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The Role of Design and Designers in the Reality of the 21st Century

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Abstract

In the rapidly evolving global economy, the role of designers has shifted beyond aesthetics and functionality to encompass social, economic, and ethical dimensions. This article explores the multifaceted responsibilities of contemporary designers, analyzing their impact on corporate structures, sustainability, and cultural shifts. Drawing insights from Klaudia Grzesik's dissertation on "Spiritual Capitalism and the Vision of a Designer in the Corporate System," Academy of Art in Szczecin 2024, written under the supervision of M. Klein, this paper delves into the tensions between creativity and economic constraints, as well as the transformative potential of design in addressing modern societal challenges.

Keywords: Design, Designer, ethic, capitalism

1. Introduction

In the contemporary corporate landscape, designers navigate an intricate interplay between creativity, economic pressures, and personal well-being. The capitalist system, deeply entrenched in principles of productivity and profit maximization, increasingly integrates elements of spirituality and mindfulness as tools for enhancing worker efficiency and psychological resilience. This phenomenon, termed "capitalist spirituality," raises fundamental questions about the designer's role within the corporate framework and the ethical implications of intertwining spiritual practices with market-driven objectives.

This article builds upon the critical analysis presented in Klaudia Grzesik's dissertation (master thesis, 2024, supervision M.Klein), which explores the designer's evolving vision in the context of corporate capitalism. It examines how the pursuit of inner peace intersects

with systemic pressures, questioning whether contemporary design practices can maintain authenticity and ethical integrity within a commercialized environment. By critically assessing the adaptation of mindfulness and self-development techniques within corporate structures, this study investigates the extent to which these practices serve as genuine self-improvement tools or mere mechanisms for sustaining productivity.

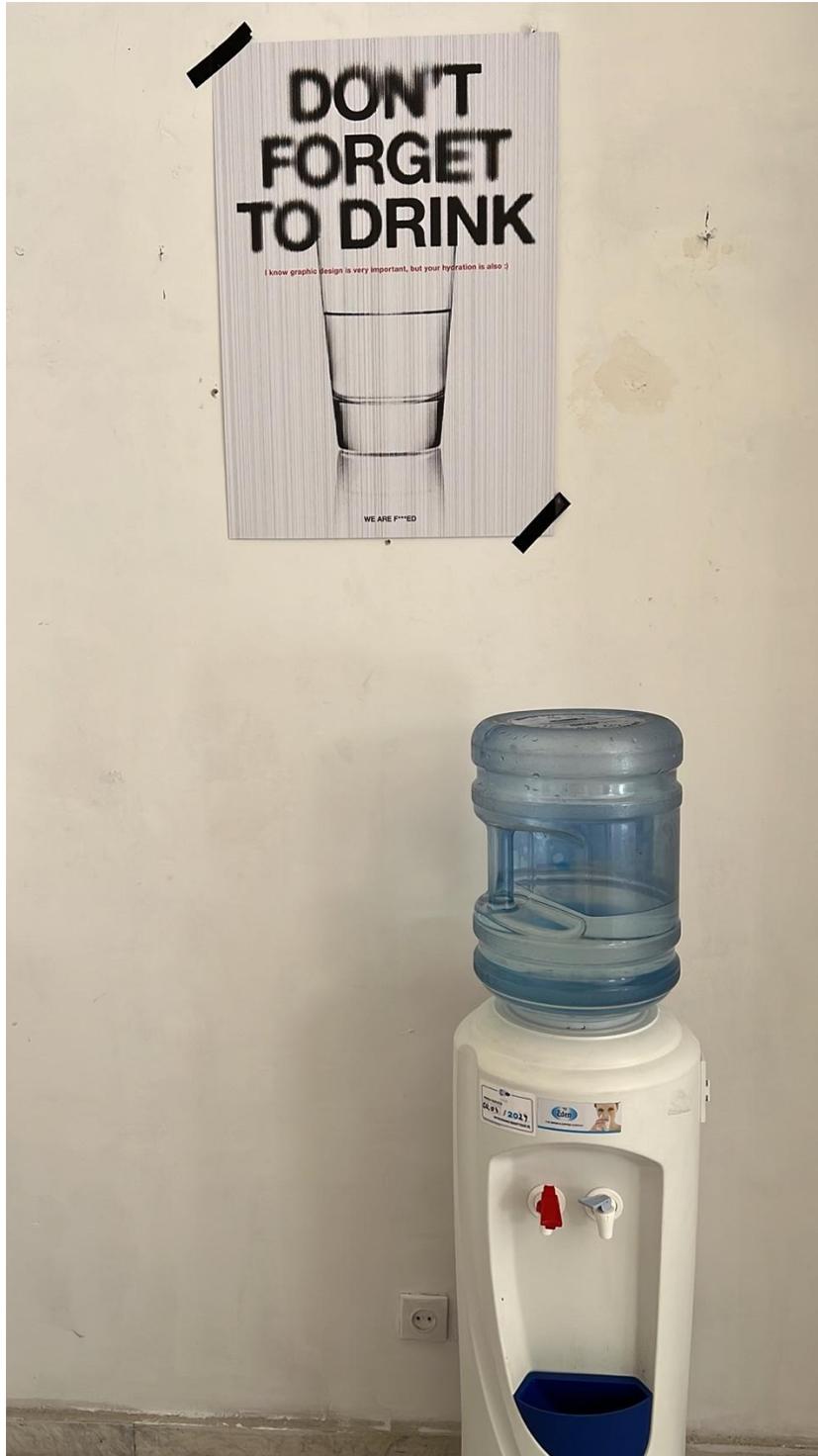
Furthermore, this work addresses the designer's transition from the academic "design bubble" to the reality of the corporate world, highlighting the emotional and psychological challenges inherent in this shift. It explores how systemic constraints shape creative expression and the potential for alternative paradigms that prioritize both professional fulfillment and societal impact. Through this inquiry, the article aims to contribute to the broader discourse on design ethics, capitalist influence on creative industries, and the potential for reclaiming agency in a system that increasingly commodifies well-being.

2. Opinion

The contemporary world presents designers with a paradox: while they are celebrated as innovators, they also navigate corporate pressures that often compromise creative freedom. Designers operate within a system that commodifies creativity, yet their work holds the power to shape user experiences, influence consumer behavior, and contribute to social change. Their role extends beyond crafting visually appealing products to fostering meaningful interactions between people, technology, and culture (Fleischmann, 2020).

Designers nowadays are deeply integrated into corporate structures, where their skills are leveraged to strengthen brand identity and enhance market competitiveness. Design Thinking—an approach based on empathy, ideation, and iterative problem-solving—has become a key strategy for business innovation (Han, 2022). In the context of design's value, it is worth mentioning the design ladder, a model describing various levels of design's impact on organizations and products. At the lowest rung, design is treated merely as an aesthetic enhancement that improves the appearance of a product. At higher levels, design becomes a crucial tool for enhancing usability and functionality, and ultimately—at the highest level—it becomes an integral part of business strategy, shaping organizational culture and the company's operating model (Danish Design Centre, 2001).

Apple, Google, and IKEA have reached the highest level of this ladder, where design not only defines their products but also influences user experience, marketing strategy, and competitive advantage. This approach demonstrates that conscious design management can be a key success factor in today's market (Han, 2022). However, this alignment with corporate goals often places designers in a complex position. They must balance creativity with economic profitability, adapting their vision to profit-driven motivations. The pressure to create commercially successful products can lead to ethical dilemmas, especially when sustainability and social responsibility are sidelined in favor of short-term gains (Greenfield, 2023).



Picture 1. K. Grzesiak master's exhibition 2024 photo: M.Klein

Designers are not merely intermediaries of consumption—they have a significant influence on cultural narratives and user behaviors. In the era of climate crisis and social inequalities,

their ethical responsibility is crucial. Sustainable design practices, such as using eco-friendly materials and circular economy principles, have gained importance as a response to environmental challenges (Greenfield, 2023). Beyond ecological concerns, designers also play a role in shaping more inclusive societies. Universal design principles ensure that products and services are accessible to diverse user groups, including people with disabilities and marginalized communities. Inclusive design goes beyond basic accessibility; it aims to create environments that accommodate various needs and abilities. Designing for all means not only eliminating barriers but also actively creating solutions that enhance comfort and quality of life for a wide range of users (Microsoft Design, 2025).

Modern technologies provide designers with the ability to implement solutions that make the digital world more inclusive. Accessible digital interfaces, such as websites and mobile applications compliant with WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines), allow blind, deaf, or mobility-impaired users to interact with digital tools on equal terms with others. Examples of such solutions include:

- Voice-command navigation and screen readers for visually impaired users.
- Captions and video transcriptions to facilitate content consumption for the deaf community.
- High-contrast modes and text enlargement options for users with limited visual perception.
- Interactive interfaces designed for people with neurological disorders, e.g., eliminating flashing elements that may trigger epileptic seizures (Interaction Design Foundation, 2024).

Beyond the digital world, ergonomic urban planning plays a crucial role in ensuring accessibility in public spaces. Cities are increasingly implementing inclusive urbanism principles, which include:

- Curb-free sidewalks and wide pedestrian crossings, facilitating movement for wheelchair users and parents with strollers.
- Public transport stops and vehicles adapted for people with mobility impairments, featuring low-floor buses and both visual and auditory information systems.
- Public spaces designed to be friendly for older adults and individuals on the autism spectrum, with rest areas, quiet zones, and intuitive navigation (Appolloni et al., 2020).

Contemporary design also considers the needs of cultural minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, and economically disadvantaged groups. Examples include:

- Workspaces designed to foster diversity, such as gender-neutral restrooms and rest areas accommodating different working styles.

- Products tailored for individuals with various physical abilities, such as ergonomically shaped utensils and kitchen tools that facilitate use for people with arthritis.
- Educational materials and spaces adapted to different learning styles, such as audiovisual content for individuals who learn better through listening and watching rather than reading (Design Council, 2025).

One of the key insights from Grzesik's work, "Spiritual Capitalism and the Vision of a Designer in the Corporate System," written under the supervision of M. Klein, is the transition from the academic "design bubble" to the realities of corporate work. Many young designers enter the industry with idealistic aspirations, based also on above mentioned examples but encounter rigid frameworks that limit their creative autonomy. The clash between personal values and business expectations often leads to professional dissatisfaction and ethical conflicts (Wheatman, 2020; Tsenova, 2024).

However, designers have the potential to challenge the status quo. By promoting human-centered solutions and questioning exploitative market practices, they can become agents of change within organizations (Mulder & Magni, 2022). The growing number of independent design studios and socially driven startups illustrates an alternative path where designers reclaim their creative freedom (Huerta, 2021).



Picture 2.3 K. Grzesiak master's exhibition 2024 photo: M.Klein

The future of design depends on its ability to adapt to global challenges while preserving its fundamental purpose—enhancing human experiences. Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and biomimicry, open new horizons for innovation. However, designers must use these tools responsibly, ensuring that technology serves humanity rather than deepens existing inequalities (Tremosa, 2024; LetterSiro, 2025).

Interdisciplinary collaboration is becoming increasingly vital. Designers now work alongside scientists, engineers, and policymakers to develop comprehensive solutions for complex problems (Liu, 2024; Anderson, 2023). This trend calls for a rethinking of design education, emphasizing critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and adaptability (Ericson, 2021; Bathla et al., 2025).

The role of designers in today's world is dynamic and constantly evolving. While corporate structures impose limitations, designers have the power to shape reality. By embracing ethical principles, promoting sustainable practices, and engaging in cross-sector collaboration, they can redefine their profession as a force for positive transformation (Peters, 2021). As Grzesik's study suggests, the key challenge lies in balancing creative integrity with systemic realities—a task that requires resilience, vision, and a commitment to innovation.

3. Conclusion

The role of designers in the contemporary world is dynamic and evolving. While corporate structures impose constraints, designers possess the agency to drive meaningful change. By embracing ethical considerations, advocating for sustainable practices, and engaging in cross-disciplinary collaborations, they can redefine their profession as a force for positive transformation. As Grzesik's research suggests, the key challenge lies in balancing creative integrity with systemic realities—a task that requires resilience, vision, and a commitment to innovation. The exhibition and theoretical contributions by Grzesik represent a powerful statement and protest from the emerging generation, voicing their opposition to the commercial exploitation of artistic design. It challenges the disconnect between academic idealism and real-world practices, where everything revolves around being faster, more efficient, stronger, and cheaper - all in pursuit of maximum profit. The images showcased in this article embody this protest and declaration. They form part of Grzesik's exhibition and highlight the superficial nature of corporate concern for employees and designers.

The messages reading *Don't Forget to Drink* appear to promote wellbeing and health consciousness, but they raise a crucial question: Is this genuine human compassion, or merely a strategy to maintain worker productivity and efficiency? These poster series embodies the younger generation's manifesto, expressing their resistance against how consumerism and capitalism dehumanize individuals. It stands as a bold critique of a system that prioritizes productivity over genuine human welfare

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