

# Introduction

It is a commonplace to say that design is a holistic art, practice, or discipline. Yet, as design is increasingly presented and recognized as a unifying agent for systemic and cultural transformation, it is important to discriminate between unification via assimilation versus integration. In cultural studies, the distinction is significant: assimilation implies losing one's identity by becoming absorbed in the larger system in which one operates or participates whereas integration makes room for a person's individual cultural practices, values, and identity. In addition to how it changes, innovates, and liberates, as an approach and philosophy concerned with wholes, design also preserves, sustains, and conserves. As it shapes the all-encompassing "wholes" in our lives, how can design actively ensure that the individual parts and voices within those wholes feel uncompromisingly fierce and empowered? In what ways can design reduce assimilation and increase integration?

Many articles in this issue of *Design Issues* use the metaphor of weaving to illustrate how design is a way to integrate, not assimilate, the various parts of the world into a meaningful whole. Manuhua Barcham's opening article introduces the idea of pluriversal ontological design using the practical case of river management in New Zealand. When the Whanganui River was granted the same legal rights as a human being and, therefore, acknowledged as an ancestor for the Ngāti Hori people, there was an opening within the social fabric to introduce and legitimize a different way of being in the world. Barcham shares about the role of design in the practical activities of governance work, goal setting, and introducing the idea of the decolonial imaginary, which provides "a critical apparatus for enabling an ontological design that includes the experiences and voices of those whose ways of knowing and being have been devalued or diminished through the expansion of modernity/coloniality."

Picking up on the weaving thread, Lauren Downing Peters presents another case—within the world of fashion and apparel design—where a social system of norms and values have traditionally approached inclusion through assimilation and not integration. Though the idea of "plus-size" seems to include the possibility and aesthetics of "fat clothes," it ultimately perpetuates the "precepts of

slenderizing and figure flattery.” Peters traces fat studies scholarship in the context of and parallel to disability studies and suggests how the two might be allied to form an alternative *ethos* of inclusivity. She presents a framework of fat clothes containing “anti-assimilationist” design principles that can enable multiple modes of being and embodiment.

The next article by Rodrigo Najar extends the practical examples of Barcham and Peters into a more theoretical realm. Using the writings of Michel Foucault, Najar describes how power relations shape truths and history. This is relevant for design because the problems available to or sought out by designers can often be interpreted as historical constructions molded by power dynamics. For example, consider a fairly recent article in *Fast Company* that describes the popular “how might we” (HMW) problem-framing prompt used by many designers as insidious and fraught with hidden biases. It illustrates Najar’s hypothesis in a real and concrete way. Instead of inadvertently strengthening dominant discourses through assimilation, Najar presents design as a way to “subvert or weaken dominant discourse, or give rise to other discursive formations.”

The next two articles are written with a view toward information systems as social technologies. Design as a means for holistic integration can take place in two ways. First, Merlijn Smits, Geke Ludden, Ruben Peters, Sebastian Bredie, Harry van Goor, and Peter-Paul Verbeek call attention to technologies that influence the “behavior, experiences, and even moral frameworks of their users.” Their proposal for a Values that Matter (VtM) methodology makes integration of values an explicit requirements-gathering step (i.e., collecting user needs) in the participatory design process. Second, John Meluso, Susan Johnson, and James Bagrow present the idea of information systems as flexible hybrid collaborative environments. They recognize the promise of virtual participation: a unity that brings work, workers, teams, and an entire organization together. They also recognize that a simplistic notion of participation can lead “minorities... to assimilate into dominant forms and [is] not likely [to] create unity.” Instead of building a narrow kind of “organizational flexibility at the expense of workers,” design can be used to “co-create personalized work systems” that are widely flexible and ultimately empower individuals.

The final two articles elaborate on the theme of information systems by anchoring our understanding of agency and the dynamic creations of designers in a (socio)material world. In a review article, Mikael Wiberg presents a continuum of transitions to organize and

make sense of the pervasive “things” and artifacts in our lives. In the first shift, the analogue or “traditional physical object”—what Wiberg suggests has hitherto been the preoccupation of design—is integrated into computational and “invisible” things; in the second shift, the things in our lives are increasingly networked, interconnected, and interrelated; in the third and final shift, there are “fluid assemblages” where “interconnected things can trigger other things.” Naturally, the rise of new material creations that “weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life” makes new demands of designers, and Wiberg’s recommendation is to turn to a more relational or processual approach to dealing with things. Lastly, Ruth Neubauer proposes a framework that makes design agency more visible through the material shaping of ideas. She, too, invokes the metaphor of weaving. Building on the concept of “artful integrations” coined by Lucy Suchman, Neubauer introduces the idea of “configuring artifacts,” or imaginaries made of material-idea relations that create new material-idea configurations. The agency of a designer’s ideas, defined as “their capacity to effect change,” hinges on the strength of the “material relations of these imaginaries.”

The three reviews at the end of the issue describe challenges to shaping holistic integration and participation when there is omission or diminution of a design *ethos*. The first is by Wesley Goatley on Johanna Drucker’s recent book. Drucker expands on her previously made argument about data visualization design as a value-driven act of interpretation, different from the “neutral,” data-free argument made by others such as Edward Tufte. According to Goatley, Drucker here provides a more focused analysis of critical perspectives, including a poignant example of what happens when there is the absence of data or representation. Next, Dennis Doordan reviews Bill Gates’s new book about climate disaster and ways to avoid it. The thrust of Doordan’s argument is that works like that of Gates create a real challenge to the social narrative of design in the ongoing work around sustainability and wellbeing (as well as scientific education and policy shaping). While technology, invention, and innovation are recognized as having a major role in building a healthier and more sustainable future, “design is missing in action.” Finally, among the many issues raised in Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch’s new anthology on the politics of craft, D Wood highlights the last essay of the book, which concludes with a conversation among black artists about “what constitutes craft and who identifies as a craftsperson.” The lack of integration in contemporary craftmaking and craft communities of certain people marks an opportunity to fill in a historical void and gap.

On the whole, the articles of this issue question the range of unquestioned systems that persist in and around our lives. By doing so, they begin to introduce a critical lens to systems, which then draws attention to certain issues. Attention then invites engagement and action. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, design has become and continues to develop as a force for integrative action in society and in our lives.

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