

Design or Decline? A Decolonial Cease *and* Desist

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This paper critically examines the contemporary relationship between design and decolonization, with a focus on reevaluating our expectations of design as a profession and exploring potential pathways forward. The discussion centers on the stagnant state of design discourse, and the intricate power dynamics within design practices. It underscores the significance of recognizing that designers do not uniformly occupy identical positions, highlighting the asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in design nearshoring and the prioritization of Northern interests. Furthermore, it questions the reliance on exclusive designerly methods for systemic change, the pursuit of the common good, and the realization of the pluriverse. We claim that design, in its current form, often reinforces capitalist and colonial structures rather than dismantling them. The paper criticizes design's complicity in perpetuating colonial differences while claiming to address them, recognizing the fundamental role of design for the realization of the modern project and as a key enabler of capitalist modes of production and consumption. Through an interdisciplinary lens, this paper scrutinizes the dissonance between design's self-professed ethical values and the pursuit of capitalistic gains.

Keywords

 decolonization

 design ethics

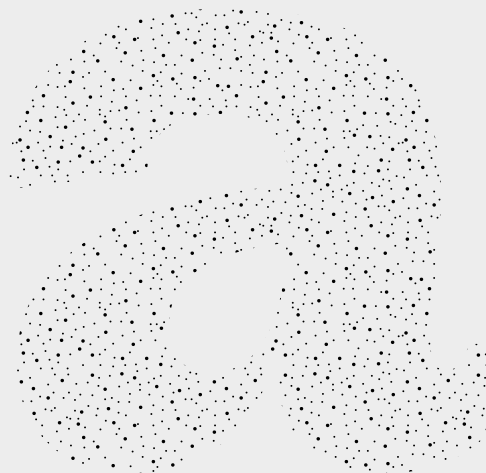
 coloniality of being

 refusal

 design practice


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AT THE END OF THE END OF DESIGN

This is an uncomfortable time to be a designer. The constant state of unrest, now delving deeper into the Global North's daily life, has given rise to post-apocalyptic discourses. After the initial wave of workforce reduction due to the pandemic crisis—when companies like Airbnb and Uber laid off around 1,900 and 6,700 employees respectively—wore off, massive layoffs continued and even increased. Companies that valued disruption and creativity that were going to hold tight to design jobs, instead delegated disruption to artificial intelligence, with companies like Alphabet and Microsoft laying off between 10,000 to 12,000 employees each.

In Mexico, the hiring spree of 2020, along with nearshoring incentives such as weak labor laws and low workforce costs, led companies like Frog, Accenture, and Microsoft to multiply design positions in the country. Many of these hires were made through mergers with local companies, which, besides reducing payroll costs by up to 60 percent, allowed these corporations to offer subpar employee experiences under the same brand while boasting about inclusion and expanding design's reach into other regions. Regional companies also found ways to profit from this trend. From multinational banks to so-called unicorns, many businesses resorted to outsourcing most of their design teams during 2022 and 2023, limiting compensation benefits and making it easier to lay off dozens of employees at a time, all while delaying and reducing accountability. Even though posts came up on LinkedIn and other platforms to empathize and offer new opportunities to those recently laid off, designers across Latin America and the Global South were often overlooked. Solidarity, much like salaries, was location-based. Choosing where to go, even in a worst-case scenario, is a privilege.

THE ECHOES OF THE POWER OF DESIGN

We argue that these events have eroded the repeated argument to reimagine design as a powerful force for societal justice. As with any promise of progress, design's allure as a transformative force for such change has gained weight in the Global South through the promise of bridging gaps in inequalities by fixing make-

shift infrastructure and providing access to everyday well-being. It has also offered designers in the Global South the appealing role of enlightened agents who have the potential to shape a world that prioritizes justice, sustainability, and equity through a commitment to the discourse we hereby term as the *power of design*.

The core of professional design discourse is politely colonial. It celebrates the potential of making design a mission-led profession that solves major global problems through compelling and clever techniques that are rarely assessed for proof of efficacy. The pervasive dominance of Western standards is hidden behind revolutionary calls to action, as shown in two dimensions of this discourse's manifestation: design for global impact and design for a better future.

Design for Global Impact

This call suggests that design can improve anything through Western-approved techniques, disregarding the need to strengthen local systems, and basing excellence in terms of how successfully it negotiates the coexistence of wellbeing with no divestment from capitalism. A common example of this are the multiple institutions offering designers from the Global North immersive programs to work with local communities and local designs, as is the case of British Council's 'Crafting Futures Mexico' looking to develop "new design methodologies were (sic) as tools of social change" (British Council Mexico, n.d.), and 'Francia en México', the French alliance with Design Week Mexico focusing on "building community links" and the "promotion and professionalization of arts and crafts trade in Mexico" (Institute Français d'Amérique Latine, n.d.). These initiatives emphasize European designers' role in 'improving' vernacular knowledge while they erase the investment—in both time and resources, plus knowledge transfer—required for local communities to host such 'collaborative spaces'. Even if not all participants join with that perspective, these practices institutionally reinforce the outsider's perspective as superior, positioning Anglo-European values as universal principles, and suggesting local practices and ways of living need improvement and updating by formally educated, often white and male, designers from the Global North.

Design for a Better Futures

The idea of consummating local futures via design often masks the Western ideals of progress and development. It usually involves Global North agents reinforcing their vanguard role, assuming leadership or pioneering roles in shaping a "new" future, while often co-opting the projects and visions of marginalized groups to introduce novelty into their own. Many multinational initiatives partnering with local design practices glorify cross-cultural exchange as the source of innovation without addressing asymmetrical power dynamics. IKEA-funded Space10 studio 'Beyond Human-Centered Design' hosts events claiming "good design is regional"

(Bloom, 2022), while Design Matters (2024) proposes to “enter an era of radically different practices, where we see the future with optimism and move forward”. Events such as those mentioned above are typically held in a foreign language and take place in neighborhoods that have experienced aggressive gentrification. They often partner with local agents from elite networks who act as intermediaries. Their costs of attendance make them inaccessible to the general population, once again excluding those most affected by the interventions they uphold.

Designed by Whom? Powered by Whom?

The *power of design* is convincing as long as it remains elusive. By highlighting the dissonance between what is said and what actually happens, we are looking to identify and explore ways in which designers from this region can uphold the desire to create better futures and, why not, better presents. We write as Mexican designers and we attempt to place our experiences and those of our colleagues in the center, focusing on our material conditions and the colonial power dynamics we are subjected to, while recognizing that our efforts build on global resistance movements with which we share many struggles and common interests.

A LOCAL REVIEW OF THE POWER OF DESIGN THROUGH HISTORY

In the 1940s, Latin America began a modernization project. The focus was on developing new forms and media to interpret national heritage according to international standards, and hopefully showcase the country’s potential for modernity. This mission was institutionalized through schools looking to educate the population on ‘applied arts’ and architecture, as well as developing rural material culture. At this time, there was no clear distinction between artisans, artists, and designers.

The professionalization of Latin American design in the 1950s coincided with the United States’ export of developmental forms of the ‘American Dream’. During this decade, design in countries like Mexico was heavily shaped by economic policies such as the *desarrollo estabilizador* (stabilizing development), or ‘the Mexican Miracle’ (Medina Lozano, 2016, p. 102), where governments were looking to optimize production processes and develop industrial capacity to substitute imports. The new mass production standards required changes in aesthetics and demand for projectual skills. Functionalism and the Bauhaus tradition were introduced and infused into new academic programs at universities, mostly through architecture and graphic design, and later into industrial design (Maseda, 2006).

By the end of the 1960s, the intensive commodification of life started eroding social solidarity and well-being, leading to student and workers’ movements that criticized what *good design* meant for Latin Americans (Bonsiepe, 1993, p. 6). At the same time, Silicon Valley was starting to bloom with the

Computer Revolution. The 'Third World' needed its own version of design—not to compete with the 'First World', but to avoid falling behind. However, the criteria for global competitiveness had already started to change: between the 1980s and the 1990s, tertiarization and outsourcing of productions brought new challenges to design. The new landscape sparked discussions about design management. While design firms and studios in the Global North were switching towards more abstract offerings, such as *design thinking*, Latin American design was held back by economic crises and political upheaval, leading to limited access to computer-aided design (CAD). Design education continued to focus on technical skills, leaving strategy and methodologies out of the scope, with some exceptions from politically-engaged university communities.

The 2000s were marked by globalization, which questioned the value and future of local design work. Multiple retrospectives and museum exhibitions sought to connect past and future in the face of digitization, while universities, studios, and professionals highlighted the potential and social utility of design. As Bonsiepe points out, "In the peripheries, design problems are firstly political, and, just in a second place, technical-professional" (1993, p. 9). Emerging theories and proposals stemming from Silicon Valley's design-enforced technological optimism left one of the most pressing questions for designers in the Global South unanswered: when would it be our turn?

AGENTS OF CHANGE OR KEEPERS OF THE SYSTEM?

Recently, comprehensive critiques of professional design practice have emerged, as in Alfonso Matos' recent *Who Can Afford to be Critical?* (2022), which delves into the economic and social privileges that underpin the ability to engage in a 'critical' design practice. Matos suggests that the goals of decolonizing design or achieving social justice may be out of reach for those enmeshed in the realities of commercial, capital-driven, mainstream work. He argues that the capacity to question and reshape design practices is often reserved for those who are not bound by financial constraints. In a discussion transcribed in the book, a couple of participants argue that:

Earning a living from doing [...] a kind of design where you can actively have a certain level of freedom and agency, even just agency in choosing the projects you accept—it's not a thing. You always have to sustain yourself with some other job. (...) There is no market for critical design. And maybe there is not even a public for it. (Matos, 2022, p. 18)

Matos further highlights that designers are either exploited or perpetuate the exploitative system, most of them having no other option but to conform to such labor practices.

Similarly, Silvio Lorusso's *What Design Can't Do* (2024) reminds us of the limitations inherent in designers' ability to effect change, particularly when systemic barriers remain unacknowledged and unchallenged. Lorusso explores the optimistic narratives within the design discourse that promote the idea that design alone can solve complex social issues, pointing out that without addressing the root causes of these problems, such efforts are largely superficial. Lorusso describes the "hidden starter pack" of design—factors like bureaucratic procedures, financial troubles, unpaid internships, and gender biases—that threaten or sustain the professional journey of becoming and remaining a designer. He likens the cycle of disillusionment in design to the Gartner hype cycle (Lorusso, 2024, p. 38), where after a peak of inflated expectations, designers often face a trough of disillusionment. This disillusionment manifests in various ways: some designers become doubtful and disoriented, others anesthetized and disappointed, and some plain angry and resentful. Lorusso highlights this with the following observation: "Perhaps designers are suddenly realizing that their relationship with their discipline has always been a form of Stockholm syndrome" (2024, p. 38), suggesting that designers remain loyal to and defend a profession that often exploits them. He quotes Baptiste Fluzin, who adds to this critique by calling designers "the most iconic, lazy, useful idiots of our era" (as cited in Lorusso, 2024, p. 38).

Additionally, meme accounts such as @dank.lloyd.wright, @ethicaldesign69, and @northwest_mcm_wholesale, offer a reflection on cultural and systemic issues within the design world. Memetic content resonates widely because it taps into shared experiences and concerns, making it a relevant and potent indicator of current sentiments and challenges within the profession, while capturing the chaotic truths and often contradictory nature of design practice through humor and satire. Both Matos and Lorusso use memes in their books to convey the modern mood and critique of design and being a designer, illustrating how this format effectively communicates the disillusionment and irony prevalent in the industry.

However, as valuable and insightful as these new critical stances are, failing to examine their limitations and the blind spots that emerge from a position of power would miss an opportunity for a deeper inquiry. "This kind of romanticized 'European citizen' experience is one that is still a faraway mirage for many young people my age," states Matos (2022, p. 10). Reflecting on design from such a vantage point overlooks the experiences and realities of the Global Majority, demanding a fundamental reevaluation of who design truly serves and whose voices are being prioritized. Designers, self-appointed as agents tasked with dismantling the systems that govern their profession, find themselves ensnared in a dual role: they are both agents of change and keepers of the status quo, navigating a terrain fraught with contradictions.

DECOLONIZING THE MYTH OF A (RE)DESIGNABLE WORLD

This paradoxical relationship between design and de/colonization has been a focal point for those resisting colonization since its inception. Decolonial thought in Latin American design should challenge these narratives by asserting the region's experiences and perspectives on design and its role in the world. Thus, it is important to state that the premise of the *Coloniality of Power*, a theory proposed by Aníbal Quijano (2000), is to identify and name the structures that hierarchize society based on categories such as race, class, and sex/gender, among others. Historically, this translated to Indigenous and black people being assigned to unpaid work through exploitation and slavery. In practice, this is still perpetuated when whiteness and masculinity are assigned the highest-valued 'intellectual' and conceptual labor, while racialized people are relegated to manual labor or craft. Through this scheme, profits are concentrated in the Global North, while the costs and losses are absorbed by the rest of the world, not only in economic terms, but also across all domains of life.

As another example, the practice of nearshoring exemplifies the industry's complicity in modern forms of colonialism. Companies from the Global North establish teams or hire individuals in the Global South to leverage lower labor costs, perpetuating dynamics of economic and intellectual exploitation. These firms attract local talent with the promise of engaging in cutting-edge design work, but they often find themselves relegated to the manual labor of the design world—executing tasks under tight constraints, with little room for creative autonomy or significant contribution to the conceptual stages of projects. The intellectual and creative output of these designers is taken back to the Global North, enriching the product ecosystems and market dominance of these corporations, while contributing minimally to the local design landscape and economy. This dynamic mirrors the colonial plunder of resources, where the wealth generated from local labor and creativity is being extracted and relocated.

If the *power of design* fails to improve working conditions for designers at the peripheries, how can any fair and sustainable transformation at the systemic level be expected? This issue extends beyond the narratives surrounding design practice to the tangible impact and agency that designers hold. Lorusso captures this dilemma:

Designers are torn between having to believe, for professional and vocational reasons, in the modern promise of a harmonic, fluid orderliness and being caught in an absurd, glitchy reality. They are the ideal type of a hyper-modern subjectivity—disillusioned evangelists who are losing faith. (Lorusso, 2024, p. 18)

Designers often aspire to change the system at an industry-wide level, tackling so-called wicked problems that are fundamentally political in nature, but the solutions they propose often fall short due to the limitations of their individual power and agency.

FROM RE- TO DE-: WHAT IF TO DE-COLONIZE IS TO DE-DESIGN THE WORLD?

Exploring labor conditions, discourses, and everyday practices reveals the notion that neither designers nor design can single-handedly create a better world—such a notion is overly optimistic. Refusal and decoloniality remain under-discussed as strategies in design, perhaps because they are perceived as too radical or threatening to the status quo. Design cannot decolonize without being simultaneously decolonized from within. Without addressing the systemic underpinnings of the industry—such as power disparities and varying levels of autonomy among designers—design will remain distant from bridging the gap between our present reality and our aspirations.

Decolonization will not come from an abundance of proposals, theories, events, and innovation labs. Instead, something transformative might emerge only if we stop repeating the actions of the past five centuries of colonization and industrialization and begin affirming what has been negated. This can only be done by attending to how concrete and discrete practices—free from flashy branding, early-bird tickets, cool headlines, and clever wordplay—can help us disengage from mutual exploitation and stop reinforcing the status quo. Systemic change may not require card decks or toolkits; rather, it can be worn down through small, meaningful changes in our work practices. Wearing down a system might actually require renouncing the tools that built it in the first place. The entanglement between the Global North and South highlights the issue of scale. Many systemic problems are found beyond the scope of what designers can address individually, thus, a collective approach to meaningful change is needed.

Refusal seeks to illuminate the spectrum of resistance available to designers in the Global South, from personal acts of defiance to collective efforts aimed at systemic change.

Design can be seen as a problem-solving and innovative interdisciplinary field, but also as part of a problematic disciplinary present. Contemporary design theory and practice have been constrained by the industry's status quo, which holds a primarily utilitarian function, emphasizing doing over thinking, the superficial over the intrinsic, and intervention over planning (Maldonado, 1972).

This introspection leads us to a critical juncture: if design in itself is the problem, how can the solution also be design? What can designers in 'hopeless cases' do? What if the most radical design act is to stop, reflect, and possibly

choose not to act? By exploring 'unmaking/refusal' as a stance against colonial practices, we introduce the idea of *inaction points*, not to re-use design's means to create a *brand-new world* but to refuse them, and, in doing so, stop recreating and innovating the old world. What if a pathway to critically examine and potentially dismantle the frameworks that constrain our imagination and perpetuate existing power structures is to refuse to continue designing the current system?

Refusal is a well-worn abolitionist strategy that has been articulated in various academic contexts, as well as within creative practice and research. Sara Ahmed (2018), in her discussions on diversity and complaint, emphasizes the power of saying 'no' as a form of resistance against normative expectations and systemic injustices. In her work, Ahmed argues that refusal can be a means of asserting one's agency and creating space for alternative ways of being and knowing (2018). Refusal in design can be understood as a deliberate and strategic act of resistance. It involves owning one's agency, by not only rejecting harmful practices and products, but also envisioning and enacting alternative modes of design. However, this also implies doing the necessary homework to understand which projects and practices align with one's values. This perspective is accordant with Ezio Manzini's argument to shift from a quantitative to a qualitative objective, from a culture of producing to a culture of reproducing—positioning designers as caretakers of "a garden of objects" (as cited in Tonkinwise, 2013, p. 1). But, as Tonkinwise observes, "gardening also requires weeding, pruning, and composting. To do more with less also means getting to less, getting rid of more" (2013, p. 1).

Tonkinwise's ideas of 'undesigning' or 'designing away' relate to this notion of refusal. Tonkinwise suggests "that not-designing is also a kind of designing; it can be proactive, a deliberate strategy to undesign, to make existing designs disappear" (2013, p. 1). This notion of undesigning aligns with de-designing in its critical stance, but differs in its proactive re-creation of space. De-designing involves a more radical rejection: a cessation of participation in the existing design paradigm altogether. It is not merely about unmaking existing designs, but about refusing to contribute to the systemic cycle of design production that perpetuates exploitation and inequality.

Tony Fry's prior concept of redirective practice emphasizes the need to fundamentally change the direction of design by questioning its current trajectory and imagining alternative futures. Fry suggests that to truly decolonize design, we must engage in 'elimination design', which involves actively unmaking the harmful structures and products perpetuated by the design industry. Fry outlines three areas of focus for redirective practice: "adaptation in face of what has to change to counter the unsustainable; the elimination of what threatens sustainment by designing 'things' away; and prefiguration, which is designing in order to redirectively deal with what is coming" (2007, p. 5).

While Fry and Tonkinwise propose new forms of designing, the concept of de-designing serves as an alternative to the design process itself, emphasizing inaction and refusal as forms of resistance. This perspective invites designers to look inward, embrace the uncomfortable silences, and question the impulse to 'make'—to remake, to redesign, to produce—as the default response to every problem. Highlighting thoughtful omission and the potent silence of refusal as acts of resistance and reclamation take on another level of significance in over-exploited regions like Latin America.

The deliberate decision to not engage in the conventional processes of design and production emerges as a critical lever for (in)action. This not merely implies saying 'no' to specific projects or clients, but represents a deeper commitment to questioning the foundations upon which the design industry operates. As strategies, we suggest:

1. *Subtle sabotage.* Make harmful products and services harder to access and use by not improving them. Do not use your creative power to make enslaving installment plans attractive. Do not make exploitative corporations appear pretty or friendly.
2. *Stretch the timeline.* Resist the habit of complying with milestones and deadlines in all design areas, every single time. Unless you work in health, justice, or public services, all work can wait. If no life depends on your design to be perfect and on time, deliver with spread around minuscule mistakes.
3. *Design badly for bad ideas.* If becoming a good designer means being good at styling oppression, then being a bad designer is good for the world. Do not hand your best knowledge or capacity to companies that overprice their services.
4. *Ignore roles and locations.* You did not come to this world to watch over your colleagues' work. Stop normalizing different pay for the same work for the accidental circumstances of geography, gender, and nationality. Avoid feeling entitled to give orders if your compensation is higher than that of others.
5. *Detach from your work persona.* Avoid viewing designers as specifically creative or sensitive towards well-being and world problems. Stop presenting yourself as a designer to add caché to your identity. Do not believe companies calling you genius, artistic, rebellious, or change-maker. Remember you are just another worker to them. Regard design as important as accounting and cleaning services.
6. *Unlike and unfollow.* Avoid assisting and gathering at events that continue to speak-from-power. Do not share yet another case of institutions using the Global Majority's knowledge, problems, and identities to give an edge to their design practice.

This is not a call to let everything go, but an invitation to let the system show its cracks and failures. This rupture will not be achieved by perfecting design within the current system, but by making design unusable to reproduce its

harm. We are aware that de-designing may feel counterintuitive. When the Global Majority has been taught that redesign is the bridge from discrimination towards dignity, refusing to design seems to imply refusing to life itself.

However, we find this discomfort can lead to a more meaningful engagement: the freedom of choosing not to. By challenging the industry's ego-trip and delusions of grandeur, we acknowledge that inaction may not be within all designers' reach, especially for those entangled in global labor dynamics of exploitation. For those designers, the most powerful tool will never be to design better, more sustainable, more inclusive products, but to stop designing for the systems that perpetuate such inadequacies and injustice in the first place. Refusing to design is designing in itself.

While we do not believe there is intrinsic power in design, we do believe that there is power in designing. That is why we advocate for its refusal. The majority of designers, as workers, often operate in environments where their actions are dictated by others: bosses, clients, and companies. Their ability to enact significant change is frequently constrained by these structures. We propose a rupture to delink from Western design traditions, avoiding the cyclical renewal of extractivist approaches. The collective refusal to design within these limits becomes a way to reclaim autonomy, and shape—or design—the world in terms that consider possible plural futures for the Global Majority. It is an invitation to step away from our role as individual designers and detach our designing power from the designs we are required to enable as a means of livelihood. The distinction between merely producing within the confines of existing structures and actively shaping worlds by letting them emerge from the chasm of refusal is crucial to restoring our collective power.

"If design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design," said Adolfo Natalini of Superstudio, "until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs. Until then, design must disappear" (as cited in Lang & Menking, 2003, p. 167). Belief in the power of design has caused us to lose track of how the weak spots in our day-to-day practice are also the closest and most accurate leverage points available to accelerate the decay of colonial systems. However, understanding the struggles of designers as laborers and contrasting them with hegemonic discourses became necessary for exploring a profession whose message is we can do everything if we take the time to do so.

Through the illusion of design's power and our eagerness as designers from the Global Majority, we have inadvertently supported oppressive systems, enabling the exploitation of our workforce to conceal their flaws and inefficiencies. For Latin American designers, refusing to commit to this power might mean risking the confirmation of colonial biases: lack of skills, lack of agency, lack of ambition. It might mean letting go of hard-earned yet fragile repu-

tations. The risks of doing so—such as economic instability, belated promotions, and low-quality work—are realities that will persist even when complying with colonial expectations. But refusal might hold on long enough for design theorists to be exposed at the center of power, and, more importantly, to ourselves. By holding onto this tension between present and future, we might create space for new worlds while refusing to preserve the old ones, instead of ‘designing away’ our dissent. **D**

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