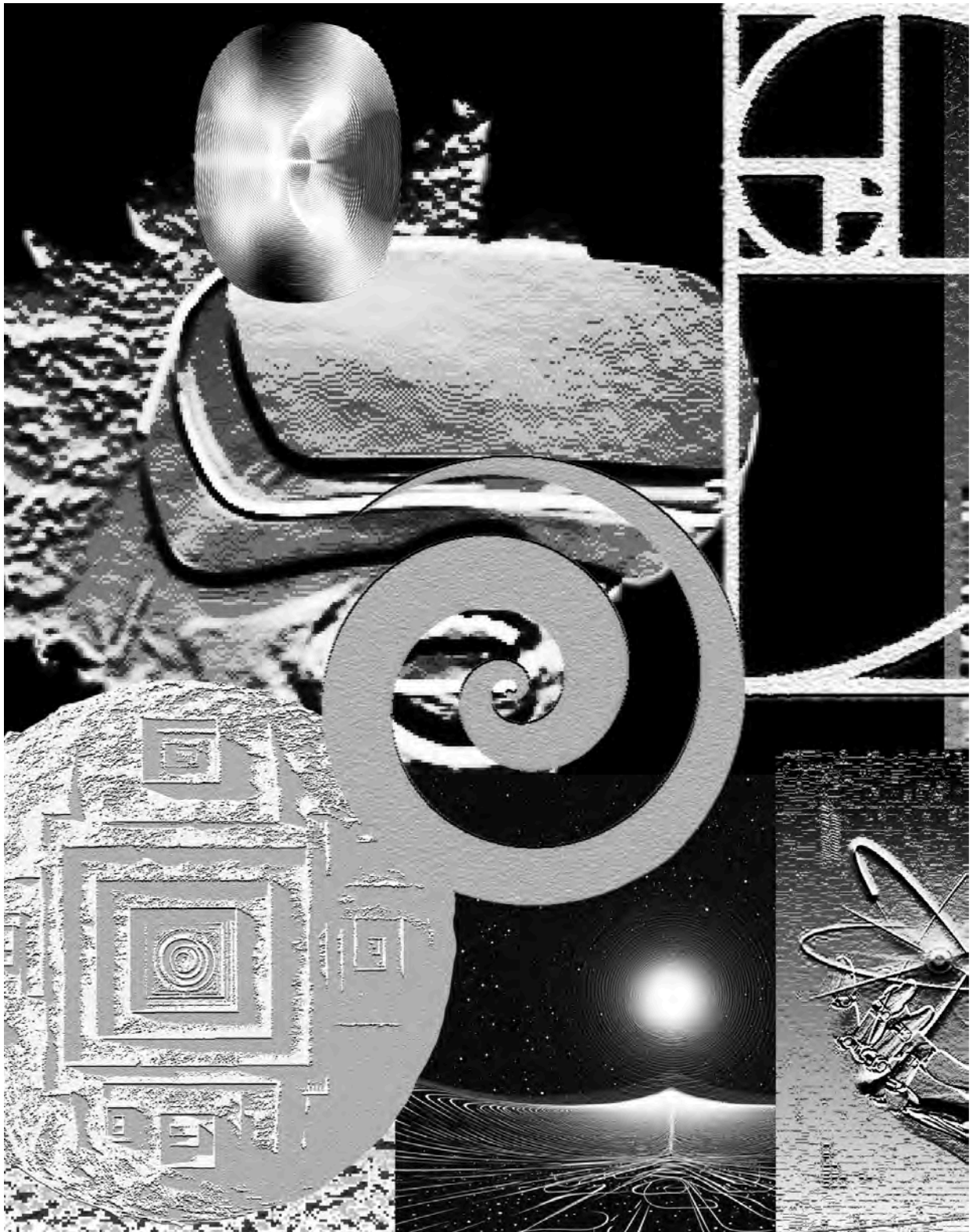


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PREFACE: THE ROOT AND THE WHOLE

Yes, while I am arguing that design is holistic, part of that holism is paying homage where it is due—starting at the root, starting from the birthplace of humanity: Africa. This isn't metaphor, this is fact. The continent where human civilization began is also the origin point for some of the most advanced, intentional, and integrative design systems the world has ever known. The perspective offered here—by me, an African person born in America—is not singular but ancestral, cosmological, and collective. While this book seeks to honor global histories and practices across many geographies and cultures, its center of gravity, its tonality, and its entry point must be what it has always been: the head, the root, the origin.

To argue for a holistic future of design—pedagogically, professionally, and paradigmatically—requires us to tell the truth about where design began. Not in 20th-century Germany. Not in 15th-century Italy. But in precolonial Africa: in the spatial cosmograms of the Dogon, in the fractal-informed architecture of the Ba-ila, in the polyphonic structures of Yoruba governance, and in the textile coding of the Akan. To erase these is to not only participate in epistemicide, but to sever design from its most fertile soil.

Design, in African contexts, has never been compartmentalized. Architecture, math, spirituality, community planning, agriculture, and aesthetic expression exist in systems of interdependence. As Eglash (1999) reveals in *African Fractals*, the self-similarity found in African village layouts is not coincidental—it reflects a fractal logic that exists both materially and metaphysically. These are not just patterns; they are algorithms. They are cosmologies you

can walk through. The same logic that shapes the scale of compounds shapes social hierarchies, ceremonial timing, and ecological stewardship.

Consider the Hausa architectural tradition, which uses sun-dried mud, rhythmic ornamentation, and thermal regulation strategies to create buildings that are both sustainable and sacred (Something Curated, 2022). Or look to Ethiopia, where ancient rock-hewn churches were engineered downward, carved into the Earth in inverse ziggurats. These are not anomalies. They are instructions. They challenge our assumptions about what design can be when it is in relationship—rather than in control. African fashion, as explored in the British Museum’s 2022 exhibition, is another arena where design has always been functional, expressive, and communal. From indigo-dyed Adire textiles to the mud-dyed cloth of Mali, from the geometric prestige of Kente to the cultural coding of Dashikis, clothing has served as political statement, lineage marker, and spiritual armor (NPR, 2022). These traditions are not pre-modern. They are Afro-futures rooted in ancestral memory.

During colonial times, African design did not disappear—it adapted, resisted, and encoded. Design became a tool of survival and refusal. In the urban planning of colonial Lagos, African architects worked subversively within imposed systems to maintain communal logic. In print culture, from pan-African posters to liberationist pamphlets, typography became a weapon and a witness. In fashion and music, design became a sonic and sartorial rebellion. This legacy must be taught—not as resistance alone, but as innovation under constraint.

Postcolonial design continues to reshape the globe. African typographers, digital artists, and spatial designers are reclaiming traditional systems through contemporary tools. Think of the work of Nigerian architect Kunlé Adeyemi, whose Makoko Floating School translates vernacular

architectural wisdom into climate-adaptive futures. Or the resurgent interest in Nsibidi, an indigenous writing system from southeastern Nigeria, which encodes complex social, spiritual, and political knowledge in non-linear, ideographic form (Oxford Research Encyclopedia, 2022).

Design, in its richest sense, is about systems: ecological systems, cognitive systems, social systems. And science has always told us that systems thrive through biodiversity. The same is true for human culture. Homogeneity is death to any living system. Yet Western design education continues to propagate a canon that is narrow, linear, and disproportionately white. The irony? Many of the mathematical and aesthetic principles that modernist Europe championed—minimalism, modularity, rhythmic spacing—were absorbed, uncredited, from African artifacts viewed in colonial museums (The Conversation, 2021).

To dismantle the white superiority complex masked as "design dominance," we must begin by naming it for what it is: fear masquerading as authority. True power does not need to erase, appropriate, or overwrite. It does not rely on hierarchy to validate its existence. It moves with integrity, balance, and reciprocity. These are the values embedded in African design systems—and the ones our global design culture must now learn to embody.

The ouroboros, the fractal, the polyrhythm—all speak the same truth: everything is connected. The future depends not on who controls the narrative, but on who restores relationship. This is not just design justice. It is world justice. Social justice. People justice. It is love as methodology. It is empathy as infrastructure.

The root and the opposite—what grows beneath and what blooms above—are not separate. They are one in the same. And if we are to design a future worth inheriting, we must return to the root, begin at the head, and move forward by remembering.

00: THESIS

THESIS STATEMENT & ABSTRACT

Full Thesis Statement / Abstract:

“The Future of Design (and of the World) Is Holistic: Examining & Transcending Western Design Pedagogy, Practice & Paradigm” is a digital thesis booklet that positions design as a world-building force and posits that an equitable, efficient, and holistic design industry—and world—is vital, denouncing Western design as canon. Drawing from global pre-colonial design histories, contemporary critique, and speculative frameworks, it presents a compelling case for reorienting design education, industry standards, and everyday applications—advocating for design in service of the collective good.

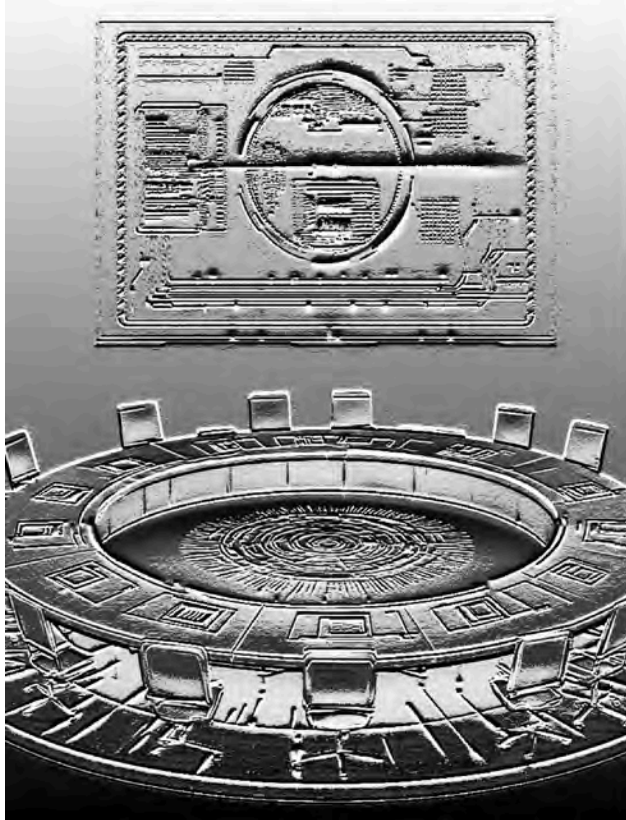
20 Word Version:

This thesis posits that an equitable, efficient, and holistic design industry—and world—is vital, denouncing Western design as canon.

Project Title: *The Future of Design (and of the World) Is Holistic*

Subtitle: Examining & Transcending Western Design Pedagogy, Practice & Paradigm

Author: Silver X



01: PEDAGOGY

ON PEDAGOGY

Design pedagogy doesn't just teach skills—it teaches values. What's centered in the classroom eventually becomes centered in the studio, the agency, the industry. The way design is taught—what is emphasized, omitted, rewarded, or dismissed—shapes more than portfolios. It shapes worldview. It teaches students how to see, who to cite, and what counts as "real design." When pedagogy is unexamined, it replicates systems of dominance even while appearing progressive. If we don't interrogate what we teach and why, we risk preparing students to perpetuate the very inequities we claim to challenge.

ON WESTERN AS CANON

The idea that design begins with the Bauhaus or reaches its peak in Swiss typography is not just inaccurate—it's ideological. Western design histories are upheld as the "canon," while non-Western contributions are framed as secondary, folkloric, or "inspirational." This hierarchy isn't neutral. It's the result of colonization, enclosure, and institutional gatekeeping. When students are only taught Euro-American movements as the standard, they internalize a distorted timeline of design—and a distorted understanding of who holds design knowledge. Centering Western canon as universal flattens the global and diverse roots of visual communication.

ON AHISTORICAL CURRICULA

Teaching design without history—real history—is not just incomplete. It's a form of theft. Most design programs skip over thousands of years of global design knowledge, focusing instead on a narrow slice of modernist, Western innovation. This erases the contributions of cultures that developed visual systems, architectural methods, cosmological planning, symbolic languages, and design logics long before the word "design" existed in the West. It also erases the violence through which Western design became dominant. Curricula that ignore this are not just outdated. They're complicit.

ON DESIGN AS INHERENTLY NEUTRAL

Design is never neutral. Every aesthetic choice, tool, or framework is rooted in values—whether named or not. And yet, many classrooms teach design as a matter of "problem solving" or "clear communication," divorced from politics or identity. This illusion of neutrality allows dominant norms—whiteness, capitalism, Eurocentrism, ableism—to operate unchecked. By refusing to name power, we preserve it. Teaching design as objective not only flattens its complexity—it shields students from the responsibility of designing with intention, accountability, and care.

ON TECHNICAL OVER SOCIAL EXPERTISE

Skill is essential—but skill without context is dangerous. Design education often prioritizes technical mastery over cultural literacy, ethical reasoning, or social engagement. Students are graded on polish, not perspective. A perfect layout can still perpetuate harm. A smooth animation can still stereotype. The metrics for "success" are shaped by industry expectations, not community impact. Until we value critical thinking, relational fluency, and social insight as much as we value Adobe proficiency, we are teaching students to make things that look good—even if they do harm.

ON TOKENIZING REPRESENTATION

Representation is not enough—especially when it's uncritical. Showing "diverse" people in your poster does not make the poster anti-oppressive. Too often, marginalized communities are brought into the curriculum as case studies, style references, or campaigns—without complexity, context, or care. Students are taught to include, but not to engage. To feature, but not to follow. This is not representation. It's tokenism. And when it happens in education, it sets the precedent for how future designers will treat the people they claim to represent.

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ON WESTERN METHODS

What gets treated as foundational in design education—briefs, critiques, individual authorship—is not universal. These are artifacts of Western academic systems built on compartmentalization and control. Other epistemologies—ancestral, intuitive, spiritual, oral, communal—aren't missing; they're deliberately marginalized, framed as peripheral or informal. Method, here, becomes a proxy for worldview. To deconstruct it is to ask: what kinds of knowledge are we willing to trust, and what kinds must we unlearn our resistance to?

ON DESIGN PROCESS

Process is rarely what the whiteboard promises. The diagram that moves from research to ideation to execution imagines time as obedient, linear, and mechanistic. But design doesn't move like that. It listens, loops, resists translation. It arrives sideways. The compulsion to formalize process into something presentable often conceals more than it reveals. A process worth teaching is one that holds complexity without forcing resolution—one that can adapt to the conditions it emerges from.

ON AESTHETICS

Aesthetic value is not neutral. The visual codes often uplifted as “refined” or “universal”—minimalism, symmetry, so-called restraint—are embedded in specific historical and cultural lineages. These preferences don't float above culture; they enforce it. Other visual systems—visceral, symbolic, layered—are rarely engaged on their own terms. Instead of asking students to conform to inherited taste, design education should ask: what does your aesthetic inherit? What systems does it comply with, and what systems might it refuse?

ON LEGIBILITY

“Make it legible” is a command often delivered without context. But legibility is not objective—it is cultural, linguistic, embodied. What reads as clear depends on who’s doing the reading and who was imagined to be reading in the first place. Default standards—like sans-serif grids or familiar UX flows—aren’t neutral; they’re learned habits shaped by dominant modes of perception. To teach legibility responsibly is to acknowledge that clarity is negotiated, not given. It must be situated, not assumed.

ON TEACHER / STUDENT

The structure of most classrooms mirrors systems far beyond them: one who knows, one who listens. The teacher speaks, the student absorbs. This arrangement is rarely questioned, though it shapes how authority, value, and voice are distributed. But learning is not extraction—it’s relational. The most generative educational spaces are co-authored. They make room for surprise, contradiction, and transformation. The teacher is not the endpoint of knowledge, but a participant in its unfolding.

ON ACADEMIA / “HIGHER” ED

Design academia often describes itself as future-facing, but the scaffolding is centuries old: hierarchies of tenure, rigid assessment, prestige-based access. What’s called “higher” education still centers those who have already been invited in. The flow of knowledge remains vertical, institutional, controlled. If we want design to become more porous, more accountable, more alive—we cannot rely on structures built to filter and rank. We need frameworks that prioritize public wisdom, not institutional exclusivity.

ON CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

A curriculum is never just a list of topics. It's a worldview in outline form. It says: this matters, this doesn't. It tells students what's worth remembering, and by omission, what's meant to be forgotten. When programs center software fluency, commercial aesthetics, and Euro-American timelines, they reproduce a narrow vision of what design is and what it's for. A living curriculum must ask deeper questions: How do we navigate ambiguity? What kind of futures are we preparing for? What tools do we need to build what doesn't yet exist?

ON PEDAGOGICAL MODELS

Many of the frameworks still used to teach design are artifacts of a different era—ones that prioritize polish over process, charisma over inquiry, obedience over risk. Studio critique becomes a theater of performance. The semester becomes a deadline machine. These structures are rarely interrogated, even as they shape what students learn to value. But if pedagogy is meant to foster critical imagination, then it must also be imaginative in form. It must be capacious enough to hold contradiction, complexity, and forms of knowing that do not resolve neatly.

ON TYPOGRAPHY

Typography is often taught through technical terms: alignment, kerning, hierarchy. But letters are not just forms—they are vessels. They carry the weight of language, memory, and control. Most design programs start the story with Gutenberg and end with Helvetica, skipping centuries of typographic expression across the global South, across diasporas, across oral-to-visual translation. To study type deeply is to study colonialism, literacy, invention, and the metaphysics of voice. It is to ask: who gets to shape how language appears—and disappears?

ON POSTERS

The poster is often treated as a beginner’s exercise in layout or messaging, but it is far more than that. It is a tool of public authorship. A visual interruption. A claim to space. Posters have long been used to rally, to persuade, to seduce, to resist. To teach poster-making without naming its political history is to strip it of its power. Every choice— image, scale, placement, audience—is a decision about whose voices are visible and whose are not.

ON STORYTELLING

Narrative is often positioned as a secondary skill in design—as something to sprinkle on top of a visual system. But story is not an accessory. It is architecture. It gives shape to time, perspective to data, meaning to form. Without story, design becomes decorative. And yet, many students are trained to design without ever being asked: Whose story is this? Who is shaping the frame? And what gets lost when a story is simplified to fit the moodboard?

ON CULTURE

Design is not outside culture. It is one of its engines. Every visual decision—palette, typography, pacing, material—reinforces or resists cultural norms. Yet in many classrooms, culture is flattened into “diversity” modules or elective content. But culture is not content—it is context. It is infrastructure. To teach culture seriously is to engage with history, with tension, with the architectures of meaning that design both inherits and reshapes.

ON CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking often shows up in syllabi as a checkbox, undefined and unquestioned. In design, it's sometimes confused with critique: a ritual of feedback that can easily reinforce hierarchy and taste. But to think critically is not simply to have an opinion—it is to develop a practice of inquiry. It means slowing down. Asking what's missing. Refusing the obvious solution. It's not about sounding smart—it's about staying awake.

ON PRECOLONIAL HISTORIES

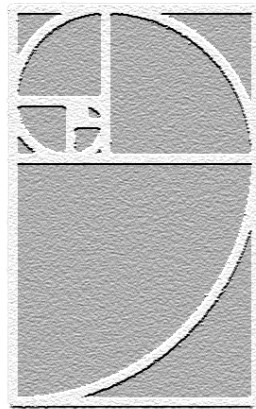
Most design histories begin in Europe, not because design began there, but because historical authority has long been constructed to protect empire. Students may graduate knowing Bauhaus but never encounter Adinkra, Islamic geometry, Indigenous mapping, or Andean quipu. This is not a gap—it is an epistemological boundary, carefully maintained. Reclaiming precolonial histories is not a matter of representation. It is a matter of integrity. To know design without them is to know only a fragment, distorted by absence.

ON DIASPORIC DESIGN HISTORIES

What travels with people when they are forced to move? Symbols. Gestures. Color systems. Resourcefulness. Diasporic design is not supplementary—it is a theory of survival. It holds within it repetition and remix, absence and adaptation. Yet in most curricula, it is treated as personal expression, disconnected from “serious” theory. But diaspora is theory. It offers ways of working that are flexible, relational, and time-bending. Not just about what was taken, but about what was reimagined in its wake.

ON INDIGENEITY

Indigenous design is often referenced but rarely studied on its own terms. It is framed as motif, not method. But Indigeneity is not a style—it is a way of being in relationship: with land, with lineage, with nonhuman time. It does not separate material from meaning, or form from responsibility. Too often, it is invoked in the past tense, as if it's not still evolving, resisting, creating. Indigenous design is not what was—it is what continues.



02: PRACTICE

ON PRACTICE

Design practice doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's shaped by systems—capitalism, academia, institutions—that determine what is viable, what is visible, and what is valuable. The problem is not just what we make, but how, for whom, and within what expectations. In much of contemporary design practice, speed, aesthetics, and deliverables are prioritized over care, process, and community impact. “Good design” is too often defined by surface polish and alignment to brand goals, rather than by relational depth or long-term transformation. And yet, how we practice is where the paradigm either replicates harm or begins to shift.

ON MARKET RESEARCH

Market research, as it's widely practiced, reduces people to trends, demographics, and data points. It identifies “targets,” analyzes “behaviors,” and draws conclusions about what people want—without necessarily asking them. Worse, it often assumes what people want can be separated from why they want it, or the conditions that shape that want in the first place. This approach erases cultural nuance, lived context, and the complexity of desire. Market research, as a tool, isn't inherently flawed—but when it becomes the foundation of design decisions without deeper relational engagement, it becomes a practice of flattening rather than understanding.

ON “USERS”

The term “user” is meant to simplify the design process—but it ends up simplifying people. Referring to a person as a “user” reduces them to their utility in a system, a product, or a service. It's a term rooted in functionality, not humanity. Particularly in marginalized

communities, where people have historically been studied, surveilled, and extracted from, calling someone a “user” replicates those dynamics. It implies one-directional interaction, erases context, and centers the product rather than the person. There are better words: community member, participant, collaborator, co-creator. Design should be relational, not transactional. Language makes that visible.

ON “DIVERSITY”

Diversity, as it’s practiced in design spaces, is often performative. It appears in hiring quotas, seasonal campaigns, and grant language—but rarely in power. Diversity becomes a metric to report on, rather than a value to embody. Teams seek “diverse voices” without redistributing authorship. Brands showcase faces without shifting culture. The word “diversity” itself is frequently used to position people as “other” to a presumed norm, rather than reimagining the norm altogether. Real inclusion is not a photo. It’s a structural commitment to shared vision, shared resources, and shared decision-making. Anything else is optics.

ON REPRESENTATION

Representation is not the same as respect. It’s not the same as truth, or care, or justice. Just because someone appears in the image doesn’t mean they were centered in the process—or in the power. Marginalized people are too often “represented” in moments of crisis, protest, or “celebration,” but rarely in scenes of joy, leadership, ordinariness, or complexity. The issue isn’t just absence—it’s framing. When representation serves the brand more than the people, it becomes aestheticized tokenism. Designers must ask not just who is visible, but how they’re being shown, why, and by whom.

ON EXTRACTION

Design can be extractive—even when it claims to do good. Especially in social impact, nonprofit, and activist contexts, designers are brought in to “help,” to “solve,” to “amplify.” But too often, the process pulls stories, pain, aesthetics, and ideas from communities without building reciprocal relationships. Design becomes a tool for translating someone else’s experience into something legible for funders, voters, or consumers. That is not justice. That is branding. A truly ethical design process requires reciprocity: time, trust, mutual benefit, and the redistribution of resources and recognition. Without that, it’s just a prettier form of taking.

ON HIREABILITY

"Hireability" in design is too often measured by proximity to corporate norms: tidy portfolios, industry-recognized tools, and visual fluency in dominant aesthetics. But hireability should reflect relevance, not resemblance. Who is "hirable" depends on who is doing the hiring—and what systems of value they uphold. Until design hiring prioritizes lived experience, community fluency, ethical rigor, and expansive thinking, it will continue to filter out the very people it claims to need.

ON LINKEDIN

LinkedIn has become a proxy for professionalism in design, shaping not just who gets seen, but what kinds of work are legible as "real." The platform rewards marketable narratives, sanitized visuals, and neat, upward trajectories. But design is rarely neat. It is nonlinear, emergent, and often unglamorous. Until LinkedIn evolves to reflect the complexities of creative labor, it will remain a mirror of capital—not of care, courage, or innovation.

ON DESIGN THINKING

Design Thinking is often framed as revolutionary—but it is, in practice, a systematized repackaging of Indigenous and community-based knowledge practices. When taught without critique, it flattens relational methods into step-by-step toolkits that can be sold to corporations. Design Thinking can be useful, but only if it's taught as a practice of humility, not authority. As it stands, it is too often a tool for making extractive design more palatable.

ON EMPATHY

Empathy has become a buzzword in design—invoked as a shortcut to ethics. But empathy is not a checkbox. It is not achieved by user interviews or persona building alone. True empathy demands proximity, self- reflection, and accountability. It requires that designers see themselves not outside the problem, but within it. Without that, empathy becomes performance.

ON HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

Human-Centered Design sounds good in theory—but often defaults to designing for users, not with them. It centers a generalized human, often imagined as a Western, able-bodied consumer, rather than specific communities with unique histories and needs. To be truly human-centered, design must be community- rooted, co-authored, and culturally humble.

ON INFOGRAPHICS

Infographics are often framed as a way to make data accessible—but accessible to whom, and by what visual language? Data is never neutral. The way we present it can obscure as much

as it reveals. When infographics prioritize clarity over context, or aesthetics over accuracy, they risk flattening the very complexity they aim to communicate. Good data design should visualize relationships—not just reduce them.

ON JOURNEY MAPPING

Journey mapping can be a useful tool—but too often it assumes a universal path through a designed experience. It simplifies lived experience into stages and touchpoints, ignoring nuance, divergence, and systemic constraint. Real human journeys rarely follow a linear map. What if we designed journeys that accounted for disruption, detour, and resistance?

ON PERSONAS

Personas can help teams empathize—but when abstracted too far, they become caricatures. Real people are not bullet points. When personas are based on assumptions, not lived input, they flatten identity into demographics and motivations into clichés. Ethical persona work should always be co-developed, and always treated as provisional—not truth.

ON EMPATHY MAPPING

Empathy mapping, like its cousin Design Thinking, claims to center feelings—but it often reduces them to surface-level insights. It risks turning emotional labor into a worksheet. Without relational grounding, these maps are more about appearing empathetic than embodying empathy. Real empathy isn't mapped. It's practiced.

ON VISUAL HIERARCHY

Visual hierarchy is taught as a neutral tool for clarity— but what is made clear, and to whom? Hierarchy reflects power. It decides whose message is loudest, and whose is small print. In many cases, hierarchy replicates societal inequities through design. We must question our defaults. Who gets to be central? Who gets to be bold?

ON DESIGN SYSTEMS

Design systems promise consistency—but too often they become cages. They can stifle innovation in the name of scale, and prioritize uniformity over responsiveness. When applied without care, systems flatten differences and impose false neutrality. A liberatory design system should adapt to people—not the other way around.

ON FORM & FUNCTION

The mantra “form follows function” has shaped design philosophy for decades—but whose function are we talking about? And whose form? Often, function is defined by Western utility, and form is judged by Western standards of beauty. Function is never universal. We must expand our definitions of what counts as functional, and for whom.

ON SITE PLANNING

Site planning is not just logistics—it’s politics. How we organize space reflects how we organize power. Site planning that ignores historical context, cultural use, or ecological systems reinforces colonial patterns. A liberatory approach to site planning would ask: Who has been here before? Who is centered here now? Who gets to stay?

ON STORYTELLING

Storytelling is not just a design technique—it’s a world-making act. The stories we tell shape the futures we imagine. But design often treats story as content to style, rather than as context to honor. Real storytelling in design begins with listening. And continues with responsibility.

ON STAKEHOLDERS

The term “stakeholder” is meant to signify anyone impacted by a design—but it often defaults to funders, executives, or users with power. Real stakeholder engagement means centering those most affected, not most invested. It means co-designing with— not just for. And it means redistributing stakes, not just managing them.

ON POLICY

Design and policy are not separate fields. Every design decision implies a policy, whether named or not. Who gets access? Who gets priority? What is protected? Design that ignores policy becomes complicit in systems of harm. And policy that ignores design misses its chance to move hearts as well as laws.

ON FEEDBACK LOOPS

Feedback loops in design are often short, surface-level, and centered on speed. We test, we tweak, we ship. But deep feedback—the kind that changes your assumptions—takes time, trust, and mutuality. Good feedback loops are not just about getting input. They’re about building relationship.

ON ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility is not a checklist—it should be a fundamental aspect of culture. Too often, accessibility is treated as an afterthought, or a compliance requirement, rather than a design value. But when we design for the margins, we design for everyone. Access isn't extra. It's the baseline.

ON XR / IMMERSIVE

Extended reality and immersive design hold immense potential—but also inherit deep risks. If we carry colonial frameworks into virtual worlds, we will replicate harm in 360 degrees. XR must not be escapist. It must be accountable. Design that expands reality should also expand justice.

ON AFRICA

Africa is often cited in design discourse as inspiration—but rarely as authority. African design histories, methodologies, and innovations are vast and varied, but remain underrepresented in global design education and industry. To reference Africa without resourcing or redistributing power is aesthetic extraction. Africa is not a motif—it is a continent of design futures.



03: PARADIGM

ON PARADIGM

Behind every syllabus, job posting, or award ceremony is a paradigm. A framework of values. A worldview about what design is, what it's for, and who gets to do it. This paradigm doesn't always name itself—but its influence is everywhere. It shapes what we celebrate, what we fund, what we cite, and what we center. If left unexamined, it becomes self-replicating. The point of shifting paradigms is not to destroy what's come before, but to expand what's possible—toward a design culture that is more curious, contextual, and collectively liberating.

ON PRODUCT OR SERVICE VS. EXPERIENCE

When design is framed only as the creation of products or services, it loses its relational capacity. It becomes about output, not impact. Deliverables, not dynamics. But design is not just about making things—it's about shaping experiences, systems, and futures. It's about how people move through the world, not just what they consume within it. Design should hold room for joy, memory, ritual, transformation. When we define it too narrowly, we miss what it's capable of.

ON EXPERTISE , HYBRIDITY, INTERDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE

The current design paradigm loves labels. UX. Visual. Motion. Researcher. Strategist. The assumption is that expertise must be legible, contained, and siloed. But many of us are fluent in multiple methods, multiple roles, multiple ways of seeing. Interdisciplinary designers are not confused—they are contextual. Hybrid thinkers are not scattered— they are synthetic. Our ability to translate across modes is not a weakness. It's the very thing this moment requires. A rigid paradigm will call us generalists. But in a changing world, we are the ones who can actually hold complexity.

ON SUCCESS

What we define as success reveals what we value. Right now, design success is still measured by virality, client names, budget size, and visual sleekness. Awards often go to the loudest, not the most thoughtful. But what if success meant community impact? Long-term usefulness? Repair? Accessibility? What if it meant listening, not leading? In the paradigm we're dreaming into, success would be relational, not extractive. Measured in meaning, not just metrics.

ON UNIVERSAL “GOOD DESIGN”

The phrase “good design” is often used as if it’s neutral. But more often than not, it refers to a very specific aesthetic: clean lines, sans-serif fonts, Swiss grids, restrained color palettes. This visual language is not universal—it’s cultural. Rooted in Western modernism, it is treated as inherently functional, professional, or correct. But there is no one-size-fits-all in design. What looks “clear” to one audience may feel sterile to another. What’s seen as “refined” might also be read as erasing. We need to move beyond aesthetic supremacy. There are many ways to be beautiful. Many ways to be clear. Many ways to design well.

ON MODERNISM

Modernism taught us to revere simplicity, universality, and objectivity. And while those ideals shaped valuable innovations, they also erased difference. Modernism flattened design into a formal language that excluded anything deemed too expressive, too cultural, too human. But the future is not grayscale. It’s not neutral. The future is layered, hybrid, culturally situated. We can honor the structure modernism gave us without mistaking it for the whole story. It’s time to design from the margins inward— not from a myth of neutrality outward.

ON TRANSACTIONAL METRICS

Design is increasingly quantified. Clicks, conversions, engagement rates, A/B tests. While data can be useful, a metrics-only paradigm reduces people to users, relationships to transactions, and impact to dashboards. It rewards speed over depth, and reach over resonance. But some of the most meaningful effects of design can’t be measured in real time. They unfold slowly—in behavior, in belonging, in cultural memory. When metrics become the only measure

of value, we lose what design does best: the ability to transform how people feel, relate, and imagine.

ON WORLD CULTURE

Design doesn't exist in a vacuum—it lives within culture. And yet, the dominant design paradigm often treats non-Western cultures as aesthetic references, rather than as holders of full and valid design systems. World culture is not a style. It's a source of knowledge, innovation, and philosophy. It is diverse, contextual, living. A decolonized design paradigm doesn't just borrow from global culture—it respects, cites, and learns from it. It asks: who does this come from? Who is being credited? And what would it mean to design in solidarity rather than appropriation?

ON THE WORD "CLEAN"

"Clean" is often used as a shorthand for good design—minimalist, crisp, modern. But underneath that word lies a whole host of assumptions about what is professional, legible, and desirable. In Western design paradigms, "clean" usually means white space, sans-serif fonts, and rigid grids. It rarely accounts for the vibrancy, density, or texture found in many global and non-Western design languages. To name something "clean" is to imply that something else is messy, impure, or unprofessional. This framing doesn't just reflect aesthetic preference—it enforces cultural bias.

ON TECHNOLOGY

Technology is not neutral. It reflects the values of those who design it, fund it, and benefit from it. In the design world, tech is often treated as inherently progressive—an inevitable future

we must catch up to. But we must ask: who is this tech for? What labor does it require? What forms of knowledge and relationship does it replace or erase? A more grounded design paradigm would treat technology as a tool—not a destiny—and evaluate it through ethics, ecology, and equity.

ON PSYCHOLOGY

Design often borrows from psychology to optimize user experience—using principles like cognitive load, attention spans, or behavioral nudges. But these psychological models are not culturally universal. They are largely based on Western subjects and value systems. When we apply psychology in design, we must question its origins, assumptions, and limits. And we must expand our understanding of mind and behavior to include collective trauma, neurodiversity, and non-Western psychologies.

ON “REALITY,” PHYSICS & METAPHYSICS

Western design has long aligned itself with material reality—form, space, objects, interfaces. But reality is not just what we can measure or build. Metaphysics—the study of what lies beyond the material—is also part of design. Cosmology, intuition, dreams, energy—these shape how people live and relate to the world. A truly holistic design paradigm would treat metaphysical insight not as fringe but as fundamental, especially in communities where spirituality and design are inseparable.

ON BRANDING

Branding, in its modern form, emerged alongside capitalism and colonization. It is the practice of distilling identity into symbols, slogans, and style—then monetizing it. Branding can

build trust, tell stories, and cultivate community. But it can also flatten complexity, extract culture, and reduce meaning to metrics. We must ask: who is this brand for? Who profits from it? And what does it cost to maintain a brand that's polished but disconnected from its origins?

ON BUSINESS

Design is increasingly framed as a business tool—measurable, efficient, profitable. But design is not business. It is creative, cultural, and communal work. When business logics dominate design, we lose space for slowness, speculation, and dissent. We begin to value what can be sold, not what can be felt or questioned. A more expansive Imagination.

ON ETHICS

Design is not neutral, and therefore, it is never outside the realm of ethics. Every design decision—what to highlight, what to hide, who to include, who to ignore—is an ethical one. Yet ethics in design is often reduced to checklists, legal disclaimers, or corporate values. We need deeper conversations. Ethics as practice, not posture. Ethics as ongoing questioning: What does this design make possible? What does it make harder? Who decides?

ON DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Design is often taught as method, not as philosophy. But behind every method is a worldview. What is design for? What do we owe to those we design with? How do aesthetics relate to power? These are philosophical questions, and they deserve space in design education

and discourse. A robust design philosophy asks not just how we make—but why, for whom, and at what cost.

ON SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is often reduced to materials or energy use. But true sustainability is systemic. It means designing for durability, interdependence, regeneration, and long-term care. In a paradigm of extractive capitalism, design is complicit in overproduction, fast fashion, and planned obsolescence. A sustainable design paradigm must be in direct tension with these systems—and must center Indigenous, circular, and ecological ways of thinking.

ON EXPERIMENTATION

Innovation is the darling of design, yet most institutions punish true experimentation. Risk-taking is welcomed only when it's safe, aesthetic, and fundable. But real experimentation is messy, unpredictable, and often uncomfortable. It requires failure, flexibility, and friction. A liberated design paradigm would create space for wild ideas, cultural deviation, and speculative irreverence—not just polished outcomes.

ON CIRCULARITY

Circularity is more than a sustainability buzzword—it's a worldview. It means understanding that nothing disappears, everything transforms, and design is part of an ongoing cycle. Circular thinking asks: Where did this come from? Where is it going? Who will hold it next? In Indigenous systems, circularity governs time, responsibility, and care. Adopting it means designing not just for impact—but for return, repair, and reverence.

ON FUTURISM / WORLDBUILDING

Design is always about the future—it imagines, shapes, and proposes what could be. But whose futures are we imagining? Western design often builds futures of efficiency, surveillance, and sleekness. Afro- and Indigenous futurisms offer alternatives: futures of care, complexity, and ancestral continuity. Worldbuilding is not about escape—it’s about possibility. To build better worlds, we must start with better questions.

ON PROTOTYPES

Prototypes are often treated as throwaways—means to an end. But prototypes are where values show up early. They reveal what’s been centered, tested, and left behind. In extractive paradigms, prototypes are made for pitching. In relational paradigms, they are made for listening. A prototype isn’t just a tool—it’s a conversation. It’s the first version of the future we’re imagining.

ON DATA

Data is framed as truth in many design paradigms—objective, reliable, self-evident. But data is collected, cleaned, interpreted. It reflects the priorities and blind spots of those who define it. Too often, data is used to legitimize harm, flatten complexity, or bypass lived experience. We must design with data, not around it—and never in place of human insight.

ON METRICS

Metrics are the backbone of business-based design—KPIs, conversions, engagement. But what do these metrics measure, and what do they miss? When we prioritize what's quantifiable, we devalue what's felt, relational, and uncountable. Joy, dignity, cultural repair—these rarely make it into the dashboard. A transformative paradigm would ask: what is worth measuring? And what is worth doing even if it can't be measured?

ON SIGNAGE

Signage is often treated as the most utilitarian form of design—wayfinding, information, direction. But signage shapes how people move, feel, and belong. It reflects power: whose language is centered, whose body is imagined, whose experience is prioritized. Inclusive signage isn't about checking boxes—it's about rethinking space. About seeing signs as invitations, not just instructions.

ON CORPORATE

The corporate design world prizes consistency, polish, and brand alignment. But this often comes at the cost of humanity. Designers in corporate spaces are taught to translate emotion into assets, culture into content, and care into campaigns. When design becomes a tool for corporate storytelling, it risks losing its soul. We must ask: what stories are we allowed to tell here—and at what cost?

ON CAPITALISM

Capitalism commodifies creativity. It turns design into labor, aesthetics into property, and culture into product. While designers may find success within capitalist systems, we must not confuse participation with liberation. Capitalism is not a neutral backdrop—it shapes what is possible, what is prioritized, and who is exploited. A post-capitalist design paradigm would value care over scale, sufficiency over surplus, and mutual benefit over extraction.

ON COLONIALISM

Colonialism is not just a historical event—it's an ongoing system that has shaped design education, industry, and aesthetics. It determines whose knowledge is considered legitimate, whose styles are seen as innovative, and whose labor is exploited. Design has long been used to erase, control, and dominate. To decolonize design is not a metaphor—it's a mandate. It means naming power, centering sovereignty, and refusing to design at the expense of others.

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04: A MORE HOLISTIC TIMELINE OF GLOBAL DESIGN HISTORY

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 The way we tell the story of design shapes what—and who—we believe design comes from. Most timelines still begin in Europe, jump from the Gutenberg press to the Bauhaus, and proceed directly to Silicon Valley. But design did not begin in the 20th century. It did not begin with Helvetica. A more holistic timeline of global design history would honor sacred geometry in Nubian pottery, astronomical urban planning in the Americas, textile coding in the Andes, and over a dozen Indigenous African writing systems that predate modern alphabets. It would acknowledge design as cultural practice, not just professional output. The history of design is longer, deeper, and more diverse than we've been taught. A complete story must expand beyond Western canons to include the brilliance of every region, lineage, and people who have designed meaning into form since the beginning.

PRE-3000 BCE

Early Symbolic Systems & Urban Planning
 Mesopotamia (Sumer): Cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals as early data visualization and recordkeeping systems; design of ziggurats.
 Egypt (Kemet): Hieroglyphics as a sacred symbolic / spatial system; pyramid design aligned to celestial orders and Maat (balance, order). Per Ankh (House of Life) as center of sacred learning.
 Indus Valley: Grid-based city planning, standardized bricks, measurement tools, advanced sanitation; seals with undeciphered script.
 Southern Africa (San/Bushmen): Mnemonic rock art systems.
 Mesoamerica (Olmec): Ceremonial site planning, colossal heads, symbolic architecture.

3000-1000 BCE

Sacred Geometry & Material Design
 Egypt & Nubia: Canonical tomb sculpture, symmetric pottery, goldwork.
 China: Oracle bones (early script), bronze casting.
 Andes (Inca): Quipu knot systems for recordkeeping; textiles encoded political (data) and spiritual status.
 Papyrus and Bamboo: Emergence of sustainable industrial materials.
 Meroë (Sudan): Meroitic script (500 BCE–400 CE), early sub-Saharan alphabetic system.
 Tifinagh (Tuareg, North Africa) inscriptions; Libyco-Berber script precedents.

1000 BCE-1300 CE

Functional Design Systems, Classical & Medieval Design, Golden Ages
 India: Vastu Shastra (spatial codes), temple design.
 China: Feng Shui (energy-based design), Confucian/Daoist spatial ethics, brush calligraphy, paper invention.
 Persia: Garden design as systemic metaphor (balance, flow).
 Greece: Architectural orders (Doric, Ionic), ideal proportion, scroll forms.
 Rome: Roman inscriptions as proto-typography; public architecture emphasizing order and signage.
 Zapoteco/Maya Codices: glyph systems, folded bark books.
 Ethiopia/Eritrea: Ge'ez script (still in use), sacred manuscript design.
 West Africa: Ife/Ibadan ideographs; early African writing systems.
 Islamic World: Kufic calligraphy, arabesque, muqarnas; pattern systems reflect divine order. House of Wisdom, Al-Jarawiyin as interdisciplinary centers.
 Byzantine Empire: Sacred mosaic iconography.
 Shmer Empire: Angkor Wat cosmological planning.
 Japan: Wabi-sabi minimalism; scroll and binding design.
 Swahili Coast: Coral stone cities; poetic trade documentation.

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Persia: Garden design as systemic metaphor (balance, flow).

Greece: Architectural orders (Doric, Ionic), ideal proportion, scroll forms.

Rome: Roman inscriptions as proto-typography; public architecture emphasizing order and signage.

Zapotecs/Maya: Codices, glyph systems, folded bark books.

Ethiopia/Eritrea: Ge'ez script (still in use), sacred manuscript design.

West Africa: Nsibidi ideographs; early African writing systems.

Islamic World: Kufic calligraphy, arabesque, muqarnas; pattern systems reflect divine order;

House of Wisdom, Al-Qarawiyyin as interdisciplinary centers.

Byzantine Empire: Sacred mosaic iconography.

Khmer Empire: Angkor Wat cosmological planning.

Japan: Wabi-sabi minimalism; scroll and binding design.

Swahili Coast: Coral stone cities, poetic trade documentation.

Australia (Indigenous): Songlines, dot paintings, oral map systems.

Benin/Yoruba (West Africa): Bronze/ivory sculpture, regalia as record.

Indigenous North America: Wampum belts; basketry and sandpainting as memory systems.

1300–1600 CE

Knowledge Transmission & Systemic Design

Mali (Timbuktu): University of Sankoré; illuminated manuscript systems. Aztec/Mexica:

Codices for law, time, and governance; visual documentation systems. Ottoman Empire:

Calligraphy, tile design, modular books.

Ming Dynasty (China): Porcelain as system; furniture as modular design.

Joseon Korea: Movable metal type (predating Gutenberg).

Southeast Asia: Scripts like Baybayin, Jawi, Balinese, Khmer; ikat, mandalas, puppetry (wayang).

Māori (Aotearoa): Whakairo (wood carving), tā moko (tattoos as lineage records), whareniui (ancestral architecture).

1400–1600 CE

European Renaissance

Linear perspective, Vitruvian Man, symmetry. Gutenberg printing press revolutionizes typography. Early branding via printer's marks.

Revival of classical Greco-Roman design logic.

1700S

Enlightenment & Rococo

Decorative arts flourish alongside rationalist classification.

Serif typefaces standardized.

Encyclopédie; anatomical drawing systems; grid-based urban planning.

1800S

Industrial Revolution

Mass production, mechanical type.

Chromolithography and photography transform visual culture.

Department store catalogs = early UX/interface design.

Arts & Crafts Movement (UK): Design ethics critique industrialization.

Liberia: Vai script (1833–present), syllabary developed for indigenous literacy.

LATE 1800S–EARLY 1900S

Art Nouveau & Cross-Cultural Influence

Organic forms, flowing lines.

Gesamtkunstwerk (total design unity).

Global design motifs integrated into Western decorative arts.

1919–1933

Bauhaus / Early Modernism

Grid systems, sans serif typography (Futura). Institutionalized design thinking.

"Form follows function" becomes dominant ideology.

1920S–1930S

Constructivism, De Stijl, Swiss Modernism Primary colors, modular grids.

Visual communication as abstraction. Beginnings of standardized systems in design.

1940S–1960S

Corporate Modernism / International Style Swiss Grid, Helvetica, rigid visual systems. Western branding systems (IBM, Lufthansa). Euro-American minimalism exported globally. Cameroon: Bamum script (1896–present). Liberia: Bassa Vah script revival.

1970S–1980S

Postmodernism & Decolonial Emergence

Memphis Group: Bold color, anti-rational design. Experimental typography (David Carson).

Feminist/anti-racist design critique enters academia. Design activism emerges in communities.

DRC: Mandombe script, rooted in Kongo cosmograms.

1990S–2000S

Digital Design & UX/UI Emergence

Adobe Suite, HTML/CSS, Flash, early web design norms.

Rise of UX/UI as a discipline.

Skeuomorphism in interfaces (e.g., iOS, buttons mimicking real-world texture). Accessibility standards initiated.

Suriname: Afaka script.

Sierra Leone: Mende Kikakui revival.

2010S–NOW

Systems, Experience, & Justice-Oriented Design Design justice, anti-racist frameworks.

Human-Centered Design (HCD), Service Design. XR/AR, speculative and immersive design.

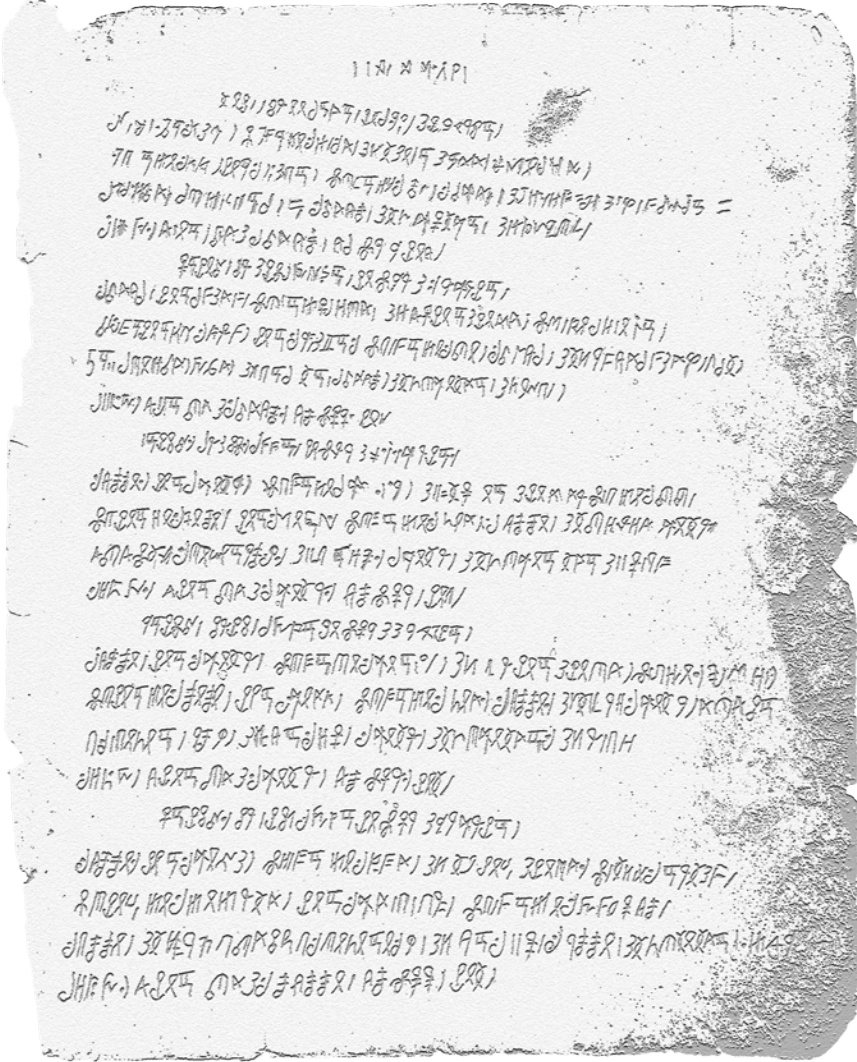
Climate-responsive design and mutual aid networks. Ethical AI and machine-generated creativity.

Revival of indigenous scripts and Pan-African digital typography (e.g., N'Ko digitization).

WHY THIS TIMELINE MATTERS

This timeline is not a "parallel history" — it is design history. It demonstrates that systems thinking, architecture, storytelling, and visual language have evolved globally for millennia. To limit design education to Euro-American narratives is not just incomplete — it's dangerous. This integrated account restores knowledge, corrects omission, and invites a more ethical, interconnected view of design's purpose and potential.





05: WHAT'S AT STAKE

The design field is at a crossroads. **As design continues to permeate every sector— from health care to activism, education to artificial intelligence—the question is not whether design has power, but how it uses it.** In its current form, design continues to replicate unjust Western systems. These include ahistorical pedagogy, extractive research, tokenized

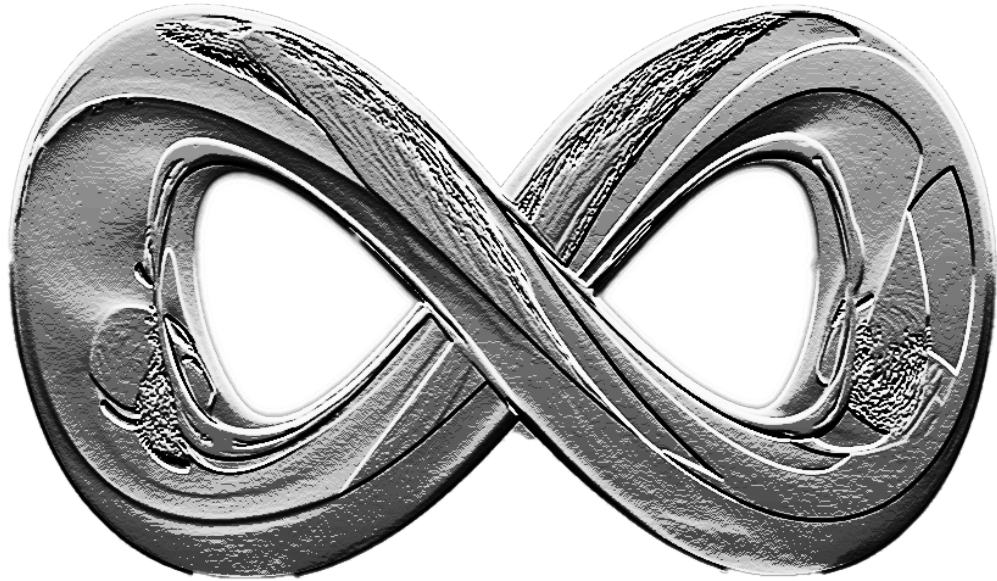
representation, and the devaluation of lived experience. Without a deliberate and systematic shift, these patterns will continue to reinforce exclusion, harm, and inequity.

The stakes are high. If we continue to teach design without interrogating its cultural roots and political implications, we risk training yet another generation of designers to replicate harm unconsciously. If we continue to define “good design” through the lens of corporate aesthetics, market appeal, or Western minimalism, we flatten the depth and richness of global creativity. If we continue to frame people as "users" instead of relational beings, we further isolate design from the communities it claims to serve.

This is not simply a theoretical concern—it affects whose stories are told, whose bodies are centered, whose knowledge is validated, and whose futures are imagined. In real terms, it determines whether communities are uplifted or extracted from, whether systems become more accessible or more alienating, and whether design expands possibilities or enforces limitations.

By failing to interrogate its own foundations, the design industry risks becoming obsolete—serving only power, not people. Yet the inverse is also true: by choosing to reflect, reimagine, and repair, design can evolve into one of the most transformative forces of our time. **What’s at stake is not only the future of design, but the kind of world we are designing toward.**





06: THE SHIFT TOWARD A NEW DESIGN ETHOS

To redesign design is to reimagine what it means to shape experience, culture, systems, and futures. Following the critique of Western pedagogical dogmas and industry norms in previous chapters, this section proposes the core tenets of a new design ethos—one that emerges from lived experience, ancestral knowledge, and the refusal to separate design from

power. This chapter outlines the transformations required across three integrated dimensions: pedagogy, practice, and paradigm. Each is addressed in relation to the design dogmas previously surfaced, offering alternatives grounded in equity, context, and care.

I. PEDAGOGICAL SHIFTS

FROM AHISTORICAL TO ANCESTRAL: Curricula must root design education in global and precolonial lineages, including African, Indigenous, Asian, and diasporic design histories that long predate modernism. A legitimate design education must include Indigenous, diasporic, and non-Western design histories not as side notes, but as foundational texts. Students should learn that design did not begin with Bauhaus or Helvetica—it began with glyphs carved in stone, cosmologies encoded in fabric, and urban plans aligned with the stars. In practice, this shift means citing, applying, and respecting these lineages in professional work, and hiring scholars and designers from those traditions to lead. In culture, it means returning to design as a sacred act of stewardship, not a product of capitalism or conquest.

FROM NEUTRALITY TO REALITY: Design is never neutral. It is always situated in systems of power. Teaching design must include ethics, identity, and historical context. From individual genius to collective wisdom: Studio models must move beyond competition to foster community collaboration, cultural humility, and long-term thinking. From Western critique to pluralistic reflection: Evaluation should be diversified to include cultural context, non-verbal critique, oral tradition, and process documentation.

II. PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE SHIFTS

FROM “USERS” TO PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES: Language and framing must respect subjectivity and lived experience. Design must be reciprocal, not extractive.

FROM TOKENIZATION TO STRUCTURAL EQUITY: Representation must go beyond images into hiring practices, leadership pathways, and ownership of narratives. Representation must be about wholeness—not just visibility. This means showing marginalized people in contexts where we are centered, powerful, playful, and complex—not just when we are suffering or being “included.” Design work should stop flattening us into campaigns and start co-creating with us as equals. In the classroom, it means critiquing how representation works—and doesn’t—and teaching students to build images and systems that reflect real, dignified humanity.

FROM SPEED TO PRESENCE: Slow design practices that prioritize care, impact, and accountability must be institutionalized over deliverables and metrics.

FROM SPECIALIZATION-OBSESSION TO HYBRIDITY: Interdisciplinary design thinkers should be celebrated as systems navigators—bringing fluidity, innovation, and range to complex challenges.

III. PARADIGM SHIFTS

FROM CAPITAL TO CARE: Success in design must be redefined through the lens of relational impact, cultural relevance, and ecological sustainability.

FROM UNIVERSALISM TO PLURALITY: “Good design” cannot be dictated by Eurocentric norms. Valuing diverse aesthetics and frameworks is essential.

FROM INSECURITY TO INTERDEPENDENCE: Design must acknowledge its entanglement in cultural, ecological, and spiritual systems.

FROM SURFACE TO SUBSTANCE: Aesthetics must be informed by values, not trends. Process must be as honored as product.

FROM HIERARCHY TO SYNTHESIS: The industry must stop treating interdisciplinary designers as diluted or indecisive. In truth, we are the translators, the bridge-builders, the systems thinkers. Our ability to synthesize across mediums and contexts is not a weakness—it’s the only kind of thinking that will sustain a livable future. We must restructure hiring, evaluation, and prestige to reward cross-functional brilliance, not just niche mastery. In doing so, we uplift not only interdisciplinary people, but the richness of design itself.

Together, these shifts offer a new ethos. One that values connection over competition. Collaboration over control. And futures over profits. A design industry rooted in these values will not only produce better work—it will create a better world. This vision is not utopian—it is already unfolding. It draws from Indigenous design practices, abolitionist frameworks, feminist design justice, and the work of interdisciplinary leaders around the world. Designers are already

building these futures, often on the margins. This chapter invites the center to catch up. We must expand our definitions. We must expand our institutions. We must expand design.

Designing holistically is not just a methodology—it is an act of liberation.



07: FINAL & FUTURE REFLECTIONS

This thesis began as a question: why does the field of design so often contradict its own values? In its most idealistic form, design claims to be human-centered, imaginative, and solution-oriented. Yet in practice, design pedagogy, practice, and the very definition of what

“design” means often replicate Western hierarchies, ahistorical frameworks, and extractive logics.

Through this research, it became clear that the issue is not simply a lack of representation, but a fundamental misalignment between the ideals of design and the systems that structure it. What is taught, who is valued, how work is evaluated, and why design is pursued all stem from a narrow framework built on exclusion.

But this book is not only a critique. It is a proposal. A vision. An invocation. We must move toward a design ethos that is holistic—one that recognizes the interconnectedness of design, culture, power, identity, ecology, and care. We must value ancestral wisdom as much as speculative thinking.

We must validate the interdisciplinary designer as a systems thinker, a cultural translator, and a future builder.

If we want to design futures worth living in, our frameworks must be as expansive as the futures we seek to imagine. That means embracing the multiplicity of voices, practices, histories, and ways of knowing that already exist—and choosing to center them in our pedagogy, institutions, and communities.

The work ahead includes rethinking how we teach, how we hire, how we research, and how we relate. It requires us to look not just at design artifacts but at design’s impact. Not just at aesthetics but at ethics. Not just at skill but at stewardship.

This is not a manifesto of answers, but a map of openings. An offering of alternative pathways. A future of design that does not erase or extract—but connects, remembers, and reimagines.

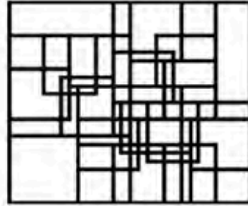
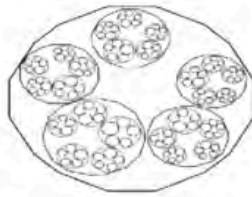
The invitation is ongoing. The shift is already here. Let's move with it.



African Fractals

MODERN COMPUTING
AND INDIGENOUS DESIGN

RON EGLASH



Why fractals?

Bottom-up geometric constructions reflect bottom-up social processes:

Indigenous commons-based production (similar to open-source gift economies)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not exist without the support, guidance, and love of so many. Thank you to my Mentor Mariln Zornado, whose clarity and belief in this work helped shape every step. To my mentors across spacetime who challenged me to go deeper. To the faculty at PNCA, the Mediatheque team, and all the invisible hands that sustain this place—thank you. To my Parents, loved ones, chosen family, community, and my ancestors—thank you for reminding me what matters and giving me the voice and vision to see it through.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Silver leverages 10+ years of experience as a hybrid brand designer, strategist, and communications professional—applying human-centered design, systems theory, and design thinking to drive measurable impact across brand identity systems, communications, UX, and social innovation.

Core Expertise

- 1. Design & Strategy: Brand Identity, UX/UI Design & Research, Emerging Tech Integration (AI, XR) | 2. Communications: Marketing Communications, Storytelling, Public Speaking, Presentations | 3. Equity & Leadership: Design for Good, Intersectional Equity, LGBTQIA+ Advocacy, Facilitation*

Professional Experience

10 years of experience across creative agencies, SMEs, public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Formal Education

BFA in Communication Design (May 2025)

Availability

Currently open to a full-time opportunity at the intersection of brand design, communications, UX, or social impact. Also open to select contract, freelance, or speaking engagements through Silver Chalice Studio, their independent design and consulting practice.

Location

Based in Portland, Oregon. Open to remote, hybrid, or relocation or travel-based opportunities.

Select Recognition & Features

National Geographic, The Today Show, Sitka Center for Art & Ecology, CSSSA, RACC

Beyond Work

Silver enjoys philosophy, meditation, fitness, travel, and interdisciplinary artmaking.

Additional Skills

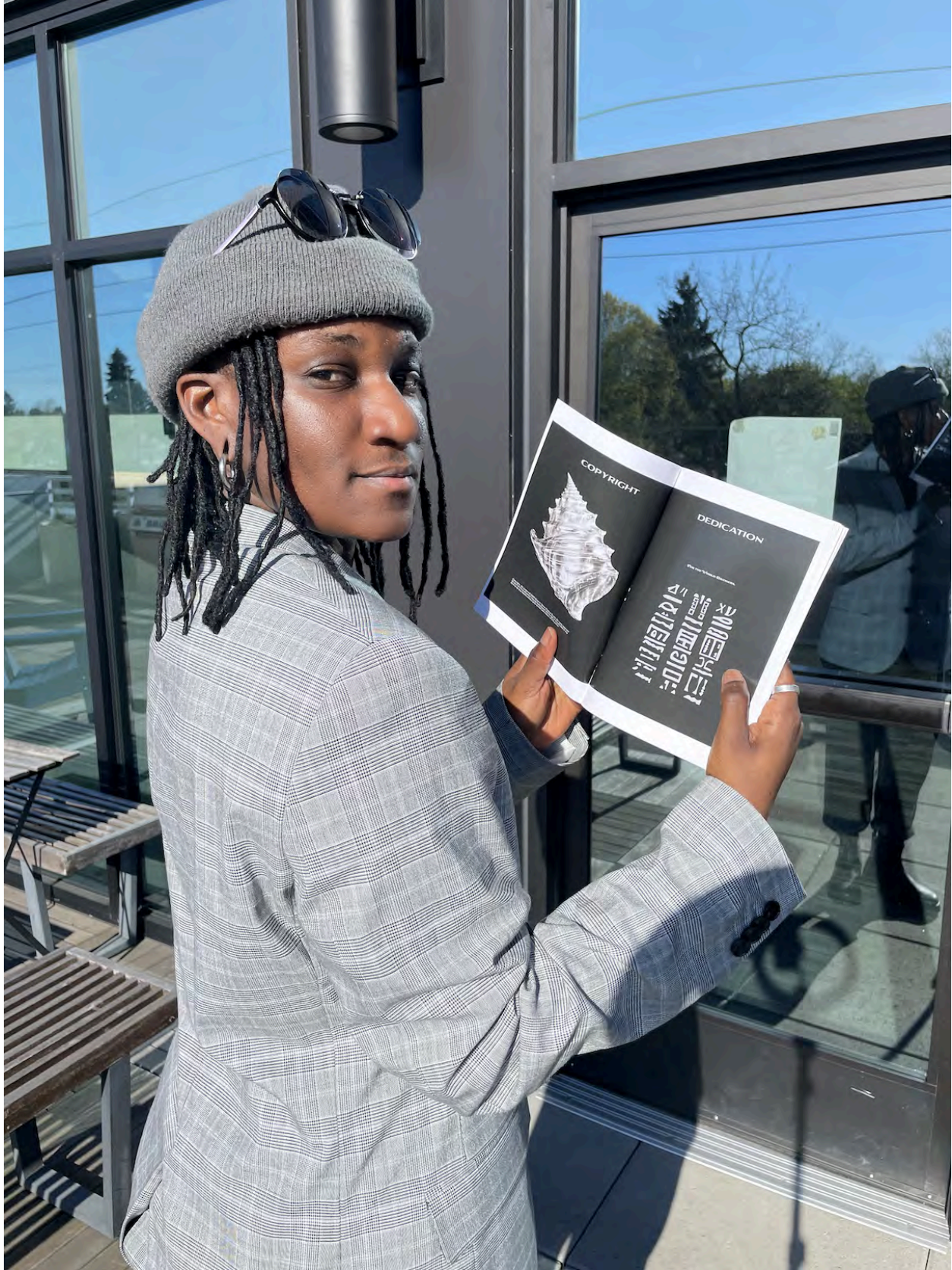
3D Branding, Motion Design, Creative Coding (p5.js), Fine Art Drawing & Painting

Contact / Portfolio / CV

SilverChaliceStudio.com | [Silverchalicestudio.com/contact](https://silverchalicestudio.com/contact)

Designer by trade, philosopher in spirit, interdisciplinary by nature. Always an Artist at Heart.





LEXICON

CONCEPTUAL / PHILOSOPHICAL TERMS

HOLISM

An approach emphasizing the interdependence of parts within a whole system. It recognizes that phenomena cannot be fully understood in isolation from their broader context. The study of fundamental questions concerning existence, knowledge, values, reason, and meaning. In design, it informs underlying frameworks, ethics, and worldviews.

WESTERN

Refers to ideas, traditions, and frameworks that originate from Europe and North America. Often associated with Enlightenment rationalism, classical antiquity, and industrial modernity.

DESIGN

The intentional planning, structuring, and creation of visual, spatial, material, or interactive systems to communicate, solve problems, or improve experiences.

SPECTRUM

A conceptual framework representing a wide, fluid range of possibilities, conditions, or identities—often used to challenge rigid binaries by acknowledging complexity, overlap, and the coexistence of multiple truths.

CONTINUUM

A seamless and unbroken span of variation in which distinct points exist along a shared trajectory, resisting fixed categories by emphasizing relational progression and contextual fluidity.

CONTEXT

The situational, cultural, temporal, or material conditions within which something exists or is interpreted. Essential to meaning-making in design.

An arrangement of elements by rank, status, or importance. In design, often used to guide attention or convey authority, but also critiqued for reinforcing social inequities.

BINARY

A conceptual structure dividing entities into two oppositional categories (e.g., male/female, real/imagined). Critiqued for oversimplifying complexity.

NUANCE

Subtlety, complexity, or distinction that resists reduction. Essential in addressing multifaceted realities and layered meanings.

PARADIGM

A dominant model or worldview that shapes how knowledge is produced, understood, and applied.

PEDAGOGY

The theory and practice of education. In design, pedagogy shapes what is taught, how it is taught, and whose knowledge is valued.

POSITIONALITY

The recognition of how one's social, cultural, and political identities influence their perspective, access, and understanding.

WORLDBUILDING

The intentional construction of a coherent system, environment, or narrative—often speculative—that reflects or critiques real-world structures.

SYSTEMS THINKING

A holistic analytical approach that examines how components of a system interact and influence one another, especially within dynamic and complex environments.

DECOLONIZATION

The active undoing of colonial frameworks in knowledge, aesthetics, power, and representation. In design, it calls for the reclamation of marginalized histories and epistemologies.

METAPHYSICS

A branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality, existence, and being beyond physical observation.

EPISTEMOLOGY

The study of knowledge—its origins, methods, and validity. Central to interrogating how design knowledge is produced and whose knowledge counts.

OBJECTIVITY

The claim of being unbiased, detached, or neutral. Often critiqued in design and scholarship for masking embedded perspectives or systemic norms.

SUBJECTIVITY

The influence of personal perspective, emotion, and experience in interpretation or creation. Recognized as inevitable and valuable in much of contemporary design.

CANON

A set of works or principles deemed authoritative or exemplary. Often reflects dominant cultural values and is critiqued for excluding diverse contributions.

VITAL

Describes something essential, dynamic, or life-sustaining. Often used in relation to ecological, bodily, or systemic health.

DESIGN-SPECIFIC TERMS

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

A modernist design principle asserting that the shape of a product should primarily reflect its intended use, not decorative elements.

HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN (HCD)

A design methodology that prioritizes the needs, behaviors, and experiences of users, often through iterative research and testing.

DESIGN THINKING

A structured yet flexible problem-solving approach emphasizing empathy, prototyping, and iterative learning to address complex challenges.

SPECULATIVE DESIGN

A design practice that explores possible futures, provoking critical reflection rather than solving immediate problems. It challenges assumptions and envisions alternatives.

SYSTEMS THINKING

(See Conceptual Terms) Applied in design, it focuses on how interrelated elements create patterns, outcomes, and potential interventions.

ACCESSIBILITY

The inclusive design of environments, products, and systems to ensure equitable access for people with diverse abilities, identities, and contexts.

PARADIGM-SHIFTING TERMS

GLOBAL PRECOLONIAL DESIGN HISTORY

The recognition and study of design practices, innovations, and systems developed outside Western paradigms, especially before colonial disruption. It validates non-Western contributions as foundational, not peripheral.

“CLEAN” (AS AESTHETIC CODE)

A design value rooted in modernist minimalism—clarity, whitespace, legibility. Often conflated with professionalism, but also critiqued for erasing cultural specificity.

“PROFESSIONALISM”

A socially constructed standard of behavior, appearance, or presentation often tied to Eurocentric, classed, or gendered norms. In design, it regulates legitimacy.

HIREABILITY

The perceived readiness or appeal of a designer for employment, shaped not only by skill but also by alignment with market aesthetics, tone, and values.

“USERS”

A term commonly used in UX and systems design to refer to those who interact with a product. Increasingly critiqued for depersonalizing complex human experiences.

“GOOD DESIGN”

A subjective designation often tied to dominant taste, efficiency, or clarity. Must be interrogated for whose needs, values, and histories it serves.

“NEUTRAL”

A false or constructed stance of detachment, often masking embedded norms or power structures. In design, neutrality is increasingly questioned as a myth.

DESIGN ETHOS

The underlying values, ethics, and commitments that guide a designer’s practice— beyond trends or tools.

CULTURAL LEGIBILITY

The degree to which a design or visual system can be recognized, interpreted, or valued within a specific cultural framework. Critical in cross-cultural or equity-centered design.

ACADEMIC GATEKEEPING

Institutional control over what knowledge is deemed credible or teachable. In design, it restricts who is published, whose work is historicized, and what is taught in curricula.

PRECOLONIAL DESIGN TRADITIONS REFERENCED

Ancient Sumer (Cuneiform)

Kemet / Egypt (Hieroglyphics, Ma'at)

Indus Valley (urban design, measurement systems) Nubia (goldwork, sacred proportion)

Ethiopia/Eritrea (Ge'ez script)

Mali Empire (Timbuktu manuscripts)

Benin & Yoruba (bronzes, cosmological sculpture) Olmec, Maya, Aztec (codices, glyphs, spatial

systems) Swahili Coast (coral city planning, trade aesthetics) Philippines, Khmer, Javanese

scripts (Baybayin, etc.) San/Bushmen (mnemonic rock art systems)

DRC (Mandombe script)

Liberia (Vai script, Bassa Vah)

Cameroon (Bamum script)

Guinea (N'Ko script)

Suriname (Aƒaka script)

ACADEMIC & INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA)

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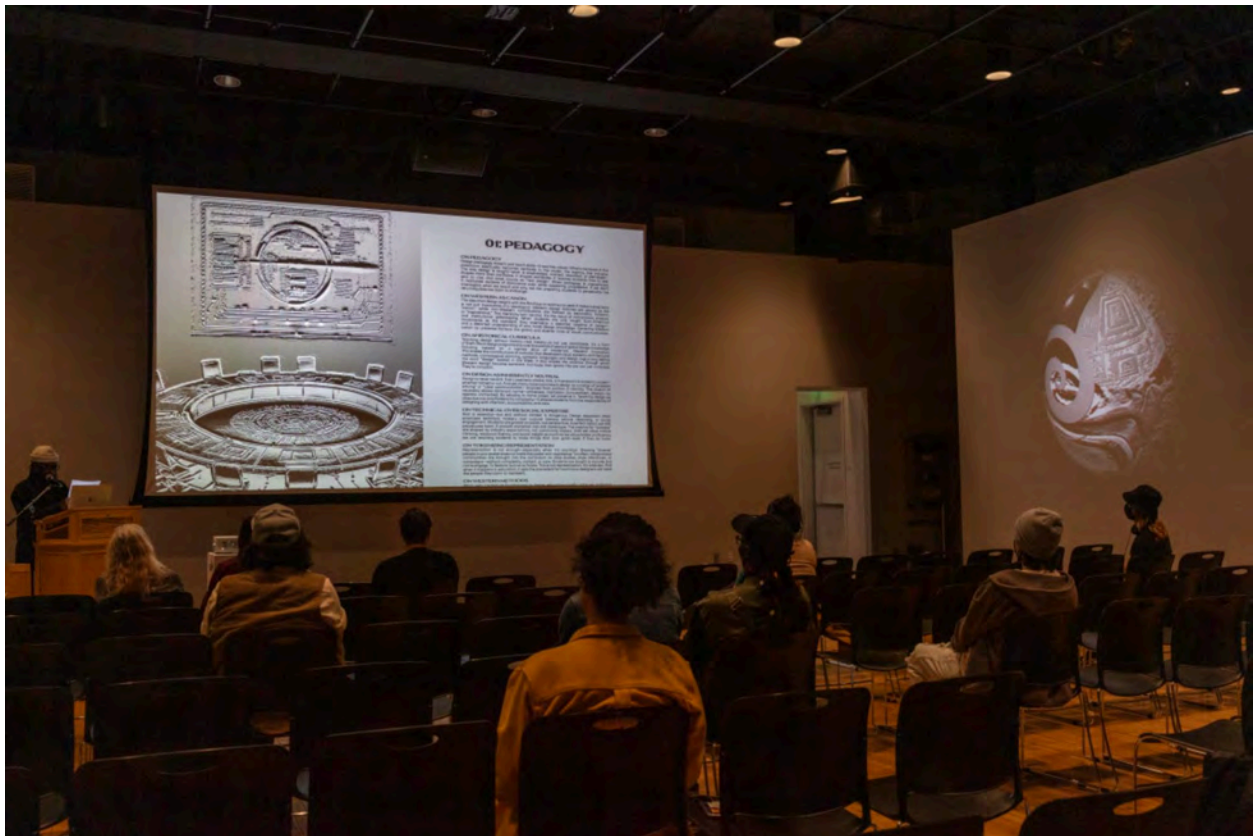
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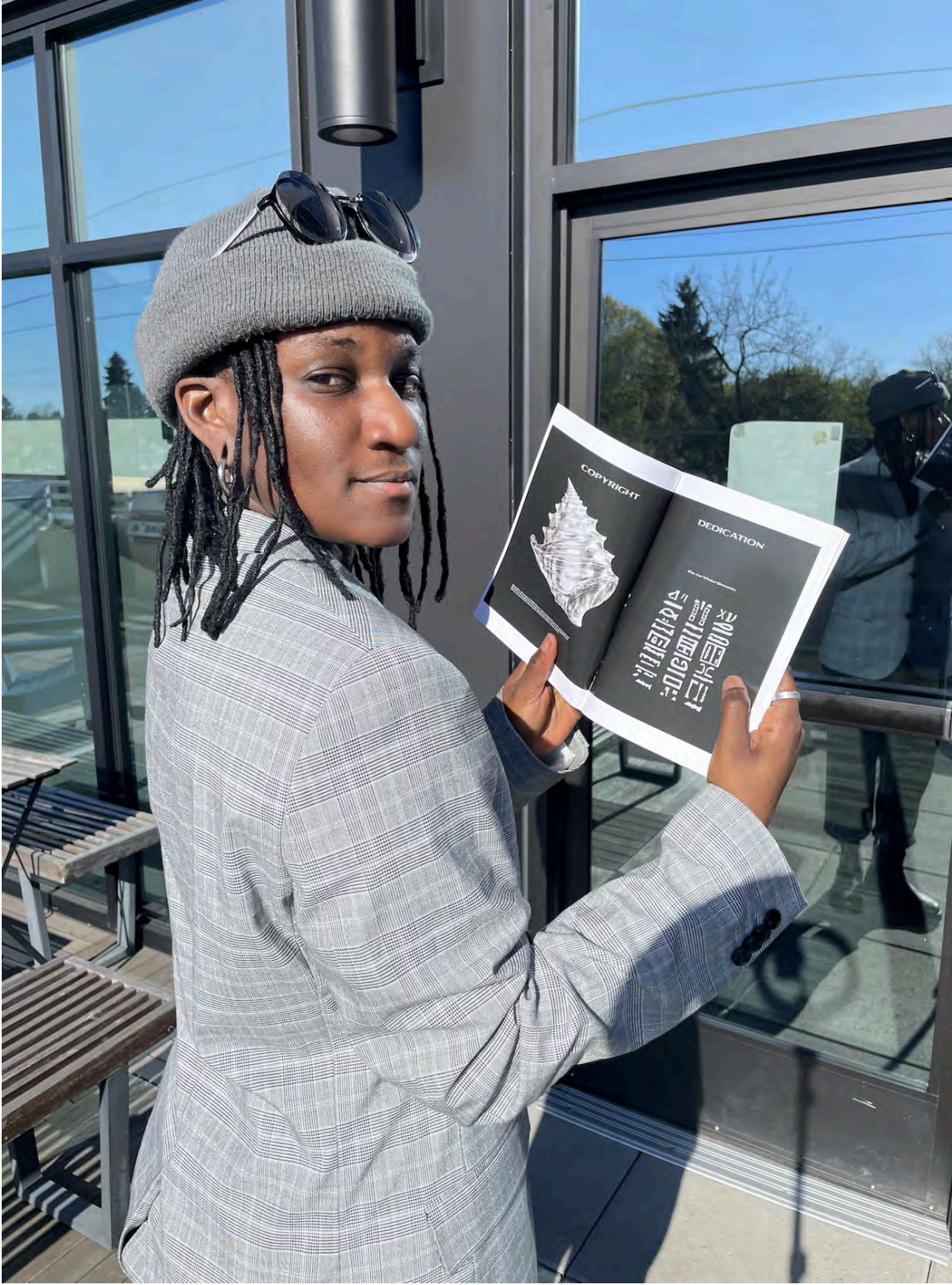
→ *Critical publications exploring architecture, design, and systemic justice.*





**THE
FUTURE
OF DESIGN
(AND OF THE
WORLD) IS
HOLISTIC**

Silver
PNCA Spring 2025
Thesis Images | Documentation | Visuals



THE FUTURE OF DESIGN (AND OF THE WORLD) IS HOLISTIC

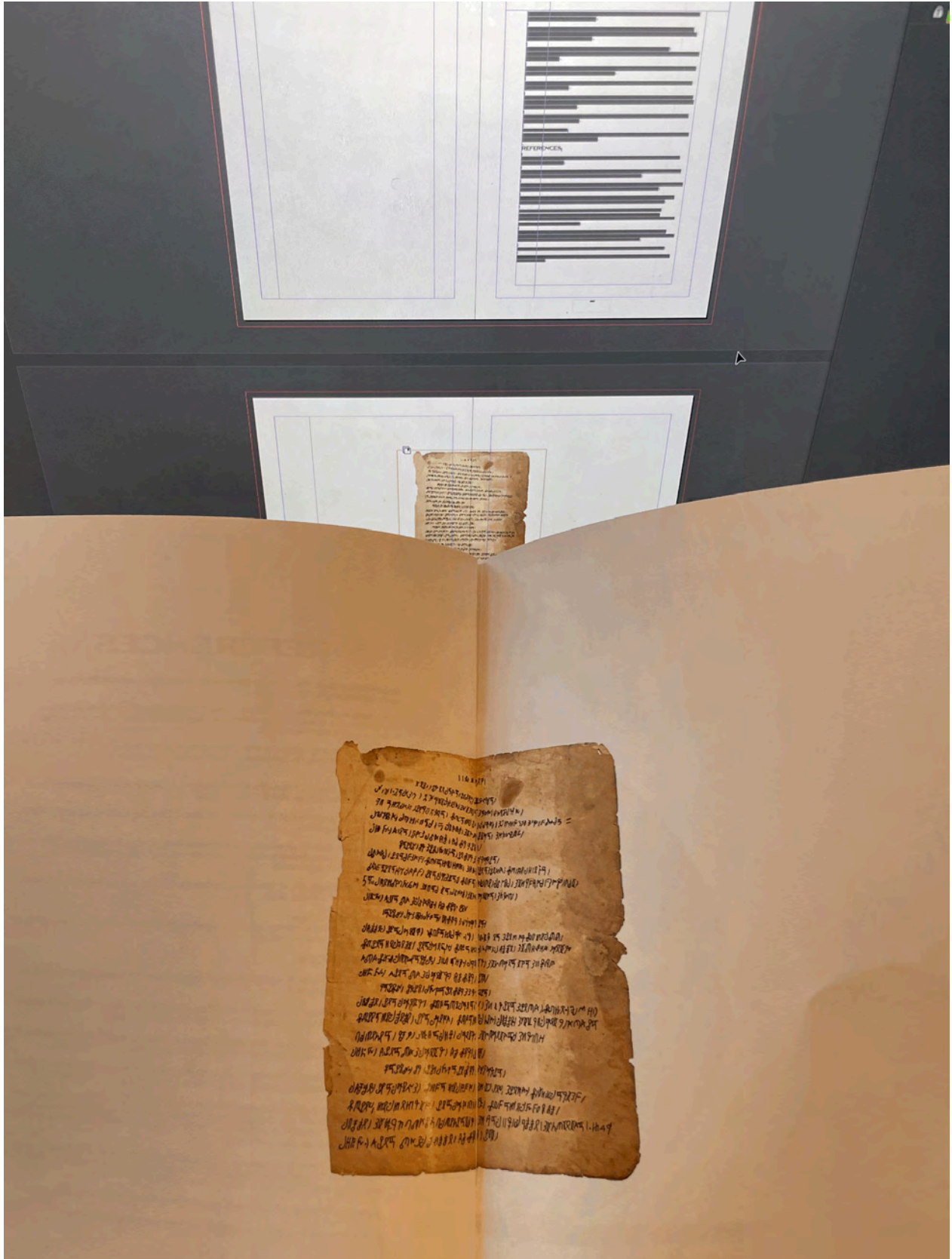
EXAMINING & TRANSCENDING WESTERN DESIGN
PEDAGOGY, PRACTICE & PARADIGM

BFA DESIGN THESIS BY SILVER X



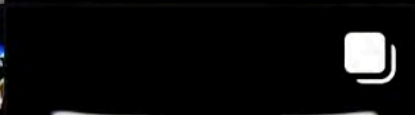
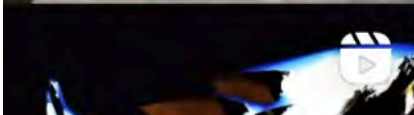
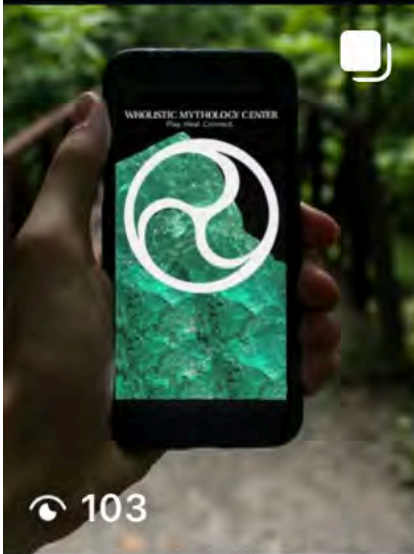
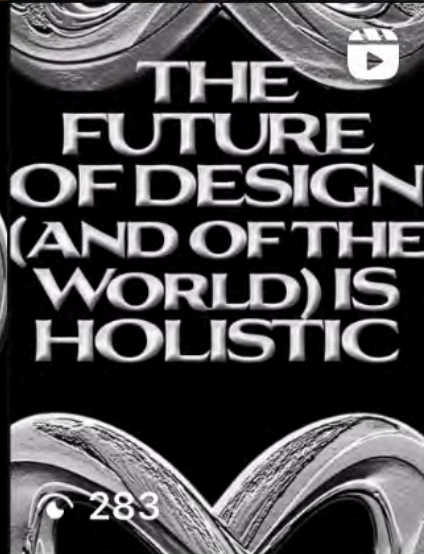
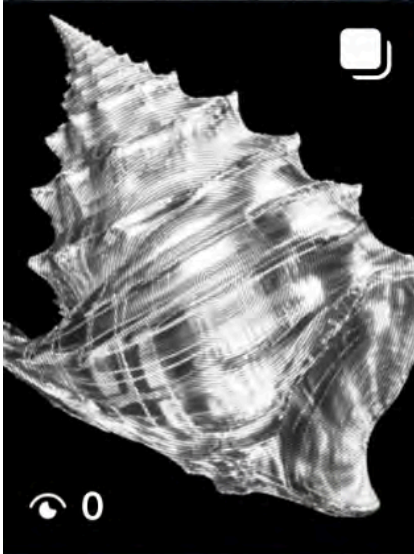
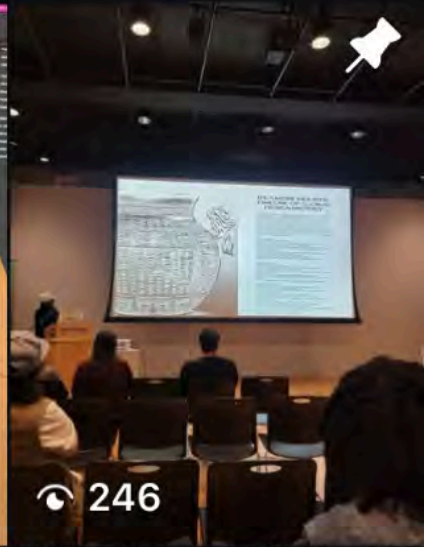






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Silver Chalice ▾

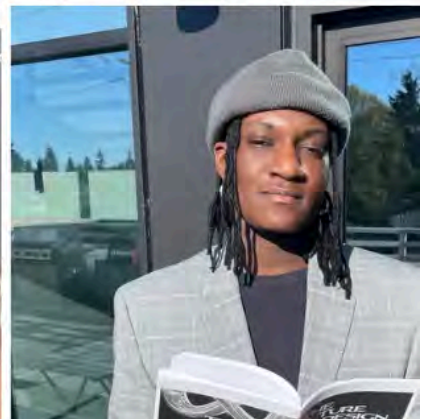


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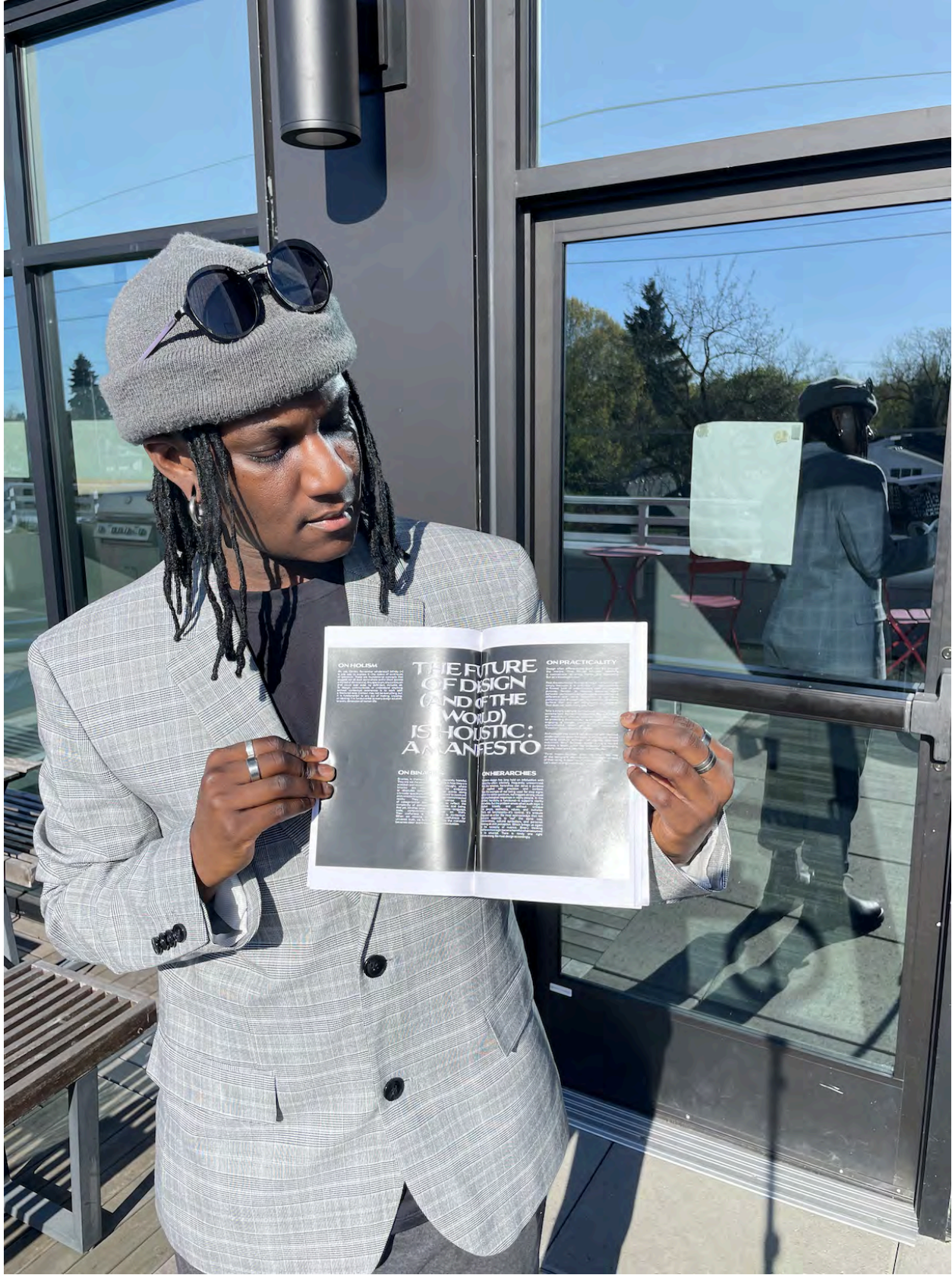
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I printed my Digital Thesis Book! 🥳 Yes, it is now tangible too! No, I did not trim this 1st print because I've been too excited to do anything but flip through it, in awe of seeing a lifetime of work, research and personal insights bundled up into one ... See more











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Your story 3h



blackacidempire

I AM ALSO DEEPLY HONORED TO HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SHARE IN THE PHILISOPHICAL-DESIGN HYBRID PRESENTATION OF MY DEAR FRIEND @silverthecreative

ON HOLISM

Ah, yes. Oracles. Remember wholeness? Infinity (∞) is one way to express it—the notion of continuum, of spectrum. These are foundational concepts that suggest we all exist somewhere within them (space that could ever exist, by definition, includes all without contextual awareness is to work with a fractured lens. Context may not be everything, but it is fundamental to any act of making, knowing, or relating. It is fundamental to every design solution, to every dimension of human life.

THE FUTURE OF DESIGN (AND OF THE WORLD) IS HOLISTIC: A MANIFESTO

ON PRACTICALITY

Design often differentiates itself from art through the means "form follows function," asserting a commitment to utility, clarity, and simplicity, but let's interrogate that.

First, the assumption that something is "not functional" simply because it is unfamiliar or unexpressed is flawed. Lack of understanding does not require purpose. Indeed, to deliver someone else's behavior—particularly across cultures or experiential differences—and claim objectivity is, at best, a surface that sits on unexamined or unperceived. That does not make it any less "real."

Take a simple example: someone wears long pants in extreme heat. Rather than assuming they are making an impractical choice, consider that they may be protecting their skin due to a medical condition, an unexamined need you do not understand. "Function" is not universally legible.

And consider this: even if two designers with identical credentials are given the same brief, they will almost certainly produce different (yet equally effective) outcomes. Why? Because design is not a rational process. It exists within the context of personality, culture, experience, aesthetic, sensibility, etc.

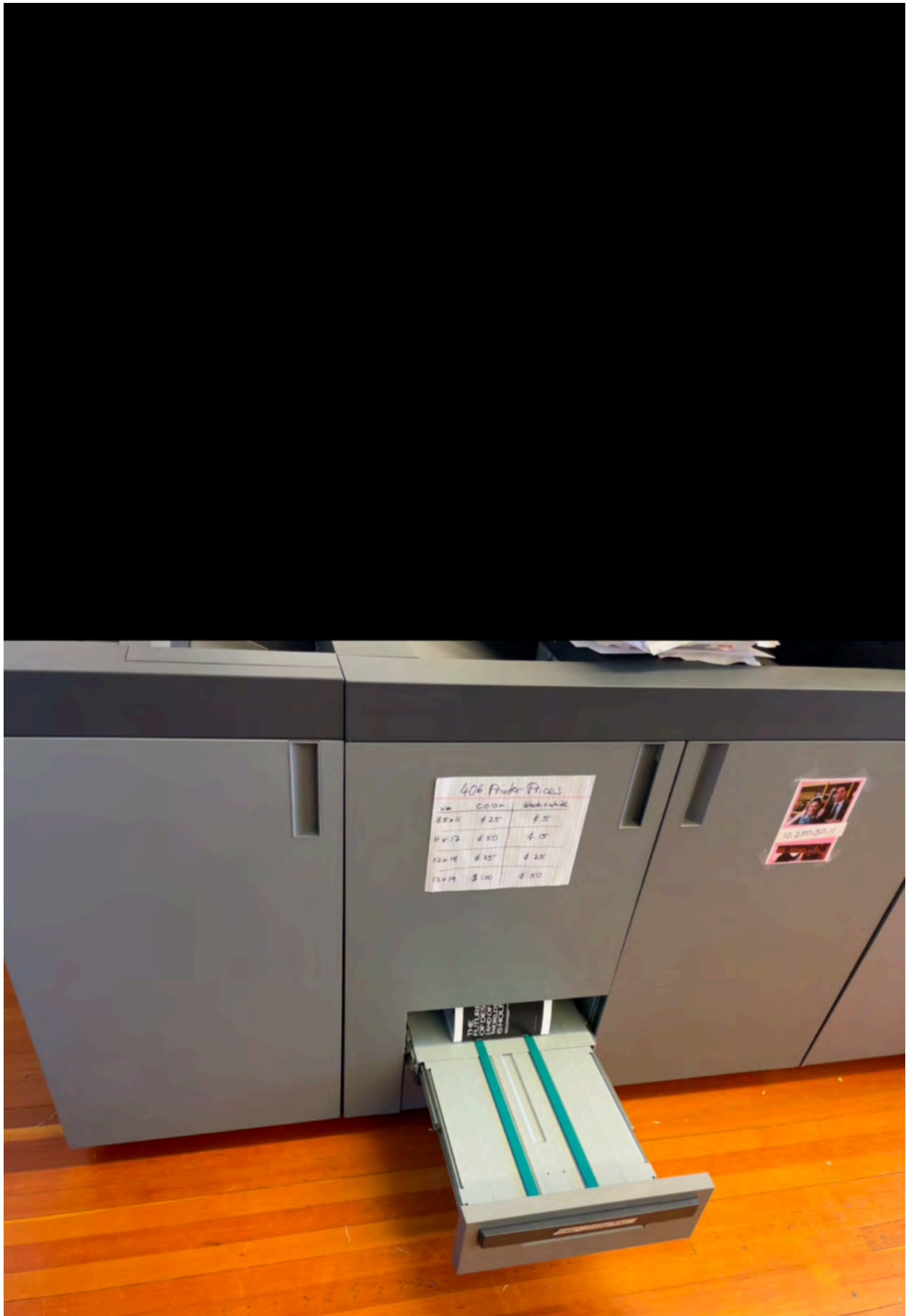
"Form follows function" does not erase the role of the designer's humanness, the entire context of that being, it never has. And that is not "bad." Let's start seeing accordingly.

ON BINARIES

Binaries, in themselves, are not inherently harmful. They are not the enemy. The issue lies in how they are wielded—particularly in Western thought, where binaries are often treated as endpoints or absolutes rather than flexible points along a broader spectrum. We are rarely invited to zoom out and consider binaries as part of a larger, interconnected reality. They are a narrow tool of categorization that often fail to reflect the complexity of perception, experience, and being. And yet, binaries serve specific purposes—language, code, computation—all depend on them. Their usefulness is real, but it is contextual. When we mistake that limited usefulness for universal truth, we forfeit nuance. So the mandate becomes clear: zoom out. Always. Contextualize.

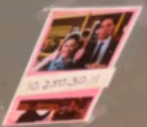
ON HIERARCHIES

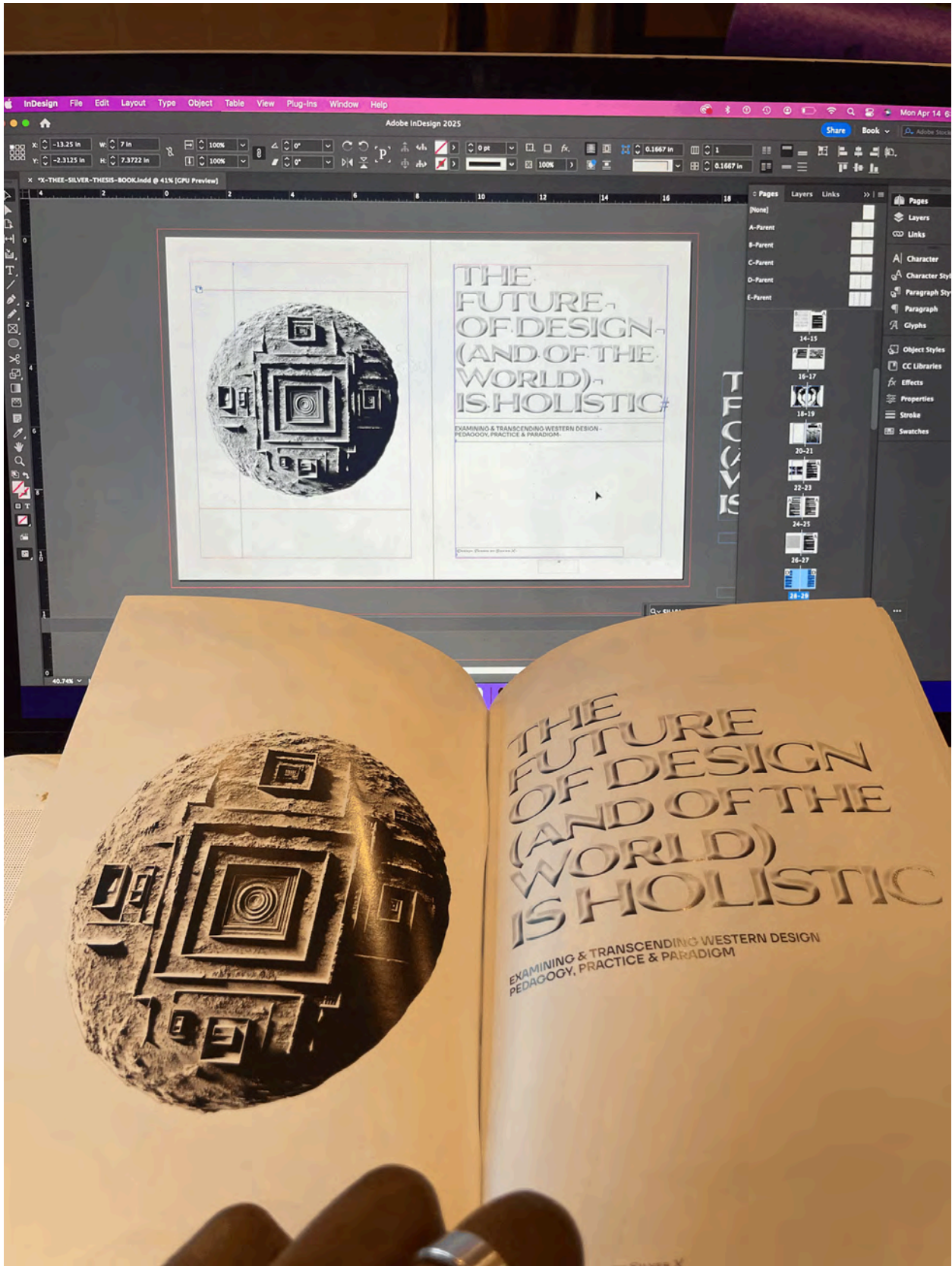
Western design has long held an infatuation with hierarchy—often arbitrary, frequently unexamined. And like binaries, hierarchies can serve a purpose—if applied with precision and context. Take the example of red being used for stop signs within the visible spectrum; red triggers strong visual and psychological responses in many people. In this context, hierarchy is functional—it supports clarity and safety. But the problem arises when such logic is applied broadly and without critique—to people, aesthetics, values, and cultures. That's not functionality—it's control. It's a means disguised as order. We must acknowledge that not everyone responds to "red" the same way. Class, gender, cultural symbolism, and personal meaning all shift perception. Which brings us again to the necessity of nuance. Binary thinking and hierarchical logic become harmful when assumed to be universal. There is rarely one right and one wrong. We must design accordingly.



406 Binder Prices

IN	COST	MARKING
8x11	\$25	\$5
8x12	\$50	\$15
12x16	\$75	\$25
12x18	\$100	\$30





repair—these rarely make it into the dashboard. A transformative paradigm asks: what is worth measuring? And what is worth doing even if it can't be measured?

ON SIGNAGE

Signage is often treated as the most utilitarian form of design—wayfinding, direction. But signage shapes how people move, feel, and belong. It is not just about whose language is centered, whose body is imagined, whose experience is prioritized. Inclusive signage isn't about checking boxes—it's about rethinking space, signs as invitations, not just instructions.

ON CORPORATE

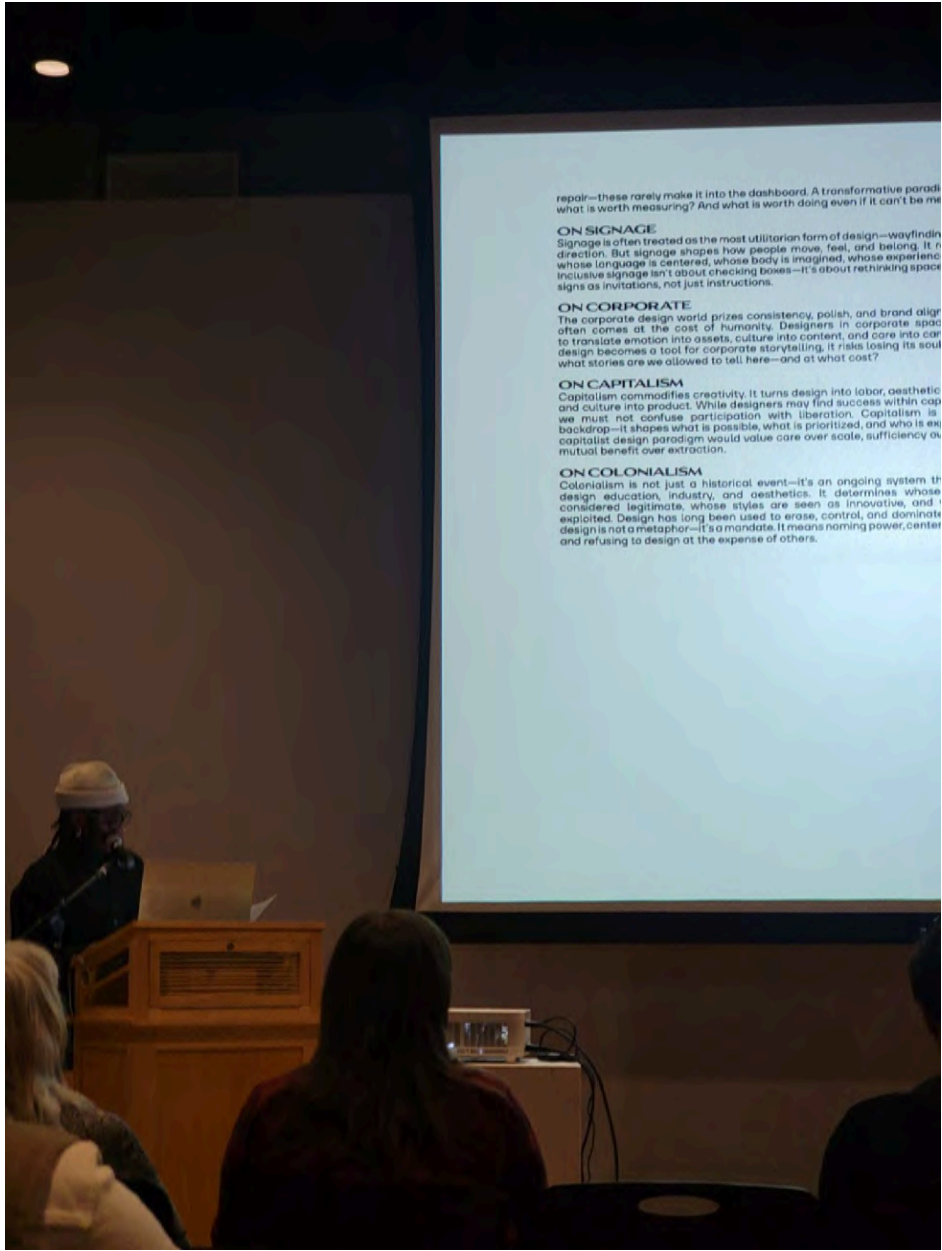
The corporate design world prizes consistency, polish, and brand alignment. Often, this comes at the cost of humanity. Designers in corporate spaces often translate emotion into assets, culture into content, and care into cost. Design becomes a tool for corporate storytelling. It risks losing its soul. What stories are we allowed to tell here—and at what cost?

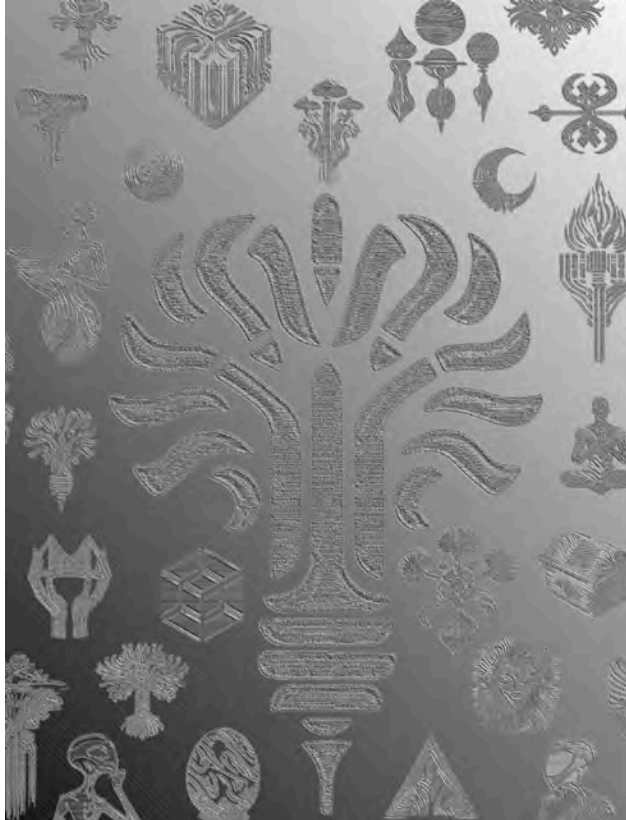
ON CAPITALISM

Capitalism commodifies creativity. It turns design into labor, aesthetic and culture into product. While designers may find success within capitalism, we must not confuse participation with liberation. Capitalism is a backdrop—it shapes what is possible, what is prioritized, and who is exploited. A capitalist design paradigm would value care over scale, sufficiency over mutual benefit over extraction.

ON COLONIALISM

Colonialism is not just a historical event—it's an ongoing system that shapes design, education, industry, and aesthetics. It determines whose styles are considered legitimate, whose styles are seen as innovative, and whose styles are exploited. Design has long been used to erase, control, and dominate. Design is not a metaphor—it's a mandate. It means naming power, centering, and refusing to design at the expense of others.





THE FUTURE OF DESIGN (AND OF THE WORLD) IS HOLISTIC

EXAMINING & TRANSCENDING WESTERN DESIGN
PEDAGOGY, PRACTICE & PARADIGM

DESIGN VISIONS BY SILVIA N.



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PREFACE: THE ROOT AND THE WHOLE

Yes, while I am arguing that design is holistic, part of that holism is paying homage where it is due—starting at the root, starting from the birthplace of humanity: Africa. This isn't metaphor; this is fact. The continent where human civilization began is also the origin point for some of the most advanced, intentional, and integrative design systems the world has ever known. The perspective offered here—by me, an African person born in America—is not singular but ancestral, cosmological, and collective. While this book seeks to honor global histories and practices across many geographies and cultures, its center of gravity, its tonality, and its entry point must be what it has always been: the head, the root, the origin.

To argue for a holistic future of design—pedagogically, professionally, and paradigmatically—requires us to tell the truth about where design began. Not in 20th-century Germany. Not in 15th-century Italy. But in precolonial Africa: in the spatial cosmograms of the Dogon, in the fractal-informed architecture of the Ba-ila, in the polyphonic structures of Yoruba governance, and in the textile coding of the Akan. To erase these is to not only participate in epistemicide, but to sever design from its most fertile soil.

Design, in African contexts, has never been compartmentalized. Architecture, math, spirituality, community planning, agriculture, and aesthetic expression exist in systems of interdependence. As Eglash (1999) reveals in *African Fractals*, the self-similarity found in African village layouts is not coincidental—it reflects a fractal logic that exists both materially and metaphysically. These are not just patterns; they are algorithms. They are cosmologies you can walk through. The same logic that shapes the scale of compounds shapes social hierarchies, ceremonial timing, and ecological stewardship.

Consider the Hausa architectural tradition, which uses sun-dried mud, rhythmic ornamentation, and thermal regulation strategies to create buildings that are both sustainable and sacred (Something Curated, 2022). Or look to Ethiopia, where ancient rock-hewn churches were engineered downward, carved into the Earth in inverse ziggurats. These are not anomalies. They are instructions. They challenge our assumptions about what design can be when it is in relationship—rather than in control. African fashion, as explored in the British Museum's 2022 exhibition, is another arena where design has always been functional, expressive, and communal. From mid-go-dyed Adire textiles to the mud-dyed cloth of Mali, from the geometric prestige of Kente to the cultural coding of Dashiki, clothing has served as political statement, lineage marker, and spiritual armor (NIN, 2022). These traditions are not pre-modern. They are afrofutures rooted in ancestral memory.

During colonial times, African design did not disappear—it adapted, resisted, and encoded. Design became a tool of survival and refusal. In the urban planning of colonial Lagos, African architects worked subversively within imposed systems to maintain communal logic. In print culture, from pan-African posters to liberationist pamphlets, typography became a weapon and a witness. In fashion and music, design became a sonic and sartorial rebellion. This legacy must be taught—not as resistance alone, but as innovation under constraint.

ON HIREABILITY

"Hireability" in design is too often measured by proximity to corporate norms, tidy portfolios, industry-recognized tools, and visual fluency in dominant aesthetics. But hireability should reflect relevance, not resemblance. Who is "hireable" depends on who is doing the hiring—and what systems of value they uphold. Until design hiring prioritizes lived experience, community fluency, ethical rigor, and expansive thinking, it will continue to filter out the very people it claims to need.

ON LINKEDIN

LinkedIn has become a proxy for professionalism in design, shaping not just who gets seen, but what kinds of work are legible as "real." The platform rewards marketable narratives, sanitized visuals, and neat, upward trajectories. But design is rarely neat. It is nonlinear, emergent, and often unglamorous. Until LinkedIn evolves to reflect the complexities of creative labor, it will remain a mirror of capital—not of care, courage, or innovation.

ON DESIGN THINKING

Design Thinking is often framed as revolutionary—but it is, in practice, a systematized repackaging of Indigenous and community-based knowledge practices. When taught without critique, it flattens relational methods into step-by-step toolkits that can be sold to corporations. Design Thinking can be useful, but only if it's taught as a practice of humility, not authority. As it stands, it is too often a tool for making extractive design more palatable.

ON EMPATHY

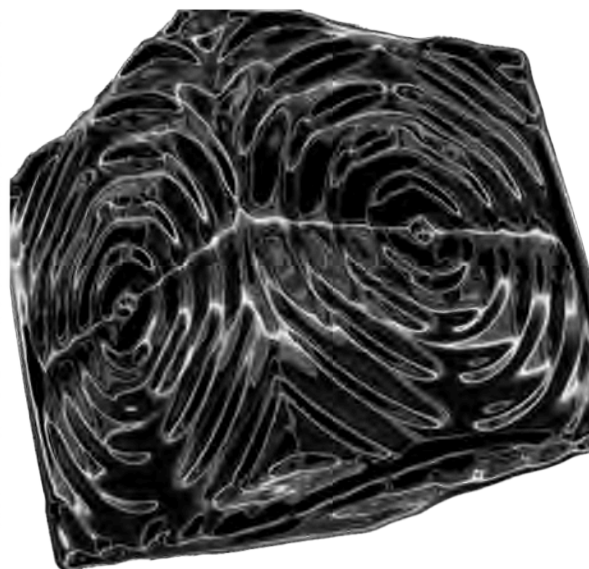
Empathy has become a buzzword in design—involed as a shortcut to ethics. But empathy is not a checkbox. It is not achieved by user interviews or persona building alone. True empathy demands proximity, self-reflection, and accountability. It requires that designers see themselves not outside the problem, but within it. Without that, empathy becomes performance.

ON HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

Human-Centered Design sounds good in theory—but often defaults to designing for users, not with them. It centers a generalized human, often imagined as a Western, able-bodied consumer, rather than specific communities with unique histories and needs. To be truly human-centered, design must be community-rooted, co-authored, and culturally humble.

ON INFOGRAPHICS

Infographics are often framed as a way to make data accessible—but accessible to whom, and by what visual language? Data is never neutral. The way we present it can obscure as much as it reveals. When infographics prioritize clarity over context, or aesthetics over accuracy, they risk flattening the very complexity they aim to communicate. Good data design should visualize relationships—not just reduce them.



ON JOURNEY MAPPING

Journey mapping can be a useful tool—but too often it assumes a universal path through a designed experience. It simplifies lived experience into stages and touchpoints, ignoring nuance, divergence, and systemic constraint. Real human journeys rarely follow a linear map. What if we designed journeys that accounted for disruption, detour, and resistance?

ON PERSONAS

Personas can help teams empathize—but when abstracted too far, they become caricatures. Real people are not bullet points. When personas are based on assumptions, not lived input, they flatten identity into demographics and motivations into clichés. Ethical persona work should always be co-developed, and always treated as provisional—not truth.

ON EMPATHY MAPPING

Empathy mapping, like its cousin Design Thinking, claims to center feelings—but it often reduces them to surface-level insights. It risks turning emotional labor into a worksheet. Without relational grounding, these maps are more about appearing empathetic than embodying empathy. Real empathy isn't mapped. It's practiced.

ON VISUAL HIERARCHY

Visual hierarchy is taught as a neutral tool for clarity—but what is made clear, and to whom? Hierarchy reflects power. It decides whose message is loudest, and whose is small print. In many cases, hierarchy replicates societal inequities through design. We must question our defaults. Who gets to be central? Who gets to be bold?

ON DESIGN SYSTEMS

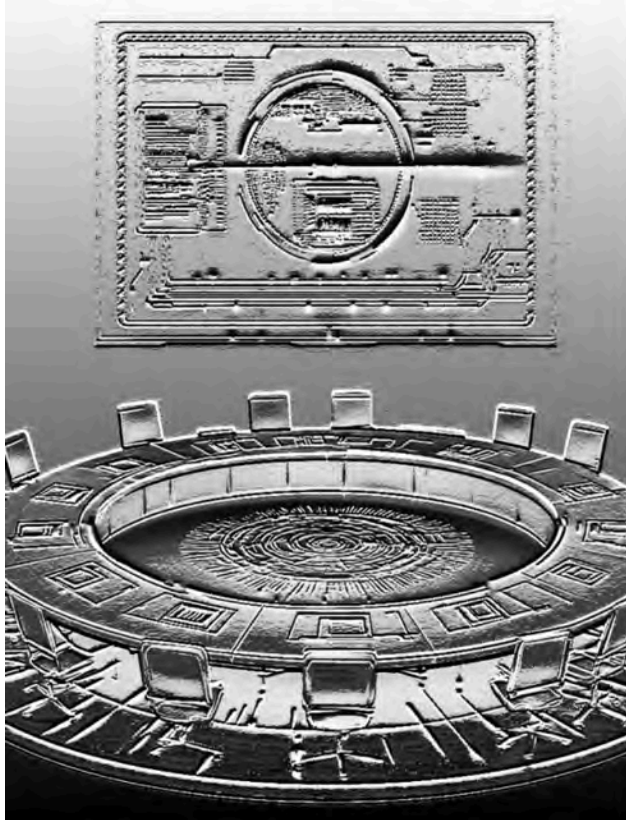
Design systems promise consistency—but too often they become cages. They can stifle innovation in the name of scale and prioritize uniformity over responsiveness. When applied without care, systems flatten difference and impose false neutrality. A liberatory design system should adapt to people—not the other way around.

ON FORM & FUNCTION

The mantra "form follows function" has shaped design philosophy for decades—but whose function are we talking about? And whose form? Often, function is defined by Western utility, and form is judged by Western standards of beauty. Functionality is never universal. We must expand our definitions of what counts as functional, and for whom.

ON SITE PLANNING

Site planning is not just logistics—it's politics. How we organize space reflects how we organize power. Site planning that ignores historical context, cultural use, or ecological systems reinforces colonial patterns. A liberatory approach to site planning would ask: Who has been here before? Who is centered here now? Who gets to stay?



01: PEDAGOGY

ON PEDAGOGY

Design pedagogy doesn't just teach skills—it teaches values. What's centered in the classroom eventually becomes centered in the studio, the agency, the industry. The way design is taught—what is emphasized, omitted, rewarded, or dismissed—shapes more than portfolios. It shapes worldviews. It teaches students how to see, who to cite, and what counts as "real design." When pedagogy is unexamined, it replicates systems of dominance even while appearing progressive. If we don't interrogate what we teach and why, we risk preparing students to perpetuate the very inequalities we claim to challenge.

ON WESTERN AS CANON

The idea that design begins with the Bauhaus or reaches its peak in Swiss typography is not just inaccurate—it's ideological. Western design histories are upheld as the "canon," while non-Western contributions are framed as secondary, folkloric, or "inspirational." This hierarchy isn't neutral. It's the result of colonization, erasure, and institutional gatekeeping. When students are only taught Euro-American movements as the standard, they internalize a distorted timeline of design—and a distorted understanding of who holds design knowledge. Centering Western canon as universal flattens the global and diverse roots of visual communication.

ON AHISTORICAL CURRICULA

Teaching design without history—red history—is not just incomplete. It's a form of theft. Most design programs skip over thousands of years of global design knowledge, focusing instead on a narrow slice of modernist, Western innovation. This erases the contributions of cultures that developed visual systems, architectural methods, cosmological planning, symbolic languages, and design logics long before the word "design" existed in the West. It also erases the violence through which Western design became dominant. Curricula that ignore this are not just outdated. They're complicit.

ON DESIGN AS INHERENTLY NEUTRAL

Design is never neutral. Every aesthetic choice, tool, or framework is rooted in values—whether named or not. And yet, many classrooms teach design as a matter of "problem solving" or "clear communication," divorced from politics or identity. The illusion of neutrality allows dominant norms—whiteness, capitalism, Eurocentrism, ableism—to operate unchecked. By refusing to name power, we preserve it. Teaching design as objective not only flattens its complexity—it shields students from the responsibility of designing with intention, accountability, and care.

ON TECHNICAL OVER SOCIAL EXPERTISE

Skill is essential—but skill without context is dangerous. Design education often prioritizes technical mastery over cultural literacy, ethical reasoning, or social engagement. Students are graded on polish, not perspective. A perfect layout can still perpetuate harm. A smooth animation can still stereotype. The metrics for "success" are shaped by industry expectations, not community impact. Until we value critical thinking, relational fluency, and social insight as much as we value Adobe proficiency, we are teaching students to make things that look good—even if they do harm.

ON TOKENIZING REPRESENTATION

Representation is not enough—especially when it's uncritical. Showing "diverse" people in your poster does not make the poster anti-oppressive. Too often, marginalized communities are brought into the curriculum as case studies, style references, or campaigns—without complexity, context, or care. Students are taught to include, but not to engage. To feature, but not to follow. This is not representation. It's tokenism. And when it happens in education, it sets the precedent for how future designers will treat the people they claim to represent.

ON WESTERN METHODS

What gets treated as foundational in design education—briefs, critiques, individual authorship—is not universal. These are artifacts of Western academic systems built on

repair—these rarely make it into the dashboard. A transformative paradigm would ask what is worth measuring? And what is worth doing even if it can't be measured?

ON SIGNAGE

Signage is often treated as the most utilitarian form of design—wayfinding, information, direction. But signage shapes how people move, feel, and belong. It reflects power whose language is centered, whose body is imagined, whose experience is prioritized. Inclusive signage isn't about checking boxes—it's about rethinking space. About seeing signs as invitations, not just instructions.

ON CORPORATE

The corporate design world prizes consistency, polish, and brand alignment. But this often comes at the cost of humanity. Designers in corporate spaces are taught to translate emotion into assets, culture into content, and care into campaigns. When design becomes a tool for corporate storytelling, it risks losing its soul. We must ask: what stories are we allowed to tell here—and at what cost?

ON CAPITALISM

Capitalism commodifies creativity. It turns design into labor, aesthetics into property and culture into product. While designers may find success within capitalist systems, we must not confuse participation with liberation. Capitalism is not a neutral backdrop—it shapes what is possible, what is prioritized, and who is exploited. A post-capitalist design paradigm would value care over scale, sufficiency over surplus, and mutual benefit over extraction.

ON COLONIALISM

Colonialism is not just a historical event—it's an ongoing system that has shaped design education, industry, and aesthetics. It determines whose knowledge is considered legitimate, whose styles are seen as innovative, and whose labor is exploited. Design has long been used to erase, control, and dominate. To decolonize design is not a metaphor—it's a mandate. It means naming power, centering sovereignty, and refusing to design at the expense of others.



ON TRANSACTIONAL METRICS

Design is increasingly quantified. Clicks, conversions, engagement rates, A/B tests. While data can be useful, a metrics-only paradigm reduces people to users, relationships to transactions, and impact to dashboards. It rewards speed over depth, and reach over resonance. But some of the most meaningful effects of design can't be measured in real time. They unfold slowly—in behavior, in cultural memory. When metrics become the only measure of value, we lose what design does best: the ability to transform how people feel, relate, and imagine.

ON WORLD CULTURE

Design doesn't exist in a vacuum—it lives within culture. And yet, the dominant design paradigm often treats non-Western cultures as aesthetic references, rather than as holders of full and valid design systems. World culture is not a style. It's a source of knowledge, innovation, and philosophy. It is diverse, contextual, living. A decolonized design paradigm doesn't just borrow from global culture—it respects, cites, and learns from it. It asks: who does this come from? Who is being credited? And what would it mean to design in solidarity rather than appropriation?

ON THE WORD "CLEAN"

"Clean" is often used as a shorthand for good design—minimalist, crisp, modern. But underneath that word lies a whole host of assumptions about what is professional, legible, and desirable. In Western design paradigms, "clean" usually means white space, sans-serif fonts, and rigid grids. It rarely accounts for the vibrancy, density, or texture found in many global and non-Western design languages. To name something "clean" is to imply that something else is messy, impure, or unprofessional. This framing doesn't just reflect aesthetic preference—it enforces cultural bias.

ON TECHNOLOGY

Technology is not neutral. It reflects the values of those who design it, fund it, and benefit from it. In the design world, tech is often treated as inherently progressive—an inevitable future we must catch up to. But we must ask: who is this tech for? What labor does it require? What forms of knowledge and relationship does it replace or erase? A more grounded design paradigm would treat technology as a tool—not a destiny—and evaluate it through ethics, ecology, and equity.

ON PSYCHOLOGY

Design often borrows from psychology to optimize user experience—using principles like cognitive load, attention spans, or behavioral nudges. But these psychological models are not culturally universal. They are largely based on Western subjects and value systems. When we apply psychology in design, we must question its origins, assumptions, and limits. And we must expand our understanding of mind and behavior to include collective trauma, neurodiversity, and non-Western psychologies.

ON REALITY, PHYSICS, & METAPHYSICS

Western design has long aligned itself with material reality—form, space, objects, interfaces. But reality is not just what we can measure or build. Metaphysics—the study of what lies beyond the material—is also part of design. Cosmogony, intuition, dreams, energy—these shape how people live and relate to the world. A truly holistic design paradigm would treat metaphysical insight not as fringe but as fundamental, especially in communities where spirituality and design are inseparable.

ON BRANDING

Branding, in its modern form, emerged alongside capitalism and colonization. It is the practice of distilling identity into symbols, slogans, and style—then monetizing it. Branding can build trust, tell stories, and cultivate community. But it can also flatten complexity, extract culture, and reduce meaning to metrics. We must ask: who is this brand for? Who profits from it? And what does it cost to maintain a brand that's polished but disconnected from its origins?

ON BUSINESS

Design is increasingly framed as a business tool—measurable, efficient, profitable. But design is not business. It is creative, cultural, and communal work. When business logic dominates design, we lose space for slowness, speculation, and dissent. We begin to value what can be sold, not what can be felt or questioned. A more expansive paradigm would recognize the economy of care, the currency of trust, and the ROI of

imagination.

ON ETHICS

Design is not neutral, and therefore, it is never outside the realm of ethics. Every design decision—what to highlight, what to hide, who to include, who to ignore—is an ethical one. Yet ethics in design is often reduced to checklists, legal disclaimers, or corporate values. We need deeper conversations. Ethics as practice, not posture. Ethics as ongoing questioning: What does this design make possible? What does it make harder? Who decides?

ON DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Design is often taught as method, not as philosophy. But behind every method is a worldview. What is design for? What do we owe to those we design with? How do aesthetics relate to power? These are philosophical questions, and they deserve space in design education and discourse. A robust design philosophy asks not just how we make—but why, for whom, and at what cost.

ON SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is often reduced to materials or energy use. But true sustainability is systemic. It means designing for durability, interdependence, regeneration, and long-term care. In a paradigm of extractive capitalism, design is complicit in overproduction, fast fashion, and planned obsolescence. A sustainable design paradigm must be in direct tension with these systems—and must center Indigenous, circular, and ecological ways of thinking.

ON EXPERIMENTATION

Innovation is the darling of design, yet most institutions punish true experimentation. Risk taking is welcomed only when it's safe, aesthetic, and fundable. But real experimentation is messy, unpredictable, and often uncomfortable. It requires failure, flexibility, and friction. A liberated design paradigm would create space for wild ideas, cultural deviation, and speculative irreverence—not just polished outcomes.

ON CIRCULARITY

Circularity is more than a sustainability buzzword—it's a worldview. It means understanding that nothing disappears, everything transforms, and design is part of an ongoing cycle. Circular thinking asks: Where did this come from? Where is it going? Who will hold it next? In Indigenous systems, circularity governs time, responsibility, and care. Adopting it means designing not just for impact—but for return, repair, and reverence.

ON FUTURISM / WORLDBUILDING

Design is always about the future—it imagines, shapes, and proposes what could be. But whose futures are we imagining? Western design often builds futures of efficiency, surveillance, and sleekness. Afro- and Indigenous futurisms offer alternatives: futures of care, complexity, and ancestral continuity. Worldbuilding is not about escape—it's about possibility. To build better worlds, we must start with better questions.

ON PROTOTYPES

Prototypes are often treated as throwaways—means to an end. But prototypes are where values show up early. They reveal what's been centered, tested, and left behind. In extractive paradigms, prototypes are made for pitching. In relational paradigms, they are made for listening. A prototype isn't just a tool—it's a conversation. It's the first version of the future we're imagining.

ON DATA

Data is framed as truth in many design paradigms—objective, reliable, self-evident. But data is collected, cleaned, interpreted. It reflects the priorities and blind spots of those who define it. Too often, data is used to legitimize harm, flatten complexity, or bypass lived experience. We must design with data, not around it—and never in place of human insight.

ON METRICS

Metrics are the backbone of business-based design—KPIs, conversions, engagement. But what do these metrics measure, and what do they miss? When we prioritize what's quantifiable, we devalue what's felt, relational, and uncountable. Joy, dignity, cultural

ON STORYTELLING

Storytelling is not just a design technique—it's a world-making act. The stories we tell shape the futures we imagine. But design often treats story as content to style, rather than as context to honor. Real storytelling in design begins with listening. And continues with responsibility.

ON STAKEHOLDERS

The term "stakeholder" is meant to signify anyone impacted by a design—but it often defaults to funders, executives, or users with power. Real stakeholder engagement means centering those most affected, not most invested. It means co-designing with—not just for. And it means redistributing stakes, not just managing them.

ON POLICY

Design and policy are not separate fields. Every design decision implies a policy, whether named or not. Who gets access? Who gets priority? What is protected? Design that ignores policy becomes complicit in systems of harm. And policy that ignores design misses its chance to move hearts as well as laws.

ON FEEDBACK LOOPS

Feedback loops in design are often short, surface-level, and centered on speed. We test, we tweak, we ship. But deep feedback—the kind that changes your assumptions—takes time, trust, and maturity. Good feedback loops are not just about getting input. They're about building relationship.

ON ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility is not a checklist—it's a culture. Too often, accessibility is treated as an afterthought, or a compliance requirement, rather than a design value. But when we design for the margins, we design for everyone. Access isn't extra. It's the baseline.

ON XR / IMMERSIVE

Extended reality and immersive design hold immense potential—but also inherit deep risks. If we carry colonial frameworks into virtual worlds, we will replicate harm in 360 degrees. XR must not be escapism. It must be accountable. Design that expands reality should also expand justice.

ON AFRICA

Africa is often cited in design discourse as inspiration—but rarely as authority. African design histories, methodologies, and innovations are vast and varied, but remain underrepresented in global design education and industry. To reference Africa without resourcing or redistributing power is aesthetic extraction. Africa is not a motif—it is a continent of design futures.





06: THE SHIFT TOWARD A NEW DESIGN ETHOS

To redesign design is to reimagine what it means to shape experience, culture, systems, and futures. Following the critique of Western pedagogical dogmas and industry norms in previous chapters, this section proposes the core tenets of a new design ethos—one that emerges from lived experience, ancestral knowledge, and the refusal to separate design from power. This chapter outlines the transformations required across three integrated dimensions: pedagogy, practice, and paradigm. Each is addressed in relation to the design dogmas previously surfaced, offering alternatives grounded in equity, context, and care.

I. PEDAGOGICAL SHIFTS

FROM AHISTORICAL TO ANCESTRAL: Curricula must root design education in global and precolonial lineages, including African, Indigenous, Asian, and diasporic design histories that long predate modernism. A legitimate design education must include Indigenous, diasporic, and non-Western design histories not as side notes, but as foundational texts. Students should learn that design did not begin with Bauhaus or Helvetica—it began with glyphs carved in stone, cosmologies encoded in fabric, and urban plans aligned with the stars. In practice, this shift means citing, applying, and respecting these lineages in professional work, and hiring scholars and designers from those traditions to lead. In culture, it means returning to design as a sacred act of stewardship, not a product of capitalism or conquest.

FROM NEUTRALITY TO POLITICIZATION: Design is never neutral. It is always situated in systems of power. Teaching design must include ethics, identity, and historical context. From individual genius to collective wisdom: Studio models must move beyond competition to foster community collaboration, cultural humility, and long-term thinking. From Western critique to pluralistic reflection: Evaluation should be diversified to include cultural context, non-verbal critique, oral tradition, and process documentation.

II. PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE SHIFTS

FROM "USERS" TO PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES: Language and framing must respect subjectivity and lived experience. Design must be reciprocal, not extractive.

FROM TOKENIZATION TO STRUCTURAL EQUITY: Representation must go beyond images into hiring practices, leadership pathways, and ownership of narratives. Representation must be about wholeness—not just visibility. This means showing marginalized people in contexts where we are centered, powerful, playful, and complex—not just when we are suffering or being "included." Design work should stop flattening us into campaigns and start co-creating with us as equals. In the classroom, it means critiquing how representation works—and doesn't—and teaching students to build images and systems that reflect real, dignified humanity.

FROM SPEED TO PRESENCE: Slow design practices that prioritize care, impact, and accountability must be institutionalized over deliverables and metrics.

FROM SPECIALIZATION TO HYBRIDITY: Interdisciplinary design thinkers should be celebrated as systems navigators—bringing fluidity, innovation, and range to complex challenges.

III. PARADIGM SHIFTS

FROM CAPITAL TO CARE: Success in design must be redefined through the lens of relational impact, cultural relevance, and ecological sustainability.

FROM UNIVERSALISM TO PLURALITY: "Good design" cannot be dictated by Eurocentric norms. Valuing diverse aesthetics and frameworks is essential.

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05: WHAT'S AT STAKE

The design field is at a crossroads. As design continues to permeate every sector—from health care to activism, education to artificial intelligence—the question is not whether design has power, but how it uses it. In its current form, design continues to replicate unjust Western systems. These include ahistorical pedagogy, extractive research, tokenized representation, and the devaluation of lived experience. Without a deliberate and systemic shift, these patterns will continue to reinforce exclusion, harm, and inequity.

The stakes are high. If we continue to teach design without interrogating its cultural roots and political implications, we risk training yet another generation of designers to replicate harm unconsciously. If we continue to define "good design" through the lens of corporate aesthetics, market appeal, or Western minimalism, we flatten the depth and richness of global creativity. If we continue to frame people as "users" instead of relational beings, we further isolate design from the communities it claims to serve.

This is not simply a theoretical concern—it affects whose stories are told, whose bodies are centered, whose knowledge is validated, and whose futures are imagined. In real terms, it determines whether communities are uplifted or extracted from, whether systems become more accessible or more alienating, and whether design expands possibilities or enforces limitations.

By failing to interrogate its own foundations, the design industry risks becoming obsolete—serving only power, not people. Yet the inverse is also true: by choosing to reflect, reimagine, and repair, design can evolve into one of the most transformative forces of our time. **What's at stake is not only the future of design, but the kind of world we are designing toward.**

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INFLUENCES

BOOKS & PRINT SOURCES

Saki Mofundikwa, *African Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Afrika*
 Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*
 Robin Dembro, "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender"
 AIGA & MIT Press, *The Black Experience in Design*
 Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology*
 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*
 Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*
 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*
 Dori Tunstall, *Decolonizing Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook*

TALKS, INTERVIEWS, AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Saki Mofundikwa, TED Talk: *Ingenuity and Elegance in Ancient African Alphabets*
 BIPOC Design History platform & Instagram
 Design as Protest (DAP) movement
 Decolonizing Design blog & essays
 WU Think Tank publications and provocations
 The Future of Black Design virtual conference series
 Design Justice Network Principles

PEOPLE & COLLECTIVES (INDIRECT INFLUENCE)

Topiwasho S. Garikayi - Type designer focused on African writing systems
 Sylvia Wynter - Theorist of the "Human as Genre"
 Allyson Logan - Decolonial Design and Diaspora Futures
 Design To Dismantle - Crossroots design interventionist work
 WOOD Design Collective
 Dark Matter University
 Decolonize All The Things (DATT)

PRECOLONIAL DESIGN TRADITIONS REFERENCED

Ancient Sumer (Cuneiform)
 Kemet / Egypt (Hieroglyphics, Ma'at)
 Indus Valley (urban design, measurement systems)
 Nubia (goldwork, sacred proportion)
 Ethiopia/Eritrea (Ge'ez script)
 Mali Empire (Timbuktu manuscripts)
 Benin & Yoruba (bronzes, cosmological sculpture)
 Olmec, Maya, Aztec (codices, glyphs, spatial systems)
 Swahili Coast (coral city planning, trade aesthetics)
 Philippines, Khmer, Javanese scripts (Baybayin, etc.)
 San/Bushmen (mnemonic rock art systems)
 DR Congo (Mandombe script)
 Liberia (Vai script, Bassa Vah)
 Cameroon (Bamum script)
 Guinea (N'ko script)
 Suriname (Arawak script)

ACADEMIC & INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA)
 Your advisors and mentors (e.g., Martin)
 Your design thesis committee
 Informal and formal dialogues around critique, studio feedback,
 and cross-disciplinary inquiry





04: A MORE HOLISTIC TIMELINE OF GLOBAL DESIGN HISTORY

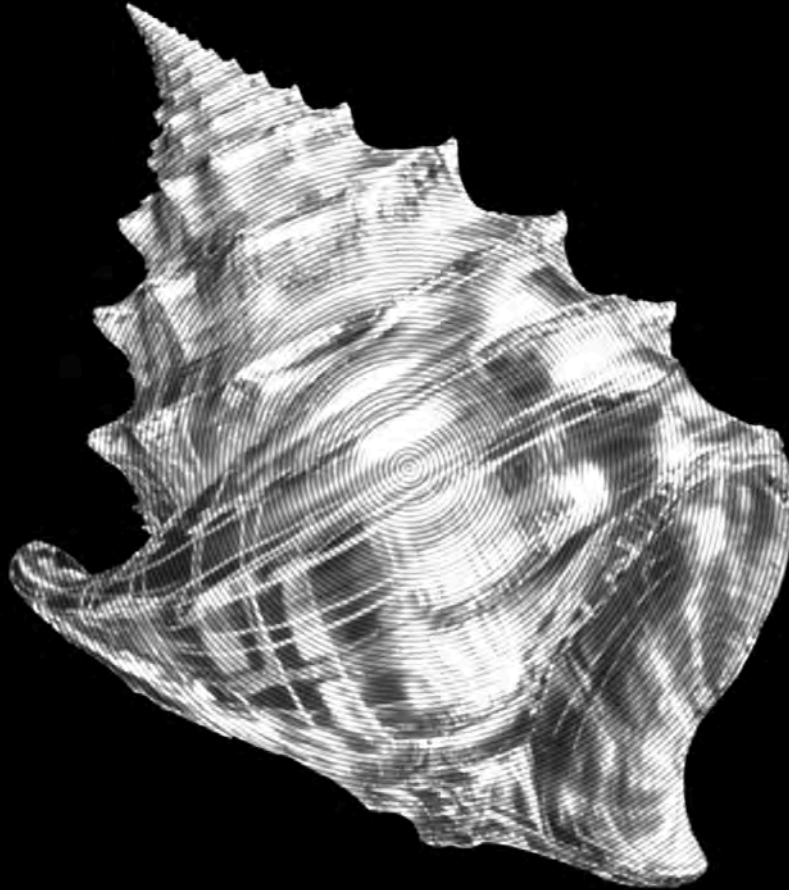
A MORE HOLISTIC TIMELINE OF GLOBAL DESIGN HISTORY
 The way we tell the story of design shapes what—and who—we believe design comes from. Most timelines still begin in Europe, jump from the Gutenberg press to the Bauhaus, and proceed directly to Silicon Valley. But design did not begin in the 20th century. It did not begin with Helvetica. A more holistic timeline of global design history would honor sacred geometry in Nubian pottery, astronomical urban planning in the Americas, textile coding in the Andes, and over a dozen Indigenous African writing systems that predate modern alphabets. It would acknowledge design as cultural practice, not just professional output. The history of design is longer, deeper, and more diverse than we've been taught. A complete story must expand beyond Western canons to include the brilliance of every region, lineage, and people who have designed meaning into form since the beginning.

PRE-3000 BCE:
 Early Symbolic Systems & Urban Planning
 Mesopotamia (Sumer): Cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals as early data visualization and recordkeeping systems; design of ziggurats.
 Egypt (Hieroglyphs): Hieroglyphics as a sacred symbolic / spatial system; pyramidal design aligned to celestial orders and Maat (balance, order). Per Ankh (House of Life) as center of sacred learning.
 Indus Valley: Grid-based city planning, standardized bricks, measurement tools, advanced sanitation; seals with undeciphered script.
 Southern Africa (San/Bushmen): Mnemonic rock art systems.
 Mesoamerica (Olmec): Ceremonial site planning, colossal heads, symbolic architecture.

3000-1000 BCE:
 Sacred Cosmology & Material Design
 Egypt & Nubia: Canonical tomb sculpture, symmetric pottery, goldwork.
 China: Oracle bones (early script), bronze casting.
 Andes (Inca): Quipu knot systems for recordkeeping; textiles encoded political (kita) and spiritual status.
 Papyrus and bamboo: Emergence of sustainable industrial materials.
 Mesoa (Sudans): Merotic script (500 BCE–400 CE), early sub-Saharan alphabetic system.
 Tifinagh (Tuareg, North Africa) inscriptions; Libyan-Berber script precedents.

1000 BCE-1300 CE:
 Functional Design Systems, Classical & Medieval Design, Golden Ages
 India: Vastu Shastra (spatial codes), temple design.
 China: Feng Shui (energy-based design), Confucian/Daoist spatial ethics, brush calligraphy, paper invention.
 Persia: Garden design as systemic metaphor (balance, flow).
 Greece: Architectural orders (Doric, Ionic), ideal proportion, scroll forms.
 Rome: Roman inscriptions as proto-typography; public architecture emphasizing order and signage.
 Zapotecan/Maya: Codices, glyph systems, folded bark books.
 Ethiopia/Eritrea: Ge'ez script (still in use), sacred manuscript design.
 West Africa: Bead idiographic, early African writing systems.
 Islamic World: Kufic calligraphy, arabesque, muqarnas, pattern systems reflect divine order; House of Wisdom, Al-Qarawiyin as interdisciplinary centers.
 Byzantine Empire: Sacred mosaic; iconography.
 Khmer Empire: Angkor Wat cosmological planning.
 Japan: Wabi-sabi minimalism; scroll and binding design.
 Swahili Coast: Coral stone cities; poetic trade documentation.

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DEDICATION

FOR THE WORLD-BRIDGERS.

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