



*Joe + Josephine*, Henry Dreyfuss Associates 1974 (MIT Press)  
 “You’ve never met them, but if you’re seated, you’re basically sitting in their chair.”  
 (Kevin Slavin, *Design as Participation*, 2016)

### (1) What does design mean to me?

Many times during my academic path, I have been asked what my career path is. It is often followed up with the question of whether I am a designer, and I have always been unsure what to reply. I have designed objects, experiences, and ideas, yet I wouldn’t define myself as a designer. Sometimes I am torn between describing myself as an artist or a designer, which makes me want to analyse the different meanings I associate with each word. As I evaluate whether I am a designer or not, it makes me wonder what the dictionary definition of a designer is.

The first definition offered by the Merriam-Webster dictionary for the word *designer* is “one who creates and often executes plans for a project or structure”, whereas for the word *artist*, it is “a person who creates art (such as painting, sculpture, music, or writing) using conscious skill and creative imagination”.

It appears that the difference lies in calculative planning versus creative passion. When we think of an artist, we think of someone who is passionate, emotional and maybe impulsive. The artist

involves themselves throughout the entire creative process. This contrasts heavily with the stereotype we have of a designer; someone who spends hours working on moodboards and prototypes before making something concrete, only to have it approved (or not) by somebody above them.

There lies not only a difference in textbook definitions between the two words, but also stereotypes we have of each occupation. “Artist” is often a word associated with prestige, reserved for people who have overcome their struggles through their artwork. To quote Louise Bourgeois, “artists are born, not made”. On the other hand, the “designer” has been to design school. Both stereotypes are a bit absurd and extreme to me, and do not apply to most cases I see.

I suppose we have developed the connotation that design is inherently consumerist and for commercial purposes. A designer designs clothes for the summer fashion season, cereal box packaging for the new Kellogg’s flavour, lampshades for a multinational company and pop-up shops for the latest marketing campaign. Those designs are often made by someone in California, but the material to make them is outsourced from Bangladesh.

However, the world of design has been through many changes over the years. Designers once standardised products for your average person like Joe & Josephine, whose measurements are shown in the photo above. Since then, we have shifted to a hyper-individualist, user-centered approach to design, at the height of UX design and social media. Now, human activity is placed at the center of the design process. “Where Joe and Josephine had anatomy, users have behaviour, intention, desire.”, writes Kevin Slavin in *Design as participation*.

A designer’s role has changed many times over the course of history, and it is bound to continue evolving. Could design mimic some of the qualities found in the art world? Keeping the organisational structure, but adding more emotion, passion and involving not only themselves, but also other stakeholders in the design process. Rather than designing for people, we could design with people, and not only.

What if we could create a new generation of designers who were more passionate, emotional, and more involved in their work? What if these designers could care more about their community and the impact of their designs? This is what design means to me. It’s an ideal vision, and not exactly what I see in the world, but I would like to get there someday.

If this is what design could be, then I would identify myself as a designer.

## (2) How can design be used to transform your world?

We encounter all sorts of visual stimulation every single day, through an array of different media. Our phones, our tvs, billboards, and even buses are used as mediums to display visuals. However, I am disappointed at the fact that this power is not being utilised as a tool for change, knowledge or emotion, but rather selling sh\*t. I have noticed that a lot of the content we consume is advertisements, either explicit, or hidden within entertainment.

Whether it be on a taxi door or an intermittent ad before a YouTube video, we are being bombarded with commercials. In 2017, Forbes stated: “digital marketing experts estimate that most

Americans are exposed to around 4,000 to 10,000 ads each day". Since then, ad time has only increased online.

With all the potential and progress we've seen in new technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, social media, photography, video editing etc. I find it is a waste to see so much of it used primarily for advertisements. Yet another company promoting yet another product and producing yet another advertisement to get yet another person convinced that they need to buy yet another thing they don't need.

This makes me question why it is like this. What are the priorities found in the current Western neoliberal society I live in? I notice individualism, scarcity, profit and consumption amongst others. Why do we have a planetary approach to material extraction, supply chains, and travel (through globalisation) yet no plans for planetary wellbeing? Are there ways of finding alternative structures to those in place?

Sometimes, we are in denial of the fact that humans have caused the Wicked problems we are facing, because we do not want to admit that we have designed the systems that allowed us to get to this point. All the things - for better or for worse - are a result of design choices made by the generations that came before us.

"It might be hard to accept that humans have full responsibility for the current climate emergency and social imbalances, but we have designed all of it. Designing something is not just to define its aesthetics or proportions, neither is it limited to objects. Design is about making decisions or provoking decisions of others. [...] These relationships are shaped by a global model of production and consumption that operates following economic principles based on extraction & competition and pursues growth & profit."

(Tomas Diez, Distributed Design)

Through the prioritization of growth and profit, we have ended up with a world facing overconsumption and a climate crisis. I would like to see the use of new technologies as a source of innovation aimed at improving living conditions, reducing toxic waste and finding carbon and oil-free energy solutions. What if the algorithms designed to make TikTok more addicting and polarizing instead valued our mental well being and education over screen time? What if we funded renewable energy technologies rather than oil production and the military?

There is something so interesting yet simultaneously challenging when facing these problems, because they are so difficult to solve. However, by redefining and reevaluating our priorities, we can understand what direction we can shift the world towards. The futures we create depend on our values right now. If our societal values were different, then we could use design to adapt to them, thus changing the paradigms in which we are currently living.

I know I can be too idealistic when it comes to these matters. Although I critique this aspect of society, part of me fears - or knows - that I may inevitably end up in the marketing industry, trying to sell products in a world already filled with too many of them. With the skills I possess; photography, video editing, motion graphics, 2D/3D, interaction design etc, the most conventional route is advertising or marketing. Becoming the designer is easier than becoming the artist, when it comes to monetary value. Part of me would enjoy making that kind of content for brands I align with, but part of me wants to fight against overconsumption and find new ways of defining meaning in my life and the life of others.

I hope that by integrating the values I have in my practice, I can slowly change the world I am living in. The previously mentioned “new generation of designers” can shift our priorities away from current values, and towards regeneration, co-creation, education and global wellbeing. Through these changes, we can shape a world with less anxiety, less polarization, more abundance and overall happiness.

### (3) How can design be used to give you purpose?

“This world is of a single piece; yet, we invent nets to trap it for our inspection. Then we mistake our nets for the reality of the piece. In these nets we catch the fishes of the intellect but the sea of wholeness forever eludes our grasp. So, we forget our original intent and then mistake the nets for the sea.

Three of these nets we have named Nature, Mathematics, and Art. We conclude they are different because we call them by different names. Thus, they are apt to remain forever separated with nothing bonding them together. It is not the nets that are at fault but rather our misunderstanding of their function as nets. They do catch the fishes but never the sea, and it is the sea that we ultimately desire.”

(Martha Boles, Universal Patterns, 1983)

Nowadays we have several categories for designers: graphic, interior, product, fashion, industrial etc. Sometimes I don't know where exactly I could fall within all these different categories, because I am very much interested in many things. My identity falls into multiple boxes, along with my nationality, interests and passions. Sometimes, I find myself intertwined in a big mess of things, not knowing where to go or what to choose.

A few years ago I came across the notion of interdisciplinarity, during a course in my bachelor's degree. I immediately resonated with the concepts and ideals tied to this topic: breaking the boundaries between art, science, technology, physical, digital, human, non human, artificial and organic. Mixing all these ingredients into a giant melting pot is how I could see myself fit in.

Rather than having to choose which box to fit into, I could tie things together and work at the intersections of all of my interests. I could balance my visually creative pursuits with mathematical and scientific logic. I found a place where I could see myself belonging. But I needed to build better foundations before getting there.

I am also fascinated by data visualization, interactivity and multimedia work. I love how captivated people can get when faced with visuals that represent broader concepts. I believe that we are inherently more attracted to beautiful, colorful things, as opposed to big blocks of text and numbers.

Recently I have been seeing the value of visuals as a tool to get people engaged. It is a way of democratizing information without creating excess data which overwhelms our brains. Finding creative ways to communicate important topics is something I would like to dive deeper into.

Ultimately, educating, engaging and bringing people together is what drives me the most. And if I can do that in a way that involves beautiful audiovisuals, that would be my perfect match.

A demonstration of this in my practice this year at MDEF is in the project on which I am currently working on with Chris; *Artificial Constellations*. I came up with the concept in January when in isolation after testing positive to Covid-19. I was watching a video of a live performance on YouTube, reminiscing of a time when concerts were possible. I came across a comment saying that they would love to listen to the artist perform while looking up at the stars, because it would be magical.

Then, I looked out of my window and I couldn't see any stars, partly due to the cloudy sky, partly because of the pollution. I thought to myself "What if we couldn't see the stars anymore?". I got a vision of a possible Design Intervention: An experience where you look at a virtual sky, projected by a machine. The stars would move around, changing shape, position & color according to the music being played, until they slowly dimmed out & disappeared. I thought it could be interesting to produce an AI-made ambient song, which would contribute to the title- Artificial Constellations.

The project would ideally make the participants reflect on the importance of our skies, and how city smog and pollution could potentially erase our view of the stars. Stars, constellations, and all the things we see when looking up are something so mystical and magical that we've been using to give our existence meaning for centuries. As Chris and I continued developing ideas, we realised that we wanted to make people reflect on how we, as humans, have impacted & changed our environment to the point of no longer seeing the stars. Some call it the Anthropocene.

The goal of the installation is to engage participants through a short experience involving Audiovisuals, Projections, and Artificial Intelligence. Our enchanting storytelling will get these people to consider alternatives to our current lifestyle and pursue environmental awareness. It will also take place on the IAAC rooftop, providing a great ambience and view of the real pollution erasing the stars.

This exhibition will take place the Wednesday after this paper is due, so I am unable to provide a description of how the event was, but I have a strong feeling that it will be rewarding. Although this project was challenging, I have loved every second of working on it, and being able to share this with a like minded coworker like Chris. I get so passionate about my outputs when they have a great message behind them, like this particular project.

I hope to continue working in this way, mixing together the parts of the artist and the designer that suit me, involving myself and others in the process, and finding my little space in the corner between the many topics that interest me. By following this kind of path, I am sure that I will be able to find my purpose and change my world, taking small steps at a time.

To conclude, I must admit that writing this paper has made me question and re-evaluate what my priorities are, not only during the course of this Master's program but also for my career path. The objective of this course was to "align students' purpose with their skills, interests and capabilities in order to provide all the necessary means to become agents of change" and I believe that writing this essay has pushed us towards this goal. It has been difficult to balance the writing with all the other assignments, interventions and challenges we must complete in MDEF. However, I love writing and I enjoy trying to do it well. It was nice to take this time to give meaning to all the things we are exploring during the course of the Masters' in Design for Emergent Futures.