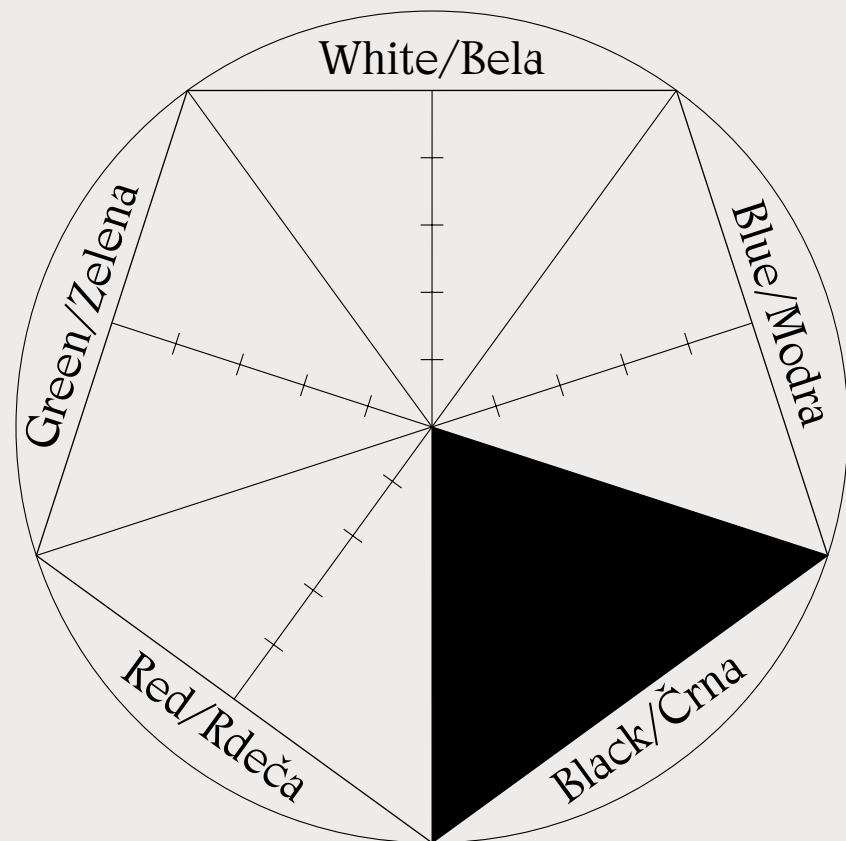


# CASE STUDY

1

ŠTUDIJA  
PRIMERA



**WHITE**

**BLUE**

**BLACK**

consumption, economic growth, capital,  
unscrupulous, murder, exploitation, weapons,  
death, immoral, evil

**RED**

**GREEN**

**BELA**

**MODRA**

**ČRNA**

potrošnja, ekonomska rast, kapital,  
brezobzirnost, umor, izkoriščanje, orožje,  
smrt, nemoralno, zlo

**RDEČA**

**ZELENA**

THROUGH THE  
EYES OF YOUNG  
DESIGNERS:  
HOW BLEAK IS THE  
PRESENT AND IS  
THERE HOPE FOR  
THE FUTURE?

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**MENTORS**

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**SUBJECT**

History and Theory of Critical Design I  
Industrial Design and Applied Arts,  
Industrial Design

**STUDY PROGRAMME AND COURSE**

**ACADEMIC YEAR**

2023/2024

As an industrial designer, I cannot but reflect that we are responsible for the current situation. We have created billions of attractive products with planned obsolescence and low-quality materials, all for the sole purpose of stimulating economic growth. (Dolinar 2023)

### STARTING POINT

## Conviviality

In the winter semester of the academic year 2023/24, the course History and Theory of Critical Design I started rather pessimistically. First-year master's students were tasked to examine the role of the design profession today and in the future. The starting point of the assignment was, however, encouraging: students had to expand on the theme of the BASE Milano call for entries titled *In-Difference: Design, Spatial Activism, Convivialism*<sup>①</sup> which, in order to create the conditions for quality coexistence, urges building on convivialist principles such as collaboration, intercultural dialogue, equality and ecological responsibility (BASE Milano 2023). But the optimism pervading the concept of convivialism raised a number of critical concerns among the students. During the first meeting on 9 October 2023, focused on the presentation of the central theme, some students immediately expressed scepticism towards the possibility of maintaining hope for a better future in today's world.

This sharp concern was likely a result of the fact that everyone was still reeling from the devastating floods that swept through much of Slovenia in early August 2023 and are now considered the worst natural disaster in the country's history since its independence (Kovač 2024).

①

After the submission of an exhibition proposal in response to the *We Will Design 2024* call for proposals, issued by the BASE Milano

cultural centre, *Echoes of Tomorrow* was selected to be showcased during Milan Design Week 2024.

Moreover, just two days prior to our meeting, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had escalated, culminating in Israel's siege of Gaza. This led many scholars to warn, as early as 15 October, of the potential for genocide in Gaza (Twairl 2023). As the students followed these events, they became increasingly aware that the situations described were not mere coincidences or exceptions, but rather a sign that similar humanitarian and natural disasters will become more frequent in the future.

### CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE ISSUE

## Who and “what” is a designer today?

A critical stance was actually desired for the assigned task. One of the first assignments required the students to answer the question “Who and ‘what’ is a designer today?” To find the answers, they were asked to refer to Potter's book *What is a Designer*, in which the author states:

- ↪ If society is geared to satisfactions on the cheap, the designer has a special responsibility to straighten himself out in that respect; to decide where he stands. When real needs are neglected, and artificial ones everywhere stimulated into an avid hunger for novelty, sensation, and status-appeal, largely (but not wholly) for reasons of private or public profit; then here is his own nature, his own society. He is involved, and he must decide how best to act. (Potter 2003, 35–36)

To this regard, Matevž Gortnar and Gal Grobovšek (2024) underline:

- ↪ The designer's work is largely embedded in a market economy, where decisions about investment, production and distribution, and the prices of goods and services are chiefly influenced by the interaction of supply and demand forces. Such a system, reinforced by human greed, requires design that conforms to its terms, i.e. terms that promote unlimited growth. These terms include non-compliance with health and environmental standards, underpayment of workers and planned obsolescence, among others. Such an approach frequently has adverse environmental impacts, as the overexploitation of finite natural resources generates increasing amounts of waste [...]. [At the same time, as Potter argues], good design solutions that consider the concerns and terms

of environmentally responsible design often go unrealised due to being less commercially viable or even unviable (2003, 32).

In addition, Luka Bernik (2023) observes that “most design decisions prioritise convenience, consumption and disposability over sustainability and ecological responsibility.” For this reason, Bernik further intensifies his criticism in Victor Papanek’s manner, stating that “consumer culture leads to wasteful and environmentally damaging practices, essentially to murder. There is nothing more immoral than killing people; murder is a malicious act, and bad design is just that. Murder” (*ibid.*). Moreover, Bernik also argues that while it may not be immediately apparent that this type of design is basically murder as its effects are indirect and, in most cases, delayed, this does not alter the highlighted fact (*ibid.*). Marko Škrbić (2023) further illustrates this by providing a very obvious example of how design can be linked to murder:

- ↪ Take, for example, the design of land mines. A land mine is intended to be hidden just below the surface of the earth and to explode when light pressure is applied to its top. The fact that hidden land mines blow off the legs of unsuspecting adults, children and animals, raises questions about the morality of those involved in commissioning, designing, manufacturing, advertising, distributing, selling and using the product.

This is a textbook example of the paradox Vilém Flusser writes about, arguing that designers cannot actually avoid acting immorally. He, in fact, states: “Between pure good (‘moral’ good), which is good for nothing, and applied good (‘functional’ good), there can be absolutely no compromise, because in the end everything which is good in the case of applied good is bad in the case of moral good” (Flusser 1999, 33). This idea can be applied to the landmine example: if it is well designed (functional good), it means that it will effectively kill an unsuspecting human, which is in exact opposition with moral good. Flusser claims that Evil is disguised within every functional object, and the only difference lies in the extent to which this is obvious (*ibid.*).

This can be confirmed by the example provided by Rin Togo (2023), which, according to the author, casts doubt on the possibility of achieving swift and drastic positive change. A solution with an otherwise good and responsible intention has become exploited by its users for harmful consumption practices. As Togo explains:

- ↪ The Japanese flea market app *Mercari* has gained over 20 million monthly users, which is approximately one-sixth of Japan's population (Mercari 2023). Mercari's mission is to drive social prosperity by promoting the recirculation of limited resources, which aligns with ontological design principles (Fry 2012). However, this app has led to the emergence of new consumer behaviour among youth: purchasing many new items to resell them at a higher price, subsequently allocating the profits to purchase more new items intended for resale.

Luka Janežič (2024), who similarly draws on Tony Fry's work, expresses the opinion that this mindset and behaviour leads to social collapse; as Fry regrettably highlights: "[t]he combination of our numbers, technology and profligate use of planetary resources ensures the continued globalization of the nihilistic character of our world (de)formation" (Fry 2012, 141). Janežič (2024) expands this idea, stating:

- ↪ Bad design, characterised by a lack of consideration for the environment and society, causes irreparable damage to our planet. From poorly designed products that contribute to pollution and waste to unsustainable production processes that deplete natural resources, existing design practices are driving us closer to the brink of ecological and social collapse."

Hana Klincov (2023) point out that the cause of this unscrupulous human behaviour is the dichotomy between humankind and nature, arguing that "humanity has enslaved the nature from which it derives. It treats it ruthlessly and without considering the necessity to cooperate with it, rather than dominate it." Considering students' views, the challenge highlighted by Fry (2012, 136) remains relevant: "In order for there to be a future for us, we have to make it by overcoming our negation—'we' have to overcome the unsustainable defuturing being that we are."

#### RESPONSE TO THE IDENTIFIED ISSUES

## What should design look like to enable positive social change?

The semester assignment for History and Theory of Critical Design I primarily aimed to encourage students to begin critically reflecting on their

actions and their consequences for the world. As Fry (2020, 10) writes in his book *Defuturing: A New Design Philosophy*:

- ↪ Fundamentally, we act to defuture because we do not understand how the values, knowledge, worlds and things we create go on designing after we have designed and made them. [...] [W]hat is being said is that we have very little comprehension of the complexity, ongoing consequences and transformative nature of our impacts.

In what follows, Fry (2020, 239) presents an ultimatum: if we are unable or unwilling to realise how our actions are leading to defuturing, we must not even attempt to create solutions or engage in design practice. The duration of one academic semester is insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the current world situation. Yet, to move beyond mere criticism, students were tasked with proposing alternative approaches after having thoroughly pondered on the state of the world and design. In light of what they had read and discussed, students were challenged to envision the social transformations necessary for a better future and to outline the characteristics of design that would facilitate or promote these changes.

The proposals are most effectively summed up by Rin Togo (2023), who, in the process of exploring solutions, points out that “up until now, numerous tools, services, and applications have primarily targeted the enhancement of individual’s capabilities such as speed, accuracy, and clarity.” Togo acknowledges that these innovations have greatly facilitated communication and various other tasks; however, she emphasises that the development of such tools has led to certain drawbacks, as illustrated by the example of Google Maps app: “Google Maps, for instance, has substantially diminished opportunities to ask for directions from passersby on the street” (*ibid.*). The author argues that as result “we are missing out on new encounters and discoveries that might occur through those conversations” (*ibid.*). Togo concludes: “By doubting the present dichotomy that convenient/comfortable is entirely good and in-convenient/ugly is inherently bad, and focusing on the richness that lies within inconvenience, it is possible to create new convivial value” (*ibid.*).

In defining this new perspective or criterion for assessing design quality, the author coins the term ‘convivialability’. She provides a further explanation of this concept by describing it as a way of creating space



for users' imagination, creativity and active engagement (*ibid.*). Moreover, it involves the discovery and development of relationships that promote enhanced coexistence. A similar opinion is expressed by Gortnar (2023), who emphasises that in design “[t]he focus should be on creating technological solutions that enrich, rather than replace, the physical experiences.” In addition, Škrbić (2023), when discussing technological development, draws attention to Ivan Illich’s guidelines for progress, which also correspond to the principles of convivialism: “People need new tools to work with rather than tools that ‘work’ for them. They need technology to make the most of the energy and imagination each has, rather than more well-programmed energy slaves” (Illich 2009, 17). Grobovšek (2023), drawing on Fry (2012), poses an even more radical demand on designers:

- ↪ Ideally, designers should disengage from the system—emphasis being on the need to go beyond applying slight adaptations from within—and begin to act autonomously, adopting a critical stance towards their previous work. First and foremost, they should act with respect for the source that provides us with the means to satisfy our basic needs: the planet where we live. [...] Radical change is needed, which will not be dictated by capital.

The reflections made throughout “History and Theory of Critical Design I” coursework are further encapsulated by the words of Barbara Predan and Gaja Mežnarić Osole, which are highlighted by Žiga Dolinar and Ana Topole in their final semester paper. “As hopeless as the situation is today, it seems that it is indeed this abyss of hopelessness that may provide fertile ground for the emergence of radical yet creative thought, which will create distance from the status quo and point out the necessity to evaluate an alternative way of life” (Predan and Mežnarić Osole 2018). This is, after all, the purpose of the present monograph.

To avoid “gazing long into the abyss”—as Nietzsche warned—let us conclude on a brighter note by borrowing Žižek’s answer to the question of how radical change will begin to happen on a global scale: “I’m a pessimist in the sense that we are approaching dangerous times. But I’m an optimist for exactly the same reason. Pessimism means things are getting messy. Optimism means these are precisely the times when change is possible” (Žižek 2012).

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