

IN THE BUBBLE
DESIGNING IN A COMPLEX WORLD



JOHN THACKARA

"I eagerly devoured every last page of John Thackara's lofty, captivating book."
—Bruce Sterling, author of *The Hacker Crackdown* and *Somorrow Now: envisioning the next fifty years*

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How to design a world in which we rely less on stuff, and more on people.

We're filling up the world with technology and devices, but we've lost sight of an important question: What is this stuff for? What value does it add to our lives? So asks author John Thackara in his new book, *In the Bubble: Designing for a Complex World*. These are tough questions for the pushers of technology to answer. Our economic system is centered on technology, so it would be no small matter if "tech" ceased to be an end-in-itself in our daily lives. Technology is not going to go away, but the time to discuss the end it will serve is before we deploy it, not after. We need to ask what purpose will be served by the broadband communications, smart materials, wearable computing, and connected appliances that we're unleashing upon the world. We need to ask what impact all this stuff will have on our daily lives. Who will look after it, and how?

In the Bubble is about a world based less on stuff and more on people. Thackara describes a transformation that is taking place now--not in a remote science fiction future; it's not about, as he puts it, "the schlock of the new" but about radical innovation already emerging in daily life. We are regaining respect for what people can do that technology can't. *In the Bubble* describes services designed to help people carry out daily activities in new ways. Many of these services involve technology--ranging from body implants to wide-bodied jets. But objects and systems play a supporting role in a people-centered world. The design focus is on services, not things. And new principles--above all, lightness--inform the way these services are designed and used. At the heart of *In the Bubble* is a belief, informed by a wealth of real-world examples, that ethics and responsibility can inform design decisions without impeding social and technical innovation.

In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World Details

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Greggo says

Great view of where design and the world should go.

Kars says

It's interesting to read this eight years after publication. The parts where Thackara heaps examples on top of each other to convince readers tech has pervaded all aspects of life haven't aged well. However, many of his suggestions for how to go about designing for this world are still relevant, perhaps more so now than ever before. It's sad that these ideas haven't found wider acceptance in tech.

Caroline says

I must've put this book on my list while in library school and it's a little outdated. And, it didn't thrill me. I did enjoy the section on designing things to mimic nature, and had a good laugh at all the outlandish things that could've been the next big thing. The networked bench that allows you to have a cell phone conversation through it? HA HA HA HA HA!!!!!!

Yu Zhu says

The first two chapters are cool, then the logic goes a little bit messy. The theory is awesome but if you even can't make this method noticed by designer, it's just academic.

Louise says

Will write soon.

Andreas says

An interesting "inspirational catalogue" of design trends for the 21st century. Rather than the top-down, technology-focused design of the 20th century, Thackara makes the argument for a new kind of almost organic design based on:

- sensing and responding to the context in which the design is part, continually adapting it as needed (perpetual beta)

- experiment at the edges, try bold new things that can become part of our wider society once it has proven its worth.
- remix! Don't expect design to be a solitary process of creation, build on others' work, adopt and adapt it for the new designs you do. Share your creations in turn (open source it)
- get people to use it early. Design should always be considered participatory design: It only improves through use and response.

All in all, good stuff...

Orton Family Foundation says

In my former life as an anthropologist, I had the unique experience of spending time with the Hadza people, the last hunter-gatherer tribe in East Africa. While I never quite warmed up to dining on spoiled kudu and singed monkey, I did come to appreciate the Hadza's innate capacity for innovation. From food gathering to building shelter and social networking they are strategic opportunists par excellence who waste nothing, least of all good information.

Perhaps this is why John Thackara's *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World* resonated so deeply with me. Mid-way into his heady manifesto on "design mindfulness," Thackara calls on us all to become "hunter-gatherers of ideas and tools," breaking out of the box of our mono-crop silos to spot opportunities for system change at the juncture between industries, professions and social sectors.

Thackara is a design critic, business provocateur and self-described "syposiarch" who organizes collaborative innovation projects in which designers, together with grassroots innovators and citizens, develop new service concepts and prototypes. His ideas and work, though far-ranging, center on a vision of sustainability and ecology of place. Thackara's definition of design is an inclusive one of great relevance to people in the planning field, suggesting "everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones."

The central thesis of this book is this: "If we can design our way into difficulty, we can design our way out." Thackara sees the effects of poor design everywhere, pointing out, for example, that "mindless" sprawl is anything but. Sprawl, he deftly argues, results from a conspiracy of intentional policies, practices and design decisions played out across industries and systems, none of which are random. "Out of control is an ideology, not a fact," he asserts and then seeks to back it up by suggesting how thoughtful, humanized applications of technology can give us better control of the same situations and systems we now feel victimized by.

Most of the examples of "design mindfulness" of interest to those of us in the planning field are about harnessing the collaborative power of the Internet and other social technologies to create open learning networks and support community decision-making. He writes, for example, about The Open Planning Project, a New York-based organization that advocates for a free, distributed and open geographic information infrastructure to help citizens engage in meaningful dialogue about their places. Such technology applications that enhance human connectedness and quality of life are key to Thackara's vision of a sustainable future and will resonate with those of us interested in the application of new tools and technologies to planning challenges.

If Thackara falls somewhat short, it's by inspiring us with visions of new tomorrows without leaving a

sufficient crumbtrail to follow. Some of the innovative projects and efforts he cites, while intriguing, are barely underway and not yet ready for prime-time. Some of the more compelling ones don't yet have websites, let alone measured results. Like Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, *In the Bubble* is the kind of big idea book that, despite intentions to the contrary, runs the risk of creating more acolytes than actors. That would be unfortunate because, as the Hadza know well, we can't survive on good ideas alone.

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-John Fox

Asaad Mahmood says

There are good generic takeaways, but the book itself is very situated, which makes its potential quite limited in my opinion.

Tom Schulte says

Admittedly this 2006 book is dated and seems most so when it considers the (unnamed) Internet of Thing reality that is already upon. Still, it is insightful and valuable to read, especially for engineers.

Thackara tells us of ancient Greece's symposiarch who could enforce drinking or nude dancing on too-serious feasters. In this, he reminds us that humor helps keep an open mind. It does feel it still takes a very open mind to see a need for sustainability in the ecology invention and production that underpins our consumerist society. Thackara's central thesis is: "If we can design our way into difficulty, we can design our way out." I have the same hope and also witness the effects of poor design everywhere, including the "mindless" sprawl that comes from designing for swiftness, not closeness.

The zen of "design mindfulness" he promotes is exemplified by The Open Planning Project. This New York-based organization advocates for a free, distributed and open geographic information infrastructure to help citizens engage in meaningful dialogue about their places.

Thackara doesn't speak to this directly, but I was drawn to think of our automotive-based society: "bedroom communities" separated by a drive from places of work, the need for an expensive (to buy, produce and maintain) automobile for modern independence, and these vehicles that carry with them their own power plants meaning they take on their own fuel-fossil fuel. I think centuries hence there will be examinations on our decades like we look book at slavery-based economies asking "What were they thinking?"

Oyceter says

<http://oyceter.livejournal.com/607689...>

Vuk Trifkovic says

Dated veeery badly. First chapter still holds true and goes hard. Then it fizzes out in mid-2000s starry eye optimis regarding "triple bottom lines" and "ubitech". Ah, the simple times...

Elan says

A lot of insights, but not so pleasant to get through. The sort of book I sort of wish had been presented as a series of bulletpoints. Was about the give up and put it down, but then it finished—the last 96 pages are endnotes, so that's good, I guess.

Kept forgetting that this was written 9 years ago. The ideas are still quite relevant (i.e. we're still screwing up).

Chiara says

Quite amazing and scary at the same time.

Steve says

This book disappointed on many levels. The author organizes the book poorly, with ideas from earlier chapters being recycled through later ones. There's also contradictions, sometimes hot air, and a bit of self-promotion (I don't really care about Doors of Perception, the conference he organizes). I think I was looking for something a little more practical with respect to design in a complex world, and all I got were other people's ideas (Paul Hawken, Ivan Illich, Janine Benyus, Malcolm Gladwell), somewhat half-baked musings and details of experimental projects that may never make it into actual products or processes.
