

Written Response

Methods of Contextualising

For this assignment, our group centred our enquiry on the prompt of space and scale, shaped by our diverse geographical and design backgrounds. My interest converged with the group's focus on 'affordability' as a factor in who can access sustainability, and how this can be scaled from individual to institution, from local to global, and from small gestures to large-scale impact. Early in our discussions, we referred to *Who Can Afford to be Critical?* by Alfonso Matos, which framed affordability to include time, labour, access, and, most strikingly, structural privilege. This became a hinge concept that guided our process.

'Affordability' first took form in a 'chessboard' exploration, where different 'chess strategies' mapped the power structures underpinning sustainability discourse. However, this framework became too broad, limiting our ability to critically unpack the depth of inequities. While still wanting to explore systems that have disproportionate ecological reverberations across different scales, we were confronted by the irony of graphic design frequently reinforcing accelerated capitalist systems through excess advertising, extraction, and material production. This prompted us to reconsider our own role within these structures and ask how design could be used to subvert, rather than reproduce, these conditions. Speculative Design allowed us to challenge the present by projecting futures through (in our case) illustrative storytelling that expose the consequences of our current trajectory (Neeley, 2024). Within this storytelling system, affordability could be transposed across economic, ecological, and ethical registers.

Using speculative illustration, we imagined alternative, self-contained worlds structured around waste: a London governed by a progressive left-wing party, a world without war and landfill, and, in my case, a "Post-Internet" world explored across institutional, urban, and global scales. My iteration was informed by Patricia MacCormack's *Cosmogenic Acceleration: Futurity and Ethics*, which proposes a cosmogenic future where the human is decentered in favour of ecological ethics (MacCormack, 2015). In an inequitable, anthropocentric world, fairness is difficult to enact without reorienting what we value. This essay helped me consider climate justice beyond an anthropogenic focus and foreground questions of who bears the cost of systemic change.

Working in a group made it challenging to sustain focused depth in the enquiry across different 'worlds'. Time constraints and dominant voices

led the final output to feel fragmented and unresolved. Yet the process itself held merit: it functioned as a workshop of perspectives, where alternative futures could be collectively imagined, communicated, and tested through graphic design, reframing where affordability sits within diverse and scalable conversations on climate justice.

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References:

MacCormack, P. (2015). Cosmogenic Acceleration: Futurity and Ethics. In: J. Aranda, B.K. Wood and A. Vidokle, eds., *The Internet Does Not Exist*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, pp.299–313.

Matos, A. (2022). *Who Can Afford to Be Critical?* Set Margins' Publications.

Neeley, J.P. (2024). *What is Speculative Design?* [online] www.critical.design. Available at: <https://www.critical.design/post/what-is-speculative-design>.

Annotated Bibliography

Calvino, I. (1972). *Invisible Cities*. London Vintage

Design Practice / Reading List / Other Readings

Invisible Cities is fiction that floats varied interpretations, through world-building, and semantically returns to the same theme of desire and memory of human nature that construct these complex systems. For this project, *Invisible Cities* is a reference for execution of storytelling - almost literally - where experiences blurring reality and fiction shape the collective imagination of a place, in the form of thought experiments - the 'what ifs?'. The text scales intimate, personal observations to planetary perspectives, demonstrating how small shifts reverberate across larger systems. This device was directly applicable to our enquiry into scale. It grounded our approach to imagining new worlds emerging from a shared conceptual starting point, rather than dispersing into unrelated fantastical ones. It helped us reinforce the idea that spaces (physical and mental) are dynamic and constructed through perception, imagination, and relationships across scale, which is translated in our speculative illustrations, where interrelated and layered networks build the image of a 'what if', holding multiple scales in tension at once.

Dunne, A. and Raby, F. (2013). *Speculative Everything : Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. MIT Press.

Design Practice / Reading / Other Readings

In Chapter 05 'A Methodological Playground' of *Speculative Everything*, the authors discuss the state of the fictional playgrounds within which these speculations are embedded and evolving. There is often a lot of anxiety around speculating future utopias and dystopias (considering both often lead to disastrous extremities, and neither can truly exist) - it was an important point to reflect on during the process as speculative design often runs the risk of being more fantastical than critical. It was important for me to create a world, in my speculative vision, that allowed for both upsides and downsides of new systems. *Speculative Everything* elaborates on 'critical science fiction', where political and social possibilities are emphasised above all, and alternate realities seek to aid critique of our own world through contrast (Dunne, 2013, pp. 57).

Holmes, B., Freek Lomme and Bureau (2013). *An Atlas of Agendas.*

Design Practice / Reading / Other Readings

An Atlas of Agendas serves as a visualisation of a network of dependencies. The reference uses “visualizations of interests and relations that re-articulate the dominant symbolic order and actualize existing structures that otherwise remain concealed and unknown.” (Holmes, 2013) This was an important connection for my group’s project, except, reconfiguring the framework to create new relationships using pre-existing datapoints and converging them with systems that differ in scale (eg. what happens to geopolitical relationships if waste can no longer be externalised?)

For our project, the key idea was to create new scenarios by connecting different networks of dependencies, resulting in newer outcomes than merely exposing incriminated systems that quietly run in the background.

MacCormack, P. (2015). *Cosmogenic Acceleration: Futurity and Ethics.* In: **J. Aranda, B.K. Wood and A. Vidokle, eds.,** *The Internet Does Not Exist.* Berlin: Sternberg Press, pp.299–313.

Design Practice / Reading List / Other References

Perhaps one of my strongest references in this process; As the group dispersed to work on their specific speculative worlds, I chose to work with a ‘Post-Internet’ scenario, working off MacCormack’s essay on Cosmogenic Acceleration from *The Internet Does Not Exist*. For me, understanding Cosmogenic Acceleration is preceded by elaborating on ‘Acceleration’ - and ‘Accelerated’ aesthetics, ones that create a sense of speed and future, consume the ‘present’ in lieu of what tomorrow might look like, create a broken sense of progress without considering its ramifications. Graphic design is complicit, in the mainstream, to create hypertechnological images of a near future, and a lot of speculative art also contributes to that vision. I wanted to envision a different future, even in a ‘post-internet’ world, and Cosmogenic Acceleration served as a good starting point. Cosmogenic Ethics prioritise the ecology, a much-larger scale that supercedes not only space, but also inevitably, time. In this world, humans are deprioritised - perhaps one of the most contentious notions within its approach. Is the anthropocene even capable of envisioning a real future where they are not relevant? What would be the point of reference in that scale? I was excited to explore these ideas in my work, stemming from the concept of the texts.

Matos, A. (2022). *Who Can Afford to Be Critical? Set Margins’ Publications.*

Design Practice / Reading List / Other Readings

‘*Who Can Afford to Be Critical?*’ helped our group to the expand on the definition of ‘affording’, and how affordability is a prominent factor when assessing access to criticality in an intellectual sense, but also in being able

to critically engage in minoritarian practices, such as radical sustainability. We imagined futures where massive systemic changes were already in place, and it was our next step, to reverse-engineer those changes and place who is the one paying the cost of these changes and who is unable to afford it. 'Affording' took on a bigger meaning than economic. For eg, in my speculative world, I considered a transport network that had been deliberately slowed down to facilitate less waste generation- 'time' and 'accessibility' then became a new commodity that was subject to affordability. The book however, alludes to a hopeful approach: structural changes can be inconvenient, but also no structural change is dealt with in isolation, but instead with community that will further new solutions.

Superflux (2019). *Mitigation of Shock (London)*. [online] Superflux. Available at: <https://superflux.in/index.php/work/mitigation-of-shock/#>.

Design Practice / Reading / Other References

Mitigation of Shock is an installation piece conceived by Superflux that aims to make the forthcoming climate projections in the UK and Northern Ireland more tangible, by creating a experiential 'hyperobject', with temporal and spatial qualities that engages to absorb the viewer. The installation is a 'future London apartment set in 2050' in the context of climate change and its consequences on food security, reflecting the limitations that the future will pose if the current climate trajectory continues. What struck out to me in this reference is the detail in the prop design - details that communicate specificity when the scale is expanded, and the intermingling of consumer items (like IKEA shelves) mixed with futuristic speculation like homegrown food labs. I used this as a prominent device within my process of worldbuilding: how do you relate a 'fantastical' future with what we bring from today? A small digression, but still pertinent: it is also reminiscent of Calvino's work, that no matter how myriad the world is in our imagination, ultimately, our interpretation of it will always, to some extent, be shaped by the lens of our prior experiences and pre-existing beliefs.