Design Fuel for the Neoliberal Fire

NASADOWSKI Becky
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
rebecca-nasadowski@utc.edu

University graphic design education and professional design organizations in the United States have generally avoided critical conversations regarding the field’s emphasis on professionalization and entrepreneurialism. In this paper, I will discuss two related neoliberal nodes that have persisted and particularly intensified over the past decade: one, design’s insistence on the social as a marketable passion project that escapes history and socio-political relations, and two, design’s fixation on an entrepreneurial mindset that subsumes all leisure time into labor time. I will articulate the ways design education and professional design organizations in the United States have been ideologically complicit in these efforts and offer potential pedagogical interventions toward more deeply examining the socio-political contexts in which we study, labor, and live.

neoliberalism; design education; professionalization; labor

1. Introduction

Scholars outside of design have long critiqued the neoliberal university and its disciplinary consequences for students and faculty alike. At the center of these critiques is the institution’s increased emphasis on professionalization and entrepreneurialism in service to “the power-concentration of capital” (Malik, 2015, p. 50) alongside increased precarity complemented by labor declarations we should “do what we love” and fault only ourselves when we do not (Tokumitsu, 2014). Design education and design organizations in the United States have generally sidestepped meaningful critical engagement with this ideological turn, instead indulging such institutional requests as offering design thinking curricula for budding entrepreneurs where diversity is a commodity and all community engagement is assumed to be beneficial. At the same time, students intensify the commodification of their own identities by cultivating their personal brand across networks like Instagram, and the flexible freelancer readily joins co-working spaces that celebrate “pseudo-horizontalism” (Raunig, 2015, p. 33) over collective work. In this paper, I will discuss two related neoliberal nodes that have persisted over the past decade: one,
design’s insistence on the social as a marketable passion project that escapes history and socio-political relations, and two, design’s fixation on an entrepreneurial mindset that subsumes all leisure time into labor time. Finally, I will offer potential pedagogical interventions toward more deeply examining the socio-political contexts in which we study, labor, and live.

2. An Alibi for Complexity
The design field is fraught with individualized, color-blind, do-good rhetoric that lacks specificity on what “good” means or for whom (Nasadowski, 2015). Select projects within this territory include:

- a collaboration between the local police department and a university design class to rebrand the police’s relationship to the community (Sarasota Police Department, 2014; Jones, 2014)—with little to no evidence of discussions of race or acts of policing playing a role in those contentious relationships;
- award-winning community projects where designers travel to impoverished towns to create “neutral” spaces for conversation (Edge, 2010)—scrubbing clean class antagonism necessary when articulating the roots of poverty; and
- the viral content marketing agency (Rob Bliss Creative, 2014) that created a video campaign against misogynist street harassment—while simultaneously villainizing people of color.

Design scholar Shana Agid (2011) observed the “social” in social design discourse is typically disconnected from an analysis of political structures and relationships of power (p. 190). Agid has also problematized the commonsense notion that civic engagement or community partnerships are de facto beneficial to the community. So entrenched in this commonsense, few design educators and practitioners interrogate the foundational logics that shape conditions of violence. Shallow design engagement with the “social,” then, becomes reformism that recasts the same violence it purports to remedy (Nasadowski, 2015; Williams, 2019).

Despite the increased interest for design students to make “socially aware” work in recent years, designers and educators have often skipped along the surface, refusing to see the web of power relations that feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1993) elegantly characterized as relations of ruling. Conceiving of power in this way moves away from a binary approach (ruler vs. ruled) and better reflects the intricacies of how we simultaneously dominate and are dominated. While clarity and succinctness can be valuable, asking students to engage in social issues without providing them necessary historical and political context encourages designers to operate under the guise of a vague moral goodness over that of explicit antagonism. It is to comply with what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) has called “harmonious, empty pluralism” (p. 193)—a hollow engagement with the social that escapes history and socio-political relations. It encourages us to ask, following Agid (2011), what do we do when we are designing within a system—or for a system—that we do not want to exist? To engage directly, critically, and rigorously with these necessary questions takes time and commitment.

3. The Designer as Entrepreneur
AIGA, the professional association for design in the United States, prides itself on being “the profession’s oldest and largest professional membership organization for design” with over 15,000 members (“Our Story,” n.d.). In 2021, they published Design POV: An In-Depth Look at the Design Industry Now. Introducing the report on their website, they write: “This research is about the future of our industry. It’s about leadership and it’s more than our profession but how design interfaces with the world. Our
mission is about bringing design to the world. We are celebrating the diversity of our industry and the social impact each and every designer makes to society” (“Design Research & Insights,” n.d.).

With input via surveys, interviews, and a triangulation of data from various other sources, the report includes more than 5,000 participants from 100 countries. Beginning with defining what it means to be a designer, the executive summary notes it asked for feedback through three lenses: Skillset, Mindset, and “Impactset,” defined as a “force for change, progress, and good” (AIGA, 2021, p. 9) with no context here of what change/progress/good might represent. In the section that discusses “advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility,” an excerpted quote from art director Carlos Estrada reads: “How do we make people feel welcome and how do we get their perspective; because it is valuable and it will make us more creative, it can help a company be more profitable” (p. 11). Directly following this section is “Market Intelligence,” where the first line reads: “Every designer is a potential business” (p. 15). The three key highlights AIGA summarizes on this page include: “1. Contrary to many other professions, your professional craft has an intrinsic value. 2. Develop your entrepreneurial spirit. 3. Celebrate that every designer is a potential business by proactively learning about business.”

What AIGA’s report makes clear is that design and designers are poised to be neoliberal commodities. Neoliberalism requires storytelling boasting good-for-business multiculturalism; a life of flexibility and freedom; and the exceptionally intrinsic value of creativity, entrepreneurialism, and innovation.

Pedagogically and culturally, one way creative fields rationalize an understanding of the self as a commodity is through the “Do What You Love” mantra and all its variations: carefully lettered across Pinterest boards, tagged on Instagram (over 9.1 million times at the time of writing; 2021), built into company missions and painted across Dwell-worthy interiors of the urban co-working space near you (WeWork, 2013), and phrased and rephrased in design blogs (Porter, 2015). In the university, students flock to graphic design programs with hopes of transforming their love of art into a lucrative career. When they get there, they are bombarded with calls for unpaid labor dressed up as opportunities to support good causes or causes good for their careers. While mainstream resistance to these calls has gained some traction in the past decade (“Articles About Spec Work,” n.d.; Hische, 2011; Skidmore, 2015; Woods, 2016), the requests continue, and thus, educators must also continue demystifying the do-what-you-love mindset that paves the way for exploitation. Miya Tokumitsu (2014) further analyzed this sentiment: “Work becomes divided into two opposing classes: that which is lovable (creative, intellectual, socially prestigious) and that which is not (repetitive, unintellectual, undistinguished).” Workers who love what they do are the ideal neoliberal subjects, encouraged by an entrepreneurial ethos with little regard for the cost or the conditions of their love.

4. Pedagogical Interventions

4.1. Design and Power

Since 2015, I have been teaching variations of a course now entitled Politics and Ethics of Design. I first conceptualized this course as a direct response to a visible increase of shallow social design efforts (i.e., projects disconnected from an analysis of power) I saw increasing in frequency at the university level. I begin our classroom discussions with Ida B. Wells and the 1893 World Fair. This exposition had an immense communicative impact for the country with one in four Americans visiting it before it closed (Treagus, 146). Three years prior, President Benjamin Harrison appointed representatives of the states to help celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus arriving in America. As a result, 208 members represented 60 million people on the Board of National Commissioners for the exposition. More than one-eighth of the American population was Black, a population (unsurprisingly) not represented at the Fair, earning it the nickname “the white American’s World’s Fair” by Black
newspapers at the time. In response to this exclusion, Wells sought fundraising and contributions for a pamphlet aimed toward educating international travelers on this affront (Paddon & Turner, 1995).

Wells’ (1893) edited pamphlet, *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition*, presented a compelling study with contributions from Frederick Douglass, educator Irvine Garland Penn, and lawyer and newspaper publisher Ferdinand Lee Barnett. They asserted much of America’s innovations and progress in education, art, science, commerce, and more that were included in the World’s Fair existed thanks to Black labor, both directly and indirectly. The contributors also made clear that the 13th amendment most certainly did not offer freedom and acceptance to everyone. In the introduction, Douglass wrote: “The life of a Negro slave was never held sacred in the estimation of the people of that section of the country in the time of slavery, and the abolition of slavery against the will of the enslavers did not render a slave’s life more sacred” (p. 6). Wells repeated slavery’s lasting effects in the chapter titled “Class Legislation”: “The Civil War of 1861–5 ended slavery. It left us free, but it also left us homeless, penniless, ignorant, nameless and friendless” (p. 13). These sentiments framed a broad context for the rest of the pamphlet, furnishing a well-rounded view of multiple, persistent mechanisms that uphold racist ideologies and racist actions. In the chapter “The Convict Lease System,” readers learn those states claiming to be too poor to maintain prisons (including Tennessee, where I am currently teaching) would just lease out convicts to the railway or mines, for example, so the state would be paid the worker’s share instead: a convenient incentive (p. 19). Wells pointed out 90% of those in prison were Black, to which she partly attributed to lack of influential friends or the financial means to employ lawyers to help avoid long terms of imprisonment for petty crimes. Additionally, she wrote, “the judges, juries and other officials of the courts are white men who share these prejudices. They also make the laws” (p. 20). Within the “Lynch Law” chapter, Wells reiterated this idea in the context of increasing mob violence under the legal jurisdiction of white Americans (pp. 25–26). These are the people that made accusations, enacted the violence, and then controlled the media through their ownership of telegraph wires and newspapers. Overall, this writing speaks to institutionalized racism that supports a racial hierarchy, from the mobs to the courts to the media, all sharing the same white supremacist beliefs. This provides a critical framework for our class before we can talk about how and why W. E. B. Du Bois entered this scene.

In 1900, the Black lawyer Thomas Calloway worked with the expo’s American delegation and invited Du Bois to oversee an exhibition on Black life in the upcoming Paris exhibition. Du Bois, in collaboration with students he was working with at Atlanta University (the first HBCU in the South), prepared for display 60 full-color hand-drawn charts, 200 books by Black authors, and hundreds of photographs and maps. This work illustrated that it was historically constituted inequalities (such as those laid out in Wells’ pamphlet), not innate moral failings, that limited Black Americans in achieving social equality. The crafted visuals helped to debunk the idea of a single Black identity and pushed against racist caricatures. This data visualization series, representing the immense progress of Black America since the abolition of slavery (via growth in literacy, land ownership, population, business, and more) has resurfaced in popularity every so often the past century, accompanied by varying degrees of context. A number of new books and articles (Mansky, 2018; Battle-Baptiste & Rusert [Eds.], 2018; Hsu, 2019; Rothenstein [Ed.], 2019) have created another recent surge of recognition, including sociologist Aldon Morris (2018) emphasizing the lasting impact of Du Bois’ visual work for communicating sociological knowledge to a wider public: “Du Bois was acutely aware that the packaging of the exhibit was as important as the data depicted” (p. 36). The visualizations were bold and colorful, complex and well-crafted, and persuasive. Media studies scholar Hua Hsu (2019) has added: “There’s a surprising amount of open space, as though viewers are being asked to fill in the history and context that hasn’t been spelled out for them.”
I begin the class with these conversations for three primary reasons. One, I want to emphasize to students design here comes as secondary to an argument. Two, this history grounds the importance of structural thinking by using Wells’ pamphlet as a critical example of articulating the social, cultural, legal, economic, and political implications of an institution. This is the content of the lives Du Bois and his team visually represented. Three, following the same logic of Wells, we can talk about why some work has not seen broader representation in traditional design education. As designer Silas Munro (2018) noted, these charts predated and existed outside of modern canons of visualization, like the modular design elements of the Bauhaus or Edward Tufte’s charts, which have typically received significantly greater representation in design history (pp. 47–49).

4.2. Designer as Laborer

Next, I want to share one way I have asked senior graphic design students to closely examine the designer as a laborer and neoliberal subject who is thus open to exploitation. In their last semester, as they prepare their thesis exhibition and put the finishing touches on their portfolios, we read a number of critical essays, including an examination of co-working spaces that sell a lifestyle where work and play are virtually indistinguishable (Aronoff, 2017); an exploration into the relationship of crowd-funding platforms—an entrepreneurial favorite—to community, capitalism, and wage labor (MacPhee, 2012); and Tokumitsu’s (2014) critique of conflating self-love and work. Additionally, we read excerpts from a manual developed by the U.K.-based Precarious Workers’ Brigade (2017), or PWB, titled Training for Exploitation? Politicising Employability & Reclaiming Education. With Tokumitsu, we locate the relationship between our shared neoliberal academic context (e.g., the decrease in state funding of education, the rise of precarious faculty in U.S. institutions, and the rise of tuition and student debt) with that of the gig economy and labor practices in the design field at large (e.g., unpaid and low-paid internships, the rise of co-working spaces where members bring their own equipment, interviews that emphasize the search for “a good cultural fit,” and the expectation—but high financial cost—to submit work for design awards). If “every designer is a potential business,” as the AIGA report (2021) summarized, then I want students to explore what the consequences are of tying our identity and self-worth to our professional success.

The manual from PWB argued higher ed’s emphasis on employability pushes students to reproduce and reinforce themselves as neoliberal subjects subordinate to the wants and needs of capitalism, which amplifies both emotional and economic pressures that deserve attention. They wrote: “By teaching students how to identify what employers want and then how to become it, employability normalises certain subordinating attitudes towards work and the self, promoting free labour and individualistic behaviour, which discourages collective practice and solidarity” (p. 5). PWB helps readers draw distinctions between volunteering vs. career volunteering. For example, students might seek out volunteer opportunities for causes and struggles in which they are invested, while simultaneously questioning career volunteering when the purpose is to advance one’s career and working for free is perhaps the only way to get a foot in the door. PWB points out the latter scenario may also be an opportunity for employers to cut existing staff and wages (p. 14), which is helpful to discuss with students how the effects of their personal choices do not stop with themselves. Workshop exercises in their manual ask students to take on both practical and critical thought exercises relevant to their lives in school and beyond, like mapping their weekly paid vs. unpaid work (including domestic labor) or deconstructing neoliberal rhetoric in job ads that demand one’s passion, for example, to potentially grease the wheels for lower pay. In teaching about exploitative labor practices, my intention is not to dishearten students by locating these instances in their own lives. While our respective privilege subjects us to exploitation unevenly, articulating what students are already experiencing in ways that shift the blame away from denigrating their self-worth can instead be validating. Instead of promoting
an idealized version of what a designer’s success looks like, I encourage each student to articulate their own values and prioritize their needs while also holding together the political, economic, and social effects of their decisions. I aim to alleviate the pressure from students that they will find a “pure” way to participate in design or that their jobs and the market will or should deliver them constant fulfillment. I ask students to identify alternative ways of practicing design or working with each other, moving from collaboration that focuses on content generation in service of capitalism to forging relationships of solidarity that intentionally construct thoughtful and equitable working relations.

5. Conclusion
Design education in the United States has been complicit in multiple efforts to fuel the neoliberal university and workforce. Over this past decade in particular, design educators and professional design organizations have helped to amplify and commodify thin commitments to passion projects framed as social engagement, omitting the study of socio-political histories and contemporary relations of power. Additionally, bolstered by technology that normalizes constant connection and presentation of the self, one can see an increase in design’s insistence on collapsing the individual with the business, further blurring any lines between leisure and labor while promoting individual value over collective solidarity. I hope these brief glimpses to conversations in the classroom offer ways design educators might encourage students to imagine new futures for living, laboring, and relating—both inside and outside the academy.

6. References
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About the Author:

**Becky Nasadowski** (she/her) is a designer, educator, and researcher exploring design’s complicity in various formations of violence within neoliberal landscapes. Her interdisciplinary approach to design research draws from feminist theory, cultural studies, urban planning, and anthropology.

She has presented her work on the aesthetics of gentrification at the annual conferences of the College Art Association (Chicago, Illinois) and Architecture, Media, Politics, and Society (Tallahassee, Florida), and will be sharing related work at the ATTENDING [TO] FUTURES conference at the Köln International School of Design (Cologne, Germany) later this year. She maintains an active professional design practice, collaborating with artists, activists, and cultural institutions, among others. In 2019, she co-authored an experimental book, *i hate war, but i hate our enemies even more*, with Heath Schultz, published by Minor Compositions in the U.K. She holds an MFA from the multidisciplinary Design program at The University of Texas at Austin and is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Art at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.