Culture of Care

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Care is the attention or provision of what is vital for health, welfare, support and protection of people, place, and planet. Traditionally, we care for each other and the things we hold dear. There is, however, a more expanded definition of care that extends to our design industry. We are facing unprecedented challenges that require even more specialized care in the face of social upheaval, climate crisis, and post pandemic problems.

How can we use design as a social practice in the service of care for self, others, community, and nature? How can we prioritize care in our design industry? This paper seeks to answer these questions while examining the role of design as a Culture of Care.

Introduction

There is a tale about cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead regarding care. A student asked what she considered to be the first sign of human civilization. Her response: a healed broken femur; in nature, if an animal breaks its leg, it dies. It cannot perform any survival tasks and thus becomes prey for other species. No animal survives a broken thigh bone long enough for the bone to heal. A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has nurtured that person. In her opinion, this is where civilization started, when humans started caring for other humans.

Many people believe that this is one of the qualities that makes us human. This reminds us that care is a responsibility to our fellow humans. Society has evolved with many levels of care. Care can be a noun, but it is also a verb, an action, where we practice care out of love, labor, or survival.

In times of stress, we often put care on the back burner. We have in recent times collectively experienced compounded trauma, which has affected our daily lives. Many of us suffer from grief, PTSD, fear, and exhaustion. Stress hormones, when prolonged, cause anxiety, anger, and lack of empathy, as well as serious ailments. However, the pandemic and ongoing climate crisis have brought the importance of care to the forefront. This new focus prioritizes people, putting wellbeing for self and others before demands of work and other societal systems.

Nurture Culture

Nurture Culture asks us to change our view of care from an individual perspective into one that values care for all of society. This is fundamentally at the heart of care culture. Recovery and safety also play important roles. Can we practice collective care so that all people can be nurtured? Can we become more resilient by embracing wellness and grow our social bonds?

To embrace Nurture Culture, we must deepen our definition of care that expands care for people, place and planet. This is an amplified mindset to incorporate positive impacts on communities, environments, and ecology. This mindset encompasses attitudes of emotional and physical repair, and renewal of nature and all living things.

One idea is to shift into a Caring Economy, where society benefits from holistic selfcare, child and family care, and elder care. This is essential for not just people's wellbeing, but for investing in communities and growing new economies. With rising costs of healthcare, consumers are seeing more alternatives to incorporate wellness into their lives outside of the traditional healthcare system. This new focus on care will be a driver for new designs, new products, and new space types.

When we design within Care Culture, we are no longer just focused on spaces for healthcare, but instead embed care concepts into all spaces and places. For care of people, it's allowing human-centered design to flourish. This includes designs that are empathic, inclusive, and nourish people's physical and mental health. For care of place, it's acknowledging that space must be healthy and accessible for all. And for planet, it's operating beyond sustainability, embracing intentional regeneration of our planet so that all may thrive. These three categories are intertwined.

We are seeing many architectural projects address a Culture of Care with new building typologies that incorporates biophilic elements to engage with occupants for a more balanced sense of calm and well-being. It is a rewilding of buildings, bringing nature into cities and departing from modern precedents.

Well-Being

Well-being includes both physical care and emotional care. Physical care is addressed through actions such as exercise, going to doctor appointments, administering medicine, or helping others in need. Emotional care is different, it's about practicing compassion and empathy for yourself or others to achieve better mental health. During the height of the pandemic in 2021, health and wellness emerged as the single most powerful trend of the new decade. We also saw that the word "Health" was being used to describe new drivers of design. People began to seek new products, services, and spaces to help on their wellness journeys. Today, there are a plethora of Instagram ads and TV commercials for workout gear; enhanced mattresses for better sleep; solutions for hair loss, intimacy problems, or anxiety; and apps for guided meditation or dieting.

This type of care, whether it be for actions or emotions, has become a core need in today's world and has been ensconced into society. For example, the hashtag #Wellness has 6 billion views on TikTok alone. Consumers want to increase the quality of their overall health, quality of sleep, nutrition, fitness, and mood. They also want more meaningful experiences, more purposeful living, social connection, work/life balance, and to feel fulfilled. They also are beginning to resist the hustle culture and having to be "always on" on our 24/7 digital life. These aspirations are universal, and yet it is often only accessible to those who can afford it, where health has become analogous to a preferred lifestyle for people that have the means to focus on these goals. Where we can extend care to be more impactful is by designing these experiences for a wider spectrum of people so that care is accessible and attainable for all. How can we as designers hold space for this?

Optimism in Design

One way to foster a Culture of Care is to embed optimism into design. For many people, optimism is hard to come by the global challenges and for some, difficult daily circumstances. This is where design comes in. There is scientific evidence through the study of neuroaesthetics, which links brain activity to creativity, that pleasure is the result of stimulus from looking at or interacting with art. Therefore, the emotional connections between people and place, and more specifically buildings, can be improved through artistic interventions. The built environment also has a direct effect on our feelings and behaviors. Designing for optimism allows all occupants and visitors of a space to experience hope and positivity. Spaces that incorporate these elements use strategies such as color, use of crafted elements, inclusion of areas for self-expression as well as community gathering.

Ethical Responsibility

Do designers have an ethical responsibility to care about people, place, and planet? The answer is yes, as designers shape not only the built environment, but all systems around us. Everything designed directly affects people's experiences and can cause harm if not designed with care. Engineers, architects, and designers all know to design with health, safety, and welfare requirements. Beyond that, designers have an ethical responsibility to consider the impact of their work on society, humanity, and the environment. This requires us to all design for positive impact.

Many companies have adopted Corporate Social responsibility, including doing good for people and communities beyond environmental interests. As designers we must consider how our projects affect all people. Is the project respectful to all parties? Are we infringing on anyone's human rights? Are we being inclusive? Will the project promote oppression? Some design firms have gone so far as to avoid designing prisons and migrant detention centers. In 2020, the AIA placed a ban on members designing spaces for the US justice system that involve execution, torture, or solitary confinement. This is intended to promote welfare of human beings and disrupt decades of systemic injustice.

Care of People

Care of People focuses on supporting one-on-one relationships, whether that's taking care of yourself or another individual. Caring about ourselves and others encourages deeper connections, so that competition and rivalry are diminished, and unity supports bonds of care. Having support of a loved one or friend, or an entire community, helps us to achieve optimal wellness and mental health, as well as

heal from illness or trauma. In this post-pandemic era, an urgent need has emerged for people to reclaim balance in their lives through healing ourselves and each other: Self-Care and new health rituals; Healing through both tech and nature; addressing anxiety and mental health; and practicing empathy as an act of care.

Wellness has become a veritable industry, complete with more accessible experiences and products. With the growing stress in the world, consumers are placing greater significance on wellbeing. And while much of this pre-pandemic was not focused on home use, now it has become more prevalent due to the shift of "Working From Home" and the renewed desire for nesting and creating comfort from the chaos of the world. Trends such as creating spa-like bath settings at home and developing effective sleep habits have surged. It's important to remember that these are responses to societal and environmental stressors that are driving consumers to recuperate.

Consumers are also going to spas and retreats for intermittent relief from daily stress, especially if the spa has services that one doesn't have on hand at home. The number of spas in the US grew to 181 million last year. Many of these spas are using a combination of natural and tech elements, including sensorial healing, where sound bathing, botanical fragrances, and light therapy are used for healing. These spaces are less clinical than spas of the past and embrace the experiential concepts of the hospitality sector, allowing visitors to feel relaxed, but also reinvigorated. Many are using warm tones, natural materials, and soft forms to convey an organic, biophilic connection, but then layer in soft tech through lighting and sound. There is also a return to nature as remedy. Ancient wellness through medicinal plants and herbal botanicals has emerged as mainstream practice and embedded into designed spaces.

Other-Care

Care of People is about prioritizing people, valuing relationships, and caring for others. We can call this "Other Care" (the opposite of self-care). This is care for all people: vulnerable people, neighbors in your community, your coworkers, people you encounter, and people around the world. Its focus is on the positive effects we can have on others. Care for others starts with empathy.

However, empathy is an emotional response and not an action, so we as citizens - also as designers - need to ensure we act on our empathy to practice care that gets embedded into our design work.

Care includes listening to other people's experiences, and welcoming people who come from diverse backgrounds and cultures. That means making space for people who are marginalized. Care creates inclusion and belonging, and this has a positive impact on everyone, especially you, as helping others may also be the ultimate form of self-care.

Care of Place

Care of Place, which embeds care into design for communities and the greater good. The collaboration between architecture and social responsibility holds vast potential to create a future where the built environment serves the needs of all individuals and contributes to a more sustainable and equitable society. Design has the power to regenerate and revitalize communities. It can improve people's lives through social, economic, physical and visual aspects of an area, especially those that were neglected or under-utilized.

If we shift our mindsets to think about "place" where individual people live- people we care about - then care of place becomes more vital and urgent. Care of Place also includes building a society where we all belong and feel cared for within the community. Of course, this overlaps with Other-Care, as we prioritize social responsibility and sustainability for the places we design and build.

Healing Architecture

Traditionally, the standard for buildings to provide care was purely functional. We have all been in these schools, hospitals, medical or social service offices that are demoralizing. We now see many examples today of architecture and design serving the purpose of social responsibility, addressing different types of care…what is called Healing Architecture. Design will move to a more holistic practice, where the needs of individuals and communities will be used to guide the project outcomes and will promote health and wellness.

Healing Architecture incorporates buildings, spaces, light, acoustics and air quality to serve the well-being of workers

and visitors to that space. Design strategies will need to rely on the healing nature of spaces and materials as part of a holistic concept of Nurture Culture. Programs such as the WELL Building Standard are already in use, as are biophilic design strategies, but we will need more of these efforts across disciplines to make real systemic change. And as we are in an era of climate disaster, design needs to contribute to disaster resilience as a measure of care for people and place as well.

Green Cities

Greening of cities and urban design is an effective way to express Care of Place. The United Nations predicts that by 2050, 2/3 of the world population will live in urban areas. Cities also consume 2/3 of the world's energy and produce around 70% of the world's carbon dioxide emissions. A 2022 study published (in the journal Nature) estimated that we would lower CO_2 emissions by 106 gigatons (vs the 40 gigatons we emit each year) if we constructed mid-rise timber buildings to house 90% of new city dwellers in the next 70+ years. This is due to wood's ability to sequester carbon, and it has a lower footprint than steel and concrete. It also has thermal properties to reduce energy consumption.

By greening urban areas, humans will thrive but so will other species, like pollinators. The greener the space in an area, the better the climate conditions, air and water quality, and noise reduction will be. Plants also reduce the heat island effect in cities. And of course, mental and physical health of occupants will be improved, enhancing quality of life for all residents. Green spaces – especially in a five-minute city- encourage more physical and social activity while easing pressure on the local healthcare system.

Space for All

How can we care for community in our cities and towns? One strategy is to create Space for All. This is public, accessible landscapes or streetscapes that support inclusivity. Well-designed public spaces are barrier-free and are not hostile to certain groups of the public; everyone is welcome to enjoy the space and heal. These spaces tend to be anchors for a community, as they are easy to use, navigate, and have functions for all to play, rest, reflect, and enjoy nature. Some design firms specialize in these types of projects, which could be characterized as a design intervention. These projects tend to offer colorful public space with zones for different outdoor activities, and for all age groups.

Created as an activation in an under-utilized area, visitors can engage in social interactions in zones intended for play, learning, and performances. The space is always open, with access from the street and the indoor commercial space. It is viewed as an intervention because the project is inserted into unused space and changes the function for the benefit of the community. This new design typology intervenes with existing urban settings by occupying the space of a given area and then gives it a multifunctional purpose, creating social interactions for the community. It helps if the space has a strong visual, attracting people to gather, and often these spaces become landmarks. During the pandemic, we saw a lot of these pop up, often closing areas to traffic to allow for full utilization of the street.

Participatory Design

A big part of Care of Place and Other Care is JEDI: Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. By embedding Participatory Design or Co-Design into all design practice, we can work within a JEDI mindset. This means that as designers, we are not designing FOR generic people or demographics, we are designing with real diverse people, as facilitators to solve challenges in the community. This may feel at odds with how A&D firms are structured, as the AIA standards of practice are set up so that firms are hired by clients and designers design for the Owner. But what if we could design beyond the Owner's vision to be more inclusive? We should also be bringing the Owner on this journey if they are not already thinking about social responsibility.

As designers, we should consider of course the end users, but we could go even beyond that. Who are the support workers in the space? Who is in the surrounding community? Could they have a say in the project as a stakeholder too? Could the space be designed to allow them access and use? This approach could be not only inclusive, but also even heal communities where they were excluded from previous projects. This is especially true in civic or public projects, where often designers impose solutions without community context.

Exercises such as Community Mapping involve the community members so that their voices are heard, and input is incorporated in the final design strategies. This

action empowers communities to feel that they matter and have been included in design decisions. After all, they have lived experience in this area and know what they need and what could be successful. Community mapping is a visual workshop-type activity. This is an iterative community session in Bangkok where community members are working together to identify what is needed in their neighborhood. This participatory technique brings people together to expand on local knowledge and co-create with the design team, who is synthesizing all info into the best mutual solution. This could be considered a more interactive version of Programming and Visioning sessions, but you are engaging with a broader range of stakeholders. This fosters belonging and expands human-centered design to achieve positive outcomes for all.

Care of Planet

For many of us, Eco-Anxiety is a very real condition driven by pollution, global warming, and the climate crisis. Care Culture helps to place focus on humans and the planet, and how we are interrelated. Our own human health is closely connected to that of the planet, as we are part of the earth's ecosystem. The Covid pandemic was but one example of this. Other diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever spread more easily due to more frequent flooding. We also have malnutrition when we have drought. 25% of diseases like cancer can be traced back to environmental factors such as air and water pollution or toxic chemicals.

This has led to a more dedicated discipline of care for our planet, and even Climate Care. The culture of sustainability has emerged for two decades now, but is sustaining what we have enough? Or do we need to be more regenerative? It seems that to care for our planet today, we must improve environmental conditions, improve biodiversity, sequester carbon, and move to generative design strategies rather than ones of extraction. All of this, along with social responsibility and more efficient resource management will help to replenish and nourish our planet, and therefore all of us.

Rewilding

Can we adopt new attitudes towards nature that nurture empathy and healing? The answer is yes, and it starts with Rewilding. Mankind has claimed much of the usable land and resources for ourselves at the expense of our planet. 60% of the world's biodiversity has disappeared over the last 40 years. Loss of forests and biomass, as well as rising seas and acidic oceans, has negatively affected all living things. Scientists say that we are heading towards the sixth mass extinction on earth. Due to this, there is a movement called Rewilding which seeks to restore ecosystems to allow nature to thrive, repair, and regenerate itself. Rewilding is about reversing the destruction of the natural world and undoing hundreds of years of domestication, cultivating landscapes, and building cities.

There are many types of Rewilding, mostly centered around conservation, including: Habitat restoration; protecting and expanding woodlands; reintroducing native animal and plant species; and allowing nature to reclaim space. Rewilding is nature-centric, allowing nature to restore itself from degradation over the last 200 years.

One movement emerging from the Rewilding movement is Ungardening. Where gardening is about cultivating plants and flowers in a controlled, orderly way, Ungardening reverses that and allows for plants to rewild. This favors native species, not using toxic pesticides, and creating a haven for pollinators, which are necessary for our food supply and survival. It is essential we design with pollinators in mind.

Select Resources

Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us by Ivy Ross and Susan Magsamen, Random House, 2023

https://www.gensler.com/blog/the-5-attributes-that-define-an-immersive-experience

"Brand Strategy: Multisensory Marketing", by WGSN Insight Team, 2024

2024 Tech Trends Report, Future Today Institute

iF Design Trend Report 2024

The Future 100, 2024 - VML