Abolish the Cop Inside Your (Designer's) Head.

Unraveling the Links Between Design and Policing

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American policing has always faced crises: of legitimacy, of efficacy, of budgeting, of racist discrimination, and of heinous violence. Over the last year, radical calls to defund, disarm, and disband police departments drowned out the historically widely-accepted explanations of these crises. Black women have always led these calls, but in 2020 much of the U.S. public heard them for the first time.

We see three main connections between design and policing. First, design creates the tools and products of policing. Designers created every stun gun, detention facility, and data dashboard that police use. Second, policing uses the tools of design thinking to legitimize itself, particularly by focusing on user experience and procedural justice. Third, design and policing both rely on and reproduce the same ideologies. This leads us to wonder whether design and policing lead to similar outcomes. From our perspective, both design and policing rely on creating "professionals" who then determine what social metrics to surveil, analyze, and change. Those making decisions are neither accountable for nor impacted by their actions' outcomes on the targeted communities.

We urge designers, especially designers who seek to build a world without policing and cages, to adopt a praxis of Abolitionist Design. To do so, we have three recommendations. One, designers must refuse to design policing tools and should prohibit their work from ever being used for policing's ends. Two, designers should resist and push back against the appropriation of design methods and discourse for policing's ends. Three, designers must develop their knowledge and discernment of policing ideologies, and in turn, of abolitionist ones. Designers should fight to abolish literal cops and the ones in their heads. Freedom demands that, and nothing less.

When Design Works in Service of Policing

Designers play an important role in creating, building, and making the world we live in. This necessarily includes policing, law enforcement, and the criminal penal system. Designers, alongside engineers and product managers, developed intuitive digital infrastructure for law enforcement databases,[1] created ergonomic weapons and armor,[2] constructed efficient carceral facilities,[3] developed user-friendly training for law enforcement, and designed well-composed police branding and insignia.[4] This labor is actively designing for policing, for its people, its tools, its infrastructure, and its systems.

How Policing Uses Design to Legitimize Itself

In researching relationships between design firms and academic institutions with law enforcement agencies in recent years, we learned that many projects have focused on fostering "interpersonal listening" and "meaningful discussion," building trust between police and communities,[6] managing "citizen expectations,"[7] or enhancing "the general public's positive perceptions of the police."[8] These designers seem to understand policing's most pressing problem as a user experience issue. Translated to the policing context, the designers focus our attention on "community engagement strategies" and "enhancing public trust."

But these design interventions are a symptom of something bigger. They are symptoms of how policing has adopted the tools of design (user experience-focused interventions, focus groups, branding, etc.) to legitimize itself.[9] Policing's central issue is its perception, not what it results in (incarceration, inequality, less safety).

Designers are helping police shift public attention away from calls to defund, disarm, and abolish, and instead towards improving the public's perception of police. The most salient example is the push for "procedural justice," a term coined by academics to describe how the public perceives the fairness of policing regardless of outcomes, that is, how they perceive the justness of the procedure.[10] Academics and designers have developed metrics, implemented implicit bias trainings to teach officers how their unconscious thoughts can impact their behavior, and offered procedural justice trainings to emphasize the importance of interpersonal courtesy and explaining why the officer is taking certain actions.

These interventions are intended to improve public relations and enhance police legitimacy. None of them limit the use of force, reduce instances of police violemce, or address the negative social outcomes of policing.[11] None alter the structural conditions that lead to surveillance, over-policing, racialized policing practices, excessive force, profiling, and so many other horrors of policing. Cynically, these interventions seem to be aimed to produce a more compliant, accepting public who will still obey when ordered and trade privacy for the false promises of "public safety."

In addition to focusing on user experience, police have adopted the tools of design thinking to invest in the apparatus and appearance of re-positioning policing over fundamental structural change. Legal academics refer to this dynamic as "preservation through transformation:" hegemonic power structures, like the law and police, will change just enough to preserve themselves as an institution; no more and no less.[12]

What Design and Policing Have in Common

Understanding how policing's logics and ideologies have burrowed their way into design practices presents a more nuanced, pernicious question, but the answer is clear. Designers should not only stop designing for policing, but they also need to understand and resist using the ideologies of policing in designing everything else.

Critical Resistance, a leading organization in abolitionist praxis, describes policing in broad terms. Their definition is as follows: "Policing is, in its very nature, in opposition to self-determination. The practices of watching, questioning, intimidating and arresting people through the use of force are violent practices. Not only do cops use threats of violence—the guns on their hips, the clubs on their belts—to control people, they often use force in making stops, inquiries, and arrests. Harassment of people on the street or 'stop and frisk' practices—stopping people to frisk them for drugs or weapons—are tools often used to intimidate, monitor, and control poor people and people of color. While we're told the police are on the street to stop or solve 'crime,' their very presence is a way of enforcing social control, and actually creates more violence."[13]

When we talk about policing, we do not limit our understanding to officers' daily tasks (e.g., drive around in cars, write reports, process individuals in custody, use force, etc.). For us, "policing" necessarily includes the various ideologies that enforce social control, limit freedom and agency, and protect the nation-state and private property.

When we studied policing's ideologies and logics, we began to notice eerily similar philosophies in design's ethos and practices. Empathy, for instance, has always been a core tenet of design and design thinking. Many designers believe that empathy is what allows some individuals, who are removed from a challenge, to solve said challenge while remaining "user centered." It absolves design professionals of the responsibility to center lived experience, as they can "walk a mile in the shoes" of others. Poorly designed products and services can then be explained as an outcome of lack of empathy, rather than the inability of design professionals to do the work of community building that allows them to be trusted by and in service of those their designs should serve.

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Recently, many law enforcement agencies have adopted tactics that appear to be rooted in this design thinking-version of empathy. Police efforts have included facilitating individual "ride alongs," hosting community meetings, pushing for individual conversations between officers and community members, and using virtual reality to help non-officers empathize with the difficult choices officers face. These efforts frame policing's problem as a lack of empathy from police and community alike. But this is incorrect. Communities' lack of trust stems from the current and historical realities of policing, including routine violence, discrimination, criminalization of poverty, and sexual harassment and assault. Policing contributes to, rather than solves, these entrenched problems.

Empathy is just one example of how policing ideologies are shared by the discipline and practice of design. There are many others. In the following table, we summarize some of these ideologies and describe how **policing** and **design** both use and reproduce them.

Ideologies Employed & Reproduced by Design and Policing

Commodification of Rights

In the design of many products, privacy is commodified as a luxury good rather than a basic right. Able consumers can purchase privacy-friendly features, such as the option to export their data or the ability to auto-delete data after a certain time, or buy their way out of having to see advertisements by paying a premium. Research shows that even the act of reading all of the privacy policies to which one is exposed online would take the average adult 76 working days per year, the equivalent of a $781 billion opportunity cost to the U.S. market.[17] As Sarah T. Hamid put it, privacy is "less like a design value, and more like a luxury demand."[18]

Discrimination

Discriminatory design practices take many forms, including determining who is worthy to design for based on their race, class, consumption ability, or other characteristics. For instance, "hostile architecture" is an intentional design practice to keep unhoused people out of public space. These practices literally install bolts and spikes on surfaces and steps and place intermittent armrests on public benches.[20] Discrimination in design extends to a wide range of products and services, from optical heart rate monitors[21] to the design of bus systems, railways, and other forms of public transportation.[22] More recently, discriminatory design was described as the "New Jim Code," with tech designers encoding biases and inequity into technical systems.[23]

Commodification of Rights

Policing and the criminal legal system often require money for freedom, even absent criminal convictions. Cash bail and bail-bondsmen literally put a dollar amount on freedom, effectively making jails debtors' prisons.[14] Similarly, policing targets non-criminal behavior (drinking in public) and low-level crimes ("graffiti, public urination, panhandling, littering, and unlicensed street vending") in public spaces.[15] Policing criminalizes individuals for simply existing, or being poor, in public. Finally, once ensnared in the criminal penal system, individuals find that poverty becomes nearly impossible to escape.[16]

Discrimination

At the local level, "discriminatory" policing defines policing. Stopping "suspicious" people, pulling over "unfamiliar" cars in the neighborhood, and ticketing car drivers for broken tail lights. Discrimination is legally protected through relying on officer discretion; the law permits officers to determine "where to patrol, when to use force, who to arrest, who to kill or let live"[19] based on how judges interpret the law. The criminal legal system, including judges, is deferential towards officer discretion. At the national level, discriminatory law enforcement looks like Muslim-targeted screenings at airports, surveillance of Black activists, gendered body scans that out trans individuals, and the failure to reckon with the links between white supremacist violence and policing.

Disposability and Extraction[24]

In design research, "subjects" are useful as long as designers are able to extract knowledge, insight, or social capital from them, and are quickly disposed of once their value is no longer of use. Even when designers attempt to facilitate processes with research or user testing participants in inclusive, democratic, or participatory ways, design processes remain by and large extractive to communities.[27]

Dominance

Designers yield a lot of power. They hold the key to methodology and solutions including ownership of the process, authorship, access to people, to information, the ability to assign validity, value, and accountability.[30] Through these modes of power, designers control research and design outcomes. As "process experts," designers are centered as the main agents in the act of designing.[31] Designers often act as de facto gatekeepers for deciding what meanings are included, connections are drawn, and knowledge produced. Designers exert power in producing and limiting knowledge based on what they view as significant or practicable.

Empathy

Empathy is a word commonly used to describe the initial phase of the design process, in which designers seek to understand their intended users in order to inform subsequent design decisions. Designers have been taught that they can perform acts of empathy, such as suggesting that a designer can learn about the disabled experience by walking around blindfolded or on crutches, instead of centering the lived experiences of people with disabilities.[35] The concept of empathy has been bastardized so much that rarely do designers actually willfully surrender power in order to be empathetic.[36]

Incrementalism

By and large, design is mostly concerned with tinkering with and attempting to "fix" products and services, often without questioning the systemic and structural conditions surrounding them. Some argue that the main problem with design is that it's incrementalist at its core. Even when you probe "designers' understanding of innovation and creativity," they "are often entangled with the reproduction of the (capitalist and colonial) status quo."[38]

Disposability and Extraction[24]

Policing sacrifices bodies in the name of public safety. By targeting those who exist, but don't or can't contribute to capitalism in public, policing deems some individuals as worthy of displacement and disappearance.[25] One salient example is the routine criminalization of unhoused encampments while cities have rushed to build outdoor eating tents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another example is when police seize and sell belongings prior to conviction through a process called "asset forfeiture." The proceedings from the sales go back into police budgets, allowing them to purchase more weapons or to hire more cops.[26]

Dominance

Many police have seen themselves as "warriors" or as "guardians."[28] Both metaphors rely on how police exert power over others. The state permits officers to determine whether to arrest an individual, to transport them for booking, and to subject them to invasive searches. Police are "experts" when exercising discretion, like when acting on "hunches" or identifying "suspicious behavior." Additionally, police use of force policies always permit police to use a greater level of force. This means that police are always permitted a greater level of legal protection than civilians, even when off-duty.[29]

Empathy

Mainstream media focuses on how cops are "expected" to do the work of a social worker, parent, teacher, etc., in an attempt to induce us to empathize with the difficulties of being a cop.[32] Even police departments emphasize that civilians lack empathy for or understanding of police.[33] They encourage citizens to use virtual reality headsets to walk in the shoes of a cop, to attend "police academies," or go for "ride alongs."[34] But that focus is asymmetrical. Media and law enforcement departments seldom express empathy for those shot and murdered by police, for their families, for their communities.

Incrementalism

The history of modern policing is defined by reformism and incrementalism. Many police departments have adopted "professional" approaches, including requiring training and/or higher education degrees, creating internal policies, and creating independent civilian review groups. But none of this has changed the basic role of law enforcement in the United States: to protect private property and to enforce racial capitalism.[37]

Designers focus on individual actions and behaviors, and often fail to consider how structural conditions (e.g., anti-Blackness, poverty, and many -ism's) shape and constrain people's affective responses and decision making. This results in many designers rendering problems as merely technical or aesthetic issues, even when they result from social, economic, and environmental systems. Design is "limited by [its] myopic focus on technological innovation and failure to address political power dynamics."[40] This failure reproduces the structural conditions it claims to address. As such, design "functions as symbolic violence when it is involved with the creation and reproduction of ideas, practices, products and tools that result in structural and other types of violence."[41]

"Everything we make is subjective and designs can therefore never be neutral, global, universal."[43] As much as design's neutrality and universality is a myth, so is the idea that designers are impartial, trained to be fair and objective. First, design projects and solutions are shaped by political agendas and human biases. Second, designers are also not neutral observers mediating the distance and interaction between clients/partners and communities. Third, designers often fall back on being "client-centered," which distances them from being accountable for the impact of their work on communities.

Designers have created deeply invasive products by embedding tracking and surveilling features. Increasingly, consumers buy smart devices with cameras, thermostats, virtual assistants, and microphones. These trends continue even when tech companies are known to surveil consumers and then harvest, manipulate, and sell the collected private data. Even in public, we are subjected to surveillance. Examples include private and public security cameras, facial recognition software, DNA and biometric databases, acoustic gunshot detection, drones, electronic monitoring, and risk profiling algorithms. All of these designs are invested in "the control, coercion, capture, and exile of entire categories of people."[46]

The mental models of design continue to privilege white, Western, European, post-colonial, post-imperialist frameworks, norms, and cultural expressions. This led some to posit that design and design thinking protect white supremacy[50] by perpetuating characteristics of white supremacy culture. These characteristics include perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, valuing quantity over quality, worship of the written word, belief in only one right way, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, belief that "I'm the only one who can do this right," belief that progress is bigger and more, belief in objectivity, and claiming a right to comfort.[51] Others have extended this analysis and argued that design thinking and its modernist roots are merely a rebrand for white supremacy.[52]

Individualism

Policing claims to focus on individual interactions and exchanges. Policing says it asks whether an individual meets the criteria to be arrested at that moment. Policing's individualism is rooted in neoliberalism, namely the idea that social problems result from failures of individual responsibility and morality, rather than wider social structures and collective action. This promotes a moralistic division between the deserving and undeserving.[39] In focusing on individual interactions, policing is able to frame police brutality and murder individual issues to solve (or reform). But policing itself is a form of violence, and violence is a fixture of policing, not a glitch in its system.

Myth of Objectivity

Police use technology, data, and the guise of scientific inquiry to support their claims that they are objective and efficacious in addressing crime.[42] Police use "predictive" policing models and basic statistical methods to deploy resources. But both rely on historical "crime data," or what we should more critically view as historical criminalization data. The data measure the rate of criminalization historically, not the existence of violence or harm historically. Thus, current police leaders will claim that they are "objective" when the data reflect historical, racist norms of previous decades.

Surveillance

After 9/11, the federal government greatly expanded the powers of law enforcement and local police to surveil, monitor, and access records of private denizens.[44] Police have state and federal databases at their disposal and can search with little oversight. Judges, too, often sign search warrants, even when the application lacks legally required, accurate information. In short, police can and do access massive amounts of information. Communities subject to police surveillance "are much more likely to produce more bodies for the punishment industry."[45]

White Supremacy Culture

Race and socioeconomic class shape definitions of criminality and practices of criminalization.[47] This is especially true for survival crimes, like petty theft and sex work. It is also uniquely apt to describe disparate, anti-Black sentencing rates or the lack of care Black rape survivors are provided. As law professor Monica Bell explains, Black Americans are subjected to, but not protected by, the law.[48] Additionally, given the existence and growth of the racialized wealth gap, policing protects white-owned property interests and white comfort over Black lives. Moreover, many members of law enforcement and the military are members in white supremacist hate groups and armed militias.[49]

Toward an Abolitionist Design Praxis

Designing an abolitionist future is no small task, but it is the most important one we have. Abolition not only requires that we literally abolish policing everywhere,[53] but that we create local, responsive, community-led alternatives that will make policing obsolete. Many alternatives already exist and provide critical reminders of the endless possibilities and potential sites of resistance that an abolitionist praxis offers.[54]

While disbanding law enforcement is necessary for abolitionist futures, abolition requires that we all participate in creating and proliferating alternatives to the systems that harm us. Some of our favorite activists described abolition as "not some distant future but something we create in every moment when we say no to the traps of empire and yes to the nourishing possibilities dreamed of and practiced by our ancestors and friends. Every time we insist on accessible and affirming healthcare, safe and quality education, meaningful and secure employment, loving and healing relationships, and being our full and whole selves, we are doing abolition. Abolition is about breaking down things that oppress and building up things that nourish. Abolition is the practice of transformation in the here and now and the ever after."[55]

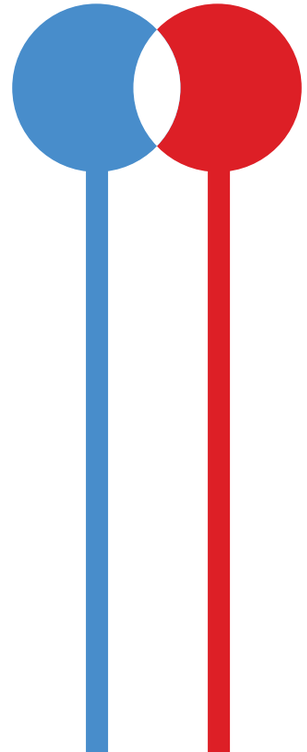
Yes, we literally want designers to refuse to work for prisons, cops, ICE, immigration detention, the military, and on all the products, services, technologies, and built environments used by policing. We don't need any more ergonomic handcuffs or more efficient body cams. Designers must also stop producing and amplifying copaganda, defined as "the reproduction and circulation in mainstream media of propaganda that is favorable to law enforcement."[56]

But we also need designers to recognize the ideologies of policing in their own work and seek to undo them, and develop a resistance-oriented praxis, in an attempt to figure out "how design can be infused with a more explicit sense of politics—a radical politics—[as] one of the most important questions critical theory can pose to design practice."[57] Here are some ways to start building an Abolitionist Design praxis:

- Learn about police and prison industrial complex abolition. Study with friends and peers, and get involved in fights against expanding police, incarceration, and surveillance. Get involved in mutual aid.
- Center de-colonial practices, disability justice (nothing about us without us),[58] and anti-racism[59] in your work.[60]
- Seek to improve the material conditions of the communities you work with. Ensure that everyone is getting something from the work, including paying participants.[61] Build this into every project proposal and budget.
- Research the parties and stakeholders you are working with. Understand what motivations they have and what they're getting out of working with you. Determine whether the project ultimately seeks to recuperate or prop up systems that are ultimately harmful to the most marginalized. Avoid legitimizing state-sanctioned violence.
- Challenge the myth that designers are neutral, objective agents. Practice critical self-reflexivity to examine your power, assumptions, and the ways in which your values, identities, and positionality affect your work and your relationship with communities. Make it a continuous and ever-evolving practice.
- Invest in relationship building with and be in service of communities. Work in solidarity with and amplify the power of community-based organizations. Counter dominance behaviors embedded in design "expertise" and practice non-hierarchical ways of working.
- Resist essentialism, focus on the structural conditions. Fight back against essentialist notions that say, for example, poor people, Black people, young men, etc., commit more crimes. Draw attention to how certain sets of practices result in the criminalization of Black people, poor people, people with disabilities, undocumented people, sex workers, and gender non-conforming people. The state focuses enforcement on these populations, resulting in cycles of poverty and targeted policing.
- Normalize balancing individual, specific stories and structural realities. Frame design research findings with statements about how things are, including information about the racialized wealth gap, the gendered and racialized pay gap, public health disparities, and state involvement in communities.
- Develop your capacity to identify and resist logics of splitting up groups of people into categories of deserving and undeserving. For example, don't require participants to be sober, have a stable address, or present in gender-conforming ways to be able to access life affirming products and services.
- Work in coalition with or join groups that organize against carceral and surveilling technologies like facial recognition. Fight for abolitionist futures, data sovereignty, and community self-governance when it comes to technology.[62] Such groups include the Carceral Tech Resistance Network,[63] Color Coded LA,[64] May First,[65] and the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition.[66]
- Develop a set of abolitionist criteria against which to assess whether you should offer your labor to certain organizations or engagements. Look at examples of criteria developed by critical thinkers for inspiration.[67] Some questions could include: Does the work reduce the scale of policing? Does it challenge the notion that police increase safety? Does it decrease resources available to police?

Ultimately, this is about recognizing the limitations of design, and when to advocate for not using design altogether. Rachel Herzing, a co-founder of Critical Resistance, states, "If one sees policing for what it is—a set of practices sanctioned by the state to enforce law and maintain social control and cultural hegemony through the use of force—one may more easily recognize that perhaps the goal should not be to improve how policing functions but to reduce its role in our lives."[68]

Herzing's wise words leave us with one question. If we see design for what it was set out to be—a set of capitalistic practices that assert consumerist and dominance behaviors through turning the innate human ability to inquire, problem solve, and create into a specialized and inaccessible practice—at what point should we stop trying to improve design and instead reduce its role in our lives? •



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