

INTRODUCTION


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NOT AT YOUR SERVICE AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

INTRODUCTION

Design is often seen as a marketing instrument that is employed to create an aesthetically or functionally competitive advantage in selling goods, ideas or services. Although this may be a valid and valuable view of design within a commercial setting, by no means does it define the boundaries of design. The marketplace, however, should neither determine the scope of design nor the roles that designers can take. This introductory essay aims to outline some aspects of critique levelled against this conception of design as well as some dichotomies whose unquestioned persistence limit the scope of design as a form of academic inquiry.

On the one hand, the scope is determined by the terminology and conception of design—that is, by the question as to what is meant by the term ‘design.’ But although there is a working definition of design, it appears very difficult to define design theoretically. This difficulty becomes evident in spiral-trap sentences such as: “design is to design a design to produce a design.” 

On the other hand, the scope of design is often limited by institutional boundaries—that is, by what ‘design’ includes and excludes within its discourse. An institutional critique of design will therefore point to the ideological, social, political or eth-

ical shortcomings of design discourse regarding both theory and practice. The *First Things First Manifesto*, for example, highlighted how narrow designers' engagement with the world was conceived as being at the time. Although satirically exaggerated, the manifesto rightly points out that the general consensus seems to have been that designers should use their skill for commercial purposes, to sell things such as "cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, aftershave lotion, before shave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons" rather than designing for socially more beneficial ends. Conceptions such as, *Design for the Real World* furthermore highlight the fact that designers address only a very limited range of issues, focusing their activity on the problems of only a small section of the world's population. What is worth designing and who is worth designing for was an area rarely addressed in the design discourse at that time and from the perspective of this discourse it thus seems that the problems designers focus on are all the problems that exist. As a consequence, these problems do not relate to the real world, but render a distorted image of the world which may be called the 'design world.' Moreover, design often oper-

ates in a solutionist fashion and turns issues into design problems to which only design can provide a solution. ٨٤٤٨

The concept of *Design Noir* ٤٨٨ highlights another ideological shortcoming of the design world. Not only do designers focus on a small segment of the issues, they also often ignore the richness and complexity of human life, thus producing design objects based on ideas of efficiency and “user friendliness” that turn the users of these objects into caricatures. Real human behaviours, needs and desires are mostly very different from the assumed behaviours designers base their designs on. The real world of human behaviour might be closer to a Film Noir than a Hollywood Blockbuster. The real world does not provide only happy ends.

The scope of design, however, is not limited merely by the issues that designers choose to take into account: it is also limited by decisions on who should be considered a designer, who can participate in a design process, and who defines the issues of design. These questions are addressed, for example, in the concept of *Decolonising Design*, ٤٤٤ which exposes normativising and homogenising forces within official design. It highlights the fact that the conception of design is largely based on the western conception of Modernity. Design understood in this tradition ex-

cludes large area of human practices, of making and doing, from the discourse of design. Furthermore, design in this tradition promotes a certain ideal of “good design” that is more often based on an attributed status within the design world rather than on actual, real-world applicability. Instead the aim should be to articulate a more diverse notion of design that takes into account the diversity of human practices. This requires taking the backgrounds and experiences of designers into account, articulating how these affect the way issues are addressed and including marginalised positions.

To summarise, all of these critiques of design challenge the conception, discourse, institutions, processes and topics of design. They ask us to consider design outside the narrow constraints of the marketplace, to adopt new roles for designers and to broaden the discourse of design.

What has been considered but remains less elaborated with-
in these critiques, and what may be especially relevant to conceiving design as an academic field, is design’s relation to knowledge. Here, the question is furthermore how design relates to other academic fields in terms of generating knowledge and understanding, which is the defining criterion of any academic endeavour. This is not to say that knowledge cannot lead to a competitive

edge in a marketplace—rather, it is probably the most important factor for creating innovative products, though this is not the main motivation for academic disciplines. However, it is not enough to label design in an academic setting as research without articulating what kind of knowledge this research leads to. If the main motivation of academic inquiry is to create a better understanding of the world, then design needs to better understand the shifting material, visual and technological landscape that it helps to produce.

Such an inquiry can take place not only in a textual form but can take place through design itself—that is, through the production of design objects both as media for investigation and discussion. This requires us to view design objects as means rather than ends. Whereas traditionally, design objects are seen as the ends (or products) of the design process, here design objects can be conceived as the means of the process of investigation, exploration and inquiry.


In order to evolve design as an academic endeavour that aims to produce knowledge and understanding, some limiting dichotomies need to be additionally overcome: first, the divide between *pragmatism* and *imagination*, second, the divide between *making* and *thinking*, and third, the divide between *experience* and *understanding*.


PRAGMATISM AND IMAGINATION

Design is often associated with solving practical problems. Moreover, this conception is often mistaken as a definition of design itself, thus excluding activities from the definition of design that do not serve a practical purpose. Design can, however, be understood in broader terms, including both practical and imaginary practices.

Contained within Denis Diderot's and Jean-Baptiste Le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, an Enlightenment attempt at categorising all human knowledge, the map *Système figuré des connaissances humaines* (Figurative System of Human Knowledge) groups this knowledge into three categories: memory, reason and imagination. Architecture is listed twice: as 'practical architecture' in the category of memory along with other arts and crafts, and as 'civil architecture' in the category of imagination along with other poetic activities. While the former deals with practical problems of everyday life, the latter deals with poetically imagined scenarios of alternative modes of living. The overall conception of 'architecture,' that Diderot and d'Alembert use, however, is capable of encompassing both practical and poetic approaches and is not limited to one or the other. Rather, 'architecture' here seems to be defined as a distinct realm of human engage-


ment with the world through ‘building.’ Likewise, the overall conception of ‘design’ should not be limited to practical or useful aims but should be understood as a comprehensive engagement with the designed environment.

Although d’Alembert views the the domains of understanding as a progression from memory to imagination,  these two dimensions of design should not necessarily be split into higher and lower, but may help conceive design as a form of inquiry that produces understanding. Whereas ‘practical design’ addresses human living conditions in technical and functional terms by producing useful things for everyday use, ‘poetic design’ investigates these questions at a more theoretical and conceptual level of ideas. Here the aim is less a practical use, but reflection and understanding. It is more an inquiry into human existence through imagining alternative forms of living than a matter of solving functional problems.

This split, however, seems to miss the point that a more imaginary and poetic exploration may have some very practical implications, as such an exploration may actually produce more appropriate objects than a more narrow and ‘pragmatic’ approach. 

MAKING AND THINKING

The separation of making and thinking in the design discourse leads to design falling into the category of making things, whereas thinking about things seems to take place somewhere else. In contrast, the traditional academic system of the university attributes more value to thinking and reflection than to making.

In the Renaissance, for example, one needed a certain level of economic freedom in order to pursue the liberal arts (*studia humanitatis*), one would have to engage in the mechanical arts if one needed to make a living. In order to raise the status of artists and architects, Giorgio Vasari used the concepts of *disegno* (sketch) to argue that the arts are not only a matter of executing and reproducing ideas but also the activity of producing them. Artists deal with ideas and concepts through sketching, just as a writer does by writing words. Their activity should thus be differentiated from that of mere arts and crafts, which is often more a matter of executing predetermined ideas rather than conceiving them.  Vasari thus provided the foundation for a conception of design as an activity that produces ideas and concepts in the form of sketches and drawings. Although Vasari's aims were to raise the status of the artist by a questionable separation of


work into conception and execution, he nevertheless conceived of design as an activity of poetic inquiry. However, viewed historically much of design seems to have focussed on usefulness and has apparently chosen to lay aside Vasari's idea.

The separation of making and thinking is an artificial distinction. On the one hand, it neglects any thought process that went into making something—and thought has certainly gone into making things, as any cognitive archaeologist will affirm. On the other hand, it seems to undermine the unique process of inquiry within the arts—that is, thinking *through* making.

EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING

Knowledge can be conceived in propositional terms—that is, as knowledge that can be detached from the knower and codified into declarative sentences. This contrasts with procedural knowledge that cannot be detached from the knower, as it involves the ability to do something. It also contrasts with experiential knowledge that may provide the knower with an understanding of what something feels like, which likewise cannot be detached from the knower. Such a form of understanding requires one to undergo an experience.

In design, the aim is frequently not to understand a situation but to design a design object for a situation. Understanding a situation is then limited to deriving sufficient parameters from a situation—through observation for instance—that allow for the designing of a design object. Since designers intervene into the lifeworlds of people by means of design objects, understanding these worlds is paramount. Understanding, however, requires a willingness to change oneself and not just wanting to change the world.

Of course, there are limits to whether one can fully comprehend the lifeworlds of others, but this does not mean that one cannot get closer. Patricia Moore, for example, attempted to investigate the lifeworld of elderly people. She decided to investigate that world through experience rather than through observation. Over the course of three years, Moore occasionally dressed up as an elderly woman from various social strata, modified her hearing, eyesight and movements in order to approximate how elderly people experience the environment and strolled through various North American cities. The outcome was a book in which she reflected on her experiences and how these experiences influenced her work as a designer. 

On the one hand, this project highlights the importance of an open-ended investigation that is not determined by the need to produce design objects but by curiosity. On the other hand, it shows how attempting to understand through experience can manifest in designers themselves, which consequently affects their approaches to the design of objects for these lifeworlds.
















The experiences of situations and lifeworlds may not only allow designers to understand issues, but may also enable design objects to provide experiences for discussing these issues with an audience. The design object thereby becomes a medium for understanding an issue rather than an object for solving a problem, with design objects often providing a more immediate and experiential perspective on issues than an abstract exploration could. ☞

CONCLUSION

The critique of design is part of the discourse and definition of design. Its aim is to highlight blind spots in the discourse, to provide new conceptual frameworks for design activity and to better understand the implications of design activity. The academic positioning of design poses further challenges, particularly the relationship between design and other academic fields in terms of creating knowledge and understanding. This may entail

questioning some long-held beliefs and ideologies relating to the field. Design is not only a service but also a field of inquiry in the same way that design objects can not only be solutions but also a means for reflection. Designing is then not only a matter of changing the world but also of understanding it. ㄱㄴ

This book gathers responses to some of these questions and challenges within the different specialisations of design that make up the Department of Design at Zurich University of the Arts. It compiles reflections on the academic role of design in a social, political and economic context. It contemplates what design can do to foster our understanding of the world rather than just producing it—as is constantly being done by many, and only to a marginal extent by people who describe themselves as designers. It sets forth an academic positioning of design in terms of research, teaching and further education, as well as with regards to collaborative exchange with other disciplines. Above all, it aims to serve as a platform for debate rather than attempting to present a monolithic definition of design.

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-  Ken Garland, "First Things First: A Manifesto," *The Guardian*, January 24, 1964. The manifesto was written and proclaimed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts on November 29, 1963.
-  Ibid.
-  Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985; reprint, 2006).
-  Cf. Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964): 571–584.
-  Evgeny Morozov, "Solutionism and Its Discontents," in *To Save Everything Click Here: Technology, Solutionism and the Urge to Fix Problems That Don't Exist* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).
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-  Tristan Schultz et al., "What is At Stake With Decolonizing Design?: A Roundtable," *Design and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2018): 81–101; Tristan Schultz et al., "Editors' Introduction," *Design and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2018): 1–6.
-  Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, "Preliminary Discourse," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Richard N. Schwab and Walter E. Rex (Ann Arbor: MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, 2009), pt. 1, accessed August 11, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0001.083>. Originally published as "Discours Préliminaire," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 1:i–xlv (Paris, 1751).
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-  Robert Williams, "Vasari's Concept of Disegno," in *Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy: From Techne to Metatechne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
-  Pat Moore and Charles Paul Conn, *Disguised: A True Story* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985).
-  Björn Franke, "Design as Inquiry: Prospects for a Material Philosophy" (PhD diss., Royal College of Art, 2016).
-  Contrary to Karl Marx' 11th thesis on Feuerbach. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

