

# The Ethics of Healing Through Design

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This essay argues that the ethical questions at the heart of Paul Woodruff's *The Ajax Dilemma*, justice, fairness, and the recognition of moral worth, parallel the tensions within contemporary design practice. My capstone project, *Design as Rehabilitation*, explores how built environments and designed systems can either perpetuate harm or foster healing. Through Woodruff's lens, design becomes a moral act: one that requires the leader or designer to balance justice (doing right by those historically harmed) and fairness (treating all stakeholders with dignity). Just as Agamemnon's decision in *The Ajax Dilemma* exposes the limits of distributive justice in a fractured community, the ethics of design reveal how repairing spaces and systems requires emotional intelligence, humility, and the courage to restore moral order where injury has occurred.

## Design as a Moral Act

Woodruff's story of Ajax and Odysseus dramatises the failure of a society to honour virtue. Ajax, the steadfast warrior, is denied the armour of Achilles despite his loyalty and sacrifice. Agamemnon's reasoning is utilitarian, Odysseus's cunning ensures future victories, yet it overlooks the emotional and moral damage caused by injustice. Woodruff thus exposes the paradox of leadership: fairness is not always achieved through equal distribution of rewards, but through moral sensitivity to context and character.

Similarly, in *Design as Rehabilitation*, my premise is that design is not merely functional or aesthetic; it is ethical. The environments we create embody social values. When architecture, policy, or product design excludes certain bodies, communities, or identities, it replicates the harm of Agamemnon's injustice. Design that heals, what I term "rehabilitative design", seeks to restore balance, dignity, and trust between systems and people. It moves beyond "beauty" toward what Woodruff would call virtue in practice: the commitment to repair what has been morally fractured.

In both cases, ethics depends on recognition. Just as Ajax's worth is unseen by those in power, many communities suffer from the invisibility of their needs, refugees in shelters, patients in sterile hospital rooms, the elderly navigating inaccessible infrastructure. The designer, like the ethical leader, must learn to see what others overlook.

## Justice, Fairness, and Recognition

Woodruff's framework of justice is relational rather than procedural. Justice is not a formula but a form of care, a continual striving to honour each person's moral worth. He writes that "justice is a harmony," implying that social healing requires empathy, dialogue, and the capacity to listen. In *The Ajax Dilemma*, the absence of this harmony destroys the Greek army's moral cohesion; in design, the absence of justice fractures the social fabric.

My capstone began with this realisation: that many modern spaces, schools, hospitals, prisons, are designed for efficiency, not empathy. These environments fail to "listen." They echo the cold rationalism of Agamemnon's choice: a prioritisation of outcomes over human dignity.

For instance, the standard layout of a psychiatric ward often isolates patients under the guise of safety. What if, instead, design embodied solidarity, transparent materials, natural light, community-centred planning? In this context, rehabilitation is not only medical but moral. Design becomes an ethical conversation between user and environment, where fairness means inclusion and recognition means empowerment.

This mirrors Woodruff's critique of leadership that lacks compassion. Agamemnon's flaw is not in logic but in empathy. He rewards Odysseus because he values intellect over devotion, strategy over loyalty. The ethical leader, like the ethical designer, must resist this hierarchy of values. True justice acknowledges the unseen labor, the quiet resilience, the unspoken grief.

## **Healing as Ethical Leadership**

Woodruff defines ethical leadership as a practice rooted in reverence, a respect for human vulnerability and the awareness of one's own limitations. Reverence, for Woodruff, is not religious but moral humility: a recognition that power must serve healing, not pride.

In my project, Design as Rehabilitation, this reverence translates to "design humility", a commitment to co-create with, not for, communities. During my research, I interviewed housing advocates and formerly incarcerated individuals to understand how design could either oppress or restore autonomy. Their insights reframed my understanding of leadership. Ethical design leadership is not about control but facilitation, creating conditions for others to thrive.

Woodruff's Agamemnon fails because he sees leadership as command rather than stewardship. Similarly, many designers fail when they impose solutions without listening. The ethical leader, whether in governance or design, must practice what Daniel Goleman calls emotional intelligence: self-awareness, empathy, and social attunement. Healing requires moral imagination, the ability to envision justice not as punishment, but as repair.

This echoes my own evolving practice. In the Design as Rehabilitation project, I position the designer as a caretaker of psychological and social ecosystems. Each design decision, light, texture, spatial flow, becomes an ethical gesture. To design ethically is to say, "I see you; you deserve to feel safe here."

## **The Limits of Fairness**

One of Woodruff's most provocative insights is that fairness alone cannot guarantee justice. Agamemnon's fair process (a council vote) leads to an unjust outcome because it neglects the emotional reality of Ajax's sacrifice. Likewise, design guided solely by metrics, efficiency, cost, sustainability scores, can reproduce structural harm even when it appears "fair."

In Design as Rehabilitation, I confronted this dilemma through the example of public housing design in Lagos and New York. Both cities justify urban renewal projects through the language of fairness ("equal access," "modernisation"), yet these projects often displace marginalised communities. This paradox, where fairness becomes a vehicle for injustice, illustrates Woodruff's central warning: that justice cannot be automated. It requires judgment, empathy, and context.

As Woodruff writes, "Justice lives in the hearts of people, not in their laws." By extension, healing design lives in the hearts of communities, not in their blueprints. My project thus reimagines

fairness not as sameness but as responsiveness. A fair design listens differently in different contexts; it adapts rather than imposes.

## **The Designer as Mediator**

In *The Ajax Dilemma*, Woodruff advocates for leaders who act as mediators, bridging competing claims of value. The ethical leader, he argues, must hold space for plural truths without collapsing into cynicism.

This vision resonates with my role as designer-curator in *Design as Rehabilitation*. I am constantly mediating between aesthetics and ethics, innovation and accessibility, creativity and care. The process demands what Woodruff might call “moral courage”: the willingness to make imperfect decisions guided by compassion rather than ego.

Through this lens, the designer is not a saviour but a servant of collective healing. Their task is to transform spaces of neglect into sites of recognition, where the invisible labor of care becomes visible again.

## **The Tragedy of Injustice and the Possibility of Repair**

Woodruff’s tragedy of Ajax ends in despair: Ajax, consumed by humiliation, takes his own life. Yet Woodruff frames this not as fatalism but as moral instruction. The tragedy teaches leaders the cost of neglecting justice, of failing to honour the full humanity of those they lead.

In my design research, I’ve encountered similar tragedies, communities disillusioned by systems that promised progress but delivered alienation. The design discipline, like leadership, risks moral failure when it forgets that human beings are not data points but emotional, embodied beings.

However, where Woodruff’s story ends in death, my project seeks renewal. *Design as Rehabilitation* imagines what might have happened if Agamemnon had chosen differently, if he had spoken to Ajax with empathy, recognised his wounds, and invited him into the process of healing. That is what rehabilitative design does: it transforms the architecture of despair into a dialogue of hope.

## **Design as Ethical Leadership**

Woodruff’s *The Ajax Dilemma* teaches that ethical leadership is less about perfection than about care. It is the art of sustaining moral balance in an imperfect world. My capstone project extends that art into the field of design, proposing that healing is both a social and spatial practice.

Where Ajax sought honour, today’s communities seek recognition. Where Agamemnon sought control, the ethical designer seeks connection. Justice in design, as in leadership, is not achieved once and for all; it is continuously rehearsed through empathy, humility, and imagination.

To design ethically, therefore, is to lead ethically. It is to repair what Woodruff calls “the fragile moral fabric” of community, one stitch, one space, one act of reverent design at a time.

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