Design for a "Mess"

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"The world is a mess," reads the opening sentence of the blurb for Don Norman's latest book, *Design for a Better World.* Compelled by that phrase, I was left wondering: Does Norman, an influential voice on user-centered design, perhaps best known for his seminal book *The Design of Everyday Things*, have workable solutions to offer so we can design our way out of the mess?

Thirty years ago, I read Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things*, which was originally published in a hardcover version as *The Psychology of Everyday Things* and retitled for the paperback edition. In his preface to that new edition, the author suggested the title change was a "lesson in design." I could not agree more—many readers may find a book on design less intimidating than a book on psychology. By changing the title, Norman was practicing what he was preaching: making its design more user centric.

In *The Design of Everyday Things*, Norman preached effectively. He offered a distinctive perspective on something commonplace (everyday things), with an approachable style and a persuasive pitch to casual readers who otherwise may not have given much thought to the good, bad, and the ugly of the designs of the many things they interact with in their daily lives. His message helped bring user centricity to the front and center of product design and was part of a widespread shift toward more intentional design.

In his new book, Norman shifts the focus to something much more ambitious: the role of design in transforming the world from its present "mess" into something "better"—more sustainable, meaningful, and centered on humanity. While I applaud the author's ambition, a shift from a relatively narrow focus on the design of tangible everyday objects to something as vast as a moral reform of the economy and its relationship to the environment is a tall order and requires more than a call-for-action-on-multiple-fronts message.

Design for a Better World begins with a compelling observation: almost everything we see, interact with, and are immersed in is not natural. Institutions; ways of observing and measuring; assessment of success and failure; day-to-day conduct; our spaces and our habitat; and all of our social constructs are "artificial" in the sense that they are *designed*. And the designs have been intuited, conceptualized, instituted, and evolved over tens or hundreds or thousands of years as humans made design choices—be they conscious or unconscious, explicit or implicit, formal or informal. Reimagining design, in this broad sense of the word, should then be considered a necessary step in reconfiguring our choices toward creating a world that is more sustainable, meaningful, and humanity centered.

Start with the call for *sustainable* design. In a chapter titled "We Live in the Age of Waste," Norman addresses the unfortunate reality that many products are designed for fast or forced obsolescence. Waste is produced by economic systems that only reward revenue and profit growth, consequently incentivizing product design that compels the consumer to purchase, discard, and purchase again, with little hesitation. In short, "design" as practiced to date is the antithesis of the concept of a circular economy.

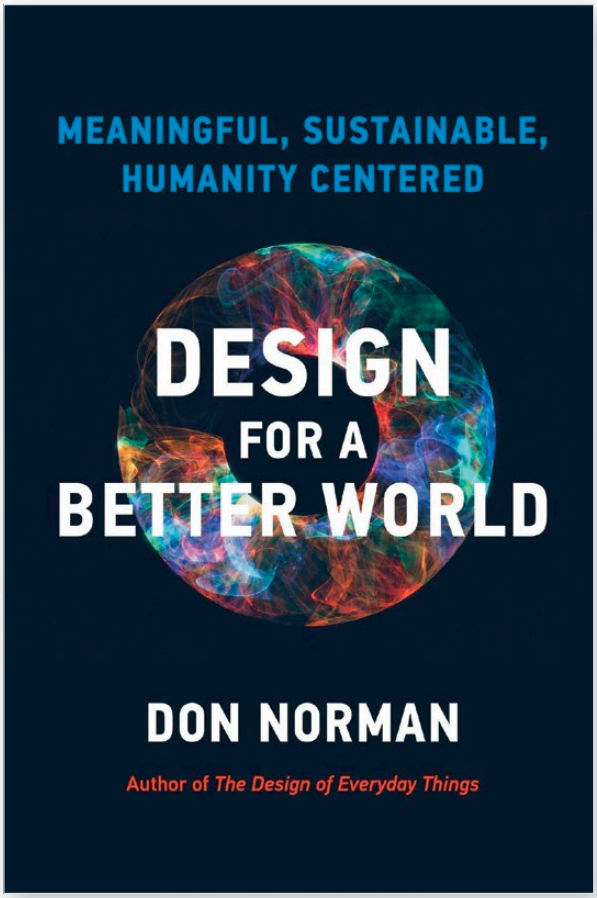
This applies to the design of not just products, but entire sociotechnical systems with substantial economic consequences and social, political, and economic interdependencies. Changes to these systems are difficult: they are hard to understand and are usually underpinned by visible and invisible power dynamics. Good luck retooling design to embrace the circular economy! Then there is the anything-but-trivial issue of cleaning up all the mess already created from past consumption. Who is to take care of that?

Next is the call for *meaningful* design. Traditionally, we—society at large—tend to focus on things, constructs, system states, and flows that can be measured. Engineers, managers, administrators,

policymakers, consultants, leaders, and observers all focus on measuring; if something cannot be measured, it is not worthy of study. But Norman argues that many of the measurements we pursue (for example, gross domestic product) mean little to ordinary people in their daily lives. What is lost is a deeper sense of meaning: What do all of these metrics mean for me and my day-to-day life?

This question underscores the role of design in choosing, framing, and measuring what we value. The goals we pursue, the progress we assess, and the impact of such progress should be designed to be meaningful to those impacted, so that meaning can be effectively communicated. "Communication" in that sense describes the execution, assessment, feedback, and interventions aimed at change—beyond simple messaging—to those directly impacted and to the wider world at large.

Finally, Norman calls for design that is *humanity centered*—an argument for shifting the focus of design from the individual user (the thrust of *The Design of Everyday Things*) to humanity in its larger, more holistic sense. This means democratizing design and engaging humanity at large in design; it also requires an expanded, more universal articulation of the construct and application of design. We are all designers now—designers not just of objects but of our worldviews, constructs, mores, metrics, institutions, processes, systems, ideas of well-being, futures, and much, much more. This is an ambitious vision, given the narrow interpretation of the word "design" and the many messy complexities of the real world. At the same time, some might also question why Norman stops at design that is solely humanity centered. Why not earth centered, thus including biodiversity, our limited resource base, and the planet?



Design for a Better World: Meaningful, Sustainable, Humanity Centered
by Don Norman. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023, 376 pp.

On completing the book, I found myself convinced by Norman's diagnosis of the design problem, and I looked eagerly for a comprehensive set of prescriptions. But here, I was disappointed. To be sure, the author effectively characterizes the messness of our world and convincingly identifies many of the underlying reasons for the mess. But it nagged at me that this would be true even if the focus of the book were simply "toward a better world," without any reference to design.

However, since the book is actually a proposition that design can contribute to a better world, I walked away with two big questions. First, in some nonobvious ways and with requisite expansive, granular detail, how exactly should design be changed to create a more sustainable, meaningful, humanity-centered world? And second, how should the changes be implemented? I wish Norman would have answered these two questions with specificity and in some considerable depth.

As it is, many of us already see and understand the problems and contributing causes of the mess. What we need are substantive, workable, prescriptive solutions to help navigate the really hard choices we must make to redesign how we interact with each other and operate in the world. Paradoxically, the design of such a redesign will take an enormous amount of action, collaboration, and coordination at both the individual level and throughout the collective population of 8 billion. Execution of this vision is likely a task beyond the reach of any one human being, Norman's expertise and capabilities notwithstanding. I believe the author is cognizant of this limitation: he makes a reference to political scientist Charles E. Lindblom's classic 1959 paper "The Science of 'Muddling Through,'" praising an approach of "incremental, small attacks on the issues, enabling continual flexibility guided by the feedback from the early results." Absent clear, specific, comprehensive, workable prescriptions, muddle through we must.

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