

Degrowth & Design

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ABSTRACT

This document elucidates key concepts pertaining to the degrowth movement in conjunction with the exhibition *Degrowth & Design*. This work outlines ways to integrate degrowth values into design practices, offering foundational information on degrowth. Degrowth critiques adverse effects of capitalism on ecosystems and human lives globally, proposing alternative systems and actions. Personal practices are one such strategy, exemplified by a two-month data collection on degrowth practices conducted by the author. Data was collected and visualized by hand, reflecting the degrowth philosophy. The narrative contextualizes the relationship between graphic design and capitalism, emphasizing the potential in design for effecting positive change. Implementing degrowth through design is highlighted as a powerful strategy, with considerations spanning materials, labor rights, governance, and more. This work underscores the integration of degrowth principles into personal practices and design work, explored in both the accompanying exhibition and document.

Degrowth & Design

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Introduction

In tandem with my exhibition *Degrowth & Design*, this document explicates and communicates key concepts regarding the degrowth movement. Furthermore, the dyad of this document and my display of communicative art describes ways to integrate degrowth values into design practices. In both the exhibition space and the paper, foundational information on degrowth is provided. Overarchingly, degrowth is a critique of the economic system of capitalism and its detrimental impact on ecosystems and human lives worldwide. Alongside the condemnation of the current dominant economic mode of production, degrowth provides a pluriverse of solutions that propose alternative systems and actions that run counter to capitalistic ideals. One set of strategies to begin converting to a degrowth-oriented society are personal practices—these include choices made at an individual level. For this research, I gathered two months of my own data on engaging in degrowth personal practices. Areas of focus included transportation, energy usage, laundry habits, clothing purchases, use of email, use of smartphone, and political engagement. In accordance with principles of data humanism, I collected and analyzed my data by hand and I executed visualizations through the process of letterpress printing. Both the data I collected and the methodology behind its presentation reflect the philosophy of degrowth.

In order to contextualize the importance of integrating principles of degrowth into design work, this document covers some of the histories of the connection between graphic design and capitalism. Since its inception, capitalism has been supported by graphic design in ways both large and small. However, design has also played a significant role in fostering positive change across many arenas. These contradictory elements of the histories of design are explicated in this narrative in service of providing a robust conceptual grounding for the considerations called for in working to design with degrowth in mind. Due to the fact that graphic design has power in both perpetuating and disrupting systems of power, implementing the changes advocated for by degrowth through design practices is an effective strategy. There are several areas in which degrowth values can be incorporated in design work, including materials, extraction, and the environment; labor and time rights; communities in which the design work is occurring; monetary and profit considerations;

governance of the design project; the role of the designer; regeneration of the status quo; and inclusion of broad degrowth values such as conviviality. Altogether, this document and exhibition elucidate the degrowth philosophy and thoroughly delve into two strategies for implementation: personal practices and infusing principles of degrowth into design work.

Degrowth

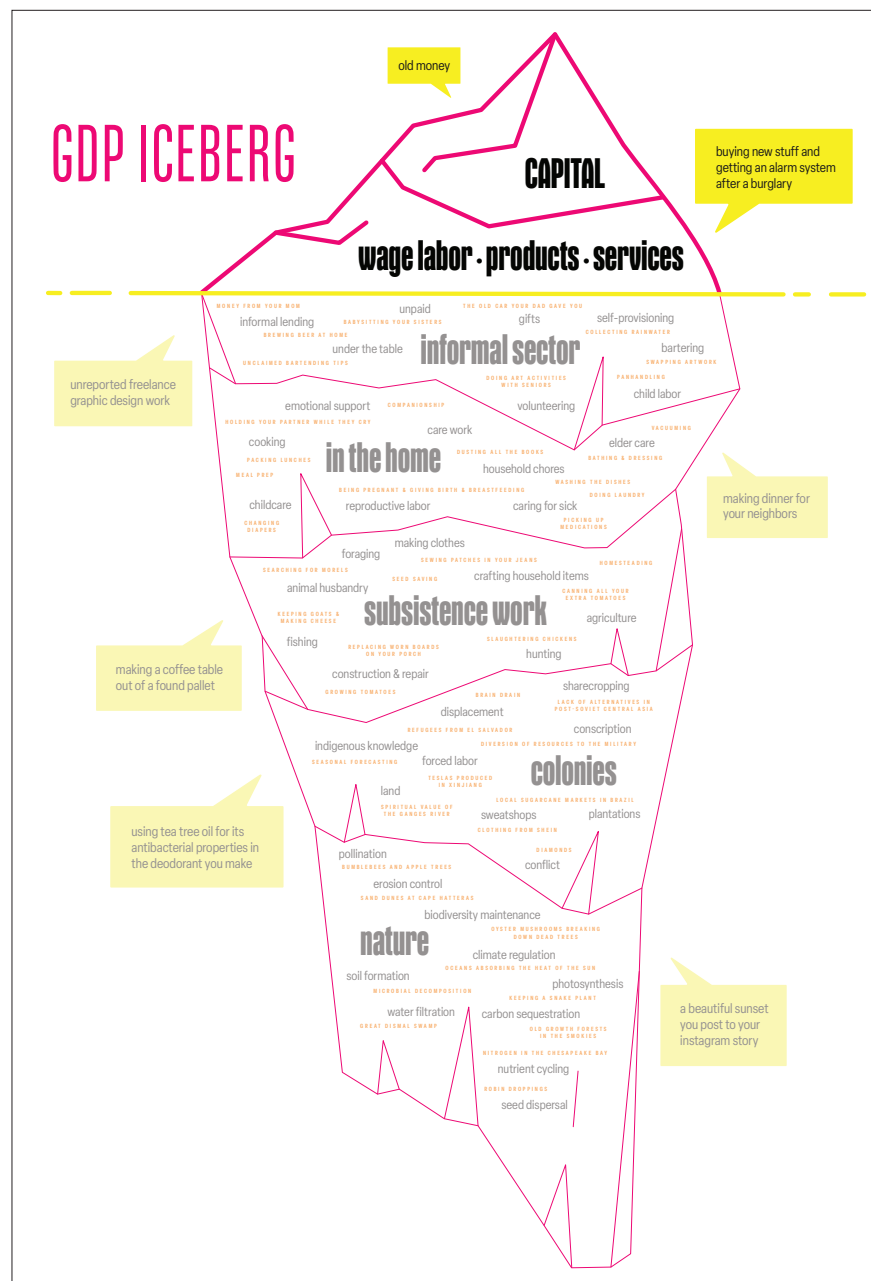
A Response to Capitalism & Gross Domestic Product

Degrowth is a critique of a dominant hegemonic culture that is practiced as if natural. There are several structures under critique by this activist movement that is also a burgeoning academic discipline. Primarily, degrowth is a condemnation of the economic system of capitalism—in particular its embedded imperative for continual expansion and accumulation. Under the current dominant global paradigm, society ascribes to the obligation of economic growth. Politicians from every point on the left-to-right spectrum agree that economic growth should be unquestioningly pursued. This growth imperative is a requirement for the system of capitalism to operate, and each subsequent quarter demands ever-increasing profits. Quarterly profit growth metrics indicate success for corporations, while nations measure success in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This model for determining success presents myriad problems. One problem with relying on GDP as a key determinant for societal success lies in what GDP does and does not measure. GDP measures all goods and services produced within a country for a given time period. This results in unequivocally negative circumstances generating positive contributions to GDP. For example, when a home is burglarized, the purchase of replacement goods, insurance rate increases, and clean-up services will all make favorable contributions to GDP—net positives could even include therapy or the installation of a home security system with a monitoring service. All of these outcomes are measured as beneficial by GDP, while none of the negatives are recorded by this metric. GDP manipulates the categorically undesirable occurrence of home invasion into advantageous economic activity. In addition to how GDP misrepresents adverse events by measuring them based on their generation of monetary value, GDP fails to capture a large number of vital human activities. What this metric does not measure includes many of the care activities that are not only necessary for human survival, but also necessary for the reproduction of capitalism. Raising and caring for children is only counted by GDP when payment for services—such as daycare—are involved. Caring for the elderly also only generates economic activity in certain circumstances. Yet, both caring for children and caring for older adults are fundamental parts of the human experience. Not only that, but capitalism requires a labor force,

and those laborers require care before, during, and after their working years. Despite this requirement, GDP does not account for such activities as a parent raising their child, roommates who take turns cooking for one another, and children who care for elderly parents. Care activities such as these are essential—and are disregarded.

Figure 1

Iceberg Model of What Counts in Gross Domestic Product



Another problem regarding GDP is the activity that is captured by the metric is subsequently boiled down to a small number which is used as a determinant for societal success. To meet the requirements of a system based on continual expansion, levels of production and consumption must rise to the occasion, regardless of so-called “externalities.” The word “externalities” in this case is meant to refer to the negative planetary and human impacts that supposedly lie outside the system, but are in actuality essential to its function. Profit generation and growth requires material inputs in the form of human labor and physical substances—both of these categories of material are finite resources. The need for economic growth under capitalism is not linear, it is exponential. Success is measured quarter over quarter, year over year, by compounded percentages. Finite planetary resources cannot support exponential growth, and eventually the materials that are called on to support this system will no longer be capable of providing the capacity necessitated by capitalism.

The Consumer as Identity & Obligatory Exploitation of Consumerism

One of the ways the capitalistic demand is stimulated is through the deliberate construction of the consumer as an identity. Individuals are taught that happiness and satisfaction in life are gained through ownership of objects and commodities—self-identification is found through owning certain cars, clothing, and objects of entertainment. Self-worth is derived from home ownership, expensive leisure activities, and individual signifiers of accomplishment put on display through the commodification of everything from art to public education. Personal valuation is derived from consumption. The consumer-as-identity is not explicitly supported by the mechanisms of capital; rather, it is insidious and relegated to the unconscious while being supported by the everyday visual culture permeated by advertisements, celebrities, and the comparison-spurning social media feeds that seem to always be just fingertips away. Individuals living under late capitalism generally do not make statements such as, “I identify as a consumer.” However, statements that belie that sentiment are commonplace—such as, “I only wear Nike sneakers” or “I drive Fords.” This consumer-as-identity is deeply culturally entrenched, as evidenced by an astounding statement once overheard by the author, “I like brands.” By way of individuals associating themselves with commodities, the growth imperative of capitalism is supported. The necessary driver of growth is collective demand, with

those at the top having an acute understanding of how to manipulate ever-more demand.

A key aspect of how this system continues to function is the way the “externalities” are hidden from the end consumer. The degradation of planetary and human conditions is far removed from the pristine shelves of grocery stores and sleek web layouts designed for clicks and conversions. The goods that make their way into the homes of consumers in the Global North often have dire consequences for the ecosystems and societies in the Global South. Countries in the Global North are connected by socioeconomic and political characteristics and consist of the countries in Northern America, Europe, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. (UN Statistics). The Global South is a group of countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Oceania which are also connected by like characteristics and were frequently the subjects of colonization at the hands of countries in the Global North. One reason for the system of exploitation that benefits the Global North is the enduring legacy and reality of colonialism and imperialism. Despite a reduction in the number of official colonies and occupied territories under nations in the Global North, imperialism is thriving through both monetary and military policy. These policies allow for rich nations to wrest value from poor nations, through both extraction of natural resources and exploitation of unregulated labor. Meanwhile, the end consumer experiences only the shiny object. This disconnect between the actuality of how products end up in possession of consumers and what consumers perceive about the production process has been termed the “imperial mode of living” by Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen. The imperial mode of living facilitates endless consumption without the doers needing to confront the reality, consequences, or guilt of a system built on destruction occurring elsewhere. Consider the commonplace colloquialism “throw it away.” Garbage removed from sight is garbage removed from mind—away. Yet most materials are not designed to go “away” in any real sense of the term. This phrase is a microcosm of the political, economic, and cultural structures that create space for the norms of consumption. The imperial mode of living and the obligatory exploitation of consumerism are resisted by degrowth.

Scarcity Construction

The necessity of growth for capitalism to function invites interrogation of another construct

that facilitates the drive for profit. Commodity production is geared toward capital accumulation—not satisfaction of human needs. In fact, a key factor in generating demand is the construction of scarcity. Dating back to the rise of capitalism as the dominant political economic system, scarcity has been created in order to drive the impoverished into wage labor. Following the enclosure of the commons, peasants could no longer rely on access to farmland to sustain their lives. This meant either migrating to the city and taking on dangerous factory work, or increasing their productive capacity on the leased land to maintain their tenancy. Both situations ensured that peasants would continually need to work in order to survive. Prior to enclosure, the commons provided land to farm—thus safeguarding against starvation. As capitalism developed, peasants, workers, and commoners were deliberately placed in competition with one another, while the owner class accumulated wealth derived from the surplus generated by paying meager wages. As labor productivity surged, those who owned the means of production profited and the impoverished were compelled to work by the threat of hunger. This was an intentional construction of artificial scarcity. The reality was the resources needed for human survival had not disappeared. However, the owner class was violently preventing access to those resources, unless the working class facilitated capital accumulation through wage labor. This situation of compelled labor for survival is known as wage slavery. The circumstance of artificial scarcity continues to be part of the global political economic system today. The wealthy understand that poverty is an essential component to retaining their wealth. Part of what is intrinsic to the system is the intention of economic growth is not the satisfaction of human needs. Conversely, the system is structured to not meet human needs in order to prevent liberation for the poor. The growth imperative has a baked-in labor imperative. Couple this with the construction of the consumer identity, and the owner class has ensured both a market demand for products and a labor force for production. The working class is thus doubly generating wealth through both labor and spending—neither of which are intended to work towards well-being. The advertisement industry that promotes consumerism thrives on and perpetuates self-loathing. Growth needs misery. Degrowth calls for disrupting artificial scarcity, reducing unnecessary labor, and restructuring the economy to be centered around human thriving and ecological balance.

Neoclassical Economics

In addition to confronting the growth imperative of capitalism, degrowth challenges the hegemonic dominance of the neoclassical approach to economics. Neoclassical economics is based on the supply-and-demand model which is thought to drive production, consumption, and valuation of goods and services. This approach incorporates the archetype of Homo economicus, a selfish and rational being who bases all choices on individualistic notions of utilitarianism. The fact that humans are highly relational is not dismissed by neoclassical economics, it is not even acknowledged. The essence of what we understand as human nature is conditioned into us by neoliberal politics and policy, is reinforced through cultural mechanisms, and is reproduced by power structures that benefit those at the top levels of capital accumulation. Neoliberalism is a social paradigm that has permeated our culture, society, and very ways of thinking over its rise to the hegemonic status quo (Lipman, 2011). Neoliberalism promotes privatization of all possible entities, increases in surplus labor value through the reduction of labor costs, accumulation of capital, celebration of entrepreneurship, and individualistic self-interest. As neoliberalism has come to dominate ideology, discourse, social policy, economic policy, and governmental operations, it has also infected ways of thinking and understanding the world. The vast majority of policy implemented under the neoliberal paradigm is intended for the accumulation of capital. The fundamental tenets of capitalism emphasize profit at any cost, including the costs of environmental degradation and basic needs provision for humans. Degrowth problematizes the structures and attitudes embedded in society, while focusing on solutions that center ecological and social well-being.

The Impossibility of Infinite Growth

Strategies for ensuring ecological well-being are foregrounded by degrowth. The political economic system of capitalism calls for infinite growth, which would require infinite material throughput. Humans extract and consume billions of tons of raw materials every year. The total tonnage increases annually, tracking closely with GDP. In recent years, growth in material use has even surpassed growth in GDP. The idea that somehow the volume of raw materials extracted from the Earth can be decoupled from economic growth is absurd. Growth in use of materials has raced

upward exponentially since the mid-twentieth century. It is not a far conceptual leap to understand that this infinite economic growth is an impossibility on a finite material planet. Degrowth leader Jason Hickel (2020) admonishes:

“Keep in mind that every ton of material stuff that’s extracted from the earth comes with an impact on the planet’s living systems. Ramping up the extraction of biomass means razing forests and draining wetlands. It means destroying habitats and carbon sinks. It means soil depletion, ocean dead zones and overfishing. Ramping up the extraction of fossil fuels means more carbon emissions, more climate breakdown and more ocean acidification. It means more mountaintop removal, more offshore drilling, more fracking and more tar sands. Ramping up the extraction of ores and construction materials means more open-cast mining, with all the downstream pollution that entails, and more cars and ships and buildings that demand yet more energy. And all this entails more waste: more landfills in the countryside, more toxins in our rivers, and more plastics in the sea.”

Capitalism existing in perpetuity is an impossibility. However, the ruling class fashions grand gestures aimed directly at communicating otherwise. Take, for example, Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk making attempts at space travel. These widely-covered events are not just in servitude of playtime for billionaires, they communicate that Earth is disposable because the moon and Mars are available for colonization. See also the introduction of the digital “metaverse” into schools. Not only will this initiative enrich folks such as Mark Zuckerberg, it indoctrinates the concept of a digital alternative to a dying planet. What seems to be missing from the narrative is the environmental impact of maintaining digital realities in the form of high-energy-demand servers, and the effect of rocket fuel and waste materials. Neither space colonization nor living as a digital replica are solutions to solving the conundrum of attempting to extract infinite growth from a finite planet. Degrowth holds answers for restructuring society so that infinite growth is not required and the health of the environment is upheld.

Planetary Boundaries

One framework for understanding the health of the environment is that of planetary boundaries, developed in 2009 by Johan Rockström and colleagues. This schema consists of nine

categories of human impact on Earth systems, alongside thresholds under which humanity can safely operate. The basic premise of this framework is that after transgressing the limits of the planetary boundaries, the environment might be beyond its ability to self-regulate. The boundaries are based upon Earth-system processes and the change in geologic epoch from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is the current epoch dating back to the Industrial Revolution, during which human activity has become the dominant driver of environmental change. While much focus and media has been dedicated to mitigating the impact of climate change, there are eight other categories of planetary health that warrant attention. In addition to climate change, the planetary boundary framework includes novel entities, atmospheric aerosol loading, biogeochemical flows, freshwater change, land-system change, biosphere integrity, stratospheric ozone depletion, and ocean acidification. The climate change metric is measured by the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Novel entities is a term closely associated with chemical pollution and has been defined as “new substances, new forms of existing substances and modified life forms” (Steffen, et al). Atmospheric aerosol loading refers to the overall particulate matter concentration in the atmosphere, measured regionally. Biogeochemical flows are the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, greatly impacted by modern agricultural practices. Freshwater change calculates the change in freshwater consumption by humans. Land-system change is measured as the area of forested land as a percent of the original forest cover. Biosphere integrity is also known as the rate of biodiversity loss or species extinction. Stratospheric ozone depletion and ocean acidification are self-explanatory. Current Earth system scientists assess that six of the nine planetary boundaries have been transgressed. Leading international researchers published their findings in the fall of 2023 stating, “The scientific updates and analyses presented here confirm that humanity is today placing unprecedented pressure on Earth systems... There is an urgent need for more powerful scientific and policy tools for analyzing the whole of the integrated Earth system with reliability and regularity and guiding political processes to prevent altering the state of Earth system beyond levels tolerable for today’s societies.” (Richardson et. al., 2023). Scientists are and have been sounding the alarm regarding the destructive impact human activity is having on the planet. The environment is in a state

of ill health, and behavior change is a requisite condition of survival for the human species. Degrowth charts a course for enacting this behavior change, at the policy, collective, and personal levels.

Circular Economies

One strategy presented by degrowth for improving the health of the planet is the reduction in material throughput in the economy. The current widespread economic model is linear, whereby materials travel through the steps of extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal. More simply put, this economic model is “take-make-waste” (Nandi et al., 2020) or “take-make-use-lose” (Raworth, 2017). The first step in remedying the wasteful situation of the linear economy is to move toward a regenerative circular model. In circular economies, the final step for materials is not disposal, but is collection and processing for reuse of materials. Degrowth goes beyond the circular economy, and calls for humanity to reduce material consumption before even considering how materials move through the system. The reason the adage “reduce, reuse, recycle” is presented in that order is due to efficacy of behavior. Reduction is the most beneficial means of lessening environmental impact, following by reuse. Recycling is a less effective method for decreasing planetary harm. Recycling does not eliminate the need for a final disposal stage for materials, it merely prolongs the material use lifespan. Additionally, recycling requires energy and generates pollution in its processes. Finally, only a small percentage of materials used in the economy have recycling potential at all (Hickel, 2020). The vast majority of materials traversing the economic landscape are used in the semi-permanent built environment, are waste from mining, or are irrevocably degraded during their use. While recycling and the circular economy can make positive contributions to curtailing ecological damage, these strategies are not nearly enough. Frivolous material consumption must be eliminated, and attitudes about what constitutes need must be adjusted. It is possible to live a bountiful and abundant life while limiting resource use—this is the degrowth course of action. As material throughput is reduced, so will be material stocks and their associated extractive processes. Material stocks comprise the factories, production machines, transport vehicles, warehouses, and retail storefronts that facilitate products being available for purchase. Lower levels of material throughput will also lower the material stocks in garbage trucks and

waste processing facilities. The impact of minimizing material flow is quickly compounded, producing a positive ripple effect.

Energy Use Reduction

Alongside a reduction in material throughput, degrowth urges for scaling down energy use. Energy production and consumption put an outsize strain on the environment, and the sector is a prime target for lessening anthropogenic impact. The impact of energy use encompasses the full spectrum of planetary ecosystems. The combustion of fossil fuels for electricity generation and transportation releases greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, contributing to climate change (Den Elzen et al., 2013). Furthermore, the extraction and transportation of these fuels can lead to habitat destruction, water pollution, and catastrophic oil spills, with far-reaching repercussions for ecosystems and biodiversity. Alternatively, renewable energy sources like wind, solar, and hydropower are not without their environmental consequences. The extraction of rare earth metals for solar panels and batteries, for instance, can result in habitat destruction and toxic waste (Rashedi & Taslima, 2020). Renewables carry the additional threats of increased land-system change, biodiversity reduction, and armed conflict over resources. Achieving a harmonious balance between meeting the energy demands of humanity and preserving the environment necessitates lessening energy consumption. Strategies to reconsider how much energy is required for a dignified life are a key tenet of degrowth.

Limits

One framework for understanding how to reduce material throughput and down scale energy use is that of limits. Limits in the degrowth sense are bottom-up choices that are engaged with on an individual and collective level, not external impositions. Self-limitation and enoughness are liberatory measures undertaken for targeted outcomes and emancipation from the unchecked want embedded in the drive of capitalism (Kallis & March, 2014). Limits are not scarcity. Rather, enoughness is grounded in satisfaction with needs being met, and an understanding of the difference between needs and wants. By deriving contentment from the fulfillment of needs, the scarcity mentality associated with endless desires generated by capitalism can be assuaged. This is not to say that

capitalism does not induce actual scarcity that results in a shortfall in meeting social needs—for example, in food security, housing, healthcare, and education. The scarcity that self-limitation combats is that of the mindset once needs provision is established. Self-limitation can be individual or collective and can include practices for working less, sharing more, and establishing equality and equity. Limits are also tools for targeting material consumption and lowering energy usage.

Colonial Appropriation

Related to downscaling energy use and reduction of material throughput, degrowth advocates for ending colonial patterns of appropriation. Colonization and imperialism are the structures that facilitate the “externalities” of capitalism. Much human-caused detrimental ecological impact comes from countries in the Global North. Although outright colonization has given way to independence for many nations in the Global South, patterns of subjugation have not. One pattern of subjugation is the negative ecological impact of high-income countries, and the consequences that wreak havoc in their low-income counterparts. Climate breakdown is occurring largely in the Global South, as a result of consumption and resource use by the Global North. Growth in economics by wealthy nations is reliant upon material and labor extraction from impoverished countries, and the appropriation of the atmospheric commons. The atmospheric commons refers to the fact that the atmosphere is shared by all, and is thus a resource in common. However, high-income nations pollute the atmosphere with no regard toward giving agency to the rest of those who rely on clean air for survival. This is but one example of how powerful nations ecologically exploit states with less global power. The degrowth call for decreasing energy use and curtailing material throughput is not only a call aimed at environmental concerns, it is a call for justice and equity on a global scale. It is an insistence against colonization and imperialism.

Human Needs Satisfaction & Doughnut Economics

The demand of degrowth for decolonization bridges the gap between the biophysical ecological crisis the movement is responding to and the social implications of a system that requires growth to function. One of the great paradoxes of capitalism is that despite being aimed at accumulation, it does not operate toward human need satisfaction. Indeed, the structures and

institutions of capitalism are not geared toward needs provision—they are geared toward growth. As previously discussed, the construction of scarcity is an intentional component of this economic system such that the working class will be motivated to engage in wage labor. Therefore, it is no wonder that economic prosperity does not yield well-being. There is a certain threshold up to which increases in income correlate with increases in happiness (Sekulova et al., 2017). However, after that threshold has been achieved, there is a lack of evidence regarding a direct relationship between happiness and income. Given that capital accumulation does not yield happiness, and the current economic system fails miserably to provide for basic human needs, it is clear that a restructuring of institutions, systems, and society is in order. Degrowth advocates for a system in which provisioning for social and human needs is prioritized, with local and autonomous input into how structures and institutions are organized. One method for structuring which human needs should be prioritized by the system is presented by economist Kate Raworth in the Doughnut Economics model (2017). This model advocates for a social foundation that includes categories of provisioning for which no one should be falling short. These categories include food, health, education, housing, income and work, water and sanitation, energy, networks, social equity, gender equality, political voice, and peace and justice. To clarify, energy refers to access to electricity and clean cooking facilities. Networks refers to both access to the Internet, and the population that states they are without someone to help them in times of need. The Doughnut Economics model promotes local decision-making regarding which social foundation categories a community deems important to focus on. Degrowth extends gender equality through an intersectional lens to include racial equity, disability rights, and queer acceptance as part of the social floor to a safe zone for humanity to operate within. Redistribution of wealth and resources is requisite in order to begin to establish the foundation of well-being for people. Inequality must be addressed with immediacy. The problem of poverty—and forming a baseline of well-being—is not a lack of resources, it is the unequal distribution of resources. Inequality has a compound effect on society, not simply disadvantaging the less well-off. Less equal societies have lower levels of trust and higher levels of concentrated political power, while more equal societies are happier and healthier—regardless of how rich or poor the nation in question may be (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Justice & Ecofeminism

Inequality is one indicator of unbalanced power relations in society. Solving the issue of income and wealth inequality is but one frontier on the journey toward the elimination of hierarchies amongst people and the move towards justice. Justice is foregrounded throughout the degrowth movement. Additionally, the disruption of systems of power is a key tenet in degrowth advocacy, especially in the focus on collective autonomy and self-organization. Put simply, power is having possession of control, authority, or influence over others, and can manifest in many forms. One of those forms is through the patriarchy. The patriarchy is a system of values, beliefs, and relationships embedded in societal systems that structure gender inequity (Nash, 2020). Degrowth incorporates the principles of ecofeminism(s), and pushes back against the norms of the current patriarchal hegemony. Ecofeminism highlights reproductive work and social reproduction executed under a gendered division of labor. These types of work—and the wealth thereby generated—are both undervalued and unacknowledged, particularly by the conventional tools of economic assessment (most notably the GDP). Ecofeminist theory is built on the premise that the suppression, invisibility, and undervaluation of nature and the labor of women are congruent and must be conjointly addressed (Akbulut, 2019). Ecofeminism integrates material perspectives, focusing on the fulfillment of physical needs, biological embodiedness, and ecological embeddedness (Salleh, 1997). The materialist values of ecofeminism ground the theory and praxis in Marxism (Vogel, 2013). The oppression of women is related to the material conditions and relations intrinsic to capitalism, a understanding derived from the Marxist critique of the capitalist mode of production.

Feminist critique of growth and capitalism emphasizes that supposedly neutral economic processes always (re)produce gender-specific relations of power and domination. Neoclassical economics structurally ignores this reproduction. The feminist critique of neoclassical economics is three-pronged: first, the GDP is a measure of economic activity that structurally invisibilizes unpaid care and reproductive work (Waring, 1988). Second, economics relies on a narrow conception of work, equating work solely with wage labor—while other socially necessary work is structurally devalued and disregarded (Himmelweit, 1995). Third, feminism critiques the concept of “Homo economicus,”

the aforementioned always rational, egoistic, and individualistic central player in the economic mainstream that is deeply androcentric (Ferber & Nelson, 1993). Capitalist accumulation relies upon invisibilization of certain types of labor, the narrow conception of work, and the rational economic actor. All of these requirements for continual economic growth have gendered impacts.

Alongside how the accumulation of capital disproportionately impacts women, the impact of climate change and the transgression of planetary boundaries marginalizes women to a greater degree than men. Women, especially Indigenous and Global Southern women, are disproportionately impacted by climate change worldwide. Climate change related catastrophes have more severe impacts for women, including floods, droughts, landslides, water shortages, rising infectious diseases, and respiratory health problems. Causes for the imbalance in impact include discriminatory laws, norms, and customs; exclusion from decision-making processes; limited understanding of legal rights; restricted access to resources and assets; inequitable distribution of care responsibilities and unpaid domestic labor; restricted access to reproductive healthcare; gender-based violence; and impoverishment when the male earner abandons the household (Differentiated Impacts of Climate Change on Women and Men, 2019). Environmental sacrifice zones—geographical areas that bear asymmetrical ecological harm (Ruckus, 2023)—are now known to be linked to femicide (Brooks, 2021). Women bear the brunt of both capitalism and the climate change it exacerbates.

Intersectionality

Gender is but one category of identity that is marginalized by capitalism. Exploitation based on class is fundamental to the system, while permanent economic growth relies on subjugation based not only on gender but also on race, ability, sexual orientation, and gender identity (this is but a short list out of many additional subjugated identities). These identities interlock to form complex, often individual situations of oppression. Intersectionality refers to the interlocking of identities dominated by structural power, and how oppression operates at the crossroads. This concept was put forth by activist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and continues to be a framework for how degrowth considers justice. Intersectionality is an effective methodological tool for understanding and explaining the experiences of folx who are subjected to compound disadvantage. The differentiated

impacts of the climate crisis on individuals and communities embodying varied social categories that are marginalized is demonstrated by an intersectional approach. Intersectionality aids in exploration of the interdependence between humans and nature in relation to the social context and dominant structures within which these interconnected relationships exist (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2013).

Decolonization

An interrogation of capitalist growth prerogatives through an intersectional lens tracks directly to the exposition of colonization as a central mechanism by which the system supports itself. Capitalist growth is intrinsically colonial in character, wherein economic growth in the Global North relies upon patterns of colonization and the active devaluing of labor and nature in the Global South (Hickel, 2021). This devaluation is necessary because there is nothing naturally cheap about resources from other lands. This cheapening relies upon dualism, the Cartesian concept that nature is to be exploited and humans have mind and agency and therefore justification for domination over nature (Anderson, 2013). Degrowth critiques not only the excess material throughput in the Global North, but the mechanisms of colonial appropriation and cheapening. Degrowth demands decolonization. In addition to the material components of this demand are the ideological ones. During the colonialism of the Enlightenment and thereafter, the Global North established itself as the hegemonic legitimate producer of universal knowledge. In the subsequent centuries, this became a coloniality of power. A continuation of physical colonization, coloniality is a social relationship consisting of specific forms of knowledge and power. Strategies of instituting power include redefining culture, relations, and knowledge production in ways that credit the superiority of the colonizer. Other terms that reference coloniality include modernity and development. In relationship to knowledge, coloniality determines what is considered legitimate and valid. Coloniality reinforces binaries, especially those of colonizer versus colonized and human versus nature (Ochoa, 1996). This ideology is a problematic instrument for (re)producing oppressive power. Decoloniality is a critique of coloniality and the perceived universality of Global North knowledge and superiority of Global North culture. Additionally, decoloniality critiques the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge structures which serve to actively silence knowledges and practices from the Global South. Decoloniality seeks to make visible other

ways of existing, analyzing, and thinking.

Degrowth recognizes that high-income countries are the primary drivers of ecological harm, while maintaining an understanding that establishing well-being for all humans will require material growth in some societies. This is not antithetical to the movement, rather, it is a recognition of the exploitation of nations in the Global South, and a furtherance of the demand for decolonization and self-determination. Due to the fact that countries in the Global North have an outsize responsibility for environmental destruction, these states also bear a greater responsibility for remedying the situation. This is known as the concept of “ecological debt” and clearly positions the obligation where it correctly lies. The Global North must not only scale back material throughput, reduce energy use, and lessen resource consumption, these nations owe both emancipation and remediation to the Global South.

Strategies for Enacting Degrowth

Primarily, degrowth is a critique of the ideology and practices of growth. However, degrowth also puts forth a diverse range of strategies for enacting its counterhegemonic visions. The work of degrowth not only encompasses analysis and dismantling of unhealthy societal structures, it also consists of establishing new ways of thinking, being, and acting that will establish a system that ensures human flourishing. The goal of degrowth is to establish a system that provides for living well within planetary boundaries. There are a multiplicity of tools and strategies for enacting this transition between the present-day system and the visions for the just future. Overarchingly, these strategies fall into three categories: policy, communal, and personal. Policy strategies are those that involve governmental regulation, whether it be at the municipal level, the federated state level, or somewhere in between. Communal strategies are comprised of activities that are taken on by large or small groups of folx, outside of state-directed policy measures. Personal practices are actions engaged with on an individual level. These categories are permeable—several individuals may undertake similar activities within a household, yielding a more communal effect. Communities might tackle local issues leading to changes in municipal policy. Policy can be an effective tool in curtailing the impact of corporations whose sole focus is on their bottom line and maintaining quarterly growth.

Policy Measures

Citizen Assemblies

One tactic for implementing equitable policy measures is the establishment of citizen assemblies. Citizen assemblies are a democratic decision-making process whereby citizens come together to deliberate on specific issues or policies facing their community. These assemblies are designed to be an inclusive alternative to traditional forms of decision making, such as elected representatives or referendums. Citizen assemblies are a means to address complex issues, as they allow for more nuanced and informed discussion compared to traditional political processes. These entities foster nondiscriminatory decision-making processes based on careful thought and discussion that empower ordinary folk to actively participate in shaping government policy. These assemblies are essential because they offer a platform for diverse voices and perspectives to be heard and considered in a more equitable manner. The assembly members engage in informed discussions, receive expert guidance, and deliberate on complex issues, resulting in reflective recommendations. This process promotes transparency and accountability within government. Citizen assemblies are an important tool of participatory democracy, and function to redistribute power. They are an example of how the degrowth values of collective autonomy and self-organization can be applied to policymaking.

Unconditional Autonomy Allowance

One large policy measure advocated for by degrowth is known as an Unconditional Autonomy Allowance. This policy proposal is an extension of universal basic income. Basic income policies call for cash transfers directly to individuals, regardless of engagement in wage labor or based upon any other condition. The premise behind universal basic income provision is that a guaranteed monetary influx at a level capable of ensuring a dignified, frugal life would not only mitigate human suffering, but would provide a pathway for freedom from wage slavery. Basic income policy is important because work has been reduced to monetary relations in the forms of profits and wages, and—for wide swaths of the population—work no longer serves the human needs of pleasure, satisfaction, nor creative engagement. Despite its importance, basic income proposals are merely considered a

starting point by degrowth. The Unconditional Autonomy Allowance broadens basic income in that it consists of more than regular cash transfers, it includes a package of “drawing rights” for basic and alternative services (Levy, 2016). This policy measure would serve to reduce social inequality and combat the central position of wage work in the lives of many. One model for implementing a policy such as this includes a voucher system by which drawing rights would be distributed freely amongst the population for such resources as energy, food, and housing. Unconditional Autonomy Allowance policies are closely related to universal basic services initiatives. Efforts at establishing universal basic services propose the delivery of essential public services to everyone as a fundamental right. The key intention behind universal basic services is to ensure that everyone has access to a set of services that are essential for a decent standard of living—regardless of their income, employment status, or other factors. In general, the services covered include healthcare, education, housing and utilities, food and nutrition, transportation, childcare, and Internet access. Embedded within Unconditional Autonomy Allowance proposals is the democratization of resource allocation. It is essential that vital decisions about how resources are shared be made collectively, through self-organized and non-hierarchical structures. Democratic deliberation must be enacted to reach conclusions about individual and collective needs and wants, and how much food, water, energy, and public services constitute rights. In addition to the provision of unconditional basic income and services, the Unconditional Autonomy Allowance puts forward the implementation of wage maximums. Upper limits to wages would aid in the reduction of income inequality, a rampant condition wherein executives are compensated at hundreds of times the rates of average workers. Alongside wage maximums, the decommodification of basic goods and services through the Unconditional Autonomy Allowance promotes the reduction in inequality and poverty, and emancipation from the tyranny of the labor market. The Unconditional Autonomy Allowance would aid in downscaling production and consumption by decoupling human well-being from the imperative to engage in wage labor. Furthermore, the ability of individuals to survive while reducing their working hours creates the conditions that allow for such activities as extended engagement in learning, raising children, attending to the infirmed, self-care, and radical rest. It is a central vision for wide-ranging

restructuring of society to focus on well-being over capital accumulation.

Right to Repair

Beyond the structural shifts advanced by policies for implementing citizen assemblies and the Unconditional Autonomy Allowance, the degrowth movement advocates for numerous smaller-scale policy measures. One of these sets of measures is referred to as the “right to repair.” The right to repair is a set of principles in support of the ability of individuals to repair and maintain their own electronic and mechanical devices—such as phones, computers, appliances, and vehicles (Chen et al., 2023). It is grounded in the belief that people should have the legal right to the information, tools, and replacement parts necessary to make repairs—not be forced to rely on manufacturers or authorized repair services. Alongside access to documentation about repair and the availability of replacement components, the right to repair movement specifically urges for the repairability of electronics. Electronic waste is a large contributor to the material throughput in the economy, and repairability promotes the increased lifespan of electronic devices. The right to repair initiative has gained international traction, with a handful of laws enacted. Consumer advocacy groups and environmental organizations have also taken up the cause. Although this set of policy proposals is multi-pronged, overarching goals include making repair both easier and less costly. The right to repair is believed to be in the best interest of the consumer and the environment, while breaking the monopoly of manufacturers on repair work. Giving consumers more affordable repair options will make them better off. Additionally, the ability to repair will result in more repairs and a lessening of material throughput. Right to repair legislation aligns with the degrowth values of autonomy and self-reliance, as well as simplicity and enoughness.

Planned Obsolescence

Electronic waste is targeted by another degrowth policy proposal: the prohibition of planned obsolescence. Not only applicable to electronics, planned obsolescence is a strategy for capital accumulation and growth in which a product is intentionally designed with a limited lifespan. Often, the goal of planned obsolescence is to encourage consumers to continually replace products with the newer model. This practice ensures a steady stream of repeat purchases and serves the needs

of corporations to post quarter-over-quarter growth. The concept of planned obsolescence can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when the light bulb was intentionally designed to have a limited lifespan—forcing consumers to buy bulbs more frequently. Planned obsolescence became more prominent after World War II, especially in the United States. During this period, there was a shift from wartime production to peacetime consumerism. Corporations began selling products with features that would quickly become outdated or were deliberately designed with lower-quality materials to guarantee shorter lifespans. Currently, the technology sector engages in some of the most notable examples of planned obsolescence. Corporations release new phones, computers, and other electronic devices every year, frequently making older models incompatible with software updates or accessories. This forces consumers to purchase replacement devices not only to stay current, but oftentimes to maintain even baseline functionality. Additionally, a saturated accessory market has developed to service the ever-changing needs of adjustments in device design. Planned obsolescence serves no function beyond corporate growth. Forbidding this practice would not only benefit the people who rely on these products in their day-to-day lives, it would lessen the ecological impact of products that become harmful waste after incredibly short lifespans.

Perceived Obsolescence & Fast Fashion

A corporate practice related to planned obsolescence is that of “perceived obsolescence.” Perceived obsolescence is a concept that refers to the belief or feeling that a product or technology is no longer useful, valuable, or up-to-date, even though it may still be fully functional. This perception is often influenced by marketing strategies, societal trends, and consumer psychology, rather than the actual operation or usefulness of the product. One industry that engages in perceived obsolescence is that of fast fashion. Degrowth advocates for outlawing fast fashion. Fast fashion is characterized by producing and selling clothing and accessories that are designed to quickly replicate current fashion trends and get them to market as rapidly as possible. Fast fashion retailers encourage consumers to buy frequently and replace their wardrobe items regularly. Due to the construction of perceived obsolescence in the industry, items quickly go out of style, leading to a cycle of continuous consumption. Fast fashion brands heavily utilize social media to manipulate consumers into a sense

of urgency and desire. This high turnover of clothing contributes to a disposable fashion culture, generating waste not only as folks no longer wear their clothes, but through the extraction and manufacturing processes. In addition to the heavy ecological impact of this industry, it relies on abhorrent labor conditions and wages to maintain the low prices that drive consumer demand. The charges of labor exploitation and abuse against fast fashion include engagement in modern slavery (Bali, 2023). This industry is highly unethical on multiple fronts, and degrowth calls for it to be banned.

Private Jets

Another industry with outsize environmental implications is that of private jets. Private jets are ecological harmful for several reasons. Primarily, travel by air is a high-emissions activity regardless of the type of craft involved (Higham, Ellis & Maclaurin, 2019). Private jets are often taken for short-haul flights with low passenger density. Short-haul flights are more detrimental than longer flights due to the fuel-consumption impact of the take-off and landing procedures. The low passenger density of flights on private jets means that the per capita impact of the jet fuel emissions is much higher than that of commercial flights. Private aviation is also subject to fewer regulations than commercial aircrafts, while these wealthy passengers contribute significantly fewer funds to the maintenance of airport infrastructure (Scott & Trimarchi, 2019). Finally, the use of private jets is an activity reserved for those engaging in indulgent lifestyles. This can contribute to a culture of excessive consumption and a disregard for the environmental consequences of personal choices. Degrowth pushes for banning private jets, alongside asking folks to interrogate the collective impact of their individual choices. This interrogation is especially important when personal decisions carry substantial ecological impacts.

Lobbying

Degrowth also advocates for interrogation of how corporations and capitalists reify their power and are permitted to engage in practices harmful to human and planetary well-being. One of the strategies for the (re)production of power is the system of lobbying. Lobbying is a process through which organizations influence government decisions, policies, and regulations to advance their interests. Lobbying can take various forms, including direct communication with lawmakers, campaign contributions, grassroots advocacy, and public relations campaigns. Wealthy corporations

with significant resources engage in lobbying practices to convince politicians to create or alter legislation and regulations that are favorable for quarterly growth. Lobbying by corporations leads to the creation of laws and regulations that prioritize profit over the public good. The structure of lobbying creates a situation in which corporations and people who already hold an imbalance of societal power reinforce and generate dominance for themselves. This system of political finance controls policymaking, thereby putting corporate earnings over ecological health and well-being for people. Degrowth proposes outlawing the practice of corporate lobbying, in order to redistribute power more fairly across society and ensure respectable human living conditions on a thriving planet. Corporate lobbying is a harmful practice that has trickle-down effects on marginalized people—banning this aspect of the political system would have a rippling positive impact.

Limiting Advertising

A final policy measure considers the limitation or even banning of advertisements. The sole purpose of advertisements is to convince the consumer to make purchases. Ads are antithetical to degrowth at their core. Advertising is a permeating industry that saturates our visual culture and spans several sectors, including media, design, and technology. Giant technology companies harvest huge collections of the minutest of data through intrusive digital surveillance apparatuses in the name of targeting consumers with commodities. The vast needs of the data mining and storage facilities required to harvest and profiteer from consumer data carries a huge environmental weight in and of itself (Osaka, 2023). Furthermore, the point of advertising is to persuade people into making purchases. This includes the construction of desire, manipulation, and even outright lying, while concerns for the welfare of humans and the Earth come second to profits, if at all. Advertising promotes the culture of consumerism, always encouraging people to buy more, regardless of actual need for the product. The construction of desire leads to overconsumption, which strains the finite resources of the planet and contributes to environmental degradation. The processes of extraction and manufacturing, alongside consumer use and disposal, are exacerbated by folk making purchases that satisfy constructed desires and not needs. The disposal stage of the product life cycle generates significant waste, as do the extraction, production, and distribution stages. Additionally, advertising

can exacerbate social inequality by promoting the idea that happiness and success are tied to material possession. This can drive financial strain and debt for those who try to keep up with the advertised lifestyle, especially for lower-income individuals. Moreover, global advertising campaigns often promote a homogenized consumer culture, eroding local cultures and traditions. This can lead to a loss of diversity in values, preferences, and practices. Advertising can have a profound psychological impact, fostering feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and dissatisfaction among individuals who perceive themselves as falling short of the lifestyles promoted in advertisements. Advertising makes negative contributions, while sustaining few legitimate arguments for its continued existence. One justification is the number of jobs and lives that rely on the industry, this conundrum could be resolved by the implementation of an Unconditional Autonomy Allowance. Another objection is that advertising provides consumers with important information. This issue could be solved by limitations over bans, or the creation of new types of information systems for communication with consumers. By banning or limiting advertising, degrowth argues that society can shift its focus from manufactured wants to genuine needs. This policy proposal has the potential to encourage more ecologically-friendly and community-oriented forms of production and consumption. Under capitalism, corporate entities must continually grow and expand to compete in advertising-driven markets. Banning or limiting advertising would reduce this pressure and create space for a focus on producing high-quality, durable goods instead of constantly chasing growth targets.

Community Strategies

Communal Cooking

Alongside policy initiatives, there are strategies for communal engagement as paths toward degrowth utopias. One of these strategies is communal cooking. The benefits of cooking with one another span several arenas. Communal cooking promotes the efficient use of resources, particularly in terms of food and energy. When people come together to prepare and share meals, this often involves cooking larger quantities of food at once, which can reduce energy consumption compared to individual cooking. Additionally, communal cooking can help minimize food waste when folx plan meals based on the availability of local harvests and the consideration of group needs. Degrowth

emphasizes the importance of local and seasonal consumption to reduce the negative environmental impact associated with food production and transportation. Cooking in community with one another can be organized around locally sourced and seasonal ingredients, fostering a stronger connection to local food systems and reducing the demand for out-of-season and long-distance foods. Shared kitchen spaces and equipment can be used to engage in the practice of communal cooking. This reduces the need for every household to have its own fully-equipped kitchen, which in turn saves resources and space. Spaces created for cooking together can be designed with energy-efficient appliances and layouts that optimize resource use. Communal kitchens can be built into housing infrastructure, as part of larger strategies aimed at addressing issues of affordability and social cohesion. Having shared versus individual facilities means that both up-front and maintenance costs associated with degrowth housing will be more affordable. Cooking and eating together can strengthen social bonds and build a sense of community. Engaging in fellowship is an important part of developing social relationships. Spending time over meals is a cornerstone of the convivial practices that are central to degrowth. Preparing meals amongst folk from diverse backgrounds can facilitate cultural exchange and knowledge sharing. Communal cooking creates an opportunity for people to learn and share cooking skills, as well as knowledge about sustainable and local food practices. This promotes self-sufficiency and resilience, which are key principles of degrowth.

Sharing Care Work

Related to sharing the responsibility of cooking is sharing the responsibility of care work. Care work is a hidden, but fundamental, form of labor that is necessary not only for survival, but for capitalism itself to function. Sharing care work involves a shift away from the traditional model where one or a few individuals, often women, bear the primary responsibility for caregiving. Instead, distributing the responsibilities of care emphasizes cooperation, conviviality, collective responsibility, and community support. Care work encompasses a wide range of activities, including childcare, elder care, household chores, caring for the sick, emotional support, and community support. The labor involved in care work is frequently not only physically demanding, but emotionally taxing. It is both a challenging and rewarding aspect of the human experience that can be more enjoyable when done

collectively. Sharing care work fosters social cohesion and solidarity within communities. It promotes interdependence and cooperation rather than individualism and competition. The social connections fostered by cooperative care work are vital for building resilient communities and addressing social inequalities. Community resilience is built through creating support networks that can respond to shocks and crises. These community networks are spaces where care work can be collaborated on, as are smaller circles of folx such as households or neighbors. A key aspect of working together to provide care is communication, along with developing an understanding of the value of care work. Recognizing the value of care work is a central tenet of degrowth, especially given that care work is essential for any economy to function. Care work sharing challenges traditional gender roles and norms, which are often reinforced by capitalism to serve its need to maintain a capable working class. The isolated nuclear family is a constructed norm of capitalism, devised to prevent groups of folx from developing collective autonomy. By sharing care responsibilities, individuals can reduce the overall time and energy spent on caregiving, allowing for more opportunities for non-materialistic pursuits. This provides individuals with more free time for leisure, personal development, and community engagement. Additionally, sharing care work can reduce environmental impact by lessening energy requirements in shared spaces and reducing commute responsibilities. By sharing care work and focusing on quality of life rather than material accumulation, people can experience greater satisfaction, contentment, and fulfillment, which are central to the degrowth philosophy.

Tool, Gear & Equipment Libraries

Another model based on developing a sharing economy is the establishment of tool and equipment libraries. Tool libraries are community-based facilitates that lend out tools or gear, in a similar way to how traditional libraries lend out books. These libraries are beneficial to both people and the planet. The establishment of tool libraries eliminates the need for every individual to own every tool they might periodically need. This not only reduces costs for individuals, it reduces the material impact on the planet. Additionally, tool libraries mean that more folx will have access to specialized tools, more opportunities for the development of skills, and more engagement with the community. This aligns with the degrowth values of collective autonomy, self-reliance, reciprocity, and

interdependence. Creating tool libraries is an example of making an economic shift from ownership to usership models. Ownership has been the dominant model, wherein goods are purchased, used, and controlled by individuals. Under usership models, goods and services are accessed by users for a specific period or as needed. Usership models are not inherently beneficial, in fact some rely on a high degree of worker exploitation. However, the implementation of strategies for usership models such as tool libraries for material goods would facilitate the reduction in material throughput in the economy. For items that are only periodically used by individuals, a system for lending is an obvious choice. To implement sharing economies in non-market capacities, the lending stock can be publicly owned with no fees for usage. This arrangement would further the degrowth priorities of equity, justice, and the creation of commonly shared resources.

Time Banks

Alongside tool libraries, another community non-market approach for degrowth are time banks. Time banks are systems that facilitate the exchange of services among members outside of monetary exchange. They operate on the principle of reciprocity, where members offer their skills, talents, or time to help others, and in return, they can receive assistance or services from other members. The medium of exchange in a time bank is time, and hours of all participants are valued equally. Time banks function by individuals making deposits in the form of the amount of time they are willing to perform tasks or services they designate. For example, in a hypothetical time bank the author could deposit ten hours of graphic design labor. Withdrawals are also taken in the form of time, for the skills offered by another bank member. The bank keeps records of the time credits earned and spent by members. Time banks are sometimes part of community organizations that engage in additional work, and some will host events to strengthen the social fabric of the membership. These entities promote a sense of reciprocal responsibility and can strengthen social networks while reducing the dependence on market systems for everyday needs within a community.

Cooperatives

A final strategy for communal degrowth action is the establishment of cooperatives. Colloquially known as co-ops, cooperatives are organizations that are owned and governed by

their members. Typically, cooperatives will be organized around a common interest or need. Some structures will feature workers who are owners, and others will feature members who are owners. Ownership is collective, and decisions are made based on democratic principles. Each member receives one vote, regardless of financial contributions, making the structure horizontal. This is in contrast with the typical capitalist enterprise that features complex hierarchies. Cooperatives generally have a mission or benefit that goes beyond capital accumulation, and decisions are made based on the mission, serving the community, and meeting the needs of members. Cooperatives are free to operate with a focus on social welfare and environmental responsibility. These entities are an example of how businesses can operate in a degrowth utopia.

Personal Degrowth Practices

Along with policy and communal strategies for enacting degrowth, there are personal practices one can undertake. This is not to frame ecological collapse as the responsibility of the individual, but it is to demonstrate that ways of being differently are achievable now. These personal practices for degrowth are sometimes referred to as voluntary simplicity or frugal abundance. They are based on the idea of enoughness—being content with having needs met, and working against excessive want. Frugal abundance means that contentment and fulfillment are derived from needs satisfaction over consumerism and desire. It involves making intentional choices to live a rich and abundant life while minimizing waste, unnecessary expenses, and overconsumption. The practice of gratitude is central to engaging in frugal abundance. It is necessary to actively cultivate gratitude and work against the conditioned norms of the growth mindset. A further exploration of personal degrowth practices can be found in the next chapter, *Personal Practices of Degrowth Values & Data Humanism*.

Decolonization of the Imaginary

The final arena in which the growth imperative must be contested is that of the mind. This is known to degrowth theorists and activists as decolonization of the imaginary (Liegey & Nelson, 2020). Decolonizing imaginaries refers to developing new ways of thinking beyond the dominant paradigms. It includes cultivating sweeping utopian visions for the future, alongside conceiving of alternative

everyday practices that are available for immediate engagement. One of the reasons that growth has achieved supremacy over thought is its alignment with an appearance of being natural. It is straightforward to consider the growth of plants, children, and animals as both natural and favorable. However, it is less effortless to recall that all of those beings eventually stop growing—and this is the optimal state of affairs. The idea of applying infinite growth to people and plants is not only ridiculous, it is an impossibility. This impossibility also applies to economics, but is much more difficult to fathom in an economic context.

Rest

A further concept that is difficult to fathom under the political economic paradigm of capitalism is the value of rest. Capitalism valorizes productivity, hustling, and grinding—because hard workers equals more surplus labor value and therefore wealth for those at the top. In response to this culture of constant hustle, degrowth champions not only the value of rest, but rest as a form of resistance. The concept of rest as resistance is promoted by Tricia Hersey (2022), who critiques capitalism for its dehumanizing effects. Capitalism teaches that success is grounded in productivity, and that workers must treat their bodies like machines. Rest is a form of rebellion and a reclamation of individual power in the face of domination. Related to engaging in defiance of oppression through rest is doing so through joy. In a system that thrives upon dissatisfaction to spurn product sales, cultivating joy and gratitude is an act of dissent. Rest and joy are revolutionary acts under late capitalism. Gaining this understanding is part of the decolonization of the imaginary espoused by the degrowth philosophy. In the words of Audre Lorde, “The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us.” (Lorde, 2019).

Personal Practices of Degrowth Values & Data Humanism

Degrowth is not merely a call for reduced economic output—it is a comprehensive and transformative ideology that seeks to redefine societal priorities. Degrowth calls for rejecting the dominant culture of overconsumption, resource exploitation, and the pursuit of endless economic growth. Rather, degrowth proposes an emphasis on sufficiency, ecological health, and the pursuit of holistic well-being. The conversion towards a degrowth-oriented society can begin at the individual level. Personal practices are one strategy to begin implementing degrowth values and fostering a mindset shift. This is not to frame ecological collapse as the responsibility of the individual, but it is to demonstrate that ways of being differently are achievable now. These personal practices for degrowth are also referred to as voluntary simplicity or frugal abundance. They are based on the idea of enoughness—being content with having needs met, and working against excessive want. Frugal abundance means that contentment is derived from needs satisfaction over consumerism and desire. It involves making intentional choices to live a rich and abundant life while minimizing waste, unnecessary expenses, and overconsumption. The practice of gratitude is central to engaging in frugal abundance. It is necessary to actively cultivate gratitude and work against the conditioned norms of the growth mindset. Frugal abundance values the importance of time and freedom. Frugal abundance does not mean living in poverty—it involves making prudent financial decisions and building a foundation of financial security. Living simply encourages mindfulness and being present in the moment. It emphasizes the pursuit of activities that bring joy, meaning, and fulfillment, such as spending time in nature, practicing mindfulness meditation, or engaging in creative pursuits. There are many ways to implement the practice of frugal abundance. Some of these include eating a plant-based diet, thrifting for clothing, minimizing screen time, hanging clothes to dry, and choosing to walk or bike instead of drive. Reducing waste, conserving resources, and adopting an eco-friendly lifestyle are common practices in this philosophy. Joyful frugality involves restoring the primacy of being over having.

One of the key aspects of personal practices in degrowth is a reevaluation of the meaning of prosperity. The growth imperative must be contested in the arena of the mind. Rather than measuring

success solely in terms of material wealth and possessions, individuals embracing degrowth values find fulfillment in experiences, relationships, and a sense of community. This shift in perspective not only enhances personal well-being but also challenges the dominant narrative that perpetual economic growth is essential for a thriving society.

Personal practices aligned with degrowth values emphasize localism and community building. By supporting local businesses, practicing food sovereignty, and participating in community-based initiatives, individuals contribute to the resilience of the folx around them. This approach fosters a sense of interconnectedness and shared responsibility, countering the isolation and alienation associated with hyper-individualistic late capitalism. Personal practices that prioritize environmental stewardship—such as reducing material throughput, adopting renewable energy sources, and promoting regenerative agriculture—contribute to the broader goals of degrowth. The ecological implications of unchecked growth and overconsumption are evident in the escalating climate crisis and transgression of other planetary boundaries. By cultivating a deeper connection to the environment, individuals become agents of change in addressing the urgent need for new ways of being.

Personal practices are not just individual choices; they are the embodiment of values and beliefs that can shape societies. Embracing degrowth values at a personal level is not a retreat from progress but a conscious choice to redefine progress in more holistic terms. By adopting practices aligned with degrowth, individuals can become catalysts for change—inspiring others to reconsider their relationship with consumption and contribute to the emergence of a more regenerative and equitable world. The significance of personal practices in embracing degrowth values lies in their potential to initiate a paradigm shift towards a more balanced, harmonious, and ecologically friendly future.

Data on Personal Practices

In this research, I have collected data on my engagement in personal practices of degrowth. I tracked behavior in seven categories: transportation, energy usage, laundry habits, clothing purchases, use of email, use of smartphone, and political engagement. A portion of these practices

are behaviors I typically engage in, while some of these practices I adopted specifically for this research. The category with the highest degree of impact on my daily activities was transportation. I kept records on these practices by hand in a notebook where I recorded my activities daily. The data collection period took place between September 1 and October 31 of 2023.

Transportation

The first category of data collection on my personal degrowth practices was transportation. The main component of this group of activities was my choice to drive my car only when absolutely necessary. Private cars are a high-impact component of society. Combustion engines in cars emit pollutants such as carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, particulate matter, and volatile organic compounds. These pollutants contribute to air quality deterioration and have adverse effects on human health. Less frequently espoused is the particulate matter shed by tires—a modern passenger car tire will contain up to 25 components and as many as 12 different rubber compounds. The production and maintenance of cars requires significant amounts of natural resources, including metals, plastics, and energy. Private cars contribute to noise pollution, which can have detrimental effects on ecosystems and human health. Excessive noise can disrupt wildlife habitats, interfere with communication among animals, and lead to stress and other health issues in humans. The infrastructure required for private cars, including roads and parking spaces, contributes to urbanization and alters land use patterns. This can lead to the fragmentation of ecosystems, loss of green spaces, and increased impervious surfaces, affecting water runoff and local climates. Public transit, cycling, and walking are all more environmentally friendly alternatives for transportation.

Access to public transit is dependent upon the area in which one lives, and in many areas of the United States, public transit infrastructure is underdeveloped or nonexistent. This is an important consideration, given that choosing to walk or bicycle is dependent upon an individual not having a physical disability that limits this choice. I reside in a small college in town in rural North Carolina where the public transit infrastructure is limited to a bus system that caters to the university, and a city bus system that does not run on a schedule. Public transit was not a viable alternative to driving my car for my transportation needs. Thus, much of my movement was achieved by walking and

cycling. Besides the requisite able body, cycling also has the consideration of infrastructure. Without dedicated lanes for bicycle travel, riding amongst the cars and trucks can be quite dangerous. My apartment complex is located on a main thoroughfare in the town, frequented by inexperienced drivers. Thus, I made the choice to walk rather than bike when my destination dictated use of this road. The majority of my route to the university campus has a dedicated bicycle lane, so this has been my transport method of choice for getting to school since matriculation. Aside from walking, biking, and the nonexistent public transit choice, I also made choices to carpool when I could and to avoid flying. Aviation is another high-impact transportation activity that is important to consider. The primary environmental impact of flying is the release of carbon dioxide and other pollutants into the atmosphere. Air travel relies on fossil fuels—predominantly aviation kerosene—and is a major contributor to global carbon emissions, accounting for around two to three percent of the total.

Energy Usage

For this category of data collection and personal practice, I focused on my energy usage through setting the thermostat. The thermostat serves as the control center for the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system, which regulates temperatures indoors. The temperature at which the thermostat is set determines how much energy will be utilized in heating and cooling the living space. The environmental impact of thermostat settings is closely tied to energy consumption. Increased energy usage means higher carbon emissions, especially if the electricity in the area is generated from non-renewable sources. In the area where I reside, the utilities commission buys electricity from a power agency who buys electricity from a larger power company. The larger power company, Duke Energy, maintains nearly 70 power plants in the Carolinas alone. Setting the thermostat responsibly is one strategy for reducing individual energy consumption.

The lifespan of HVAC systems can be affected by how often they operate at maximum capacity. Frequently running the system to maintain extreme temperatures leads to increased deterioration of the components. Setting the thermostat at moderate levels helps in preventing unnecessary strain on the equipment, potentially extending its lifespan. This is one way to reduce material throughput, as replacement HVAC systems require extracted materials and nonfunctional

units must be disposed of. Some components of HVAC systems are able to be recycled (a process that has negative environmental impacts), while other components are dangerous and difficult to dispose of—such as refrigerants.

Setting thermostats within optimal temperature ranges is a straightforward yet effective approach to minimize the environmental impact of home heating and cooling systems. The U.S. Department of Energy recommends keeping thermostats at 68 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter and 78 degrees in the summer (*Energy Tips for Institutional and Government Buildings*, n.d.). Responsible thermostat management also involves seasonal adjustments to accommodate changing weather conditions. During colder months, embracing practices such as wearing warm clothing and using blankets allows folx to maintain comfort without relying heavily on heating systems. In the summer, light clothing and the use of fans can complement higher thermostat settings. By integrating these practices, individuals can strike a balance between energy efficiency and personal comfort, thereby reducing their overall environmental impact. During this data collection period, I kept the thermostat at 85 degrees when I left town, 78 degrees when I was home (with one exception), and turned the HVAC system off once high temperatures began falling.

Laundry Habits

Washing machines and dryers are convenient appliances—but they make environmental impacts through their energy consumption and water usage. Washing machines, particularly those with high-capacity features and robust functionalities, demand a considerable amount of electricity to power the motor, heating elements, and electronic controls. Dryers are among the most energy-consuming household appliances. The heating element and motor, combined with the continuous airflow needed for drying, result in a considerable energy demand. While washing machines are designed to conserve water compared to traditional hand washing, they still consume a substantial amount of water. Older models, in particular, use more water than necessary. Additionally, the production of washing machines and dryers involves the extraction and processing of raw materials, causing environmental degradation. This extraction contributes to habitat destruction, deforestation, and the depletion of non-renewable resources. Furthermore, the disposal of nonfunctional appliances

poses a challenge, as electronic waste releases hazardous substances into the environment. However, the impact of washing machines and dryers can be mitigated through personal practices. The use of the dryer can be reduced through air-drying laundered items. Air-drying laundry by hanging it on a clothesline or using a drying rack can eliminate the need for a dryer altogether. This not only conserves energy but also extends the lifespan of clothing. Additionally, the frequency of washing items can be reduced. In many cases, clothing can be worn several times before it is truly in need of laundering. I engaged in both of these practices—washing only when truly necessary and air-drying most items. Over the course of the two-month data collection period, I only used the dryer three times.

Clothing Purchases

This category of data collection pertains to new clothing purchases. One of the foremost environmental issues associated with buying new clothes is the depletion of natural resources. The production of textiles relies heavily on water, energy, and raw materials. Cotton, one of the most commonly used fibers, requires vast amounts of water for cultivation, leading to water scarcity in regions where it is grown. Moreover, the extraction of non-renewable resources, such as petroleum for synthetic fibers like polyester, contributes to environmental degradation and climate change. The fashion industry is a significant contributor to environmental pollution. Throughout the entire life cycle of clothing, from production to disposal, various pollutants are released into the air, water, and soil. Textile dyeing processes release harmful chemicals and heavy metals, contaminating water sources and posing threats to aquatic habitats. Additionally, the disposal of synthetic fabrics results in microplastic pollution, as these materials break down into tiny particles that find their way into oceans and aquatic ecosystems, posing risks to marine life and entering the food chain. The throwaway culture perpetuated by fast fashion exacerbates the problem of waste generation. Trends change rapidly, prompting consumers to discard clothing items that are still in good condition. The accumulation of textile waste in landfills is problematic, as many fabrics take years to decompose. Moreover, the disposal of unwanted clothes contributes to material throughput and perpetuates a linear model of production and consumption that is ecologically

unhealthy. Addressing the environmental impact of buying new clothes requires a paradigm shift in consumer behavior and industry practices. Embracing alternatives, such as second-hand shopping, upcycling, and supporting eco-friendly brands, can significantly reduce the demand for new clothing production. Additionally, adopting circular economy principles is imperative in mitigating the negative environmental consequences of the fashion industry. For this practice, my intention was to purchase only previously-owned clothing—with the exception of socks, shoes, and underwear. During the data collection period, I purchased no already-worn clothing, no underwear, no shoes, and one pack of socks.

Use of Email

A key component of embodying degrowth values is decoupling oneself from work. This includes both the physicality of engaging in labor and the mental state of tying self-worth and validation to productivity. One of the ways that work has permeated the boundaries of working hours and working location is email. In particular, access to email via smartphones has, for many, created a culture of constant availability. Email has also become a frontier for demonstrating that one is doing work and for compensating for the precarity that accompanies a disorganized labor force. Women have a tendency to engage in more email attentiveness outside of working hours, in an effort to demonstrate productivity and their value to the employer (Gregg, 2011). Workplaces that encourage friendships between co-workers—or even refer to employees as “family”—are implementing pressure to work not only from management, but from everywhere and everyone. This is exploitation by the employer of the natural human tendency to care about one another. Humans are relational and do not want to let others down—workplaces leverage this knowledge to manufacture social pressure to constantly work. Emails pinging through during personal time serve the same function to pressure people to become their job, the productive, moral, “good” worker. In addition to receiving emails at any time, constant access to sending emails engenders the hubristic attitude that the schedule of everyone else belongs to the sender.

Another problematic facet of email is the lack of nuance. Due to the text-based nature of emails, non-verbal cues present in face-to-face and telephone conversations are lost. This absence

of visual and auditory elements can lead to misinterpretation, misunderstandings, and potential conflicts. The written format of emails may not adequately convey emotions or tone, making it easier for messages to be misconstrued. This can be particularly problematic when communication styles between sender and receiver are at odds. For example, this author is a direct communicator living in an area where direct communication is interpreted as rude. Consider that in the American South, “bless your heart” is an insult. For the data collection period, I removed email from my phone, checked my accounts once daily, and tracked anytime I sent an email after hours. I defined after hours as any time before 8am, after 5pm, or on the weekends. On thirteen out of 61 days of data collection, I did not check my email at all. Email is an ubiquitous form of electronic communication that it is important to consider how we engage with.

Use of Smartphone

Closely related to email is the overall use of the smartphone. The smartphone is an omnipresent feature of contemporary life, and has caused some to posit that humans should now be considered cyborgs. In 2014, Chief Supreme Court Justice John Roberts wrote a majority opinion stating that “modern cell phones . . . are now such a pervasive and insistent part of daily life that the proverbial visitor from Mars might conclude they were an important feature of human anatomy.” (*Our Cyborg Future: Law and Policy Implications* | Brookings, 2022). There are myriad negative implications of continual engagement with smartphones for humans. The use of smartphones can contribute to a sedentary lifestyle. Excessive screen time is linked to various health issues, including eye strain, headaches, and disrupted sleep patterns. Social media platforms—easily accessible via smartphones—are associated with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Constant comparison with curated online lives can lead to feelings of inadequacy and discontent. Paradoxically, while smartphones connect people digitally, they can contribute to social isolation in the physical world. Individuals engrossed in their devices may withdraw from face-to-face interactions. Some folx prioritize virtual conversations over real-life moments, affecting the quality of relationships and interpersonal communication. During this data collection period, I worked consciously to disengage from my phone. I turned off notifications for as many applications

as possible, implemented a screen time limit for social media, and removed Reddit and Twitter. I maintained accounts I use for messaging and Instagram, which I use for posting my design work. I tracked my daily pick-ups, screentime, and notifications.

Political Engagement

The final category of personal practices for degrowth is that of political engagement. Working to implement degrowth values as an individual is important, but does not supplant the need for policy measures. I choose to be politically active during this period by sending a daily postcard to an elected official. This includes representatives at the municipal, state, and federal government levels. The town where I reside is run by a city council, where I am represented by a district representative, an at-large representative, and the mayor. At the state level, the government is run by the North Carolina General Assembly. I am represented there by a State Senator and House of Representatives member. Additionally at the state level I am represented by the governor. At the federal level, I am represented by two Senators and one member of the House of Representatives. I am also represented by the President of the United States. Overall, there are ten elected public officials who (in theory) work to carry out the will of the people. I focused the subject of each post card on what I felt drawn to at the time of writing. Topics included public transit infrastructure, establishing dedicated bicycle lanes, renewable energy initiatives, education policy, student loan forgiveness, and calling for an Israeli ceasefire and condemnation of the genocide of Palestinians. The most frequent topics were public transit and bicycle lanes, as my choice in mode of transportation was impacting my daily life the most.

Data Humanism

Information design is the visual representation of quantitative values. Also referred to as data visualization, information design is a tool that can aid the human mind in comprehending large numbers, understanding sizable data sets, and apprehending changes over time. Additionally, information design can be a beautiful art form that transforms the perception of data. Data humanism is a reaction against computer-generated information design: sterile bar graphs, pie charts, and slick infographics that populate the visual culture. Data is a literal commodity. Numbers can obfuscate humanity—or, numbers can make us more human. In the era of digital information explosion, the role

of data in shaping the world has become increasingly prominent. However, amid the sea of numbers and statistics, there is a growing recognition of the need to infuse a human-centric approach into data interpretation, application, and visualization. This emerging perspective, known as data humanism, seeks to bridge the gap between raw data and the lived experiences of individuals, emphasizing the importance of context, empathy, and ethical considerations. Data humanism is an interdisciplinary concept that draws from fields such as data science, sociology, philosophy, and design. At its core, it challenges the conventional view of data as a detached, objective entity and advocates for a more holistic understanding that incorporates the human element. Giorgia Lupi is often credited with coining the term and promoting the idea that data should be a tool for storytelling rather than just a set of cold, hard facts (PrintMag, 2017). One key tenet of data humanism is acknowledging the human stories behind the data points. Instead of reducing individuals to mere data entries, this perspective encourages exploration of the rich narratives that underlie every piece of information. By placing the human experience at the center of data analysis, a deeper understanding of the context and nuance that shape the numbers can be gained. Data visualization plays a pivotal role in the data humanism movement. Visualizations serve as a bridge between the numerical and the narrative, transforming complex datasets into accessible and engaging stories. Infusing creativity into data visualization not only enhances understanding but also allows for a more emotional and intuitive connection to the information presented. The truth about data is often obfuscated by its graphic presentation: people situated in contexts decide what data to collect and analyze and for what purpose and what to do with the data and what visual form it takes. The reality is that data is a construction of humanity. Yet, data is presented as objective and detached from social processes. Data humanism represents a paradigm shift in how data is approached and utilized. By recognizing the intrinsic value of human stories within datasets, we can create a more meaningful data culture.

I collected data for this research using a deliberately slow method. I used a small physical graph paper notebook and a pencil and wrote out each data point by hand. This choice was to embody the practice of data humanism. Additionally, I engaged in data analysis by hand, writing out numbers and conclusions in that same notebook. I am working to present data in a more honest and

approachable way, by using letterpress printing. Letterpress printing is a process in which raised surfaces are inked and pressed into paper. The physicality of this process allows me to generate a more personal, embodied knowledge of the data I am working with. I am provided a deep sense of connection to the work I am making through the tactility of letterpress printing. After deciding what one is going to print, the letterforms must be located and gathered individually—touching each one by hand. Working in this medium causes an inescapable deeper connection between maker and message. This process gives the data a chance to tell their story. In this work, I selected which data points to include, the date of data collection, how I analyzed it, and how I am presenting it. There is a person making these choices about every data set. The way I am depicting the data makes this clear, and keeps the human role from getting lost.

Plates

Plate 1

Walking & Biking



Plate 2

Walking & Biking Key

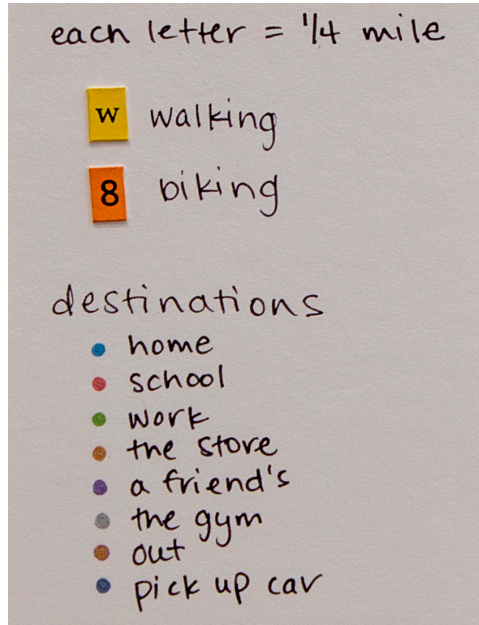


Plate 3

Minimizing Driving Key

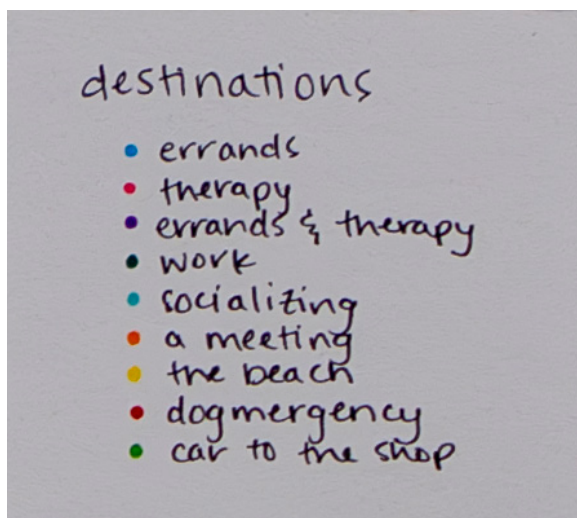


Plate 4

Minimizing Driving

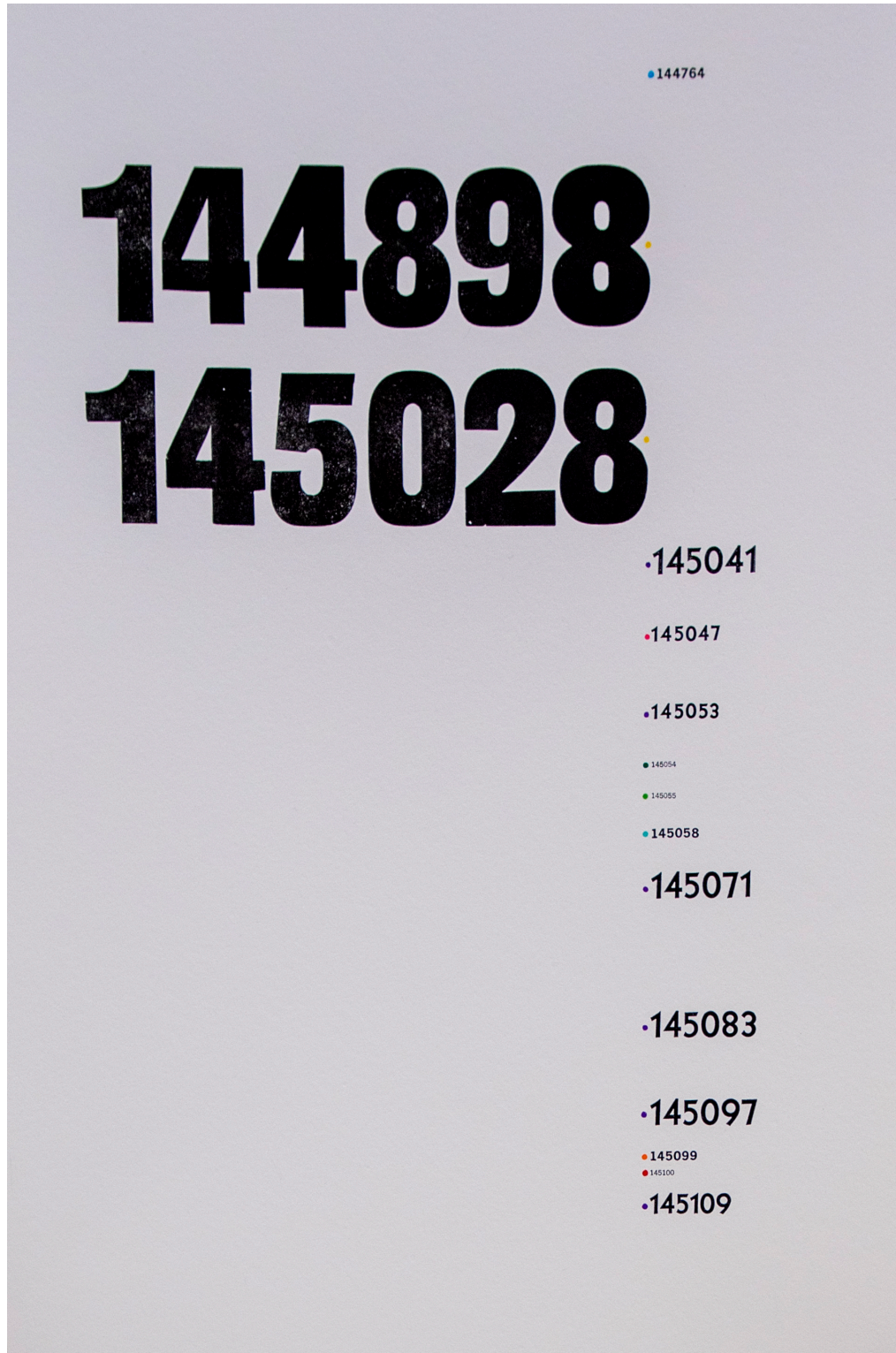


Plate 5

The Temperature & the Thermostat

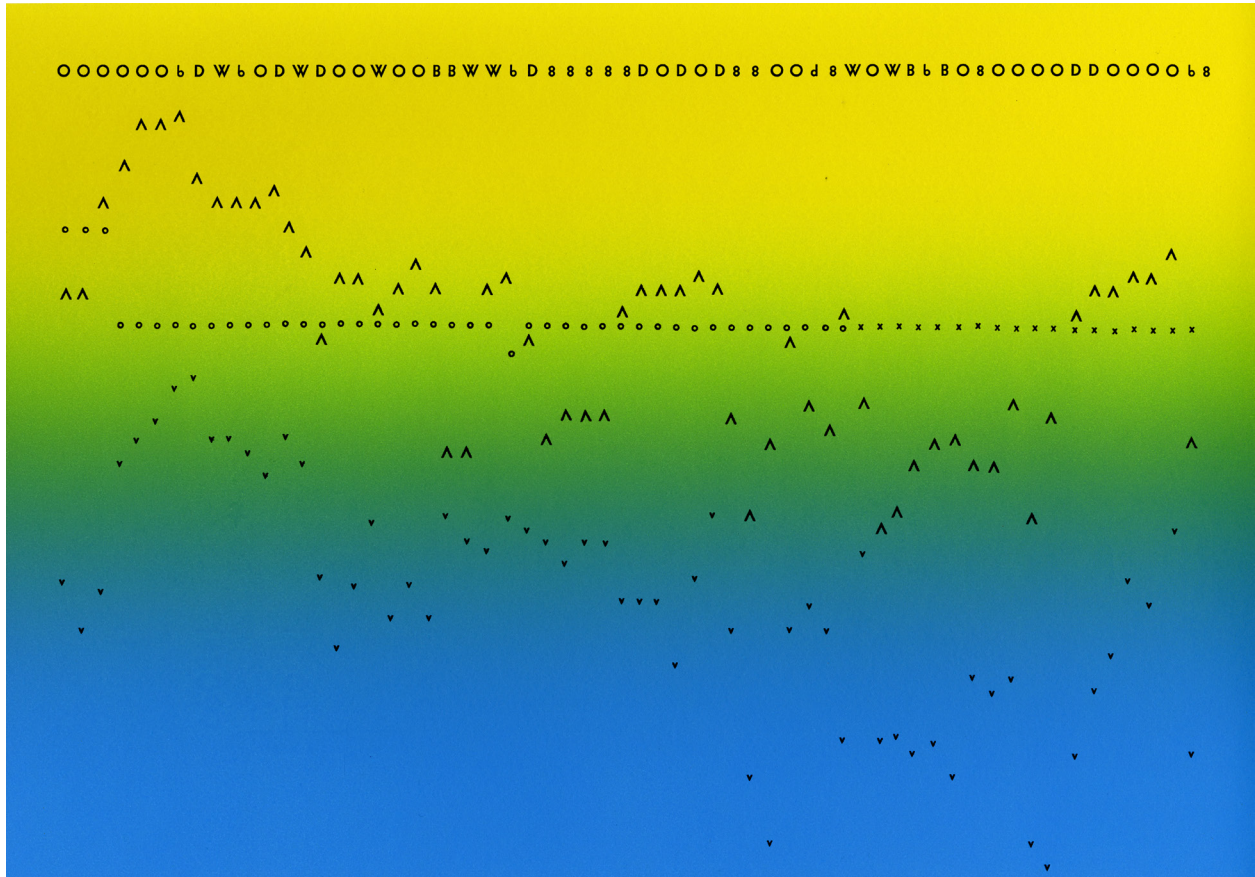


Plate 6

The Temperature & the Thermostat Key

D mostly sunny	O sunny
d partly sunny	W rainy
b partly cloudy	8 cloudy
B mostly cloudy	
A high temperature	
V low temperature	
o thermostat	
x thermostat off	

Plate 7

I only used the dryer 3 times



Plate 8

The only clothes I bought were 10 pairs of socks



Plate 9

Damn Emails

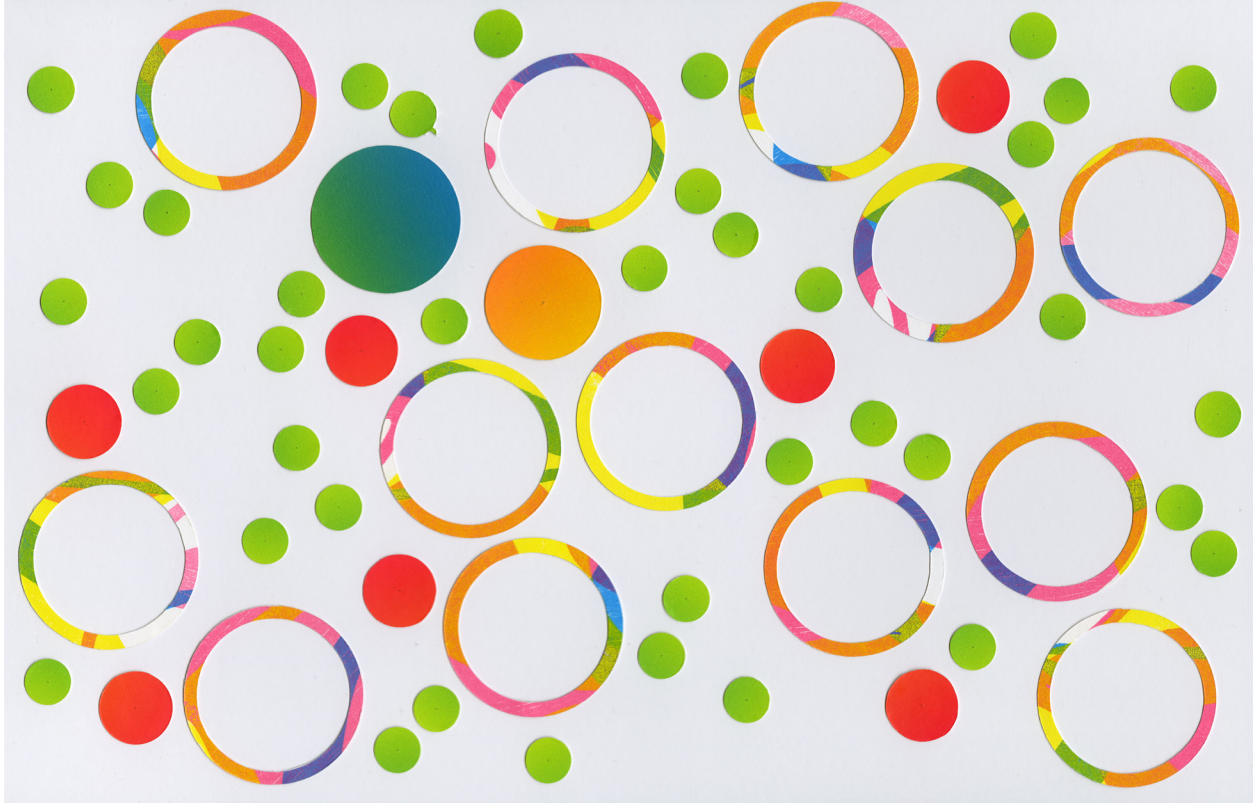


Plate 10

Damn Emails Key



Plate 11

I picked up my phone 5,391 times

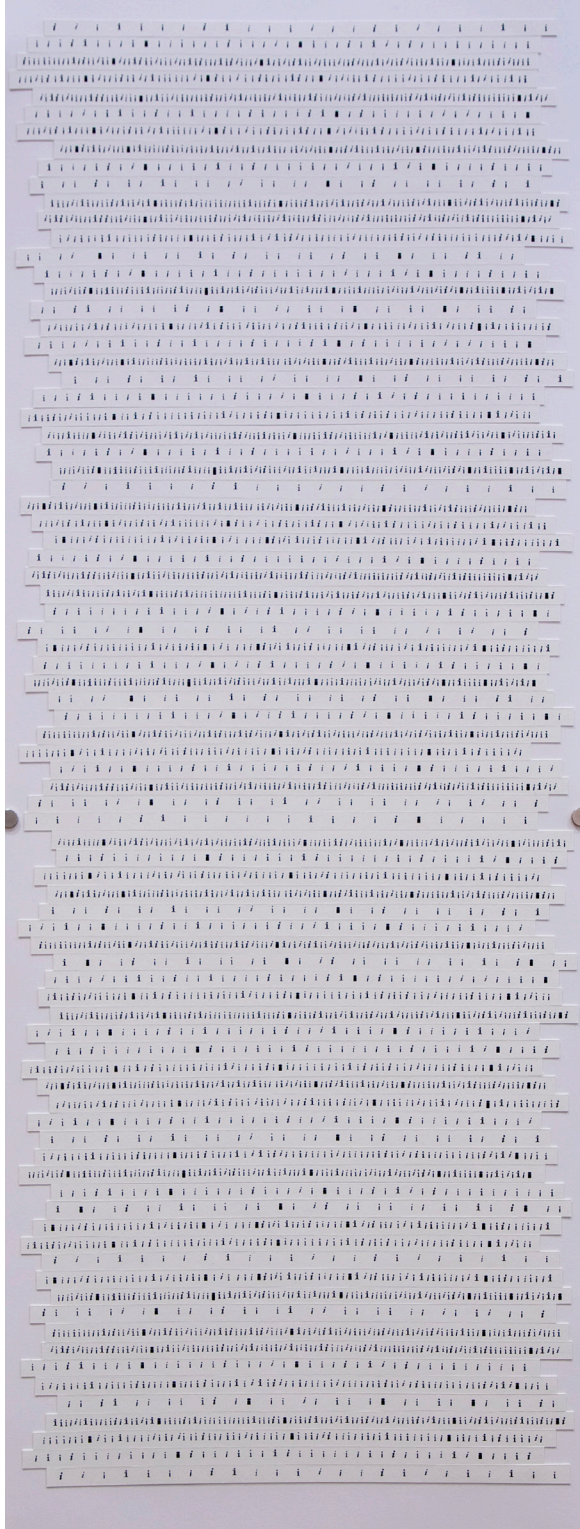


Plate 12

Contacting Politicians

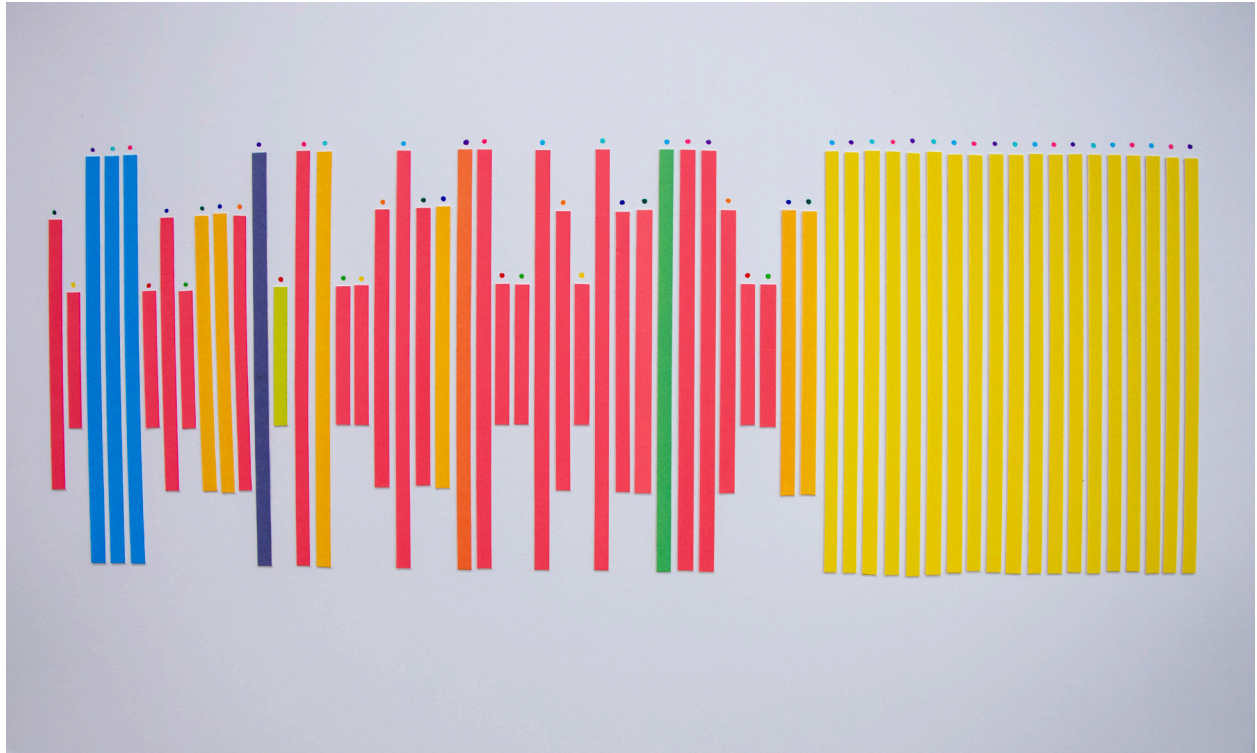
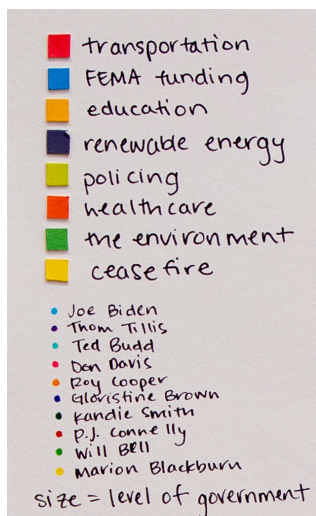


Plate 13

Contacting Politicians Key



Graphic Design: History & Exploration of Connection to Capitalism

Class Relations of Capitalism

Graphic design and capitalism have an intertwined history. In many ways, design has served the function of propping up, perpetuating, and reproducing both small facets of capitalism and larger structures inherent to the operation of the economic system. In order to interrogate how design has supported capitalism, it is important to understand some of the intricacies of the system itself and how it came to be. There are several key features of capitalism to note. First, it is characterized by private ownership and control over both the means of economic production and the value created from the production of goods and services. The means of production refer to the various physical, technological, and organizational resources and tools necessary for the creation and distribution of goods and services in an economy. Examples of the means of production include resources such as land (including minerals, water, forests, etc.), human labor, machines, tools, factories, technology, equipment, digital platforms, intellectual property, and financial resources. A second key feature of capitalism is the existence of the labor market. This is the situation whereby labor power is turned into a commodity via wages. A labor market is a dynamic and complex economic system in which individuals, businesses, and organizations interact to buy and sell labor services. Third, capitalism includes profit-seeking as the goal behind the production of goods or offering of services. This for-profit production occurs through exchange mechanisms, more commonly known as markets. Embedded in the aim of production toward capital accumulation is the imperative for continual economic growth. Finally, within the market competition is the supposed motivator behind innovation and technological development. What is unique about capitalism is that the folk working in production do not own their own means or tools. People have been producing and selling goods and services throughout history, what capitalism introduces is a new system of social relations. By way of private ownership of the means of production, the owner class accumulates power and control over the workers producing the goods and services. The working class is reliant upon the owner class in order to subsist by selling their labor (and thus also their minds and bodies). The class relations created and perpetuated by capitalism are at the crux of much of the critique of the system.

Capitalism: The Beginning & Structure

Capitalism did not always exist. Although it is difficult to fathom, capitalism is a relatively new economic system that developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What created space for the system to develop included the infrastructure for global trade, new methods and technologies for the private means of production, new models of land and property ownership, legal protections on private property and wealth accumulation, and the transition of the peasants into the working class reliant upon wages for survival. The process of people moving from subsistence labor to becoming employed as wage laborers is known as proletarianization (Wizinsky, 2022). Proletarianization involves a shift from self-employment or small-scale farming to working for wages in factories, mines, or other capitalist enterprises. Workers become dependent on selling their labor power to earn a living. Those undergoing proletarianization often experience a loss of control over their means of production. In traditional agricultural or artisanal settings, individuals may have owned or controlled their tools, land, or products, but in the industrialized setting, they become subordinates to the owners of the factories or businesses. As peasants lost the common land to farm to provide for themselves, agricultural technology was developing at a rapid clip. The number of workers needed to produce enough food shrank, while the population was climbing. Put together, this meant there was a large population of landless poor folk seeking ways to survive. Wage labor became the answer for the impoverished. The loss of subsistence agricultural lives also meant that the former peasants were not only no longer growing their own food, but were also not engaged in other self-sufficient activities such as making their own clothes. This created markets for both food and textiles in which the new working class would participate. Herein lies the rise of the consumer. As this shift from feudal relationships to worker/capitalist class relationships was occurring, the Industrial Revolution was burgeoning.

The Industrial Revolution was a period of significant economic, technological, and social change that began in the late eighteenth century and continued into the nineteenth century. It marked a transition from agrarian and craft-based economies to industrial and manufacturing-based ones. The introduction of machinery and automation significantly increased the productivity of a wide variety of industries, while necessitating a large working class for operation. Within the factories,

workers engaged in specific and repetitive tasks. This contributed to the specialization of labor and worker focus on individual duties. Displaced peasants sought out wage labor relationships in the cities, contributing to the urbanization of society and the creation of dense centers of human need. Markets for goods and services arose to meet the demands of a centralized population. The competitive labor market was also developing during this period, as were class relations. Those without capital to invest in money-making activities were forced into the labor market for survival. Both the labor market and the market for goods and services benefited those with capital who were deriving profit from both workers and consumer spending. At the beginning stages of industrial capitalism in Europe, working conditions were abhorrent and consumer safety was virtually nonexistent. Although in some cases conditions have improved today, there are many places that continue to engage in deadly worker exploitation. Industrialization fueled the development of detrimental societal relations that privilege the few at the expense of the many.

Alongside industrialization is another process that contributes to social hierarchies: colonization. Although colonization predates capitalism, the two have an enmeshed history. Colonization is a sociopolitical process in which one group or nation establishes and maintains control over another territory and its people. This process frequently involves the settlement of people from the colonizing nation to the colonized area, with the aim of exploiting its resources, expanding political influence, or asserting cultural and economic dominance. One of the primary motivations for colonization is the economic benefit it offers to the colonizing nation. This often involves the extraction of resources, such as minerals, agricultural products, and labor. The extraction of these resources provides a significant source of wealth and capital that has both historically and contemporarily fueled the growth of capitalism. The cheap—and often coerced—labor force under colonization has been essential for the production of inexpensive goods and commodities, driving capital accumulation for the settler nations. Colonizing powers impose economic policies that favor the interests of the colonizers. These policies often include export-oriented production, trade restrictions, and taxation, all of which serve to benefit the capitalist class. Additionally, imperial monetary policies can impose economic power structures amongst wealthy and impoverished

nations without necessitating settler colonialism. The consequences of colonization often include economic disparities and inequalities, which perpetuate global relations of power and injustice on a massive scale.

Clearly, capitalism is a problematic economic system. Although it is true that the system has produced material wealth the world over and pulled innumerable folx out of poverty and suffering, the wealth generated is incredibly unevenly distributed. Not only that, but under capitalism there can never be enough. In order for capitalist entities to survive, they must undergo continual growth and expansion. The growth imperative supersedes all else, and has resulted in a system in which morality will always come second to growth and profits. This means that not only is there staggering inequality in resource distribution, oppression of minorities in all categories of identity is rampant. Relations of domination are especially true for racial, gender, dis/ability, queer, and religious minorities. Combined with the class differences inherent to capitalism, minority groups and the intersections thereof are repeatedly and systemically oppressed to serve the needs of the powerful. Coupled with the exploitation of the environment to serve the aim of profit accumulation, it becomes clear that capitalism does not serve the needs of people nor the planet.

Graphic Design & Capitalism: History

Early Stages

Indeed, human needs satisfaction nor ecological health are not the goals of the political economic system of capitalism. It is structured around providing value to the owner class, and graphic design has played a not-so-insignificant role in ensuring its perpetuation. The first publicly traded corporation was the Dutch East India Company, a company engaged in long voyages by sea aimed at colonization and trade enterprise. The ships flew under both the Dutch flag and a flag featuring the trademark of the company. The monogram trademark was also displayed across company property, including shipping containers and cannons, and then later on merchant goods. The mark is considered the first example of a globally recognized corporate logo. The Dutch East India Company was an example of a new form of economic activity involving capital investment, and its global activities necessitated distinguishability for its property and products. It is an example of how graphic design

played a role in the earliest stages of the emergence of capitalism, as the new trademark eventually became the centerpiece of the corporate branding system for the company.

Differentiation & Construction of Desire

As capitalism developed into the global juggernaut it is today, design played a continually greater role in the reification of the system. In the early twentieth century, advancements in industrial production capability had led to wide ranges of similar products available for consumption. This meant that corporations hawking similar products needed to differentiate and promote their wares in order to stay solvent. Design became the tool to create exchange value for these products. Exchange value is the value assigned to products in the marketplace, usually expressed in monetary terms. It is the price that a product or service can command when it is bought, sold, or traded. The exchange value of a product or service is just one way of quantifying its value. The use value of a good refers to the material function of the object and what it is used for in the process of consumption—it is concerned with the practical utility of the product. It is the value that an item has because it can be used to satisfy a human want or need. For example, a bicycle has use value based on its ability to meet specific needs or desires—such as transportation, exercise, environmental concerns, or economic savings. Additionally, the value of a commodity can be expressed in terms of its labor value. Labor value means that the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labor required to produce it. The greater the amount of labor, effort, and time put into the production of a commodity, the more valuable it becomes. In this paradigm, the primary source of value in an economic exchange is the labor input required to create a product or service. Despite there being several ways to conceptualize value for goods and services, capitalist enterprise is most concerned with maximizing exchange value. Herein lies the role of the designer. The more desirable a product becomes to the consumer, the higher the exchange value can be, delivering higher profits. Designers can and do construct desire in the hearts and minds of the consumer to serve corporate profit motives. As more products became available at the turn of the twentieth century, designers worked to persuade the public into becoming consumers. While industrial designers were working to differentiate products, graphic designers were creating corporate identity programs advertisements with the same aim. Graphic design was

coined as a term in 1922 by W.A. Dwiggins who used the term to describe his activities in visual communications (Wizinsky, 2022). Graphic design was becoming a specialized profession related to and reliant upon industrial production.

Works Progress Administration

As graphic design became a tool used to make distinctions between products and generate markets, a shock occurred to the capitalist experiment. The Great Depression brought on unprecedented setbacks in manufacturing, which led to a drastic reduction in the workforce, which in turn meant less consumption as folk lost their incomes. In response, the U.S. government took on the role of injecting capital into the depressed economy, in order to save the system of capitalism. This project was known as the New Deal, and included the creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Within the WPA was the Federal Art Project (FAP). The FAP intended to put unemployed artists and designers to work during the Great Depression. Additionally, the FAP sought to reconceptualize art as an accessible commodity and encourage the development of a national culture. The FAP was a hegemonizing force that attempted to recruit the population into patriotism and nationalism. Public support for the New Deal and the rescue of capitalism was rallied by art and design that summoned forth pride out of common experience. One WPA program was the Graphic Arts Division and within it, the Poster Division. The American government produced the most far-reaching marketing campaign of the 1930s through the Poster Division. The public was encouraged to buy war bonds, plant victory gardens, enlist in the armed forces, and join the workforce. The widespread distribution of the posters served to permeate the American visual culture with the messages of the Roosevelt Administration and its capitalist agenda. Designers working in the Poster Division were not permitted to sign their work—all of the art objects created during this time were stamped with “WPA.” Some of the surviving prints of this work are unattributable because there is no surviving information about the designer. As the WPA agencies closed, much of the materials on hand were trashed, including posters. Approximately 2,000 posters remain in known collections—only a fraction of the work produced. Under the New Deal, policies served to perpetuate the values of capitalism. The New Deal policies worked to increase the government intervention within the capitalist system. Roosevelt needed buy-

in from the public in order to continue his policy agenda. One way in which this public support was elicited was through the marketing campaign produced by designers working at the FAP.

Modernism & the Great Acceleration

After the years of designers engaged in the work of propaganda through the WPA and in the name of the war effort, a postwar boom took hold in both the U.S. and Europe. This period is referred to as the Great Acceleration and is characterized by dramatic growth in human activity and its ecological impact. Growth during the Great Acceleration includes increases in wages and production, leading to increased consumer demand. The burgeoning consumer class signaled status through material possessions, and created wide-ranging opportunities for designers to engage in mass-produced culture and the construction of desire. New materials afforded designers the opportunities to create new types of furniture and objects for the home, while advertisements reflected the sleek minimalism of this visual culture. Some of the most famous designers in the profession were engaged in their work during this period. In the name of disrupting the idea of the individual creative genius, those designers will not be mentioned here. It was also during this period that the notion of universally “good” design came to fruition, intended to champion social responsibility and democratic values. However, in actuality, the volume of available commodities functioned to indicate social rank and became part of the seemingly incessant material accumulation that serves no positive civic purpose. Consumers desired the newest in widgets and styles, while designers served up products and advertising to satiate the desire and meet the growth demands of capitalism. Planned obsolescence and disposability contributed to ever-increasing material throughput, while marketing stimulated consumer aspirations for lavish lifestyles and social acceptance. Consumerism dominated the social, political, and economic landscapes. The system of capitalism required constant growth in consumption to maintain economic stability. Advertising and mass media became the avenues by which consumptive growth was propped up, especially in the new medium of television. Psychological motivations for making purchases were implanted in consumers by designs that serve the needs of profit accumulation. Growth and consumerism led to consolidation across industries in the U.S. This necessitated both wide ranges of corporate collateral necessary for doing big business, and the need

to give consumers a sense of differentiation between essentially the same products. Design and advertisement were not only selling commodities, but selling ideas about those commodities.

In the decades following the postwar intensification in production and consumption, technological advances provided avenues for continued capitalist expansion. Automation and globalization helped create opportunities for greater production of less expensive goods. Consumers and investors could obtain lower price points for commodities, driving both purchasing and profits. In the later twentieth century, new technologies meant cheaper materials, cheaper labor, and cheaper methods for the transport of products. Globalized business structures led to competition on a larger scale than ever before, contributing to the downward plunge in the cost of commodities. As these changes were taking place, corporations were focused on generating returns for investors in the form of quarterly profits. Every three months, businesses needed to post capital growth to satisfy their shareholders. Executives would be on the hook for producing these earnings, with their employment on the line if the business showed stagnation or decreased revenue. This precarity—paired with enormous financial incentives—led to fierce competition and harmful industry practices helmed by executives embedded in these structures of capital accumulation. As corporate behavior took an outsize toll on the humans and environment involved in industrial production, lobbying became a tool to prevent governmental regulations from standing in the way of profits. Continued stockpiling of wealth set up businesses to be able to invest more and more money into politics, entrenching their power and removing influence from individuals and groups of citizens.

Market & Product Diversification

Advertising, marketing, and branding constitute a wide arena in which design has contributed to the continued existence of capitalism. In its current form, branding consists of a comprehensive set of design choices, including how a store smells, what music plays, employee uniforms and more traditional components such as colors, logo, and typography. However, the roots of branding are much more sinister. The practice of branding began as a way to designate ownership of livestock, by way of burning a mark into the hide of the animal. After humans began engaging in the ownership of other humans, enslaved people were branded to indicate if they had bought their freedom, if they

were runaways, and who “owned” them. During the height of European colonizing activity, burning logos into the flesh of enslaved people was done for both marketing and torture purposes. Locations, situations, and owners were designated by the graphic systems used to brand slaves laboring in colonial territories. Although transatlantic slave trade is no longer part of global capitalism, the violence of the act of branding reveals a throughline in the values of this economic system. Capitalism will exploit people and destroy the planet, monetizing and extracting every possible bit—including rendering human life a disposable commodity.

Contemporary Branding

Although branding is no longer used to designate ownership of enslaved people, it serves a damaging function beyond market differentiation. On its surface, branding and corporate identity are methods to indicate the value of a product or service and to communicate to the consumer distinctions between products. However, the commodities available for purchase on the shelves of stores and online are purposely disjointed from their production processes. Industrial production includes a plethora of harmful practices, beginning with material extraction and its devastating ecological impact. Material extraction refers to the process of obtaining raw materials or natural resources from the planet. Extraction includes such processes as mining, quarrying, and logging. Outside of material extraction are the energy considerations for such commodities as digital services and artificial intelligence. Obtaining the materials to bring products to market is a segment of the operations that are hidden through branding and advertising. Products take their heaviest toll on the environment long before they reach the shelves—not only during the extraction phase, but also during the manufacturing, transportation, and distribution phases of the life cycle of a product. All of these are but material considerations. Another portion of industrial production that is hidden from saleable objects are the labor conditions and human impact of manufacturing. When a sale is rung up at the register, the repetitive tasks of the assembly line, the hum of a room full of sewing machines, the long hours and the low pay associated with the object do not print out on the receipt. The faces of the folk doing the work of commodity production are purposefully invisible to the consumer. Branding and advertising serve an important role in this obfuscation, for the reality of working conditions

and ecological harm could outweigh consumptive desire for many. Package design, copywriting, and commercials all serve the role of creating distance between products and how they came to be. This is a nefarious, and arguably for capitalism, more important role of branding than market distinguishability. Despite the capitalistic logic of the rational, individualistic, self-serving actor, people are inherently relational and tend to care about the well-being of others. If the human impact of production were visible at the point of purchase, consumption would be curtailed.

Harms of Advertising

The obfuscation of industrial production practices is but one harmful role that branding and advertising play. Advertising can also be a tool used to disguise violence, brutality, and exploitation undertaken in the drive for financial gain. Ad campaigns can be captivating and emotionally appealing, functioning to divert attention away from violence and making it easier for the escape of scrutiny. In attempts to minimize concerns about harmful corporate behaviors, advertisements will present inaccurate representations, skewed perspectives, and downplay negative outcomes. In some cases, entities involved in violence or exploitation use their advertising budget to control media outlets, thus limiting reporting on their activities and thereby maintaining a façade of respectability. Additionally, corporations fund lobbying efforts and advocacy campaigns that shape public opinion in favor of an industry involved in bloodshed and subjugation. If all else fails, maligned entities will simply rebrand their product or service, providing consumers with the same offering under a new name. Advertising, marketing, and branding shroud commodities in a veil of lies, solely in servitude of generating profit.

A trait associated with the advertising industry across its history not related to concealment of truth is its employment of racist imagery and tactics. Racism was first used in advertisements to promote colonial products such as coffee, cacao, palm oil, and chocolate. Beyond the imagery being problematic in and of itself, early racist advertising helped promote white supremacy and ideologies regarding racial hierarchy amongst wide swaths of the European population. This helped set the groundwork for the structurally racist society today. Some of the ways racism appears in advertising include the portrayal of Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) in a negative or stereotypical light, reinforcing harmful beliefs and perpetuating bias. Token characters from racially

oppressed groups emerge, becoming props that appear inclusive without genuine diversity or representation. Cultural appropriation occurs in advertising (and design more broadly) when elements from other cultures are integrated into work without respect or understanding, contributing to the commodification and distortion of those cultures. Additionally, cultural appropriation is problematic because the targets of this activity are not the financial benefactors. Corporations and shareholders garner profits for themselves by usurping populations who have often already been the targets of oppression and marginalization in other forms. Racism in advertising has reinforced white standards of beauty and homogenized culture, while actively perpetuating harmful stereotypes and hegemonic white norms. The advertising industry does not exist for any benefit to humans or the planet, and in many cases is actively harmful. As stated by Victor Papanek, “There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design.”

Control of Information

Outside of marketing, advertising, and branding, there are several ways in which design and designers contribute to the (re)generation of capitalism. One of these ways is the control of information. Designers are responsible for much of the form that information takes. This includes not only information/infographic design, but other forms of information such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, books, newspapers, websites, and mobile applications. Industrialization corresponded with the development of the idea that a standard visual language could be used to represent information. The pioneering designer who invented the infographic formats of the trend line, the bar graph, and the pie chart, was primarily an engineer and an economist. Economics relies heavily on math, which serves to abstract information from the social processes it represents—labor and exchange. Information design can be a tool of further abstraction, giving numbers a visual form without contextualizing them in their social relations. It is important to note that this is not always the case, and there is a rich history of designers working to foreground humanity and ecology through the visual display of quantitative information. However, a numerical visual language can obfuscate and ignore exploitation, extraction, and the human impact of economic activity. Alongside visualizing

quantitative information, designers are responsible for the form that written information takes. Choices about hierarchy in an encyclopedia inform which facts the reader will focus on. Readability in book design contributes to the ease or difficulty in absorbing the content, making the audience more or less likely to continue reading the material. Editorial design choices in news media can shape worldviews, under the guise of journalistic neutrality. Designers retain a significant amount of power in terms of handling how information is displayed, and this power is not always used toward promoting ecological and social well-being.

Money

One of the tools of capitalism that is used to abstract economic social relations and disguise harmful activity is money. Money represents the abstracted concept of value, and is assigned to commodities, labor, and everything capitalism can devour—including even water and human life itself. The use of money for exchange facilitates this activity, but money hides how its value was generated in the first place. For example, one dollar earned through internet gambling on a sports team holds the same value as one dollar earned by cleaning vomit off the toilet in a bar. Once the dollar is earned, the activity to obtain it holds no relationship to it. This is an important feature of how capitalism functions, because it allows for commodity exchange without guilt on the part of the participants. In a similar way to how products on shelves do not reflect their production processes, money does not reflect its value generation. Designers play several roles in supporting the function of money. The most obvious is currency design. The design of bank notes is widely considered a prestigious and seductive design role. For centuries, currency has been a paper note created with the most advanced available printing techniques and guaranteed by centralized governments. Its design is a space where watermarks, holograms, special inks, light-sensitive printing, foils, perforations, and security threads are employed. Currency designers utilize these techniques and more to ensure confidence and trust in the note, and to reinforce the hegemony of monetary exchange. Increasingly, society is moving toward cashless market relations. Much like currency, designers take part in cashless transactions. This includes the design of such objects as plastic credit cards, checks, and mobile applications. Digital financial tool design and credit cards create another layer of abstraction from

value. Cash is tangible, material, and finite. Credit cards and mobile phone applications have the same appearance regardless of value, creating space for the notion that spending can be infinite. Cashless transactions can also be tracked in ways that cash cannot, providing opportunities for predatory data harvesting. Designers make choices about how monetary applications look, feel, and function, which includes decisions aimed at manipulating users into certain behaviors that benefit the corporations on the back end, not the person. Money is a part of capitalism wherein designers have many spheres of influence—this situation is unlikely to change without a systems-level shift in political economy. As stated by Ruben Pater, “...imagining a currency that reflects economic transactions as well as the social relations it represents, would have to coincide with an economic system that prioritizes social and human values over economic growth.” Although money serves a problematic role within capitalism, the greater problem is the system.

Property, Mapping, Citizenship & Documents

Another realm which demonstrates problems in the system is that of property and land ownership. Land as property is a key tenet of capitalism, and is often taken for granted as a natural state of affairs. But private ownership of anything, including land, is not a given. There are many traditions and cultures that do not engage in land ownership, as land is viewed as something that belongs to no one and is to be stewarded. One of the ways that design upholds the private ownership of land is through mapping. Maps are a graphic language of land ownership that are singular and prevent conceptions of land use outside of capitalism. Taxation of land is facilitated through maps, which serves the needs of the ruling class. Land is a primary form of wealth for the ruling/owner class. Taxation of land is used to protect and legitimize property rights. By ensuring that landowners pay taxes, the government protects the property interests of the ruling class—sometimes referred to as the propertied class. The rights to property are mediated through maps and other graphic objects, such as contracts, forms, and signs. In order to begin to question private property and conceptualize unconventional forms of land use, the graphic representations of land must also be questioned. In addition to reinforcing the concept of private property, mapping is used to designate conquered lands and support a Eurocentric worldview. Outside of establishing and maintaining global power relations,

there is no reason for north to be positioned at the top of a map. Maps present themselves as neutral representations of the world, but they are anything but. All maps are representations of social relations, power, and politics and are embedded in the area they symbolize. Designers have been responsible for facilitating the creation of these tools of power, and designers should begin the work of designing maps “otherwise”—working in ways running counter to Eurocentric modernist narratives (Mareis & Paim, 2021).

Maps control property and land, functioning as designed objects that reify capitalist power. Power and control over people is also executed through designed objects. Determining citizenship status is one way in which power is exerted over individuals. Establishing oneself as a citizen occurs through forms, identification cards, and birth certificates. These documents are created by designers using official typography, symbols, images, and standards. Documentation of citizens came into practice as nation-states developed under capitalism and record keeping of populations became a common practice. Census taking is an activity that occurs through a designed document, and can be used to both confer rights to citizens, or persecute people based on their responses. Passports are documents that are used to control and restrict the movement of people. These documents are costly and can be difficult to obtain, conferring a level of privilege to the holder. Passports and other identification documents are essentially tools of state surveillance. These items can have negative and even violent consequences, as they are utilized by authorities to retain power over movement. Where a human body has permission to exist is related to status as a citizen. Under capitalism, citizenship is a form of property. Citizenship as property is the concept that citizenship has value, and can be used to confer benefits to its possessors, such as the rights to the benefits of education. Citizenship as property also excludes those who do not possess the property from the set of rights and freedoms it confers, including both material and abstract benefits. Additionally, citizenship is a type of property because it can be purchased and demonstrating it requires the cost of obtaining documentation.

Graphic Design: History & Exploration of Change Making

Although graphic design has played a significant role in the perpetuation of capitalism, there are also many arenas in which the discipline has supported disruptive change. Graphic design has been part of changemaking since its inception, as the communication arts can ignite revolutions, challenge norms, and advocate for social progress. Through posters, logos, and other visual communication strategies, design and designers have played a vital role in shaping the narrative of movements and causes.

Abolition

One example of graphic design playing a role in effecting change is the abolitionist movement in the United States. Although the abolitionist movement took place in the nineteenth century, before the term “graphic design” had even been coined, visual communication played a vital role in advancing the cause. The abolitionist movement sought to eradicate slavery, and various forms of visual media were employed to convey its messages, evoke empathy, and spur action. Newspapers were an important tool of the abolitionist movement. Newspapers of the time regularly featured illustrations and cartoons that depicted the harsh realities of slavery. Artists and designers aimed to evoke emotions and sway public opinion by depicting the brutality of enslavement. Designers were responsible for typesetting the information, and making choices about the visual form of the narrative presented in the papers. The first Black-owned newspaper in the country was *Freedom's Journal*, published in 1827 by John B. Russwurm and Samuel Cornish. Following was the *North Star*, a paper established in 1847 by Frederick Douglass. The *North Star* served as the primary vehicle for abolitionist news. In addition to using newspapers to convey information, abolitionist designers used broadsides to promote the campaign. These broadsides served the purpose of visually communicating the messages of anti-slavery. They frequently featured powerful images and concise, impactful text that demanded attention and conveyed the urgency of the cause. Additionally, posters created in protest often reflect the pressure under which they are created—large letterforms not only demand attention, but they are also faster to typeset and thus reduce production time allowing for larger runs to be completed more quickly. Typographic choice was also informed by the inventory of type available at the shop where printing was taking place. Often, printers and designers were constrained by a

limited supply of wood type. Despite the limitations of print technology at the time, mass production techniques were becoming more widely available, creating the opportunity for the extensive distribution of visual materials. Abolitionist graphics were reproduced and disseminated on a large scale, reaching a broad audience and sparking conversations about the negative moral implications of slavery.

In both newspapers and broadsides, graphic designers created emblems and employed visual metaphors to convey the inhumanity of slavery. Symbols like chains breaking, shackles, and clasped hands signified the desire for freedom and the breaking of oppressive bonds. The advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century further contributed to the visual documentation of individuals and events. Photographs of former enslaved persons and abolitionist leaders helped humanize the cause. As the abolitionist movement gained political traction, graphic design played a role in campaign materials. Posters, banners, and other designed ephemera were used in rallies and events to promote anti-slavery candidates and initiatives. The visual communication strategies employed by abolitionists contributed to bolstering the role of design in social and political movements. The power of images combined with typography to evoke emotions, tell stories, and convey messages was instrumental in shaping public opinion and ultimately contributing to the abolition of slavery.

Russian Revolution

Another significant instance of graphic design influencing sociopolitical events was during the Russian Revolution of 1917. The revolution, marked by the overthrow of the monarchy and the rise of the Bolsheviks, brought about sweeping changes in ideology, politics, and culture. As various factions vied for public support leading up to the Russian Revolution, graphic design emerged as an effective means of communication—serving as a vehicle for political messaging and ideological dissemination. The development and availability of new printing technologies—such as lithography and photomontage—facilitated the mass production of visually striking posters and publications that could be widely distributed. The Bolsheviks recognized the ability of graphic design to shape public opinion and mobilize support. The historical design movement known as Constructivism emerged

to meet the need for a visual identity for the Soviet state. Designers like El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko played pivotal roles in creating a new visual language that reflected the principles of the revolution. Geometric shapes, bold typography, and stark contrasts were characteristic of the Constructivist movement. The Constructivists sought to break with traditional artistic conventions and create a visual representation of the revolutionary ideals of progress, equality, and solidarity. Rejecting the ornamental excesses of pre-revolutionary art, Constructivist designers worked to create a functional and utilitarian visual language.

One of the most prevalent forms of graphic design during the Russian Revolution was the political poster. These posters were strategically placed in public spaces, factories, and communal areas to convey messages that aligned with the Bolshevik agenda. Designers used symbolism and allegory to communicate complex political ideas in a visually accessible manner. The poster by El Lissitzky *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* employed geometric shapes to symbolize the triumph of the Bolsheviks over their adversaries. These visuals were not merely aesthetic; they were powerful tools that communicated ideology, unified the masses, and kindled a sense of collective identity. The techniques and approaches pioneered by Soviet designers influenced the development of modern graphic design worldwide. The legacy of Constructivism can be seen in the minimalist and functional design principles embraced by contemporary designers. The relationship between graphic design and the Russian Revolution serves as a testament to the transformative power of visual communication. In a time of radical social and political change, designers played a fundamental role in shaping the narrative by creating a visual language that encapsulated the ideals of the revolution. The graphic design of the Russian Revolution not only reflected the zeitgeist of the era but also became a catalyst for the evolution of design as an effective tool for social and political commentary.

Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, & Black Liberation

While the Russian Revolution was taking place overseas, former abolitionists in the United States shifted focus to cover issues such as segregation, voting rights, and racialized violence in the South. A newspaper run by Ida B. Wells, *Memphis Free Speech*, covered the epidemic of lynching. In Richmond, Virginia, the newspaper *Richmond Planet* was founded in 1882 by thirteen formerly

enslaved men. The paper garnered a national audience through its coverage of living conditions for Black folx in the South. The *Richmond Planet* was in operation until 1938. These presses served as precursors to the graphic design work taking place during the civil rights movement.

The civil rights movement aimed to dismantle racial segregation and discrimination against Black folx in America. Central to this transformative period was the use of graphic design as a tool for conveying messages, mobilizing communities, and fostering a sense of unity among activists. Visual communication, through posters, flyers, and other graphic materials, played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and driving social change during the civil rights movement. Much of the designed activist work that emerged during the civil rights movement consisted of smaller flyers and pamphlets versus large posters. This was because during the McCarthy era following World War II, many progressive presses were shut down in the wave of anti-communism. Combined with segregation and restrictive Jim Crow laws, this meant Black resistance designers and publications did not have access to presses that printed posters. Therefore, they used the technology and materials at hand to give visual form to their messages, frequently working on commonplace office machines.

Although many design activists working during the civil rights era were constrained by limited access to print technology, there were those who were able to create posters that combined images with bold, typographic calls-to-action. Images have the ability to evoke emotions, convey messages, and transcend linguistic barriers. Graphic designers working during the civil rights movement recognized the power of visual communication in influencing public perception and garnering support for the cause. Through the use of imagery juxtaposed with type, designer activists to expose the harsh realities of racial injustice, humanize the struggle, and inspire collective action. Graphic design became an integral part of protest culture during the civil rights movement. Protest signs, banners, and placards became powerful tools for expressing dissent, demanding change, and showcasing unity among activists. The simplicity and directness of these designs made them accessible to a diverse audience, allowing people from all walks of life to participate in the movement. For example, in 1968 Black sanitation workers in Memphis went on strike to demand safer working conditions and higher wages. During their marches, the striking men wore and held up letterpress-printed

signs with large letterforms stating, “I AM A MAN.” This simple, boldly displayed statement was a demand for equality, dignity, respect, and basic human rights—easily digestible and comprehensible to nearly any audience. Two notable organizations that also engaged in poster creation were the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was involved in organized direct actions and voting rights campaigns. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was organized in 1966 in Oakland, California as a Black power political organization operating from a Marxist perspective (Bloom & Martin, 2016).

The founders of the Black Panther Party were Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton. The organization came together to resist violence perpetrated by police against Black folx, and enacted a socialist agenda that provided free breakfast for children, education programs, and community health clinics. The Black Panther Party was active across the country, with offices in sixty-eight cities at its height. They advocated for engaging in the struggle for emancipation, and organized around their Ten Point Program, originally published in the second edition of their newspaper. The Black Panther party sought to uplift and strengthen their communities, working in arenas where the state had failed to protect people. A large portion of the work being done by the Black Panther Party was that of political education. This took several forms, including the publication of a newspaper. The newspaper was created in order to promote the political agenda of the party, to recruit new members, and to generate operating revenue. This newspaper is a key part of graphic design history. Despite the social welfare goals of the organization, the FBI still categorizes the Black Panther Party as an “extremist organization” that “advocated the use of violence and guerilla tactics to overthrow the U.S. government” (*Black Panther Party*, n.d.).

One of the designers engaged in the political education work of the Black Panther Party was Emory Douglas (Daniel, 2020). Douglas served as the Minister of Culture for the party from 1967 to 1980. After spending some time studying commercial art at City College in San Francisco, Douglas learned most of the graphic design techniques he used on the job. After Douglas became the editor of the party newspaper, the publication grew from four pages to thirty-two, added color, and developed its visual voice. At its height, the newspaper boasted a circulation of more than 300,000—making it

the most widely read Black newspaper in the country. In addition to the newspaper, Douglas worked on other designed ephemera and materials for spreading the message of the party. His work was intended to articulate the politics of the party using comics, illustrations, and typographic messaging. Douglas gave visual identity to the message that organized armed resistance was part of the solution to police violence. The materials available and affordable to the party both allowed Douglas to produce designed ephemera quickly and cheaply, and served to define the visual style. Douglas used basic, readable type, rub-down patterns for texture, and thick outlines to obscure imperfections in registration. These choices were not only practical, they conveyed an urgency in the message—a message that was being threatened and surveilled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Even the Pantone selections made by Douglas were being monitored (Munro, 2022).

The legacy of graphic design in the civil rights movement extends beyond the 1960s and 1970s. The visual language developed during this period continues to inspire contemporary movements for social justice. The principles of impactful graphic design—simplicity, clarity, and emotional resonance—remain relevant tools for activists seeking to communicate messages in the fight against systemic oppression and inequity. Graphic design played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement by translating complex social issues into visually compelling messages that resonated with many viewers. The influence of images, the use of posters, and the design of newspapers, flyers, and pamphlets all contributed to the visual language of the movement. The impact of graphic design in shaping public perception and mobilizing communities during the civil rights movement highlights the transformative potential of visual communication in the pursuit of social justice and equity.

Women's Liberation

Concurrent with the civil rights movement in America was the women's liberation movement. Also known as the second wave of feminism, the women's liberation movement gained momentum in the late 1960s and continued through the 1970s, and marked a significant period in the development of empowerment for women. The movement sought to dismantle traditional gender roles and challenge societal norms that perpetuated the subjugation of women. Graphic designers played a role in creating visuals that encapsulated the spirit of feminism and conveyed messages of empowerment,

equality, and independence. One collective that engaged in this work was the See Red Women's Workshop, operating out of London (Munro, 2022). This group worked to support women in need and spread its message via wheatpasting and sticker bombing. The members of the group produced prints that addressed issues such as gender discrepancies in pay, the reliance of capitalism on unpaid domestic labor, sexist content in advertising, and the importance of women working against racism. The messages were intended to address the undervaluation and devaluation of the sacrifices and contributions that women make. These prints were typically screenprinted using one or two inks and often featured hand-lettered messages. The shop became a target of right-wing extremists, and was repeatedly vandalized, forcing them to relocate. Even so, the See Red Women's Workshop remained in operation until 1990.

The rise of feminist literature during the women's liberation movement was accompanied by innovative publication design. Magazines such as *Ms.*, founded by Gloria Steinem in 1972, featured bold and impactful graphic design that reflected the ideology of the movement. The covers often displayed powerful images and typography that challenged prevailing norms, sparking important conversations about the rights of women, reproductive health, and workplace equality (Spillar, 2023). Another example of graphic design supporting the women's liberation movement can be seen in the ERA Yes sign. This was a sign produced by the Feminist Majority Foundation in support of ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)—a constitutional amendment in support of legal equality for women. The concept is a green circle with idiosyncratic lettering, intended to contrast with a stop sign symbol in use by a campaign against ERA ratification. The ERA was originally presented in Congress in 1923, was revived and passed in the House and Senate during the second wave of feminism, but fell short of the thirty-eight states needed for constitutional ratification. In 2023, one hundred years after its introduction, the ERA still faces hurdles, but activists continue to struggle for its implementation and the ERA Yes sign was reissued in 2021. Graphic design played a meaningful role in the women's liberation movement by providing a visual language that challenged societal norms, broke stereotypes, and fostered unity among women. In looking at the intersection between graphic design and the women's liberation movement, it becomes evident that visual communication

played an essential role in shaping the narrative, inspiring change, and leaving a lasting legacy of progress in the ongoing fight for gender equity.

Queer Liberation

Another arena in which graphic design has supported the struggle for equity is the queer liberation movement. In the realm of queer liberation, designers have the ability to disrupt heteronormative and cisnormative narratives by creating visuals that push the boundaries of conventional gender and sexual identities. Through choices in visual communication, graphic designers can work to dismantle dominant ideologies, promoting an inclusive, equitable, and accepting society. One significant contribution of graphic design to queer liberation is its role in promoting visibility and representation. Designers have the power to create imagery that reflects the rich diversity within the queer community, ensuring that individuals of all backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and orientations feel seen and heard. By depicting a broad spectrum of identities, graphic design fosters a sense of belonging and validates the experiences of those who have historically been marginalized. Although the start of the queer liberation movement is usually associated with the confrontation between the New York Police Department and patrons at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, graphic designers were creating spaces for queer voices in America long before. While queer identities have long been silenced, forbidden, and abandoned by systems of power and oppression, communities have arisen that foster safe spaces for love and thriving existence. These communities often engage in graphic design work, in support of spreading their message and publicizing their spaces and services.

One such publication was produced in the 1920s. Titled *Fire!!* this publication depicted openly gay Black people during the Harlem Renaissance and was one of the first magazines to cover Black queer life. The editorial staff was comprised of Black contributors, many queer themselves, espousing the principle of “nothing about us without us.” The subject matter ranged across taboo topics of the time, including interracial love, homosexual desire, and teenage prostitution. The intent of collective was to gain freedom through the destruction of a moral code that called upon Black folx to only engage in heterosexual monoracial partnerships. Another early queer publication was *ONE*, designed

by Joan Corbin, a queer woman. *ONE* was circulated in 1953, and funded by the gay and lesbian rights groups Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis. The covers created by Corbin showcase a midcentury modern approach that served to obscure the contents of the magazine. Despite the mainstream style of illustration and typesetting on the cover, the U.S. Postal Service still briefly banned the publication, citing obscenity.

A year following the riot at Stonewall Inn, the first gay pride march was organized. Designers contributed ephemera in support of the cause. Several decades later, in 1981, the first cases of AIDS were reported in the United States. The virus wreaked havoc on gay folx, while the public and the government disregarded and ignored the crisis and abandoned those suffering in the depths of the epidemic. This situation urgently called for public education to facilitate stymying the spread of AIDS and to generate awareness regarding the excruciating experiences of those dealing with the virus. In 1986, Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Lione, and Jorge Socarrás joined to create the *Silence=Death* design. This piece appropriated the pink triangle used in Nazi Germany to designate gay people in concentration camps. The choice in typography echoed the type treatment of headlines in advertising. The design quickly came to represent the response of the queer community to the AIDS crisis, and was reproduced on posters, tee shirts, and many other forms of media. In another response to the AIDS crisis, a group emerged with a focus on lesbian visibility and perspective. This group called themselves fierce pussy—intentionally not capitalized to demonstrate their commitment to non-hierarchical organization—and its members included Joy Espisalla, Carrie Yamaoka, Nancy Brooks Brady, and Zoe Leonard. The work of this group features a heavy focus on typography, and more recently addresses contemporary capitalism and the sociopolitical positions of lesbians therein. A final example of queer design comes from nonbinary alphabet artist Nat Pyper and is titled *A Queer Year of Love Letters*. This project is a collection of digital fonts that pay tribute to overlooked figures in queer liberation history. Pyper states that they intend to “make the act of remembering these overlooked and legitimate histories... as easy as typing.” (Munro, 2022).

The digital age has transformed the landscape of graphic design in the realm of queer liberation. Social media platforms can serve as effective tools for disseminating information, fostering

connections, and mobilizing support. Graphic designers leverage these platforms to create visually compelling content that engages audiences, educates the public, and mobilizes support for queer causes. The role of graphic design in queer liberation is multifaceted and profound. It challenges dominant ideologies, promotes visibility and representation, serves as a tool for advocacy and activism, builds community and identity, and thrives on digital platforms. As the queer liberation movement continues to evolve, graphic design will maintain a role in shaping narratives, breaking barriers, and contributing to the continued struggle for queer liberation and equity.

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Anti-Vietnam War

The Vietnam War, a conflict that spanned from 1954 to 1975, was part of a wider regional conflict and a manifestation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies. The war centered around the desire of the newly independent North Vietnam to unify the country under a communist government versus the desire of South Vietnam to model itself after the West. The United States initiated involvement in active combat in 1965, and was deeply entrenched by 1969 when more than 500,000 military personnel were stationed in Vietnam (Spector, 2023). Public sentiment turned against the war, and a strong anti-war movement took hold in America. In the midst of this tumultuous era, graphic design emerged as a tool in the arsenal of the anti-war movement. Graphic design served as a vehicle for conveying the emotional toll of the Vietnam War. Designers employed powerful imagery that evoked empathy, capturing the anguish of both

soldiers and civilians caught in the crossfire. Posters featuring haunting photographs of wounded soldiers, grieving families, and war-torn landscapes resonated deeply with the public, humanizing the conflict and fueling anti-war sentiments. Symbols such as the peace sign, the clenched fist, and the dove were employed to create a visual language that transcended words. These symbols became synonymous with the anti-war movement, fostering a sense of solidarity and resistance among groups united in their opposition to the war.

Graphic designers challenged the authority and legitimacy of the war through their work. The creation of visually arresting and thought-provoking posters questioned the government narrative, depicting the war as morally dubious and highlighting the disconnect between official statements and the harsh realities on the ground. Anti-establishment sentiments were vividly expressed through bold typography, provocative imagery, and subversive graphic elements. One such designed artifact is largely considered the most effective anti-Vietnam War poster. Following the 1968 My Lai massacre, army photographer Ronald L. Haeberle snapped a photo with his personal camera. The image depicted the mutilation and murder of unarmed Vietnamese civilians; the death toll from the event totaled in the hundreds and was carried out under orders from the Nixon administration. The publication of the photograph galvanized designers Frazer Dougherty, Jon Hendricks, and Irving Petlin to create a poster featuring the image and quotes from a televised interview with a soldier regarding the massacre. Text from a *New York Times* transcript of the interview was reproduced and enlarged and printed in a red screen, mimicking the appearance of dried blood. *Q: And babies? A: And babies.* was emblazoned across the wrenching image of bodies strewn on the ground. Two years after the original poster was produced, the designers again used the photograph and red screen, now paired with the query *FOUR MORE YEARS? FOUR MORE YEARS?* in a call-to-action for voters to renounce the policies of the Nixon administration at the ballot box. In the context of the anti-war movement, graphic design became a powerful tool for information dissemination. Posters, flyers, and other printed materials served as tangible and impactful means of communicating messages, organizing protests, and rallying support. The immediacy and accessibility of these designs contributed to the rapid spread of anti-war sentiments, mobilizing folx against the conflict. The impact of anti-war graphic design during

this period serves as a testament to the transformative power of visual communication in times of upheaval.

Black Lives Matter

A more recent example of social upheaval has been ushered in during the current digital age, in which access to technology and platforms for sharing information have permeated the cultural landscape. The development of personal devices capable of recording, uploading, and sharing video footage has dramatically shifted the public perception of police violence and systemic racism. The Black Lives Matter movement emerged following the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and the subsequent acquittal of his killer. Graphic design has become an instrument of this movement, which seeks to work toward racial equity and dismantle structural white supremacy. According to the organization, “Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. is a global organization in the US, UK, and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives.” (*About – Black Lives Matter*, n.d.). The initial branding for the Black Lives Matter movement was carried out by Design Action Collective—a design cooperative grounded in the liberatory struggle against systems of oppression. Although the branding has since been updated, the straightforward sans serif type and original black and yellow colorway have remained. In the digital age, social media has become an effective tool for activists, and graphic design plays a central role in shaping the online discourse surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement. Designers create shareable content that spreads rapidly across social media channels, reaching diverse audiences and initiating conversations. The use of aesthetically pleasing and emotionally resonant graphics helps in breaking down complex issues into digestible content, mobilizing a wider audience and driving engagement. Designers create infographics, posters, and visual narratives that highlight the history and reality of racial injustice, police brutality, and the continued struggle for equity. These visuals not only educate the public but also elicit empathy and understanding, fostering a broader and more informed base of support for the movement. As

people take to the streets to protest against systemic racism and racialized violence, graphic design shows up through protest signs, banners, and placards. Protestors engage in graphic design work by creating posters and communicating individual messages. Designers contribute to the movement by creating printable materials that protesters and activists can use. By providing effectively designed and crafted collateral, graphic designers contribute to the success and visibility of smaller, community-driven efforts within the broader movement. Graphic design serves as a vital ally to the Black Lives Matter movement. Designers support the movement by creating strong visual identities, amplifying narratives, fostering online engagement, participating in protests, and empowering grassroots initiatives. Through the collaboration of designers and activists, graphic design continues to play an essential role in the ongoing fight for racial justice and equity.

Ecological Well-Being

In the era of environmental challenges, climate crisis, and the transgression of multiple planetary boundaries, the intersection of graphic design and environmentalism emerges as a force for positive change. There is a symbiotic relationship between graphic design and environmentalism—designers can contribute to an ecologically healthy future through their creative endeavors. Designers possess the ability to convey complex environmental issues in visually compelling ways, making them accessible and engaging for folk across the ideological spectrum. Data visualizations, posters, and information campaigns become tools to raise awareness, educate, and inspire action on critical environmental topics such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. As environmental impact is increasingly a factor in consumer choice, graphic designers play a fundamental role in shaping the identity and perception of brands. Ecologically friendly products are not just a trend; they are a necessity. Designers must meet the task of creating visual communication elements that reflect the commitment to environmental responsibility, from ecologically friendly packaging designs to logos that indicate a dedication to green practices. The visual identity of a brand influences consumer choices, steering them towards environmentally responsible products and fostering a culture of eco-conscious consumption. Beyond communication, graphic designers have a responsibility to implement ecologically healthy practices within their own field. This involves reconsidering materials,

minimizing waste, and adopting eco-friendly printing methods. Designers must advocate for the use of recycled paper, vegetable-based inks, and energy-efficient processes, contributing to the reduction of the environmental footprint associated with graphic design production.

Eco-design is a way of designing products such that their negative impact on the environment and society is mitigated as much as possible while also upholding fundamental parameters such as functionality, appearance, quality, and cost (Dahmani, et al, 2021; Jedlicka, 2009). The term “eco-design” is one amongst many that describe similar concepts. Other terms include “sustainable design,” “design for environmental impact,” “green design,” and “responsible design.” For the sake of simplicity, this narrative will use the term “eco-design”—however, that choice is not intended to invalidate other terminology. Eco-design practices include using clean energy, sustainable material selection, longevity, repairability, low-impact transport, and packaging considerations (Maccioni, Borgianni & Pigosso, 2019). A key component of evaluating products in terms of their ecological impact is lifecycle assessment. Lifecycle assessments evaluate the impact of products from their inception to the end-of-life (Martínez-Cámara, et al, 2021). This evaluation includes resource extraction, material manufacturing and conversion, product manufacturing, distribution and warehousing, retailing, consumer product use, and end-of-life. Although lifecycle assessment is comprehensive in its analysis of product impact, consumers generally associate eco-friendliness of a product solely with the product packaging (Zeng & Durif, 2019). This indicates that in order for consumers to be able to make the most ecologically friendly choices, more education about the overall environmental impact of consumer goods is necessary (Widodo, Ardianto & Budi, 2021). Here lies an opportunity for graphic designers to engage in information campaigns to assist consumers in more fully understanding eco-design and product impact.

One of the widespread drivers behind the current situation of waste associated with consumer goods is that corporations have not had to bear the true costs of their resource impacts (Gottberg, 2006). In the linear economy, not only are there not widely-adopted planning measures for product end-of-life considerations, material disposal is the responsibility of consumers. The current status quo is such that corporations reap profits, while consumers are not only responsible for generating

those profits through their purchasing dollars, consumers are also responsible for dealing with the material waste when a product has run out or worn out (Muranko, et. al., 2021). One of the ways this situation is being addressed is known as extended producer responsibility and entails policy measures aimed at making the entities that produce waste responsible for the disposal of that waste. Another concept that targets excess material waste is that of the circular economy or circular consumption (Martínez-Cámara, et. al., 2021). In the conventional linear consumption model, there exists the double environmental stress of continual resource extraction followed by incessant generation of waste. In the circular economy paradigm, extracted resources are continually reintegrated into the consumption stream. The impact of the circular economy structure is twofold in that it not only reduces demand for new materials, it also reduces end-of-life product waste (Jedlicka, 2009). As previously addressed, moving from a linear economic model to a circular economic model is but a first step in creating a regenerative economy in which all living things have the capability of thriving.

Circular economy concepts are becoming more popular in policy, corporate culture, and consumer mindset. Although nationwide policy regarding adoption of the circular economy has yet to reach the United States, in 2020 the European Union adopted an action plan to transition to a circular economy, and policies also exist in the United Kingdom and Australia (Gottberg, et. al., 2006). A systems-level approach to the problems associated with environmental degradation is necessary if true progress is to be made. Education of consumers is also related to policy initiatives and corporate behavior in that knowledge can be a tool to generate consumer and voter demand that drives change. Environmental issues often involve complex data that can be challenging for the general public to comprehend. Graphic designers, with their ability to distill information into visually digestible formats, can transform data into compelling narratives. Through charts, graphs, and interactive visualizations, designers can effectively communicate the urgency of environmental challenges, fostering a greater understanding of the issues at hand and empowering individuals to make informed decisions that contribute to an ecologically and socially healthy future. The role of graphic design in environmentalism goes beyond aesthetics; it is a powerful force for change. By leveraging their creativity and communicative skills, graphic designers can be advocates for a future in which

environmental well-being is prioritized. From shaping eco-conscious brands to visualizing complex data and fostering environmental activism, designers have the capacity to inspire and mobilize communities toward positive environmental action. As stewards of visual communication, graphic designers wield the tools to create a more environmentally aware and responsible global society.

This collection of examples are but a minuscule subset of the ways graphic design and designed ephemera have generated positive change. The contributions of graphic design to change-making are apparent, as the field can serve as a catalyst for social, cultural, and environmental advancements. Whether advocating for social justice, environmental stewardship, or cultural inclusivity, graphic design plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives and mobilizing communities towards positive change. The lasting impact of graphic design in effecting change demonstrates the enduring power of visual communication in driving meaningful progress.

Degrowth & Design

Graphic designers bear responsibility for the outcomes of our work. It is imperative that as design practitioners, we analyze our work to bring into focus our role in (re)producing hegemonic stratification and hierarchies based on human difference. Across its history, design has been complicit in constructing systems of power and oppression that exploit the many to serve the few. The structural inequities reified by design are endemically rooted in capitalism. We must interrogate what we support through our work and how we can be advocates for just and compassionate outcomes that decenter greed. It is essential for designers to begin taking steps to incorporate degrowth practices into our work. Infusing principles of degrowth into design work can aid in disrupting harmful systems of power (re)generated by capitalism. Degrowth recenters ecological and social impacts in design processes. Following are starting points to cultivate this approach. These entry points will be framed as questions to consider throughout the design process. While this narrative is focused on the profession of graphic design, these guiding questions can be applied to a wide range of vocations. The answers to these questions are intended to steer towards starting to design with degrowth in mind. Designers can use these queries to determine whether or not to work with a particular client, how to ethically engage in a project, and as tools to communicate the importance of degrowth considerations in the design process. Designers can and should raise the collective bar by elevating ethical standards for the industry.

However, being in a position to turn down work is an incredible privilege. Most designers do not have the luxury of saying “no” to paying gigs even if the work is ethically questionable. This is the reality of being in the working class under capitalism. In a degrowth utopia, designers will have the freedom to choose work that promotes healthy environments and human flourishing.

Materials, Extraction, & the Environment

Can the Client Answer Basic Supply-Chain Questions About Labor Exploitation and Material Extraction?

Degrowth encourages responsible and ethical consumption patterns. Being aware of labor conditions and material extraction processes allows the designer to make ethical choices regarding

which clients to work for and with. This aligns with the idea of consuming less and choosing products that are produced with minimal ecological impact and using fair labor practices. By working with clients who maintain ethical practices throughout their supply chains, designers are creating more opportunities for consumers to make choices that align with degrowth principles. Knowing about the supply chain helps the client (and thus designer) assess the impact of production processes on local communities, ensuring that economic activities do not harm the well-being of people in the vicinity.

Has the Client Completed a Life Cycle Assessment?

Life cycle assessment (LCA) is a method used to evaluate the environmental impact of a product or service throughout its entire life cycle, from raw material extraction to disposal. Knowing whether a client has completed an LCA can provide information on how the client views their responsibility to the environment. The LCA provides insights into the ecological consequences of products or services. Assessing the life cycle of a product helps in understanding the efficiency of resource use and identifying areas for improvement. It is congruent with the principles of degrowth by encouraging clients to minimize resource inputs and waste outputs. By understanding the life cycle of a product, designers can assist in making informed decisions to create products that have a reduced impact on the environment. This involves considering factors such as materials, production processes, and end-of-life procedures. Communicating the results of an LCA to consumers can raise awareness about the environmental impact of products, enabling them to make more informed and ecologically healthy choices. This is consistent with the degrowth principle of fostering conscious consumption. Designing with a focus on degrowth involves considering the entire lifecycle of a product, from raw material extraction to disposal. With the knowledge provided by an LCA, designers can work to minimize the negative environmental and social impacts of the products they are working with.

What is the Plan for End-of-Life of Any Physical Materials You're Designing?

Asking about the end-of-life plan ensures that designers consider the lifespan of materials—encouraging material choice towards substances that are durable or biodegradable. Designing with a plan for product end-of-life involves strategies such as recycling, upcycling, or repurposing materials.

Addressing the end-of-life aspects of design encourages the development of products that generate less waste or have mechanisms in place to responsibly manage and dispose of materials at the end of their useful life. Designing for the final stage of the life of a good entails creating products that are durable and repairable. This not only extends the lifespan of the product but also reduces the frequency of replacements, aligning with degrowth principles of resisting the constant pursuit of new and disposable goods. Designing with a focus on the end-of-life stage of a product incorporates the principles of a circular economy. Instead of following a linear “take, make, dispose” model, circular economies aim to close the loop by reusing, recycling, and reducing waste. Consideration of end-of-life plans is linked to broader issues of social and environmental justice. It involves assessing the impact of material choices on communities and ecosystems, aiming for designs that are both equitable and environmentally responsible in material consequences.

What are the Material Waste Implications of the Project?

By evaluating the material waste implications throughout the entirety of a project, designers can assess project alignment with degrowth principles. It is important to consider both overall material waste implications of a project in addition to the end-of-life/disposal waste considerations. Although related, these questions should be considered independently so that effective solutions can be developed with nuance. Projects that create excessive material waste are incompatible with the goals of degrowth, which seeks to minimize environmental impact. The environmental consequences of material waste—such as pollution, depletion of natural resources, and environmental degradation—are critical considerations in both degrowth and eco-design. Assessing material waste implications also involves considering the social aspects of a project. Projects that generate excessive waste disproportionately affect already marginalized and oppressed communities. Designing with an awareness of these implications supports the values of social equity and justice that are inherent to degrowth. The question about material waste implications is pivotal in the intersection of degrowth and design as it addresses both ecological health and social welfare—the two key components of the degrowth movement.

How Can the Environmental Impact of this Work be Minimized? What is in Place to Make Sure That Happens?

Following the initial interrogation of the ecological impact of materials and extraction, it is important to consider pathways for improvement. Every project will have ecological implications, and designers are well-positioned to advocate for mitigating those impacts. The answers to these questions prompt a holistic approach that goes beyond bottom-line considerations, fostering a mindset that values the health of the planet and its inhabitants.

Labor & Time Rights

Is This Work Promoting Hustle Culture?

Hustle culture glorifies constant work and economic success, which is at odds with the principles of degrowth. Understanding whether a project or client promotes hustle culture helps assess alignment with degrowth values. Examining whether work promotes constant productivity provides insight into its potential environmental impact. Hustle culture, with its focus on constant productivity and consumption, contributes to resource exploitation and exhausting ways of being. Degrowth is concerned with improving overall well-being and quality of life. Continually grinding can lead to burnout and negatively impact mental health. Considering whether a work promotes hustle culture is important in designing alternatives that prioritize balance, mindfulness, and harmony—it prompts designers to explore solutions that align with degrowth principles. Both degrowth and design are influenced by cultural norms and practices. Understanding whether a work promotes engagement with norms of constant productivity sheds light on prevailing societal attitudes towards work, success, and lifestyles. This insight is valuable for efforts to bring about cultural shifts aligned with degrowth ideals. It helps assess the compatibility of the work with principles of sufficiency, well-being, and alternative design approaches that prioritize a more balanced and mindful way of living.

Does This Work Allow for Rest and Recreation While it is Being Created or Will You (and Others) Sacrifice Your Physical and Mental Health?

This question addresses the impact of work on the physical and mental health of individuals, aligning with the degrowth emphasis on human flourishing. Degrowth challenges the traditional

notion that constant economic growth is necessary and questions the value of certain types of work. Rest and recreation are vital parts of the human experience, and should be placed at a higher value than that of work. Clients, projects, and labor endeavors that do not provide for engagement with rest while they are being completed should be rejected by designers. Consideration of the impact on human well-being during the creation of work is compatible with the degrowth idea of reevaluating the purpose and nature of work. This question acknowledges the importance of considering the impact of work on individuals during the design process, aligning with human-centered design approaches. Designing with a focus on human well-being is a core principle of responsible design. Responsible design seeks to avoid exploitative practices, including those that harm the physical and mental health of individuals. The question urges a consideration of whether the creation of work involves practices that may lead to the sacrifice of well-being. Sacrificing physical and mental health for the sake of work may have long-term consequences on both individuals and society. The importance of prioritizing rest and recreation while undertaking projects cannot be understated.

Is Your Work Being Exploited? Is the Work of Others Being Exploited?

Each of these questions bears consideration as designers can be responsible for advocating for both themselves and others when executing projects. Questioning whether work is being exploited is rooted in ethical considerations. Exploitation implies an unjust or unfair treatment of workers, often associated with overwork, low wages, and poor working conditions. Addressing exploitation aligns with the ethical principles of degrowth. Ensuring that work is not exploitative is critical to creating honest and equitable designs. Designing products, services, and systems that prioritize the well-being and fair treatment of workers contributes to a humane approach. By questioning the conditions of work, individuals and societies can move towards creating environments that prioritize fairness, dignity, and equality for all workers. These questions also tie into the broader goal of systemic change advocated by degrowth. If work is found to be exploitative, it highlights a need for restructuring economic and social systems. This involves reevaluating the current economic models and power constructs to create more inclusive and equitable structures. Addressing exploitative practices regarding work is an essential step towards creating a more just and peaceful society.

What Are the Project-Wide Labor Practices Involved?

This question is related to the exploitation of work, but encompasses a wider range of considerations. These considerations include coercion, restraint on worker rights, union practices, discrimination, retaliation, and wage theft—amongst other unfair labor practices (*National Labor Relations Act* | *National Labor Relations Board*, n.d.). Labor practices have a direct impact on the well-being of individuals and communities. Understanding and promoting fair labor practices is linked to the degrowth goal of improving social conditions. Examining project-wide labor practices is essential to addressing issues of equity and justice. Ensuring fair wages, equal opportunities, and a safe working environment supports the social principles of degrowth to reduce social inequalities and promote social justice. Designing with a focus on responsible and ethical labor practices contributes to the overall long-term viability of the project. Local communities and how they engage in projects is often mediated by the labor practices involved. Understanding and promoting practices that empower and involve local communities follows the principles of degrowth that emphasize collective flourishing. Ensuring fair labor practices across the scope of a project contributes to the broader goals of equity, justice, and community well-being.

Is Proper Credit Being Given to All Collaborators?

In the degrowth paradigm, collaboration and cooperation are essential to finding alternative ways of organizing societies. Ensuring proper credit for collaborators acknowledges their contributions to these collective efforts, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and value. Properly crediting all participants is key to empowering individuals and groups who contribute to degrowth initiatives. It promotes inclusivity by recognizing diverse perspectives, skills, and knowledge. This inclusivity is a cornerstone of degrowth, which aims to address inequalities and promote a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. In design, collaboration is fundamental to creating innovative and unexpected solutions. When designing for degrowth, the emphasis is on creating products, services, or systems that prioritize durability, repairability, and longevity over continuous consumption. Crediting all those who have generated inputs to the project acknowledges the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of design processes, ensuring that the contributions

of different stakeholders are acknowledged and valued. Properly crediting everyone involved in a project upholds transparency and fairness, preventing exploitation or marginalization. This ethical dimension is particularly important in degrowth, where values of justice, equity, and social well-being play a central role. Finally, crediting collaborators builds trust within the community involved in degrowth and design initiatives. Trust is essential for fostering cooperation, sharing knowledge, and sustaining long-term efforts. By recognizing and valuing the contributions of all collaborators, a sense of community is strengthened, contributing to the overall success and resilience of degrowth and design projects.

Community

Who is This For? Who Asked For This?

By asking “Who is this for?” and identifying the stakeholders involved, designers and advocates for degrowth aim to understand the broader implications of their actions. They consider the diverse needs and interests of different groups, ensuring that proposed solutions do not disproportionately benefit certain individuals or harm marginalized communities. Designing with a degrowth mindset involves addressing social inequalities and ensuring that the benefits of design interventions are distributed equitably. Understanding who asked for a particular design or solution allows for a more democratic and participatory approach, involving diverse voices in the decision-making process. Degrowth emphasizes reducing unnecessary consumption to achieve ecological health—by questioning who the intended audience is, designers can tailor solutions to meet actual needs rather than fueling overconsumption driven by market forces. These questions also tie into cultural considerations. By understanding who a design is for, designers can create solutions that respect and integrate with local cultures and contexts, avoiding imposing capitalistic ideas that might not be suitable for diverse communities. Questioning who asked for a particular solution helps resist the influence of profit-driven corporations that may prioritize growth and profit over social and environmental well-being. It encourages alternative models that prioritize human and ecological flourishing.

What Purpose Does it Serve?

Asking about the purpose of a project forces a reevaluation of the goals and objectives that guide economic and design decisions. Questioning the objective helps challenge the conventional pursuit of endless growth and encourages a shift towards more equitable goals. Understanding the purpose of a project also addresses issues of social equity. It cues a reflection on who benefits from the current economic and design systems and who is left marginalized or disadvantaged. Interrogation into the intention of a project helps identify and rectify existing inequalities. Design, in particular, is deeply influenced by cultural values. By questioning the purpose of a design intervention, one can explore how cultural values are embedded in products, services, and systems. Considering the purpose helps in assessing the long-term impact of design decisions. Degrowth advocates argue for designs that have positive, lasting effects on the environment and society, emphasizing the need to break away from short-term, unsustainable solutions. The question opens the door to exploring alternative narratives and paradigms. Degrowth encourages the consideration of unorthodox economic and design models that prioritize quality of life, ecological regeneration, and community resilience over conventional growth-oriented approaches.

Who Can Access This Work? What Barriers Are There to Accessing This Work? What Technology Does the Audience Need?

Asking who can access a particular work helps ensure that the benefits of design interventions are distributed equitably. Understanding potential barriers allows for the identification and elimination of inequalities, ensuring that advantages of a project reach a diverse audience. By questioning access and barriers, designers can address issues related to the democratization of knowledge. This is important for making information and resources available to a broader audience, and fostering informed participation in design strategies and projects. Understanding the technological requirements of the audience is essential for designing with degrowth in mind. It ensures that technological solutions are inclusive and do not create additional barriers. Technologies that align with the principles of degrowth minimize negative environmental impacts and ensure that advancements are accessible to a wide range of people. These questions also highlight the need to

consider cultural and social factors that may affect access to and interaction with a particular work. Tailoring designs to accommodate different cultural practices and social norms ensures that projects are not reinforcing dominant societal narratives. By regularly asking these questions, designers and practitioners in the field of degrowth can create a feedback loop. This loop allows for continuous improvement, ensuring that any emerging barriers are identified and addressed promptly. Iteration facilitates the refinement of designs to better meet the needs of the audience over time.

What Are the Real-World Outcomes and Consequences of This Work?

Understanding the real-world outcomes allows for a thorough assessment of the impact of design initiatives. Examining consequences aids in determining the effectiveness of specific design choices made within a degrowth framework. This includes assessing whether design solutions contribute to minimizing environmental degradation, reducing inequality, and enhancing overall quality of life. Analyzing real-world outcomes helps identify whether these design initiatives are successful in promoting justice by reducing disparities and ensuring equitable distribution of resources. By understanding the consequences of design efforts, it becomes possible to assess their adaptability and resilience in the face of changing circumstances. This is important for ensuring that initiatives remain effective over the long term and can respond to evolving challenges. Examining outcomes provides valuable insights for learning and improvement. If certain approaches are not yielding the desired results or unintended consequences arise, this information can guide adjustments to strategies and designs to enhance their overall efficacy. Communicating the real-world outcomes of design initiatives helps raise public awareness. Transparent reporting on successes and challenges fosters public engagement, trust, and support for ongoing efforts.

Is This Work Harmful to People or the Environment? In What Ways?

Degrowth advocates for moving away from the growth-centric economic model that often leads to environmental degradation and social inequalities. By questioning the potential harm, designers contribute to the broader degrowth agenda by promoting designs that are in harmony with the principles of sufficiency, equity, and ecological well-being. Identification of the ways in which a project has the potential to induce harm can inform ways in which designers can advocate for

changes within the project or make the choice to not engage with the work. This question serves as a reflective tool for designers within the degrowth paradigm, guiding them to create solutions that are mindful of their impact on both human societies and the natural world.

How Does This Work Help Build a Local Community?

By asking how a particular system or design contributes to building a local community, designers emphasize a community-centric approach over profiteering. Designing systems that contribute to building a local community fosters resilience and self-sufficiency. Degrowth emphasizes creating systems that are less reliant on globalized supply chains and more focused on local resources. This question encourages consideration of how a design can support local economies, reduce dependence on external sources, and enhance community resilience. Building a community involves fostering social connections and solidarity amongst local folk. Designing with this question in mind encourages the creation of spaces, structures, and systems that facilitate community interactions. Strong social ties are essential for collective well-being and are consistent with the values of degrowth. By focusing on how a particular design or system contributes to the local community, there is an implicit consideration of whether it encourages responsible consumption, resource sharing, and environmentally sound practices.

If the Work is Change-Making, Will it Last? How Are Resources Being Secured to Make the Change Last? What Are Those Resources?

These questions are consequential because they emphasize the importance of designing for longevity and resilience. Designing products, systems, or solutions that contribute to positive change requires consideration of their durability and lasting impact. These questions prompt designers to think about the resources needed to support and maintain the designed solutions, ensuring that they are not only effective initially but also long-standing. If a design intervention is initiated specifically to promote degrowth principles, it is fundamental to assess its lasting impact. Ensuring that changes are enduring and feasible over time is essential for the overall success of the degrowth movement. These questions motivate an evaluation of the resources and mechanisms in place to support and maintain the proposed changes in the long run.

Follow the Money

Who Benefits From This Work?

By asking who benefits from a particular design, designers can assess whether the advantages are shared across different social groups or if they disproportionately favor a specific segment of the population. Understanding who makes gains from a design allows designers to focus on creating solutions that enhance the overall quality of life for a broad range of people, rather than contributing to the concentration of wealth and resources. Traditional economic models often prioritize growth without considering who benefits and who bears the costs. By posing the question, designers and proponents of degrowth challenge the dominant growth-centric narrative, pushing for alternative models that prioritize equity.

What Entities and Individuals Are Deriving Profits or Getting Paid?

Identifying the entities and individuals profiting from a project assists in assessing the equity and fairness of resource distribution. It allows for a critical examination of whether profits are concentrated among a few or distributed more widely. By scrutinizing who is getting paid, it is possible to assess whether economic benefits are distributed in a socially just manner. This includes considerations of labor conditions, wage disparities, and the overall impact of economic activities on different social groups. Identifying the entities deriving profits helps in designing systems for resilience and longevity of equitable outcomes. Additionally, understanding to whom profits are directed can inform on whether or not a project is solely aimed at capital accumulation. Knowledge of who is deriving profits can guide designers in decisions on whether or not to take on projects, as certain individuals or entities may be at odds with degrowth values.

What Goals Does This Work Have Outside of Profit?

Traditional economic models prioritize profit as the primary goal of businesses and economic activities. Asking about goals beyond profit challenges this conventional approach and encourages a consideration of social, ecological, and ethical dimensions in the design and implementation of projects or initiatives. By asking about goals beyond profit, there is an implicit acknowledgment of the importance of ecological impact in design, ensuring that projects contribute positively to

the environment rather than exploiting it. Questioning motivation also addresses the potential social impacts of a project, such as fair-labor job creation, community development, and equitable distribution of resources. The question opens the door to consideration of ethical principles in the design process. It encourages designers and decision-makers to reflect on the consequences of their choices on individuals, communities, and ecosystems. Degrowth encourages unconventional metrics for success outside of economic growth or profit margins. Interrogation into goals beyond profit recognizes alternative measures for prosperity, such as improved quality of life, cultural richness, and ecological health.

What Does the Client Do With Their Money? Who Do They Make Donations To?

Understanding how clients allocate their money provides insights into their priorities, morals, and values. This information can be significant for designing strategies that embody degrowth principles. What a client does with their money could easily be the sole deciding factor for a designer to not engage in a work relationship. One strategy for determining client monetary allocation is to analyze their donation behavior. Donations play a significant role in influencing societal values and priorities. Examining where clients choose to make donations can reveal their support for causes that may either align with or challenge degrowth principles. For instance, donations to environmental initiatives or social projects may indicate a commitment to ecologically friendly and equitable progress, while contributions to industries with high resource consumption probably indicates misalignment with degrowth goals. Design choices—whether in product development, services, or systems—are influenced by the values and preferences of clients. Knowledge of where the client money goes can lend insight into their partiality, and shed light on strategies to persuade clients toward creating products or services that resonate with the tenets of degrowth.

Are You Tacitly Supporting an Agenda?

Design decisions often reflect underlying values and assumptions. Asking whether a design tacitly supports a political or social agenda prompts designers to critically examine the implicit values embedded in their work. It encourages awareness of whether a design contributes to or challenges dominant societal norms and structures. Additionally, supporting clients through executing their

design work supports the agenda of those clients. This question is intended for designers to evaluate what the priorities of their clients are, and whether or not those priorities are in harmony with the tenets of degrowth.

Governing the Project

How Does Decision-Making in This Work Use Strategies of Collaboration, Mutuality, and Horizontal Organization?

Collaboration in decision-making is one way the degrowth principles of fostering cooperation and shared responsibility are exemplified. Degrowth emphasizes the importance of mutual relationships, where interactions benefit all parties involved. Examining how decision-making embraces mutuality ensures that outcomes are inclusive and contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities. Degrowth challenges hierarchical structures and encourages more egalitarian and decentralized systems. Collaborative and horizontally organized decision-making fosters resilience within systems. This resilience is crucial for adapting to changing circumstances, addressing challenges, and ensuring long-term viability. Horizontal decision-making encourages diverse perspectives and fosters innovation. For designers, this can lead to more creative and effective solutions by considering a wide range of viewpoints and experiences. Strategies of collaboration, mutuality, and horizontal organization in decision-making contribute to creating more equitable societies. These strategies are essential for redistributing resources and opportunities more fairly, and implementing degrowth principles into design practices. Horizontal decision-making promotes active participation from all stakeholders. Designers depend on this involvement to create solutions that truly meet the needs and aspirations of the communities involved. Decision-making that embraces collaboration and mutuality empowers individuals and communities by involving them in the process. This empowerment is consistent with the degrowth perspective of shifting power dynamics for more inclusive and just outcomes.

How Does This Work Value Lived Experience in the Generation of Knowledge?

This question delves into the philosophy and approach underlying the creation of knowledge. In questioning how knowledge is generated, degrowth seeks alternative perspectives that go beyond

conventional measures. Traditional methods of knowledge generation rely on such instruments as quantitative metrics, theories, hypothesis testing, and expert analysis to determine validity. In contrast, knowledge created through lived experience relies on understandings derived from the personal narratives of individuals. Knowledge generated from lived experience is valuable in that it provides a holistic, context-rich, and diverse understanding of the world. It encompasses not only intellectual insights but also emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and practical problem-solving skills. Lived experiences are central to human-centered design, ensuring that solutions are rooted in the realities and needs of people. This approach is in contrast to top-down, growth-oriented models that might not consider the diverse experiences of individuals. Valuing lived experience in the generation of knowledge recognizes of the importance of involving individuals and communities in shaping designed interventions. It encourages a shift away from quantitative and growth-focused approaches toward inclusive and contextually relevant knowledge generation.

Role of the Designer

How Am I Being a Helper and Meaningfully Engaging With a Community?

Meaningful engagement with a community is imperative to designing with degrowth in mind, as it involves understanding the wants and needs of the folk impacted by the work. Designing processes and solutions that align with community values ensures that ideas are not imposed but co-created with the people who will be affected. Being a helper and engaging with a community in a worthwhile way contributes to building social cohesion and resilience. It acknowledges the importance of social connections and community well-being as essential components of a flourishing life. Implementing degrowth practices in design work goes beyond traditional models that may prioritize efficiency and growth. It involves participatory design, where community members actively contribute to the creation and shaping of systems and solutions. Asking how one is being a helper ensures that the design process is inclusive and respects local knowledge. Meaningful engagement with a community promotes local empowerment. By understanding the strengths, challenges, and aspirations of a community, designers can enable community members to actively participate in decision-making processes. This can foster decentralization and localization, allowing communities to

have more control over their own outcomes. Designing for degrowth requires a deep understanding of local cultures and contexts. Being a helper involves respecting and valuing diverse perspectives within a community. By actively engaging with the community, designers can ensure that solutions are culturally sensitive and relevant, fostering a more harmonious relationship between people and their environment.

Am I “Peacocking” and Performatively Dropping in to Make Myself Look Good by Doing This Work?

Am I Doing This Work Just to Put it in My Portfolio?

Authentic engagement in degrowth activities involves a genuine commitment to these values rather than engaging in actions solely for personal gain or image enhancement. This question raises concerns about the ethical considerations behind a given design project and whether it genuinely contributes to ecologically friendly and equitable solutions or if self-serving motives are driving the designer. If a designer is engaging in work primarily for personal gain or to build their portfolio, it could lead to projects that prioritize aesthetics over substance—potentially harming the intended beneficiaries and the ecosystem. Working to design from a degrowth mindset requires a commitment to inclusivity and community participation. Designers taking part in performative actions to enhance their image can undermine the collaborative and participatory nature of degrowth design initiatives. If the motivation behind executing design projects is solely for short-term personal benefits, it may conflict with the long-range goals of degrowth, which emphasize lasting positive impacts on society and the environment. This question prompts designers to reflect on their motivations and interrogate whether or not their actions align with the goals of creating a world of human thriving and ecological balance.

What Do I Stand to Gain? Are My Gains Ethical? Should I Be Making Gains in Doing This Work?

Asking about personal gains aligns with the degrowth ethos by questioning the constant pursuit of material gains and encouraging reflection on alternative measures of success and fulfillment. Questioning the ethical implications of gains in doing work emphasizes the need for responsible and conscientious design practices that prioritize long-term well-being over short-term gains. Interrogation of these questions will inevitably lead to affirmative responses in most cases. The

query is not intended to communicate that designers should (or even could) be making sacrifices on every project. Under the current economic system, working class folk must work in order to provide themselves with the material necessities for survival. Thus, most design projects will at least be providing the material gain of monetary compensation for the designer. Income should be evaluated in terms of its ethicality within the context of each project. Outside of compensation, designers should deeply probe what they stand to gain from a project, determine the moral implications of those gains, and make choices about approaching the work based on consideration of personal gain. There are some projects in which designers should not be making gains. Determining which projects those are will vary by designer and context. These questions dovetail into a holistic evaluation of the consequences of design practices beyond immediate personal benefits.

Remaking the Status Quo

How Does This Work Support the Dominant Hegemony? Does it Uphold Capitalism, Colonialism, Racism, Sexism, or Classism?

This question addresses the broader societal implications and power structures embedded in design systems and processes. Questioning how a particular design functions allows one to uncover the power dynamics at play. It creates space for an analysis of whether the design intervention supports or challenges dominant structures such as capitalism, colonialism, racism, sexism, or classism. Examining how design work supports the dominant hegemony helps identify whether it contributes to growth narratives, exploitation of the environment, or perpetuation of inequitable economic structures. Grasping the social and economic implications of a design intervention is essential. It enables designers to create solutions that are more equitable, inclusive, and ecologically balanced.

Does This Work (Re)produce Biases and Intersections Thereof?

Examining whether design work reproduces biases can function toward ensuring that a project does not inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. Consideration should be given to the interconnected nature of social categories such as race, gender, class, queerness, disability, and others. Intersectionality recognizes that individuals may experience multiple layers of oppression or

privilege. Examining whether a system or design reproduces biases at these intersections helps in addressing the nuanced ways in which marginalized groups are affected. This includes understanding whether the design may perpetuate stereotypes, exclude certain demographics, or reinforce existing power dynamics. Investigating intersectional biases necessitates a focus on inclusive decision-making. Involving diverse perspectives in the design and implementation of projects reduces the likelihood of unintentionally reinforcing the domination of already oppressed groups. Ensuring that biases are not reproduced in the design process is essential for creating resilient and just systems that can withstand the test of time.

Does This Work Support Authoritarianism, Totalitarianism, or Tyranny?

Assessing whether design work supports authoritarianism or other forms of oppressive governance is fundamental for enacting tenets of degrowth in the work. Designing for degrowth involves creating systems that prioritize human well-being and environmental health—which is in conflict with authoritarian ideologies that prioritize control and centralization. Designing with a degrowth mindset involves considering the social implications of systems and structures, and design work that promotes totalitarianism undermines the positive social goals of degrowth. Examining whether a work supports tyranny is essential to understanding its impact on inclusivity and equitable distribution of resources. Authoritarian regimes often prioritize economic growth at the expense of environmental degradation. Assessing the political implications of a work helps determine its potential impact on ecological health. Degrowth emphasizes community empowerment and local autonomy, while authoritarianism tends to concentrate power at the top, thereby limiting community participation in decision-making. Understanding whether a work supports authoritarianism is foundational for evaluating its compatibility with the principles of decentralization and community-based decision-making inherent in design approaches that center degrowth. Designing for degrowth involves envisioning and implementing solutions that can withstand the challenges posed by oppressive political structures.

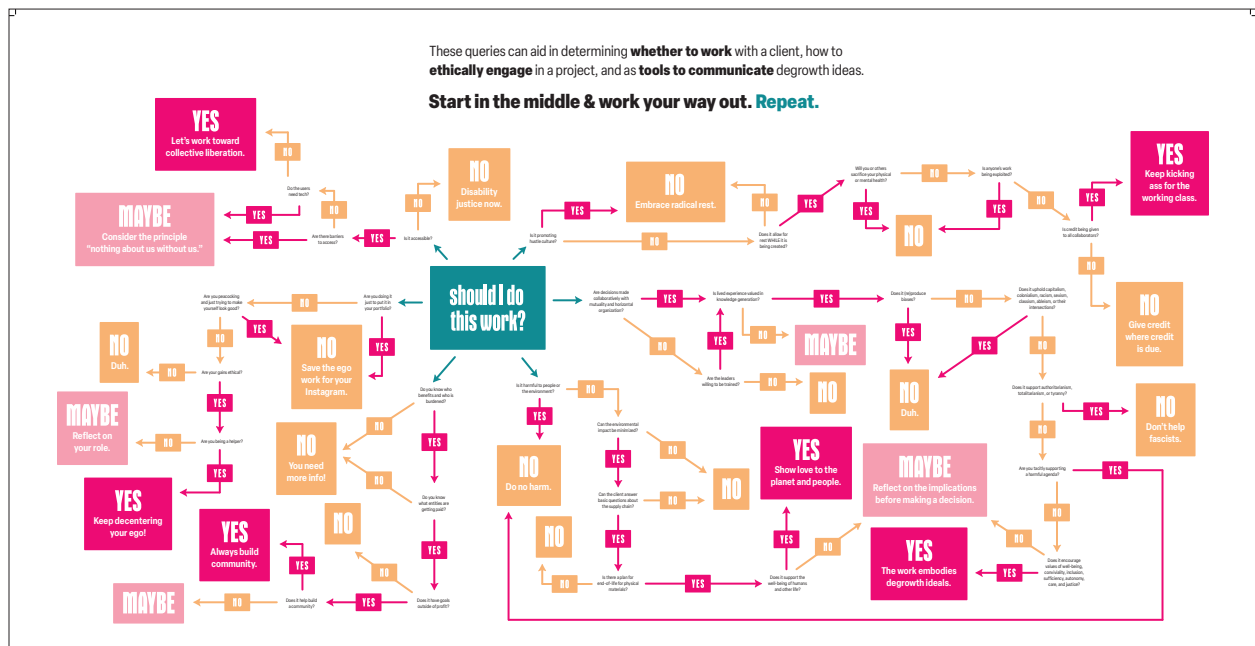
Degrowth Values

How Does This Work Encourage the Values of Well-Being, Care, Conviviality, Inclusion, Sufficiency, Autonomy, and/or Justice?

These are some of the core values of degrowth. This question is intended to focus designers on explicating how these values show up in their design work. The value of well-being implies a concern for the overall welfare and quality of life, rather than merely maximizing production or consumption. The question begs thoughtful and considerate approach to understanding the mechanisms of a project and their implications, fostering a more caring attitude towards the environment and society. Additionally, designers should probe how a project promotes the importance of care work and if it creates space for folx to care for one another. The inquiry into how the design work encourages a convivial approach asks whether harmonious relationships between humans and between humans and the environment are emphasized. It supports the idea of creating systems that enhance communal living and shared well-being. Designers must think about how a system, product, or intervention can be inclusive for diverse groups of people. This involves addressing accessibility, affordability, and participation, making the benefits of the project available to a wide range of individuals and communities. This question is linked to the concept of sufficiency by encouraging a focus on essential functionalities and necessities. Sufficiency promotes design work that meets basic needs without unnecessary excess or overconsumption. Sufficient designs prioritize essential functionalities over superfluous features. Determining if a project encourages autonomy involves assessing whether it empowers individuals and communities to have control over their own lives. It promotes decentralized and self-sufficient systems, allowing people to make decisions that align with their values and needs. Evaluating the impact of a project on justice means examining its fairness, equity, and social implications. This question encourages a consideration of whether the project addresses systemic inequalities, supports social justice, and ensures fair distribution of benefits and burdens. Evaluating design work for its encouragement of degrowth values creates opportunities for projects to be conceptualized from a holistic perspective.

Design choices can have profound impacts on people and the planet. This question encourages designers to consider the broader social and environmental implications of their work, promoting justice and equity. Design executed from a degrowth perspective should move towards regenerative practices that enhance rather than deplete natural resources. By asking how a design supports the well-being of human and non-human life, designers can ensure their creations contribute positively to ecosystems and communities. Asking how a design supports well-being ensures that it not only meets immediate needs but also considers the long-term health and resilience of both human and non-human systems. This question serves as a guiding principle for decision-making when designing with degrowth in mind, fostering a comprehensive approach that prioritizes the well-being of all life forms.

Degrowth & Design Flowchart



Design plays a vital role in the degrowth paradigm. Our experience of the world is mediated by choices made by designers. Evaluating design work by answering these questions will provide a thorough understanding of how projects impact people and the planet on multiple fronts. Over fifty years ago, in the original publication of *Design for the Real World*, Victor Papanek admonished that, “Design, to be ecologically responsible, must be independent of concern for the gross national product” (Papanek, 2019). It is past due time for designers to begin implementing degrowth values in our work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my exhibition *Degrowth & Design*, alongside this accompanying document, have elucidated the core tenets of the degrowth movement and proposed strategies for its integration into individual lives and design practices. Through a critical examination of the detrimental effects of capitalism on ecosystems and human well-being, coupled with a presentation of alternative solutions, the significance of adopting degrowth principles becomes apparent. The embrace of personal practices and the methodology of data humanism, as exemplified by the meticulous collection and hand analysis of personal data in this research, underscores the grassroots nature of the degrowth movement and the power of individual actions in effecting broader societal change. By focusing on personal practices and advocating for changes in design methodologies, this research underscores the potential for meaningful transformation towards a more ecologically friendly and equitable society. As we navigate the complexities of the relationship between capitalism and design and its role in shaping societal norms, it becomes evident that embracing degrowth values offers a pathway towards positive change. From rethinking materials and labor practices to fostering inclusive community engagement, the integration of degrowth principles into design work presents a compelling opportunity for transformative action. Ultimately, this document and exhibition serve as a call to action for designers and individuals alike to embrace degrowth as a guiding framework for creating a more just and resilient future.

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Appendix: Photographic Documentation of Installation



