



Week 5

Design & Self

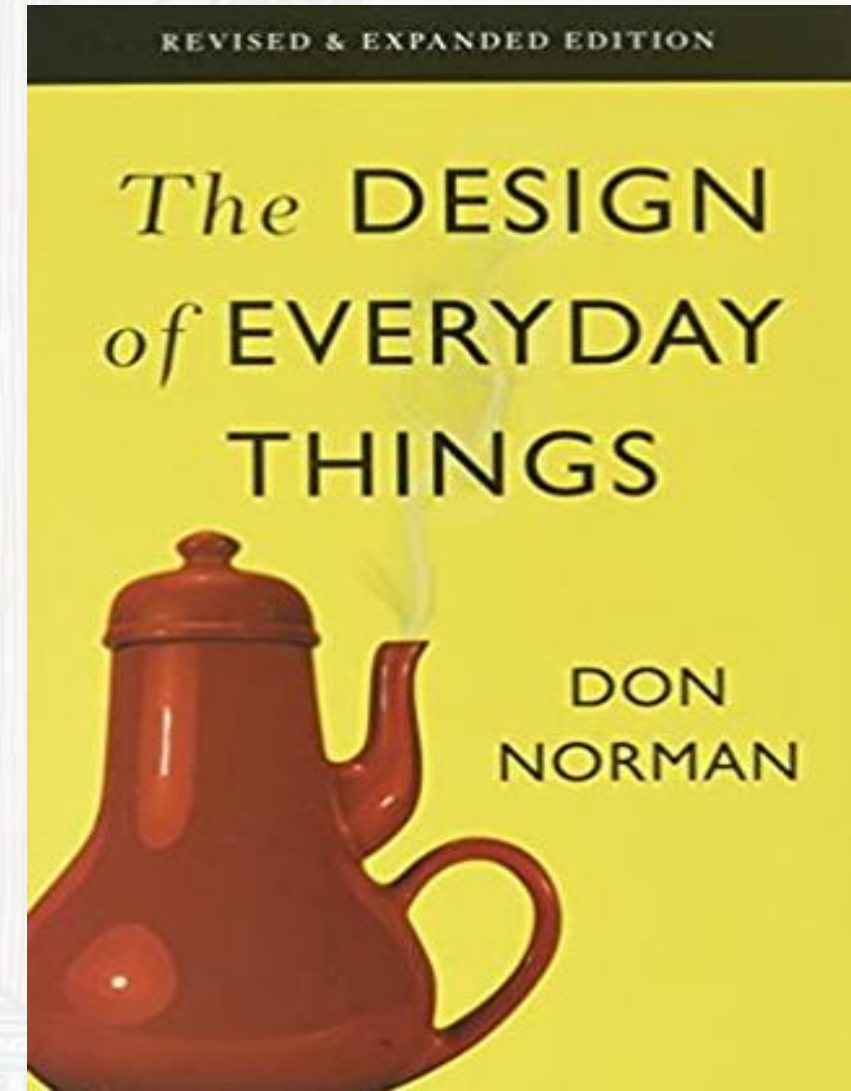
**Social Theory &
Design Thinking (2410302)**

PGS, Fall 2025

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Last Week's Content (Week 4)

- **Norman's Classic Work:** *The Design of Everyday Things* (2013 [1988])
- **Norman's Human-Centered Design (HCD)**, a *Design Philosophy that Helps Minimizing Complexity and Difficulty for Users*
- **5+1 Key Design Parameters as a Framework for Design Analysis & Criticism**



Criticisms of Don A. Norman's HCD (1)

- Problems with Norman's Human-Centered Design (HCD): *Very Functionalistic Orientation, Very Mechanistic Explanation*
- One of the most serious criticisms he has received is that he presents an image of robotic, information-processing human actors struggling to deal with gadgets and technologies.
- Critics say that he does not penetrate into the social or deep psychological analysis (or psychoanalysis) beyond surface behaviors.

Criticisms of Don A. Norman's HCD (2)

- He also does not talk about emotional meanings, or the underlying dynamics of identity, personhood, and self.
- He, furthermore, is not interested in political questions such as how the objects or technologies can possibly create winners and losers, inclusive and exclusive social conditions through power relations.
- Moreover, he is not interested in histories (changes, contingencies, flows of experiences, or local contexts), mainly talking about the present situations of people using gadgets and technologies.

The Non-Neutrality of Technology (1)

- Conventional Thinking (Something You Simply Take for Granted or Passively Accept without Questions or Skepticisms) = It's Just There! (Technology as a Permanent Feature in Our Society. It's natural, fixed, and static and seems to exist with its autonomous force.)
- Thinking Against Convention (NOT to Take Things You See or Hear for Granted or Passively Accept without Any Confrontations with It) = It Doesn't Have to Be There. (Technology Is NOT a Permanent Feature of Our Society.)

The Non-Neutrality of Technology (2)

- **Technology** = Product of Our Decisions → a Sense of “Provisional” Embodied in It → about “Contingencies”
- Technology Is NOT Just *Good* or *Bad* BUT *Designed Products*.
- Thinking about Alternatives: Do We Really Need It? Can We Make It Better?

The Non-Neutrality of Technology (3)

- **Conventional Thinking = Technology Is “Neutral”** → as External Objects with Autonomous Forces, Just There!!!
- We're the Users. Objects (or Techs) Don't Have Meanings or Impacts without Us. They're Neutral.
- **Thinking Against Convention = Technology Has More Implications. It Is Part of Our “Life-Worlds.”** (Will Come Up Later in Next Week's Reading: Week 6.)

The Non-Neutrality of Technology (4)

- For Example: The Confusion Surrounding the Current Debate about the Control of Firearms (C&R, p. 16).
- A Slogan of the Gun Lobby: "***Guns Don't Kill People. People Do***" (C&R, p. 16).
- The neutrality of the object is assumed in that slogan. "People's intentions will be carried out independently of the things they use" (C&R, p. 16).
- C&R takes an opposite position: "There are no 'people' in the abstract, people are what they attend to, what they cherish and use. A person who has a gun in his or her house [hand] is by the fact different from the one who does not" (p. 16).

The Non-Neutrality of Technology (5)

- “Because objects are so intimately related to the self, the same criteria of development can be applied to them as was earlier applied to personhood. Things contribute to the cultivation of the self when they help create order in consciousness at the levels of the person, community, and patterns of natural order. An object that, when attended to, inhibits the pursuit of goals at any of these levels is a hindrance to the development of the self. Thus the material environment that surrounds us is rarely neutral: it either helps the forces of chaos that make life random and disorganized, or it helps to give purpose and direction to one’s life” (C&R, pp. 16-17).

The Meanings of Things

- **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi & Eugene Rochberg-Halton (C&R):** *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (1981)
- **Assigned Chapters:** Part I:
Chapter 1: People and Things, pp. 1-19; Chapter 2: What Things Are For?, pp. 20-54.

The meaning of things

Domestic symbols and the self



Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
& Eugene Rochberg-Halton

People & Things (1)

- Things matter to the “self.” Things are expressive themselves.
- Things are *more fundamental* to the “self” (p. 1).
- Conventional Thinking: Human personalities (self) pre-exist expressions (the Cartesian Conception)
- Things are not simply tools for survival. They are not simply passive vehicles, but they help constitute the “self” the first place. (p. 1).
- Things embody goals, making skills manifest, and shaping the identities of their users. (p. 1)

People & Things (2)

- “Man is not only *homo sapiens* or *homo ludens*. He is also *homo faber*, the maker and user of objects, his self to a large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts. Thus objects also make and use their makers and users. ...” (p. 1)

People & Things (3)

- Social scientists tend to study the internal psychic processes of the individual or in the patterns of relationship between people. They rarely consider the roles of material objects and the relationship between people and objects. (p. 1)

People & Things (4)

- **C&R:** Definitions of “People” and “Things” (pp. 2-17)
- **C&R:** What is possible for me, in my life, in my trajectory?
- Material objects are situated in the “flow” or optimal experiential state (deep psychology). Interactions with material objects or machines have the impact on “selfhood.”
- Reciprocal Dynamics between Objects and Persons (Users)

People & Things (5)

- The main claim/argument of this text is a radical statement. **Why? It's going against the western philosophy or intellectual history.**
- It goes against the Cartesian conception of the "self," as exemplified by the philosophy of René Descartes.
- **Descartes: "I think, therefore I am."** → This statement begets a dualism between mind and body, between the "thinking self" and the "physical things." Thought is non-physical.
- **"I Think." = Privileged Excess to Our *Thoughts***

People & Things (6)

- **Mind-Body Dualism:** Separation between The Interior and The Visible
- I'm not my body. But, I have a mind, so I think. I have a privilege to access my own thoughts and feelings.
- Starting from the "self" → Moving from the Concentric Manner to Know the World → Moving from "Self" to Find Knowledge
- "Self" = Mental NOT Physical
- "Self" = *Discretely Know NOT Inferentially Know*
- NOTE: "Discretely Know" means to know something that is countable and distinct such as facts, numbers, or objects. "Inferentially Know" means to acquire knowledge or understanding that is not directly stated but is brought about by logical reasoning and interpretation of existing information, evidence, and background knowledge.

People & Things (7)

- **Descartes:** Ignoring the Contexts of the “Self” (Social, Cultural, Historical, etc.)
- Contexts or various things or objects beyond you and me are important because they shape the “self.” *There is no such thing as the “self” in the first place.*
- If Descartes separates between the mental (the inner, the mind, the thought) and the physical (the outer, the others, the body, the action), C&R say that such distinction is wrong!

People & Things (8)

- “Who Am I?” = To Answer This by *Inner Essences Are NOT Enough*
- BUT Other Things, Contexts, Events Are Mediations of Your Thoughts.
- **This Week’s Readings:** Thinking BEYOND Yourself to Other Things BEYOND Our Heads and Biases

People & Things (9)

- “Sign” or “Thing” = Projecting Ourselves to the Pastness and Futureness of the Presence (pp. 13-14)
- **Man-Made Things = Double Reaction to Consciousness:**
(1) Psychic Activity of the Interpreter/User and (2) Psychic Energy of the Maker = **Interaction BETWEEN Man and Object** (p. 14)
- **Main Argument (p. 16)**
- Ideas constitute the “self.” We infer ourselves by pointing to our pasts and futures outside of the thinking subjects. **This is the critique of the Cartesian conception.**

People & Things (10)

•Comparison Between Descartes (Rationalism) and C&R (Revisionism):

Descartes	C&R
"Self" IS the <i>Beginning</i> (Cogito or the "Real Me" Inside or the Absolute Origin).	"Self" IS the <i>Outcome</i> (through Critical Reflection of Things or <i>Cultivation</i>).
The Cartesian Approach = Peeling off the Allegedly False Persona or Mask of the Self to Attain the "Real Me"	C&R Approach = Cultivation as a Self-Corrective Process, in Which Some Goals Are Refined or Given Expressions and the Others Are Rejected

People & Things (11)

- “Selfhood” = How is “self” shaped by environments and ordinary physical things? (pp. 14-15)
- Things shape our personalities. Things change our lives.
- Without an object “X, Y, Z,” I would be a different person.
- The object “X, Y, Z” do not simply the reflection of “self.” What surrounds you does not just simply reflect who you are BUT constitute who you are!

People & Things (12)

- “Selfhood” = Process of Becoming or Achieving, a Goal, a Cultivation
- **Design = Cultivation of “Self” (p. 8)**
- **Cultivation** is referred to as how meaning involves an active process of interpretation oriented toward goals (p. xi) or a process of interpretation and self-control motivated by goals rather than by origins (p. 4).
- “Cultivation refers to the process of investing psychic energy so that one becomes conscious of the goals operating within oneself, among and between other persons, and in the environment” (p. 13).

People & Things (13)

- Knowledge of the “Self” = Knowledge of the Nature (Constructivism) (John Dewey)
- Cultivation of “Self” = Paying Attention Selectively to Other Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts (Attention as Psychic Energy, p. 4)
- Cultivation of “Self” = Individuals have free dispositions to reflect on their own thoughts and actions (“human freedom”).

People & Things (14)

- “Psychic activity consists of intentions that direct the attention through which information is selected and processes in consciousness. When attending to something, we do so in order to realize some intention. Because psychic activity determines the dynamics of self-consciousness, it also determines what a person is by constituting his or her self” (pp. 4-5).

People & Things (15)

- “Personhood” = The Ability to Advocate One’s Psychic Energy Freely (p. 9) = “Cultivation” (p. 13)
- “Self-Control” = The Ability to Invest Psychic Energy Freely in Two Ways: Balancing Psychic Order/Disorder and Social Order/Disorder
- Things have stabilizing effects for ongoing selves by congealing “identities,” more concrete identities.
- **This Week’s Readings:** Providing Deeper Theoretical Claims → What it means to be a “person” comes from relationships with objects or things.
- Even the most mundane objects or things shape who we are in a profound sense.

People & Things (16)

- **Thinking against the Grain** → Against the Cartesian Common Sense: Things or objects *simply* reflect “self” (complete self).
- Different shapes of contextual components bring about different human beings or selves.

People & Things (17)

- Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition* (1958)
- Hannah Arendt: **Stabilizing Identity = We make order out of chaos (Shapeless Self) in 3 arenas (Mind/Man, Body/Nature, and World or Human-Made Institutions and Objects).**
- Hannah Arendt: The “World” as the 3rd Dimension BEYOND the Cartesian Dualism
- Hannah Arendt: Things or objects surrounding us are part of who we are.

People & Things (18)

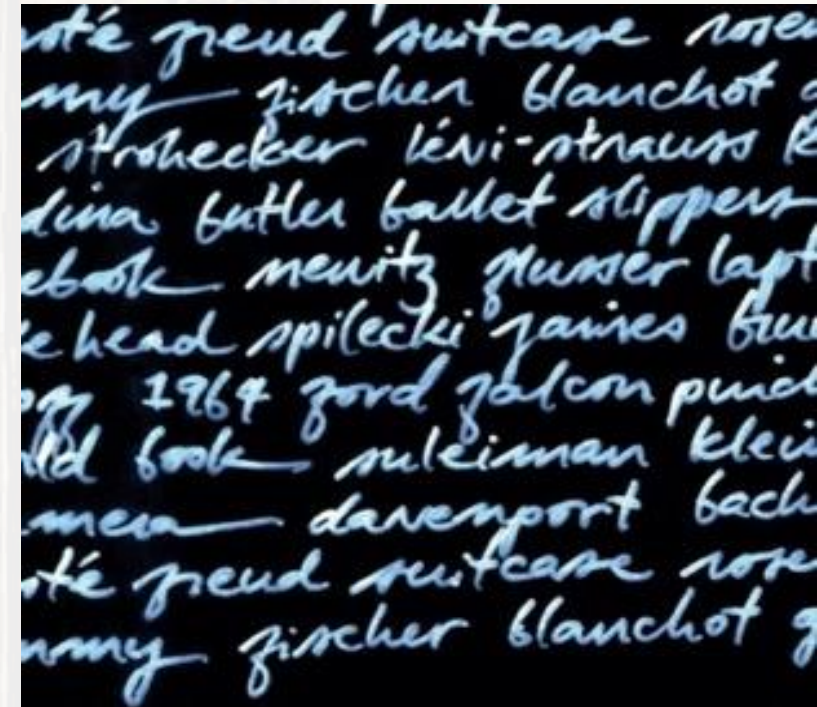
- Design is important beyond common sense. Design is central in human life not just some decorations.
- Hannah Arendt: Design can improve human conditions! (Quotes: pp. 16-17)
- What Should Design Do?: Expanding the Horizon of Possibilities OR Blocking the Expansion of Imagination?
- C&R: Design SHOULD expand the horizon of possibilities, by stimulating actions to change the world or providing solutions to real-world problems.

What Things Are For?

- C&R: Chapter 2: What Things Are For?: A More Detailed Discussion of the Conception of “Things” (Objects)
- Things as “Signs” (pp. 20-22)
- Things as Symbols that Mediate Conflicts within the Self (pp. 22-25)
- Things as Signs that Express Qualities of the Self (pp. 25-29)
- Objects as Signs of Status (pp. 29-32)
- Objects as Symbols of Social Integration (pp. 33-38)
- Three Levels of Representation (pp. 38-45)
- The Socializing Effect of Things (pp. 45-50)
- Things as Role Models (pp. 50-52)

Evocative Objects (1)

- **Sherry Turkle:** *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (2007)
- **Assigned Chapters:** "Introduction: The Things That Matter" by Sherry Turkle, pp. 3-10; The Four Following Excerpted Vignettes: "The Archive" by Susan Yee, pp. 30-37; "Ballet Slippers" by Eden Medina, pp. 54-61; "The Elite Glucometer" by Joseph Cevetello, pp. 62-69; "The Radio" by Julian Beinart, pp. 102-109; and "What Makes an Object Evocative?" by Sherry Turkle, pp. 307-326.



Evocative Objects

Things We Think With

edited and with an introduction
by Sherry Turkle

Evocative Objects (2)

- Organization of the Book: Table of Content
- Introduction: Things That Matter
- Objects of Design and Play
- Objects of Discipline and Desire
- Objects of History and Exchange
- Objects of Transition and Passage
- Objects of Mourning and Memory
- Objects of Meditation and New Vision
- What Makes an Object Evocative?

Evocative Objects (3)

- **Sherry Turkle:** NOT a Pro- or Anti-Technology BUT MORE “Reflection”
- **Sherry Turkle:** Instrumental Technology vs. Subjective Technology

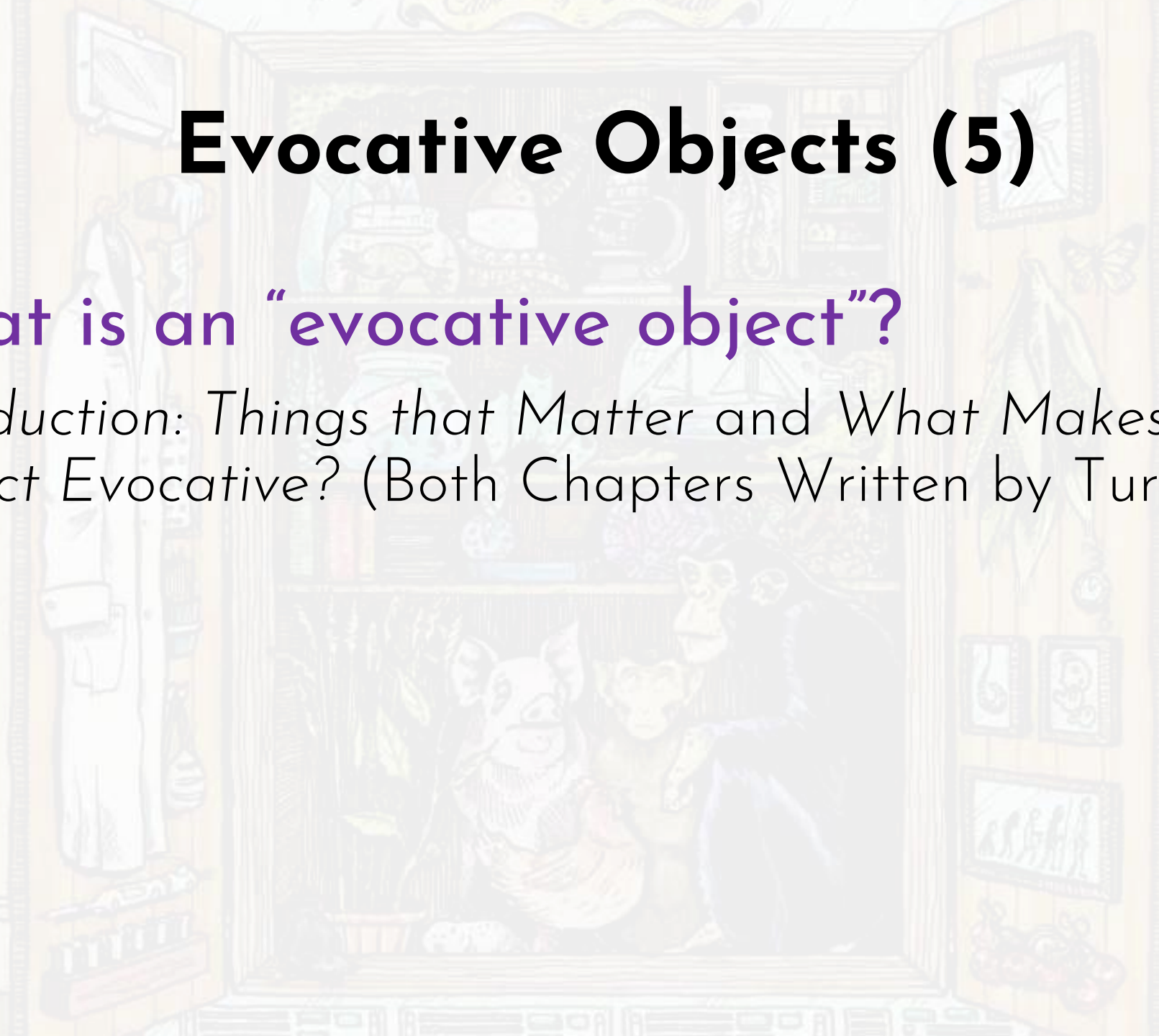
Instrumental Technology	Subjective Technology
What a tech can DO FOR US?	What a tech can DO TO US?
Neutral Physical Things NOT Important to “Self”	Physical Things HELP Constituting “Self”

Evocative Objects (4)

- **Subjective Technology:** Providing an Emotional Depth to Physical Things
- **Instrumental Technology:** Serving as an Effective Tool, Aid, or Utility for Human Beings
- On Subjective vs. Instrumental Technology, please also see Turkle's other work: *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (pp. 18-19; 2005 [1984])

Evocative Objects (5)

- What is an “evocative object”?
- *Introduction: Things that Matter and What Makes an Object Evocative?* (Both Chapters Written by Turkle)



Some Concluding Remarks

- Designing Environments as *Dynamics and Unfolding* = “Wicked Problems” and the Ways C&R and Turkle think
- Both C&R and Turkle discuss “designs” in terms of deep psychological questions, pointing to the contexts of “self.” The “self” is contextualized in multiple ways such as in temporal or spatial dimensions. The self-identification is a discursive process, happening in time and space.

Next Week's Theme:

Week 6: *Design & Democracy*

