



Introduction to Design Psychology

Eleni Kalantidou



“This subversive book challenges commonly accepted notions of stability and attachment to make a radical proposition that calls for care-fully embracing the axiologies of “Di/De”: Positive destruction, disassembling, detaching and discomforting are advocated as new epistemological and ontological orientations in the face of unsettlement, unhoming, and precarity. Bringing dominant approaches to design and psychology under scrutiny, and criticizing the pitfalls of their mutual trajectories of universalism, cartesian dualism, and scientification, Eleni Kalantidou reads the two fields in conjunction with each other urging us to overcome their misconceptions and malpractices while restoring their potency of transformation.”

Jilly Traganou, *Professor of Architecture and Urbanism, Parsons School of Design, The New School*

“For years, critical academics have argued that the discipline of psychology must learn about mental life by including the psychological humanities. Eleni Kalantidou thoughtfully expands the boundaries of psychology and demonstrates that psychology and design studies mutually invigorate their theories and practices. This relevant book is thoughtfully articulated and convincingly affirms that design psychology is a program that deserves significant intellectual and applied attention.”

Thomas Teo, *Professor of Psychology, York University*

“Psychology is intrinsic to design practice, is elemental in acquiring a design habitus, and is mobilised in numerous environmental contexts. Yet for all this, design psychology mostly resides in the domain of the unthought. So, what exactly is it? How should it be understood? And, how can it be moved directly into the consciousness of designers, and with what consequence? Eleni Kalantidou’s informative and challenging book provides the means for designers to answer these questions.”

Tony Fry, *Adjunct Professor of Architecture and Design, University of Tasmania*



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INTRODUCTION TO DESIGN PSYCHOLOGY

In the age of climate change, psychology and design have been employed through impromptu collaborations to validate solutions and future scenarios.

Introduction to Design Psychology contests this approach by proposing an ideological framework for an intentional, joint endeavour between psychology and design. Intentional design psychology is presented as a critical proposal grounded in unpredictability, nominating ways to activate new production, consumption, and habitation patterns. It unfolds through chapters exploring urban environments, technology, and consumer culture, making evident the need for new definitions of social resilience and adaptation. As part of this process, adaptive designs that enable resilient psychologies are revealed. By challenging the disciplinary status quo of psychology and design, this book aims to activate a new field of knowledge.

Introduction to Design Psychology is essential for psychologists, designers, and urban planners, as well as professionals from affiliated fields, willing to reconfigure their own thinking and practice.

Eleni Kalantidou is a design psychologist, strategist, researcher, and senior lecturer at Griffith University, Australia. Her research activities are focused on environmental and social resilience, design strategy, social impact, and social innovation. Kalantidou's research on repair, community-led behavioural change, resilience, and adaptation has been published in books and journals and funded by grants and consultancies. As a researcher and consultant, she has collaborated with various international, national, and local non-governmental organisations, as well as the public sector.



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PREFACE

What is design psychology? This question arose from my own curiosity and background. Being educated in psychology and moving into design through my doctorate in architecture and academic work, I discovered their disconnection and a lack of shared language. Most importantly, I realised that despite their clear disciplinary boundaries, they are obliquely intertwined in all facets of everyday life. For many years, I experimented with research projects and concepts in order to discover their joint agency beyond these disciplinary limitations. This journey culminated in the writing of this book, primarily aimed at understanding how we can overcome the cycle of offering the same ineffective ‘solutions’ that have contributed to the problems we face today, including climate change, social injustices, and increasingly unsettled realities. I have been greatly invested in this project for several reasons: as a human living in an unpredictable world; as a psychologist grappling with limited tools to deal with what is present; and as a designer restricted by repetitive patterns of production and consumption. Additionally, as a researcher and teacher, I equally feel overwhelmed by the limitations of existing epistemological and educational paradigms that often feel disconnected from lived experience. That said, I am mindful of my own biases, having been educated within a Eurocentric framework, and recognise how my own conditioning and experiences influence my practice.

My aspiration for this book is to foster camaraderie and establish a common ground for researchers and practitioners like me to jointly re-evaluate our thinking and practices. Intentional design psychology is envisioned here as an ideological framework, but it can be so much more. As a discursive practice it invites diversity, experimentation, and methodologies that are not yet present. It introduces projects showcasing community-led

behavioural change, affirmative destruction, relational accountability, and constantly changing configurations of subjectivities. These initiatives have the potential to instigate new patterns of production, consumption, and habitation. In brief, this book has been instrumental in transforming my sense of angst into agency, providing a platform to articulate my ideas about changing the world. My hope is that it will have a similar impact on my colleagues, students, and fellow practitioners.

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I acknowledge the Traditional Owners/Custodians of the lands on which I work and live across Australia, and their continuing connection to the Country (land, sea, and sky). I pay my respects to Elders, past and present.

This book would not exist without the support and encouragement of Tony Fry, who believed in its potential and planted the seeds for it to grow through his work. Encouragement was also provided by the late Paul Pholeros, who saw potential in my work and has served as a great source of inspiration through the integrity he embodied as an architect and Healthabitat leader.

The ideas for this book were further enriched through visiting prominent academics with the support of Griffith University. In 2018 I visited and had discussions with Juliet Schor (Boston College), Stephen Gray (Harvard Graduate School of Design), Robin Nagle (NYU), Greg Castillo (UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design), Adam Millard-Ball (previously UC Santa Cruz, currently UCLA), and Andrew Szasz (UC Santa Cruz). I extend my heartfelt gratitude for generously meeting with me and sharing their insights, especially given my lack of clarity at that stage. I would also like to thank architect Mark Primack and his family for their hospitality, during the same trip. Additionally, this book greatly benefited from gaining experience with place-based, lived experience approaches through conducting the research component of the initiative ‘Creative Industries, Social Enterprise, Repair and Restoration (CISERR)’ over the past three years in Maryborough, Queensland, in collaboration and camaraderie with Tammy Brennan.

All chapters have been substantially improved through the feedback of Tony Fry and Naomi Hay. I am grateful for Naomi’s gentleness, editorial support, and perceptive comments. Indirectly, my work was encouraged by the critical direction of psychologists such as Ian Parker and Thomas Teo

(who legitimised my seeing things otherwise), as well as voices from architecture, philosophy, and sociology, strengthening my arguments for a necessary change in how we respond to present and future challenges.

Finally, I am indebted to my friends for putting up with me while writing this book and most importantly, my family. This book would not exist without the patience and care of my family members, especially my partner, Petros Nyfantis, and my daughters, Iris and Daphne, to whom I dedicate this book.

1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

What is design psychology? Despite the term sounding familiar, it is hard to define it and pinpoint its practice. The always present and implicit connections between psychology and design are usually neglected, owing to the hard lines dividing the two disciplines. On the one hand, attempts from environmental psychology to bridge the two have relied mainly upon a cause-and-effect, explanatory model of their relationship, providing psychological interpretations of design. On the other hand, design has followed the same route by employing pre-existing psychological schemata to add a psychological interpretation to its process and outcomes. The disciplinary traditions of psychology and design have greatly influenced both approaches.

To understand the current definition and practice of design psychology, the evolution of psychology and design as disciplines was examined, tracing their paths to becoming sciences and their alignment with the natural-scientific model. This knowledge was crucial to pivot from them without discarding their histories. Positioning psychology and design in time and place helped comprehend the role of measurement and scientific standards, how contemporary models work, and their relationship with historically corresponding socioeconomic systems. This process allowed to detect their intersections and differences and understand their active participation in creating everyday life. Understanding the embeddedness of both disciplines in contemporary socioeconomic structures enabled the interpretation of design psychology's existing configurations. The latter, simply a bricolage of existing theories and methods from psychology and design, is frequently adopted to fulfil the same purposes as the disciplines it draws

from. ‘Impromptu’ design psychology is employed in this book, because psychologists and designers have not intentionally nor jointly developed it to address their respective disciplines’ inevitable synergy in making habitus. The lending and borrowing happening between psychology and design in the context of impromptu design psychology prompted questioning its effectiveness as a model for responding to contemporary challenges, and its success in implementation. It also sparked the enquiry of what ontological and epistemological insights from the critical branches of various disciplines exist outside of impromptu design psychology. All the above triggered the endeavour to loosely frame an intentional design psychology.

Why is intentional design psychology needed? Many people, especially those from the disciplines of psychology and design, might find this proposal unnecessary. Still, the answer can be found in assessing the effectiveness of conventional psychological and design approaches to tackle contemporary challenges. Environmental and social injustices are accelerated by unprecedented change happening across all levels of human activity. Pandemics, climatic disasters, and displacement are asymmetrically impacting human populations in the global North and South (as they exist as divided and within each other). Housing and the employment security necessary to attain it are becoming increasingly precarious in the global North, while they have always been so in the global South. In the latter, basic needs such as water are becoming increasingly scarce and are accessed according to one’s level of privilege.

Nevertheless, technology, particularly in developed countries, has facilitated a detachment from these realities. Everything appears to function perfectly from the outside, concealing how most things work, owing to cognitive deskilling brought by technological obscureness and service-driven economies. Addressing these issues requires a systemic response, which cannot come solely from intentional design psychology. The everyday normality designed to reflect unreal stability in privileged settings and the lack of designed provisions for the ones affected by disaster, designate the necessity of a different approach. The latter should adopt designs deriving from an acceptance of impermanence as the natural state of being, acknowledging the unsustainability of the current production/consumption models and accepting change as a condition to design with, not against. To activate such an approach, contemporary psychologies of fear, eco-existential angst, and denial must be confronted, along with psychologies of loss. Instead of medicalising these as states of depression, they should be seen as symptomatic of problematic, designed conditions or ineffective design responses.

Given the fast-paced transformations happening in all planetary life and the impending need to respond intentionally and not reactively, the task becomes to develop an approach that helps reconfigure our sense of normality. There is a notion that nothing changes unless people change, and

change is hard. Redirecting how cornerstones of life are perceived, such as happiness and success as well as loss, necessitates a discursive practice that makes the exploration of knowledge outside its current exclusive prescriptions possible. This would entail an intentional design psychology framed through a discursive practice as a critical, uniting front, bringing together diverse voices from various fields and epistemologies. Emphasis is placed on producing knowledge via heterogenous and incidental practices taking place in various settings, merging symbolic with material meanings that embody the reality and political nature of everyday life (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014). Without discursive practice being a science or a discipline, it designates a system of thought that chooses and reconfigures elements from various disciplines in unforeseen ways. It is not limited to generating 'discourse' but expands to practices of everyday life. It adapts to change in order to pursue knowledge according to the needs and possibilities of a given time and place (Foucault, 2021). Considering the complexity of contemporary circumstances, intentional design psychology as a discursive practice becomes a starting point to explore how to reconfigure models of living in conditions of unpredictability.

From this standpoint, intentional design psychology requires an emphasis on place-based, lived experience, contrasting the universalising nature of psychology and design. Through their scientification, psychology and design have embraced the canon of external validity, resulting in the possibility of replication and generalisation. Adopting this epistemological position led to psychology excluding or psychopathologising whoever did not fit into the mould of socially accepted identities (Danziger, 1994; Gergen, 1997). For design, this meant dismissing the importance of 'bringing forth' (Heidegger, 1927/1962) and intuition as part of the design process (Schön, 1983) by standardising it to achieve a fixed outcome. Psychology and design's intention, driven by the ontology and epistemology that established them as disciplines, has been to form lived experience rather than learn from it. In that sense, no matter how psychology and design are employed in this book, one is not prioritised over the other. They have both complied with the given socioeconomic paradigm and its demands.

Critical exceptions in these fields have identified the biases of the Eurocentric, patriarchal and binary gaze of psychology and design's scientific direction. They have also stressed the destructive impact of psychology and design's implementation on social and natural ecologies. Against this backdrop, critical psychologists and designers have conducted much preliminary work in uncovering their wrongdoings, yet not through a joint undertaking. There has not been an intentional framework for collaboratively exploring critiques of conventional practices by practitioners and transforming them into new theoretical schemata and practices. In this view, intentional design psychology, as envisioned here, invites academics, professionals, and

organisations to participate in a discursive practice aimed at revealing adaptation pathways that could foster social resilience.

Despite this sounding like jargon repeated by almost everyone these days, including governmental organisations, techno-driven solutions, and grass-roots initiatives, this book emphasises discovering how to best put forward adaptation and social resilience. Existing psychological and design directions related to prominent aspects of human activity, such as urban life, technology, and consumption, are analysed to unearth their limitations and potential when seen under the light of impermanence. The objective behind this process is to reveal what disturbs human and planetary equilibrium in the context of everyday living and discover how to implement adaptive designs that enable resilient psychologies. Both adaptation and resilience are removed from the ‘bouncing back’ narrative of economic recovery and positioned within the time and place risk conditions communities face.

Considering the introductory nature of this book, the aim has been for it to be non-prescriptive. Instead, the intention has been to provide an ideological backbone of intentional design psychology by emphasising where it comes from and what it could be. The idea is to develop new means and experiment with them by embracing place-based, lived experience principles without negating existing methodologies from psychology and design. In this sense, intentional design psychology invites like-minded theorists and practitioners to explore it by conceptualising and implementing it. It is also a provocation for students, scholars, and professionals from various fields to re-evaluate their education and practice. The researcher is acknowledged as biased, embedded in the context of their investigation, and affected by what is at stake professionally, economically, and perhaps politically. There are different pathways proposed to make this happen: intentional design psychology as overarching supplementary knowledge impacting all fields in need of re-learning, as investigated in this book; a developing specialism, not as a fragmented overspecialisation, but as a new extension of psychology and design leading their redirection; a practice in its own way adopted and adapted by the insightful designer inherently introducing a psychological dimension through their practice; as enablement of decision making developed by practitioners to help people get control over their lives. Despite the challenges and obstacles this invitation contains, as well as potential misappropriations, it allows new practitioners and psychosocial technologies to emerge, with affirmative techniques becoming the means for us to employ design in its most fundamental way, remaking our cosmologies and ontologies.

From this perspective, intentional design psychology, as presented here, calls for a commitment to change and its values as defined by plural psychologies and respective designs – all shaped by and shaping continuously transforming environments. Its non-prescriptive nature is deliberate, owing to unpredictably changing conditions, globally and locally. There are no

clear indications of how phenomena such as climate change and socio-economic shifts will co-evolve, making it impossible to forecast what means will be available to respond. In this context, human agency cannot be claimed without the resources to support it. That said, intentional design psychology can move beyond passively exploring the psychological impact of design and provide alternatives to prescribed ‘solutions’ claimed by technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The ideas introduced through this brief overview further unfold in the six chapters of this book. In detail, Chapter 1 negotiates the ontological, epistemological, and cosmological positioning of psychology and design to comprehend their ideological framing and respective implementations. The chapter provides an overview of existing ontologies and epistemologies and explains the leading role of the natural-scientific model in scientising aspiring disciplines. Under this banner, psychology and design’s histories of becoming sciences are explored. The excluding, discriminatory nature of this process is also discussed in the context of their Eurocentric, mono-cosmological, and colonising traditions. After establishing where psychology and design come from, an investigation of their shared manifestations follows. This is through environmental psychology, the work of human geographers, grassroots initiatives, and the efforts of primarily architects in the 1960s and 1970s to involve the user in the design process with methods such as participatory design and Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE). Most recently, human-centred design has been promoted as an expression of addressing psychological needs via design. Despite its objective to make products easier to use and thus more saleable, it is unpacked as an anthropocentric and ethnocentric example of the unconsciousness of a Eurocentrically inculcated design psychology. Chapter 1 concludes by stressing the limitations of existing approaches combining psychology and design while highlighting their commonalities and differences. Most importantly, it makes a case for a revisited framework of intentional collaboration between the two that will allow for adopting more insightful, informed, and efficacious ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies.

After examining the roots of psychology and design and how they initially came together, Chapter 2 focuses on design psychology through its current applications. Examples of impromptu design psychology and connections between psychological models and design showcase the development of design streams affiliated with cognitive, behavioural, and affective psychology. As a result, cognitive and behavioural design, together with design and emotion, have been actualised to reinforce the influencing impact of design. While many efforts promoted the improvement of conditions related to user experience, comfort or sustainability, most of them have perpetuated flawed psychological models without questioning the implications of borrowing theories from psychology. To contest this uncritical exchange between the

two disciplines, Chapter 2 proposes employing practices such as accountability mapping and opening design psychology to plural psychologies and designs. Correspondingly, it promotes ‘researching with’ rather than ‘researching for’ (Estalella & Criado, 2018), by employing lived experience and place-based approaches. It additionally frames intentional design psychology as a discursive practice responding to the need for a new imagination cultivated by practitioners, researchers, theorists, critics, and educators.

Urban environments are emphasised in Chapter 3 to explore why intentional design psychology is necessary and how it could unfold in conditions of accelerating change. The psychologies and psychopathologies of evolving cities are looked into, in conjunction with socioeconomic and political developments. What arises from this inquiry is the growing unsettlement caused by gentrification, increasing need for housing, physical, and psychological displacement. In addition, geopolitical tensions and climatic disasters lead to cities in global North and South becoming illusionary havens, which could easily collapse under the pressure of infrastructural failure. Adaptative philosophies currently put forward advocate for technocratic, degrowth, and transitional approaches. These are being analysed to assess their potential and critiqued for projecting the present into the future. Most importantly, what is underlined in this chapter is the misconception that unsettlement only affects the ‘disfranchised’, evidenced through examples designating the impact of displacement on people from various socioeconomic strata. As a closing remark, intentional design psychology suggestions involving participatory governance and redefining adaptation, are provided to sketch a pragmatic response addressing (un)settlement and (un)homing emergencies.

Chapter 4 explores where technology comes from, its connection to psychology and design and how it has become interwoven into human activity, like never before. Despite the acknowledgement that we have always been technological, Chapter 4 elucidates the transition to posthumanism and shares an account of existing facets of design psychology as enablers of the informational revolution. It presents the history of this relationship by exploring the role of design in enabling technological advancement, with the highlight being Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). HCI has been facilitated by cognitive psychology and cognitive science, which legitimised the claim of computers being the extension of the human brain, particularly with the most recent developments of deep networks and machine learning. Impromptu design psychology facilitated this effort through projects such as the affecting computing approach (Picard, 1995) and the more contemporary iBorderCtrl (European Commission, 2022). Consequently, it has enabled users’ technological dependence and deskilling, which contributes to artificialising reality and compromising their agency. A discussion on the ramifications of this condition ensues, including the necessity of intentional design psychology to address technology through the lens of life knowledge

(savoir-vivre) (Stiegler, 2019) and situational knowledge (Dreyfus, 1972). The final part of this chapter also identifies the importance of holding technology accountable by acknowledging its embeddedness in transindividuations (Tucker, 2022) and ourselves for equating our brains to AI through second-order cybernetics.

Similarly to how technological dependence has been enabled by psychology and design, overconsumption has been established through consumer culture facilitated by impromptu design psychology worldwide. What is being negotiated in Chapter 5 is how consumer culture was created and enabled by psychology and design. Moving beyond the irreversible environmental damage that consumer culture has catalysed, Chapter 5 explores its negative impact on psychologies by generating constructs of happiness and success. These have progressively led to mental health conditions that design has tried to alleviate (with more consumption), while psychology has pathologised without targeting the root causes. Critical theorists and practitioners from both disciplines have proposed alternatives to contest the harm their respective disciplines have caused. Likewise, impromptu design psychology initiatives have directed users' reform through individual behavioural change methods such as nudging (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) and design and emotion (Chapman, 2009), as well as social reform through practice-oriented design (Shove et al., 2007). Yet, their limited success designates the need for intentional design psychology responses. These, grounded in existing approaches such as community-led behavioural change (Kalantidou & Brennan, 2024), are exemplified through expressions of commoning, repair, and care in action that could transform psychologies and designs.

The book's final chapter scaffolds intentional design psychology by underlying its recurrent theme, the urgency for change. It provides a loose ideological framework with its predominant principles being the inclusion of uncharted ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies; overcoming modern dualism; discovering subjectivities anchored in relational accountability; shedding the label of 'expert' from the researcher embedded in time and place; and sharing purpose. In this light, the priority for intentional design psychology as a discursive practice becomes the disengagement from social constructs enabling destructive patterns by adopting di/de- with care. Di/de- requires emotionally and materially detaching from notions of permanence, manifested through ownership, place attachment, and nation attachment. It also necessitates positive destruction and acknowledging the negative destruction that current socioeconomic systems contribute to. Disassembling is also suggested as a vehicle for identifying what needs to be maintained, repaired or abandoned. In relation to psychological constructs, discomforting becomes a priority as a means to depathologise conditions such as eco-anxiety. Turning psychological discomfort into an asset is intertwined with redirecting belief systems by accepting impermanence. To do so, normality,

adaptation, and resilience must be redefined, while community-led behavioural change (Kalantidou & Brennan, 2024) should be explored in conjunction with place-based and trans-local adaptation. Accordingly, Chapter 6 and the book close with suggestions about how intentional design psychology should be used, identifies its audience, and invites practitioners and theorists to contribute to its realisation as a discursive practice.

Taken as a whole, the book introduces intentional design psychology as an alternative to impromptu design psychology and the disciplinary applications of psychology and design. Its topics were selected as overarching, owing to their impact on natural and social ecologies. Still, these topics are only representative of a vast array of problems that need to be seen in a different light. By identifying what is currently excluded from epistemological enquiries, the need for new ones arises, which could capture momentum while thinking from the future. This can only happen with the participation of critical theorists and practitioners, by developing further the ideas presented here. The goal of this book is not (only) to challenge the disciplinary status quo of psychology and design. Its aim equally is to activate a research community consisted of psychologists, designers and professionals from affiliated fields, willing to reconfigure their own thinking and practice. It is a starting point and a call for action. The aspiration is for its ideas to be engaged with and employed as a tool and a guide. Finally, the hope is that this book will inspire theories, projects, and collaborations that can provide pragmatic responses to the challenges, present and ahead.

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