

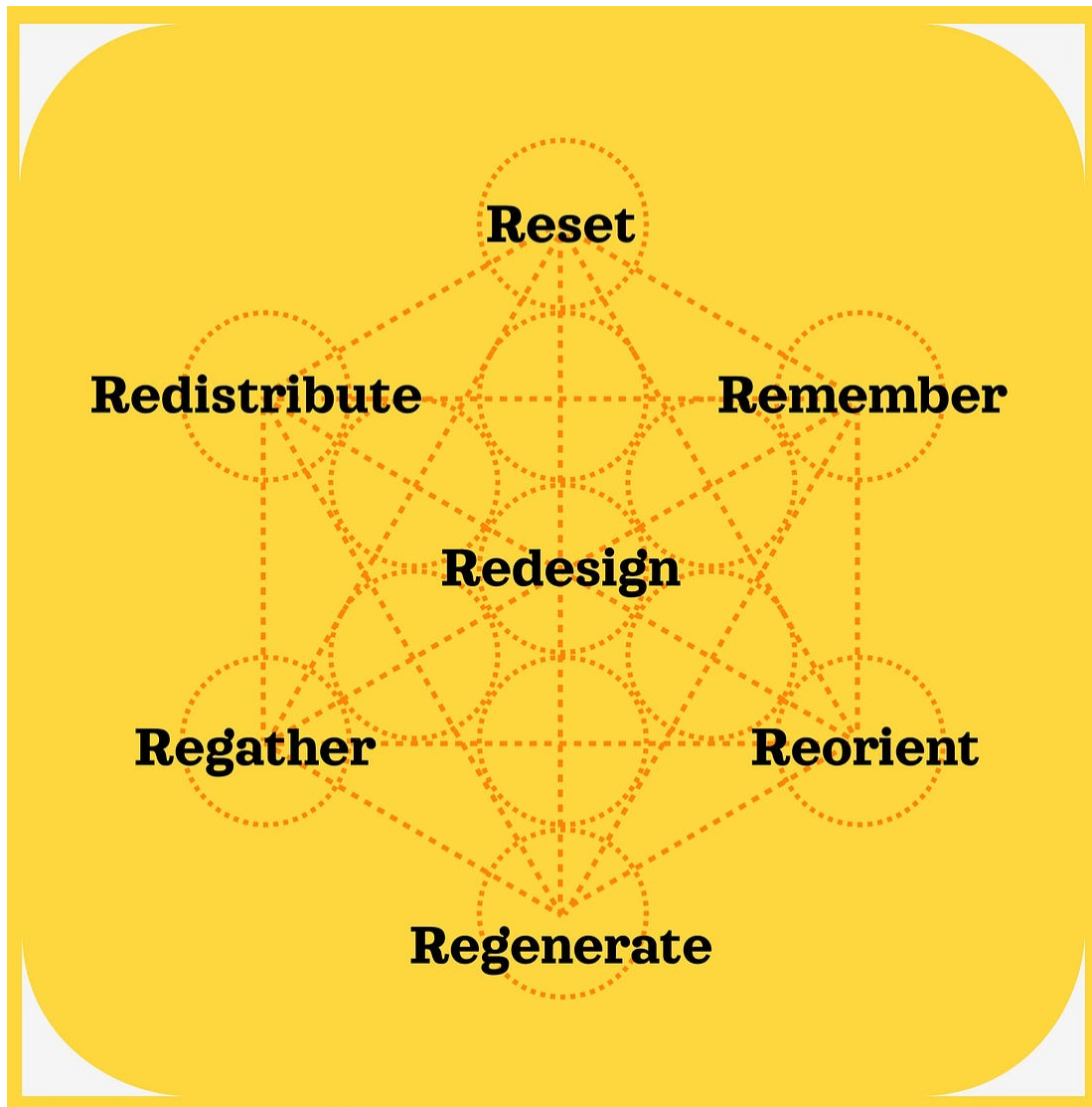
Undesign thinking

Part 2: the undoing



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The steps of undesign thinking projected onto the sacred geometry of Metatron's Cube.

To design 'environmentally improved' versions of existing products or buildings will not deliver a condition of sustainment. This is because current 'practices and products of 'sustainability' just cannot displace the sheer mass of the unsustainable. — Tony Fry, Elimination by Design (2003)

What if design would be about dismantling and replacing modernity's tools, incentives, and processes? In the first part of this essay, I outlined some fundamentals and current perspectives to design thinking as a contemporary problem-solving process. Design thinking has been employed in various sectors of business for creating products and services during the last decades. I ended that piece with the sentiment that we still need a process, somewhat similar to design thinking, to build things. But, that process would need to begin from regenerative needs, operate regeneratively, and for regenerative ends. To accomplish that, I suggest we need to unthink and unsee many premises, and re-see the world and ourselves as a connected organism and parts of a shared metabolism. Only then can we start undesigning the current and past ways of overreaching. I teased with a process where several things are *re*-thought and *re*-done: **Reset, Remember, Reorient, Redesign, Regenerate, Regather, and Redistribute.**

Today, I will continue the sketching by adding details under those headings. These steps, or interrelated parts, are sketches in the sense that I have not yet tried to run them in practice. Experience tells me that the steps and their substance are bound to change when participants with their lived experiences engage with them in real-world contexts for real-world issues. That is my aspiration, sooner rather than later (please let me know if you want to chat about collaborating!). Nevertheless, some housekeeping needs to be done beforehand. As soon as one begins thinking how 'undesigning' would work in practice, various questions rise to the surface: how and why to undo things, and which things would remain valuable, to be redesigned rather than undesigned as such? Which designs would be fit for a civilisation that values the

relationality between all things — the *more-than-human-world* as David Abram has put it?

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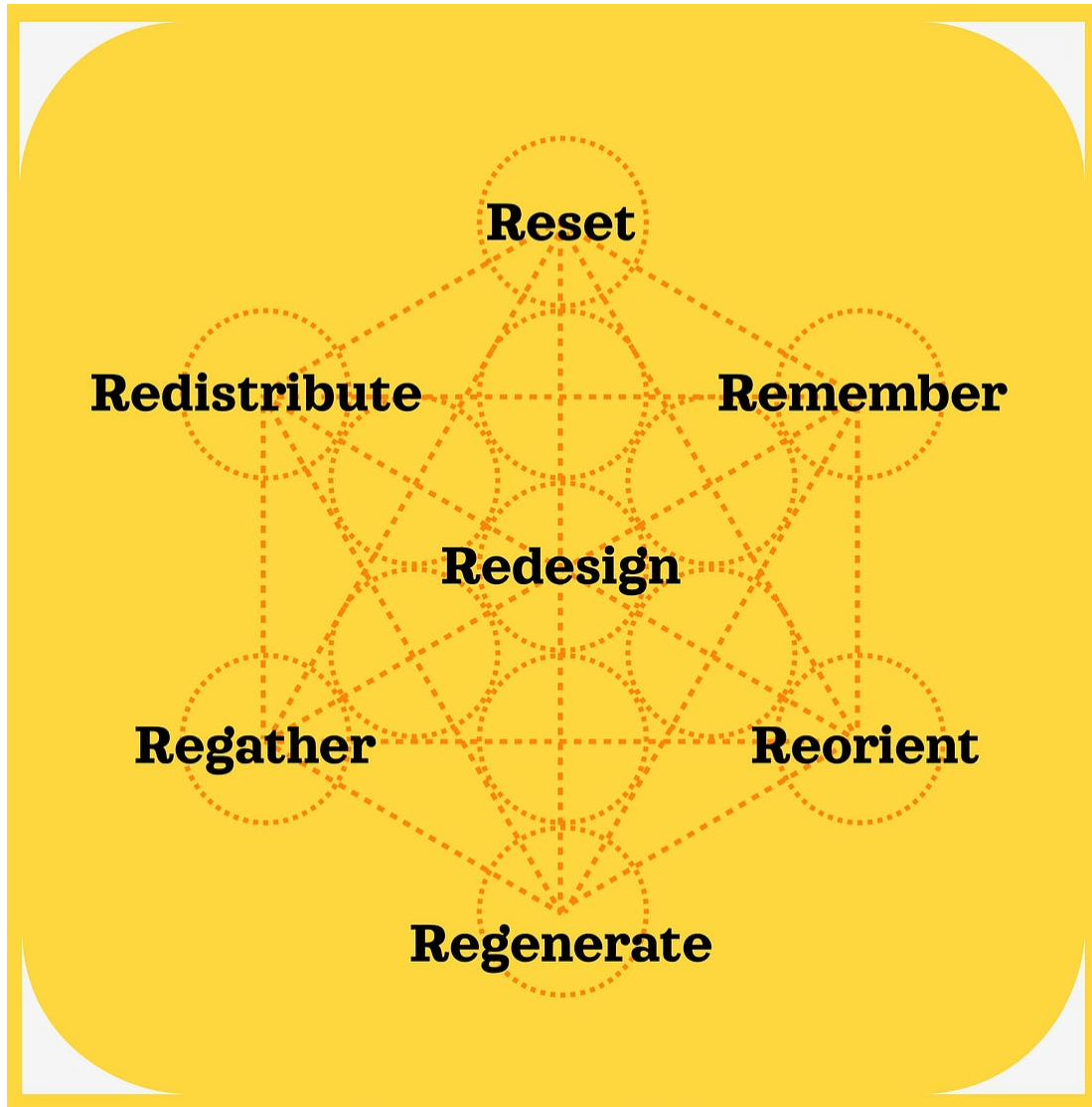
To justify dismantling a current technological solution, for example, there needs to be either a solid rationale about how keeping the current process, tool, or habit is damaging. Or an argument, based on evidence, about its contribution to the risk of collapse. In case the object or process under scrutiny is critical for sustaining life, the intention to undesign needs to be accompanied by suggestions for planet-preserving alternatives that are not depending on unsustainable and profit-seeking extraction of natural resources or human labour. For example, in the form of regenerative approaches that substitute the extractive solution with equitable more-than-human-world impacts. The more-than-human-world is important here to transcend 'user-centric' or 'human-centric' approaches, outputs of which might still remain extractive and only accessible to privileged groups.

In many ways, then, the undesign thinking process is about the dougaldhinean work in the ruins ([Dougald Hine](#)) of a human-centric civilisation; it is about the tasks where we begin discerning what is worth keeping and what can be found from the past, once held primitive or unproductive, that is worth rediscovering and redesigning for new contexts. By paying attention to the past, undesigning can be said to conservative in two senses of the word: 1) first, with a small c in that it values the true, good, and beautiful over deterministic views of progress and post-modern, overtly relativist views of nature (well documented by [Paul Kingsnorth](#) and others), and 2) that it tries to *conserve* the more-than-human-world, respecting the creativity and intelligence of nature, and transcending the nature-culture dichotomy to see all activity on earth as deeply interwoven.

Undesign is relational

A 'process' implies linearity and step-by-step methodologies, and when taken to the extreme, stringent standards that stifle creativity and relationality with their left-hemispheric desires for certainty and control. Undesigning steers away from reductionism and stays with the interrelatedness of the trouble. Undesigning should strive to acknowledge the complexity, situatedness, and embodiedness of systemic contexts in the more-than-human-world. Undesign thinking dares to be messy when viewed through the lenses of modernity and patriarchy. Hence, in practice there would need to be a balance between process and spontaneity; between creativity and incorporation; between extrinsically directed, goal-orientated activities, and activities that address meaningful, true issues, motivated by intrinsic joy. Easier said than done, I know. But as an aspiration, still worth pursuing.

My illustration of the tentative phases of undesign thinking is projected into the sacred geometry of Metatron's cube. It attempts to express the non-linearity and fundamental relationality of undesign activities. I'll return to the symbol at the end of this essay.



Reset

The first step has to do with slowing down and looking around: to pay attention to what is going on in the world on a scale of planetary systems. Only then, can the subsequent steps be taken with integrity and strength. So, what is going on? Broadly speaking, in terms of volume, the polycrisis, and in terms of the structure of feeling, a metacrisis: not just climate change but climate emergency, not just escalation of military activity but relentless wars that endanger already fragile supply chains and needlessly sacrifice lives and habitats for corrupted nationalistic worldviews. Not just mining natural resources for

life-saving and enhancing needs but for profit-seeking extraction to satisfy consumerist and individualist whims. Not just a deterministic march of harmful technological innovations but a paralysing blindness to the finiteness of the sources of energy that fuel those innovations, and so on. These crises are separate only for analytical purposes, and it is the more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts realisation of their cascading effects where the 'meta' aspect becomes tangible. It often travels with the realisation that the thinking that led us here is not going to address the crises.

A reset is needed, if only to get the participants of the undesign process on to the same page from the start. Resetting at the beginning of the undesign process is about acknowledging modernity's victims, such as loss of connection to nature, loss of local community, various hurtful dualisms, and the long and continuing exploitation of the Global South for the comfort of us in the Global North. Ultimately, resetting is about leaning into a worldview that sets out, with baby steps, to undo harm by keeping on building things, but things that are entangled with living beings. This means decelerating instead of accelerating, degrowth instead of growth, undesigning instead of designing more on top of what constitutes parts of the problem. I deliberately describe the shift in worldview the term as leaning because for anyone to be able to dive straight in, it has been necessary for them to go through a grieving process about our current ways of living. We cannot assume all willing participants in undesign thinking have gone through that. It might be an undesign project that brings them to face that grief.

I don't have any illusions about the uniqueness of the undesign proposal, there are approaches out there similar in spirit, such as Dark Matter Labs' Life-Ennobling Design framework that aims to give tools "to respond to the world in ways that make us feel more alive and at home in it." Yet, I find them less explicit in trying to re-articulate a familiar process (e.g., design thinking). As with my other writings that aim to awaken one technologist at a time to alternative perspectives, I

strive here to engage one design thinking participant at a time to reconsider the premises from where these practices of building stuff begin from and how we can reimagine them.

Remember

Once we have reset, we are in a better place to remember. The regenerative economist John Fullerton says that we have to literally “*re-member* ourselves with nature”. He implies that we have dismembered a connection that is as critical on a planetary scale as an artery would be on the level of an individual living being. How might we re-member ourselves while remembering something eternal about where we come from that connects us with all living beings beyond space and time?

One way to think about this is [Rupert Sheldrake](#)’s theory of morphic resonance. Sheldrake’s theory, based on a life-long career in evolutionary biology and morphogenesis, addresses how living beings find paths of development that are not coded in their genes. But it also suggests that our memories are not in the brain, but that they exist around us as fields. This is how e.g. skills not only get transferred from generation to generation but also how those skills improve from generation to generation so that someone talented in gymnastics today begins from a more evolved resonance of the craft than someone a hundred years ago. There could not be a Messi without a Maradona, a Simone Biles without a Nadia Comăneci, so to speak. I’d like to think that such fields and their resonance ultimately should allow us to strive for what is true, good, and beautiful — to immediately resonate with such qualities, as Max Scheler’s notion of value-ception puts forward (which [Iain McGilchrist](#) discusses, and [I’ve touched upon in a post](#)).

But could it also be that living beings collectively lose access to the fields, if they don’t seek to resonate with them any more? We are in the process of losing the craft of growing food locally, and in general building things with our hands in ways that do not require a computer between us and the substrate for the construction. In addition, if we let

machines do our writing for us, and submit ourselves to short-form visual storytelling, will the human world ever witness great novelists of the late 21st century?

Perhaps because of our left-hemisphere leanings during modernity, we are losing access to the resonances that hold us closer to nature; to the resonances for living in harmony with the laws of nature rather than attempt to dominate them. We are striving to live as machines rather than creatures, to put Wendell Berry's question to rest. Seeing things through the metaphor of the machine, mechanistically, has not allowed for such a 'woolly' notion such as a resonating, morphing field to gain prominence — accepting it might have brought us closer to the situated and embodied truths that I discussed with the help of Lucy Kimbell's critique of design thinking in the first part. Acknowledging morphic resonance might lead to the past, people, prayer, and place, as Paul Kingsnorth would argue. Or to the things worth taking with us from the ruins, even if they would appear primitive by the standards of today's AI overlords. On the other hand, if there is a current resurfacing of religious affiliation (e.g., with young men and Christian Orthodoxy), what does that tell us — about the need to regain a resonance once lost?

Remembering can also be conceived as a practice of sharing the stories of the ones involved in the process. What if one of the tasks of the (un)designer would be about sussing out the stories of participants and anchoring them back to myths, when possible? Tellingly, in Norse mythology, remembering is an act that nourishes the tree of life, the origin of all living things. This is an act of regeneration, a continuous process of becoming where living beings extend their potential out to the world, into healthy manifestations of it.

I suggest that all of the above is about remembering in a way where two contradictory opposites — recalling the past and childlike wonder of the present — come together to reveal greater truths about how we should design and build things.

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Reorient

Resetting, i.e. starting again from regenerative premises, and remembering, surrendering to the resonance of nature, when put together, lead to the critical reorientation that is necessary. Reorienting brings to the fore the need to slow down. Such reorientation would lead towards entanglement and relationality, towards the great simplification and the new civilisation.

Some time ago, I wrote a series of essays about what would it mean to begin to design technologies from awakened perspectives. The attempt was not to produce answers but to ask relevant questions, to shift the perspective — to reorient. The three axis I sketched out in that approach were transcendence, immanence, and relationality. That thinking was inspired by spiritual approaches and deep ecology.

In the undesign thinking approach I propose here, while transcendence and immanence are important for the resetting and remembering steps, the emphasis is on relationality — on design as an embodied, situated, and collective practice. Such practice privileges relations, the vectors, over what is found at the end of vectors. Hence, the visualisation with Metatron's cube. It also implies that reorienting needs to be constant because it is too easy to get distracted by modernity's trappings.

Redesign

This step — the one most closely associated with what design practice typically is and amounts to — is about putting the resetting, remembering, and reorienting into practice. To achieve that, undesign in practice necessitates designing by several principles, including sufficiency, resilience, regeneration, biomimicry, and deep ecology, which is another way to express the planetary relationality among which

we live and die. It is essential to note that these principles aim to transcend principles that might be associated with so-called sustainable practices. Their failings tend to be in admitting to some concessions, such as efficiency in the name of wasting unnecessary energy, but ultimately striving to keep things as they are. John Fullerton cites sustainability expert Hunter Lovins who suggests that we must urgently focus on efficiency gains to buy time — but more importantly, Fullerton continues, “at the same time, we must also look ahead and envision a truly regenerative system design. That is something entirely new, requiring fresh imagination, not just incremental tweaking around the edges”.

The term ‘undesign’ I borrow from James Pierce, who in turn was inspired by Tony Fry’s notion of elimination by design (cited at the beginning of the post). As with Pierce, my background and practice within design thinking is closely related to the discipline of human-computer interaction (HCI). Pierce articulates the premise of undesigning as follows:

“there is an apparent rift between researchers and others that describe, explain, and argue the limitations and problems with technology, on the one hand, and those whose primary concern is designing technology affirmatively. This gives way to a distinct issue for design in the context of HCI: What are the range and scope of activities that researchers have available when the implication *is* to *not* design technology; or, to go one crucial step further, when the implication is to *undesign* technology?” — James Pierce, Undesigning technology: considering the negation of design by design (2012)

Pierce uses the term *undesign* to refer to “a notion of design which emphasises that all design variously negates as well as creates, both intentionally and unintentionally”. However, Pierce promotes intentional and explicit negation of technology. Consequently, by *undesigning*, he refers to “the intentional negation of that which design brings into existence”. Undesigning technology, then, is about intentionally

exploring the negation of technology as the solution in design contexts, or identifying “when the implication is not to design technology”, as human-computer interaction researchers Baumer and Silberman have put it.

I want to extend the scope of undesign from the particular domain of technology, and ask *what is it that we can intentionally negate out of what design typically brings, when harnessed into the goals of growth without limits and colonialist human exceptionality, into existence?*

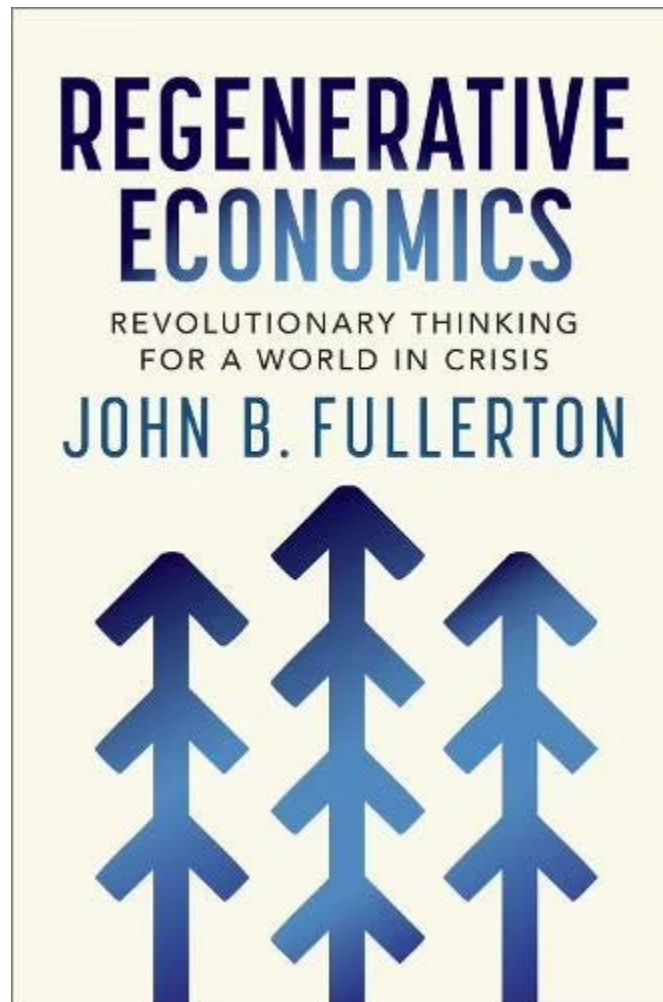
Regenerate

The outputs of undesign aim to regenerate by acknowledging the complex planetary metabolisms. A particular way to strive for this is adopting biomimicry as a reference point (something I am keen to learn more and write about in the future). Yet, the specific method of biomimicry as regenerative means functions in the wider context of regenerative economics. Fortunately, the degrowth/post-growth movement and thinkers such as John Fullerton have done a lot of groundwork. For instance, they have pointed out that true innovation lies in how to break from the shackles of predatory capitalism and the illusion of infinite growth, and direct innovation towards what would make the living planet thrive.

I have only started reading Fullerton’s recent book *Regenerative Economics: Revolutionary Thinking for a World in Crisis*, and will no doubt be drawing from his thinking for future essays. For now, his hypothesis will suffice to set undesign practices in motion:



We can use the universal principles and patterns underlying stable, healthy, and sustainable living systems, including insights from nonliving systems throughout the real world, as a model for economic-system design.



Fullerton sets the purpose for regenerative economics to “promote and sustain human prosperity and wellbeing” in an “economy of permanence”, a concept he borrows from J.C. Kumarappa, an Indian economist and associate of Mahatma Gandhi who pioneered rural economic development theories. Efforts in undesigning would need to break ties with economics that, first, operate from a dualistic view of humans and nature, and second, due to the objectifying relation to nature, only see it as a resource to be exploited. Given the climate emergency we are in, undesigning would need to address acute issues here and now to seek self-sustaining balance, similar to what Fullerton sees as the quality of regenerative systems:

A regenerative system is self-organizing and self-sustaining. It does not “kick the can down the road” as our modern political economy does with respect to inequality, poverty, natural resource limits, pollution, health, deficits, pension plans, retirement, education, and regulatory reform.

The notions of self-nourishing and self-regulating are key to such a system, as is the need to not exhaust the critical inputs (such as natural resources) while maintaining healthy outputs for the more-than-human-world. Biomimicry is a particular approach in design contexts to find reference points for such healthy, self-regulating systems in nature and mimic their operation when designing artefacts for human needs.

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Regather

In taking undesign outputs to the world, communities and commoning are key. There, the resources lend themselves to regathering, and the people to re-commoning, awakened from our urban dormancy. Undesign thinking strives to be a fundamentally commoning practice, or more precisely, it sees commoning *as* design practice, when it aims to produce material outcomes in the form of artefacts and services and regenerative ways of doing things.

For example, Chris Smaje has pointed out in [Finding Lights in a Dark Age](#), in the coming age of less cheap energy and smaller scale economies, there will likely be more commons. In designing towards such equitably shared resources, it is important to avoid the extremes: free-for-alls, the idea of which led to the misconstrued notion of

‘tragedy of the commons’, but also forced collective labour, i.e. the mistake the communists made.

Ultimately regathering leads to questions about decision-making. The authors of books like Half-Earth Socialism (Vettese and Pendergrass) and Radical Abundance (Heron, Milburn, and Russell) show how politics should not be outsourced to the markets. The latter promote Chilean journalist and sociologist Marta Hanecker’s idea of ‘popular protagonism’, where those who participate in democratic planning are transformed by the experience and in the process, become a collective agent of social transformation. Heron, Milburn, and Russell write about the conditions for this:

For popular protagonism to develop, or become stronger where it already exists, two things must happen simultaneously. First, the associated producers must learn through acting collectively they have the power to change the world, which is to say they must become conscious of themselves as a collective political subject. Second, the associated producers must build institutional forms that empower them to act in their collective interest both at the site of production and in broader practices of social reproduction.

Essentially, popular protagonism is about finding alternatives to capitalist forms of production and distribution of wealth. Not all commoning needs to become an undesign practice, but when it does, it can strive to build and strengthen collective agency.

Redistribute

Once there are commoning practices in place, they can contribute to redistributing wealth and resources in ways that change our business of usual. Fullerton reimagines economics “from the ground up through the lens of living systems science”, and this is what undesigning should aspire to: its outputs, such as rebuilt food and medicine systems, should fall in line with understanding of wealth in the more-than-human-world

context, beyond monetary wealth and towards wealth understood and experienced as a diversity of regenerative relations and practices in community contexts.

Both regathering and redistributing relate to place-based practices. Fullerton writes about how regenerative economics aims at honouring people and place, and all the way to bioregions, celebrating their individual histories and qualities. Scaling according to modern capitalism leads to monoculture. To avoid that, redistribution is about relocation, away from “placeless” global or nationwide corporations that blatantly dishonour people and place via avoiding taxes and through other financial arrangements that create “shareholder value” while causing harm.

But it is not only wealth that needs to be distributed robustly and evenly, it is information as well, to enable continuous learning and adaptation in an evolutionary, wide-boundary view rather than narrow-boundary growth. “Robust circulatory flows”, as Fullerton calls them, would reflect the metabolism of healthy living organisms as closed loops, instead of the linear take-make-waste business models.

✓ **Subscribed**

Undesigning for the sacred

Metatron’s Cube has been associated with depicting the harmony and balance of nature through the geometric shapes and the patterns that arise from their connections. Whitney Hobler writes: “In sacred geometry, Archangel Metatron, the angel of life, oversees the flow of energy in a mystical cube known as Metatron’s Cube, which contains all the geometric shapes in God’s creation and represents the patterns that make up everything God has made.”

If you believe, as I do, that God is in nature and nature is in us, there is no escaping the patterns — we cannot rise above them, though we have certainly tried. Even if you do not believe in any kind of God, the emergency is out there, plain to see. We can't innovate out of the predicament with the means that got us here. Responsible innovation, value-sensitive design, and other well-meaning methods are failing, because they don't go far enough and are embedded into systems that resist them. Doing by undoing, designing by undesigning, hospicing and composting are all necessary, to paraphrase Nate Hagens, "in the face of the upcoming great simplification".

Thank you for reading.

With love and kindness,

Aki

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