Design Struggles: Intersecting Histories, Pedagogies, and Perspectives

Edited by Claudia Mareis and Nina Paim. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021, 416 pp. PB 9789492095886. €27.50

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Book Review

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The *Design Struggles* anthology, the third book in the Plural series (all designed by Lotte Lara Schröder), gathers voices from across design theory, practice, and education that are engaged in the struggle to "design *otherwise*" (11), to break from design's oppressive legacies. In the introduction, editors Claudia Mareis and Nina Paim argue for a critical look at modernism and its assumptions of universal solutions, which they argue rest on systems and materials of colonial violence. "Decolonization, in part, means wrestling with the full breadth of such violence" (17), they insist, and contemporary discourse should set a stage for critical exchange in which contrasting world views encounter one another, and the voices of those who have been ignored, those with "subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies" (17), are given credence and value. In response, they bring together conversations, institutional movements, analyses, and perspectives focusing on the practices of decolonization, situating, and pluralization. The ideas in the book intend

to be "radical, open, generous, caring; they're antiracist, antisexist, dedicated to abolition and liberation, and imagining a pluriverse of worlds" (22).

In the prelude, Arturo Escobar says that we are witnessing the emergence of the "transnational critical design studies field" (25). He sees this discourse as grounded in the Global South, and positions the work as political because of its world-making power. This new field theorizes expanded forms of subjectivity (including the decentering of the human), welcomes more voices and disciplines, engages with the new power relations that these expansions allow, and is rooted in many local and specific approaches to development. Escobar links this kind of specificity to autonomous or endogent design, wherein communities evolve using their own resources and methods. Escobar's prelude could be a great introductory reading for design studies students, launching units on non-human subjectivity, decolonial discourse, or endogenic practices.

Following the prelude, the text is divided into three sections: "Histories" presents a new lens on the roots of today's design discourse; "Pedagogies" focuses on structural changes that help us move towards a more just future; and "Perspectives" brings together voices that are "reflecting and practicing in the midst of design struggles" (20). Not surprisingly, the first and third sections have pieces that could be assigned in a design discourse class, while the second is more appropriate for educators as they consider institutional and pedagogical change. Together, the collection – energetic, timely, sprawling, and sometimes biting in its critique – has a raw and radical tone. Schröder's designs on the cover and between chapters mirror the complexity and range of sources through collages that connote geologic strips of human ephemera and cutouts reminiscent of digestive organs in greyscale and hot pink. It is as if the critique of design builds up in layers and must be digested by more stomachs than any one of us possesses.

"Histories" begins with Cheryl Buckley's "Made in Patriarchy II: Researching (or Re-searching) Women and Design," an update to "Made in Patriarchy," her famous 1986 essay. Following the pluralism theme, she calls for recognizing a broader swath of activity as design, especially women's vernacular production of material culture that often occurs outside of paid and professionally trained venues. In "Breaking Class: Upward Climbers and the Swiss Nature of Design History," Paola De Martin presents an autobiographical testament to and a research model on behalf of specificity. She describes her own origins as the child of Swiss working-class parents, and her research grounded in interviews of working-class people entering the design field. The following essays question, deepen, and refute histories of design. They include Alison J. Clarke's nuanced take on Papanek's Social Design movement; Kjetil Fallan's introduction to the origins of Norwegian ecological design; Tania Messell's critique of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design's

ambivalence towards environmental degradation; and Sria Chaterjee's account of the National Institute of Design in India and the tension there between importing Western modernism and promoting local indigenous design practices.

"Pedagogies" opens with Decolonizing Design group members Ahmed Ansari and Matthew Kiem's "What is Needed for Change? Two Perspectives on Decolonization and the Academy." They argue that to decolonize design means to rethink and transform "the very conditions – political, economic, institutional, etc. – by which design theorists make sense of what design is" (159). Both are skeptical of the extent to which this can happen in the academy, embedded as it is in "structures of neoliberal capitalism and modernization" (165).

Nan O'Sullivan's "Do the *Mahi*, Reap the Rewards," is a step-by-step account of the integration of indigenous Maori knowledge and practices into Te Kura Hoahoa, the School of Design Innovation, Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. It is not a list of helpful tips for a generally inclusive classroom, but a map of one institution's particular shifts. Rooted in the Maori concept of *rangatiratanga* (self-determination), which emphasizes *designing with* rather than *designing for*, this model "ensures that decisions around stakeholder participation, methodology, evidence, intervention, communication, facilitation of outcomes, and distribution of funding are in the hands of those whose lives, lands, children, and grandchildren are to be impacted" (255). While the program is compelling and ambitious, O'Sullivan cannot yet describe the results of the integration beyond a few student comments. This may be indicative of these design struggles; new models are just that: products of struggle and rethinking but not yet methods of quantifiable social change.

"Perspectives" includes Johannes Bruder's "Alexa's Body: What the Interface Obscures and How Design Could Help Us See," a Marxist argument aiming to reconnect production and consumption. Bruder argues that our smart devices are tools of mystification: they invisibly reinforce inequitable power systems that stem from centuries of colonial extraction, while unwitting users build these systems through the submission of their own data. "UX and interface design are in a unique position to support workers' struggles against a social factory," he writes, "by reminding the user that she is a producer herself" (285). He argues that design could make the human infrastructure more visible, and describes projects that visually map the costs – human, carbon, ecological – of producing and using our everyday devices.

"Perspectives" also includes a number of dialogs. In "Emotional Labor, Support Structures, and the Walls in Between," Corin Gisel and book co-editor Paim document an interview with five of the eight members of the Decolonizing Design group after their presentation at the 2019 Papanek Symposium. The group, founded in 2016 by Danah Abdulla, Ece Canli, Mahmoud Keshavarz, Kiem, Pedro Oliveira, Luiza Prado, Tristan Schultz, and Ansari, is an international

alliance that is project-based – they co-author, edit, and present – and a meeting place for support and idea exchange as members face the challenges of building decolonial discourse, practice, and pedagogy. The interview documentation is informative but also personal, and feels like an approachable window into this movement and some of its central voices. Griselda Flesler speaks with Depatriarchise Design (Anja Neidhart and Maya Ober) in "Not a Toolkit," a Socratic dialog honed from numerous texts, emails, and verbal exchanges on the "pedagogy of discomfort" (206), a program Flesler has been creating at the Faculty of Architecture and Design at the University of Buenos Aires. They delve into the non-neutrality of education spaces, the importance of situating oneself, and strategies for working from "margins as places of resistance, but also places of hope, kindness, and generosity" (206).

The book ends with a highly readable essay by Mia Charlene White on her practice as an autoethnographic theorist and educator. She argues for love and potential connections between people and for lucidly seeing and hearing the bent or varied notes (a reference to Blues music and to creating space) as underpinnings for structural change to bring a more just occupation of land. White's frank and reaching use of her own personal history draws the reader into her ambitious vision. It's a warm closure and bookends beautifully with Escobar's more theoretical call for broad thinking.

A tighter scope might make *Design Struggles* easier to describe but would betray its push for meaningful plurality and the richness of situated veracity. Some of the contributions accomplish this more than others, but all are interested in the struggle to break and remake our approach to making and discourse, and in recognizing design's full potential for world making and the responsibilities that implies.