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Media Review: *Designing Our Way to a Better World*

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MEDIA REVIEW

DESIGNING OUR WAY TO A BETTER WORLD
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The purpose of this review is to give visibility to Thomas Fisher's important book, *Designing Our Way to a Better World* (2016). My hope is that after reading this review you will be touched, moved, and inspired to explore Fisher's newest book. It will inform the way you view design as a pathway to co-creating a better world that we know is possible.

Fisher paints a vivid image of our need to consider geodesign, a design concept that reaches far beyond the physical design of a building, chair, or dress, giving us a way through the dire and dangerous threats facing humanity and our planet today.

Thomas Fisher is a professor in the School of Architecture, Dayton Hudson Chair in Urban Design, and director of the Metropolitan Design Center at the University of Minnesota. He was recognized in 2005 as the fifth most published writer about architecture in the United States, and has been named one of the top 25 design educators four times by *Design Intelligence*. His books include *Designing to Avoid Disaster: The Nature of Fracture-Critical Design* and *In the Scheme of Things: Alternative Thinking on the Practice of Architecture*.

The falls or shortcomings of previous ages lay the groundwork for innovations of coming ages. Unmet needs motivate creativity and invention. Historic data informs future designs - or does it? What if those short-comings, inequities, and diseases were actually invisible spaces - social constructs in need of intentional design and reimagining? What if wicked problems were approached in alternative ways to forge a future that generates life organically through geodesign?

Designing Our Way to a Better World is a compendium of Thomas Fisher's provocative published works that, according to him, have remained invisible over the past 15 years. Fisher believes that now is the time for design thinking to undergo a renaissance. He believes that the rampant system dysfunction we are experiencing in personal, planetary, and society structures is due to inadequate design thinking. This book is Tom Fisher's contribution to the theory of transformative change.

Lack of comprehensive design thinking in our current systems and strategies, policies and procedures, and organizations and institutions prompts us to consider the interconnectedness of all parts that define a unified whole and well-functioning system. Designing for the invisible invites humans to see more by partnering with the people most affected by failing systems, and using them as guides to create new and innovative solutions that hold people, process, and planet as essential design elements for this time.

The book is organized around seven elements, beginning with essays demonstrating places in which design thinking is invisible and how it can be made visible. Each part opens with an introduction followed by three chapters about that topic. Individual chapters use history and stories to reveal aspects of how design can transform dysfunctional areas in any system.

Fisher's unique and futuristic perspectives conclude with an introspective look at the beliefs that inform mechanical and societal design. Redesigned beliefs build

capacities for rethinking and reorganizing new outcomes of our systems. Use of informed, whole-system design of both the visible structures and invisible infrastructures holds the promise of creating a better future. The intent is to shift the "dark matter" or invisible drivers supporting or not supporting life into powerful, inclusive, life-giving redesigns.

Fisher begins with an analysis of logic as the basis of design, outlined in the familiar deductive and inductive types commonly used in science, social science, and mathematics, as well as a third type, abductive logic. Fisher builds on the 19th-century philosophies of Charles Sanders Pierce, by introducing the idea that design must use abductive logic to truly understand any subject. Using Pierce's analysis, Fisher explains the importance of including design thinking in any process to solve for unmet needs, inequalities, and disparities in products, environments, and services.

Abductive logic is the missing link. According to Fisher, this third logic is the unconventional solution to the problems that plague us. Each type of logic has its place and function in the human thinking process:

- Deductive logic proves that something must be.
- Inductive logic shows that something actually is.
- Abductive logic suggests that something may be. (Fisher, 2016, p. 21)

Using all three types of logic makes possible designs that reaggregate the invisible reality of our segregated and separated world. Through abductive logic, historic data is analyzed to draw diagrams of what is, for the purpose of identifying what isn't that should be. Visualizations emerge as well as insights and intuitions engaging hypothetical scenarios for prototyping new ideas. Through an iterative inquiry and test process, holistic design applications change perceptions, and new ideas become the basis of creativity and innovation for designing a better world.

Examples of abductive design thinking success stories are sprinkled throughout the book, pointing to a need to teach creative design thinking at all levels, to our youth and our leaders. The anthology encourages us to rethink design holistically in several areas for transformative results:

EDUCATION

Fisher argues for the addition of design education for K-12 students to foster creativity. Inclusion of design in curriculum engages youth to learn to become active, contributing citizens who will one day be informed community leaders. The final chapter in this section moves the discourse into higher education for the engagement of all minds as stakeholders. We must begin seeing students as future innovators designing a more socially just, environmentally sustainable, and economically equitable future.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Fracture-critical problems are the invisible underground of understated elements that run behind the scenes. Fisher looks into the conversation about more and more infrastructure development, asking, how much is enough? He encourages us to think about living differently as partners with our environment, which is showing stress related to an overtaxed world of finite resources, and discusses possible solutions to managing terrorism by discovering vulnerabilities.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Fisher describes the history and grueling challenges of public health. He suggests ways in which design thinking can be applied to aspects of expanding environmental issues, including access to clean water, food security, and the spread of disease in an era of transcontinental travel. He argues for the application of virtue ethics to create

relationships with nature so that we consciously and respectfully work with and care for Earth, our home.

POLITICS

Reframing the political tradition of oppositional thinking that creates the familiar, ineffective, and immovable gridlock that hampers change is paramount. Fisher references Roger Martin's concept of "opposable" thinking, the ability to hold the tension of two opposing ideas at the same time, as the antidote to our polarized politics (p.44). Taking a nuanced approach helps politicians mature as true servant leaders by developing capacities for looking at several solutions at once. "Not in my backyard" (or NIMBYism), can be mitigated using design thinking in order to see potential developments through many eyes using a diverse and inclusive democratic community planning approach.

The section ends with an appeal to apply aesthetics as a tool for seeing the simplicity inside complexity when developing integrated environments. Designing for beauty elicits emotions that can be leveraged as a means to move beyond seeing only the bottom line or recent polling results. Aesthetic designs look toward community values and people's shared experiences as reasons for changing beliefs and worldviews, and developing partnership behaviors.

ECONOMICS

Similar to his claims about the existing designs of our education and political systems, Fisher discusses the ineffectiveness of our current economic system for the majority of people. He recalls the ideas of Adam Smith and warns that our current capitalist economics have strayed far from their original intention.

Chapter two focuses on Jeremy Rifkin's ideas about what the workforce will require to support the trends of an emerging 21st Century economy. The section concludes

with an exploration of the social psychology of designing a metasystem focused first on providing for basic human needs, while maintaining regard for its impact on the planet.

BELIEFS

In this section Fisher takes a look at the current unsustainable circumstances and provides nine points to consider to shift harmful cultural beliefs and behaviors, including competition, power, dominance, and elitism, toward creating resilient communities. He touches on human hubris and promotes collaboration with nature.

Finally, Fisher challenges us to evolve as a species that organizes itself spatially, as part of the whole ecosystem. His hope is that by adopting new belief systems and reflective behaviors, the human race may learn how to act in ways that join us with all living organisms. We can redesign ourselves in ways that co-exist and align with the great interconnected web of life.

Designing Our Way to a Better World identifies many ways to reimagine, reshape, and re-aggregate our complex, interconnected world. Fisher's call to action employs integrated geodesign as a methodology for saving ourselves and our planet from imminent demise due to its current inadequate design, which is void of holistic thinking. He covers a broad spectrum of systems and institutions ripe for a design renaissance.

Fisher is one of many brilliant visionaries calling for deep, systemic, transformative change. Fisher advocates for change by way of design thinking - teaching it, learning from it, and creating with it. Everyone who toils to discover a better world in the realms of education, public health, economics, politics, and every other imaginable facet of daily life will benefit from looking at their world through the design genius of Thomas Fisher.

References

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Vicki O'Day, MA is a collaborative consultant with 20 years of leadership experience in financial services, organizational development, community organizing, program management, and futures learning. As a human potential coach, she designs and facilitates behavioral science programs promoting capacity building for change leaders. Vicki works in partnership with the School of Nursing as Coordinator of the MN Next System Project, which is a community and campus conversation for innovating healthy communities. She values learning with others how to imagine, design, and create resilient futures for themselves, their communities, and our shared home, planet Earth. Vicki is a board member of Northland Sustainable Solutions, a local non-profit that promotes inclusion of Native American values and culture for environmental education. She also serves on the leadership team of Communities of the Future 2.0. Correspondence about this article should be directed to Vicki at vicki@vickioday.com