Why We Need Design for the Circular Economy

From Linear to Circular — it's time to call out designers to rethink our broken economic model

**Future Urban Living**
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Design was born to combine functional and aesthetic meaning for everyday objects after the massification of production that came with the industrial revolution, which disrupted the ways of interaction between people and goods. Rapidly, over the past 20 years, industrial objects became services and systems of touch points, digital interfaces, and even further, with digitalisation came the Internet of Things and machine learning systems. Our cities grew bigger, our networks of production and trading more articulate and our societies more multicultural.

> *A complex industrial network grew much faster than our human ability to adapt to it and understand its real opportunities without feeling overwhelmed, driven by markets and numbers.*

From the Western economic boom, to globalisation and delocalisation of industries, to the growth of new markets in the East, all these changes led by industry came at a cost: greater distance between producers and consumers. Goods and services became widely available and affordable but as we accumulated them, the lack of purpose and connection with their increasingly diversified public became more evident.

Businesses, in time, noticed that they could not continue to thrive without a community to support them; that they were drifting apart from their consumers. Industry started to look for consultants to advise them on how to bridge the gap with their consumers and organically, the profession of product designer evolved with the demand.

This is when Service Design emerged as a new practice.
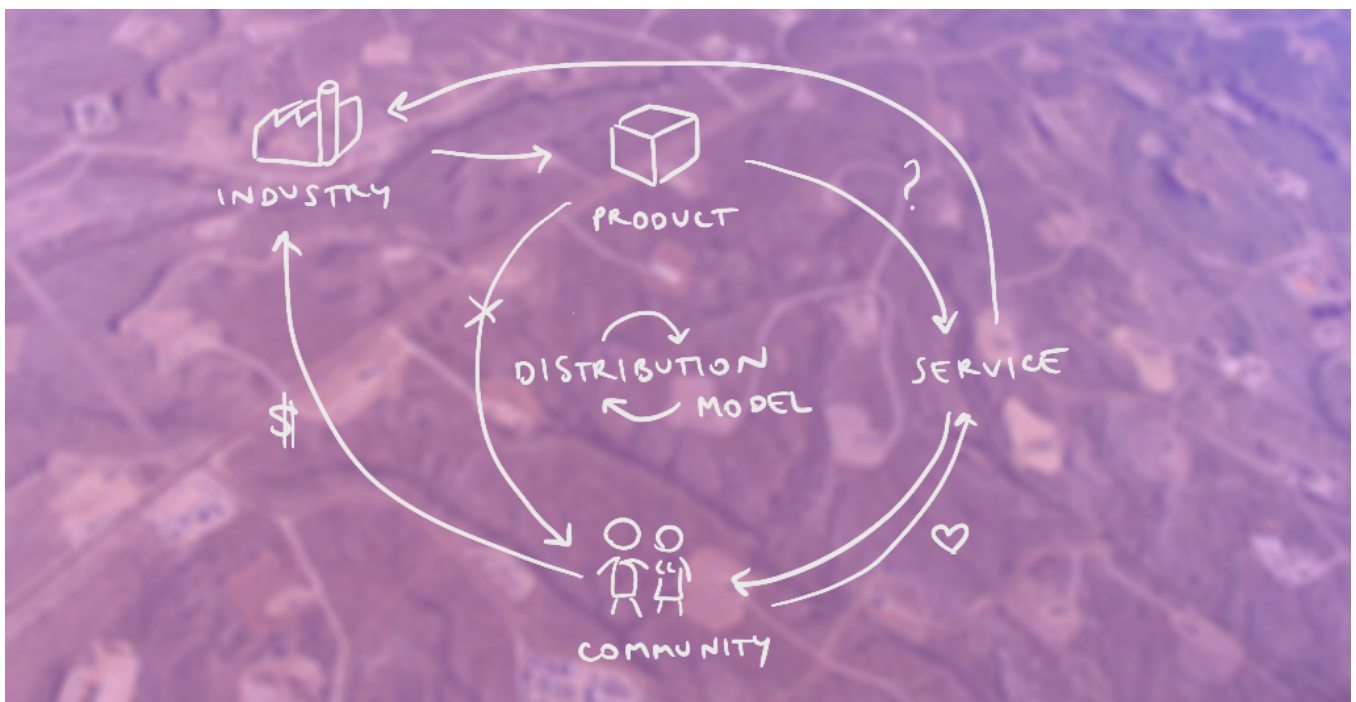
Service Design aims at rethinking our interaction model with product-systems

Evolving Design Practices

With Service Design the focus shifted from objects to services and systems, from the products of the business to their model of interaction with customers: how could companies better serve their communities? How might they center their operation models around their customers' needs, rather than solely their products sales?

> By focusing on the end consumer, products and services improve, customer retention improves, and business innovation and value outpaces the competition. What could be more important than customer satisfaction in a world where a single user's opinion can go viral?

In the modern world of screens and interfaces, User Experience Design (UX) too evolved as the digital sibling of service design. A UX designer must understand how a digital product can enter the user's life seamlessly through a delightful, non-disrupting experience based on practices that are familiar to the users and create added value for them. Fail at understanding the user, and meeting their true needs, and you're just inviting disruption from the next startup.

Design had to adapt along the years to the changes and demands of business in order to maintain a *connection* between service providers, product manufacturers and developers, and the people that use them. **Each industrial revolution demanded designers to evolve with the challenges faced by new market opportunity**.

The work of a designer is essentially to connect, enable, resolve, strategise. The method we use today to investigate services and digital products is the same a product designer would have used 50 years earlier to design a spoon.


Good design creates value transforming problems in opportunities

Designing Circularity

Today, as we are entering the doors of the radically disruptive **4th Industrial Revolution**, we are also facing a major environmental challenge derived from the outcomes of previous Industrial Revolutions and the effects of globalization: *climate change.* What is the new opportunity emerging for designers in this herculean feat?

Up until today, linear economies based on the model of *make-use-dispose* have been driving innovation in our world, creating 'externalities' that seemed not to matter too much within a short-term context, but eventually accumulating to cause negative impact on our Earth, our oceans and the atmosphere. So much so, that we are entering a new accelerated geological era called the Anthropocene, 'the Epoch of Humans', the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment. **Environmental pollution has become the biggest threat to life on Earth.**
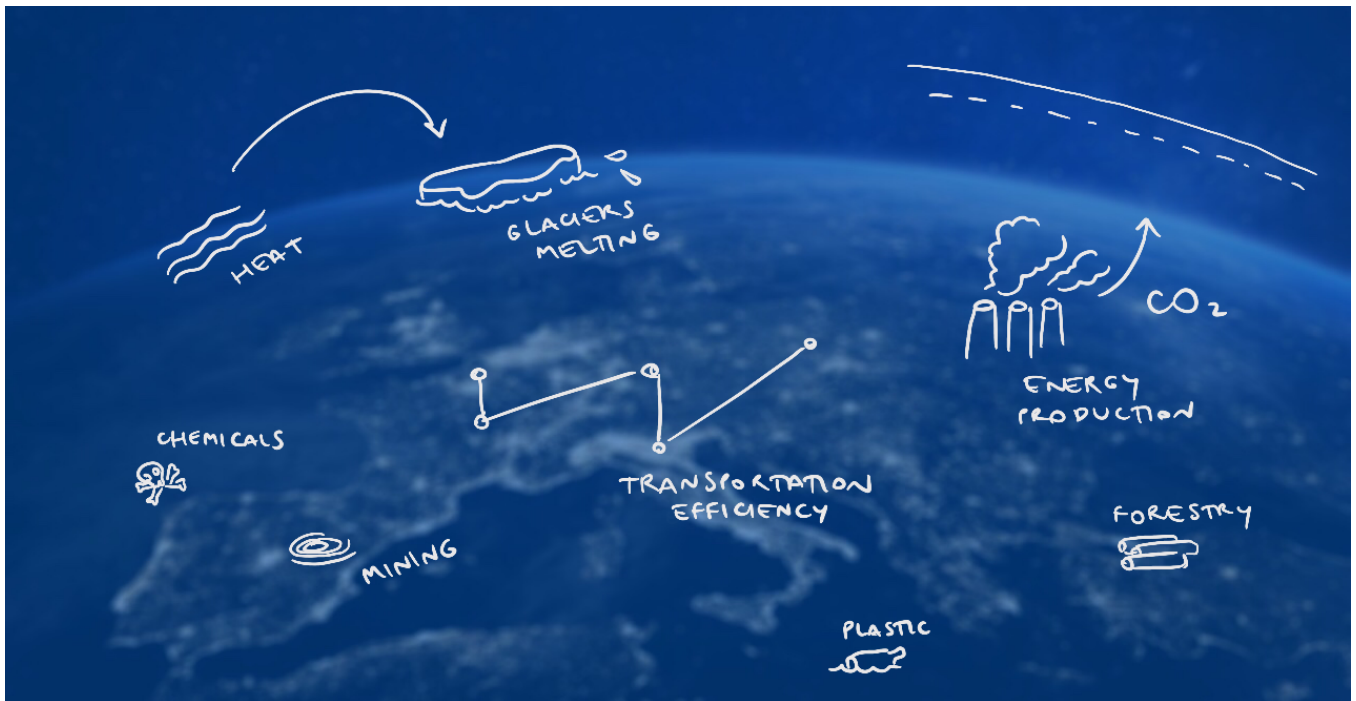
Zooming out on some of the effects of the Epoch of Humans on the Earth

The Linear Economy model is no longer viable if we want to inhabit our Earth for generations to come: once again we need design to focus on creating new value chains for our businesses to operate within new constraints.

A viable alternative would be the **Circular Economy** model, theorised at the end of the last century: a model where all waste generated at the end of a product or service lifecycle *re-enters* the production and consumption loop as regenerative resources. A

system where the waste is **"designed out"** of business operations, and where businesses themselves are working together to preserve and restore our ecosystems.

The urgency to change was never so imminent as it is now: our coastlines, oceans, ice caps, glaciers, forests, harvests, and cities are at risk and will definitely go through immense changes within the next decade. Animals, plants and natural ecosystems are suffering, and as a consequence we will suffer famine, sickness, migration, extreme weather events that will have a huge impact on our cities and our population's general wellbeing.

Once again, the role of designers today needs to be *agile* enough for the changing landscapes of the market. **Design can be used to address entire business models rather than individual products or services**.

The design method, also popularised as **Design Thinking**, can be applied to economic structures to act on the production and distribution processes of globalisation to revert its negative effects on our environment; keeping businesses competitive and user-centered at the same time.

Users and consumers are ready for this change: according to 2018 Cone/Porter Novelli purpose study *"78% of consumers say that it's no longer acceptable for companies to just make money — they need to **positively impact** society as well"*. For this reason corporations and governments too are starting to support this shift, which for a long time was neglected and denied for fear of shaking up the status quo.

Research has been extensively conducted and reported by NGOs, institutions and scientists. We know what needs to change. Now we need to **make the changes.** We need designers and creative thinkers to accept the challenge and apply their know-how to adapt our business structures to the Circular Economy.

And we need decision-makers in businesses and urban cities to respond to this challenge and rethink how value is created.

This is the reason why Future Urban Living project was born in the first place. At the intersection of business and design expertise, from the conversation between the corporate and creative world. We believe design can make our cities and businesses future-ready.

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If you are curious to know more, drop us a hello here and we'll loop you in!

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