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Design Justice **Book Review**

"Design Justice" is a transformative design framework created by the Design Justice

Network, an active community of design practitioners founded in 2015. The framework consists

of ten principles, the Ten Design Justice Principles, which challenge dominant design practices

that perpetuate structural inequalities and advocate for community-centered processes that

address systemic oppression. In *Design Justice,* Sasha Costanza-Chock critiques the dominant

practices prevalent at large tech companies, community design spaces, and educational

institutions through the lens of the design justice framework. She analyzes these practices'

limitations, particularly their failure to meaningfully involve marginalized communities or

address the intersections of race, class, gender, disability, and other dimensions of structural

inequality.

The book is a contribution to the growing landscape on the intersection of social justice

and technology, alongside influential works such as *Race After Technology* (2019), *Artificial*

Unintelligence (2019)*,* and *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018). But Chock sets herself apart from

these other critical books by sustaining focus on the design justice framework through her

critiques, and addressing topics beyond AI and algorithms to explore five interconnected

dimensions of design across five chapters: design values, design practices, design narratives,

design sites, and design pedagogies. Throughout the chapters, Chock also focuses on providing

concrete examples of ongoing initiatives and organizations that are already putting design justice

principles in practice. In this review, I will first provide a breakdown of each chapter to unpack

the book's arguments and examples, and follow with my thorough final analysis and critiques at the end.

[Introduction] Chock opens the book with a personal example of a modern design with harmful assumptions: TSA body scanners. While intended to enhance security, these scanners marginalize trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals, as well as Black women, Muslim women, Sikh men, and people with disabilities. The design enforces cis-normativity and subjects those who don't conform to gender binaries or normative bodies to invasive searches. Although I found myself wishing Chock had proposed alternative solutions to the problem, this example served a compelling and concrete entry point for readers to understand how modern design choices that appear neutral can, in fact, still perpetuate exclusion and discrimination.

From this example, Chock introduces the matrix of domination, a critical framework coined by Patricia Hill Collins that is used throughout the book to illustrate how intersecting forms of oppression shape one's affordances. Chock also reflects on her own position within this matrix, openly acknowledging her privilege as a white, able-bodied, and educated individual. This acknowledgment is significant, as it highlights the importance of self-reflection in understanding one's positionality within systems of power – a key argument throughout the book. By inviting readers to consider their own position in the matrix, she sets the stage for a more introspective discussion.

Lastly, Chock transitions to an introduction of the Design Justice Network, its ten principles, its history, its mission, and gives credit to them for the design justice framework she uses throughout this book. In doing so, Chock highlights another key argument of the book: the importance of giving credit to the collective efforts of marginalized communities. As someone who highly values background context and concrete examples, I found this introduction

particularly strong and enjoyable. It does not assume prior knowledge and ensures that all readers are well-informed before diving into the book's arguments.

[**Chapter 1**] Chapter 1 focuses on design values, examining how design practices and influential design texts perpetuate structural inequalities by embedding biased values into everyday objects and systems, and constraining affordances for marginalized groups. Chock frames the chapter around the central question: *"What values should we encode and reproduce into the objects and systems we design?"* (Chock, 24). Through a series of compelling examples, Chock illustrates how seemingly minor design choices can have compounding, exclusionary impacts that constrain affordances and signal to marginalized users that their needs are not a priority. Examples include facial recognition technology and soap dispensers not recognizing darker skin tones due to poor performance of optical sensors, Native American and LGBTQ names being flagged by Facebook as "fake" because algorithms used to detect fake names were trained disproportionately with European names, and default language settings in phone applications prioritizing English to reduce bounce rates among English speakers.

In addition to critiquing products, Chock also critiques influential design texts like *The Design of Everyday Things* and *Don't Make Me Think*, which continue to shape values in the design profession but fail to address how race, class, gender, disability, and other dimensions of the matrix of domination influence usability and accessibility. This oversight perpetuates a narrow, universalist approach that excludes marginalized communities. Chock does a strong job in this first chapter, continuing to provide a compelling and concrete entry point for readers by underscoring the harmful implications created by the universalist designs in many products and outdated influential design texts, and emphasizing the urgent need to adopt design justice practices that center the needs of those most affected by exclusive design decisions.

[Chapter 2] Chapter 2 focuses on design practices, examining how design systems in large tech companies often reinforce a cycle of exclusion, where people of marginalized communities are not only underrepresented in design teams but also underserved by the products created. Chock frames the chapter around two central questions: *"Who should get to do design?"* and *"How should we move toward community control of design processes?"* (Chock, 24). Chock first highlights the extreme lack of racial diversity in tech companies and leadership positions. She then argues how money powerfully shapes which users' needs are prioritized – the needs of users who are cisgender, white, able-bodied, English-speaking, and have access to technology are nearly always prioritized, as this user group is seen as the most profitable.

One powerful example that Chock provides in this chapter to demonstrate these two points is the widespread design practice of creating user personas at tech companies. User personas are fictional, generalized representations of the target users of a product or service. Although user personas are intended to help designers focus on the diversity of target users and create better designs, Chock critiques this practice as "far too often user personas are created out of thin air by members of the design team, based on their own assumptions or stereotypes about groups of people who might occupy a very different location in the matrix of domination. And when this happens, user personas are objectified assumptions about end users. These objectified assumptions then guide product development to fit stereotyped but unvalidated user needs." (Chock, 83) I found this chapter to present some contradictions in Chock's critique. While she emphasizes the need to diversify design teams, she also contends that diversity alone is insufficient, as profit-driven companies will in the end still continue to prioritize the most lucrative users. Ultimately, Chock calls for more meaningful inclusion of community members throughout design processes. By doing so, there is potential to end this cycle of exclusion.

[Chapter 3] Chapter 3 focuses on design narratives, examining how stories about design and innovation are exploitative, often overlooking or erasing contributions from marginalized communities. Chock centers the chapter around the question: *"Who should receive attention and credit for design work?"* (Chock, 24). She emphasizes the importance of the scope and attribution of design stories, and heavily critiques the "genius inventor" narrative that misattributes technological advances to privileged individuals rather than acknowledging the collective efforts behind them. Twitter, the Internet, live streaming, and the encrypted messaging protocols later adopted by WhatsApp are examples of technological innovations that originated from collective efforts, particularly within social movements and among marginalized communities, yet were ultimately appropriated by powerful actors. Another example discussed, the Gates Foundation *Reinvent the Toilet Challenge,* an initiative held by the Gates Foundation between 2011-2018 that awarded grants to researchers and organizations to develop sustainable, affordable toilet technologies for the billions worldwide without toilet access, is also thoroughly criticized in this chapter. Chock argues that low cost and sustainable solutions already existed in villages in China, and that this challenge failed to consider the importance of scoping and attribution to the community, as it tasked privileged "genius inventors" in elite institutions thousands of miles away from their clients to solve this issue due to a "lack of interest in pre existing community-based design practices." (Chock, 128). This chapter was strong and effectively critiques the "exclusionary and elitist understandings of what technology is and where it comes from" (Chock, 128). By providing explicit examples and directing attention to the importance of scoping and attribution in design stories, Chock effectively calls for a reframing of design narratives to center the contributions of communities rather than perpetuating exploitative storytelling.

[**Chapter 4**] Chapter 4 focuses on community design sites (such as hackerspaces, fab labs, hackathons, and DiscoTechs), examining how spaces originally intended to democratize innovation and foster grassroots collaboration have often been co-opted by corporate and governmental interests. This shift has transformed them from community-driven spaces into profit-oriented, exclusionary environments. Chock frames the chapter around the two questions: *"What design sites are privileged and what sites are ignored?"* and *"How should we make design sites accessible to those who will be most impacted by design processes?"* (Chock, 24). She argues that, despite their founding ideals of inclusivity, these spaces frequently exclude marginalized communities, favoring White and Asian, cisgender, able-bodied, and male participants. Chock further argues that even in situations when marginalized communities are included, there is often a lack of meaningful ownership and non-extractive practices, which reinforce existing power dynamics. I appreciate how Chock's critique extends beyond tech companies, often seen as an easy target, encouraging readers to consider how community design sites can also inadvertently replicate the same exclusionary practices they claim to counteract. She calls for a reimagining of these design spaces, urging a shift toward non-extractive practices that prioritize accessibility and thoughtfully include marginalized communities as active co-creators rather than token participants.

[**Chapter 5**] Chapter 5 explores design pedagogies, focusing on the challenges of incorporating a design justice framework into design education. Chock looks to the future of design education and frames the chapter around the question: *"How should we teach and learn about design justice?"* (Chock, 24). She revisits the Design Justice Network and the Ten Design Justice Principles introduced earlier in the book. However, drawing on real-life case studies from her students at MIT, she spends time acknowledging the logistical challenges often encountered

in collaborative projects between design students and communities. These include the difficulty of meaningfully involving community members who don't often have the free time to dedicate to a design process, balancing the voices of community members with those of student designers, and managing time constraints, which often result in excessive focus on research and ideation at the expense of prototyping and iteration. Additionally, Chock critiques the frequent failure to hand off collected data to the community after student assignments are completed, leaving projects unfinished or unimpactful. This chapter is notably self-critical, directly acknowledging the challenges of applying a design justice framework in educational contexts. Its insights are particularly valuable for students and educators, offering relatable reflections on the complexities of applying theory into practice.

[Conclusion] The final chapter, "Directions for Future Work", provides a logical ending for the book. After exploring different dimensions of design across five chapters, Chock explores the possible directions for future work and addresses common concerns of the design justice framework. She discusses the evolving ethical resistance within the tech industry, highlighting the rise of the #TechWontBuildIt movement, where tech workers at different companies have begun refusing to participate in projects that perpetuate harm, such as Google's Project Maven or Microsoft's contracts with ICE. This discussion effectively grounds the design justice framework within real-world ethical dilemmas and resistance efforts.

In the remainder of the chapter, Chock responds to concerns she has received from others throughout the years over the practicality of design justice within projects with limited time and resources. She argues that "we have to articulate a vision of the world we want" and insists that "working slower is worth it to build a better, more just and sustainable world." (Chock, 219) While her standpoint is admirable, this portion of the book left me disappointed and unsatisfied.

There was a missed opportunity to provide more concrete strategies or guidance on how to reconcile these ideals with the realities of design work. Practical examples would have strengthened this conclusion, offering actionable steps for practitioners.

[Final Analysis & Critique] *Design Justice* is a powerful call to action for all design practitioners. The central argument is clear: design injustice permeates all design domains. From the products we create, the narratives we tell, the pedagogies we teach, and the people we chose to make design decisions, Chock demonstrates "how design reproduces the matrix of domination" (Chock, 217). Through real-world examples, she powerfully illustrates how marginalized communities are often overlooked, excluded, or harmed by dominant design processes, making a compelling case for change. This argument is especially relevant in a field where accessibility and inclusion are central priorities.

While many practitioners and organizations are already actively doing design justice work today, this framework has yet to be widely adopted. This book effectively demonstrates that there are still dominant design practices with critical issues that must be discussed openly and directly addressed in order to effectively dismantle the systemic inequities that permeate all design spaces. Chock's expertise shines through in the book from her frequent use of references to other authors and display of concrete examples, whether through critiques or by uplifting organizations that embody design justice principles. Her transparent, critical, and narrative tone deeply engages the reader, often encouraging self-reflection and fostering a sense of connection.

One critique I have is that for individual readers, especially young designers working within large tech companies, *Design Justice* will feel abstract. The book focuses heavily on critiques, and highlighting the theoretical frameworks underlying design justice, but offers fewer actionable step-by-step methods for implementing these ideas into everyday practice. Chock

effectively opens the eyes of the young designer, however, may leave them feeling overwhelmed or unsure of how to begin applying these concepts within rigid corporate environments that may not fully support justice-oriented approaches. Although it is not the responsibility of one book to resolve all challenges, and Chock's intention may simply be to start the conversation, readers may need to seek additional resources to complement the theoretical foundation of *Design Justice*. However, this complementary material may not yet exist as *Design Justice* is the only influential book focused on design on the conversations of social justice and technology. Because of this, I believe the book's true audience, whether intended or not, will be designers in more authoritative positions, rather than design students or entry-level professionals. Providing thorough case studies with clear, practical toolkits would be the next step in helping emerging designers take incremental steps toward more inclusive and ethical design, especially within challenging organizational structures.

Works Cited

Costanza-Chock, Sasha. *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*.

MIT Press, 2020.