

Design Studies in Crisis: A (Too Late?) Conversation with Cameron Tonkinwise

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Luke **Professor Cameron Tonkinwise is a design studies scholar who teaches service design and design theory. Cameron has long advocated for the field of design studies and its importance in ensuring the social responsibility of design professionals. His expertise has reshaped traditional thinking around how designers should be educated, and he has established design studies programmes at Parsons School of Design (The New School, NYC), Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), among others, that have transformed international design curricula. He has written a number of influential articles on design thinking, design ethics, design research, and speculative design.**

More recently, Cameron has emerged as a leading voice in the field of transition design through his long-standing research and teaching around sustainable design. Transition design aims to provide designers with ways of contributing to social systems change towards more equitably sustainable ways of living. Cameron helped develop transition design with Terry Irwin and Gideon Kossoff while working at CMU a decade ago. When he returned to UTS, he directed its Design Innovation Research Centre, bringing transition design approaches to the organisation-specific design challenges of research partners in financial services and the energy sector.

Cameron is currently involved with research projects bringing speculative product design to scenario planning distributed energy systems and investigating shared cooling practices in the face of extreme heat events. Cameron is also reworking his design philosophy essays from the last twenty years into a book for Bloomsbury entitled *How Designing Happens*, expected 2026.

This interview was conducted by email between 7 November 2024 and 18 March 2025. What follows is an edited version of the original email conversation.

Luke Back in 2023, I participated in an online symposium that you organised titled 'Design Studies in Crisis'. I was interested to join in, but I had never worked anywhere that offered anything called design studies. Initially I was keen to figure out what it was exactly, but also I was attracted to the 'in crisis' part. Because I have realised over recent years that much of what I have enjoyed about graphic design education is also perhaps in crisis. Could I ask you to get things started here by briefly describing what design studies is, and why you think it is in crisis?

Cameron Most design schools teach design through studios. Designing is something you learn by doing it. Studio classes involve problem-based learning; carefully 'scaffolded' projects that allow students to progressively learn a range of the techniques involved in designing. The briefs for these classes might specify particular contexts that students have to learn about in order to respond appropriately, but it is not really the intent of a studio class that students develop comprehensive knowledge about this or that domain; that just happens to be where the motivating design task is situated—though it is obviously good if they pick up a few things.

There are other ways of teaching design, or other aspects to designing that can, and perhaps should, be taught by means other than studios. And these non-studio-based classes might be good for ensuring students have more than scattered knowledge about the contexts they might go on to work in as designers. These are what I mean by 'design studies'.

There are, to my mind, three kinds of things that design studies might be concerned with. The first is 'knowledge about different kinds of designing'. You can know how to design in a particular way without knowing much about other ways of designing. Design practitioners are often a bit defiant about their expert 'know-how' being 'tacit', by which they mean—as Michael Polanyi famously put it—'we know more than we can tell'.¹ I take this to mean that they have not been taught how to articulate their expertise. Their studio-based education often does not equip them well enough to explain clearly how designing works and why. By, for example, comparing it to other ways of making things, or making decisions about forms of experiences, etc., design studies subjects that are more 'about design' than 'how-to design', give

designers language, concepts, models, theories, even histories, that can help them critically defend certain ways of designing. (It's worth remembering that most university education in other professions is 'studies' based. A law degree is 'legal studies'; afterwards you learn how to lawyer; similarly for 'education studies' vs being a teacher, 'medical studies' vs nursing, or doctoring or surgery-ing, etc.)

The second thing is 'knowledge about the domains in which you get to design'. A good designer will research every context they design in/for/with, but if they are going to design professionally—more in some areas of society than others—it would be good if they had a more comprehensive working knowledge of those places, people, and processes. Design studies subjects (or papers) are often moments in the curriculum in which students are being given introductions to, surveys of, or critical evaluations of certain aspects of society. Or to put it another way, because design studies subjects are not centred around design problems that aim to build particular skills, they are able to be wider or deeper or more conceptual or knowledge-oriented than a studio. (This kind of design studies is often also called [material/visual] cultural studies, or [science and] technology studies, etc.)

The third version of design studies is particular to North America, where universities are regulated to ensure that there is some breadth to what undergraduates learn. So, profession-oriented programmes like design are required to give 25 percent of their degrees to liberal arts subjects. These are supposed to have nothing to do with the profession that a student is studying, and in some ways, they are supposed to be not-at-all commercialisable—they should be knowledge-for-knowledge's sake, or avocational skills—though 'critical thinking', which is the catchall defence for the liberal arts, is perhaps halfway between the two. (Because the 'history of design' does not really help you sell design services, these subjects, though about design, generally get taught in liberal arts units, often by art historians.)

Design studies is then, for me, a way of asking, what should a well-educated designer know in addition to whatever it is that they know how to do? What aspects of the world, including design itself, should designers know about? The history and limits and potential of what kinds of things?

For example, if you have trained as an interaction designer, how much demonstrable knowledge should you have of the history of social computing, the field of media studies, psychologies of addiction, sociologies of misinformation, the economics of tech startup financing, etc.?

The crisis is, in my experience, that there is diminishing space in degree programme curricula for teaching these sorts of critical 'design studies'. For example, in Australia, higher education is funded by a (conservative, but unrepealed by the current centre-left) government policy called 'Job Ready Graduates'. It charges students more and gives universities less for subjects classified as 'society and culture', compared to skills-oriented classes such as studios. So universities have a financial incentive to reduce the amount of design studies they teach. The progressive response is to try to bury the teaching of design studies knowledges in studios, but that often requires having a design studies scholar in the studio alongside a more practice-oriented studio leader, thereby increasing the cost. Instead, we graduate designers who know less and less about the world they are responsible for designing (in). The class that my institution used to mandate all designers take in 'Social Media Cultures' has, for example, been displaced by a university-wide industry-partnered collaborative innovation subject.

Luke The situation you're describing in Australia is similar to what's happening here in NZ too. We just don't have a pithily titled government policy to justify it quite so clearly. Not yet anyway. Although this year (2025) our current right-wing coalition government set up a new 'University Advisory Group' (UAG), which has been charged with reassessing the purpose of universities with a focus on productivity and economic growth. Business NZ, a powerful free enterprise advocate organisation, has made a submission to the UAG stating that, among other things, universities should not be able to run their own course approval and audit processes. I find this counter-intuitive—even the fact that a group like Business NZ has any say at all—because I grew up in a world where universities were places where you went to learn to think differently, and where 'business-as-usual' was to be scrutinised, critiqued, and reimaged. In fact that notion is still somewhat

1. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Doubleday, 1966; repr. University of Chicago Press, 2009).

enshrined in NZ legislation by way of the Education Act of 1989, which mandates that all universities 'accept a role as critic and conscience of society'.

I've recently discovered that this act was repealed and replaced by the 'Education and Training Act' in 2020, but they left that bit in. Although the introduction of the word 'Training' to the title maps accurately onto my experience working in universities here for the last twenty years now, where I have watched these institutions move away from that role of critic and conscience, towards becoming vocational training grounds (traditionally the role of the polytechnic here in NZ) wherein the primary focus is the reproduction of status quo skills for obedient workers. Your 'Job Ready Graduates'.

I'm interested to know more about what you think about the relationship between industry and academia? My perspective on this is that industry is the source (and/or symptom) of many of the so-called 'wicked problems' we face today, and so why would we let these same industries drive/influence our institutions of higher learning and research? I understand your work in the field of transition design sees you working on both sides of this equation. How does that work? And how is academia—my 'critic and conscience' version of it anyway—not totally compromised by this relationship?

Cameron I think one way of thinking about what is going on here is a 'division of labour'; who is best placed to do what? A state sets rules for a group of people and has the power to enforce those rules. This can be thought of as the negative space of a society: legislators specify what cannot be done and police punish those who do not obey those restrictions. What people do within those limits is not specified. They live by exchanging goods and services on the market, and that system is supposed to need no guidance.

But the modern nation state has additional objectives around enhancing how those people live. This is often cast as a wider commitment to progress, improving absolute well-being, but it is also motivated by competition with other nation states, whether by economic or direct conflict (though the 'improving' is not only technological in capacity, but can also be concerned with 'hearts and minds'). To do this improving, you need people

dedicated to what we now call researching and teaching; that is, coming up with new ideas, and advising those in power or disseminating those ideas to society. The problem is that the knowledge these experts are focused on might lead them to challenge those with power.

The modern university was established so that the state could control these 'professionals' by licensing their activities. Immanuel Kant set out a model for the modern university that promised to critically guide the practices of lawyers, doctors, and priests in ways that would not challenge the authority of the King of Prussia.² Importantly, that critical guidance in Kant's schema comes from philosophy. This is the 'studies' side of any higher education, the part that thinks about why we are teaching professionals to do this or that, or studying ways that those professionals might practice, especially with a view to what is happening in other professions and in a society's future.

So now we have (a) those in power, (b) the market, and (c) the university as a space between those other two providing guidance to both. But increasingly the university is subsumed into the market. Rather than maintaining a critical distance in order to study where things are heading—so as to work out how to redirect what professionals are learning in response—the university is just training students how to be of most value to current markets.

There's a couple of contrasting problems with this. The first is that it undermines the need for learning fundamentals or situating contexts. Schools teach the basics across a range of subjects—not only for employment, but also for being a citizen, and even living a good life. But all that employers need of university graduates is that they can do the tasks businesses need them to perform right now. It can even be an obstacle when graduates know more than the minimum skills. For example, there is no need, in terms of being 'job-ready', for a technologist or even a doctor to know any history, even about prior technologies or medical treatments; they just need to know how to do what is now considered the latest.

Even if universities were only serving the needs of the market, you would hope that they were teaching toward the near-future (at least). After all, their graduates only enter the job market after a few years, and might only become independent contributors to the companies that employ them

after a decade or so. But the dominant view these days is that university researchers and teachers should not try to anticipate those near-future needs. Things are apparently changing so quickly, and as a result of such amazing disruptions, prediction is useless. And if anyone knows where things are heading, it is the businesses themselves rather than out-of-touch universities.

And this leads to the second problem, the market tells the universities to make sure that their graduates are—in addition to being well-trained for right now—super-flexible, and so ready to surf whatever changes may come. And the best way to cultivate that innovative flexibility? Do 'work integrated learning', or 'industry partnered creative challenges'. In my institution 'wicked problems' are not prompts for critical contextual study, but the briefs for 'design thinking' collaborative sprints overseen by 'change management experts' from businesses and business-like not-for-profits.

This, by the way, points to how non-sensical it is. Universities are marketised, but never completely. Surely the best way to be job-ready—in terms of the skills needed right now, and in the face of change/innovation that will inevitably come—is to learn on the job; so apprenticeships, and workplace training, etc. But businesses don't want to wear those costs. They want to outsource making people employable to universities. This is like saying that if I run a restaurant, I want most of the food prep done for me by a university. As government subsidies for universities reduce, the cost of that 'food prep' passes to students themselves in terms of tuition fees. A degree is a way of proving to a company that you have paid out of your own pocket to be of value to them and how they make money.

Design is interesting in terms of all this. It's not an actual profession—there is no government-enforced licensing. So anyone can call themselves a designer and the market—clients who are prepared to pay for that person's services—is the only test of that claim. On the other hand, there is no central set of skills that amount to what it means to be a designer. You need a range of techniques in the different fields of design, but designing is always context specific. To design, in the market, means being able to explore contexts, their pasts and futures, and innovate rather than just adapt to change. This is precisely why all the other professions get those graduating into them

to do 'design thinking' challenges to make them more flexible. But this means that if you are going to be an expert at guiding society by design, your education must not just be in how to design, but also in the study of how designing happens in such a society: an expansive and critical design studies alongside practical studios.

Luke This conversation feels timely right now, because just after I sent my last email to you, our Minister for Science, Innovation, and Technology (Judith Collins) announced that New Zealand's largest contestable research fund, The Marsden Fund, would no longer support humanities and social sciences. This is of course due to the right-wing perception that these subjects don't contribute to the economy in any useful way. Just after this, I noticed a post you had commented on on LinkedIn. The original post was by Paul Egglestone from FASTLab, and he is reiterating a similar argument about why Australian universities should prioritise creative industries over the humanities. I'd like to quote the first part of your comment on this post:

Should the mission of a university be alignment [...] with contemporary economic, societal, and political trends? Societies can also be well-served by having time and spaces protected from those trends, environments of learning that resist alignment, spaces of critique, organisations and activities that aim to be deliberately untimely. What is lost when the humanities is reduced to or displaced by prioritising what can be 'easily adapted to the evolving job market'?

What you said there really resonated with our situation here obviously. And a whole swathe of researchers and academics from both sides of the sciences/arts divide have come out saying as much.

I'm interested in where design sits in all this. The way I think about design it comfortably fits into the humanities and social sciences, but Paul Egglestone's post reminded me that the 'creative industries' is what I should be interested in. If I want to keep my job that is. That term/category makes me cringe though, because it puts an obviously neoliberal spin on something I understand as a social/cultural practice.

2. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798; repr. University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

I would love to know what you think about the 'creative industries'? Over thirty years ago now Richard Buchanan was interested in design as 'a way of thinking' that was different to both the sciences and the arts.³ Is the creative industries what he was after?

Cameron There's a lot in these questions, a terrifying amount given that the situation you reference seems part of an ongoing war against contextual (let alone critical) thinking. A situation that puts immense pressure, especially time pressure, on any answers. For me, the war is not just explicit defunding of anything not job-ready/STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), but the wider decline of rigour in societal information distribution systems, with venues for investigative journalism disappearing, and the flood of engagement-obsessed 'influencers' filling the vacuum. I have said, utopianly, on several occasions that newspapers should be owned and run by universities—if the latter are independent of market forces.

As you note, there is a long tradition of people proposing that design should be considered the domain in which C. P. Snow's 'two cultures'—science and the humanities—finally succeed in communicating with each other.⁴ This is a big claim in a pretty confused space. Design is usually classified as one of the 'useful' or applied arts, though it has conceptual components that differentiate it from other technical domains. The applied arts are distinct from the fine arts—making beautiful, but not directly useful things—but both are about making things rather than interpreting them, which is the focus, supposedly, of the liberal arts. However, within the latter, there are acts of communication that can be creative—not just poetry (the word derived from the Ancient Greek word for making), but also rhetoric, which does aim to make artful use of language. When Buchanan argued that design is a new liberal art, he was following the argument of his doctoral adviser (Richard McKeon) that modern technologies can be considered forms of rhetoric insofar as rhetoric is the art of persuading people to live in particular ways.

There is the other side of the argument, that design concerns what could and should be. So it is not a 'science of what is' (experimentally uncovering facts), but a 'science of the artificial' as Herbert

Simon dubbed it.⁵ For someone like Bruno Latour, this means that design is just the obverse of science: it experiments to see what can be made to be a fact (the Latin origins of that word refer to making), by (socially) constructing a new product or practice into the world. Science from this perspective looks a lot like design: creative leaps to hypotheses that are then strength tested in labs.

All this historical jargon is relevant to where, and so how, designers get educated. Design, as an applied art, is often the embarrassing, because commercial, side gig of fine arts schools. Or design, as soft-skill techniques, is the embarrassing, because artistic, side gig of engineering schools. (Recently, research universities with long-standing architecture schools have also started to cash-in, embarrassedly, with non-architectural design programmes; design thinking or UX, teaching that doesn't need expensive studio spaces.) If design is an art, the emphasis is on creativity ('only be new') and learning through making ('practice-based research'). If design is a science, the emphasis is on principles (e.g., human factors) and research methods (e.g., user testing).

These are tired debates rendered obsolete by things like digital humanities, media studies, multi-modal learning, and ideas of 'post-normal science'—which refers to societies making decisions about the risks of technoscientific developments, like climate change or so-called AI.

I prefer coming at the question another way: what do we think designers need to know? For example, what kind of education would have better prepared UX designers working over the last thirty years in terms of online abuse, dis/misinformation, scamming, digital device addictions, oligarchic tech company owner wealth, etc.? Would the subjects/papers adequate to those challenges look and feel like the humanities, the social sciences, or creative experiments?

This gets us back to design studies and the question of 'creative industries'. One of the ironies of our current situation is that it could be up to design to save the humanities. Humanities folk have been mostly unsuccessful at defending their value—to administrators, all-powerful industry captains, and enrolling students. Their arguments about knowledge for its own sake, or for the purposes of making well-rounded citizens, or even critical thinking, have not worked. But 'newer' arts like design desperately need

to be teaching things that make designers more critical and well-rounded professionals. Design studies can welcome humanities educators made redundant in their own disciplines, so long as humanities types are not disdainful of working with, not only makers, but commercial makers.

This gets to the real issue. What those UX designers really need to be educated about is business. Not in the job-ready sense of being able to talk value-propositions and so get 'a seat at the table', but in the critical sense of understanding the history of capitalism and the current financialisation drivers that are enshittifying (to use Cory Doctorow's term⁶) everything, in addition to refusing action to minimise climate change or reduce inequality, etc. McKeon was perhaps wrong; the current rhetoric structuring the world is profit. And C. P. Snow was wrong; what lies between science and the humanities but understands neither is profit. Designers to date also have not understood profit, but they are better positioned to have a critical understanding of profit because, in the end there is no escaping that value ultimately depends on some things being useful—on things working well enough to make it possible to work, and shop, and invest, etc. This is getting arcane but the point here lies in the difference between 'use value', which is an actual value, and 'exchange value', which is just the game the market plays on top of that actual value.

If design is the art and science of making the useful, of creating things (communications, environments) that prove valuable because of the new activities they enable, then designers have a special insight into value creation. They should be able to therefore have a critical perspective on how the value they create gets 'captured' by profit-maximising businesses. But this isn't how design (studios) are taught. We badly need design studies subjects/papers that help designers see that they are the key to creating values that could resist capitalism.

However, such subjects/papers could not be 'industry-partnered'. Though about business, jobs, and the economy, such subjects/papers need to be spaces and times in which it is possible to think critically about these three things. This is what I meant by my comment on Egglestone's endorsement of 'creative industries'.

I really loathe the idea of the 'creative industries'. At the most pragmatic level, the phrase

refers to creative practices that can sell their output; film, theatre, visual arts, literature, etc. The first thing here is that 'creativity' that cannot be industrialised does not count. The second thing is that design and architecture initially do not fit because though they sell their output, the value of what is sold lies beyond what might be creative about it: products and communications and environments that have a use value, whether or not they are perceived as 'creative'. The last and most significant thing I hate about the notion of 'creative industries' is that one of the key things that all of us need to understand, especially designers in terms of developing a critical understanding of profit, is 'industry'. What does it mean for something to function at scale? Why is standardisation, reproduction, automation so central to business? How do people come to accept repetitive jobs, or uniform products and lifestyles? But what no-one ever thinks should be part of a 'creative industries' faculty/education is a thorough and critical interrogation of industry in relation to contemporary profiteering. It is so infuriating that the term gets close to what is needed, but is ultimately just a miscellany of 'can we sell tickets to it—actually we'd prefer a subscription'.

Luke You have reminded me of something that came up right towards the end of the Design Studies in Crisis symposium. Things were winding up, from memory, and someone had started saying that they thought designers need to know a lot more about business. I remember cringing and beginning to tune out assuming I knew what was coming next, but then you said something that really stuck out and stayed with me. You said that yes they should learn about business and that they should start with Karl Marx. It was at once hilarious and provocative. And maybe one of the seeds for my wanting to do this interview with you.

There have been a few books come out recently authored by contemporary graphic designers grappling with the practices' inextricable links to capitalism. *Caps Lock* by Ruben Pater (2021), *Design after Capitalism* by Matthew Wizinsky (2022), and *What Design Can't Do* by Silvio Lorusso (2024). The books all respond to a seemingly pervasive dilemma designers find themselves in, whereby they love the work but passionately hate the motivating context the work exists in, or for.

3. Richard Buchanan, 'Wicked Problems in Design Thinking', *Design Issues* 8, no. 2 (1992): 5–21.

4. Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959; repr. Cambridge University Press, 2012).

5. Herbert A. Simon, *The Sciences of The Artificial*, 3rd ed. (MIT Press, 1996).

6. Cory Doctorow, *Enshittification: Why Everything Suddenly Got Worse and What to Do About It* (MCD, 2025).

You say that designers need a critical understanding of profit, and of industry, and books like these seem to suggest there is a growing interest in exactly this. How do you see this kind of work/study being done though? Especially inside universities where criticality is being actively disabled. Playing devil's advocate for a moment, how would teaching students this stuff not just be totally depressing for them? Students need to have some sense of optimism and agency when they graduate. I think?

Cameron I'm reminded of the social media post (attributed to @alexblechman) that was doing the rounds:

Sci-Fi Author: In my book I invented the Torment Nexus as a cautionary tale.

Tech Company: At long last, we have created the Torment Nexus from classic sci-fi novel *Don't Create The Torment Nexus*.

(In fact, this point is equally applicable to a lot of 'design fiction' which mistakenly thinks it is being critical about what it is in fact enabling via a 'Streisand Effect'.)

So, yes, I think that one of the answers to the question, 'what should designers learn (about) other than (how to) design?', is Marx. Or rather, the key aspects of the capitalist way of organising societies. And *why* is exactly what I think is the important argument here.

The liberal arts version of the answer is: designers should know something about society in general—civics—so that they can be informed citizens. Reading (around) Marx to understand capitalist systems is outside design, but relevant insofar as designers are people who vote (if living in a functioning democracy).

The more instrumental version of the answer is: designers need sponsorship to design things, and right now the sponsors are capitalists, so if you want a seat at the table to pitch your design idea, you better be able to business-speak. Reading (around) Marx is outside design, but essential for designers winning the chance to design (what they want to design) in the current system.

This instrumental version can be idealist ('designers, become [business] leaders'), realist ('you have no choice'), cynical ('here's the MBA jargon they use'), or even critical ('hack the business code to change the system from within'). It is rarely actual resistance ('so here are collective action tactics that can obstruct and even overthrow the rentier class'). The books that you mention seem to me somewhere between the cynical and critical, but unfortunately not 'actual resistance'.

Part of the problem is that there are two errors that plague a lot of anti-capitalism. The first is the 'ism'. A lot of critical discourse tends to turn capitalism into a totalising all-powerful abstraction—as if 'capitalism' is what is oppressing us, rather than people with the inclination to exploit their access to capital to increase their capital. The people who 'bogey man' capitalism tends to belittle as naive are those attempting to sustain alternatives, such as people trying to use design to support social innovation or hasten and direct transitions.

I am fond of the Gibson-Graham argument that part of the power of capitalism is its ability to make itself seem more all-encompassing than it is.⁷ Their suggestion is to audit the amount of time you spend in wage labour or shopping, compared to the amount of time you spend in 'community economies', commons, government-owned infrastructure, local clubs and associations, or doing favours for friends and family. As David Graeber often pointed out, base-level sociality is communist, or more accurately, reciprocal altruism—if someone stops you on a street to ask for help moving something, you do not start negotiating a price for your help.

The second error is, however, the reverse: a not substantial enough account of capitalism. People who make this mistake tend to be talking about consumerism, or shopping addictions. They think that buying-less, or at least buying-better, is an act of resistance—that we just need to spend our money at small local shops and service providers—or imagine that corporations can be ethical, purpose-driven, or responsible. They might even imagine that there should be social enterprises that use 'making money' to 'do good'. This tends to miss the capital side of capitalism, or rather the lack-of-capital side; that is, someone with little choice but to sell their labour to businesses. It also tends to miss the ontological design side: that we get entrained by

the material setup of the systems we use. Which means property, growth, and competition tend to override any other more 'social' values. This does not happen because capitalism is an evil force; it happens because the design of how things get made and distributed enables, and so promotes, certain ways of being in the world. If you want to resist you have to (transition) design other values into being. To paraphrase Bruno Latour, designs are social values made durable.

When I said that designers should learn Marx, I think what I meant was a third thing, different from the liberal arts or instrumental rationale. Marx is, I reckon, directly relevant to designing. Marx's account of how and why we make things is not adjacent to design, helping designers have more agency with their business clients or bosses; it's an account of how designing happens. Designers are the bridge between something's more tangible use value—giving things form that makes them useful—and something's less tangible exchange value—its price, in the sense of supply and demand, as well as the costs of exploited resources and externalised social and ecological impacts, but also its symbolic value (aesthetics, brand, aura, etc.). Marx does not use the word (in reference to the modern profession of form-giving), but the account of 'work' (which Hannah Arendt characterises as the making of semi-permanent things, as opposed to 'labour', which for Arendt are those activities that you almost have to start doing again as soon as they are finished: making meals, cleaning, child-, elder- and health-care, etc.) is essential for designers to understand. Marx teaches designers that, at least in industrial economies, they are the base level creators of value.

When a product designer makes a chair, a business makes money selling the chair, but the designed use value of the chair will always exceed the value that that business can extract from selling the chair—as can be seen by the fact that the chair put on the street during a household chuck-out continues to offer seating long after anyone is able to re-sell it.

Consider all the crazy things you used to see in an 'Innovations' catalogue, or a designer shop, but even in a 'two dollar shop' or the likes of Daiso. Everything in there has been designed, and almost everything is junk. Meaning the products are never of enough value to warrant the natural and human

resources exploited to realise them. But, for most of those things, you can also see that there is some tiny amount of usefulness, sometimes even amusing cleverness. The extreme version of this is Chindōgu—things that are obviously useless, yet never entirely. To me this means that no matter how much you think capitalism is an evil force with magical marketing powers to make us want to enslave ourselves to earn enough cash to buy crap we do not need, that whole system still needs someone somewhere to perceive a micro-pain-point and 'wish-it-be-gone' (Elaine Scarry's beautiful phrase⁸) by what they creatively design. Designers need to understand that they are the foundational value creators to every aspect of the economy. This does not mean that they have agency over that power—for that, you still need acts of collective resistance. Reading (around) Marx just might give designers both insights.

I could give one other example. The relatively new field of service design, when it is not subsumed into digital transformation UX (which Scandinavians interestingly call 'design for self-service') or the experience design rubbish that is 'end-to-end branding', is still dominated by talk of 'customer-centredness'. But the 'material' of service designing is service workers. Service designers are designing 'work'; specifying not just what a service worker has to do all day, in service of 'customers', but how. Bringing service workers into the picture here—so that service design is understood more symmetrically, and not just from a 'customer-centred' perspective—is a quite Marxist thing to do. The outcome, as with Chindōgu, is attention to how value is being created when designers design service interactions. They are designing how to facilitate strangers collaborating with each other, how to help customers help service workers help them. This is a much more political because relational, but also, I think creative, way to approach service design. So, it would be great if every service designer had taken a course in Marx, or David Graeber, instead of just a six-week bootcamp in service blueprinting.

In both of these cases, I hope I've answered your last question—that I see in these 'anthropology of value' perspectives like Marx, nothing depressing (because capitalism is not monolithic—it's just rich people we could refuse to work for or buy from), but in fact something really rich; a set of social, creative challenges for design, ways of seeing how

7. David Bollier, 'Katherine Gibson and the Community Economies Research Network', Resilience, accessed 27 August 2025.

8. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

fundamental designers are, or at least can be, if they also begin to design resistant values into new kinds of products, environments, and services.

Luke I like the sound of this 'new kinds of things with resistant values designed into them', and I am wondering if you have any more specific examples in mind? I'm guessing it would be easier to think of examples in the realm of service design than in, say, graphic or communication design?

I'd love to pick up (and maybe wrap up?) on the point you make about 'designing other values into being'. It sounds romantic at first, but also resonates with an experience I had a few years ago when I curated an exhibition of lathe-cut records.⁹ These were 'low-fi' audio records cut into polycarbonate discs, in very small runs, by a guy called Peter King here in the South Island of NZ. They had been kind of popular with (purposefully) unpopular bands and artists throughout the 1990s. I'd started the research looking into (mostly) private archives out of an interest in the types of cover art, packaging, and design that had developed around these unusual objects. But by the end, and a bit too late really, what I realised was actually interesting was how, seen together, these records revealed a quite functional alternative to the mainstream music industry. I mean, I sort of knew this already, but seeing it at scale, in the exhibition, made it feel more real. More possible. And more political. A 'cottage industry' to be sure, and one functioning through more of a gift economy than anything else, but then no one making these records was in it for the money. Obviously.

That was the first thing I thought of when I read 'designing other values into being'. Although maybe it's worth pointing out that no one who had work in this exhibition would have called themselves a 'designer'. I'd almost say it is a body of work that exists *below* the level of design. It seems significant to me, again in hindsight, that professional designers were not involved in this. Because generally I think of design, done or conceived of 'professionally', as being re-active rather than pro-active.

I'm certain you're going to make me feel like an idiot for saying that for some reason? But it's one of the big problems I have with the idea that design, or designers, have any real agency in a larger sense. Because (most) designers don't generally get to choose or decide what they design. Or even, much

of the time, how they design. Designers might have the best intentions in the world, but they are, at the end of the day, hired guns. I'm guessing that will sound naïve and/or cynical to you? Maybe both?

Cameron I think there are two sides to 'designing new values into things'; the first of which is your 'romantic' low-fi example. It reminded me that there is a deliberately perverted version of sustainability, and communism, which suggests that those of us extolling these principles want everybody to have impoverished lives. 'We' want a future of fewer things, either to save 'the environment' or because everybody should be sharing everything. (More concerning to my mind are the 'leftists' who buy into this projection by countering with visions of 'luxury communism' that seem to forget about the ecological impact of their 'accelerationism'.) The slightly positive but to my mind still unattractive version of this vision imposed onto eco-socialists is a future in which we are spending our lives sitting around self-satisfyingly talking about our values and not doing much else.

I remember a contrarian book about consumerism that pointed out that the problem wasn't too much materialism, but not enough: we do not love our stuff enough, which is why we just cycle through it.¹⁰ One of my favourite examples is Mikko Jalas's doctoral dissertation from twenty years ago that was about time-use perspectives on sustainability, and specifically Finnish wooden boat building.¹¹ One of the arguments was that, though this activity has a certain materials intensity, it contributes to societal sustainability by using up time that would otherwise be spent on more consumerist activities (also travel), or work in the productivist system behind all that consumption (and travel). People spending more time on dilettantish unproductive material practices is what degrowth means. A more equitably sustainable society is one filled with (to use Ezio Manzini's mantra) small, local, open, and connected initiatives like Slow Cities.¹²

Certainly, the nature of these small-scale and time-consuming activities lends them to committed people not needing professional design's focus on efficiency and effectivity, mostly via standardisation. So, they tend to be characterised these days as 'arts and crafts' with all the range of commitments those terms imply, from avocational

amateurs to highly skilled artisans. The political project is, however, to attract more people to these kinds of activities. The 'transition design' task is to work with committed people to develop tools, guides and support frameworks that might help the not-so-or at least would-be-committed to find a way in. Designing these kinds of things, which would afford people ways into practices with different values from those that dominate consumerism and work in the consumerist ecosystem, is a delicate task. You want to make the practice more available without simplifying it, certainly not automating it. You want to provide easier ways into practices whose very value lies in their not being so easy. There will always be a risk with this kind of designing, of betraying the cultural values of what the designs intend to afford access to.

I remember being at a Sharing Economy conference in NYC around 2011 or 2012 and hearing Janelle Orsi, who founded the Sustainable Economies Law Center, a not-for-profit that provides legal guidance to community enterprises. I was extolling how designers could help cooperatives by creating digital platforms for collective decision-making. Orsi interrupted and said, 'be careful—you might find those meetings painful, but for many in those cooperatives, the work of those meetings is what makes the cooperative feel like a cooperative to them'. You must have felt that tension when lending design to small-run music pressings and designing that world up into exhibitable form. The Orsi story points to the kind of designing that is not just the design of products for fostering time-consuming practices.

When you asked about communication design versions of this kind of designing, I was thinking about how I just finished reading Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents*, the follow-up to her *Parable of the Sower*. Embarrassingly, I had not read Butler before, and these books, written in the 1990s and set in 2025 and 2035, are unnervingly portentous. When I finished the second, I desperately wanted to know more about the book, its writing and reception, Butler, etc. I could web search, join some subreddit, but without much quality control. I was thinking how easy it would be to design the e-book to have the kind of extras that used to come with DVDs, to provide alongside the e-book a range of interesting extension material. Instead, e-book design for the most part remains just bare and awful.

While there is clearly a strong (bourgeois) demand for what I am talking about—see the endless number of writers festivals and book author podcasts, etc.—we do not get what the form of e-books affords because there must not be enough money in that to warrant designing it; better to get readers to just move on to the next book, rather than help them make a community out of interpreting and debating the book they just read. Reading, at the level of its communication design, remains productised consumerism rather than being valued by e-book design, as a social practice.

This is the second point I wanted to make. The values that designers could be helping design into existence might be new pleasures like wooden boat building. But they could also just be anything that is not profit-oriented business.

A couple of years ago, I did a project for a big bank researching how to prevent older people from non-English speaking communities falling for investment scams. Our research indicated that a key problem was people making financial decisions on their own; older men not wealthy enough to have financial advisors would receive a 'tip' on some money-making scheme in their own language, and then act on it out of greed or patriarchy or just because they had no-one to ask. We wanted to try to build onto existing strong cultural community connections, some way for people to discuss these 'opportunities' before making any decisions. This would be quite a challenge socially, in terms of getting people to talk about money, but we felt like there were ways of service designing these kinds of conversations into existence. We envisaged that a consequence would be, over time, more communal approaches to money management—people pooling their investments to benefit together—technically challenging in terms of financial data sharing, but possible. Someone could begin to work on this kind of 'transition design', creating platforms and processes that could, in this case, change values-as-practiced around money itself. The system impacts of that would be way beyond just scam prevention.

There are many more interesting examples, but this is the kind of 'designing value change' that could be done—except that there are no paying clients because the long-term intent would be to undermine the value proposition of financial planners and their institutions.

9. *A Short Run: A Selection of New Zealand Lathe Cut Records*, Objectspace, Auckland, 19 October–30 November 2019.

10. James Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (Columbia University Press, 2000).

11. Mikko Jalas, *Busy, Wise and Idle Time: A Study of The Temporalities of Consumption in the Environmental Debate* (Helsinki School of Economics, 2006).

12. Ezio Manzini, 'The New Way of the Future: Small, Local, Open and Connected', *Social Space* (2011): 100–105.

So what to do then, as you ask at the end of your question? My current utopian answer is collective action. This should be explicit and conspiratorial. The explicit version mostly has to do with saying 'no'. If a client asks for something—a deceptively patterned UX design for example—designers need to risk their livelihood to refuse, but also tell their design colleagues that this particular client is asking for something that they should also refuse, if not collectively 'whistleblow' about.

The conspiratorial version is designers working in secret alliances to begin to create opportunities for transition designs. One scenario could be when a design firm is pushing a client toward more equitable and/or sustainable options but then meets resistance, so they arrange with colleague designers to stage something that might convince the client; for example, Bank A 'learns' that Bank B is starting to do what Bank A just refused to do so now embraces it, perhaps even vowing to go further. This kind of conspiring might require careful breaking of non-disclosure agreements, but the point here is for designers to take risks to win agency to change values away from what those agreements are trying to lock in.

Luke I ended the interview here, thinking I could write some sort of concluding statement from Cameron's provocative suggestion that designers might need to engage in conspiracy and subterfuge if they are to have any real agency in the world. I like that sort of stuff.¹³ But so many significant things have happened in the world of higher education in the last four months—including at the institution Cameron currently works at (UTS)—that I decided to go back to him for a sort of a 'coda', to both update and conclude our conversation.

Coda [7 August 2025]

Cameron I feel like things have changed rapidly since we exchanged a few months ago—or else, I think things were changing in ways I had not sufficiently noticed. Two related things in particular make me feel like much of what I was putting to you was misdirected if not already obsolete.

The first is the imminent major restructure of the Anglosphere university sector. And I say Anglosphere, because universities in non-English-speaking countries seem much less impacted. It seems that half of the universities in the UK are bankrupt, and half of the universities in Australia are in the middle of significant job losses (my institution is planning, with the help of KPMG, to sack 250 professional staff and 150 academics). Elite universities in the US are being subjected to a protection racket by the Trump regime and conservative state legislators are doing the same to their land grant universities. I do not understand what is happening in your part of the world but what I glimpse seems halfway between the UK and US situations. Despite these 'crises', there are no higher education policies let alone visions for the sector by in-power Anglosphere governments at the moment. The causes of the sectoral collapse seem to be the convergence of:

1. the predictable consequence of corporatising university management, which has pursued quality-destroying bigness in all respects to justify their bloated pay packets
2. the de-internationalisation of the world, manifesting as reactionary anti-immigration in 'already developed' countries and de-linking in 'newly developed' countries (so educating their own students)
3. the anti-intellectualism of a significant proportion of people believing social media conspiracies and disparaging 'elites'
4. excessive investment in so-called artificial intelligence pre-emptively spooking perceptions of jobs, training, and research.

These are all widely discussed, but I have been surprised that they are not being thought together. I wish I had the capacity and ability to do that.

The second is more relevant to design. Our discussion began by trying to draw attention to the seeming diminishment of 'design studies' in design education. I have recently started to worry about a wider issue.

The management at my university recently decided to merge the Faculty of Design, Architecture, and Building with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. This was initially done under the aegis of a Creative Industries Strategy, but when faculty members 'consulted' *against* that dated idea, the university proceeded with the merger even though the new 'mega faculty' had no name (i.e., no rationale other than administrative 'efficiency'). At some point, leadership suggested it be called 'The Faculty of Design', since 'we are all designers'. My colleagues in the School of Design were concerned that this would mean the erasure of the School of Design with its specialist design degree programmes (in Fashion, Product, and Visual Communication Design). We have since learned that Queensland University of Technology is moving to a more generic design degree rather than practice-specific degree programmes. And the Australian National University's restructure proposal will bring Art, Design, and Music into one programme.

Why might this be happening? Clearly, this second issue is mixed up in the first. Specialist design degree programmes are (somewhat) expensive to deliver because you need studio classes with fewer students and you need specialist equipment and/or dedicated space for project work. Filling out a 'creative practice' degree programme with more generic content classes would be more 'efficient'.

Another explanation is that this is 'design thinking' bedding down to finally displace most of the *actual* designing. While all that innovation theatre seems to have lost its commercial lustre, the idea that there are ways of thinking common to all designers, distinct from their material differences, warrants making the teaching of those ways of thinking the core aspect of creative practice degrees. The obverse of this is the disparagement of craft as a commitment to particularised quality. Good design, it is claimed, is a universal style; everything should look the same; the value is in the

content not the form; so teach creative problem-solving and outsource production to reproducing machines.

In a wider context, this is interdisciplinarity bedding down to displace many disciplines. But it is easiest to do with practices like design precisely because designers are not actual professionals, with professional associations controlling their qualifications. Ex-consultancy managers in charge of universities can dictate what counts as the 'creative industries' because it is not in fact an industry with some tight constraints or fixed requirements.

I had not anticipated this turn in design education. It is going to be hard to defend specialist design practices because we will have to be defending changing practices. Design studies in the North American sense—naming a field of studies concerned with any and all design—might ironically become more important, but certainly not as a field of critical inquiry, and only at the expense of hard-won material skills.

13. Cameron's remarks here reminded me of something I'd written for *The National Grid* #3 in 2007. 'Counterfeit Design: A Tactical Approach' was an essay about a graphic designer from Tāmaki Makaurau who had been sentenced to four years in jail for counterfeiting various official documents. This is not what Cameron is talking about obviously, but it's not a million miles away. I had been interested in the case as an example of a graphic designer employing their craft in a politically radical and subversive way, which was (almost) successful, precisely because it was so mundane. Hiding in plain sight, as Sarah Maxey might say.