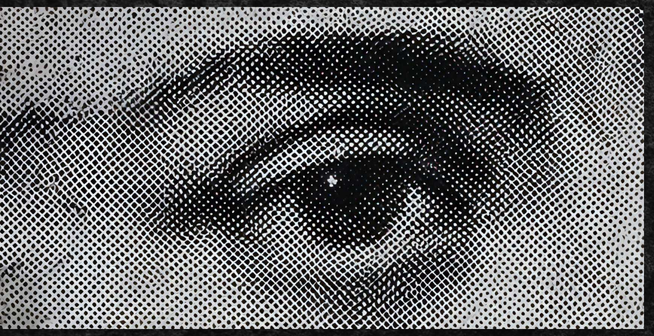
BEYOND THE BOX

Our design journey through the EPDA White Box Challenge

Facilitated by: Lena Lekkou & Petros Antoniou

SAE Athens participation for EPDA's White Box Challenge 2026

Every project comes with predefined boxed rules: a format, a client, a deadline, or just standard ways of doing things. Our design students usually learn to work within those rules. But this White Box Challenge gave them the opportunity to try something different. We asked them to question the rules before starting their work.









Start with the Question

The Question

When EPDA launched the White Box Challenge, 18 SAE students answered our open call. The brief asked for a cubic box that becomes something worth keeping, guided by EPDA's process: Think. Don't think. Think again.

We kept packaging out of the room for the first weeks. Design thinking teaches that the problem you are handed is rarely the problem worth solving and we wanted the students to find theirs.



The Box

The Process

Our first meeting was on May 6th, marking the start of a one month Design Sprint. We met for three hours each week, using design sprint exercises to push past conventional boundaries and think outside the box.

Initially, we questioned the fundamental nature of a box. What defines a box, and what does not? What emotions does it evoke? We explored current trends in packaging, materials, and sustainability, and ultimately reflected on what matters most to us as designers and individuals today.

First meeting: 06th May

Meetings in total: 16

What is a Box

Storage

Carrier

Closure

View

Safety

Boundaries

Memory

Shape

Gift

Surprise

Pixel

A way of thinking

Toy

Trap

Home

What is NOT a Box

Fluid

Freedom

Infinity

Uncertainty

A feeling

An idea

Open

A Sound

A conversation

Imagination

Something invisible

Time

Chaos

Belonging

An experience

What emotions does it evoke?

Nostalgia

Fear

Sadness

Grief

Calm

Anxiety

Joy

Claustrophobia

Excitement

Safety

Curiosity

Doubt

Loneliness

Pressure

Awkwardness

“Packages are an inescapable part of modern life. They are omnipresent and invisible, deplored and ignored”

“Just because you’re not looking at a package doesn’t mean you don’t see it. Most of the time, you see far more than a container and a label.

You see a personality, an attitude toward life, perhaps even a set of beliefs”

Quotes from the book “The Total Package”

“Packages serve as symbols both of their contents and of a way of life. And just as they can very powerfully communicate the satisfaction a product offers, they are equally potent symbols of wastefulness once the product is gone”

“Then once the product has been used up, and the package is empty, it becomes suddenly visible once more. This time, though, it is trash that must be discarded or recycled. This instant of disposal is the time when people are most aware of packages.It is a negative moment, like the end of a love affair, and what’s left seems to be a horrid waste.”

Quotes from the book “The Total Package”

The Box

Once students start to see the box as a human experience, the conversation naturally turns toward social impact.

When asked about their main concerns, students shared critical issues like overconsumption, isolation, burnout, housing, resource limits, and fast tech changes.

New designers care deeply about society giving them a structured space helps turn those values into meaningful work.



Finding the Box again

The Box

From those worries, 10 students formed four teams. Each found its own way for design to do some good:

Raising awareness

a walk-in installation exploring the hidden environmental toll of AI and water scarcity.

Human Relevance & Natural Self-Sufficiency

an exploration of human importance and nature's self-sufficiency through a resilient plant species that thrives without care.

Self-image

an installation narrative exploring beauty standards and social pressures.

Material practice

gift packaging for conference attendees exploring traditional Sashimono Japanese joinery, with components repurposed into functional objects.

Final Projects

Two teams made it to the final round by exploring broad themes of technology, history, and human behavior and turning them into design proposals.

Escape Your Echo Chamber

It started with a simple question: can propaganda do good? Focusing on everyday AI, the team did something interesting: instead of thinking outside the box, they stepped inside it. It became a way to look at what we do and the impact we have, leading people into a dark box that ends in a ruined landscape.

PHYLLOS

It started as a four-part box about human history. Soon they moved away from the form itself and focused on the idea of a container—asking what is truly worth holding inside. Touching on Dadaism, it asks a simple question: is this a watering can?

Escape Your Echo Chamber

This is the packaging of AI, built as a walk-in installation. Its black exterior sells artificial intelligence through propaganda, as an effortless time saver. Inside, serverracks and messages grow more truthful until a window shows what every answer costs in power and water. a burned world. A dustopia.



Team:
SOFIA KOKOLAKI
PANAGIOTIS KONTOGONIS
JOSEPH MOSCHOPOULOS

View full concept here:
https://www.behance.net/gallery/258040143/Escape-your-echo-chamber

PHYLLOS

PHYLLOS looks like a watering can, but the user never uses it to water. The user fills the can, and the ceramic pot inside soaks up the water on its own. Its form moves from a square base, the collective, to a round top, the individual.



Team:
GINA NIKOLINA
ZOE TSIRI
IOANNIS MASTROTHEODOROU

View full concept here:
https://www.behance.net/gallery/258039339/Phyllos



Our role as Designers

Our role as Designers

Designers shape behavior.

Throughout this process, we repeatedly questioned our own roles as designers and human beings.

Our daily concerns surfaced even in the practical aspects of concept development. AI was used for the final presentation because it helped bridge areas that presented challenges.

This dynamic captures the core of the discussion, the daily struggle designers face when integrating AI into their practice. On one hand, it feels like a tool that makes tasks easier but on the other hand there is a sense of guilt surrounding its use and broader impact.

Quote from Lena Lekkou

“From the start of this project, we took the risk to experiment and explore ideas that we don't usually get the chance to work on in our everyday work.

Letting the students speak first about their worries and how they see the future set the direction for the projects right away.

I'm really glad that what came out of all this experimentation was our real concerns as designers, but also the feeling that our ideas can speak our truth and make a real impact on the world around us. Even though I didn't expect it, I come out of this challenge feeling much more optimistic.”

Quote from Petros Antoniou

“This project gave us a chance to pause and reflect on how we design and how we work together, at a time when AI is reshaping creativity and what it means to be a designer. As facilitators we set out to guide the process, and we ended up learning just as much from the students

Week by week, we watched the their ideas evolve, drift apart and come back together, moving from the abstract to the concrete. They used design methods to talk about big global issues and to think through complex problems as a group.

For me, that is the true spirit of innovation through design: staying with the hard questions long enough for something honest to come out of them.”

“Design matters, because we all matter.”

“I’ve never forgotten that there is a human side to business, or that we should do what we can to help someone else.”

“While design can be used as a tool for change, only as people can we collectively make change happen.”

“Everything is temporary. Being aware and conscious of the difficult sides of the world, of its suffering, I am able to learn from it and help causes or bring beauty into situations with my design. As designers we can create the world we want to see, we have the skills to extract the positive from any brief - and that is what makes me wake up every day and go to the studio.”

Quotes from the book “Citizen First Designer Second”

“But the earth is not infinite, and today the finite capability of its natural resources has been exceeded. Temperatures are rising, the atmosphere is becoming poisonous, food is less and less healthy as the number of chemicals necessary to grow it in overplanted farms has increased.Change is essential to allow the earth to come back into balance”

“Humanity centered emphasizes designs that take into account the sociotechnical system in which people reside. Design must be sensitive to the impact on the environment.”

“The things we design—the artificial—change the way we behave and act so that just as we have changed things through our designs, those things then change us, affecting how we behave and live: we design the world, and it, in turn, designs us.”

Quotes from the book “Design for a better world”



Appendix

Sprint 1 on FigJam

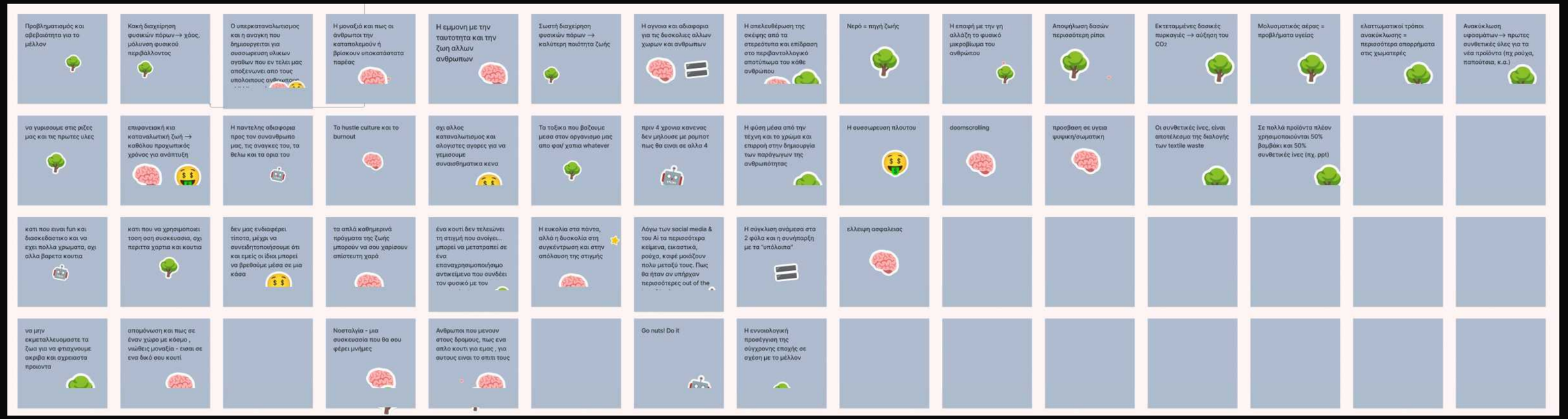


"What is a box?" The first exercise on the board.



"What is NOT a box?" The second exercise.

Sprint 1 on FigJam



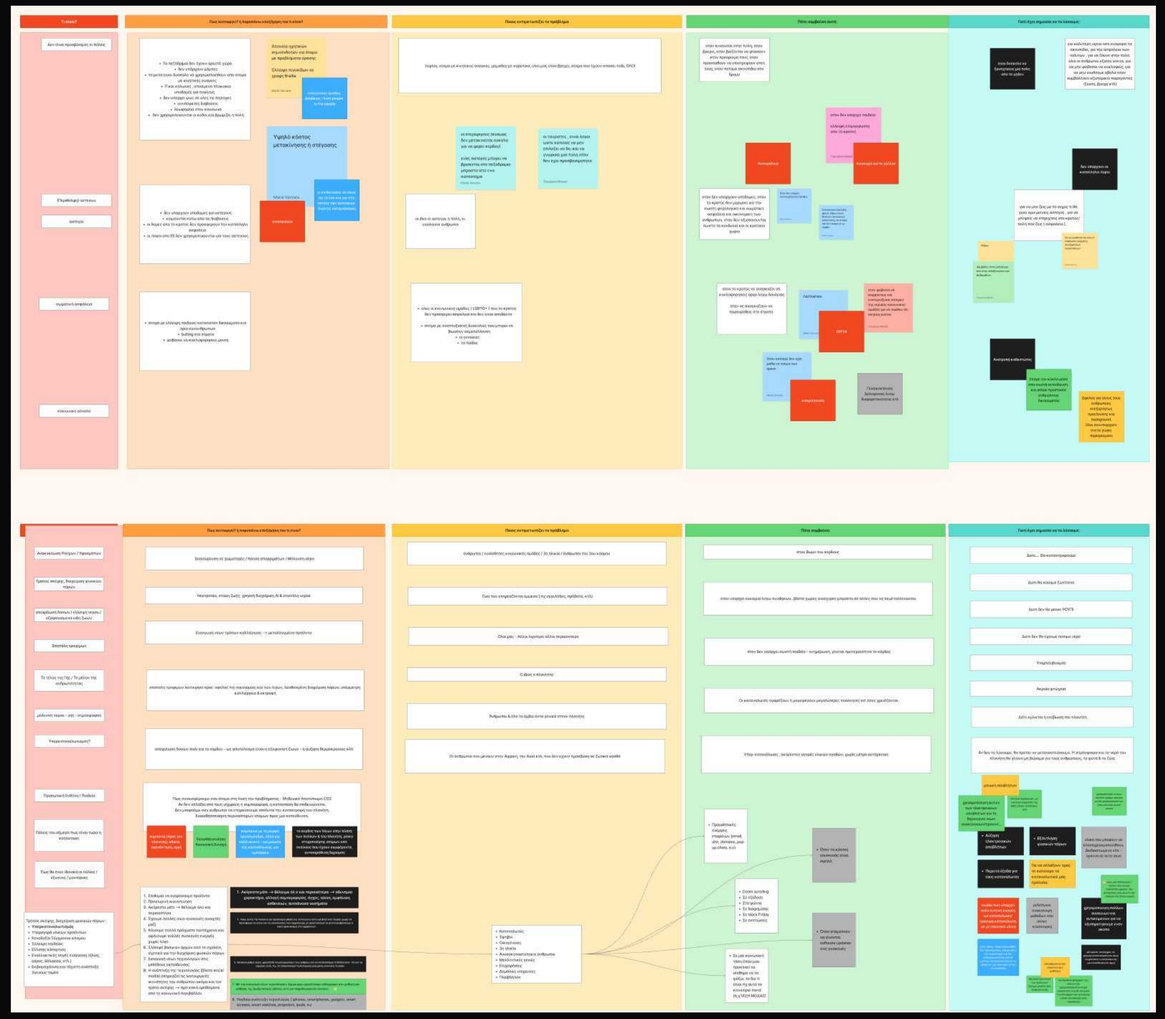
The Problem Statement board: what worries the students, from overconsumption to loneliness.

Sprint 1 on FigJam



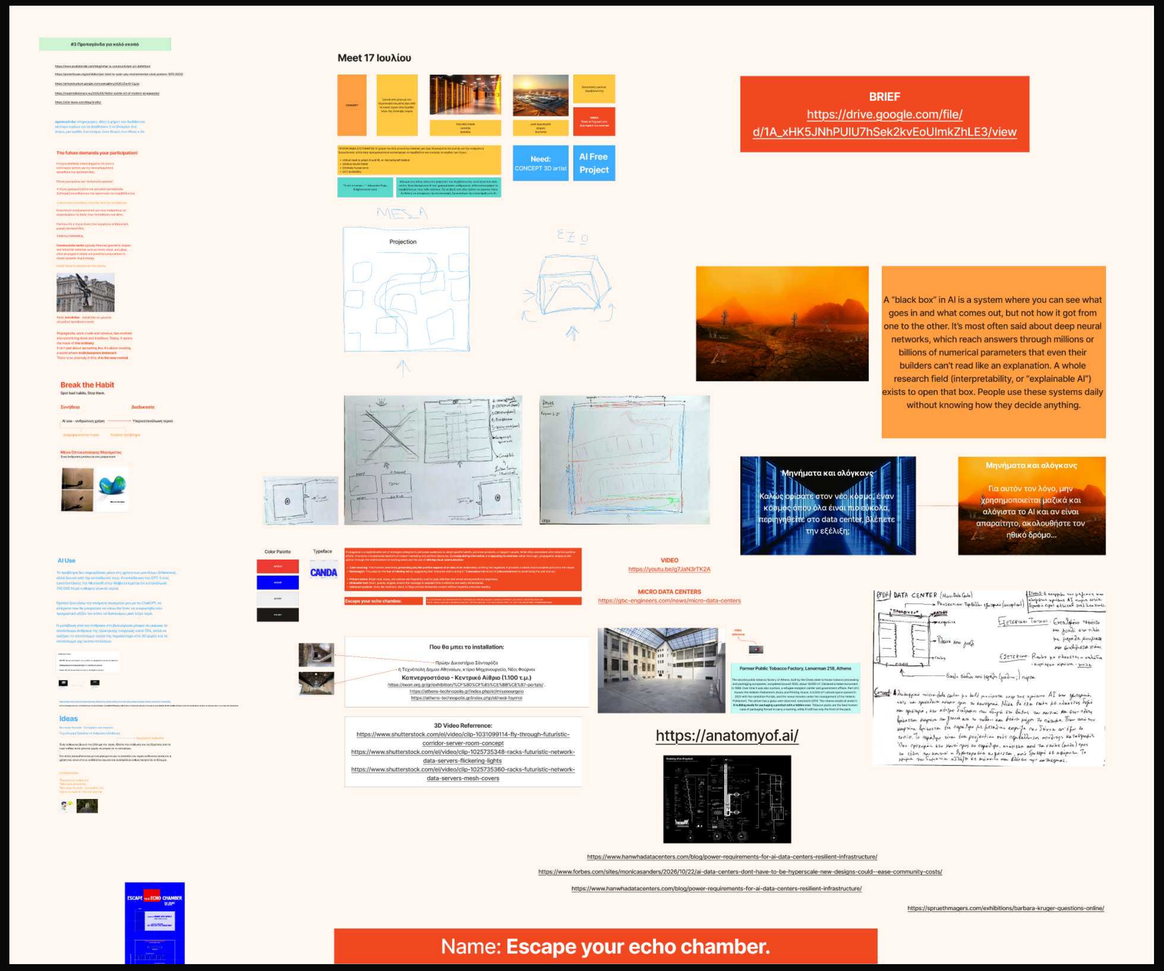
A screenshot from our FigJam board with all the photos.

Sprint 2 on FigJam



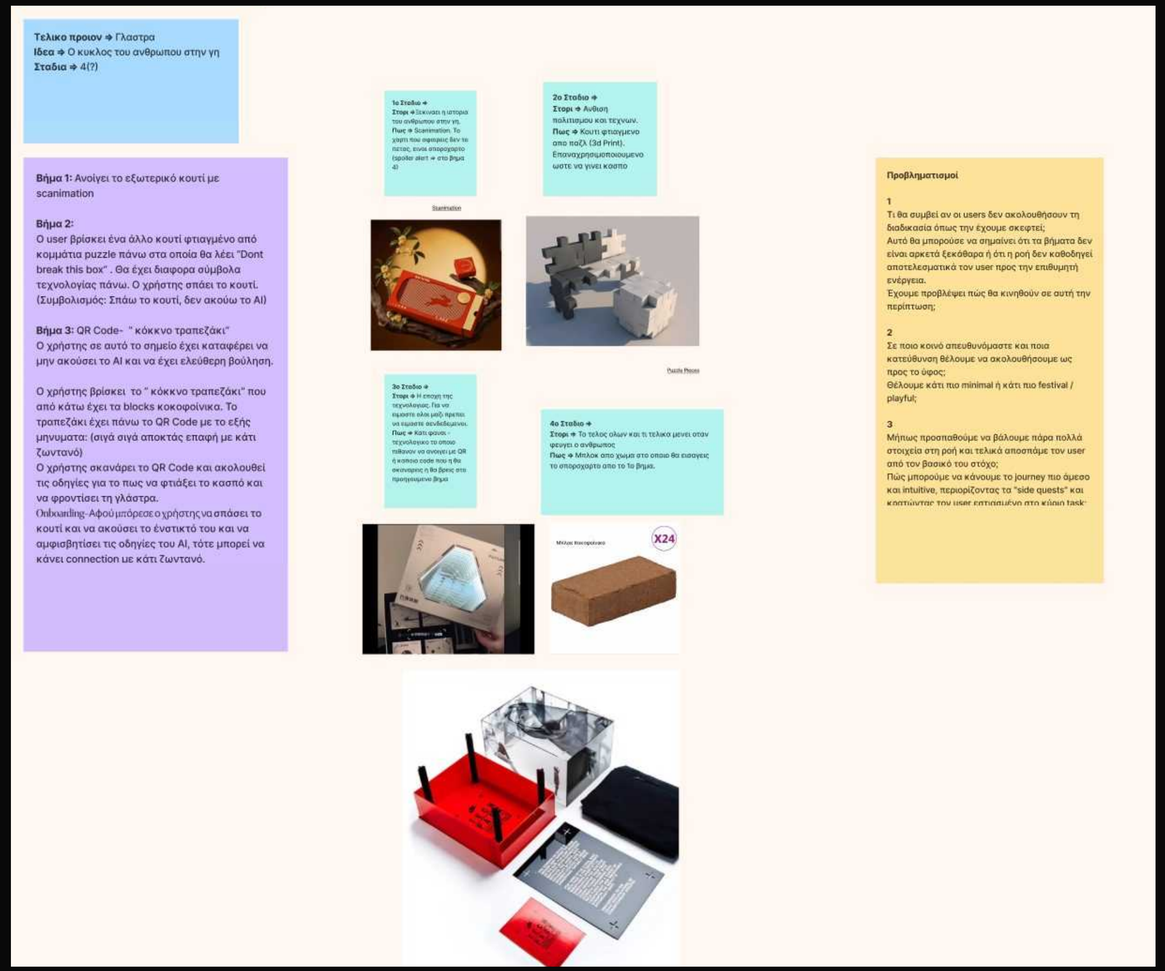
The 5W problem statements: What is it? How does it work? Who faces it? When does it happen? Why does it matter?

Escape Your Echo Chamber



From the team's board: hand sketches of the box and the walk, slogan tests and the Tobacco Factory as the site.

PHYLLOS



From the team's board: hand sketches of the box and the walk, slogan tests and the Tobacco Factory as the site.

Final Meeting :)



A snapshot from our last meeting with the teams

