"*Design must fill current human needs before imagining new futures.*"

The transcript of the speech given for
the motion by Ahmed Ansari at the
MIT Media Lab Summit, 2015.

Debators: Ahmed Ansari, SZABIST (For)

              Jamer Hunt, The New School (Against)

Moderator: Paola Antonelli, The MOMA

I'd like to start off the debate by confessing that I've been feeling a kind of cognitive dissonance for the last few days. It feels a little weird to have been shooting in the dust and heat and crowds of Karachi just a few days ago, to move to the brief limbo of airport lounges, and finally to the pleasant, cool, and much less crowded streets of Boston. I always find that every time I come to America I have to make a sort of subtle mental switch. The slideshow I'm running here in the back should give you all a feel for the place I'm coming from.

So, my identity is like my city. My city is Anzaldua's 'mestiza' made concrete and rubble and stone. My city is the city being remade as large private enterprises crack and shatter the skeletons of a colonial past with their armies of steamrollers and cranes to pave the way for condos and shopping malls and overpasses - overpasses under which the homeless crowd under and sleep at night, malls that the working class is barred from entering, and condos and suburban housing schemes bordered by slums. My city is the city where the working class reclaims the parks and the beaches as the rest of society shutters itself within the security and comfort of air-conditioned malls, because middle class people can't walk on the street without the fear of getting robbed or shot. My city is the city where some of the oldest public hospitals service as many as 21,000 new patients every day, and you'll informal bazaars operating in between ENT and Epidemiology. My city is the city where 2000 people died in the first two days of a massive heat-wave last week, among the first wave of casualties to global climate change, and where thousands of citizens mobilized and shouldered the responsibilities of supplying overcrowded hospitals and clinics with water, ice, and medicines when the government failed to act and the clergy was still exhorting people to keep fasting in the heat.

My city is a fractured city, schizophrenic, in a culture that can't decide whether it identifies as South Asian or Middle Eastern, that struggles with negotiating and reconciling its Islamic identity with the forces of globalization and modernity and the cultural hegemony of the West. My city is a city where order and design emerges, if only briefly, out of chaos. My city is a city of scales so immense and complexities so intricate that they truly deserve the title of 'wicked'.

I think I don't need to drive home the point anymore that where I come from, we are already balanced on a knife's edge - the existential threats to humanity that have become a staple trope of dystopian design futuring are a perceptible and concrete thing instead of existing in the abstract for us. For myself and my comrades and students back home, extremes in unpredictable climate, the rise of ethnic and religious fascism, the increasing takeover of public spaces and institutions by corporations, the shrinking space for radical politics and intellectual debate, the growing gap between the working class and the elite, growing populations that are already massive: these are not some semi-distant futures or theoretical exercises, where problems have yet to be discovered, framed, explored, and turned into prescriptions and provocations - we are already living these futures as part of our everyday lived experience. The crises in design in the Global North are the crises of the abstract framed as possibilities, as opportunities, as futures. Our crises in the Global South are the crises of the concrete present; our challenge is to wrest from the present the agency to both imagine futures and to design them.

So it any surprise that my students, colleagues and I should find the kind of futuring that happens within critical design projects somewhat frivolous? In the interests of time, I think I should cut straight to the chase: I will now quickly outline three problems that I see embodied in the critical design enterprise.

The first is what I see as the artificial separation in critical design discourse between futuring and problem solving. This is a false distinction. All acts of poeisis, of making, reconfigure and change our reality, enabling certain future arrangements and shutting down others. The claim that critical designers make that problem-solving designers are not explicitly involved in the act of imagining alternative political, social, and economic arrangements is misplaced – in fact, these speculations are critical to discussions in classrooms that I teach in, when conversations on how to prevent clientism and voter fraud turn into larger debates around whether democracy is even the most viable form of government for a feudal, hierarchical society and whether we would not be served better by socialism or some other political system. In this sense, I think, the enemy of critical design is not the kind of problem solving design that deals with wicked systems, but the kind of suffocating, cookie cutter work of designers slaved to corporate enterprise or 'solutionist' approaches to design undertaken by engineers or computer scientists where technologies are developed first and then retrofitted into existing problems.

My second critique concerns the nature of the critical design project. The vast majority of work that we see represented in publications has a particular kind of flavor to it: the project of critical design is driven, by and large, by aesthetic, rather than political, concerns and questions. That question so important to critical designers, "what if", is very different from the question that so many designers grappling with wicked systems ask, which is, "how else". "How else" emphasizes a connection to current systems and structures where the principal project is framed not as an aesthetic, exploratory, intellectual exercise but as a political, transformative, active enterprise. Even projects that play around with ideology and politics, like Dunne and Raby's United MicroKingdoms, deal only with representing specific kinds of extending ethical debates that polarize the avante garde of the international scientific community into the realm of the political, and thus seem closer to the science fictions of Huxley or Le Guin than as prescriptions or directives for reimagining's of real systems today. If the critical project claims that it can, and I quote, "inspire us to imagine that things could be radically different than they are today", then I see little evidence that this kind of radical reimagining is rooted in an understanding of the today.

Which brings me to my last point: critical design is not sufficiently critical or imaginative. Its provocations reflect the fears, anxieties, desires, imaginaries, and ultimately, politics of an intellectual, liberal progressive white middle class that believes in the promise and purity of technological progress. At their worst, projects claim to be apolitical, vested as they are in purely aesthetic preoccupations; at best, they acknowledge a link to real issues without committing themselves explicitly to any political program of action. Critical design fails to recognize that all design, even design that claims political neutrality, is a form of frozen politics, that the material is always committed to a political agenda even when it does not claim to be. How often do critical designers acknowledge the role that their own class, race, and gender privileges, their ideological commitments play in shaping their own work?

Provocations are only provocative within a certain context - remove them from that context, and they cease being provocations. This cannot be truer when my students look at slides of critical design work in class and ask me: is this what white people find provocative? They find some projects cool, some weird, some simplistic and some outlandish in their tall claims, but certainly not provocative in the sense that I think critical designers mean them to be. And they are acutely aware of something very important that is missing in these projects – the futures that they see in slideshows and on the internet are futures that have no recognition of them and no place for them - again, we are relegated to the sidelines, we are the subalterns of design.

So I ask:

Where is there any kind of understanding of futures in a sense larger than aesthetic explorations surrounding emerging technologies? Where is there an understanding of futures as not only local, but global, connected to a world that is increasingly interconnected and interdependent? Whose futures are we creating? Have any critical designers thought about who will make the stuff in the futures they propose? About the millions of people laboring in sweatshops and factories to produce those futures for an affluent West? How the futures of millions are foreclosed when your futures open up? Where is the acknowledgement that any kind of future imagining that we need to indulge in must needs deal with global inequality, new forms of colonialism, and the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism? Where are the missing masses whom critical designers do not address? Hell, where are all the colored, the queer, the feminist, the working class people in critical design?

I live in a city, and I live in times far more interesting, complex, and thought provoking than any fictional future that critical designers have to offer. For myself and my colleagues, the future suggests itself in the contours of the problems and crises that we face every day in the problems of the present – the future is fluid and complex, it is open, not bound by any particular taste regime, it is political and bound up with the project of our emancipation and freedom. For us, futuring is critical because futuring is the way forward dealing with the critical problems of the now.

Thank you.

Ahmed Ansari,
July 16th, 2015