

## 6

## 'I PREFER NOT TO'

## Anti-progressive designing

*Cameron Tonkinwise***Destructive preferences**

When Herbert Simon defined design – in order to point out that engineers did not have a monopoly over design – as what anybody does when they try change existing situations into preferred ones (1996, p. 111), his choice of terminology reflected that he was an economist thinking about emerging powers of computation. Economics is the dismal science of preferences, of how people choosing one thing over another lies at the basis of the systems by which we organize the distribution of resources. Preferring a product seems like a mild mannered everyday activity. If I choose this one, that leaves the other for you to choose – no harm done, unless you wanted what I chose. However, if I keep choosing this one, and you choose not to make do with your second choice, over time ‘they’ will stop producing the second one. My and your preferences will have had an impact on the stock of things in the world. The economic systems, increasingly backed by computational technology throughout Simon’s lifespan, that are the aggregate effect of our preferences, in fact determine over time what gets made and what conversely gets no longer made, perhaps even un-made, or destroyed. Design, in Simon’s broader sense of preferring, is in the end a matter of life and death, at least for artifacts.

Designers make futures. They make the things that will make up the future. When they choose one version of something over another, the one that is not materialized never even makes it into a state that would be available for other people to choose. As an idea, especially if documented, the less preferred option could be materialized by a designer later, but other non-designers only get to make use of the one that made it.

If the designer succeeds in making something that not only he or she prefers, but proves more preferable to users, or at least consumers, then existing versions of that thing, or the things that were previously used to accomplish the kinds of tasks that the newly designed thing accomplishes more effectively, will become redundant. While still in existence, and so available for use, they will tend not to be used, since a ‘better’ one now exists, and so will fall into disrepair and/or will need to be cleared away. In this way, the creative act of designing

is inherently destructive. Designers do not *change* existing situations into preferred ones; they destroy what currently exists by replacing it with a preferable one.

Designers rarely take responsibility for the end-lives of what they do design (i.e., making things disassemble for component and material recovery, and designing the reverse logistics to get products back from customers for that disassembly). However, designers almost never take responsibility for the waste they make when their new design replaces old, probably still functional, ones. It would slow innovation down if designers had to take into account the disposal of an existing situation when evaluating preference for a new situation.

Because designers are not required to take responsibility for the waste they turn existing products into when making preferable replacements, things pile up – the previous two or three versions of every thing in the household collect in landfills after dwelling for a while in wardrobes, garages, attics and basements.

### Clearing the design way

This undesigning that any design does (even new product categories must involve new practices that take time away from activities involving other existing products) is not only physical, but also ideational, that is to say, part of the design process itself. When a designer receives a brief to design a new kind of X, the designer must find a way of freeing her or himself from existing notions of X, and in particular from any sense that current instances of X are adequate. Designers often begin the process of designing by critiquing precedents of what they have been asked to design. If asked to design a chair, a designer might start by critically examining a series of past and present iconic chairs appropriate for the new design's context. As Jan Michl has succinctly noted (2002), all design is redesign. While instructive of what a new chair might seek to accomplish, these critiques also serve to undermine the value of existing designs, justifying their replacement by something better. If designers do not start with this act of ideational destruction, they may instead try to approach the design from 'first principles,' determining the nature of the problem that any particular instance of X claims to respond to. In this case, the designer is effectively 'destroying' every existing version of X in order to justify 'starting again.'

Without this clearing, the designer may struggle to validate why there is any need to produce yet another X at all. There has to be the sense that current Xs, despite existing, are not in fact perfect, so there is room for preferring new Xs that surpass the performances and qualities of those existing ones. This is the arrogance of design, an optimism that is nevertheless a kind of permanent dissatisfaction, the persistent, even insistent, sense that things as they currently are, are not what people should consider preferable. Jan Michl is again insightful on this (1991): design seems motivated by 'the rumour of functional perfection.'

This commitment to perfectibility is what perhaps distinguishes designers from most other people. Non-designers tend to suffer from confirmation biases and endowment effects that over-valorize what currently exists, discounting the possibility of betterment. 'If someone could have, they would have, so they probably can't.' This means that designers cannot assume that everybody thinks that every thing could and so should be improved. Designers consequently must come up with things that are considerably more preferable than what currently exists merely because their design will be compared to what does already exist and so is considered, by most non-designers, to be more or less satisfactory.

## Making room

This inertia toward what currently exists is not only an effect of social psychology. It is the result of the fact that no artifact is ‘an island;’ each is only ever a node in an ecosystem. A device must be plugged into infrastructures and most likely has peripherals or other associated equipment for adequate use, and even more ancillary gear for specialized use or maintenance. Each product functions or makes sense only when in particular kinds of places characterized by related collections of artifacts. A toaster in a living room is out-of-place and perhaps a fire hazard. A lounge-chair in a schoolroom is (or was) inappropriate, as is a bicycle on a train, unless the latter is designed for it.

This means that a whole set of other artifacts contextualize what counts as preferable. Any new toaster will need to work with existing infrastructures and kitchens. Only on very special occasions will the innovativeness of a new version of a product – a radically redesigned form of toaster perhaps – result in such increased preferability that it justifies changing everything else in its designated locale – such as rewiring the kitchen with a new power supply. At the moment, many think electric cars are preferable to an extent sufficient to warrant installing new power supplies into their garages, as well as beginning to replace petrol stations with charging centers. In these cases, a disruptive innovation will have destroyed an entire ecosystem rather than just displaced one component.

The wider sets of artifacts that maintain the preferability of an existing design also entail the walls and streets that infrastructures servicing certain devices must run through. Buildings and even cities may need to be destroyed to make way for preferable devices if those devices require access to different kinds of resources. For a couple of decades, developed economy cities drilled holes into all their existing buildings, turning them into ‘Swiss cheese’ as Vilém Flusser once noted (1999, p. 81), to make way for telecommunications prior to wifi. By contrast, for almost a century, the lack of space for plumbing individual laundries into dense buildings has fated New Yorkers to use laundromats.

## Expecting destructive practices

What resists new designs are not just existing versions and their associated product ecologies, built environments and infrastructures, but also all the skills and habits associated with using those existing versions. Users invest in learning to use everyday tools and devices to the point of making them routinized aspects of their everyday lives (see Ilmonen 2004). The preferability of a new design must overcome the costs (more in effort and time than finances in most cases) involved in learning a new set of interactions and a new set of routines for any new product. This again is not merely an additive process – invariably some unlearning is also required. Existing interaction habits must be broken. With each new update to an app, habituated ways of doing things must be destroyed and replaced by the new ones.

If users are prepared to unlearn and relearn modes of interaction, it is mostly because the latter are, in the end, easier and more convenient, and hopefully more effective and pleasurable. As a result, these changes function like ratchets – it is almost impossible to reverse them, to make people return to what is more difficult or inconvenient, or less effective and pleasurable. The history of air conditioning for instance has been the step-wise process of people experiencing coolth in a cinema and so coming to expect it of their home (Cooper 2002). Once someone has experienced the ability to call for an indentured driver at the push of an

Uber button, they apparently now desire an Uber for chefs and cleaners and doctors, etc. – destroying the idea that some effort is required to complete daily chores.

For something to be easier, it requires, in the end, less skill. In this way, device innovations can ratchet users away from skilled forms of interaction. Technology critics from the beginning of Western philosophy have complained of the deskilling that flows from the adoption of new technologies: writing destroys remembering, television destroys reading, hand-held screens destroy sociality, etc (Borgmann 2009, Braverman 1998).

Just as products are not islands, skills also do not occur in isolation. They are part of social practices that take place within particular product ecologies that constitute their own 'timespaces,' to use Theodore Schatzki's term (2010). Modifying aspects of those practices can alter their pace and rhythm, which will in turn disturb adjacent practices (Shove et al. 2012). Modifying how one engages with news for instance can affect breakfasting and commuting, or vice versa. In this way, what can get destroyed when innovating new products and their associated practices will not only be the skills directly associated with that product-practice, but indirectly other practices. This was the argument made about the microwave oven (see for instance the use of this example in Verbeek & Kockelkoren 1998). Not only was this product disruptive of what people ate and how it was prepared, but it also disrupted when people ate and consequently whom they ate with. In this way, microwaves made possible longer work hours and so the missing of the family meal, perhaps increasing the chances of family breakdown.

The qualities of any practice are not only material or bodily performed; they are also concern the wider purpose of that practice. Showering involves systems of water heating and pressure, and skills in shampoo use and hair drying; but it also has overall cultural expectations, something like a combination of efficiency, pleasure and hygiene. Existing shower devices or practices may start to seem less preferable if it takes a long time to wait for the hot water to come through, or if the shower head produces less invigorating jet of water. People have expectations of the products and infrastructures that are particular to each practice. I may tolerate much less efficiency in my food preparation than I expect from my internet access.

Radical innovations often require expectation management (Borup et al. 2006). In order to enhance preferability, marketers claim that each innovation allows customers to raise their expectations of effectivity or pleasure. However, new categories of product-practices might involve wholly different sets of expectations. A dating app might initially seem to make finding love more efficient when it is in fact enabling different kinds of engagements, ones that in fact allow you to lower your expectations of love. Many people insist that sharing economy platforms are more effective ways to create trust, whereas it is more likely that they are allowing new kinds of economic interactions between peers outside of formal firms that make trust redundant as a factor. Whether expectations are being ratcheted up or just transformed, current senses of what a certain ensemble of infrastructures and products can deliver through a practice can be destroyed to make way for new ones. Shifting from a car-based commute to cycling requires changing your expectations about travel time and arrival state; cyclists need to expect to have to change clothes, but they also expect to get improved health from how they get to work.

### **Destruction denialism**

So designers, who think of themselves as creators, in fact are, and must be, in many different ways destroyers: destroyers of existing products and even whole product ecologies; and destroyers of existing patterns of everyday life and expectations associated with those habits

and systems. According to Simon's definition of design with which we began, all these things that get removed from our societies are, we must remember, the less preferable. Their removal is apparently worth what they make room for.

Simon is probably more famous for his notion of 'bounded rationality,' the idea that we, or especially expert professionals, delimit and reframe problem-spaces in order to allow calculation of best-fit solutions. By considering only what we are creating rather than what possible futures we might be destroying, Simon suggests that it becomes necessary to repress thought of more complex, longer-term futures when trying to decide on what to design for the near future:

Beyond that circle [of concern for our grandchildren] our concern is more curious and intellectual than emotional. We even find it difficult to define which distant events are the triumphs and which the catastrophes, who the heroes and who the villains.

Thus the events and prospective events that enter into our value systems are all dated, and the importance we attach to them generally drops off sharply with their distance in time. For the creatures of bounded rationality that we are, this is fortunate. If our decisions depended equally upon their remote and their proximate consequences, we could never act but would forever be lost in thought. By applying a heavy discount factor to events, attenuating them with their remoteness in time and space, we reduce our problems of choice to a size commensurate with our limited computing capabilities.

*(Simon 1996, p. 157)*

Designers, to determine, or convince themselves about, the value of what they are designing, must, it seems, discount, externalize or ignore not just what they might be destroying, and so taking from the future, but also the very fact that irreversible destruction might be entailed by any designing. Designers must destroy to create the preferable, sometimes explicitly in relation to precedents; but they also tend to, or perhaps have to, destroy any strong sense of what their designs will destroy in order to maintain belief in the value of what they are designing. Designers who pay too much attention to all the destruction involved in their profession – sustainable designers for example – often complain of feeling debilitated. Better to ignore that you are a destroyer and instead focus your brand on being a creator.

Given the extent to which our societies are mired in unsustainable products, infrastructure, practices and expectations, however, certain forms of large-scale destruction do seem necessary (Tonkinwise 2014). In this situation, getting designers to acknowledge the necessarily destructive parts of their creative practice should not be a burden to repress, but rather a license, liberating designers to take responsibility for their destructive powers and direct them against ways of living and working that are themselves destroying our societies' long-term viability. How to undertake carefully targeted comprehensive acts of destruction by design?

### Nothing worth doing is easy

Currently pervasive discourses do seem to promote more destructive acts of design, though always ambiguously. Consider that, at the moment, the Global Consumer Class seems bewitched by ideas of sudden change. Preferability in innovative products and services preferably comes in the form of violent 'disruption.' Things that seem adequate one day should feel like useless relics of the past the next when a brilliant newly designed product service

system bursts on the market. We, in the global consumer class, seem to have been conditioned to not only expect this, but also even desire it. Our formal and workplace education is apparently making us simultaneously resilient to change and agilely adaptive to its inevitability.

Nevertheless, this scale of destruction, even when desired, is difficult. Most of what is marketed as disruptive seems, in a relatively short time, to fit with existing infrastructures, lifestyles and incumbent business models. Innovations that declare themselves to be radical breakthroughs seem in the end to destroy very little. While this is primarily the result of the vested interests of those investing in profitable returns from these disruptions, it is also because destroying everyday things, to which we are each expectantly habituated, is not easy. How then to more carefully and comprehensively direct the destructive aspects that are central to the power of design?

Designers who want to take responsibility for the destructive side to their practice, and apply it at a larger-scale against unsustainable systems, can take advantage of other destructive events (see the special issue of *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, Van den Bergh 2013). A natural disaster for instance may actually destroy existing built environments. A financial crisis may require communities to relinquish ownership of some or all of their goods. At these moments, people are forced to experience very different kinds of existences. Expectations associated with existing infrastructures mediated through everyday devices can no longer be sustained. Routine practices become impossible, forcing exposure to other possibilities. What people must deal with in those situations is clearly far from preferable; one does not wish these disasters on anyone. But in the diminishing number of places where a social safety net still exists for such 'disasters,' these moments of unexpected, external, yet not total destruction create opportunities for the preferable to be trialled. People might be more open to lifestyles with fewer possessions, less electronic devices perhaps; or they may come to see the value of more diverse communities and tolerating dependence upon, perhaps even working to actively sustain, commons-based resources. These events need not be large-scale or permanent: extended blackouts during extreme weather events open people to desirability of shifts in their built environments.

In consumer theory, the less drastic version of these events is referred to as 'innovation junctions.' (De Wit et al. 2002; see also Cowan 1987) These can be significant life-stage events that require reorganizing everyday life: leaving home to go to university; geographic relocations as a result of a job, or a relationship; a religious conversion; a death or divorce; a lifestyle impacting illness or accident, etc. Market data analysts are desperate to identify these moments in people's lives as early as possible, if not to predict them, because within current consumer systems, they are moments when a slew of new purchases must be made: think of the re-equipping associated with starting to have children (and the 'destruction' of (sporting) equipment associated with the time-consuming leisure activities of the soon to be, no-longer-childless adult).

These occasional moments of household restructuring should be sites of intervention by the designer intent on being productively destructive. There should be a range of ready-to-try experiments in different ways of living – living labs (Scott et al. 2012) – specific to any of the more common 'innovation junctions': trying car-free living in the city of a new job before settling on a new home; enhancing the experience of cohousing at university so that graduates can continue the experience; receiving information about ways of breaking bad dietary habits along with information about a chronic condition diagnosis, etc.

### Critical (i.e., crisis-causing) design

If events that afford destructive restructuring of everyday life, whether larger-scale and external natural or financial disasters, or those that are part of life-stages transitions, are too infrequent to enable the amount of change our societies need to become more sustainable, then responsibility falls to the designer to try to foster such moments. The task of the designer is not merely to look for innovation junctions but to create their conditions of possibility. This means moving critique from a process that is internal to designing, after receiving a problem context from a project sponsor, for example, to something that is external to and prior to designing (Pel et al. 2016; Avelino 2017). To reconfigure design in this way, designers must be public intellectuals (Tonkinwise 2016), who creatively but forcefully criticize existing products and systems as well as the practices enabled by them.

Design education does not equip designers well for this role. Designers at best are taught how to present and perhaps defend their own ideas, but almost never how to conduct critique of others, especially in media ecologies outside of the studio. In many professional contexts, there seems to be some kind of code among designers against publicly criticizing the work of other designers. The defense of this proscription is often that ‘you cannot know the client-context that constrained that outcome’ – though this is exactly what should be ‘outed’ by critical debate around a design, so that judgments about responsibility can be made, and actions taken with respect to future projects.

Fomenting moments of crisis that make possible processes of destructive restructuring does not only involve argumentative criticism. Producing and circulating design propositions, especially if explicitly designed to stretch current notions of what is possible, can themselves solicit critical discourses. This was recognized at the very birth of modern industrial design with Raymond Loewy’s Most Advanced Yet Acceptable doctrine which extolled designers to produce explicitly radical designs ‘on spec’ in order to extend what clients would consider a safer yet still innovative design. The more recent version of this doctrine is ‘Speculative Critical Design.’ These idiotic propositions (in Isabelle Stengers’ sense – see Michael 2012) use the plausibility of designed artifacts to try to ‘assemble political publics.’ (Marres 2016) They gather people, it is claimed, because of their ambiguity. Current products and systems have the endowment-effect of being already existing shaken when these alternatives are materialized by Speculative Designers, even if not in viable-to-diffuse ways. Transition Management theorists are now appropriating a similar rhetoric of deconstruction to describe these ambivalence-generating events. (Walker & Shove 2007)

Being critical, whether in the explicit sense of verbal argumentation, or in the performative sense of speculative design, is not only something required in order to open up practices to destructive restructuring. It is also something needed throughout designing, and after. There is a survivalist drive to what currently exists – partly due to the network effects discussed above – which means that destruction will be resisted by the status quo. Innovation junctions therefore need to be defended, and held open. To defend design interventions that will displace current products and systems, designers and their allies need to maintain their criticality. This means that even after designing alternatives, designers must try to prevent reappropriation by aspects of current systems that remain in place. Sharing economy value propositions need to be structured into service provider owned cooperatives for instance, so that they do not get reappropriated by private equity and converted into transaction skimming exploitative Gig economies. (Scholz & Schneider 2016)

## De-progressing

Much of what needs destroying are current modes of living and working that are dominating what will come to be the future, thereby destroying our chance at more sustainable futures. These defuturing lifestyles and their artifacts (Fry 2009), infrastructures, practices and expectations, appear to us as 'modern,' 'progressive,' and 'future-oriented.' These characterizations make them difficult to criticize, and cast actions that seek to destroy them as extremist.

In addition to wanting to displace those ways of being that might be destructive of our sustainability, we need to displace the belief that 'there is no alternative' (Margaret Thatcher's famous neoliberalist slogan). These lifestyles are hegemonically entrenched by manifesting as the most (technologically) advanced ways of being. Their slickly designed currency moves them from an 'is' to an 'ought,' from what just happens to be the current manifestation of unsustainable capitalism to the best of all possible manifestations of techno-scientifically supported freedom. To free ourselves of these currently dominating ways of organizing our society, we have to destroy the perception of them as the latest and the best.

This means that the change affected by acts of creatively destructive design cannot in turn be cast as 'progress.' To do so might succeed in displacing the present with something more preferable. Yet, the governing ideal of progress will not have been destroyed. Rather it will persist, in turn entrenching in place a designed short-term future, just as it made the present resistant to structural change. Designers need to find a way to pursue the destructively preferable without casting the resulting change as progress: what is preferable are futures that no longer appear to be mere advancements of what currently exists. How is it possible to deny progress, or to prefer what does not feel like progress?

The simplest response to this paradox is to find aspects of past ways of living and working preferable; in other words, directly destroy idea(l)s of progress by reversing apparent developments and seeking to make things return to previous styles of product ecosystems, practices and expectations. Trying to recover lifestyles that have been destroyed by currently dominant individualistic consumerism or technologically advanced economies is itself an act of destruction of those 'innovations' that displaced them. The practices of Slow Food for instance aim to destroy the unsustainability of the Fast Food Industry by recovering local communities and crafts of food production. Walking buses, which arrange for groups of children to walk together to schools, also begin to destroy the over-expectations of safety that drive sales of 4WD vehicles. Something as simple as choosing a manual push-mower undermines not only the sale of polluting two-stroke lawn mowers, but also the suburban idea of large swathes of fertilized and pesticided lawn – because you tend to want less lawn, needing less frequent mowing, if you are the one who has to push the mower around (Fry 1992).

Critics of sustainability often recognize this with their alarmist assertions: 'do you want to destroy all the progress that capitalism-derived civilization has delivered by returning to less convenient social systems?' (Nordhaus & Shellenberger 2007) On the one hand, the answer is yes; what appears civilized is in fact unsustainable and destroying it is preferable, because doing so does not necessarily entail things getting worse. Obviously, the argument here is not to insist upon what is not preferable.

On the other hand, de-progressive design does not mean returning to how things were. It is first, not the entire lifeworld of a past that designers might seek to restore, only the more sustainable aspects. Second, the process of redesigning aspects of the past to re-take the place of the present that displaced them would entail reconfiguring those pasts; they would not



arrive in the same form as they were previously. Third, in most cases, what is being restored never entirely disappeared. It is the myth of progress that it happens evenly: if the future is already present in a dispersed manner as William Gibson is often quoted as saying, that is because the past persists in various ways and places.

I must now admit that this third point somewhat contradicts all that I have been arguing up this point. When a new design is taken up, it may not mean its complete destruction, just its marginalization. Products, practices and their associated expectations can remain the preferences of non-mainstream groups, or for only occasional avocational activities. Though destroyed as principal ways of organizing everyday living and working, they still exist as remnants that could be redesigned into preferability. This is precisely the argument Elizabeth Shove makes when thinking through the relation between destruction and transitions to preferable futures in her article 'The Shadowy Side of Innovation: Unmaking and Sustainability' (2012). Shove notes that as cities evolved, cars displaced cycling, destroying infrastructures and skills associated with the latter, but not entirely; cycling instead migrated into a leisure activity. The task of transitioning to more sustainable transport systems can therefore involve not disruptive technological innovation, but instead

situations of revival and reinvention . . . in which relevant forms of materiality and know-how already exist. Accordingly the challenge is one of rescuing, remembering and perhaps adapting but not generating competence from scratch. In such cases, relevant cohorts of lead users might turn out to be those who are least experimental in orientation, and who are in fact laggards doggedly clinging to old ways.

(p. 373)

Shove notes that such creative acts of recovery will still involve destructive tactics:

If lower carbon ways of life depend on reinstating arrangements that have been displaced by new more resource intensive forms, a further strategy is to deliberately dislodge these incoming regimes. . . . This might mean directly attacking systems of automobility, or figuring out how to unmake suburbia and suburban ways of life as a means of reinstating the bike.

(p. 373)

### Destroying what does not actually exist

Taking responsibility for the destroying that designing does can therefore involve seeking to undestroy. To do so is an act of world disclosure (Spinoza et al. 1997), of revealing that elements of past practice persist throughout the present in unacknowledged forms, that the key to sustainability is identifying practices that have in fact been sustained all along because they are precisely sustaining practices.

To put it another way, capitalism is an abstraction that presents itself as a totality when in fact everyday life involves a wide range of activities that are not capitalist in nature. Being critical of the unsustainable present, and designing toward non-progressive preferable futures, means finding and amplifying all the ways of being in the world that are persistently non-capitalist, that defy technological ratcheting of expectations around efficiency and comfort and instead entail everyday practices of sustainment (Fry 2003): localist systems of resourcing,

commons and shared resource use, ways of consuming time that are regenerative of ecosystem health and diversity. This is in essence Gibson-Graham's political position (2006); that post-capitalism lies in foregrounding the pre-capitalism that sustains in unacknowledged ways current formal economic systems. To 'Take Back the Economy' (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013) is to destroy progress by taking the economy back to prior but still persistent, preferable ways of organizing society.

In short, destructive designing that works to bring the non-progress-reinforcing preferable into existence entails, Bartleby, the Scrivener's retort, which became a by-line for the Occupy movement: 'I prefer not to.' I prefer not to have a future saturated with social media habits that empower the continued advertising of the unsustainable consumption; I prefer not to have car-based futures even if they are electric and autonomous; I prefer not to be dependent on global commodities and associated forms of employment. I am designing toward futures in which it is possible not to prefer all of those defuturing advancements, in which progress toward these kinds of futures no longer seems fated. I am designing the destruction of the necessity of finding progress preferable. I prefer to live with other kinds of futures, which also means some still existing pasts. I do so by redesigning what has been rendered less preferable. I design to restore practices that systems of bounded rationality have tried to destroy by casting as less preferable. I prefer what I am not supposed to prefer, and I use design to encourage others to join with me in designing only for those kinds of preferences.

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