Chapter 5

Flourish(ing) by design?

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The word 'flourish', like the word 'design', is both a noun and a verb. As a verb, flourish means to grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way (especially as the result of a particularly congenial environment); develop rapidly and successfully; be working at the height of one's career during a specified period. Flourish as a noun means a bold or extravagant gesture or action, made especially to attract attention; an elaborate rhetorical or literary expression; an impressive and successful act or period.

The etymology of the word flourish[1] c. 1300 (as a verb) is '*to blossom, grow*' from the Old French *floriss-*, stem of *florir* '*to blossom, flower, bloom; prosper, flourish*' and similarly from Latin *florere* '*to bloom, blossom, flower*'; figuratively '*to flourish, be prosperous*'.

Interestingly, in the 1550s, flourish (as a noun) takes on the meaning '*an ostentatious waving of a weapon*' and from c. 1600 '*excessive literary or rhetorical embellishment*' in reference to decorative curves in penmanship as '*a fanfare of trumpets*' c. 1650.

Design as a noun refers to a plan or drawing produced to show the look and function or workings of something before it is made; the art or action of conceiving of and producing a plan or drawing of something before it is made; the arrangement of the features of an artefact, as produced from following a plan or drawing; a decorative pattern; purpose or planning that exists behind an action, fact, or object. As a verb, design means to decide upon the look and functioning of (a building, garment, or other object), by making a detailed drawing of it; do or plan (something) with a specific purpose in mind.

The etymology of design[2] (as a noun) from the 1580s means '*a scheme or plan in the mind*' from the French *desseign, desseing* meaning '*purpose, project, design*' from the verb in French, especially '*an intention to act in some particular way*' often to do something harmful or illegal. Earlier, in the 1630s, the artistic sense of the word 'design' was taken into French as *dessin* from the Italian *disegno*, from *disegnare* '*to mark out*' from the Latin *designare* '*mark out, devise, choose, designate, appoint*', which is also the source of the English verb. The general (non-scheming) meaning '*a plan or outline*' is from the 1590s, '*the practical application of artistic principles*' is from the 1630s, and '*artistic details that go to make up an edifice, artistic creation, or decorative work*' is from the 1640s.

Design (as a verb) originates from the late-14th-century meaning '*to make, shape*' from the Latin *designare* '*mark out, point out; devise; choose, designate, appoint*'. The Italian verb *disegnare* (16th century) developed the senses '*to contrive, plot, intend*' and '*to draw, paint, embroider etc.*' French took both these senses from Italian, in different forms, and passed them on to English, which uses *design* in all senses.

So to flourish involves growth, development, and success, the very same outcomes that many design projects set out to achieve. As such, one might argue that a key aim of design and designing (be that a new product, service, system, space, or strategy) is to flourish—in an economic, social, cultural, and/or environmental sense. Flourishing in this world, however, is not achieved by dealing with these things in isolation. A nation's economic development, for example, cannot and should not come at the expense of its people's health and well-being. Nor should it harm the planet's natural environment and resources. Gordon Brown, ex-prime minister of the United Kingdom, stated in a speech on climate change in 2005:

> If our economies are to flourish, if global poverty is to be banished, and if the wellbeing of the world's people enhanced—not just in this generation but in succeeding generations—we must make sure we take care of the natural environment and resources on which our economic activity depends.
>
> (Full text: Gordon Brown's Speech on Climate Change, 2005)

In essence, Brown is suggesting that we, as designers and design researchers, strive to achieve a harmonious and sustainable balance between our natural environment and resources and our economic development. In a design context, this challenge is not new. Designers and researchers such as Victor Papanek, Donella Meadows, Dieter Rams, and others have acknowledged the significant impact of their work and the responsibility of balancing economic development with the health and well-being of people and the planet. In recent years, Papanek's primary argument around design's responsibility has become central to many designers' ethical stance in the design, production, and consumption of products, systems, and services. The notion of 'responsibility' has been embraced by many contemporary design researchers and practitioners working towards positive social and environmental outcomes, which is acknowledged explicitly in three of Dieter Rams' 10 Principles for Good Design (Lovell, 2011):[3]

• Good design is long-lasting—it avoids being fashionable and therefore never appears antiquated. Unlike fashionable design, it lasts many years—even in today's throwaway society.
• Good design is environmentally friendly—nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance. Care and accuracy in the design process must show respect towards the user(s). Design makes an important contribution to the preservation of the environment. It conserves resources and minimises physical and visual pollution throughout the life cycle of the product.

- Good design is as little design as possible—less, but better, because it con-
  centrates on the essential aspects, and the products are not burdened with
  non-essentials. Back to purity, back to simplicity.

More recently, however, Arturo Escobar's critical questioning of Papanek's 'Real
World' highlights a lack of representation of all experiences of reality and all
worlds. Escobar proposes a decolonial and pluriversal approach instead, one that
designs for many worlds rather than the usual one world of the Global North
(Escobar, 2018).

From another perspective, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, founder of the renowned
'Radio Alice' in Bologna and an important figure of the Italian Autonomia
Movement, points out that the endless thirst for economic growth and profit and
the denial of our planetary limits makes us extremely tired (Berardi, 2011). Berardi
believes that for our future world to flourish, it will not be driven by energy but by
slowness, reminding us that we were first advised of the finite physical resources
of the planet when the Club of Rome commissioned the book *The Limits to
Growth* over 50 years ago (Meadows *et al.*, 1972).

Today, we witness a world that is seriously unprepared to deal with the
mounting crises we face because we have based our ways of life on the iden-
tification of energy and goods; have an overriding obsession with accumula-
tion, property, and greed; and strive for continual growth, expansion, and social
well-being. For example, currently in the United Kingdom, 300,000 households
could be forced into homelessness because of the rising cost of living and the
ongoing economic and social impacts of the COVID pandemic (Crisis UK, 2023).
Also, pollution and pollution-related deaths are increasing; we see rising levels of
poor mental health, workplace discrimination, depression, and high suicide rates
(particularly amongst young men); significant increases in violent crime and hate
crime have been reported in the aftermath of the Brexit vote; and sustainability
and transformation plans (STP) designed to make improvements to health and
social care across the UK will actually mean a loss of services.[4]

But if we were to contemplate a creative consciousness of slowness, as
Berardi proposes, the current crises and other issues may mark the beginning of
a massive abandonment of competition, consumerist drive, and dependence on
work and help address our contemporary malaise.

In their book *Slow Wonder: Letters on Imagination and Education* (2022),
Peter O'Connor and Claudia Rozas Gómez develop Berardi's concept of slow-
ness further by proposing creative alternatives to current orthodoxies that priv-
ilege technocratic approaches to education, which, they claim, have strangled
discussion about what it might mean to make education good and right or even
beautiful. O'Connor and Rozas Gómez posit the imagination as a powerful site of
resistance within education and other walks of life through marrying the poetic
and the academic, the rational and the affective, to model a slow approach to
wondering about the joy, beauty, and possibilities of life. In so doing, they con-
template new ways for us to think (design) and live.

Returning once more to Papanek, this year (2023) sees the 100-year anniver-
sary of the birth of the Austrian-born American designer and educator who became

a leading advocate of socially and ecologically responsible design. Papanek's book *Design for the Real World*, originally published in 1971, has been translated into more than 24 languages and has sustained its impact among design scholars and researchers all over the world. Papanek's radical ideas on design and his global approach to educational and other issues at the time was a fresh shift away from the existing design movements of the 1960s and '70s—a time of significant individual self-expression and personal emancipation. Papanek perceived design as an object or system, specifically as a political tool and how it might directly affect people, society, and the environment. He considered much of what was being designed and manufactured to be inconvenient, often frivolous and thoughtless (Papanek, 2019).

As we face a series of interrelated global crises of climate emergency and serious public health issues, financial inequalities and challenges to democratic processes across the world, the need for designers and design researchers to develop impactful interventions takes on ever greater importance. This does not mean we overlook important qualities such as care, responsibility, and rigour but that we are wary of economic-driven quick wins and of doing things in a rush solely for a fast profit. Currently, we inhabit a world (at least from a UK perspective) that cannot be described as flourishing—in an economic or environmental sense, nor in a health and well-being or a political or any other sense. Indeed, Adam Smith, the revered Scottish economist and philosopher, wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776): "No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable" (Smith, 2014).

So the call is for design researchers to take the lead on impactful interventions where our purpose and focus is on caring for life rather than on extraction, consumption, and production. If we are to flourish in the future, we need to privilege 'Earth Care' where an ethics of care for humans applies to all-of-life design. Stephanie Carleklev describes this as a careful theory of design(ing) that "has fewer answers and embraces the life we care for in a rather inconsistent, inaccurate and unpredictable manner" (2021, pp. 244–245).

What is needed, then, is a repurposing of design to focus on innovative ways and methods that open up new possibilities for our lived experiences and imaginations. New ways forward that advance the understanding of design from the perspective of social responsibility. Ways that support design as an innovative and creative practice that can transform communities and societies and enhance human well-being. Perhaps a caring theory of design that seeks to make a difference in the world, bringing greater care to what we look to design and make. As Jen Archer-Martin writes, "a caring theory of design is an embodied, living practice of caring for, about, with and through design" (2021, pp. 220–221). New designed ways forward that help us flourish collectively and not at the expense of any group or individual nor at the expense of any more-than-human entity. This is **the** challenge facing us all.

Notes

1 Online Etymology Dictionary. *Flourish entry*. See www.etymonline.com/
2 Online Etymology Dictionary. *Design entry*. See www.etymonline.com/search?q=design

3   Dieter Rams. *Ten principles for good design*. See https://readymag.com/shuffle/dieter-rams/?
    gclid=EAIaIQobChMI39DE5o_5_AIVCZntCh1fOw0-EAAYASAAEgLmn_D_BwE

4   Grayling. See https://grayling.com/news-and-views/a_look_at_the_biggest_social_issues_
    facing_the_uk/

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