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Society, Design, Communication

Prolegomenon to a Great Problem

Abstract

The article “Society, Design, Communication” examines the intersection of contemporary societal challenges and environmental design practices. It contextualizes these challenges within the pressing global environmental crisis, highlighting critical perspectives that caution against unchecked technological and industrial advancement often disregarding natural ecosystems. The study explores how sustainable design, when integrated with innovative communication strategies, can address these concerns and foster awareness and action. The article delves into the role of sustainable design in commercial and public communication, focusing on word-of-mouth strategies and immersive presentations at trade fairs and exhibitions. Using the Milan Design Week as a case study, it highlights the BioWoodesign project led by the Technical University in Zvolen, which exemplifies a biomimicry-inspired approach to design. This initiative underscores the synergy between nature and human creativity in addressing

sustainability while fostering meaningful audience engagement. Furthermore, the discussion expands on emerging trends in sustainable communication, such as systemic design and circular economy principles. These approaches enhance both the functional and experiential dimensions of design exhibitions, creating immersive narratives that resonate with modern audiences. The article also critiques the prevalence of “greenwashing”—the practice of overstating environmental credentials—emphasizing the importance of transparent and credible strategies for fostering trust. By examining the intersections of society, design, and communication, the article contributes to the discourse on sustainable practices, demonstrating their potential to influence meaningful behavioral and systemic change in a rapidly evolving world.

Key words

Biomimicry. Environmental Communication. Greenwashing. Marketing. Sustainable Design. Technology. Virtualization.

Introduction

The relationship between design and technology has transformed dramatically in recent decades, reshaping how we perceive and create in the digital age. As digital tools and platforms become increasingly integrated into the design process, designers are exploring new dimensions of creativity and expression. This article examines the implications of these technological advancements on contemporary design practices, emphasizing the evolving roles of designers as both creators and collaborators in a rapidly changing landscape. Through various case studies and examples, we will delve into the intersection of design, technology, and society, revealing how these elements interact to influence artistic innovation and cultural discourse.

1 Society

One of the significant challenges in reflecting on today's world is the futile attempt to capture it in its entirety and then identify its critical fault lines for deeper analysis. A more natural and suitable approach, given the current stage of knowledge, is to go in the opposite direction. That is, to identify and name the specific points of tension, and through understanding them, gradually define and comprehend the broader whole – rendering it less elusive from this perspective. To address the communicative dimension of today's world, we must first define the situation we find ourselves in by naming its circumstances and

conditions.

As Homo sapiens, we are not separate from either the natural or technological world, despite often behaving as though we are in our prideful anthropocentrism. One of the key figures advocating for the inseparability of these worlds – the human and non-human – is Donna Haraway. The American biologist, philosopher, and feminist even claims that we have never really been human (Gane, 2006). From another perspective, theorists refer to the current era as the Anthropocene – the age of humanity. However, this “age of humanity” is not defined by empathy, solidarity, or sensitivity toward our environment. Instead, hidden within this label is the “threat of humanity” – the destructive force that has caused and continues to cause the rampant exploitation and devastation of natural ecosystems. This devastation extends to human mental, emotional, and perceptive capacities. By attacking the world around us, we have also attacked ourselves.

Since the end of World War II, many voices have sounded the alarm, but humanity's masochistic will to self-destruct, combined with the “ability” to ignore these warnings, seems limitless. In the early 1970s, the Club of Rome published *The Limits to Growth*, and around the same time, Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz (2014) wrote *The Eight Deadly Sins of Civilisation*. Closer to home, Václav Havel often issued similar warnings, and today, we hear from figures like French philosopher Bruno Latour and Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han, who

lives in Germany. We could compile an extensive database of such voices, but for now, we highlight these particularly prominent examples.

It is beyond dispute that humanity, in its rampant anthropocentrism, has largely severed itself from natural cycles and processes. One serious consequence of this, reflected in the cultural imagination, is the transformation of the Earth's role. For a long time, we have treated the Earth as an inert, inexhaustible source of raw materials, ripe for endless exploitation to serve our needs. However, nature is now reacting – although its timeline does not align with our limited human lifespans. We have tried to impose our short-term perspective on nature, but the consequences are now manifesting with increasing intensity, often surpassing our ability to intervene effectively. In other words, in the Anthropocene, the Earth has begun to demand attention, and humans are acutely feeling its response (through floods, droughts, melting glaciers, dwindling animal and plant populations, decreasing biodiversity, and so on).

We began this discussion on a grim note, but given the current situation, we feel that we have no choice (this article is being written in September 2024, following devastating floods in Central Europe). Our goal is not to dwell on the impending end – whether in millennia or in the far more immediate decades during which we may witness the end of our grandchildren's lifetimes – a matter of mere centuries.

Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze (2010), the French philosophers, offer an insightful idea relevant to our discussion: that complex phenomena, which surpass human cognitive abilities, cannot be understood by reason alone. Since they operate in the realm of the non-human, it is necessary to activate artistic modes of production and perception to fully grasp them. A similar logic guided the development of the Register of Art Output (RUV) 15 years ago, a system still in use today to evaluate artistic work at universities for the purpose of securing adequate funding. At the time, we argued that artistic knowledge – knowledge acquired through art – is parallel in significance and value to scientific knowledge, which is measurable by verifiable methodologies.

2 Design

In this situation, we must cling to every opportunity, initiative, and project that advocates for change, exploring and supporting them. One such attempt is the environmental approach in design – a tangible, hands-on effort to improve how we understand and interact with the world. Terms like sustainable design, green design, progressive design, and transitional design all refer to the same idea: designing objects and processes in ways that make them as environmentally friendly as possible throughout their entire lifecycle.

Environmental thinking in design is not just a passing trend; it has been integral to design philosophy throughout modern history. Its

evolution in different historical contexts reflects changing needs, values, and visions of designers and users alike. Let us briefly explore this development.

The Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries marked a period of rapid industrial and technological progress, bringing significant benefits but also creating severe environmental and social problems like pollution, poverty, inequality, and exploitation. Designers sought to meet the growing demand for consumer goods while also being inspired by romantic ideals of harmony with nature and society. Movements like the Arts and Crafts, which began in England, promoted hand craftsmanship, traditional skills, and organic forms, as well as social reform. While noble in intent, this approach was not realistic given the growing population's need for affordable goods.

The long 20th century, often inaccurately labelled as the “modern period”, was influenced by scientific progress, globalization, and the effects of world wars. Designers shifted their focus toward creating rational, functional, versatile, and efficient products for mass production. Design was seen as a tool to improve quality of life, as well as to promote economic growth and ideological goals. The German Bauhaus, founded by Walter Gropius, exemplified this trend, blending art, technology, and society to create simple, elegant, functional designs, including architectural solutions for mass housing.

Postmodernism, which emerged in

the latter half of the 20th century, was a reaction and critique of modernism. Designers began focusing on cultural, historical, and personal aspects of design, experimenting with styles, materials, and meanings. Design became a form of communication, expression and interpretation, but also a source of conflict, manipulation and power.

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century is a period marked by increasing awareness of environmental and social challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, and poverty, alongside posthumanist approaches to the world that demand a new relationship with design. Designers are striving to create products that are environmentally friendly, socially just, economically viable, and culturally sensitive. Design is understood as a process that involves collaboration, participation, innovation, and learning. It embraces design thinking, a human-centred process that connects people's needs with the potential of technology through design tools. Concepts like “less is more” embody this shift. In practical terms, for instance, fewer work hours could lead to more leisure time, or better design solutions could lead to achieving maximum impact with minimal resources. The principle of simplicity – like designing products with less material or producing more in less time – makes products more affordable and “democratic”. This also opens up the possibility of offering better materials or higher craftsmanship for the same price. The latest advancements, particularly

additive technologies represented by three-dimensional printing methods, are playing a significant role in this process.

But can we really communicate sustainability on a global scale? Although the human perspective often overlooks it, design – being an everyday part of our lives – can have a tangible impact. We find ourselves needing to communicate these conditions and needs to truly fulfill the goals of sustainable design. Unfortunately, the general state of communication – both in public and specialized discourses – faces significant challenges. People are increasingly indifferent to words, which have lost their power due to the inflation of “newspeak”, fake news, manipulation, and disinformation.

Shaping and inventing everyday tools, along with energy management, is the second most important area where humans can impact the environment they inhabit, filling it with work and other daily activities that shape our everyday lives. However, the quality of life is closely linked to the quality of the environment. It is expressed by the level of human satisfaction with personal health, work, family, housing, education, safety, and leisure time.

What role do we assign to design in these seven “commandments”, and how does design function within them? Here is a brief summary:

In the realm of personal health, design plays a role in practical aids for easier and safer mobility, pill packaging, and comfort when using various

applicators. The work environment is an endless universe of continuously testing the shapes and possibilities of tools and devices, from hair clips and pens to kitchenware and various work tools. For family life, design contributes to improving the functionality of family relationships through modifications of living spaces, whether internal or external. As an example, designers have been replacing the dominant organization of communal spaces, traditionally centred around a large TV screen, with a new focal point – a large family table as a place for regular gatherings, echoing the ideas of Adolf Loos in his interior designs over a hundred years ago.

In a broader sense, it is about fulfilling the housing needs that allow for both work and relaxation. In the field of education, the focus is on designing and communicating processes that lead to the best outcomes, ensuring education is inclusive and accessible geographically, through housing, and more. A key factor influencing our sense of life quality is safety – creating a sense of security through personal initiatives (material and electronic resources) as well as utilizing societal safety structures. Last but not least is the area of leisure. For design, this is a limitless field, and each of us can find countless examples in our lives where product design enables both active and passive enjoyment of our free time.

Let us consider some current trends in environmental design.

The scientific community today explores diverse approaches to sustainability that extend beyond conventional strategies focused on renewable resources and waste reduction. One such approach is *regenerative design*, which aims not only to minimize negative impacts but also to actively contribute to the restoration of natural systems. This approach involves designing products and processes that enhance ecosystem health, enabling them to regenerate beyond their current state (Benyus, 2002). For instance, the project “Restorative Agriculture”, which combines agriculture with ecosystem restoration, employs techniques such as agroecology and permaculture to support biodiversity and soil health (Pretty, 2007).

Another influential approach is the concept of the “circular economy”, which emphasizes the cyclical nature of materials and the reuse of resources to prevent unnecessary waste. This includes recycling and refurbishing, as well as shifting toward shared economy models, where product and material usage is maximized (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, n.d.). An example is the company Patagonia, which offers a program for repairing and recycling used clothing, thereby extending the lifecycle of its products and minimizing waste (Patagonia, n.d.).

Also gaining considerable attention is *systems thinking*, which views products as components of larger ecosystems. This approach stresses the importance of interactions among system elements and seeks to design solutions that respect ecological

and social relationships without creating “externalities”, or hidden environmental or social costs borne by future generations (Meadows, 2008). An example is *cradle to cradle* design, which strives to ensure that all materials in the design are recyclable or biodegradable, thereby returning them to the natural cycle (McDonough & Braungart, 2002).

With these approaches, contemporary design is moving beyond traditional concepts of sustainability toward deeper understanding and active collaboration with natural systems.

3 Communication

From a marketing communications perspective, every conceivable method is used to make sustainable products resonate with consumers (Kusá & Marko, 2023). There is a clear desire to create aesthetically pleasing environments, filled with products that align with human tastes while adhering to sustainable practices in material and energy use. Marketing communications are now deeply integrated into the design process, visible at all levels of communication. This includes visual identity – logos, colors, typography, and other brand elements – ensuring clear, intuitive signage that conveys essential information. All forms of indoor and outdoor advertising come into play, and physical presentations at design fairs and exhibitions remain crucial for gauging product interest and quality. In these contexts, digital tools can be seamlessly integrated with empirical methods, including testimonials from influencers and celebrities.

In our opinion, and based on our experience over the last few years with design and reflections on marketing communications, two genres of marketing communications play the most significant roles in the current situation.

The first is Word of Mouth (WoM) and Word of Mouse, i.e., online WoM: e-WoM. In today’s context, the transformation of WoM from a marginal tool to one of the most important communication strategies is evident, especially thanks to social media and the mass influence of celebrities. This success stems from the natural human tendency to share information, both from the sender’s and receiver’s sides of the communication chain. On a smaller but not insignificant scale, we see this in interest groups or so-called social bubbles, where the principle of highly effective targeting is akin to the military concept of Joint Direct Attack Munition – though perhaps a more peaceful analogy, drawn from nanotechnology, would be more appropriate. In this case, WoM operates like a targeted drug delivery system, delivering active components only to the affected area. That is exactly how WoM functions in communication.

The resurgence of WoM, especially in its online form, is closely tied to the rise of new digital technologies and the increasing popularity of the internet. These advancements have provided WoM with entirely new possibilities through discussion group activities, blogs, and social networks, allowing messages to spread not

only faster but on an incomparably larger scale than ever before. Another driving factor is the decline in trust toward other communication tools, particularly advertising, which has been observed in both the professional community and among the majority of consumers. People are increasingly aware that advertising (and other marketing communication tools) aims to persuade them to take certain actions, especially making a purchase, which benefits the advertiser. They often feel that advertising is more manipulative and annoying than informative and useful. In the WoM communication models described by Světlík (n.d.), we can identify all three types (spontaneous, linear, and network co-production models) in the case of environmental design. The widespread use of WoM in this area is primarily due to the theme of environmental design, which resonates with society in the context of sustainable living, where design plays an integral and significant role.

Although the academic community aims to give equal weight to all three of the mentioned models, the most effective remains the model of spontaneous communication, owing to its natural alignment with the human need for direct interaction. When digital platforms enter the communication chain at the media level, communication elements rooted in human attributes, such as haptics, facial expressions, and other nonverbal characteristics, are diminished. Graphic substitutes, the accumulation of superlatives or pejoratives, and sharing within large communities without personal

experience all contribute to reducing the effectiveness of the other two WoM communication models.

A completely new phenomenon shifting WoM firmly into the realm of digital communication is *algorithmic WoM* (a-WoM). The current, incredibly rapid pace of AI development, especially in natural language processing, is gradually giving rise to algorithmic WoM. Here, content is generated by AI, with linguistic or speech characteristics (distinguished in Saussure’s terms as *langue* and *parole*, where *langue* represents the sign system of natural language and *parole* its specific realization) becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate from human or artificial generation. These AI-generated contents are disseminated through automated tools and gradually replace traditional e-WoM means.

As a result, the spontaneity of human-driven WoM principles is slowly eroding and will likely struggle to reach broader audiences in the future. Nevertheless, it will continue to function at an individual level, either in harmony or in conflict with the sophisticated tools of e-WoM and a-WoM.

A necessary condition for communication in the genre of WoM is prior empirical experience. This can be provided by events, particularly large ones, such as trade fairs and exhibitions. These are considered the second important way to communicate sustainable design – haptically, empirically, and directly. We once thought that this

method was ineffective, that it had lost its relevance with the rise of digital technologies. However, it has become clear that some commodities and product lines cannot do without targeted personal experience – visual, tactile, and empirical in general – such as those presented at global design fairs under the World Design Weeks platform. Advertising, as an impersonal method, has receded in importance compared to the personal empirical experiences of potential customers. Moreover, trade fairs have adapted to digital communication tools, and their organizers and curators have been able to combine empirical methods with hybrid and digital approaches. This creates a unique event that captivates audiences with a variety of ways to focus attention on products, their properties, and their relationship to the environment.

From a historical perspective, we can apply the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the functioning principles, communication genres, and platforms of trade fairs. While *Gesamtkunstwerk* may initially appear to belong exclusively to the realm of pure art – where it was established as a structural and receptive principle by Richard Wagner in the 19th century through his operas – its application extends further. Architect Walter Gropius introduced the concept into the field of design at the dawn of the 20th century when he founded the German Bauhaus school of art and design. For Gropius, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “building”, represents a work, project, or event that, in today’s terms, synergistically

combines multiple online and offline activities within a single space.

This synergy encompasses not only individual exhibition booths but the trade fair as a holistic experience: physical presentations and performances, lighting design, visual and auditory projections, each both individually and collectively, along with print publications, personal interactions with creators, the ability to engage hands-on with certain products, the architecture of both individual displays and the fair as a whole, programming for supplementary events, sensory experiences through touch, scent, and taste, and the distinct spatial and temporal framing. All of these elements contribute uniquely, especially in the context of design, to creating a functional and effective experience that enhances the impact of marketing communications at trade fairs.

All of this can be effectively communicated through personal interaction, not only with industry professionals but, more importantly, with everyday users. At design fairs, users can test various everyday items and fully immerse themselves in the truly experiential space of modern trade exhibitions.

Global companies, as well as local creators, have found ways to showcase both B2C and B2B commercial interest at design exhibition weeks, combining a small space and a limited time to reach professional buyers and regular consumers interested in product innovations.

One of the largest, oldest, and most famous of these is Milano Design Week, named after the city of its origin. This name serves as an umbrella for various exhibition activities with different focuses. In Milan, the tradition of furniture design is represented under the title “Salone del Mobile”, which is accompanied by activities using the name “Fuorisalone”, or “outdoor salons”, referring to exhibition spaces located outside the main venue. These spaces are not necessarily outdoors, though some products do use open-air spaces. The point is that the exhibition activities extend beyond the main exhibition halls of Triennale and Fiera, spreading into the wider city centre. Manufacturers and organizers rent spaces that may be used for private purposes or owned by companies unrelated to design. During the design festival, these spaces are offered to both famous and smaller designers and manufacturers to showcase their products in a uniquely arranged, visitor-friendly setting (Fuorisalone, 2024).

As mentioned earlier, Milano Design Week is not only a platform for presenting world-renowned brands across almost all product lines, but it also provides opportunities for emerging projects and design departments from art academies and universities. For five years now, Zlín University has been successfully participating alongside designers striving to minimize environmental impact while offering affordable products. A notable example of this is Zlín University’s collaboration with other design schools from Slovakia,

Poland, Portugal, and Taiwan, which was showcased during Milano Design Week over the past five years. These projects included the “Made in Paper” student paper furniture edition, the food-saving initiative Food Print, the waste management-focused “Taste the Waste”, and the longevity-themed “Long Life”.

Returning to the critical introduction, we want to emphasize that one must not be intimidated by global catastrophic visions but instead rely on oneself, adopt a positive mindset, and contribute to improving the current situation through small, everyday efforts, as advocated by Čapek’s (1982) philosophy.

A significant example of design working for the environment comes from the latest project by the Technical University in Zvolen, specifically the Department of Furniture and Interior Design of the Faculty of Woodworking. This project demonstrates the diversity of marketing communications.

Slovak colleagues have elevated the technological appeal of sustainability by drawing inspiration not from natural materials, but from the principles that naturally govern the formation of biological structures. This approach is called biomimicry. The foundation of this concept was documented by Zuzana Tončíková (2020) in her monograph *From Bioinspiration to Biomimicry*. “Nature creates perfect works of organic minimalism, where nothing can be removed from the form, and everything is designed and set to function flawlessly with

minimal use of materials and energy, while maintaining beautiful and breathtaking forms” (Tončíková, 2020, p. 8). Tončíková explores the history of design approaches inspired by nature and defines two key concepts: biophilia and biomimicry. “Biomimicry is typically applied in addressing technological, product, and functional challenges in projects, while biophilia is more often applied in the context of space design, interiors, and urbanism, with the goal of humanizing the design” (Tončíková, 2020, p. 35). The author delves into the history of these concepts, introduces key figures who viewed design in this way, and develops biomimicry as a method for creating design innovations inspired by nature – its forms, processes, and functions. Her theory, grounded in practical creation, is built on three pillars: an ethical approach, renewed connections between the human and natural worlds, and the imitation of natural processes and shapes.

For Milano Design Week, the result was the “BioWoodesign” collection. At the exhibition site, there was a setup allowing for hands-on testing of the products, complemented by printed materials and a dynamic film projection, which mirrored the project’s web presentation. The concept of biomimicry was explained, and the development process of the products, inspired by natural processes, was outlined. The collection features lighting fixtures and furniture (see, Figures 1-4).

In the field of biomimicry, innovations such as surface coatings inspired by the structure of lotus leaves are

notable; these coatings repel water and resist contamination. For instance, Sto SE & Co. KGaA developed its “Lotusan” product line, a facade paint that, through a specialized microstructure, remains clean over time and inhibits microorganism growth (Xu et al., 2016). Another example is the “WhalePower” project, inspired by the tubercle structure on humpback whale fins. This technology has led to the creation of turbines and fans that are up to 20% more efficient than conventional designs, significantly reducing energy consumption (Fish & Battle, 1995).

Advanced scientific approaches in biomimicry include the development of materials with microstructures derived from the wings of the Morpho butterfly, which reflect light to produce vibrant colours without



Figure 4: Cactus,
Milano Design Week 2024.
Source: BioWoodesign (2024)



Figure 1: Sella, 2024.
Source: BioWoodesign (2024)



Figure 2: Exposure, Milano Design Week 2024.
Source: BioWoodesign (2024)



Figure 3: Puppy, Milano Design Week 2024.
Source: BioWoodesign (2024)

chemical pigments. This effect is now applied in the development of colourless optical materials and photonic structures that reduce the environmental impact of chemical dyes, finding use in packaging and textiles (Vukusic & Sambles, 2003). Another prominent example is biomimetic “nanotubes” inspired by spider silk fibers, which are both exceptionally strong and flexible. These structures facilitate the production of more sustainable composite materials and are utilized in building construction and medical applications, replacing synthetic materials with high production demands (Elices et al., 2011). Through these advancements, biomimicry has secured a growing role in sustainable design, offering scientifically grounded material innovations with a long-term impact on reducing the environmental footprint.

Another example, viewed from a different angle – that of intervening directly into a specific biotic space to transform it – can be seen in the recurring thematic exhibition at the Designblok Prague International design show. Known as “Art House / Our Garden”, this exhibition adopts the concept of the garden as a referential and metaphorical motif for constructing habitable spaces grounded in natural world principles. At Designblok (n.d.), the garden emerges as a multi-layered metaphor for a space requiring human intervention, care, and attention, whether for oneself (biodesign as a principle in fashion design), for others (biomimicry, biophilia, and biomimetics in product design), or for

the public realm (biophilic principles in architecture, public furniture, transport infrastructure, etc.).

Transitioning from this designer microcosm to principles applied to so-called “large public space” – primarily in architecture – one cannot overlook the influence of a major figure in Czech architecture, Jan Kaplický. With his biomorphic approach, Kaplický set a direction for an entire movement that has drawn on natural forms and principles for over half a century. His natural inspirations extended across a wide range of work, from fashion and furniture design to prominent architectural projects. He is known as a pioneer of “blobitecture”, a style of architecture inspired by biomorphic, amoeba-like cellular structures, whose organic forms and properties are utilized to create habitable spaces for people. The most notable examples include the Selfridges department store in Birmingham, UK, and the Enzo Ferrari Museum in Modena, Italy. The rounded, curved shapes of these buildings, along with the “scaly” facade in Birmingham, which functions as a distinctive lighting system, reflect bioinspiration as a foundational principle in the consideration of both functionality and aesthetics in the final structures (Margolius, 2020).

Post Scriptum

A separate issue, even within the realm of marketing communications, that will require more thorough research, is greenwashing – activities that appear sustainable, but whose claims are either unverifiable, obscured, or outright concealed. This could

involve deceptive maneuvers, such as claiming that a product is made from recycled materials when only some of its components are. For example, a product might be made from natural wood, but its production and transportation contribute significantly to CO₂ emissions. Or the product might come in eco-friendly packaging, but the product itself does not exhibit any environmentally friendly properties. Uncovering such instances requires the same expertise and advanced analytical and technological methods that event organizers will sooner or later have to engage with intensively. They will need to demand credible certificates that confirm and verify the true nature of sustainability.

Marketing communications, with their tools, naturally prioritize success that can be measured by sales figures, and are not inclined to complicate matters by highlighting problems that could hinder a product’s entry into the market or accompany it throughout its life cycle. It must be acknowledged that the average consumer lacks the competencies and resources to assess these claims, so the responsibility lies with the organizers and their expert panels, curators, and dramaturges.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34135/ejmap-24-02-05>