

equity **x**design

**A PRACTICE FOR
TRANSFORMATION**

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RACISM AND INEQUALITY ARE PRODUCTS OF DESIGN. THEY CAN BE REDESIGNED.

We are a country founded on the genocide of one people and the enslavement of another. We have yet to reconcile the impact of this inheritance on us all.

The experiment of America is 240 years old. In these 240 years, systems were designed that isolate and separate us, that empower a chosen few with the privilege of invention, innovation, and creativity, that lay the groundwork for misunderstanding, fear, and ultimately hate.

Racism and inequality are products of design. They can be redesigned.

We believe that in community, with thoughtful and deliberate action, we can design the obsolescence of those systems. We offer **equityXdesign**, a practice that organizations, teams, and individuals can use to mitigate the impact of racism and sexism in design practices.

As a collaborative, this work is our voice—an offering to the legacy of liberation, truth, and democracy. We collectively leverage the magic of relationships across difference to design right-fit solutions. Christine empowers people to reimagine themselves as school designers and founders. Michelle helps people find their own voices as anti racist leaders for equity. Caroline activates the voices of the marginalized to strengthen relationships, particularly those across lines of difference. Given who we are and what we know, we feel uniquely positioned to contribute to this fight, in this way—at the intersection of equity and design. We know it is not the only thing that needs to be done. It is no silver bullet, but it is where we think our energy has the greatest return.

As leaders from the racial equity and design and innovation spaces, we offer **equityXdesign**—a new way to think about and approach achieving equity. **equityXdesign** creates the conditions and relationships for inclusive innovation. A process for anti-racist and equitable design, it is guided by three central beliefs: innovation's need for inclusion and intentional design, the indistinguishable relationship between the past and the present, and our moral imperative to live in the future we desire to create.

equityXdesign is a practice that merges the consciousness of racial equity work with the methodology of design thinking. We

believe that designing for the most affected and marginalized, letting their voices and experiences lead, and acknowledging the barriers to engagement are critical for this new process. Most importantly, we believe this design work must happen across racial difference. All people have the capacity for innovation. We believe it is this multiplicity of entry points that will create the conditions for new invention and innovations for equity. This practice is for teams of educators, designers, advocates, and agitators committed to building internal capacity and confidence designing for equity. It is

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reserved for those who believe we are stronger together and have the bold imagination to cultivate new ideas, invent equitable institutions, and reform biased policies.

MOVING EQUITY WORK TOWARD ACTION

American history has created a segregated world where white people are rarely in community with others. The isolation creates myths, stories, and beliefs that go unchallenged, and people of color are not immune. The work of acknowledgement, the telling of truths, and the opportunities for community and reflection are necessary before we can move forward. If we remain unwilling to do serious individual, institutional, and structural work as a people, our path toward a truly equitable future will stagnate.

Helping us see and understand our history, bringing us in community with one another in ways that allow us to hear each other, the raising of voices traditionally lost in the white noise of hegemonic discourse—this is the power of equity work.

From large government agencies to schools, tech startups, nonprofits, and philanthropic groups, the education ecosystem has a very narrow definition of inequity and how it manifests, often focusing only on explicit and intentional racism. But racism today looks different than it did in our Jim Crow past. Overwhelmingly, individuals no longer believe in the biological inferiority of black and brown people; however, while we may all claim egalitarian values, and while it is no longer socially acceptable to treat others differently because of the color of their skin, most of us hold implicit biases that impact our behavior and allow for structural and systemic inequality to remain.

We are living in a “colorblind” society that often recognizes racism as anomalous, individual acts of aggression or the mere acknowledgment of difference, not the silent structures that continue to divide.”¹ The victories of the civil rights movement, and now the Obama presidency, have reinforced the notion that we are a post-racial society. However, the lived experiences of millions of people of color reveal otherwise. Racism and other forms of discrimination have simply shifted from explicit and interpersonal to structural and less overt manifestations. The rise of identity-based aggression cannot distract us from recognizing anchoring systems of oppression and how they manifest in the lives of people.

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Our individual actions can cumulatively serve to maintain existing forms of inequity—or they can serve to dismantle systems of oppression.

Historically, we have put the expectations of this change entirely on individuals, requiring each of us to maintain a fully developed relationship with our own racial identity, an intimate knowledge of the history of oppression and current manifestations of inequality, and the personal comfort and initiative to see, call out, and actively fight hegemonic systems. The focus of equity work for most organizations leans

toward the having of courageous conversations about race and power and on individual racial identity development work. While this approach is necessary, it will not, alone, end individual, institutional, and systemic inequality.

Identity development work takes time and is never complete. Individuals can engage in such work without ever taking action to dismantle systems of oppression—particularly those that benefit from status quo systems or from being seen having such courageous conversations. Additionally, personal work can only progress when individuals first understand and then commit to doing deeper and often painful work. For many, this personal work is often seen as unnecessary.

We must start with individuals, but we cannot stop there.

Equity work helps us understand where we are and how we got here, but it is missing the tools for building a different reality. It is here that design thinking can lead the way.

Institutions are the sum of the people within them, and they create the systems and structures we live in. The work of racial equity is to create safe spaces for people, to connect them, and then to move from merely understanding the role of the individual to understanding the role individuals play in institutions and systems. Only then can we move to action.

Our current paradigms and tools for truth, reconciliation, and anti-racist action are insufficient for the magnitude of the challenge we face. Racial equity work engages people in meaningful and authentic conversation, sparking individual transformation but not preparing people to create long-term systemic change. Organizations that engage in racial equity work may create space for individuals to find themselves personally awakened to their role and identity in society, ready to change their institutions for the better, but without the

tools to take such action. Consultancies and protocols are not equipped for the complexities of racism's manifestations within individuals, institutions, and societal structures.

Some say talk is cheap. We disagree. Talk is deeply important, but it is simply not enough. We need to move toward new designs. For many, talking about racism and our long history of oppression feels paralyzing. The complexity of racism on individual, institutional, and structural levels feels insurmountable. Equity work helps us understand where we are and how we got here, but it is missing the tools for building a different reality. It is here that design thinking can lead the way.

DESIGN THINKING: IN NEED OF AN EQUITY RETROFIT

In recent years, design thinking has left its roots as a tool used for product design and emerged as a powerful problem-solving methodology across fields and sectors. This shift in how design thinking is used has come in concert with a societal shift in the way we identify problems and understand solutions. Our current charge is to solve problems where there is no one solution, where more data and information

doesn't necessarily make things more clear, where the problem is hard to even define. For instance, we know that solving issues of terrorism is less about building better weapons and more about interrupting radical group recruitment strategies. We know that issues of environmental degradation are no longer about technologies for clean energy; they are about incentivizing corporate and consumer behavior changes. We know how the brain learns, but we can't figure out how to create school environments that are socioeconomically and racially integrated.

Problem-solving is no longer about inventing things; it is about recreating systems. And in a world that continues to increase in complexity and technology, design thinking can simplify, humanize, and order this chaos.

TRADITIONAL DESIGN THINKING PROCESS



This shift in the way we define problems necessitates a shift in the tools and mindsets we use to solve them. Design thinking provides a framework for complex, iterative, and targeted solutions: It emphasizes the need to define the problem well and build sooner to get better feedback, and it has fundamentally changed the relationship between designers and those they are designing for. This focus on the end user is so central that design thinking is often simply referred to as user- or human-centered design.

While elevating the user in the design process has been the key to its success, it is also the reason why our current approach to design thinking needs to be retrofitted. **If we believe design thinking is the right tool to use to redesign products, systems, and institutions to be more equitable, then we must redesign the design thinking process, mindsets and tools themselves to ensure they mitigate for the causes of inequity**—the prejudices of the human designers in the process, both their explicit and implicit personal biases, and the power of mostly invisible status quo systems of oppression.

The role of implicit bias is particularly distressing as we consider the design thinking process. In its current state, it may be doing as much harm as it is good. While engaging with end users, many forms of design thinking still see the designer as separate from the user and grant the designer the power in the relationship—the power to decide with whom to do empathy work, the power to interpret the results, the power to decide the framing of the problem, and the power to pick the best solution.

Many forms of design thinking grant the designer the power in the relationship.

It stands to reason that any problem definition or solution created by biased individuals—which we all are—will perpetuate inequity if the process does not actively acknowledge and combat bias. **A process that is itself colorblind will be blind to the effects of color in both problem and solution.**

We see this regularly in our work facilitating design challenges with organizations. An example: The well-intentioned, usually white, educated, and middle- to upper-middle-class designers working with low-income urban (code for black and brown) schools to help design new programs know it is important to engage in empathy work, so they ask the principal to give them access to some parents to interview. The principal emails the PTA for volunteers, which are often not representative of the general student body. After a few interviews, the designers go back to their conference room to decide what the parents and students need. They brainstorm options, narrowing to those that fit within the existing structure of the school. In the best-case scenario, the program is something the school community can in fact benefit from—but it is unlikely to be designed to serve students and families most in need or to question status quo systems or structures. But these are essential when designing for equity.

There are many failings in this illustration, some of which can be attributed to a lack of rigor in using true design methodologies. However, even when pure design is applied, issues of power and bias have powerful sway. **We can do better.**

AN ALTERNATE PATHWAY

Two of the greatest hindrances to fighting inequality are literally hiding in plain sight: our implicit biases and the prevalent narrative of “colorblindness.” **If we don’t even know we’re doing something wrong, how can we be expected to change it?**

We can enhance the design thinking process with tools frameworks that account for and make visible our individual biases; push us past the individual to the institutional, systemic, and historic inequality at play; and fight against hegemonic ideologies.

equityXdesign is a framework that reimagines all of us as designers, adjusts for our implicit biases, and minimizes the scale and amplification of a dominant identity throughout.

Instead of asking individuals to think their way into a new way of behaving, relying on their individual levels of awareness around issues of inequity, we can provide them with a framework that embeds that awareness. We can make design thinking, an already widely accepted and valued process for innovation and problem-solving, into a process that provides individuals with experiences that elevate their understanding of inequality while also providing tools to dismantle systems of inequality.

This is **equityXdesign**: an additional layer of checks, tools, and activities that, when laid on top of traditional design thinking methodologies, will illuminate racism and inequality—individual, structural, and institutional—that exists in the individuals involved in the design team and potentially shapes the way problems are framed and solutions are proposed.

Design thinking is an ideal starting point. When merged with the power of equity work, we believe it can be used to tackle our most urgent equity-based problems.

EQUITYXDESIGN: DESIGN THINKING'S RETROFIT

equityXdesign intentionally convenes people across difference and builds a common language for system-wide change. It is a framework that reimagines all of us as designers, adjusts for our implicit biases, and minimizes the scale and amplification of a dominant identity throughout. It creates guardrails and checkpoints that nudge design teams to identify problems through a lens of equity, brainstorm transformative possibilities, and prototype and test these possibilities in low-cost, low-resolution, inclusive, and participatory environments.

Pastored by the spirit of inclusive invention, the process engages designers in their own identities and the identities and experiences of their co-designers in order to seed collaborative, inclusive innovation and invention. **The centering ethos—see, be seen, and foresee—overlays the three beliefs we believe are preconditions for equitable design. These beliefs lead us to the five design principles that guide our actions.**

THE EQUITYXDESIGN FRAMEWORK

BELIEF #1

LEARNING TO SEE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT MATTERS

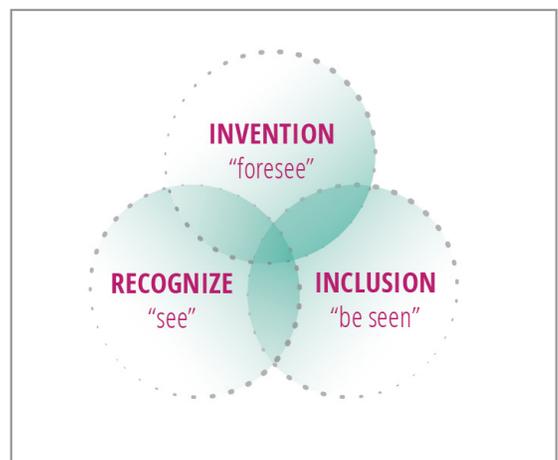
Evolutionary science tells us that the most beneficial traits survive; we are the recipients of the genetic legacy of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. And social inheritance mimics this genetic inheritance: We inherit the traits and characteristics of legacies of privilege and oppression. **We must see both who we were (our historical selves) and who we are (our current selves).** In order to understand the present time and space we occupy, we must understand the inherited legacy surrounding the thing we are designing, the place we are designing in, and the community we are designing with.

BELIEF #2

BE SEEN: RADICAL INCLUSION

equityXdesign is intentional about bringing diverse stakeholders together across race, role, gender, and socioeconomic status to build relationships and lay the groundwork for community. Inclusion is not merely the absence of exclusion: Radical inclusion requires going further—identifying barriers that exclude and eliminating them; welcoming different people, stories, and experiences to the innovation conversation; creating spaces where everyone can truly bring their full selves and be equally valued. Radical inclusion is not simply about reducing hate or respecting difference; it is about truly loving others.

CENTERING BELIEFS



BELIEF #3

FORESEE: PROCESS AS PRODUCT

Process dictates product. In order to design for equity, we must design equitably. The practice of equitable design requires that we are mindful how we achieve equity. Inclusive design practices raise the voices of the marginalized, strengthen relationships across difference, shift positions, and recharge our democracy. Because exclusion feeds inequity, we can no longer argue that there is not enough time to include the community. We must make time for the magic of human connection, especially across difference.

These core beliefs, and the manifestations thereof, lead us to the following design principles:

DESIGN PRINCIPLE 1: DESIGN AT THE MARGINS

Our current innovation conversation is exclusive, accessible only to the powerful and privileged. This erodes the innate creative agency and leadership in the marginalized, reduces the experience of incredibly complex people, and often leads to the allocation of resources to symptoms while neglecting the existence, permanence, and resilience of root causes.

The current social order blames the marginalized for their experience without acknowledging or attempting to redesign oppressive historical structures.

equityXdesign expects the privileged to trust and listen to the voices on the margins to identify the root causes of inequity and the ways they manifest. It positions the marginalized as leaders in the design process and experts in their experience, arming them with a process to solve their own problems. Designing at the margin means that those in privileged positions do not solve for those experiencing oppression; rather, in true community, both the privileged and marginalized build collective responsibility and truly innovative solutions for our most intractable problems. Even the use of the word *marginalized* linguistically parallels the exclusion of individuals. The definition of a group simply by their relationship to the dominant culture is a problem that continues to persist.

DESIGN PRINCIPLE 2: START WITH YOURSELF

Our identities (race, gender, upbringing, social status, home language, etc.) create our lens for the world and how we make sense of it. We must be aware of this lens when engaging in design. When we design for people without understanding the impact of their historical stories, our understanding slips into paternalism. When we design for people without accounting for our own biases, our understanding slips into stereotypes. We must raise our awareness of our own identities and how bias impacts our thoughts, choices, conclusions, and assumptions in order to truly co-create with others.

**DESIGN
PRINCIPLE 3:
CEDE POWER**

Equity requires a nonviolent, action-oriented spirit of co-creation and co-invention, necessitating an inversion of legacy power structures. Expertise cannot be quantified in degrees, and the designer-end user dichotomy is no longer useful. We must acknowledge the power dynamics that allow some votes to count more than others. Equitable design demands that practices change and evolve—that we redefine roles, revalue ways of knowing, and reassess the ways we reach decision. We recognize the potential for cede power to reinforce the hegemonic view of power as a zero-sum game—more for you must mean less for me. This is not the case. We believe that shared power is in the interest of everyone and does not require a growth in the ranks of the powerless. And yet, this work still requires each of us, who hold power in some ways, to deeply question its inheritance and its locus and to cede it when necessary.

**DESIGN
PRINCIPLE 4:
MAKE THE
INVISIBLE
VISIBLE**

The relationships between people and problems are often governed by sets of heuristics—techniques that allow problems to be solved with speed, agility, and economy. However, these preexisting schemas can perpetuate exclusionary assumptions and biased practices, manifesting as implicit bias, power dynamics, and hegemonic practices that govern relationships with people in our organizations, schools, and governments. By making them visible, we can assess their impact and create a space for reflection and repair.

**DESIGN
PRINCIPLE 5:
SPEAK TO THE
FUTURE**

Because an equitable reality has never existed, we cannot look to our past to learn how to create an equitable future. With no guide, we must speak this reality into existence. In order to write a different story, we have to use different language. We must replace our current discourse.

Discourse 1 is our current, and hegemonic, discourse—the language typically used to talk about, question, and plan the work of reform. This dialogue supports and maintains the status quo without appearing unresponsive to outside demands

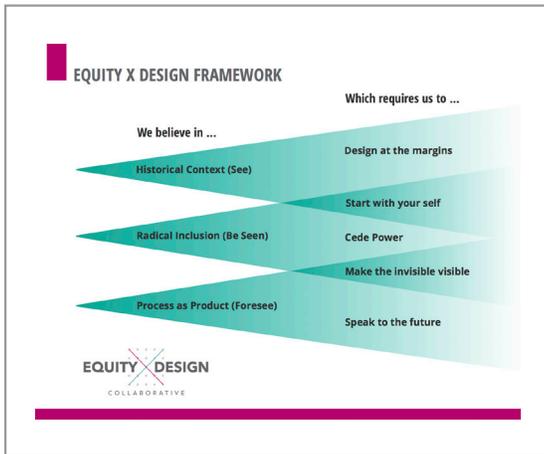
for improvement. Discourse 2, the discourse of transformation, is the language that tends to be about uncomfortable, unequal, ineffective, prejudicial conditions and relationships. This discourse creates space for ambiguity, change, and the opportunity to be a part of a purposeful structure.²

There is an often-overlooked power in language and discourse to influence and control ideas, beliefs, actions, and ultimately culture. When we notice how hegemony dominates our conceptual understanding of problems and how they impact others who are different, we have a powerful opportunity to see the end users' historical selves and how that self manifests in the present.

When we take control of our language, when we speak to the future, we lay the groundwork to create something new—together.

There is an often-overlooked power in language and discourse to influence and control ideas, beliefs, actions, and ultimately culture.

THE FRAMEWORK



EQUITYXDESIGN IN ACTION

Equity Design Collaborative believes change will come from the intersection of equity, design and collaboration.

We harbor no false beliefs that any exclusive group of individuals is capable of creating the tools society needs to dismantle systemic inequity. Our hope is to create a network of collaborators, inventors, and designers who prioritize equity. At the connections, nodes of opportunity create space where radical inclusion strengthens our individual and collective humanities.

The following modes and adaptations to the design process represent the some of the latest retrofits for the

stages of the invention practice. They are currently in the pilot phase of development.

Transformational Empathy

Mode 1: Meta-Empathy Maps

The design thinking process begins with empathy to build an understanding of another's experience. **equityXdesign** transforms empathy into a tool that helps people recognize how implicit bias and identity can impact their understanding of others. At the center of transformative empathy is listening to understand while also understanding how we listen. Through the use of a modified empathy map and three essential empathy questions, we facilitate this awareness and support the synthesis of the empathy experience.

- **Individual:** How does my identity impact how I understand my user's experiences?
- **Institutional:** What are the important customs and practices at play in my user's experience?
- **Structural:** What are the ways customs and practices work together to include or exclude your user?

Mode 2: Notice and Reflect³

Adding additional modes to the design thinking process revealed more ways of connecting with others during the empathy stage—notice and reflect. The essence of these modes is captured in a pre-empathy identity reflection activity, which asks individuals to start by articulating some of their core values, emanating from their heart, followed by how they define their own identities. They then reflect on how they are feeling in that moment, biases that might be at play, and finally, any noticings the reflection process created about the empathy work that is about to be done.

“NOTICE AND REFLECT” DESIGN PROCESS



Equity Pauses

A sense of urgency can mask hegemonic strategy. Our common discourse of urgency and business-as-usual creates little time for reflection; our pace of life eclipses our awareness. Strategic equity pauses stop the clock to reflect on our language, ideas, and hunches in the context of a discourse of transformation. Without this moment to think, our brains default to the familiar and the known, making a repeat of past practice likely. Incorporating these discourse checks and pauses after each stage

ensures that our ideas remain on the path of achieving equity.

Brainstorming and Transformation Cards

One of the fundamental rules of brainstorming is to build on the ideas of others. Alex Osborn, considered as the originator of classical brainstorming, created a checklist that can help transform existing ideas by prompting users to modify, rearrange, substitute, and magnify. We have built on those core prompts with a suite of equity transformations, asking users to move more to the margin, adjust their discourse, and invert power.

Defining and Solving the Right Problems in the Right Way

Adopting others' perspectives through a lens of equity requires acknowledgement of the ways privilege and oppression work to include some and exclude others. The following form positions the needs of a person opposite societal obstructions and institutional inhibitors:

A person needs a way to *(insert the needs of another)* because *(insert the values, beliefs, and morals of the person)*. Surprisingly, *(state a fact that demonstrates the intent to meet the need)* but *(insert an institutional inhibitor or societal obstruction)*.

Invention with an equity lens requires teams to identify and test the riskiest assumptions about how we understand and know other people. **Risky assumptions without an equity lens are racist assumptions.** This is especially true when we are designing at the margins. Because our implicit biases frame our assumptions about ourselves and other people, their experiences, and the best ways to solve their problems, awareness of our biases at this stage is necessary to reverse hegemonic invention.

A TECHNICAL TOOL FOR MORAL WORK

As a culture, we currently have limited courage, will, and skill to talk candidly about race and inequity. The current discourse around equity exists in one of two opposing extremes: morality and linear reasoning and logic.

Morality: Driven by our emotions, we talk and evaluate the degree of goodness. We talk about good people and bad people. We learn about microaggressions and reflect on our moral responsibility to be better. This inspires the motivated and engaged to remain critical of relationships, language, and assumed cultural norms, alienating those without the skill or will for engagement.

Linear reasoning and logic: This technical discourse prefers to quantify equity and reduce it numbers, strategy, and outcomes. This conversation leaves little room for the real experience of people—the meaning, magic, surprise, and possibility.

Our current equity discourse is either a moral conversation or a technical conversation. It is not often both.

The complex work of achieving equity requires a dialogue bold and sophisticated enough to hold both moral and technical ways of thinking, acting, and designing. This integration requires tools that can marry the head and heart while allowing a truly diverse set of thinkers—technologists, freedom fighters, and everyone in between—to create and design in service of reconciliation.

Equity—the integral sum of inclusive practices and that obstruct, threaten, and dismantle systems of oppression and amplify, privilege, and promote the voices of the most marginalized and most affected—is the work of our time. It demands enhancements, retrofits, and retooling of our current toolkits to meet this pressing need. Simply put, work across difference that privileges the voices and perspectives of the most affected “bends the moral arc of universe towards justice.”⁴

We do not have the answers, but we are committed to solving this problem. We do believe that disciplined processes that support the transformation of all of us and our inventions keeps us moving toward realizing the American dream for all people.

Join us to solve it.

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¹ Bonilla-Silva, 2014, page 302.

² Eubanks, Eugene. "Changing the Discourse in Schools." ICT Changing Education (n.d.): n. pag. Changing the Discourse in Schools. Race, Ethnicity, and Multiculturalism Policy and Practice. Web.

³ David Clifford, Senior Learning Experience Designer at the Stanford d.School K12 Lab. A veteran educator, master craftsman, and longtime practitioner of equity and design, David is working with the K12 Lab at Stanford to explore the intersection between equity consciousness and design consciousness with both EDC and the National Equity Project.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr./Theodore Parker.