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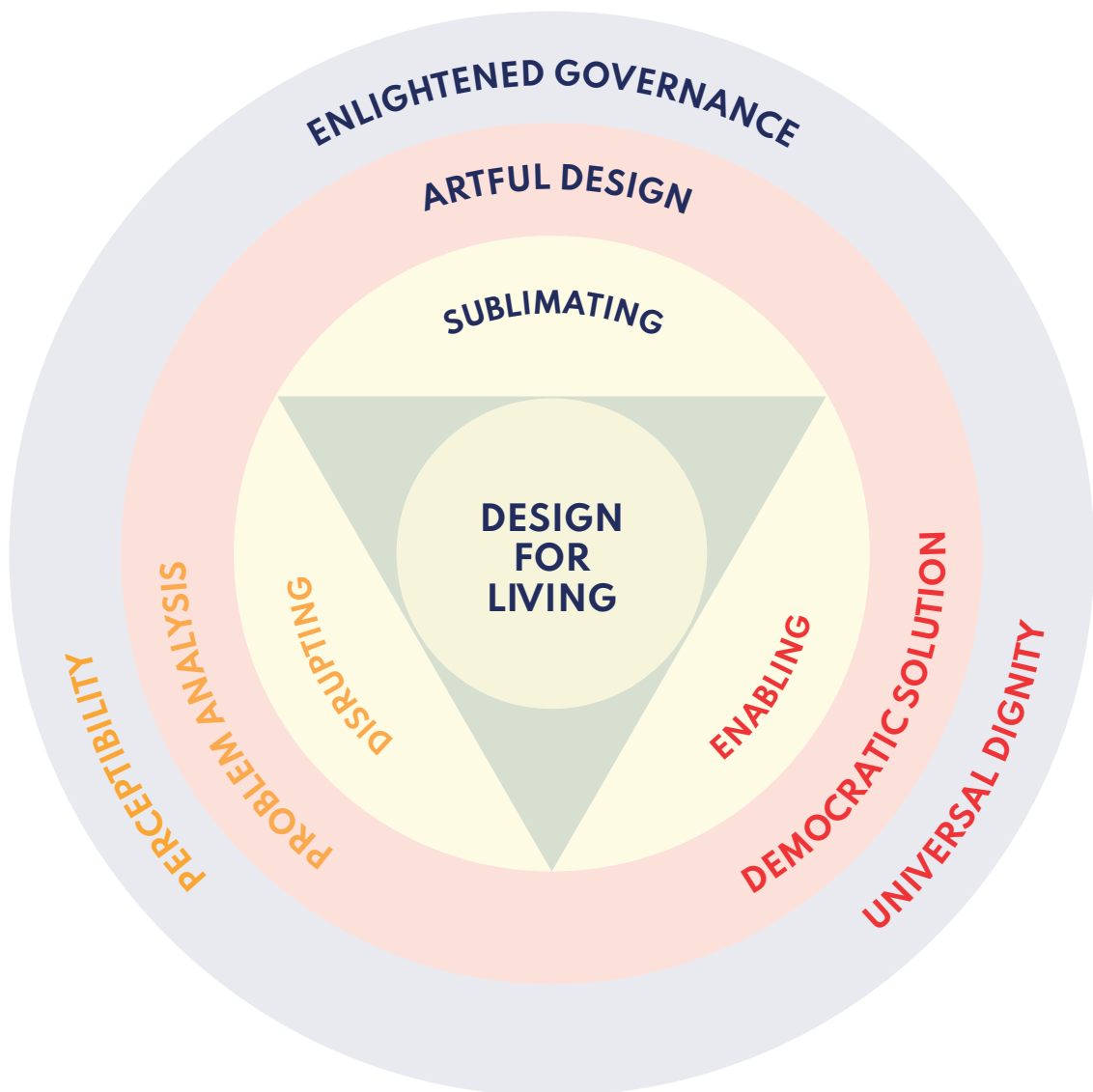
SINCE

1946



DESIGNING

A BRAVE NEW ERA



“When I have finished working on a problem, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong”—the words of R. Buckminster Fuller capture the aesthetic core of our argument in this issue. As we attempt to reconnect with *Marg*'s early engagement with “design for living”, our interpretation of the idea resonates with the Dymaxion, “a kind of provisional prototype, a mere sketch, of the glorious, eventual future”.*

*Phil Patton, “A 3-Wheel Dream That Died at Takeoff”, *The New York Times*, June 15, 2008.

NOTES AND QUERIES

Dear Reader,

One more time this season has missed its legendary gayness, the world its annual share of rainbow parades. But Pride has steered past the fear of the invisible lurking in our streets, taking a digital turn to come out. LGBTTQQAAP+ voices are rising in the rooms of apps like Clubhouse, designed to break new ground as communication enablers.

With technology aiding diversity of perspectives in all walks of life, inclusive representation of identities has emerged as a seminal design concern. In 2018, Daniel Quasar redesigned Gilbert Baker's iconic Rainbow Flag with a chevron representing communities of colour. In June 2021, a circle was added to it for "intersex inclusion".

Is such literalism a sustainable design approach for today's complex democracies? The new Progress Pride Flag has been termed "a triumph for inclusiveness, but a design disaster". It lacks the rainbow flag's poetic evocations; it fails its first practicality, to be perceptible from a distance, from all sides, as it flaps or flutters.

Tokenism has never advanced any humanitarian cause. Nor has elitism nourished any artistic or scientific revolution. The enterprise of design must possess the courage to whet each emerging idea against a living question such as the one the janitors of Miami addressed to the curatorial design of Art Basel 2019. The workers saw Maurizio Cattelan's "conceptual work" *Comedian*, which took pride of place at the fair, as it was—a banana taped on a wall, "authenticated" by the artist and priced at \$120,000. They rose in protest, asking: "Is a banana worth more than us?"

In an artworld that has lost its social purpose, sense of integrity and ethical direction, such a poignant question may miss the mark. Even the pandemic could not deter conceptualism from scaling such bizarre heights as where Salvatore Garau took it a few weeks ago when he auctioned his "immaterial sculpture" *Lo Sono* ("I am").

This is not an argument to beat experimentalism, but a warning against letting depravity consume its design, silence its conscience, exploit technology to create illusions of authenticity.

That leads us to the non-fungible token, the enfant terrible of today's tech-art space. An NFT on a digital collage could transform a Mike Winkelmann, who had never sold a print for more than \$100, into a sensation called Beeple when it was sold for \$69 million at Christie's, positioning him "among the top three most valuable living artists".

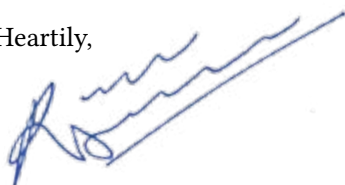
Technology can be a vehicle of dignity; market, a site of evolution; politics, the fulfilment of a promise. Their designs can uphold the quality of humanity, the relevance of our arts and sciences, the truth of our democracy. Hying up a banana, a digital collage or simply "nothing" as a rare art concept is as much a travesty as a multibillion architectural design to build grandiose administrative offices in a nation where large portions of its citizenry do not have access even to basic needs.

In a world ailing from audio-visual overload, the heart and hands of design may disrupt custom, lift broken wings and sublimate the smell, taste and touch of human living.

The verso shows the visualization of an imaginary that builds on our founder's proposal for a "design for living". An imagined conversation with him preludes *Marg's* exploration in this issue, of the possibilities of designing a brave today with efficiency, innovativeness and aesthetic depth, towards making our tomorrow an artful ecosystem, a shared joy.

While at it, we pay tribute to three *pathmakers* in India's design history; we celebrate a few contemporary designers who have transformed their disabilities into inspirations. We foreground the critical idiom of the comic art; we raise a design question for all genres of art: How can our creative work today be an integral part of a future of truth?

Heartily,



Rizio B. Yohannan

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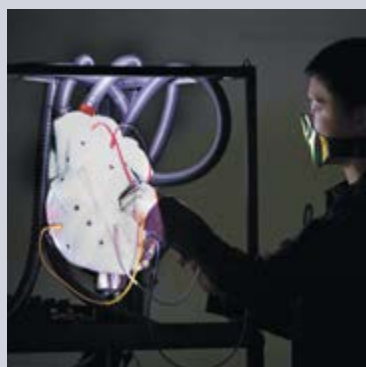
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AT THE CORE

How must humanity design its post-pandemic living? Provoked by this urgent question, we have placed design's redemptive power at the core of this issue. *Marg's* historic engagement with the concept of *design for living* finds organic contemporary connections in the contributions in this section. Musician and computer scientist Ge Wang's interdisciplinary vision seeks to create a collective aesthetic of joy that evokes a sense of the sublime. His emphasis on the larger play of design beyond limited problem-solving finds synergy in the graphic story that follows—Mohd Salman's and Rai's combined take on invention and erasure as a continuum that marks our fellowship with the newly launched comics quarterly *Comixense*. Their case for the inherent renewability of life's design leads to inventor-entrepreneur Sanandan Sudhir's discussion on the essential conditions for creating and sustaining an ecosystem of innovation in India. We join hands with these thinkers to imagine a brave new era that is at once disruptive and heartfelt.



What is Artful Design?

Academic and software designer **Ge Wang** makes an impassioned case for Artful Design, the subject of his 2018 book. In this interview, he explains how design for him is not about prettiness, utility or self-indulgence. “It is a tool that gives you the space to be yourself,” hinting that design includes musicality, rebellion and joy.

Marg: What are your thoughts on artful design and how did you come to write a book on it? What are the ethics and challenges surrounding artful design?

Ge Wang (GW): I build tools in the service of creative expression and most often for music, such as programming languages, Virtual Reality experiences and Artificial Intelligence systems. What started out as a computer music design book, *Artful Design: Technology in Search of the Sublime*, turned into a broader book about design, addressing first: what the nature of design is. It is something we all do when we shape the world around us with a purpose in mind. Second, what does it mean to design well? And third, in this age of technology and unyielding human discord, how do we design ethically?

Technology is not going to solve all our problems or create wealth. Rather it could bring us, if we design it that way, a kind of inner peace. One of the laws of artful design is that *good design enables us, but great design understands us*. It makes us feel like we belong and that we can be free. The ethics of technology is central to the aesthetic dimension of artful design. The reason why we work is making “design for flourishing”, but who gets to flourish? You are never designing an object only for the few, it entails thinking about the larger social design project, whether it is roads, policies or software. When we

design, we’re wielding a kind of power over people who come into contact with us. We need to take responsibility and have some humility.

Marg: The focus is now shifting towards “flourishing”. It is also not enough for people to feel enabled, they have to feel great. Also, the general understanding of technology is that it is too removed from the physical, but you have bridged that gap. So how do you make technology the channel to physicality? Also, if you can go on to the dimension of play, which is connected to the physical, but also connected to the sense of feeling great.

GW: We live in a world that is chaotic. Technology has also probably helped to bring us here. I mention in my book a principle in artful design which is applicable here too: Play is what we do when we are free, but play is also what we do to be free. Play is agency. It is frivolous and it serves no purpose, but that means it has to be valuable in itself.

Marg: But how does one get to artful design?

GW: The way we educate engineers should evolve. Tomorrow’s designer has to be much more than a

specialist; he has to be a technological artist, more of a moral-ethical inventor and system designer.

In artful design, I have this notion of a “pi-shaped person” (see page 26 for the diagram). Where on the left leg is just disciplinary expertise—for me, it was computer science—on the right leg is domain expertise—it was music for me, for someone else it could be public health. But this horizontal bar is what I call the aesthetic lens, which is the philosophical, artistic and moral lens that gives broader meaning and context in bridging the two legs. This is why it matters for engineers to not just gain a passing awareness, but a deep understanding, of context.

Therefore, liberal education really matters, and not in an elitist way. I am educating a fairly elite group of students, but the hope is that they can look beyond themselves and use the power they have wisely.

Marg: And do you think technologists and those working in the scientific domain acknowledge the significance of artful design or is it a concept that is still alien to most people?

GW: On the one hand, it is a concept that is new and perhaps alien to a lot of people—this is why it is a manifesto. It is not readily understood in the current culture of thinking about design and engineering. At the same time, people like us who care to think and are worried about the world are increasingly feeling a misalignment between what our technology is doing for us and the kind of communities we want to have.

In that sense, the concept of artful design is not alien at all. It is trying to address this disjunction we feel between ourselves and technology. So on the surface it may seem like a radical idea, but it is not saying combine art and technology. Rather, it is saying make technology that is artful. While humanists and artists are already engaging with it, engineers are not taught to think in this way even as some of them wish to. I have sometimes come across students for whom this is very new, but for some others their reaction would be: “This is the language I have really been looking for and I did not even know that it existed.”

Marg: How is what you’re doing through design and computer science different from the power of art and music generally? Were there any platforms that you particularly took note of because of their efforts to bring peace and people together?

GW: We have to think about this connection: What if our tools understood us the way music could understand us? Music has to be a really great reference point from which to think: Am I making something that, even if it doesn’t make sound, is musical in a deeper artistic sense?

In the past year of the pandemic, the tools for making art were impoverished, but they are better than nothing.



A \$5 pencil bag from a Walmart store, which “transforms” into its own zipper, understands the need for play.

MANIFESTO

In our age of rapidly evolving technology and unyielding human restlessness and discord, design ought to be more than simply functional; it should be expressive, socially meaningful, and humanistic. Design should transcend the purely technological, encompass the human, and strive for the sublime.

Sublime design presents itself, first and last, as a useful thing, but nestled within that window of interaction lies the novel articulation of a thought, an idea, a reflection—an invisible truth that speaks to us, intimate yet universal, purposeful without necessity of purpose, that leaves us playful, understood, elevated. It is a transformation so subtle that it escapes our conscious grasp but that once experienced—like music—we would never want to be without again.

Design should be artful.

**ARTFUL
DESIGN**
(Prelude)

Zoom, with musicians coming together and playing music, is not a substitute for face-to-face interactions.

The first question for all of us is: What things in our life are actually sublime? Not that many, and once you realize it, you will say, “I know what you mean.”

The second: What technologies do we use for the clarity that the sublime brings? What does it mean to try to design for the sublime?

Marg: To go from the sublime to the comic, why did you choose the comic book format? Because comedy is open-ended unlike tragedy? But then we also think of the comic book as a means to express rebellion. So did you want to consciously communicate in a subversive way?

GW: The comic book is a medium which has its own power to get across the message, to also change or modulate it. It's a 488-page comic book, which tries to cover a lot of ground. It is optimistic, but that is not comics are for. There's a principle in Chapter Eight that says, “Worry, Be Happy”. This is the post-Bobby McFerrin view of the

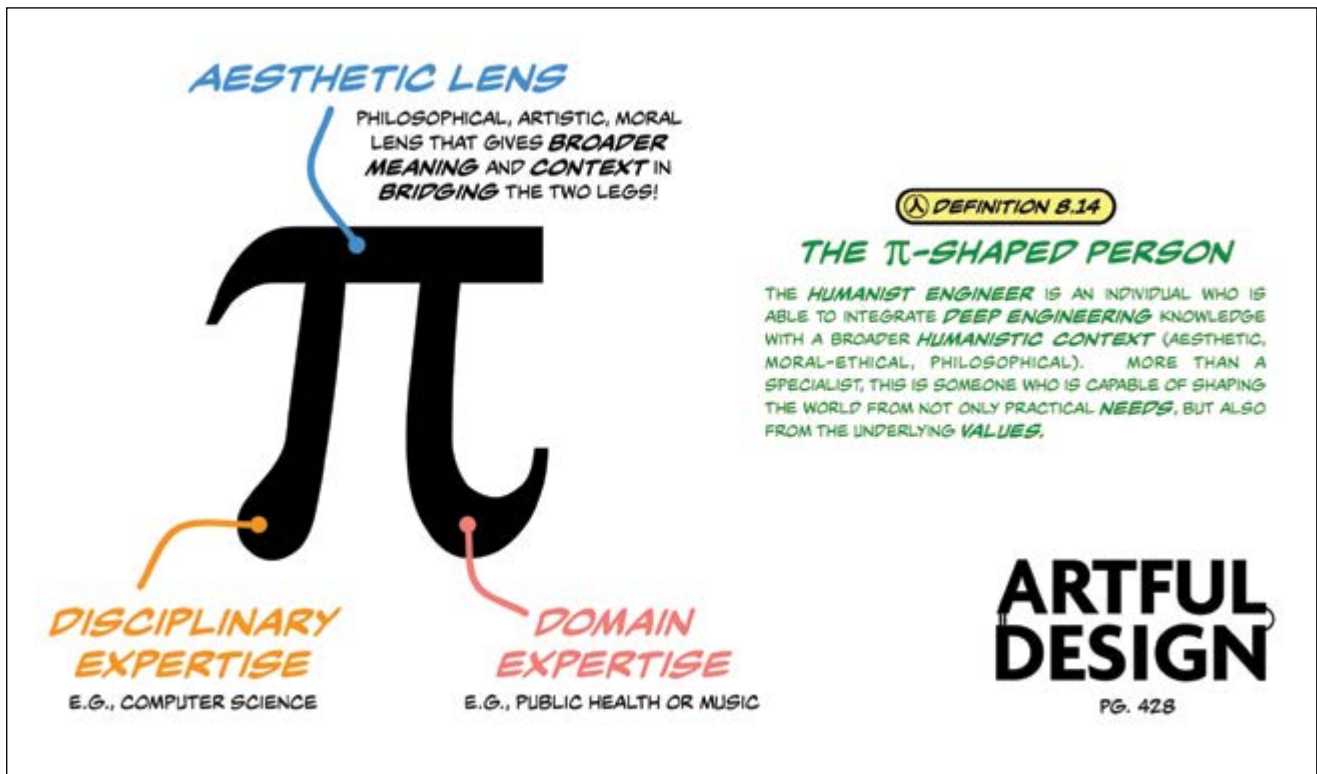
world: The world gives you so many things to worry about, but you can't wait until all of it is solved before you can learn to find a kind of flourishing or happiness for yourself.

Therefore, in artful design, it is not only critical thinking, but also critical making. You design things for the world you want to live in, for the kind of people you want to be.

The rebellion in the book is to say: We are at a stage where designers and engineers have got to do more than just be practical technicians or problem-solvers. We have to be the pi-shaped person basically.

Also, since I grew up reading comic books—the monochrome, cheaply printed, flip books bought off street vendors in Beijing—I saw in them a different way to tell stories; more than tell stories it's a way to inhabit.

Marg: The word “inhabit” brings “belong” to mind—politically charged terms today because one is also forced to inhabit, belong in places. Does your application of artfulness allow one to understand and coexist or is it inviting us to belong?



The “Pi-Shaped Person” from Ge Wang’s book, *Artful Design*, offers a rationale for a broad-based liberal education.

GW: “Inhabit” may evoke an architectural concept, a space. Artful design is saying that we have to go beyond feelings such as “Is this pretty or useful?” to “Does this make you feel included?” The idea of inhabiting is not necessarily in the way the world expects it of you, but rather a tool that gives you the space to be yourself.

Marg: These are times of hyper-nationalism and social upheaval in India: From a design perspective how does one access happiness and harmonious relationships in a place where you neither feel a sense of belonging nor feel an outsider? Residents of Delhi were witness to the protests against the new citizenship laws in 2020. A Muslim student who was trying to visit a friend did not feel safe enough to make the trip.

GW: Artful design is not here to directly address these issues, but it would ask: Who is designing what parts of the systems? Ultimately, all design is politics. It is trying to show us a way to think and convince us to design these things. For this to happen, the right people have to be in the right places. Artful design is trying to be a generational tool so that the people we are educating today—when they hopefully become CEOs, policymakers, government officials, investors—have a framework to think for themselves on why they want to support certain

causes and not others. This is why I am rebelling against human-centred design that says, “Let’s build an app to help people in this situation”. The problem is not a technology problem. The problem is a human, social problem.

As the author of this crazy comic book, I don’t have a lot of power in terms of being able to change what we’re talking about, but I have the responsibility to educate students who will have the power to reach people. I try to be an activist in certain ways.

To know in detail about Ge Wang’s work in the area of artful design, log into <https://artful.design>.

Figure Acknowledgments

All images used in this conversation piece have been reproduced from the 2018 book, *Artful Design: Technology in Search of the Sublime*, with permission from Ge Wang.

