When Is the Pluriverse?

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When is the Pluriverse in Design Education?

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Abstract: Currently design is in the midst of several potential upheavals including the postcolonial, decolonial, ontological, and pluriversal turns. This conversation among design educators explores these turns under the inclusive umbrella of pluriversal design by focusing specifically on the temporality of the pluriverse in design education. By engaging in communal sensing, living in a world of many worlds, we relationally engage and question whether pluriversal design is a struggle for emergence, a past history, a possible future, a current reality, some combination, or something else entirely for design education? The reason we find this question important is because it determines what we do today, as design educators across many worlds. If the pluriverse is truly a future experience that we do not have today, we want to know what we need to do today to aid its arrival in design education. We engaged in an asynchronously written conversation in which Victor Udoewa, served as a facilitator and complicator of a conversation between design educators Adolfo Ruiz, Alfredo Gutierrez Borrero, Arvind Lodaya, Frederick van Amstel, Lesley-Ann Noel, and Nii Bostway.

Keywords: pluriversal futures; design education futures; design education pasts; ontological design; decolonizing design
Conversation

Victor: In the course of Western-dominated, academic philosophy in the humanities and social sciences, there have been a number of “turns,” major or minor shifts in the dominant mode of practice or thought within a discipline. Examples include the linguistic, reflexive, critical, interpretive, constructivist, and postmodern turns. These turns always seem to enter design later than other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. In anthropology, there was an academically famous debate over the ontological turn (Ontological turn, 2023). There were anthropologists who said that ontology is just another word for culture (Rollason, 2008). There were more anthropologists who said that ontology is more than culture or worldviews, that people occupy different worlds. But if people do occupy multiple worlds or realities or ontologies, why do we speak of the pluriversal futures or the pluriversal future of design and design education? Is the pluriversal future past? Is it here? Is it here but not in its fullness? Is it a possible but not definite future? Is it some combination or something else? If we know this, we might know if there is anything we need to do for the pluriverse to flourish.

Fred: The pluriverse is not an alternative reality or place that design educators may bring design students to imagine or visit in order to develop multi-cultural sensitivity. The concept has been used by social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean to denote the possibility of several worlds coexisting together, even if eventually in conflict (Escobar, 2012). These movements rejected the colonialist imposition of a single universe because their worlds would be included in a universe that does not welcome their differences. World differences in the Eurocentric universe are measured by criteria that always favors the colonial powers like, for example, the Human Development Index (HDI). Entering the universe, for Latin American and Caribbean worlds, means becoming less developed, subaltern, or not even worlds in themselves, at least, in relation to European worlds. In contrast, declaring to already live in a pluriverse means welcoming world differences that could be positive for them even if not so easily comparable. Issues such as land ownership, border politics, official idioms, resource management, and military sovereignty come to the fore (for a summary of these issues see Kothari et al, 2019), requiring democratic governance diversity, i.e. demodiversity (de Sousa Santos and Mendes, 2020). World differences go way beyond cultural differences and require more than the XXth century democratic multiculturalism (Canclini, 2001).

Arvind: I once asked my would-be PhD guide, “why do we have to write theory in the ‘set’ (western academic) format, when in our (oral) tradition, even monologues and dialogues are considered ‘valid’ forms of ‘knowledge’?” His answer, which stunned me then and still stuns me, was: “in order to do our own theorizing, we first need to theorize the west.” My point therefore is about the western hegemony over the very concept and form of ‘knowledge’ - which requires deploying it even in order to refute or challenge it. Those of us educated in this tradition are thus entrapped and unable to step outside of it to theorize in other ways - because outside of it, there seems to be no theory, only folklore and mysticism. I realized this early on in my academic life, where I said, “the problem with modern design (education) is that it alienates us from our own immediate culture and environment, and turns us into ‘foreigners’ in our own space.” My question is, am I just barking up yet another ‘western conspiracy’ tree, or is there something to it? Somehow, I keep returning to the distribution of power and influence, which distorts and constrains our vision and imagination, the instant it gets imprinted in one mode. This gets more complicated in design, as design itself stands on the fringes of conventional academics with its substantial component of intuitive and tacit knowledge - then, add to it the problems of colonization and erasure/marginalisation and we have the recipe for a perfect ‘epistemic turn’!

Victor: So, when is the pluriverse? Is the pluriverse of design and design education here, past, to come, partly here but not its fullness, a combination, something else?

Lesley: It was hard for me to wrap my head around the question of “when” is the pluriverse. It makes it seem like a mythical time that we are waiting to arrive. I don’t want to remain caught in that idea of waiting for it to happen. My pluriverse (if I can own it!) is now. Many of us live in a world of many worlds even if these worlds are invisible to people from colonial or dominant groups. So when is the pluriverse, as Victor asks? The pluriverse is now. It shifts the narrative of Eurocentrism that design has traditionally held to multiple voices, multiple ways of being, doing and knowing.

Victor: What’s interesting is that there is a tension in our conversation. On one hand, Lesley, you are saying the pluriverse is here now and exists today. But Arvind seems to be suggesting it is not yet here in design and design education, that in order to write in a way that challenges Western, modernist understandings of knowledge, you must use Western, modernist methodologies and arguments. Arvind is saying we’re still in the midst of an epistemic turn. Is it that the pluriverse exists in general, in the world, but we must still move towards a pluriversal future in academic design and academic design education?
Nii: lol [lots of laughs] on the comment by Arvind “my would be PHD guide”.

Here are my opening shots.

Back in 2006/7 I returned home to Ghana after spending 22 years outside my country of birth. To say that the experience was a “culture” shock would be an understatement. I returned to the country I currently live in South Africa and that February I attended the Design Indaba in Cape Town for the first time. Literally in the space of a week I had my “realities” shifted, from a hot, humid chaotic dusty so called “3rd world” experience to one where I was sitting in air conditioned luxury listening to the “world’s best designers,” talking about “how design can change the world” while quaffing expensive delicacies. The disconnect from the reality on the ground I experienced in Ghana and the airy-fairy platitudes aired by these so-called design luminaries in their air conditioned 1st world comfort always struck me. I realised then and there that “design” I was taught and was listening to in the air-conditioned comfort of the Cape Town International Convention Centre and the harsh reality I had just left behind in West Afrika were not the same thing. 17 years later, after just having come back from another such visit to Ghana on reflection, I can say that I was in what we would call the “Pluriverse,” and I returned to “design”.

The Pluriverse has always been here. It is.

“design” with a capital “D” as I choose to frame and call it has just never acknowledged it. The famous South African author J.M. Coetzee wrote a book titled “Waiting for the Barbarians”, an allegory of sorts (from my understanding) of Apartheid South Africa at the height of the State of Emergency in the 1980’s as the white settler colonizers hunkered down in their created (designed) reality waiting for the “barbarian” masses to finally overrun them in their anger.

For me as I reflect on these things, I come to the realization that the world the white settler colonizers created (designed) for themselves in that book, that they sought to “protect from the savages” is the “design” with a capital “D” that we have been taught. The world outside those walls, of the unnamed “dark masses” the so called “barbarians” is the Pluriverse.

It’s here. It’s ALWAYS been here. Do you see it? Do I? Do we?

Victor: Yes, it sounds like you’re saying what Lesley and Arvind are saying together. The pluriverse exists and has always existed in the world, outside of the walls of academic design education. But Design or academic Design does not see it, or we do not always see it. What work is there for us to do for the pluriverse to infiltrate all spaces and places in our world and enter past the gates and through the walls of academic Design education? Is there anything we should (or shouldn’t) be doing so that more of us may see it and participate in it?

Adolfo: In response to Victor’s question, it may be helpful to bring the discussion back to the ‘temporality of the pluriverse.’ I will do this at the end of this contribution. But first I will reflect on this rich conversation.

Based on the conversation thus far, we seem to agree that the pluriverse does indeed exist—by the pluriverse, I will refer to parts of the world where the dominant ontology is not that of Western modernity (I believe the pluriverse may also refer to contexts in which Western modernity is entangled with diverse modes of living, Indigenous cultural practices, or traditional ecological knowledge).

In my experience as a design educator, the rich and vibrant cultural traditions of Indigenous communities offer a vital source of design knowledge that is derived from ancestral memory and land-based know-how (Andrews & Zoe 2007; Scott, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Such examples provide important lessons for teachers and students regarding our connection to Mother Earth. But as many of you have suggested in this and previous conversations, most academic design spaces have a long way to go before arriving at some form of knowledge parity (and an even longer way to go before, for instance, Indigenous knowledge is fully integrated into design curriculum and/or professional practice). The reasons for this lack of epistemological diversity, in my understanding, are multi-faceted and enormously complex.

I suggest that addressing this lack of diversity requires an ongoing challenge to the modernist notion of design as best we can from our cultural/geographical locations, while also building common goals and making sense of what pluriversality means over time. I would argue that the very existence of our pluriversal group of design educators is already an important step in the right direction. Furthermore, there are gatekeepers (in the form of university
governance, industry stakeholders and government entities) that may not be open to a radical and abrupt revisioning of design education and practice. But a gradual metamorphosis of design education (operating on a temporal level that is not rapid and abrupt but continuously transforming over time) may lead to meaningful change in the long run. I believe that members of this group are contributing to this change.

To conclude this contribution, I’ll add that I interpret the pluriverse as both a noun and a verb—a place (or places) that currently exist, as well as an ongoing process of questioning, critiquing and challenging colonial narratives and market-driven priorities. From this point of view, we have already started the process of pluriversalizing design education.

Lesley: The thing is ‘When is the Pluriverse’ or even the lack of plurality in design may be different according to where you are. When I think back to when I was in the Caribbean, our design classes were already ‘pluriversal’, but we didn’t know it. Maybe I was / we were self-conscious at times by creating such a hyperlocal curriculum. Sometimes on the other hand we were very proud. I recall looking at my graduating students one year and being so proud at how rooted their work was in our local context through the choice of themes, imagery, materials, then I recall a colleague or a visitor to the final show being very disdainful about how the Caribbean work was. I see my colleagues in Brazil also doing very locally grounded work sometimes. Maybe what is different is that we are talking much more to each other in “the Pluriverse”, which I take to mean outside of a Euro-centric world, and some of us may be more confident in our practice and are learning from each other.

Another element of our discussions about the Pluriverse is that several of us (pluriversal scholars) are from the Global South but now in the Global North, which shifts our positionality, point of view, collaborators, platforms, practice and questions. I see the lack of plurality more clearly now. As an outsider where I am now, I ask different questions and am more aware of my outsidership. I also draw more heavily on my nostalgia for a different place and different cultures, than I would have had I actually been in a different place and culture. This feeling of loss or longing for the place where I belong, ‘saudade’ in Portuguese, has changed my design practice and may be a significant part of my pluriversal approach which I bring into design education and practice. Belonging is about feeling accepted and valued and mattering is about being viewed as significant. The conversations with other people ‘in the Pluriverse’ make me aware of the significance and value of belonging and mattering. So yes the Pluriverse is now, and it is all around us. It is not this mythical time and space that we are waiting for.

Nii introduced me to a text by Namata Serumaga-Musisi (2016), Bauhaus Already Lives Here and Why the World Still Doesn’t Know It. In that text Serumaga-Musisi criticizes the plans for a Bauhaus Africa, and demonstrates that all of the constraints that led to the creation of the Bauhaus, the conditions that facilitated the creation of the Bauhaus and the creative experimentation and innovation of the Bauhaus already exist in Kenya, so there is no need for a Bauhaus Africa. This is a good reminder that we have examples of innovation happening everywhere jugaad in India, jeitinho in Brazil, inspiring innovative folkloric characters like Anansi throughout the African diaspora, even the more pejorative ‘trickidadianness’ about Trinidadians demonstrates innovative tendencies.

Victor: It seems we agree that the pluriverse is here. Let’s hold Lesley and Adolfo’s lived experience as both true, that perhaps in design education, there may be certain people who experience it like Lesley, and there are also people who do not experience it in academic design education like Adolfo. Judging from my biased interactions, I’m guessing that most people in academic design education, whether administrator, educator, or student, fall into the second group. The question before us is whether it is here in academic design education and if not, what should or could we do to welcome, embrace, or usher it further for the many of us not experiencing it? What can we do to contribute to its flourishing in academic design education? Is that even the best question or pursuit?

Lesley: I also felt like Adolfo, that design education was not diverse. So it took me a long time to see that the pluriverse is already here. I also felt the pressure of having to fit in, and having to teach design in a way that aligned with Eurocentric design education. It is more recently that I’ve understood the value of our contexts, materials, people, issues etc, and that I’ve become more confident in design practices more centered in my positionality and that of the students that I work with and the contexts that I work in.

Adolfo: As a way to contribute to its flourishing in academic contexts, it may be helpful to complement writings about pluriversal design with specific examples of pluriversal design. Providing visual/tangible evidence of such work (developed through teaching and/or research and practice) may be an important next step in helping educators and students better understand how designers can engage with issues of pluriversality. Published work including such examples, online resources, case studies, summaries of field work, teaching tools and workshops are some possibilities through which to further communicate such knowledge (see Redwing, Neebinnauskzhik, Tunstall, 2023;
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Renwick, 2008; Rogal, 2023 for some examples). In providing such examples it may also be helpful to describe how pluriversal design is similar to, and different from, other socially engaged design practice and pedagogy.

Victor: Ok, so it seems the work to contribute to the flourishing of the pluriverse in academic design education rests on the academic design educators, in our teaching tools, workshops, case studies, published work, etc. Do I understand that correctly? Then, is there any work for those of us who are administrators or students, or even for those outside academic design education contexts or even outside design?

Alfredo: I resonate with Nii: The practices of the barbarian masses are the pluriverse. They are very different from the design sold in fancy stores, taught in universities or published in journals. They are something altogether distant and different. It is necessary to assume the huge antinomy between design and pluriverse, what is behind the idea of pluriversal design. Could we speak here of design versus "pluriversign" (behold: not necessarily pluriversalizing)? Could we avoid the gluttony with which design (while remaining intact) absorbs with adjectives all othernesses, instead of accepting itself as an “other” (that varies in each particular case) of them all. By transforming the other into the same, pluriversal design produces to the mainstream mind one type more of the design already known (in universities, journals and shopping malls). Something similar happens with indigenous knowledge (converted into an amorphous heap that engulfs knowledge of all human groups whose name and particularity disappears under the all-encompassing Western generalization of "indigenous").

Indigenous peoples of all sorts just have in common circumstances such as the lack (and not in all cases) of a nation state of their own. Thus indigenous knowledge and the pluriverse when incorporated into the academic circuit end up becoming more marketable and saleable genres within this: the mainstream does not have time to think in, or care about impluralizable webs and entanglements of particularities. However to a large extent I believe that design (or designs) are where pluriverse (or pluriverses) is not, and conversely, pluriverse is often where design is not.

Adolfo suggests enriching diversity by confronting the modernist notion of design from our geographical and cultural locations in order to make sense of what pluriversality means. In a radical way and returning to the acceptance of the opposition raised by Nii (between design and pluriverse), one could not design but pluriversign from many practices. Not to denaturalize, domesticate and educate the pluriverse in the country of design, but to allow design to be denaturalized, domesticated and educated (kind of) in the ever changing territories of the pluriverses (which are not necessarily countries). We need to confront the modernist notion of design by radically exiling ourselves from it, at least from time to time, it (what a problem because all of us work in designed schools that teach design!) in order to abandon the monoculture, the mono-logic, the plantation that annihilates diversity with the reproduction of the same thing. The West presents itself as unitary and that is how we conceptualize it, partly because it is convenient for it to deny its own heterogeneity, partly because we do not want to see it either. Perhaps pluriversalizing education in design comes by way of pluriversigning (and not designing) education in pluriverses (also in plural).

If design (Journals, Fairs, Universities) is different from the pluriverse, maybe the pluriverse is experienced and lived by abandoning the controlled production of design, exiling ourselves from the plantation sometimes without the intention of returning (so as not to strength that things we want to run away from), about taking paths of this kind thinkers such as Bayo Akomolafe (MacKenzie, 2020, 1:03:00-1:04:00) and Grada Kilomba (Kilomba, 2021) speak to us. Lesley points out that in our design classes we were already pluriversal but we did not know it, but now that we know it does not imply taking care of that "novelty", that "otherness", that "difference" to prevent it (or to them) from being classified, domesticated, weighed and measured with Western codes and ways of measuring, and to prevent the pluriverse from being locked up in those farms and laboratories of modernity that erase the diversity and heterogeneity of others while hide their own.

Why not give the ideas of jugaad (India), jeitinhas (Brazil), trickidadianness (from Trinidad and Tobago), or indigenous recursivity or malice (sort of Colombian indigenous tricksterism or perhaps tricksterhood, like parenthood) a substantive parity status by valuing (and learning from) the regimes of relations and meanings from which they come, and where they occur, instead of turning them into a servile attributes to the same "design" (that in the end by etymology by academic tradition and for the same reason as the Nii points out, is something else).

Rather than a pluriverse, there would be pluriverses not as different names for the same, but several of "the same" (each of them only identical to itself but equivalent in its difference ). Perhaps all those who speak of the pluriverse speak every time indeed of different pluriverses. The question: “When is the pluriverse?”, therefore is not one but many and would imply different "whens" in different "nows", and specifying every time "where" each "now" is located, and respecting the circumstances of emergence of every single “where”... everywhere.
Adolfo proposes, on the other hand, to give specific examples of the pluriversal design. But shouldn’t we be concerned about the power of the examples to transform themselves into models and then into mandates and finally into impositions that induce us to believe that the pluriverse is easily measurable or definable? In my perspective, every time the pluriverse comes up it does so under a different name and as something else, a different thing every time, so if we expect the pluriverse to arrive as just another type of the same thing (design as usual or clearly written: “design” in any of the predictable forms enclosed and submitted under that name). We will miss it, or almost all of it because of our obsession to standardize and homogenize and demarcate the unknown in terms of the known.

Let us then contemplate the alternative and perhaps indeed pluriversal way of unmarking the known (the design) to reframe it in many ways in terms of the unknown: the pluriverse, which takes on value in terms of the specificity it acquires in each enunciation and emergence (many names for many things in many acts and facts) and not in the mirage that generalization gives us. When the pluriverse? Well perhaps when we abandon the tendency to impute to the pluriverse an omnipresence that we naively or dogmatically believe is easily understandable. For me we cannot include with as much simplicity as irresponsibility “the many worlds within the world” within a guiding idea of (Western) world, nor assume that there are “many designs within design” within a preconceived and guiding idea of (Western) design. Then the pluriverse is in every “now” and “then” and “when” and “where” design is valued as one more (and no more than that) among many of “whatever-each-group-call-them” jeitinhos, trickidadianesses, gambiarras, jugaads, indigenous malices and so on.

**Victor:** To summarize, Alfredo, I think you are saying the question is not a good one because there are many worlds and therefore many whens and wheres and hows. I imagine we are having semantic differences because language is very difficult. I think I was looking at the entire world and asking if that world is a world of many worlds with many educations about many designs. I hear you, and believe you are saying that the question about when is the pluriverse in academic design education has a western framing of design and even the pluriverse so that it is difficult to ask the question I am trying to ask. I do not have another word to use to talk about the thing that is different in different spaces and places and times, the thing some of us might call design. Additionally, I did not intend to try to bring the many worlds in the pluriverse to the universe of academic design education. The problem is that if I just say design education, people with pluriversal sensibilities will naturally interpret that to mean any kind of education of any kind of design, which we know already exists. My guess is that our question is specifically focused on academic design education, which Arvind and Fred admit is still in the process of pluriversalizing.

So I think while Adolfo suggests case studies, teaching tools, documentation, workshops, and field studies to showcase and learn of the unknown “design” in all its specific instances in specific places, Alfredo, you suggest the only thing we can do is remove ourselves from the plantation of academic design education.

**Alfredo:** I insist on the issue of the many worlds within the world, since I am not referring to different perspectives on a totality that we all already know (the world), but to an entanglement of many different totalities (which are not necessarily worlds). Let me explain: The Samoan Lalolagi, the Pacha of the Andeans, Quechuas and Aymaras, the Ao of the Maori, etc., we would say that all them are “worlds”, since that is what the dictionaries (Western artifacts) say, which “are” the words that those human groups use, there precisely where Westerners understand the idea of the world. But, as I presume, these are worlds that are not (at least not entirely) worlds, although we think that they are understood or lived as such, they are truly untranslatable and non-comparable ideas of equi-altervalents (Gutiérrez, 2022) of the world.

Against this, Mercier (2019) warns in a text recommended for the most enthusiastic pluriversalists, the problem is not so much how much is lost when translating, but how much disappears when comparing, since the meta point of view from which the differences between the many worlds within the world are regulated, turns out to be none other than the Western idea of the world. Well, Mercier denounces that supposed inter-comparability between incomparables that makes us presume that one world corresponds to another, as happens with the Western units of measurement, one centimeter to another, a millimeter to another, when we are faced with untranslatable and incommensurable scales. Thus, Mercier (2019) invites us to interrupt the Western cosmos by means of “the others of the humanities”, placing us before an “exorbitant heterogeneity before language and before being, before the “world” or “worlds” themselves – an untranslatable heterogeneity that cannot be accounted for by anthropology or ontology, even the most pluralistic of ontologies”.

Therefore, in addition to thinking about “when” the pluriverse perhaps we should also ask ourselves from where comes these pluriverses (because even theoretically there are several that are little considered in the emotion that
the pluriverse idea arouses among contemporary designers)... just to mention two forgotten pluriverses let us think of the ones in the works of Benjamin Paul Blood and Carl Schmitt (Blood, 1920, Schmitt, 1932 /2008). And also always let us consider what we are pluralizing with “the pluriverse”?, worlds? universes? verses? versions? all of them in different proportions each time? This has enormous implications for an education that is ready to radically accept differences, because we need a recognition that implies risking our own categories of valuation

Mario Blaser (2019), emphasizes the difference between a "radical openness" (which requires risking one's own categories of recognition) and a "liberal openness" (which we often use when equalizing what cannot be equalized) that requires of that which is different to first become "recognizable" in already established terms in order to, then, be included as a legitimate participant in politics (or in education or in design) that is why I am interested in dispensing from time to time of ideas as design or education or even pluriverse...

Victor: To summarize, the pluriverse is already here; we already have a world of many worlds. There is no work for us to do, today, to aid its coming. Nevertheless, the pluriverse is not evenly distributed; design taught and experienced in MOST of academic design education is not pluriversal, but universal–universal aesthetics, knowledge, and methods. So there is work for us to do in academic design education including pluriversal case studies, teaching tools, documentation, workshops, field studies, and even using a non-Western word like design to describe what we experience differently in different places and times. Still, a few questions remain for us.

Does fugitivity—removing ourselves from the plantation of academic design education—have the effect of a pluriversal design education—all the various worlds of being, knowing, doing and design education about the other worlds? That’s the question. Is there anything more radical to do beyond case studies, field studies, and workshops if we want to see a pluriversal design education in academic design education, while the general pluriverse continues living and growing? Great comments and thoughts. As usual in pluriversal conversations, there are no final, universal answers. This is a great first conversation. Thanks for your participation, and let’s keep talking.

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