



By **BIANCA CARAGUE**

# Design's new role in shaping desirable futures

**I** imagine this: you find yourself in the year 2050. Take a look around and notice where you are. What do you see, smell, and hear? How does it feel to be there? Taking a few steps forward, you encounter an object. You pick it up and examine it. What is it? What does it do? Who is it designed for?

This was the gist of my exhibition in The Netherlands last summer. It took the climate crisis as a starting point to imagine four different types of children that might exist in the year 2050 and took visitors through their bedrooms.

Exhibition visitors shared their own ideas of what the world might look like in 2050 through workshops I facilitated. Over the course of two months, I incorporated these ideas into my work and the exhibition gradually evolved. What started out as my own vision of the future eventually gave way to a thousand other points of view.

I build virtual worlds that tell stories about the future and society. But these worlds I create are not ends in themselves. They are tools to communicate how I see the world and are means to reflect on my own values, biases, and beliefs. I believe that it matters to be aware of who you are and where you stand as you put something out into the world. Whether you're

know it themselves. While this approach has its merits, it is important to recognize the biases we might unintentionally project onto others as we seek to help them. If the design profession poses this risk, how can we design better?

Last June 29, on World Industrial Design Day, I participated in a roundtable conversation hosted by the Design Center of the Philippines. Alongside Abi Mapua-Cabanilla, Kara Rosas, Kar Abola, and Birdie Salva, we explored the idea of "Design's New Purpose." We discussed how the traditional purpose of design for industry and aesthetics might now evolve into bringing people and perspectives together. Of all the things that came up, one thing became clear: the role of the designer is becoming that of a mediator between people and their own sense of agency. Rather than prescribing solutions, the role of designers now must be to empower communities to dream bigger, imagine differently, and bring their own visions of the future to life. In a world brimming with possibility, design has taken on a powerful new purpose — one that goes beyond mere aesthetics and embraces the potential for impact and diversity.

Phoebe Tickell describes imagination activism as "a new kind of activism powered by imagination and the vision and tools to

Friday, July 21, 2023



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important to say about what a desirable future looks like. The role of a designer is not just to make more stuff but to hold space for unexpected points of view.

As Abi Mapua-Cabanilla mentioned during the roundtable discussion on June 29, change happens when your efforts are scaled up to the level of policy, out to communities, and

The solutions we design are direct reflections of how we perceive problems, and every creation is a manifestation of everything we've ever seen, experienced, and believed. What we design speaks volumes about who we are as individuals and as a society. In a world of infinite potential, the world is a canvas, but it's also a mirror. Worldbuilding starts with world-seeing.

The new purpose of design offers us an opportunity to imagine futures that are actually fundamentally different from what's in front of us. By recognizing the values and beliefs we bring into our work, holding space for multiple perspectives, and embracing the complexities of uncertainty, we can create things, places, and experiences that truly reflect our diverse society. Let's pave a path where design is not just about problem-solving, but empowering individuals, fostering dialogue, and nurturing the agency within each of us to shape the world we want to live in.

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