Designing Designers
A critical look at design education

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Design has enormous influence on the world at all scales; it mediates our daily experiences and shapes our ways of life.

We all "design" to some degree, but professional designers are in a unique position to influence our social practices, our environment, and our experiences of the world. The ways in which professional designers practice is commonly formed through tertiary design education (i.e. at a university or similar).

Living in a time of global ecological and social crises when design could be leveraged to transition to alternative futures, we take a critical look at design education, asking how we might navigate toward sustainable and equitable design practices through a preferred design education landscape.

What is design?

DESIGN IN LAYERS

Design goes far beyond its popular understanding, ranging from physical products to the natural environment. The deeper layers of design encompass the layers found above them.

Increasing scale & complexity

1 **PRODUCT & GRAPHIC**
e.g. furniture, household objects, posters

2 **INTERACTION (1 + a person)**
e.g. human-computer interactions, services

3 **SOCIAL (2 + more people)**
e.g. education systems, organizations

4 **ENVIRONMENTAL (3 + the natural environment)**
e.g. agricultural systems, urban environments

"[D]esigning is fundamental to being human . . . we design our world, while our world acts back on us and designs us."
– Anne-Marie Willis

"To design is to devise courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones."
– Herbert Simon

"In a world in rapid and profound transformation, we are all designers."
– Ezio Manzini

"All design-led objects, tools, and even services bring about particular ways of being, knowing, and doing."
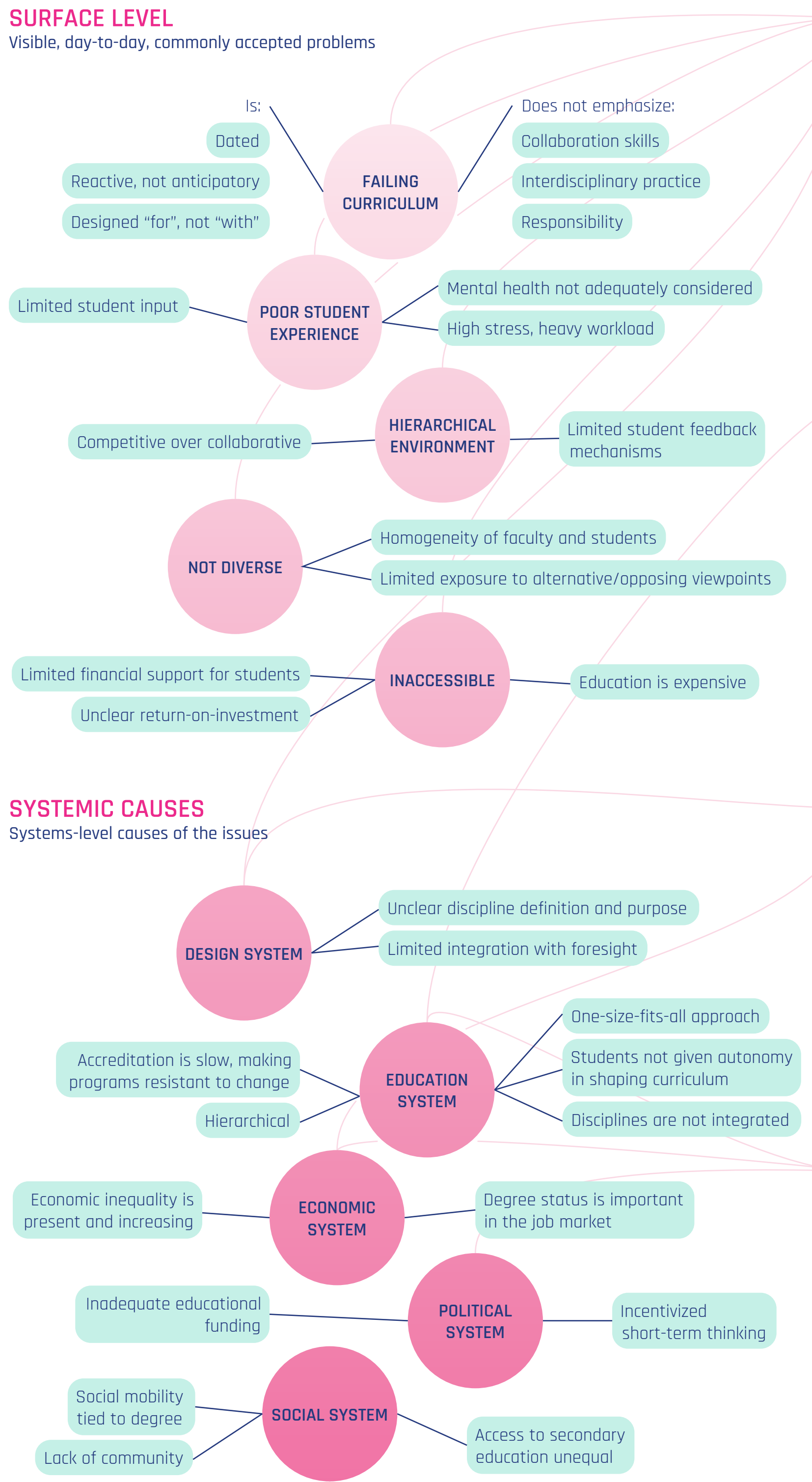– Arturo Escobar

"Design is decision-making, materializing values as communications, products and environments."
– Cameron Tonkinwise
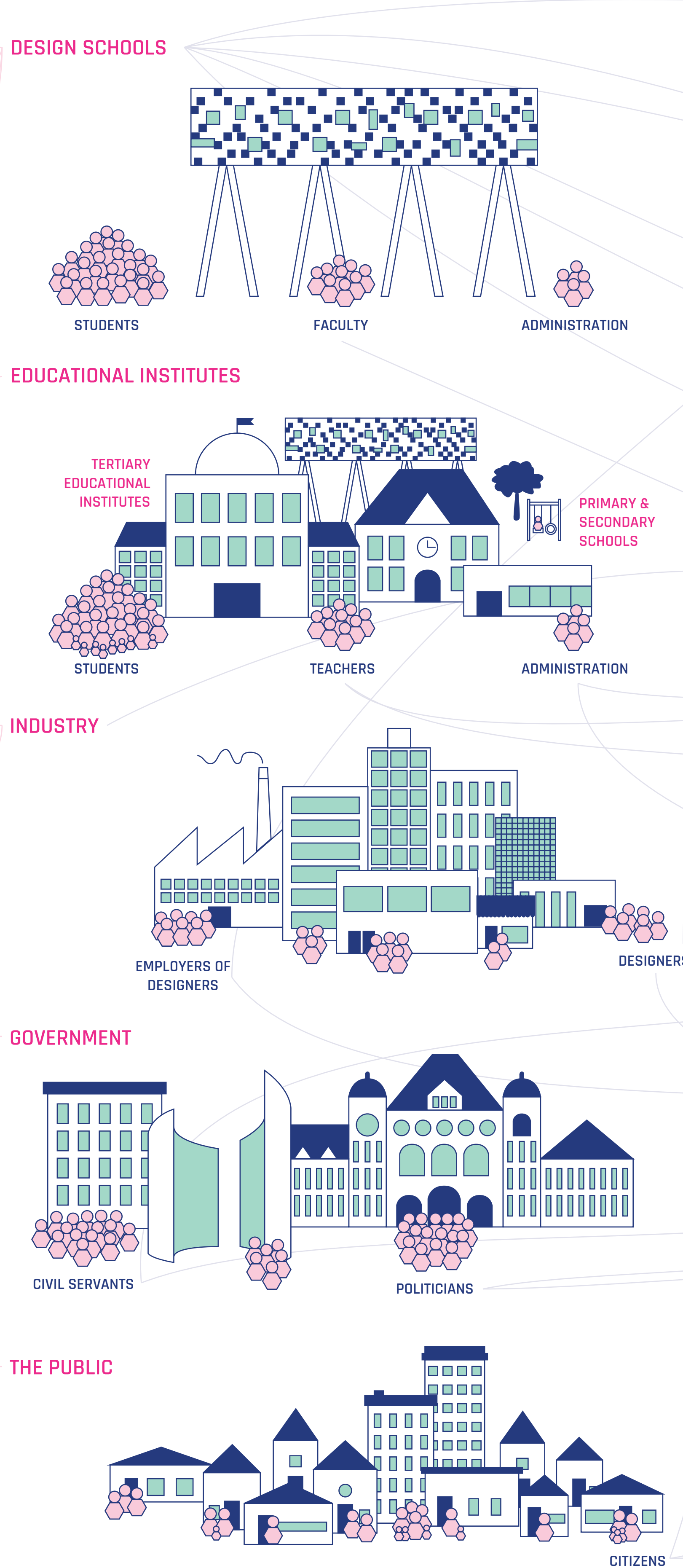

CAUSAL LAYERED ANALYSIS
What is the problem?

Critiques of the current design education landscape have been mapped using Causal-Layered Analysis (CLA). The four layers of CLA get deeper to understand a problem from its surface-level manifestations to its deepest, unconscious roots.

SURFACE LEVEL
Visible, day-to-day, commonly accepted problems

Is:
- Dated
- Reactive, not anticipatory
- Designed "for", not "with"

FAILING CURRICULUM

Does not emphasize:
- Collaboration skills
- Interdisciplinary practice
- Responsibility

POOR STUDENT EXPERIENCE
- Limited student input
- Mental health not adequately considered
- High stress, heavy workload

HIERARCHICAL ENVIRONMENT
- Competitive over collaborative
- Limited student feedback mechanisms

NOT DIVERSE
- Homogeneity of faculty and students
- Limited exposure to alternative/opposing viewpoints

INACCESSIBLE
- Limited financial support for students
- Unclear return-on-investment
- Education is expensive

SYSTEMIC CAUSES
Systems-level causes of the issues

DESIGN SYSTEM
- Unclear discipline definition and purpose
- Limited integration with foresight

EDUCATION SYSTEM
- Accreditation is slow, making programs resistant to change
- Hierarchical
- One-size-fits-all approach
- Students not given autonomy in shaping curriculum
- Disciplines are not integrated

ECONOMIC SYSTEM
- Economic inequality is present and increasing
- Degree status is important in the job market

POLITICAL SYSTEM
- Inadequate educational funding
- Incentivized short-term thinking

SOCIAL SYSTEM
- Social mobility tied to degree
- Lack of community
- Access to secondary education unequal

WORLDVIEWS
Cultures or paradigms in which the systems are embedded

COMPETITION	SHORT-TERMISM	DISPOSABILITY	CORPORATE EDUCATION MODEL
INSTITUTIONALIZED KNOWLEDGE	UNLIMITED RESOURCES	HIERARCHY	
INDIVIDUALISM	REDUCTIONISM	CAPITALISM	PATRIARCHY	MERITOCRACY

MYTH
The deep, unconscious stories and metaphors from which our worldviews emerge

A story of...
INDEPENDENCE

"Everything fits in a box"
"Trust your elders"
"There is always a loser"
"Growth is good"

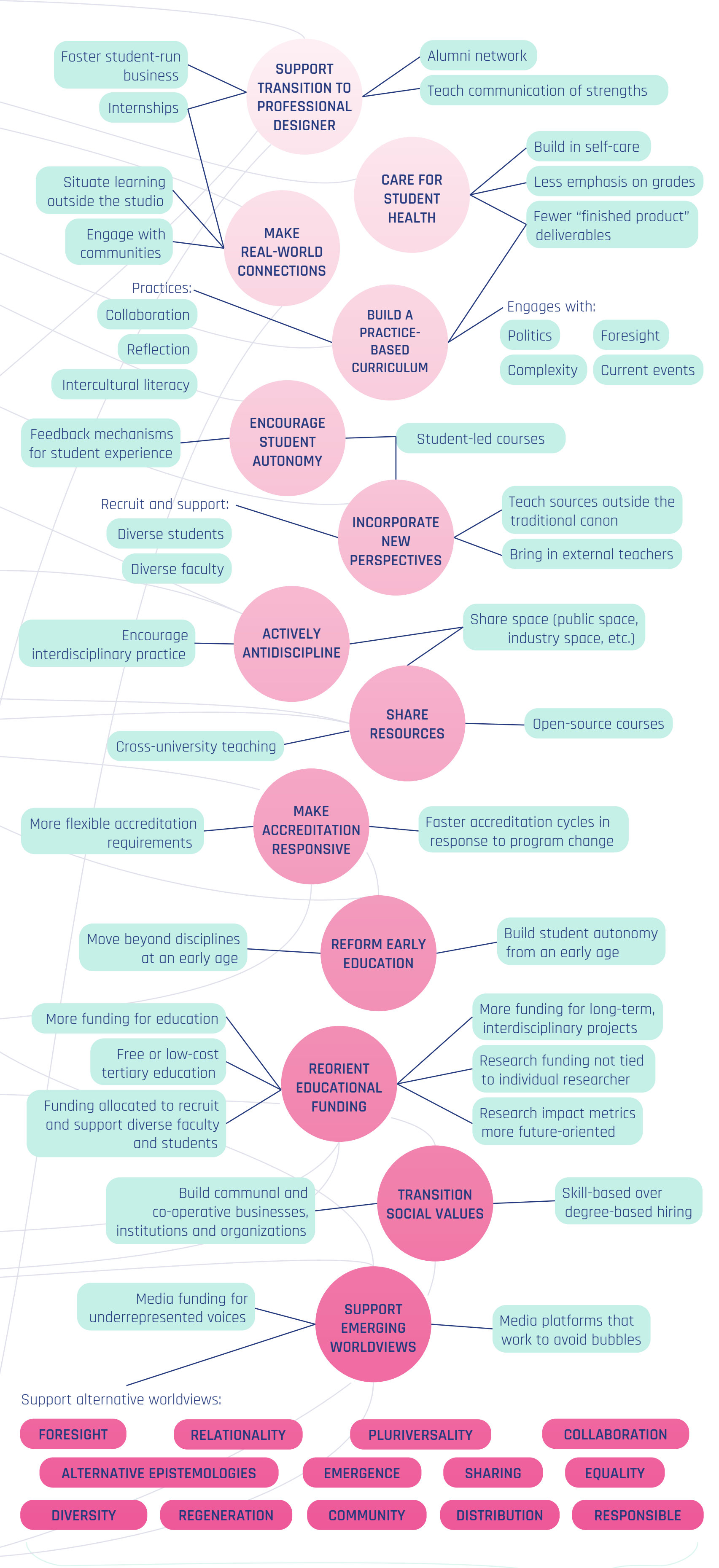## STAKEHOLDERS & ACTORS
Who is involved?

Surface-level problems may be located within design schools, while deeper issues are located within increasingly diffused spaces. We have identified key actors within each problem space and the interventions they have power to act upon.

DESIGN SCHOOLS
STUDENTS   FACULTY   ADMINISTRATION

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES
TERTIARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES
PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOLS
STUDENTS   TEACHERS   ADMINISTRATION

INDUSTRY
EMPLOYERS OF DESIGNERS   DESIGNERS

GOVERNMENT
CIVIL SERVANTS   POLITICIANS

THE PUBLIC
CITIZENS

WEAVING A NEW MYTH

In this world...
WHAT IS DESIGN?
- Short-sighted
- Limited
- Imposed
- Siloed
- Divided
- Misunderstood
- Theoretical

In this world...
WHO IS A DESIGNER?
- A professional
- A practitioner
- An academic

In this world...
WHO IS A DESIGNER?
- A community member
- A facilitator
- A student and teacher
- A practitioner

In this world...
WHAT IS DESIGN?
- Far-sighted
- Diffuse
- Valued
- Shared
- Integrated
- Expanded
- Practiced
- Ethical

POINTS OF INTERVENTION
How do we take action?

Below are a list of possible points of intervention for transforming design education toward a preferred future from surface to system, drawing directly from the critiques mapped using CLA.

SUPPORT TRANSITION TO PROFESSIONAL DESIGNER
- Foster student-run business
- Internships
- Alumni network
- Teach communication of strengths

CARE FOR STUDENT HEALTH
- Build in self-care
- Less emphasis on grades
- Fewer "finished product" deliverables

MAKE REAL-WORLD CONNECTIONS
- Situate learning outside the studio
- Engage with communities

BUILD A PRACTICE-BASED CURRICULUM
Practices:
- Collaboration
- Reflection
- Intercultural literacy
Engages with:
- Politics
- Foresight
- Complexity
- Current events

ENCOURAGE STUDENT AUTONOMY
- Feedback mechanisms for student experience
- Student-led courses

INCORPORATE NEW PERSPECTIVES
Recruit and support:
- Diverse students
- Diverse faculty
- Teach sources outside the traditional canon
- Bring in external teachers

ACTIVELY ANTIDISCIPLINE
- Encourage interdisciplinary practice
- Share space (public space, industry space, etc.)

SHARE RESOURCES
- Cross-university teaching
- Open-source courses

MAKE ACCREDITATION RESPONSIVE
- More flexible accreditation requirements
- Faster accreditation cycles in response to program change

REFORM EARLY EDUCATION
- Move beyond disciplines at an early age
- Build student autonomy from an early age

REORIENT EDUCATIONAL FUNDING
- More funding for education
- Free or low-cost tertiary education
- Funding allocated to recruit and support diverse faculty and students
- More funding for long-term, interdisciplinary projects
- Research funding not tied to individual researcher
- Research impact metrics more future-oriented

TRANSITION SOCIAL VALUES
- Build communal and co-operative businesses, institutions and organizations
- Skill-based over degree-based hiring

SUPPORT EMERGING WORLDVIEWS
- Media funding for underrepresented voices
- Media platforms that work to avoid bubbles

Support alternative worldviews:

FORESIGHT	RELATIONALITY	PLURIVERSALITY	COLLABORATION
ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMOLOGIES	EMERGENCE	SHARING	EQUALITY
DIVERSITY	REGENERATION	COMMUNITY	DISTRIBUTION	RESPONSIBLE

To a story of...
INTERDEPENDENCE

"Everything is connected"
"Better, not more"
"If one of us loses, we all lose"

A final word...

It is important to discuss and address the surface-level problems within design education, but lasting change will require an exploration of their deep, systemic causes. A preferred future for design education involves working to not only better the education itself, but to build a better world.