
Book Review

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Ruined by Design: How Designers Destroyed the World, and What We Can Do to Fix It
by: Mike Monteiro with a foreword by Vivianne Castillo
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This book deals with the ethical dimensions associated with the design profession. Right from the Introduction, *Ruined by Design* confronts the reader with the destructive power of design through several hypothetical scenarios, which Monteiro calls ‘horrible things’ (p.9). Some of these scenarios are: rising sea levels due to melting of the icecaps in Greenland, Silicon Valley lobbying for the illegalisation of women or privacy breaches at a planetary scale. These scenarios are well within the realm of possibility, Monteiro claims, and one must admit that they are at least imaginable. For Monteiro, they are possible because that is how designers designed the world. Either inadvertently or knowingly, designers have designed the world to behave as it is now: “the world is on its way to ruin and it’s happening by design” (p.10). This is the central argument in Monteiro’s commentary on the current state of design.

The book is divided into three parts preceded by an introduction and a code of ethics, which was posted by Monteiro (2017) on his website a few years ago. The first part offers an exploration of ways in which designers ruin the world, either by action or inaction. Most of his examples are based on digital products and services such as Facebook, Twitter or Amazon. The discussion of the nefarious effects of digital technologies and companies will be accessible to most readers, even to those unfamiliar with the ins and outs of digital products and services.

In the second part, Monteiro aims to offer a set of solutions – a toolbox – and help the reader do the ‘right thing’ (p.10) in an environment that is often not only not amicable to ethical behaviour but, in fact, facilitates wrong doing. He discusses issues such as working in teams, and how to persuade others and make a case for ideas that are conducive to doing the job ethically.

The third part deals with the communal aspects of design. In these chapters, he makes a case for the need to develop and keep a design community that takes care of people and goes beyond learning and socialising. This is followed by a defence of professional organisations and a call for mandatory licensing for designers.

Ruined by Design is “for everyone who designs things, whether they claim the title or not” (p.11). Monteiro acknowledges the great influence of Papanek (1984, p.3), who notoriously stated that “all men¹ are designers.” Monteiro, without going that far, is still

very lenient. Directly speaking to those who have an impact on the final design either by defining product strategy, functionality or by managing budgets, he argues: “[i]f you’re affecting how a product works in any way whatsoever – you’re designing” (p.11). It must be noted, however, that it does not follow from this that *everyone* is a designer. It can be assumed that Monteiro – who identifies himself as a user experience (UX) designer by trade – believes that designers do constitute a distinct professional group. This much becomes clear from his discussion of the design community and the need for professional regulation.

Monteiro offers a furious but also hopeful declaration of principles – with plenty of anger and foul language – about the social role of designers and the way they ought to carry out their activities ethically. The vehemence and the urgency with which he summarises the designer’s role, dismisses any possible confusion about his outlook on the nature of designers’ ethical obligations. For Monteiro, a designer is a ‘gatekeeper’, i.e., somebody who protects the public from being harmed and mistreated, and delivers products that are at least not detrimental to society. Designers are not to be mere ‘hired hands’ or ‘pixelpushers’ who carry out orders (p.24).

Ruined by Design is not an academic book. References to current or past literature are almost non-existent. Whilst there is a succinct ‘Further-reading’ section at the end of the book, it includes no titles that could be characterised as full-fledged design or ethics books other than Papanek’s (1984) *Design for the Real World*. It must be acknowledged that Monteiro explicitly mentions that he did not want to write a ‘dry and academic book’ (p.12). Fair enough. After all, the reader he envisions would not read that book, he writes. Designers, he posits, would not read boring moral philosophy books. “There’s a reason everybody hates moral philosophy professors: they write incredibly boring books!” (p.13), he lambasts.

A major conceptual flaw

Readers of this review who are familiar with (some) of the vast literature that exists on the topic of design, technology and ethics would probably beg to differ with Monteiro’s views on the subject of readability. It is true that some philosophers’ and ethicists’ writings are obscure, but many books on design and ethics are still widely read. And they are read not only by scholars but also by designers. Some of those books are even read by students in different design schools. One could think of the recent scholarly works produced by a wide range of thinkers and educators such as Ezio Manzini, Sheila Jasanoff, Peter-Paul Verbeek, Shannon Vallor, or Arturo Escobar, among many others. Their works are not the 800-page ‘moral philosophy books’ Monteiro ridicules, they are sophisticated and often very readable works that deal with many of the very themes Mike Monteiro aims to address. It is unreasonable to dismiss them, however boring they might be.

This should not be taken as a straw man attack. Even if Monteiro is wrong about the nature of academic books, the view he puts forward about the degree of control, impact and responsibility designers have on the designed world may well be sound nonetheless.

But it is not.

That this view is flawed is important because it serves as the main premises upon which his book is grounded. First, the thesis that the material world, as it is, is the result of design and that designers have designed the world to behave as it is behaving. Second,

that given the gloomy state of the world, it was designers who ruined it because they could and should have prevented it by designing things differently.

The philosopher of technology, Ihde (2008, p.51) speaks of the ‘designer fallacy’, “the notion that a designer can design into a technology, its purposes and uses.” Ihde (1999) also coined the notion of ‘multistability’ to refer to the different trajectories of use any design product can have. One can use a hammer to hit a nail, which is presumably one of its intended uses, but a hammer can also become a piece of art when used by an artist as expressive material. Evidently, it could also be used as a murder weapon or to crack nuts.

To complicate matters further, the consumption, adoption and use of products is known to be not a passive act but a dynamic process through which people engage with products in ways other than those intended – or foreseen – by designers. This issue has been explored by many sociologists, historians of technology and anthropologists (see, e.g., Bijker et al., 2012; Latour, 1999; Miller, 1987). All technologies always exceed the intent of the designer, as they display many more possibilities than those originally intended. These possibilities are thus neither fully determined by the designer nor even by the properties of the product itself, but by users and practices embedded in specific cultural and political contexts.

Monteiro’s view is too simplistic: a designer-god that designs products or services that behave as intended. If these products or services are unethical or if they bring about negative consequences, it is the designer’s fault and they are to blame. He writes (p.30):

“The world isn’t broken. It’s working exactly as it was designed to work. And we’re the ones who designed it. Which means we fucked up.”

This seems to be an implausible claim. Let us consider the design of cars to explore it further. Cars cause (and have caused) pollution. They injure and kill people. They are also a contributing factor for the appearance of suburban sprawl, which has profound negative social and environmental effects. Furthermore, as Jane Jacobs famously argued, cars are a contributing factor towards making cities less habitable. This is no news, many scholars linked car culture to environmental and urban degradation (e.g., Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2017; McNeill, 2014). But while agreeing to the environmental devastation cars cause, it is also reasonable to argue that it is not obvious who should be blamed for the situation. Some sceptics could, moreover, even question if somebody should be blamed at all. Besides, the effects of car emissions on the environment were not discovered until years after the mass adoption of cars, which makes them a clear-cut case of the so-called *unintended consequences*.

Monteiro writes, “that’s how we designed the world. We designed the combustion engine that led to global warming” (p.9). Designers did that? Really? Is it that simple? Many people were involved as well as designers: policy makers, car sellers, car drivers, people from the oil industry, advertisers, rubber producers, etc. All of them got some chance to embed their own norms and values in cars. Singling out designers greatly overestimates their influence on the actual development of material culture.

Simon (1996, p.114), in an often-quoted passage, wrote that design “is concerned with how things ought to be.” Monteiro would probably agree with this, as he ceaselessly tries to show that designers have great influence on how people live their lives. Designers, however, are not the only ones that get to instil their normative views in the things they design. Many others are involved in the design and development of material

culture as well: not everyone involved herein is a designer. If designers did ruin the world, they did not do it on their own.

For Monteiro, being a designer “isn’t about helping Nike sell shoes. It’s about making sure everyone has shoes” (p.208). To require this would surely be too demanding. No single profession can meet such high demands.

This, however, does not entail that designers have no individual responsibility. One can see beyond the designer fallacy, accept that designs are multistable and that technologies are socially construed, and still allow for individual responsibility.

Of course, designers can be at fault and do wrong intentionally. Monteiro discusses a good example: Volkswagen’s *Dieseldgate*, a scandal involving 11 million cars which were fitted with a ‘defeat device’ that would engage in full emissions control during regulatory testing in the USA but not on real roads. The cheating device worked indeed as designed. It was not an unintended consequence: cheating was the goal of the design.

True, perhaps we do not need Kant, Bentham or Aristotle to remind us that it is wrong to cheat the public and to knowingly contribute to damaging people’s health by emitting dangerously high levels of pollutants. But the scholarly literature Monteiro so adamantly dismisses as dry, boring and academic can help us stipulate a more modest and plausible role for designers. Designers have the skill to deal with the world’s intrinsic epistemic complexities and uncertainties, but they are no gods. Fully foretelling the use and effects of design is impossible, and a designer cannot be responsible for everything. A more humane approach would be to accept these limits.

Monteiro states that designers “have the same responsibility as every other ordinary person in this planet” (p.14). This distributed allocation of responsibility, however, seems to contradict the singling out of designers as responsible for the state of the world, and especially, the very notion of being a gatekeeper. If designers are the gatekeepers, they do not have the same responsibility as non-designers. Due to their professional role, the former have the very distinct responsibility of protecting the latter.

There is another issue with the notion of being a gatekeeper. How must this be understood? Are designers individual gatekeepers or are they part of a professional corps of gatekeepers?

Manzini (2019, pp.52–54) argues that attributing *all* the responsibility to a single person is either paralyzing or leading to indifference. None of these states is conducive to ethical behaviour. So, at the individual level, the idea of gatekeeping seems to be fatally flawed. A possible way to rescue it is by considering gatekeeping a necessarily communal activity. Judging from the mood of the contents of the third part, perhaps this is what Monteiro had always in mind, but when he writes things like “your job is to be a gatekeeper” (p.124), it is not always straightforward to ascertain if he means it communally or individually.

A necessary conversation

Despite presenting an exaggerated view on the destructive capacity of designers, *Ruined by Design* makes some interesting contributions to the conversation around the ethical and political implications of design. First, the many examples, Monteiro provides make it clear that the design and development of products and services have great ethical relevance.

Second, his code of ethics (pp.19–24) also adds to the discussion on the ultimate purpose and value of the profession. To develop a code of ethics is a frequent way to

integrate ethics in a profession. Many authors (notably Ladd, 1998) have dismissed them from the outset for being vague, inconsistent and even detrimental to ethical autonomy. Even if that is true, and codes cannot guide designers, Monteiro's code can serve as a prompt for further reflection and discussion around design professional ethics.

Third, towards the end of the book, Monteiro goes full analytic philosopher mode introducing and rebutting many arguments against the professional licensing of designers (pp.199–204). He brushes off the arguments against regulations rather convincingly, but he fails to be persuasive at demonstrating that licensing would be a good enough solution for the ethical problems he identified in the previous chapters. Alas, due to the word limit, I cannot address in detail the valuable – and yet controversial – insights that Monteiro provides on this issue.

A last point to conclude. Almost in passing, Monteiro mentions that “[w]orking ethically is a skill, and it’s a skill that needs to be taught and then developed” (p.62). This is very important. No philosophy professor – and no 800-page moral philosophy book – can come from outside articulating detailed courses of action for designers to follow blindly. Reflectively engaging in deliberation from *within* the design practice is perhaps the best way of developing practical ethical expertise. Despite its many shortcomings, *Ruined by Design* is a further step in this indispensable exploration.

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Notes

- 1 Presumably, people of other genders too, one can imagine.