

## Prefigurative Politics and Design

GERBER Alix  
Designing Radical Futures  
designradicalfutures@gmail.com

It is difficult to imagine what life might be like without capitalism, patriarchy, and modernism, yet these systems did not always exist: they were built. As professional designers who want to work towards something different, what can we do? Some have turned to prefigurative politics for a path forward. Prefiguration is a political strategy of working towards social transformation by “building the new world in the shell of the old”. For example: solidarity economies prefigure an economy based in cooperation rather than competition through shared ownership of production; and transformative justice initiatives prefigure a world without police by finding new ways for people to keep each other safe. These efforts question the fundamental values and beliefs underlying the oppressive systems we rely on today by building something different. This paper grapples with questions like: How have professional designers worked with prefigurative projects in the past? What roles do designers think we could play in prefigurative projects? When designerly frameworks and methods, timelines, partnerships and outcomes carry the baggage of an industrial field born out of capitalism and modernism, is it possible for a design practice to contribute towards building social systems based in fundamentally different values?

*prefiguration; counter-institutions; participatory design; pluriverse*

### 1. Designing for radical social transformation

If you are a designer interested in social transformation, you may find yourself drawn to prefigurative politics – the practice of acting out the socio-political structures we want within the world we have (Raekstad & Saio Gradin, 2019). Think Occupy Wall Street prefiguring a system of direct democracy and shared resources, immigrant groups prefiguring mutual aid and support for newcomers, and abolitionist projects prefiguring a world where we reduce harm through community accountability and transformative justice rather than relying on the police. Yet working with prefigurative politics as a

designer trained for industry has pitfalls. It requires reckoning with the fact that the dominant design practices taught through university studios and critiques tether practitioners to the status quo. What value do we think professional design practices bring to prefigurative projects? How can designers work towards fundamentally different social systems, rather than replicating the status quo?

Designing for social transformation shows us that inequity has deep roots. For example, a common refrain about the U.S. criminal legal system states that the system is not broken; it is working as it was designed. Policing was never meant to address conflict or heal harm; it has always been a way to protect property, maintain the wealth of those who have it, and secure the status quo (Davis, 2003; Muhammad, 2019). This truth requires us to look beyond reform and band-aid solutions, which so often strengthen and obscure the foundational violence and racism of the systems around us. Instead, we need to question those core values and make room for something different. In this paper, I'll share my own journey navigating different ways to direct my design practice towards this transformational societal change. I'll focus on designing within prefigurative projects, and I'll share how other designers have worked with groups prefiguring alternative social structures.

When I first began to understand and grapple with the complexity of transformational change, I was also learning about speculative design and futures studies. Speculative practices provide an exciting and creative approach for radical re-imagining. Rather than attempting to earnestly propose new political structures, speculative design opens creative space by asking 'What if?' and provoking questions about how societies could be different (Dunne & Raby, 2013). It's a way to dig into the values at the foundations of our systems and to consider alternatives. Futures studies similarly provides a way to imagine – and often enact – future scenarios so that audiences can experience and think critically about them. Stuart Candy, Jim Dator, and Jake Dunagan showed this through the project *Four Futures for Hawaii 2050*, where they enacted four different possibilities about how Hawaii could look different, depending on the actions we take today (Candy et al., 2006). Candy and Dunagan continue to explore how to bring people into experiential future scenarios to provoke reflection. In 2017, I began teaching a new course at Washington University called Radical Design, building on these speculative design and futuring approaches to imagine worlds without policing and without capitalism. I also created speculative projects with residents of heavily-policed neighborhoods to visualize what public safety could look like without policing. I was seeing the benefit of imagining and enacting alternative futures in collaborative ways and thinking about how to do it more experientially.

## 2. Prefigurative politics

Through my work with New Yorkers and residents of Ferguson, Missouri living in over-policed neighborhoods, I also became aware that people enact futures without policing all the time. One Ferguson advocate was fearless in her support of those who created safety in their own neighborhoods. She stood up for a Search & Rescue group that had filled the gap left by police who refused to look for missing children. It was created and maintained by volunteers, mostly local parents. She also suggested that street gangs enact their own kind of justice and protection. This felt clear to me after learning from young people in New York who felt abandoned by the police, and through learning about the Young Lords and other gangs who offered members protection when the police did not. Other prefigurations are performed by activists like #LetUsBreathe Collective in Chicago, who set up a no-cops zone to prefigure and perform a world without policing in one vacant lot (The #LetUsBreathe Collective, 2016). Groups like the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective and Safe Outside the System practice transformative justice and community accountability, trying out ways to protect each other and hold each other responsible for harm caused, without involving the police (Mingus, 2016; Safe OUTside the System Collective, 2016).

I learned that these efforts can be seen as examples of prefigurative politics, the political strategy of acting out the socio-political structures we want within the world we have. This term was first used by political science professor Carl Boggs in the 1970s (Boggs, 1977). The practice built on anarchist ideas from the turn of the twentieth century. For example, the Industrial Workers of the World (a worker-led union founded in Chicago in 1905) wrote that they sought to "form the structure of the new society in the shell of the old" (2014). To see how this applies to the examples above, consider the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC). BATJC prefigures a society that is different from the dominant system in the United States, because the collective responds to the sexual abuse of children without calling the police or engaging with the U.S. criminal legal system. Instead, BATJC relies on forming close community bonds and building accountability structures to protect children from harm and prevent future violence. This means that members work within their everyday lives to intentionally form community bonds and respond to situations of abuse, hosting children and parents who have been harmed in their homes and practicing ways to support abusers in stopping or changing their behavior (Mingus, 2015).

Prefigurative politics, as illustrated in this example, is different from surface-level reform or future envisioning in general. It's different from reform because it does not attempt to change policing, or to improve relationships between police officers and community members. Instead, members of BATJC act an alternative structure for safety into being on a small scale. It's different from other kinds of future visioning because it seeks a fundamental shift in values, rather than replicating the same values at the core of our society today. By focusing on social bonds and community accountability processes, BATJC centers protection and healing over lawfulness and maintaining order, a shift that is only possible because it exists unofficially, outside formal governance systems.

### **3. Why use a professional design practice for political prefiguration?**

If we think of design as "changing existing situations into preferred ones" as Herbert Simon describes it (1969), then groups engaged in prefigurative politics all do design. But they have different design approaches, often learned from social movements and political strategies, or simply acting on a need for personal safety and protection. At the core of any act of prefiguration is a deep understanding that the foundational values of the status quo are not working. This means that design action by members of these groups is often motivated by a fundamental shift in social values.

In contrast, the kind of design we learn in design jobs and schools is a particular form of designing— a professional practice that is made of institutions and that has a particular history. As the Decolonising Design group has pointed out, the dominant language of design connected to this professional practice comes with a specific way of thinking and knowing that is grounded in modernity and industrialization. We can see this, for example, in how design is contrasted against the lesser status of craft. What makes one wooden chair a designed object, and another chair a crafted one? Because of this history and context, design action coming from this professional practice is often motivated by replicating the values of modernity and industrial capitalism. This motivation is baked into our methods, vocabulary, decision-making structures and in the beliefs and frameworks we repeat (Ansari et al., 2016).

In recent years, designers interested in social transformation have used design, whether speculative design and futures studies or other approaches supporting prefigurative efforts, to explore transformational systems change. But if design is a professional practice that is rooted in modernity and industrial capitalism, why do we think we should use these design approaches to create political alternatives that strive to discard those mindsets? Why not, instead, follow the lead of those who have been learning from political struggle and movement building for generations?

#### 4. Design approaches to prefiguration and their challenges

To explore how to navigate this contradiction, I looked into how designers have worked with prefigurative efforts in the past couple of decades. In 2007, a project among European universities published a book on *Creative Communities* about “people inventing sustainable ways of living” (Meroni, 2007). It cataloged projects like ecovillages, local currencies, time banking, urban farms, and cooperative businesses. While this publication remained politically neutral, I would classify these as prefigurative projects because they involve small groups of people prefiguring alternative social systems based in fundamentally different values. Time banking, for example, prefigures a system where everyone’s time costs the same, and where traditionally feminine caretaking tasks are of equal worth to traditionally masculine tasks of industry and production. Arturo Escobar compares these European life projects to the indigenous struggle for self-determination in South America— Buen Vivir, post-development, and transitions to post-extractivism (2018). He references, for example, the Zapatistas, who prefigure a Good Government model grounded in direct democracy. Programs like Carnegie Mellon’s Transition Design Ph.D. and the International DESIS Network (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability) have built on the *Creative Communities* publication, saying that design-led social transition should amplify and extend the work of grassroots groups prefiguring alternatives (Irwin et al., 2013). And Carl DiSalvo, author of *Adversarial Design*, addresses prefigurative politics directly as an approach to political design in an article for the *Journal of Design Strategies* (2016).

For the group building on the *Creative Communities* publication, designers are often cast as experts and leaders of social transformation. For example, Ezio Manzini’s framework in his book *Design When Everybody Designs* differentiates between diffuse design and expert design (2015). Manzini says these *Creative Communities* are doing diffuse design, the kind that comes out of every person’s inherent creativity. He argues that expert designers – that is, designers trained in dominant design languages – have unique skills to make grassroots projects “visible and tangible, possible and probable, effective and meaningful, replicable and connected, local and open”. Putting this framework in the context of prefiguring worlds without policing helps to clarify the question, Which skills do designers really bring to enacting alternative social structures? Do we really think professional design expertise is what is needed to make community accountability structures effective and meaningful, compared to the expertise of mediators and transformative justice practitioners with years of practiced skill? What education and experience are designers bringing to this task? Maybe it is expertise in visual communication, problem solving, idea generation and prototyping. Yet without focused practice in enacting transformative justice, and an understanding of the fundamental value shift it performs, these skills and mindsets may do more to replicate the status quo than to enable a new vision of justice and healing.

The DESIS Lab at Parsons used the designer-as-amplifier approach outlined by the *Creative Communities* publication and Manzini’s framework in a 2010 project called Amplify (Parsons DESIS Lab, 2011). It focused on connecting and expanding on local grassroots projects around the Lower East Side and Brooklyn in New York, including community-supported agriculture, bartering groups, art collectives, etc. Ten years after the Amplify project, the DESIS Lab reflected on the approach, noticing how their design mindset led them to replicate values of modernity and industrialization. They asked, “Should people’s ideas be scaled-up or ‘mass produced’ so they might be adopted by others? The idea of scalability is no stranger to designers. It is a practice that emerges in great part through the industrial design tradition and the mass production of goods. In our work, we grappled with the ways in which the mass-

production of industrial products is qualitatively different from the proliferation of collaborative services” (Parsons DESIS Lab, 2020, p. 17). This reflection grapples with how the history of dominant design shows up (as mass production) when designers take on a leadership role in social change. Mass production is a big part of design for industry, so it makes sense that this same mindset might arise when we apply a design approach to social issues.

I think it is a good idea to question this designer-as-amplifier approach. The process of scaling, networking, or making prefigurative projects ‘possible’ looks a great deal like co-optation, the process that often happens when radical initiatives are defanged of their central criticisms as a way to incorporate them into the status quo. While some may see this incorporation and expansion as a win, it is often a scenario prefigurative projects actively work to avoid, to preserve their ability to think and act outside the status quo.

Carl DiSalvo shows another way to work with prefigurative groups: not facilitating, leading, or amplifying their efforts, but simply acting as a service provider, designing things that enable their desired social interactions. DiSalvo has shown what this could look like in his own work at Georgia Tech, and, in the *Journal of Design Strategies* article, he shows it through the work of a grassroots group called Occupy Sandy. Occupy Sandy arose as an emergency response to Hurricane Sandy in New York City, led by people involved in the Wall Street occupation about a year before. Building on the politics of Occupy Wall Street, they created a mutual-aid-based emergency response, enabling neighbors to support neighbors to fill in the gaps of government-led relief. Designers within the group of volunteers created a modular signage system that enabled anyone to hang signs directing residents to a place where they could find food, water, and phone chargers. In this case, designers used skills they learned in design school – visual hierarchy, contrast, and material creativity – to support the larger effort of Occupy Sandy to prefigure a world in which people freely take care of each other (DiSalvo, 2016).

Carl DiSalvo has built on this example with his own work at Public Design Workshop, a design research studio at Georgia Tech. For example, his team of designers and researchers partnered with a local group called Concrete Jungle, which forages fruit from trees on public land to fill city food pantries. Foraging in this way prefigures a world where food is grown on publicly owned land and accessible to all, as opposed to our current system that prioritizes profit over food security. But Concrete Jungle was facing a challenge. Foraging in public parks means that trees are dispersed across a large surface area, which makes it difficult to know when fruit is ripe and ready to be picked. The team at Concrete Jungle collaborated with Public Design Workshop to experiment with multiple ideas to keep an eye on fruit ripeness from afar, from drones to sensors that populate a digital map (Public Design Workshop, 2016). Similarly to the Occupy Sandy project, professional designers here used technical expertise to support a prefigurative project led collaboratively by a group with different backgrounds and different ways of designing.

## 5. Conclusion

I prefer this means of using design in prefigurative politics – working in a group of people with different backgrounds and using approaches that come from professional design practice only as it’s helpful to the collective process. But even when used as a supportive service, professional design practices still carry the baggage of their industrial, modernist development. In 2020, Christine Hegel and I facilitated a workshop at the Participatory Design Conference asking what is specific to a designerly perspective on prefigurative politics. We seeded the conversation with a design exercise that provoked participants to design something for a prefigurative group. In the end, the group discussed tendencies that designers

have (shown through the workshop exercise and results) that are different from how an organizer or activist without a design education might work. For example:

1. Designers prioritize the production of tangible artifacts in defined project time frames, while other activists are more likely to focus on building skills and relationships over long periods of time.
2. Designers want to generate innovative ideas and solutions, while embedded activists care more about implementing the ideas that are right for the prefigurative effort, no matter who generated them.
3. Designers tend to see themselves as 'external' to communities. We consider our skills to be transferable to any context, which we learned through the idea of developing a process that can be deployed for clients. Instead, activists tend to be embedded in a community that they identify with (Gerber & Hegel, 2020).

By reading the approaches of other designers, I have clarified my own perspective on designing with prefigurative projects. It starts with building relationships with prefigurative groups not as an external design partner but as a member— joining groups that I personally identify with. It's a reminder to learn design approaches from all people involved in the work, even (and especially) when it conflicts with the design approaches I've come to know. It's participating and following as much as leading and facilitating. It's using the design methods and skills I know when appropriate, but also questioning their impact on the broader ideological goals of the project and applying them carefully. It is helpful to be aware, not only of the skills we have built through professional design practice, but also of the baggage those practices bring, especially in a context where we strive to enact ways of thinking and doing that conflict with the status quo.

## 6. References

- Ansari, A., Abdulla, D., Canli, E., Keshavarz, M., Kiem, M., Oliveira, P., Prado, L., & Schultz, T. (2016, June 27). *Editorial statement*. Decolonising design. <https://www.decolonisingdesign.com/statements/2016/editorial/>
- Boggs, C. (1977). Marxism, prefigurative communism, and the problem of workers' control. *Radical America*, 11(6), 99-122.
- Candy, S., Dator, J., & Dunagan, J. (2006). *Four futures for Hawaii 2050*. Retrieved from <http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/publications/hawaii/FourFuturesHawaii2050-2006.pdf>
- Davis, A. (2003). *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press.
- DiSalvo, C. (2016). Design and prefigurative politics. *The Journal of Design Strategies*, 8(1): 29-35. [https://issuu.com/journalofdesignstrategies/docs/the\\_journal\\_of\\_design\\_strategies\\_vo](https://issuu.com/journalofdesignstrategies/docs/the_journal_of_design_strategies_vo)
- Dunne, A., & Raby, F. (2013). *Speculative everything: Design, fiction, and social dreaming*. MIT Press.
- Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.
- Gerber, A., & Hegel, C. (2020, June 15-20). *Designing for self-determination: Making futures without policing*. [Conference workshop]. Participatory Design Conference, Manizales, Colombia.
- Industrial Workers of the World. (2014). *Preamble, constitution, & general bylaws of the Industrial Workers of the World*. Last amended 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.iww.org/PDF/Constitutions/CurrentIWWConstitution.pdf>
- Irwin, T., Kossoff, G., & Tonkinwise, C. (2013, October 10-12). *Transition design: Re-conceptualizing whole lifestyles*. [Conference presentation]. Head Heart Hand: AIGA Design Conference, Minneapolis, MN, United States. <https://www.aiga.org/inspiration/talks/terry-irwin-gideon-kossoff-cameron-tonkinwise-transition-design-re>



- The #LetUsBreathe Collective. (2016). *Imagining a world*. <https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/freedomsquare>
- Manzini, E. (2015). *Design, when everybody designs*. MIT Press.
- Meroni, A. (Ed.). (2007). *Creative communities: People inventing sustainable ways of living*. Edizioni POLI.design.
- Mingus, M. (2016). *Pods and pod mapping worksheet*. Retrieved from <https://batjc.wordpress.com/resources/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/>
- Mingus, M. (2015, March 26-29). *Still choosing to leap: Building alternatives*. [Conference presentation]. INCITE! Color of Violence, Chicago, IL, United States. <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2015/03/31/still-choosing-to-leap-building-alternatives/>
- Muhammad, K.G. (2019). *The condemnation of blackness: Race, crime, and the making of modern urban America*. Harvard University Press.
- Parsons DESIS Lab. (2011). *Amplify*. <http://www.amplifyingcreativecommunities.org/>
- Parsons DESIS Lab. (2020). *Possibilities for thought and action: DESIS at 10*. The New School.
- Public Design Workshop. (2016). *Fruits are heavy*. <http://publicdesignworkshop.net/portfolio/fruit-are-heavy/>
- Raekstad, P., & Saio Gradin, S. (2019). *Prefigurative politics: Building tomorrow today*. Wiley.
- Safe OUTside the System Collective. (2016). *The safe party toolkit* [Zine]. <http://bit.ly/SafePartyToolkitZine>
- Simon, H. A. (1969). *The sciences of the artificial*. MIT Press.

#### About the Author

**Alix Gerber** is an independent design researcher in New York City. For the past five years, she has investigated designing for futures without policing and capitalism, working with groups of young people in Harlem, residents in Ferguson, Missouri, and college students at Washington University in St. Louis. As a designer interested in prefigurative projects, she has been reading design perspectives to explore her own hesitancy about using a professional design practice in prefigurative contexts. Alix is a white, cisgender woman from Portland, Oregon, born to two industrial designers. She became a design researcher through working at consulting firms after studying interior design in college. Her experience in the Transdisciplinary Design MFA program at Parsons School of Design caused her to question and explore the implications of applying design practices to social issues.