

# Surviving climate change means transforming both economics and design

April 11 2019, by Joanna Boehnert

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

What could be more important than sustaining [habitable living conditions](#) on Earth? Climate change, biodiversity loss and other environmental problems demand changes on an order of magnitude well beyond the trajectory of business-as-usual. And yet, despite accumulative social and technological innovation, environmental

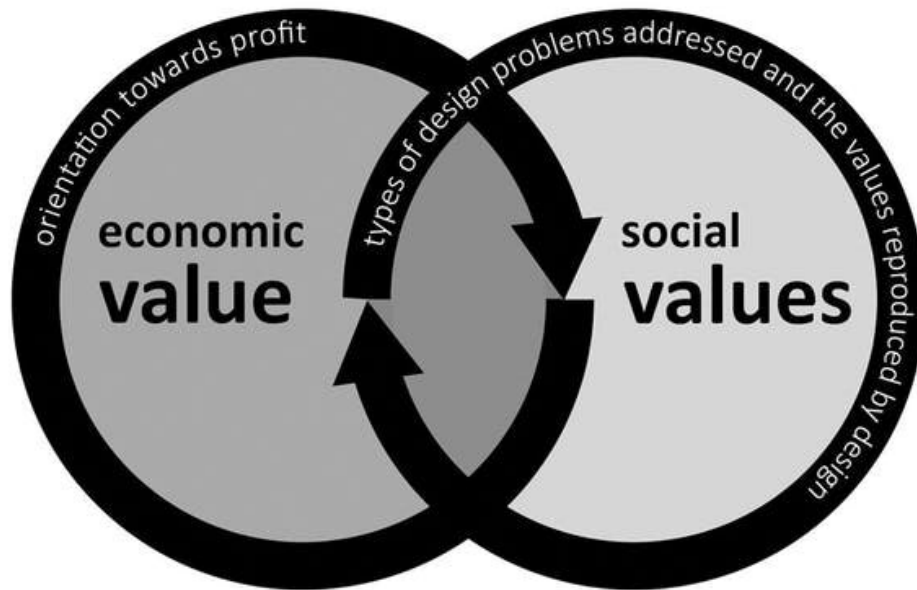
problems are [accelerating far more quickly](#) than sustainable solutions.

The design industry is one of many industries mobilising to address environmental imperatives. While sustainability-oriented designers are working towards change from many angles, addressing [climate change](#) and other [environmental problems](#) on this scale demands [much more dramatic transformations](#) in economic ideas, structures and systems that enable – or disable – [sustainable design](#).

Put simply, designers cannot design sustainable future ways of living on scale without a shift in economic priorities. Human impacts on planetary processes in the [Anthropocene](#) require new types of ecologically engaged design and economics if the necessary [technological, social and political transitions](#) are to take place.

## **World making design**

Design is crucial to this debate because it is key to the creation of future ways of living. Designers make new ideas, products, services and spaces desirable to future users. With the shape of a font, a brand, the styling of a product, the look and feel of a service, the touch of a garment, the sensation of being in a particular building, designers serve the interests of customers (generally, those with disposal income). They do so according the logic and modes of governance generated by what is valued by economic structures. Design is the practice that makes capitalism so appealing.



The cycle of cultural production. Credit: EcoLabs 2018, Author provided

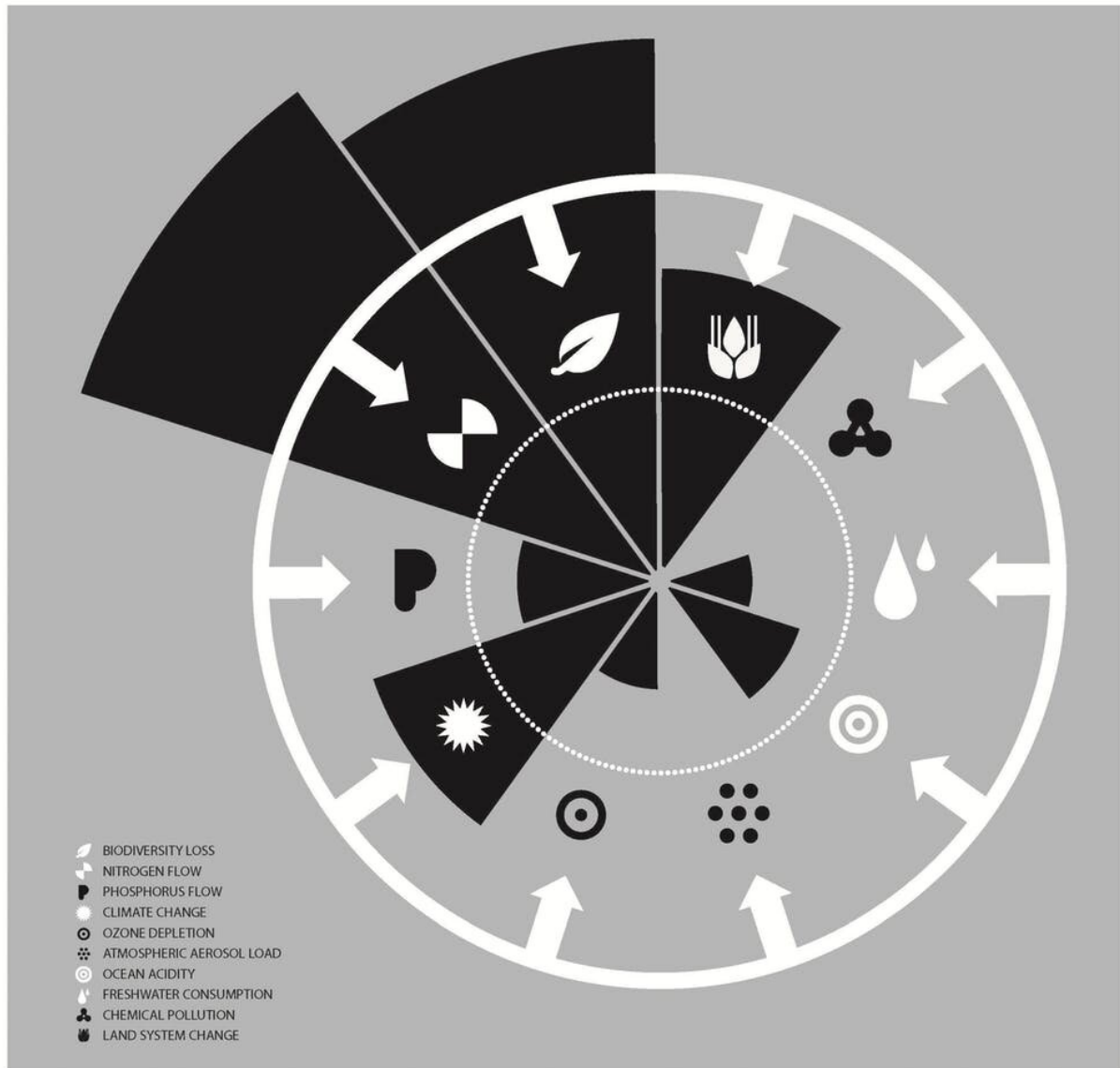
Designers make new products, services and spaces that shape future ways of living – and can use their skills to create sustainable options. But there is a [dilemma here](#). The market rarely prioritises interests that do not pay the bills or otherwise bring capital to the table.

Design sits at the intersection of economic value and social values. Design transforms what economic systems value into new ways of living – which in turn produce certain types of social values. This work is generated by priorities in the design industry, driven by economic imperatives.

## Blind spots in conventional economics

Traditional neoclassical economics was developed in an era when all knowledge systems essentially ignored ecological concerns. In conventional economics, value – which is created by generating profit and accumulating capital for owners and investors – is systematically extracted from the systems in which economic systems are embedded: the social and the ecological systems.

Contemporary [economic systems](#) reproduce this tradition by rewarding individuals and companies for using (and often exploiting) resources to generate profit, regardless of the ecological or social consequences. The extractive and exploitative dynamics of capitalist economics generate economies locked into accelerating climate change, species extinction and other severe environmental and social problems. This economic system continues to produce ever greater degrees of crises as [planetary boundaries](#) are breached in ever more extreme ways.



Planetary boundaries. Credit: Ecolabs, Tzortzis Rallis and Lazaros Kakoulidis, 2017, Author provided

But there are economic alternatives. Heterodox economic theory (such as [ecological](#), [feminist](#) and [Marxist economics](#)) challenges the assumptions of mainstream economics. It has shown how neoclassical and neoliberal economics produce unsustainable economies that

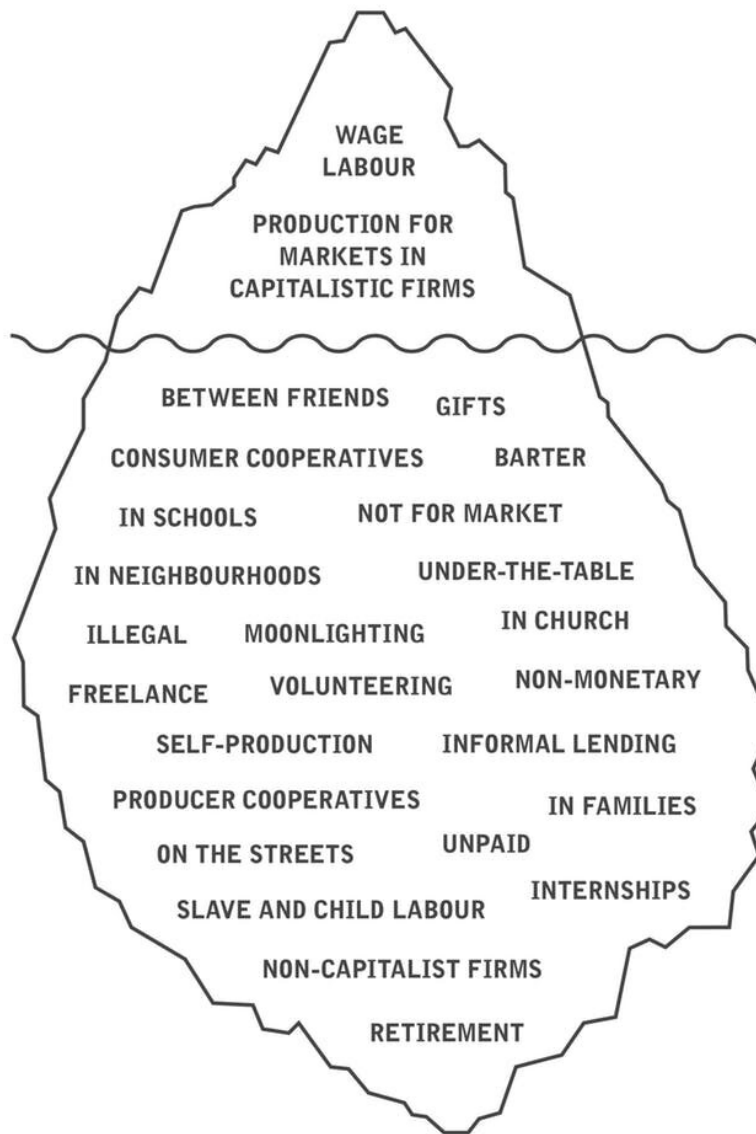
consistently devalue the natural world, [women's work](#) and the labour of other groups historically denied equal access to capital.

For example, the Iceberg Model depicts a feminist economic framework where non-market activities, including the unpaid labour that buttresses capitalist economics, are made explicit.

The challenges of the Anthropocene demand that we overcome the exploitative and anti-ecological biases in neoclassical and neoliberal economics. One popular alternative is Kate Raworth's [Donut Economics](#). This would prioritise both social justice and environmental sustainability to create a [safe operating space](#) for humanity. Unlike conventional economics, heterodox economics takes the ecological context and planetary boundaries into account – while also addressing the interests of historically disadvantaged populations.

## **Ecological economics and design**

The design industry, like most industries, is governed by [economic ideas](#), structures and systems. Economic systems determine priorities in design studios and design education – including whether or not designers can focus on [sustainable solutions](#).



The Iceberg Model. Credit: Bianca Elzenbaumer/Brave New Alps, 2018, Author provided

And so economic factors govern whether designers can direct their



energies towards making sustainable ways of living possible – or not. Few of us are employed to do tasks that make it possible to respond responsibly to environmental circumstances because the current political economy is not oriented towards prioritising the preservation of life on this planet.

When the priorities of an individual designer who is oriented towards sustainability conflict with those of the design industry, which is often governed by an economic system oriented towards profit, the designer finds it hard to make a living. If sustainable solutions will not generate profits, they will not succeed in this economic system (without either government intervention or charitable support). The design industry does not systemically prioritise the needs of the environment within this economic system because the way value is generated in contemporary economics depends on the systemic dismissal of ecological priorities.

## **New design economies**

Addressing this dilemma is a severe challenge. It is now evident that the economic system must be designed to reflect priorities and values associated with preserving habitable conditions on the planet. Climate change and other severe environmental threats require dramatic shifts in economic priorities. The fields of economics and design must be redirected so that economic services, structures and systems will support socially distributive and environmentally regenerative design.

Humankind already has the knowledge to make sustainable and socially just ways of living on this planet possible. What we do not yet have is the ability to make these transitions possible in the current political context. New types of design and economics could be a basis for systemic transitions.

Key to this transition is ecologically literate education in both design and



economics. Both fields must be radically transformed to meet the challenges of the Anthropocene. With critical, ecologically-engaged design and economic education, new redirected design economies could facilitate sustainable transitions and make another world not only possible – but desirable.

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