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EVERYTHING IS DESIGN
The Hidden Ethics of Our Objects and Public Spaces

Alan J. Reid, PhD

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Everything is Design

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THE INTERDISCIPLINARY BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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The book synthesises several different disciplines relating to design and ethics. The topics include urban design, prison design, factory farming and design, the environment and design, technology and design, genetic design and death by design. The work effortlessly guides its readers through issues of design that propose new ways of thinking about it from a compelling point of view.

Dr. Caroline Donnellan
Boston University; Global Programs, London, UK

About the author

Alan J. Reid, PhD, is an Assistant Research Scientist at the Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) at Johns Hopkins University, where he primarily conducts mixed-methods research studies and design reviews on the efficacy of learning technologies. In addition, he is an Adjunct Teaching Faculty in the School of Education and teaches a doctoral-level course in the Diffusion of Technology Innovations. Dr. Reid is also an Associate Professor of Writing and Instructional Technologies at Coastal Carolina University, where he teaches graduate courses in research and writing and undergraduate courses in new media, digital culture and design. He received tenure in 2021.

His previous works include 'The Smartphone Paradox' (2018) and 'A Philosophy of Gun Violence' (2022), both of which are precursors to this book, which seeks to evaluate technological mediation through the lenses of ethical behavior and decision-making. He has given several public lectures and appeared at numerous conferences to discuss the central theme of these publications: Technology is non-neutral, which defines our identities, compels our behaviors, and affects our psychological and emotional well-being.

Summary

Ethics – to put it concisely – is 'mindful well-being'. It is a set of standards that guides how we treat ourselves, one another, and the environment. When we design things for public use, we also communicate an ethical perspective. When we use things designed for us, we adopt their ethics.

This book synthesizes several different disciplines as they relate to design, ethics, and the built environment. Our objects, according to philosophers like Ihde, Verbeek, and Latour, mediate our experiences with the world around us. Through their designs (and, by extension, our perceived affordances), we largely comply with what our objects and spaces want us to do. At the micro-level, the phones in our pockets command our attentive processes in order to feed an attention economy. At the macro level, urban planning and infrastructure can both promote inclusivity and foment violence. We are deeply intertwined with the objects and spaces that have been designed for us. Baked into every object, process, system, and environment are the remnants of the designer's morals, ethics, values, and biases.

Importantly, this book seeks to cultivate mindfulness of the reader's interactions with their surrounding world, providing them with a line of inquiry that questions areas of unethical design in their built environment and offers useful critiques and new solutions to these ethical dilemmas. We often have the power to reject those things that are irresponsibly designed and unethical in nature, and it is through this agency as users that we can demand better from designers, developers, and companies. It is imperative to understand our mediated relationships with the built environment that surrounds us and the objects within it; this can help explain our behaviors and empower us to make ethical decisions that serve future generations.