Chapter 19.

# Undesigning: Design at the end of the world

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**Biography:**

Allan Parsons was born in Glasgow and grew up in Scotland. For most of his professional career he has been based in London, UK. He has a BA and an MPhil from Middlesex University where he studied design practice with particular emphasis on its philosophical aspects. For many years he worked as an external research consultant for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) attached to the Secretary General's Advisory Unit on Multidisciplinary Issues' long-term futures programme. He taught on the theory strand of the MA Narrative Environments design course at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London and took part in developing communities of learning for the advancement of pedagogic practice in the digital age at the University of Westminster (https://ceti.westminster.ac.uk/ouilearn/). Currently, he is a Visiting Professor at the China Academy of Art. He maintains an ongoing academic website on topics related to design practice, design history and design contexts at Incomplete (https://incompletion.org/).

**Abstract**

It is argued that the issue of homelessness and housing stress is both a challenge *for* design practices and a challenge *to* them. Design practices are not autonomous but they do not necessarily conform to the situation in which they find themselves. They have potential, as a practice of bricolage, to intervene and alter ongoing contextualising practices and therefore change the situation, whether for the better remains a question only answered over time. The situation in which the issue of homelessness and housing stress arises is theorised as an immersive, historical narrative environment: ongoing processes of world-making that, initially understood, articulate a (post-modern?) neoliberal moment. However, that moment is further understood to encode the perduring legacies of modernity: liberalism, colonialism and enslavement. The implications for design practices in understanding homelessness and housing stress in this complex

situation, while responding appropriately to alter our understanding of world building as dwelling and inhabitation of the Earth, are explored. The value of an affirmative (non-catastrophic, non-apocalyptic) approach to worldlessness for designing for *Homefullness* is proposed.

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**Intractableness**

In this chapter, it is argued that the issue of homelessness and housing stress presents both a challenge *for* design practices and a challenge *to* them. This double challenge calls for a topical understanding of the issue of homelessness and housing stress; while presenting an opportunity for a reflexive self-understanding and evaluation of the situation of design in the contemporary world, one that takes into account its historicity, its actuality and its potentiality.

The issue of homelessness and housing stress, in its seeming intractability, is, like other societal issues, a wicked problem. Wicked problems are unique problems for which there is no definite formulation, as stakeholders cannot agree on the definition; proposed solutions are not true or false but better or worse; and resolutions are numerous and, when implemented, change the formulation of the problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Ritchey (2013) comments that wicked problems are not actually 'problems' in the sense of having well defined and stable problem statements because they are too messy, which is why they have also been called messes (Ackoff, 1974) and social messes (Horn, 2018).

The wicked problem of homelessness and housing stress has not arisen simply because the housing system is broken. Rather, it has arisen because the neoliberalisation of the environment, pervaded by expert systems, is working well, if evaluated on its own terms. In this situation, it may become necessary, as Silvio Lorusso (2023b) suggests, to accept the blurring of the distinction between design, conceived to be all about order, and bricolage, which addresses the dis-ordered and dis-orderly mess with which it is confronted, while not seeking to reduce that seeming chaos to a single, simple, designed, rational solution. For this reason, design practices, as bricolage, may be a valuable response to the issue of homelessness and housing stress because, as Don Norman (cited in Lorusso, 2023a, p.102) argues, although perhaps

overstating the contrast and exaggerating the positive and negative capabilities of designers, ‘the trouble with experts is that they know too much and they think the same way other experts think. Designers, on the other hand, know nothing, they ask stupid questions, and that’s exactly why they’re brilliant’.

Lorusso contends that, ‘the designer is … a bricoleur – a person who makes do with what they find, in the conditions in which they find themselves.’ (Lorusso, 2023a, p. 288). This underscores Schön’s (1983, p.76) systematisation of the design process which distils its underlying principle as being, ‘a reflective conversation with the situation’. Design practices, given these premisses, cannot promise a (permanent) solution to the issue of homelessness and housing stress, in the form of a finished or completed design outcome, but rather they can advocate situated, improvised, provisional resolutions on a path which may be considered more socially and environmentally just but which nevertheless will remain contested and contestable as part of an ongoing societal dialogue or rather multilogue. As Lorusso (2023a) points out, design practices are not autonomous but they are not without agency or a degree of self-determination. Designing has served dominant interests in the past, but this does not mean that it inevitably will always do so.

**Unhousedness**

What, then, is the situation with respect to the issue of homelessness and housing, the conditions in which designers find themselves and to which they are to respond?

Slayton (2021) reports that activists and housing advocates have begun to use the term unhoused or houseless instead of homeless. Being homeless is primarily interpreted as being houseless: not having a fixed or permanent abode, a regular, and adequate night-time residence. The term homeless, he argues, has become inseparable from a toxic, moralistic narrative that blames and demonises people who are unhoused. Slayton argues that shelter should not be conflated with housing. He notes that both the terms homeless and unhoused can seem to suggest that a house in itself is a solution. However, housing needs to be accompanied by supportive services, from mental health and medical care to social work.

*Homefullness* connotes an environment greater than housing. More focus, he suggests, needs to be paid to root causes producing the situation rather than the people struggling.

As Tom Slater (2012) notes, the early 21st century has been a lean time for proponents of affordable housing, protections against displacement and valuing housing not as a commodity but rather as a source of basic need satisfaction upon which people crucially depend. This situation has arisen, in part, because housing has become one of, if not the, major vehicle of capital accumulation, the nexus in which productive capital (the material economy) and financial capital (the speculative economy) have become fused (Soules, 2021). The financial crisis of 2008, involving as it did the failure of speculative investment in housing-related projects, clearly demonstrated the degree of this (con)fusion.

However, Soules (2021) concludes that, while the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression made explicit the problems of positioning buildings at the centre of speculative financial markets, no significant change has occurred. Furthermore, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have not significantly altered the long-term trajectory: for example, Australia reverted to the path of its pre-2020 housing market which sharpened the wealth divide between property owners and renters, contributing significantly to the country's growing wealth inequality (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). Indeed, as Tian (2025) reports, decades of government policies in Australia have commercialised property ownership, so that the ideal of owning a home, once seen as a right in Australia, has turned into an investment opportunity. The situation is similar in Spain: Jaime Palomera of the Barcelona Urban Research Institute is quoted as saying, 'The rich have got richer since the financial crash in 2008 and the Covid crisis and they have used this wealth to buy more and more property, constantly driving up prices and increasing inequality' (Burgen, 2025).

Slater, Soules, Tian and Palomera bring to attention the double economic status of housing. It is at once a financial asset (a commodity) that is part of a speculative or fictitious financial economy (Harvey, 2001); and a non-fictitious, material entity that provides people with shelter and home as part of a material, productive (service and industrial) economy.

This brings into clear focus the two different kinds of interest in housing: home as dwelling-place, a locus of intimacy and trust, where sentiment and space intersect, which serves as a base from which people

pursue their emotional and material needs; and a site through which investors' and property developers' speculative financial interests passes, a process whereby speculative capital ceases to be fictitious and becomes realised to the degree that it brings about profitable transformations in the productive economy by running through the whole cycle of money being transformed into commodities and back into the original money plus profits (Harvey, 2001). Soules (2021) argues that housing has become the primary medium through which finance actualizes itself.

However, Harvey cautions, performing this transformation relies on a set of expectations which are socially constructed. People have to believe that wealth, that is, mutual funds, pensions, hedge funds, bonds, mortgages, stocks and shares, government debt, and so on, will continue to grow in value indefinitely. These expectations are secured through a work of persuasion that falls to the state and the media. A tremendous ideological battle is necessary, Harvey argues, to maintain confidence in this system, in which the activity of the state is vital.

As far back as the 1980s, Marcuse (1986) warned that the larger question related to urban housing is not whether and how abandonment can be avoided, gentrification controlled and displacement eliminated but rather whether there is the desire to tackle those issues, a question that can only be answered in the political arena. The political question, then, concerns the feasibility of de-commodifying housing, implying radical change in the organisation of the economy, by bringing the processes of financialisation under control through more stringent state regulation.

These goals (de-commodification and regulation) come into conflict with the agenda of neoliberalisation, which emphasises: the individual, as property-holding economic agent; the prioritisation of the financial, fictitious economy over the material economy of social and environmental justice and human needs; society as a collection of individuals with their own self-interest; and a minimal state that does not interfere significantly in the operation of the financial economy. Although neoliberal thought is complex and fractured, Philip Mirowski (2009) argues that two of the main features that hold this thought collective together are that under neoliberalism everything, including politics, becomes fair game for marketisation; and that the market, suitably reengineered and promoted, can always provide solutions to problems seemingly caused by the market in the first place (Gane, 2012).

In respect of this situation, Wizinsky (2022, p.143) comments that, ‘if design is capable of initiating social change in ways both large and small, it has to think and act ideologically. It must acknowledge the situation, determine alternatives, and make pathways to achieve them’.

**Situatedness**

The foregoing narrative is one way of understanding the situation of homelessness and housing stress. How might that narrative be theorised to see more clearly what the range of possible design interventions into the situation might be?

As a starting point, let us take the work of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, Rector of Karlsruhe University of Art and Design in 2001-2015, whose theory of situations may allow us to configure an understanding of where to intervene in housing as a site of axiological contestation among different interest groups.

Sloterdijk (2011, p.107), in developing his notion of dwelling in terms of a theory of situations, defines situations as ‘forms of coexistence of someone with someone and something in something’. He suggests that building villages, towns, cities, nations and empires**,** as examples of world building, expand upon an initial architectonic practice of developing sheltering as housing. Although at different scales, they are all immersive, environing techniques, or narrative environments (Austin, 2020; Parsons, 2009), that encode socio-economic and cultural histories as material and practical legacies, inheritances and traditions.

In the situation depicted in the previous section, there are several someones co-existing with one another, notably speculative investors, house owners, second house owners, short- and long-term renters, the displaced and the unhoused. The something with which they co-exist is the house or material dwelling. The something in which they co-exist is a housing or property market, defined increasingly since the 1980s in neoliberal and speculative financial terms. Neoliberalism frames the situation as a particular immersive, historical, narrative environment.

Each of the above-mentioned someones has a different interest in the situation, some to sustain it, others to change it. When neoliberals look at the flow of goods, capital, people and ideas across countries, they perceive it in terms of potential mutual benefits, ignoring any accompanying competition and exploitation (Harari, 2025). In this way, differences among the interest groups are resolved hegemonically in favour of the investors, as dominant grouping who benefit most.

Given this narrative, it might seem that the sites for design intervention, as bricolage, lie in working with the (neo)liberal market while seeking to restore some of the obscured republican values on which liberalism relies. Thus, the market needs to be re-designed to eliminate such undesirable negative 'externalities' as unaffordability, displacement and homelessness. This is the realm of the application of design thinking in policy making, as advocated by, for example, Buuren, Lewis & Peters (2023), aligned with practical design interventions that focus on restoring the commons for the public, the *res publica*, thereby providing the environmental affordances that support civic and community development. This suggests such approaches as critical design (Bowen, 2010), participatory design (Smith *et al.* (eds), 2025), speculative design (Dunne & Raby, 2013) and co-design (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

Although valuable, the danger for such approaches is that, by remaining within a post-modern phenomenological mode of world building, framed by a neoliberal immersive, historical, narrative environment, design interventions may reproduce or indeed exacerbate the social and environmental injustices they sought to solve because, 'neoliberal finance capital appears to run on the very values of phenomenological world-formation' (Vegso, 2020, p.9).

**Darkness**

What if we change the framing narrative, to alter the immersive, historical, narrative environment? How does it alter our understanding of dwelling and inhabitation?

This is a question with which Elizabeth Povinelli (2021), Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, engages. Povinelli suggests that the emergence of the Western liberal epistemological, ontological and axiological hierarchies that we have inherited can be found in the violent history of colonisation and slavery. Making their contingent historicity explicit enables us to intervene in ongoing historical development, to engage with the persistent legacies of colonial power. In this way, we have to acknowledge that we live in 'a modern/colonial world system' (Mignolo, 2001), with coloniality being the darker side of Western modernity (Mignolo, 2011). Thus, for Povinelli, the purpose of altering the framing narrative which orders the accompanying sub-narratives is: to change the historical horizon and to dramatise what is at stake politically and ethically; and to enable us to recognise what is foregrounded and what is occluded by the narrative's focalisation. Povinelli suggests that contemporary critical theoretical discourse suffers from a moral and a political failing by adopting a Western-centric focalisation on modernity, as enlightenment, while ignoring that of coloniality, as its dark side.

Revising the Sloterdijkian conception of the situation, we may now perceive, not only competing-co-operating (neo)liberal individual subjects as the someones, co-existing with housing, and the something in which they dwell as a neoliberal market economy, but also colonising settler subjects and colonised subaltern subjects co-existing with the territorial structures that order the world in which the legacies of colonialism actively perdure.

In this way, according to Vazquez (2017, p.82), the contours of the anthropocentric Anthropocene become visible, reflecting, 'not just the traces of human life on earth, but also the impact of a particularly modern/colonial way of living on earth and of worlding the world'.

In addition to the approaches already mentioned in the previous section, the design interventions here might seem most obviously to be decolonising design practices and the design curriculum, as recommended by, for example, Vazquez (2017) and Tunstall (2023). This call may be interpreted as a return to indigeneity attached to the land. As Tunstall puts it in a chapter heading: 'Decolonizing Design Means Putting Indigenous First.' Alternatively, Vazquez (2017, p.78) states, 'Decolonizing design, then, brings us to a three-folded path: to understand modernity's way of worlding the world as artifice, as earthlessness; to understand coloniality's way of unworlding the world, of annihilating relational worlds; and to think of the decolonial as a form of radical hope for an ethical life with earth'.

**Blackness**

While Povinelli and Mignolo focus on the duality of modernity/coloniality, the strain of thought within Black Studies identified as Afropessimism focuses on enslavement, the other founding violence of modernity mentioned by Povinelli: its blackness. Afropessimism, draws attention to the relation and the disjunction between racial slavery and settler colonialism in the development of global modernity. During the 1980s, the term Afropessimism expressed the view that Black Africa was politically corrupt and poorly equipped for economic development. In the 2010s, Frank Wilderson (2010, 2020), Professor of African American studies at the University of California, Irvine, re-defined Afropessimism in terms of the ontology, epistemology and axiology of enslavement, emphasising the tenacity, perdurance and radical character of anti-blackness not only in the USA but, Wilderson contends, across the modern world.

By borrowing and integrating several discursive tropes, wretchedness from Franz Fanon, social death from Orlando Patterson, flesh from Hortense Spillers and afterlife of slavery from Saidya Hartman (1997), Wilderson's Afropessimism updates, revises, and unsettles how we think about blackness and its relationship to humanity, existence, politics and the world as a whole (Winters, 2019). For example, Jared Sexton (2011, pp. 6-7) points to this radical dispossession by posing the question of, 'what is the nature of a human being whose human being is put into question radically and by definition, a human being whose being human raises the question of being human at all?' The ontological abjection of slave existence is not primarily defined by alienation and exploitation, that is, a suffering due to the perceived loss of one's humanity, but by the condition of being owned and traded, of having one's being reduced to a being-for-the-captor (Aarons, 2016). It is this abjection that persists into the modern/colonial, neoliberalising world.

In terms of revising the Sloterdijkian conceptualisation of situation which we are pursuing, what Afropessimism brings to the fore is the co-existence of someone (the colonising liberal human subject), and someone (the colonised subaltern human subject) and something (the non-human human object-subject) in something (the world, structured in dominance in the anthropocentric Anthropocene, as neoliberal, modern/colonial, geo-economic and geo-political global order).

Wilderson stresses that Afropessimism is not concerned with reforming the world, since this would leave untouched the metaphysics of the Human that underpins it: a modern world which legitimises violence against black bodies. What Afropessimism wants is *the end* of this world because it is this world itself that is unethical and needs to be undone (Zalloua, 2021, p. 548).

**Worldlessness**

In design philosophical terms, what Afropessimism brings to attention is the paradoxes of worldlessness: the existence of the non-human human, and indeed the non-human living being and the non-human being, who is by definition worldless because being-in-the-world is what is said to constitute human being. Although the term worldlessness is resoundingly negative, Roland Vegso (2020, p.3) poses the question: what if our task today, as world builders or as designers, is 'precisely to imagine worldlessness without an apocalypse?' Worldlessness, Vegso argues, is a double paradox that emerges in the mid-20th century with the Heideggerian encounter with the problem.

As Vegso explains, for Heidegger the world is originary and constitutive. Nevertheless, his work is infused with a moral panic concerning the loss of this world. Heidegger repeatedly argues that we are threatened by the spectre of worldlessness in the age of modernity.

Even so, Vegso continues, Heidegger also argues that, because modernity threatens us with worldlessness, our historical goal is to overcome modernity. What this acknowledges yet dissimulates is that beyond modernity we find exactly the worldlessness that this philosophy was supposed to protect us from. The task of overcoming modern worldlessness once again exposes us to worldlessness of a more fundamental ontological kind.

In this situation, *Homefullness*, to be achieved in part through design practices, must address the paradox or aporia outlined by Sexton (2016). Abolition of slavery goes beyond the restoration of the sovereignty

of the human being treated as non-human. It also goes beyond the restoration of a lost commons through radical redistribution, such that everyone has access to everything.

In Sexton's (2016, p. 593) logic, 'if the indigenous relation to land precedes and exceeds any regime of property, then the slave's inhabitation of the earth precedes and exceeds any prior relation to land.' To this landlessness, the correlate is selflessness. There is no ground for subjective identity and no land (home) to inhabit.

For Sexton (2016, p. 593), 'This is not a politics of despair brought about by a failure to lament a loss, because it is not rooted in hope of winning. The flesh of the earth demands it: the landless inhabitation of selfless existence.' In other words, the earth demands worldlessness.

**Designlessness**

The task for design practices, then, in the 21st century is to engage with the paradoxes of the situation in which they find themselves. It must take into account worldlessness in non-apocalyptic and non-catastrophic terms. This requires undesigning the worldliness of existing designs for world building. As Vegso (2020) emphasises, worldlessness is not a pathology; pathologies are ways of dealing with worldlessness. Zalloua (2021, p. 548) expresses it as follows: what is being called to an end is, 'the phantasmatic idea that we all belong to some organic whole – let's call it humanity or world, or simply humanist world'.

One implication of these arguments is that, once design practices are recognised to be implicit in the human, that we become human by design (Fry, 2012), co-evolving with what we have designed, they are susceptible to the criticisms of Afropessimism. It is therefore not simply a question of re-designing design, as suggested by Williams (2022), as this leaves design implicit in the ongoing performance of the social and environmental injustices of the neoliberal, modern/colonial, enslaved world. Undesign allows for the possibility of undoing a design that already exists, while also pointing to that which cannot be

designed, the limits of design, the un-designable (Coombs, et al., 2019): designing for worldlessness with its impossible aesthetics.

Rather, it is a question, firstly, of undesigning existing designs which take part in the worlding of the world that is neoliberal, modern/colonial and enslaving. Secondly, it is a question of undisciplining the (academic) discipline of design. This implies unconfiguring design education and the design methodologies inscribed within it ([Un]Disciplined Ventures, 2024). In part, this is a process of unlearning. The aim is to recognise that, while design practices have always been thoroughly transdisciplinary, they have been constrained by their narrow framing within an educational, phenomenological aesthetic that effectively excludes the ethical and the political. Thirdly, although design practices are not autonomous, they must reconfigure their relationships to the speculative, financial economy, the material economy and the attention economy to exert an ideological, ethical and political agency. This is a question of forging alliances.

In short, undesigning, undisciplining and unlearning for *Homefullness* as worldlessness are kinds of not-knowing. Not-knowing is a form of welcome towards each situation as it unfolds, to which the designer responds inventively and affirmatively as bricoleur.

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