THE ART OF PRUDENT INTERFERENCE

This chapter deals with a development that has been manifest for some time—in practice, training and in the self-reflection taking place in the design disciplines. It describes a process of differentiation that is emerging with ever greater clarity and that is going to provide new stimuli for design practice, training and research.

Whether they are guests at our bachelor or project exhibitions, readers of our publications, experts or laypersons, all these people have proven to be somewhat surprised at the expansion of our general understanding of what design is, and what it can bring about. Besides designing products, interactions and information—things one generally expects from a design university—we also bring forth work and projects that cannot be unambiguously assigned to the design disciplines or to any narrow definition of design. Instead, students and researchers are using design methods and processes to have an impact that is societally relevant. The visible results of this may well be "objects" in keeping with a classical understanding of design, and they generally also reflect a high degree of design quality; however, that is no longer their prime focus and function.

It is part and parcel of design history that the discipline engages intensively with societal circumstances and contexts, whether of its own accord or because someone commissions it to do so. For example, the idea of providing people with a "better" life through design can be traced back to the Arts and Crafts Movement of the mid-19th century. John Ruskin investigated the link be-

tween art, society and work; William Morris put into practice this idea of "pleasure in understanding the capabilities of a special material, and using them for suggesting […] natural beauty." ⌐⌐ In the age of emergent industrial production with its supposedly concomitant trends of dehumanisation, both Ruskin and Morris proposed returning to "true" handiwork, because they believed this would improve the lot of human beings. From today's perspective, this was an early instance of criticism of the emergent industrial society, offering guidelines for a better life through design.

The narrative of this relationship between design and a "better" life can be seen to be ongoing, right up to the present day, via the activities of the Wiener Werkstätte, the *Deutscher Werkbund,* the Bauhaus, the HfG Ulm, the Black Mountain College and the example of the *Wohnhilfe* in Switzerland, which aimed to improve life by means of good, cheap design. This notion of something "better" often implied criticism of progress, or at least endeavoured to give that progress a visible quality of life. It is thus an important aspect of the history of design—and of its self-understanding—that in engaging with living contexts and societal conditions it should employ means different from those of the natural or social sciences, though with the same degree of seriousness.

But what exactly is a "better life"? The modern era—which signified an upheaval in many areas of life, and shifts in tradition on

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⌐⌐   See "Arts and Crafts: An Introduction," Victoria & Albert Museum, London, accessed January 13, 2020, http://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/arts-and-crafts-an-introduction.

⌐⌐   William Morris, ed., *Arts and Crafts Essays* (London: Rivington Percival & Co., 1893), 38.

account of industrialisation—brought with it "mass-produced goods" that began to supplant products made by hand. ⌖ Anonymous goods for an anonymous society were the result, and they did indeed simplify and improve many areas of life, especially the processes of production. One can justifiably claim that the "good design" of these industrial goods was an important aspect of design's *raison d'être* in the first place. Not for nothing did the *Deutscher Werkbund* award a prize for "good form."

⠀⠀⠀⠀This positivist attitude changed because designers felt that economic considerations were manipulating their artistic choices, and also because they realised that they bore co-responsibility for the emergence of an excessive consumer culture and were being manipulated in general by politics and business. Economic growth was also being stimulated by the attractiveness of ever-new designs for things that people perhaps did not even need. So why should designers continue to design things for a small segment of society that was already living in excess, when large sections of society did not even have access to the most basic essentials?—Quite apart from the huge consumption of resources that this consumer culture required, along with the resultant damage to nature and the environment. The Report to the Club of Rome of 1972 underlined this when it described "the limits to growth." ⌖ The fact that design itself often merely intensifies societal differences (or at least makes

⌖ Sigfried Giedion, *Die Herrschaft der Mechanisierung* (Bodenheim: Athenaeum Verlag, 1988).

⌖ Ugo Bardi, *The Limits to Growth Revisited* (New York: Springer, 2011).

them clearly visible) has been a particularly painful aspect of this overall realisation.

This critical assessment of global living circumstances and their impact led to an endeavour to change the state of things to achieve "not more—just better." Victor Papanek ⧝⤳ began to look at "real world problems" from a design perspective, thereby demonstrating the necessity of not just thinking about what and how we design, but above all for whom (and for whom not). Lucius Burckhardt, by contrast, was concerned with what is "invisible," namely the social impact of design. ⼁⼁ He believed that every act of design (both "good" and "bad") has an impact on society. It changes it, steers our behaviour, demonstrates structures of power and ownership, and can be more powerful than what is actually visible. Function and aesthetics are merely a thin, visible surface, beneath which design exerts its impact on society and human behaviour. Burckhardt described how designers are either knowingly or unknowingly engaged in designing relationships and actions, not form or function as they tend to think; he also posited that they generally do this without reflecting on it.

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "PRUDENT INTERFERENCE"?

This acknowledgement that designers contribute more than they imagine to our quality of life (in both a positive and negative way) is thus hardly new. Whereas the impact of earlier design generations was still limited, due to the

⧝⤳   Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

⼁⼁   Hans Höger, ed., *Lucius Burckhardt: Design ist unsichtbar* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1995).

political, financial and technological opportunities at their disposal, today's global flows of information mean they have access to knowledge about living circumstances and conditions in real time. Awareness, discourse and action can all be triggered across a worldwide sphere of influence, using simple, cheap means. Conditions in the world—also seen from the perspective of individuals or small groups—can be experienced as something that can be changed, and thus also "designed." No large-scale, centrally run campaigns are needed to exert a major impact; even small-scale "injections" by individuals can achieve this.

The same is true of communication. The Internet carries knowledge, findings and new concepts to all parts of the world, where they are then used, adjusted, adapted and passed on. Many designers have made these hybrid strategies of action and communication their own. This often goes hand in hand with a rejection of any claims to authorship or copyright. Strategies for sharing knowledge and results are becoming ever more important, and the significance of authorship is dwindling. Innovative ideas are being "shared" or are even made available as "open source," and are tested and further developed. The IDEO design agency, for example, is realising this with its "design kit," a blueprint for "social design" that requires expert knowledge for its application. Design knowledge and design results are thus no longer anyone's "property" to be traded, but are to be disseminated and ap-

"IDEO Design Kit," IDEO, accessed January 13, 2020, http://www. designkit.org.

plied swiftly. This easy access to information is often the beginning of a "better life."

As a discipline, design is unique because it is creative and exploratory, while also being pragmatic and innovative. The practice of design includes observing things, states of being and processes, and also means asking fundamental, clever, critical questions in order to arrive at unexpected solutions. Here, "clever" means the ability to propose intelligent solutions by acting appropriately in concrete, individual cases, taking all relevant factors and the situation of those affected into consideration. In other words, it means taking into account the current state of things, and acting according to the circumstances at hand.

The focus is here not "just" on designing artefacts (though this continues to play a crucial role) but on designing quality of life, relationships and states of being. In contrast to business-oriented design tasks, in these cases there are often no briefings, no clients, and no manufacturers with a market to satisfy. Even the "use" of a design object has to be defined here, along with its users. Problem definitions and goals are thus often neither clear nor unambiguous. Designers who want to work in these fields have to learn to deal creatively with these imponderables, separating the important from the unimportant, and developing successful methods on their own. They have to observe whether and how the quality of life can actually be altered.

This also means engaging directly and personally with social conditions. Designers are often confronted with complex, multifarious, global challenges that have a local impact.

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There is thus much which lies outside their sphere of influence, though some things are simple to change. The term "human-centred design" describes the concept exactly—which is, namely, to make the human being the focus of one's attention in a given situation and in a given environment; "social design," on the other hand, tends to focus on designing social circumstances and conditions. In our work, we have developed the following criteria for "circumstances and impact":

⌐Identify the setting: Who wants to do what for whom and why, and who is defining what is needed for whom?

⌐What is the use, and what are the risks, for those involved?

⌐Take into consideration the cultural and social context, customs and behaviours

⌐What is already extant in the way of knowledge, material and resources?

⌐Take the cultural language into consideration by taking an ethnographic perspective

⌐Can independent, local products and producers be supported and promoted?

⌐Can inclusion take place?

⌐Will solutions lead to economic independence?

With these criteria in mind, we begin to realise that what is interesting, unexpected and incomplete is waiting for us on the margins of design as a discipline—at the very place where different disciplines and exciting topics come together. This is why designers work together with social scientists and natural scientists on development topics and ecological procedures, with engineers on environmentally friendly technologies, and with climate

researchers on simulating global-warming sce-
narios. There are many more possible exam-
ples. The realisation that many problems today
are neither monothematic, nor solvable by any
single discipline alone, opens up opportunities
for interdisciplinary cooperation. This brings
us back to the topic of "prudent interference."

Living conditions—as the phrase sug-
gests—always have to do with the "condition"
of things. The world in which we live is both
diverse and disparate. Ecological, economic
and cultural conditions are not static things,
but can be actively changed and improved.
The UN has described its 17 most important
"Sustainable Development Goals" in very clear
terms. 🔲 Many of these goals—if not all of
them—can also be seen as design tasks. Glo-
balisation means that these goals are not just
intended for "distant societies," but can have
an impact on us too, as we can clearly see in the
case of climate change.

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF
THE IMPACT OF DESIGN

Participatory methods directly integrate the
people affected into the design process. Such
design solutions no longer emerge in a sequen-
tial, expert process, but in simultaneous itera-
tion; and above all, they emerge in a participa-
tory manner. Such solutions are multi-layered,
but are usually defined from a perspective of
societal necessity: the topics they may address
include fighting poverty, migration, urban de-
velopment, healthcare provision, education,

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🔲   United Nations, "The 17 Goals,"
accessed January 13, 2020, http://sdgs.un.
org/goals.

religion, the ageing society, segregation, and many more. And the methods for devising solutions can involve integrating users, experts, stakeholders and others affected in all phases, and also incorporating their expertise and experience while treating everyone as equals engaging at eye level. This is why we no longer design "for" people, but "with" people, and why we regard these same people as our greatest source of potential solutions. ⟨x⟩⟨x

This "solution-oriented approach" is based on the assumption that many causes cannot be altered, but that resources are already available for possible solutions. As designers, we should thus seek out potential opportunities in that which already exists if we really want to change things. In this sense, we assume the function of a kind of advocate for social potential and social concerns that have been inadequately recognised and utilised by the state and by the market. Ultimately, such an approach can lead to economic independence, better living conditions, social innovation and transformation—not just in so-called "developing countries," but here in our own country.

What should the assessment criteria for such attempts to find solutions be like? What factors might be relevant?
Is the solution fair, appropriate, customised and flexible?
Simple and intuitive?
Tolerant of errors, robust and durable?

⟨x⟩⟨x   See "Design with Social Impact: A Learning Source," Zurich University of the Arts, accessed January 13, 2020, http://designwithsocialimpact. net.

Does it consume a minimum of resources
    and energy?
Is it minimally invasive and does it incor-
    porate that which already exists?
Is it culturally comprehensible and assimi-
    lated—is it "aesthetic"?
Non-discriminatory?
Sustainable in production, consumption and
    disposal?
Sensitive to gender, culture, ethnicity and
    religion?
Does it make good economic sense and open
    up new potential?
Is the solution in the hands of those affected?
Is it based locally, and can it be controlled
    locally?
Is it designed so as to enable different forms
    of independence and to dismantle de-
    pendencies?

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WHAT ARE WE REALLY DEALING WITH?

Design knowledge, design actions and design thinking can make a meaningful contribution towards solving problems such as the inequal distribution of goods, the ageing society, increasing urbanisation, and towards finding sustainable solutions for our approach to the environment. These solutions have to be responsible, and have a long-term impact. To achieve them, design models will often have to be defined and tested in a hitherto unknown environment; and this brings with it hitherto unusual forms of cooperation and sites of action. We can provide relevance and can help to shape things. Design can support many types of societal development, from analysing prob-

lems to implementing solutions. It can facilitate the process of finding answers beyond the bounds of familiar patterns and schemata, and can promote the participatory inclusion of users. Such methods turn our gaze away from the artefact to the context, to societal relations and to the environment. Design can offer a "tool set" for this, which designers and others can use to advance social change—always in awareness of the boundaries of those tools. This has allowed a significant field to emerge in design training. It combines intercultural, interdisciplinary, ethnographic, economic and technological aspects.

RELOCATING DESIGN

As an art and design university, we are concerned not just with the practical implementation of our ideas, but with questions such as how practices and aesthetics can emerge from such contexts, how innovative methods, models and results might be communicated and discussed critically, and—of course—what future fields of work and knowledge may grow out of them. "Human-centred design," "participative design," "co-design"—the expansion of our activity demands a critical engagement with these new concepts. What exactly are societally committed designers? Are they just a kind of better, more creative, more inventive social worker, development worker or migration researcher?

We would not be a proper university were we not aware of design's potential for promoting a sustainable, positive transformation of society. When training students in our discipline and researching in this field, we are less concerned with creating new catego-

ries and more interested in putting existing design expertise and knowledge to socially relevant use, in an ingenious, competent manner. This means formulating our tasks and research questions differently, in order to ask less about the "how" and more about "who." As a discipline, design is currently busy redefining this—and as so often, it is doing so in a close partnership between active practice and critical reflection. As an educational institution, this approach is helping us to further develop our discipline. Research questions, practical implementation, reflecting on one's own activities—ultimately, all this produces knowledge that enables us to engage in a greater diversification of design itself.

This diversification of the role of design creates interfaces that in turn make new cooperation and alliances possible. Even today, for example, development organisations, homes for the aged and refugee organisations are asking us to advise them in order to create a holistic approach to implementing systemic change in their respective environments. A whole body of methodologies, abilities and tools is being devised for design objects (whether a product, an interface or a piece of information) that enables designers to grapple with the problems at hand. In radical terms, "social design" must also always change the system. This is the only way that societal change can truly come about: which brings us back once again to "prudent interference." ✄

✄   For further literature on Social Design see Social Design Lab, Bücher: Interessante Literatur zum Thema Social Design, accessed January 14, 2020, http://socialdesign.de/buecher.

THE FOCUS IS ON DESIGNING QUALITY OF LIFE, RELATIONSHIPS AND STATES OF BEING