

The Critical Designer and Material Culture

By Nathaly Pinto

Working unreflectively and predominantly for neutral or anti-social programs perpetuates a society characterized by inequalities.



Photography by [luis_molinero](#) on [freepik](#)

It is crucial, both in professional practice and in academia, to regain a focus on problem-

solving in our work. By placing the objects of design and their practices in a cultural context, we can facilitate this recovery and highlight the designer's social interactions. The contextual premises outlined below serve as the foundation for this critique:

1. **Design products are a part of material culture:** design is a productive practice of creating artifacts that interpret and consume the beliefs (values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions) of a particular community or society at a specific moment in time.
2. **Design is a type of productive work:** it is a trade that is inscribed in the labor market as differentiated, located in a greater process – material production – as an intermediate phase between programming and the manufacturing of any product.
3. **Design is a process for solving problems:** it is the process of creating something intentionally while simultaneously considering an objective/purpose, function, economy, socio-cultural factors, and aesthetics.

Design as practice, deals with the creative, functional, and aesthetic production of objects, environments, and services. It actually deals with the production of “artificial things” that allow us to preserve ourselves and adapt to nature. Design programs, through conceptualization and technology, a form or means of representation that manifests how human beings subsist, and how they conceive and interpret the world. We must objectively recognize ourselves as mediators of material products: design inevitably mediates and materializes.

We socialize to a great extent, through that production of design. It is our interactions – observation and use – with the things we make, that teaches us about our place in society and how we meta-conceive ourselves. We must recognize that the messages we create as designers, far from ephemeral or transient, are part of the coding that interprets, exposes, and disputes reality: the production of design affects the cultural cycle.

On the other hand, design is a profession, and its recognition as a professional and economic activity, allows us, first, to recognize ourselves as agents in the process of material production. Agents in extenso, visible and participatory subjects, not exclusively operational. Which demands that we develop as what Ellen Lupton calls the “Designer as Producer”: designers with the ability to lead content, through critical navigation of the social, aesthetic and technological systems through which communications flow. In other words, as designers who question their activities.

Second, consistent with this first permission, it allows us to move away from the idea of the relationship between social function and design as an accessory relationship. A relationship relegated only for moments when the client poses a humanitarian project. It is evident that these demands from the client – when they are real and not business conscience-washing – will be minority, given the dominant guidelines of the designer's labor market. Seeing the relationship in this way, discards the project quality of design and reduces it to corporate techniques to gain consumers, space and power.

We must recognize that we are subject to a market that demands and finances primarily projects associated with consumerism; that commercial work is what allows us to survive in

most cases. And this is the reason that inclines us towards a pole of design that is concerned with styling to sell and leaves, more and more forgotten, the other extreme; the design that has as its object the intelligent solution of problems.

We must understand that working only in that pole transforms us into executors of what has to be seductive, brilliant, colorful, fast; of what has to be hypermediated, apparently immediate and disposable, but that together promotes a reductive abstraction of a much more complex social reality, and a codification about what it means to live now in the world, extremely harmful.

Reflecting on this is a progress in itself.

Reflecting prompts us to recognize ourselves as design subjects and designers capable of changing practice. Reflecting allows us to reject the role of passive audience and actors in a material production process that keeps us distracted, unable to understand ourselves and without the will to change political reality.

Reflecting gives us agency, as design subjects and designers who understand the transmission process of ideas in which we are involved. Reflecting on the encoding of the message expands historical, cultural, social and political understanding of design, and enables us to execute and control voluntary actions at different levels, from where we stand.

Reflecting makes us responsible, it requires us to think about who we are really creating messages for. Reflecting forces us to place the user at the center of our exercise, to recognize them beyond their objectification as consumers. It urges us to think about all social groups and how they participate in today's world. And finally, it commits us to intervene in the ability of these less manifest groups – which are the majority of the population – to define their own lives.

After all of this, reflection vindicates the authorship of the designer's action. It urges us to prioritize design that is concerned with solving problems: to position ourselves as professionals and educators who use our skills and knowledge to meet real, urgent and socially more widespread needs. Designers who understand and seek to mediate their environment, carrying out actions – large or small – that do not strictly respond to a dominant and exclusive ideology. Ultimately, critical designers who have a deliberate impact on social structures.

Published on 18/05/2023

The logo for FOROALFA, featuring the word "FOROALFA" in bold, black, uppercase letters inside a yellow speech bubble shape.

ISSN 1851-5606
<https://foroalfa.org/en/articles/the-critical-designer-and-material-culture>

