

Design and Ethics

We live in a world in which our species has never known and could never predict. Humans are able to communicate and travel the globe faster than ever, obtain natural resources in moments, and affect our culture from anywhere on Earth. Despite all of this, our seemingly successful reality causes us to battle new challenges and destruction. Our progress has in turn created problems like rising global temperatures, a human population growing at unsustainable rates, and (especially in the United States) increasing economic inequality. Much like our technology, that moves in a more powerful way than ever, humanity is reaching a critical point in which we need to begin implementing ethics in our design.

While we notice a growing awareness about environmental vulnerability and how practices of production and consumption that we both create and support are developing a future that lacks safety and sustainability, we can also see the potential of design to create necessary change. Ethical turns are being taken in most professional practices and design is no exception. For many this means design's role is evolving. Designers have responsibilities beyond expressive and functional capabilities. Now the design process includes aesthetics humans desire as well as considerations for the consequence we create. What this means is that the traditional role of the designer has evolved. This reframe is based on new acknowledgements of the designer and their connection to products, process, and prevention. With this shift in roles we question social responsibility, sustainability, and larger impact of products and experiences beyond creation.

Ethics is not determined by a single school of thought, group of attitudes, or beliefs grounded in any individual principle. To move forward design must take a cross disciplinary approach. In order to follow a value system of questioning that is balanced and fair we must allow for a wide range of socio-cultural practices and perspectives to be weighed. The conversation should be about who develops ethical guidelines and in what context they are relevant in order to build a fair foundation by which to discuss solutions. When we consider other disciplines we change the frame. Looking at a lens outside of design we are able to understand how concepts are connected and make more informed decisions. By looking beyond a single discipline we are able to base products and the means by which they are made and consumed in logical and effective ways.

The design community will need to work together to apply empathetic and iterative methods to larger social issues. This will protect people and the world we live in. Additionally, we will see a reframing in failed systems that have been the cause of problems in the past. Often these problems were caused by services designed by nondesigners. Working to fix pre existing issues gives us a chance to collaboratively change. When we work together we are more powerful than any one individual hoping to change the course of ethics in design. The input and iterations offered from many people are required for us to reach solutions.

This is a very broad look at an extremely complex issue. I am hopeful for the future and design at large. In this very short piece I hope to add a sense of visibility to issues that are often avoided or remain brushed on the rug. An awareness not just for those of us who understand these ideas but for those of us who do not know how much design plays a role in our lives is important. If nothing else, I hope this essay has encouraged you to create change.