# The Bigger Future of European Design

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Design history tells us two things. One is that the design profession has always been shaped by economic, social, political and cultural forces. The other is that many designers and design educators are idealists. These two issues remain in conflict. The former suggests that design is a passive, pragmatic activity destined to respond to the ebbs and flows of local and global change. It is driven by service to wider interests. But designers are also interested in improving on what exists. Nonetheless, despite a history of reformists, from John Ruskin, Henry Cole and William Morris to Walter Gropius to Buckminster Fuller to Tomas Maldonado to Victor Papanek and beyond, designers continue to express consternation at the gap between their ideals and the reality of what is around them. This is perennially felt by graduating design students as they collide with the professional world of design. As Adrian Forty famously argued, 'both conditions [the idealistic and the realistic] invariably co-exist, however uncomfortably, in the work of design' (Forty 1986: 242).

Individual 'works of design' continue to express compromise between conception and execution, artistic ambition and client demand, producer and consumer. However, the relationship between these two camps is being redefined and the bigger 'work of design' is far from over. It will take further change on the part of designers and the context in which they work before the meaning and values of what design is can reach a mature state.

So let us look at the principal issues that are driving the redefinition of a bigger future of European design, taking the wider view first and then focusing on what individuals and educational institutions might do. We shall do this by using a mixture of what they call in the futures forecasting business, 'extrapolators' (extending current trends) and 'intuitors' (making informed predictions based on what we already know).

The Post-Industrial Design Boom

Design is bigger than ever. The latest exponential expansion of the design profession began in the 1980s. Wave after wave of deregulation of financial and service markets and the privatisation of public sectors led to increased competition and positioning and the growth of retail and leisure services. The net result was more packaging, more signage, more interior, more annual report design. The European design market grew at around 25% between 1982 and 1989 (NDI 1994: 10). Indeed, the well-tried Spanish joke chat-up line, '¿Diseñas o trabajas?' emerged in this 1980s context as did, of course, Barcelona as design tourist destination and Spain as a serious player in the European design markets.

While the quantity of design practice continued to rise, there were significant qualitative developments in what design meant and how it was practised in the 1990s. The design industry moved up a gear because of rather than in spite of the global economic recession of the early 1990s. The many clients who had engaged design services for their first time in the 1980s became more demanding with experience. So while the European design market shrank drastically between 1991 and 1993, many established design professionals learnt to be more tactical in the services they provided. Here we see the beginnings of the extension of design into

related disciplines such as marketing, management and public relations as professionals in these sectors saw how they could use design and some designers realised that they could take a larger fee and retain clients through providing more integrated services. More prosaically, studios and consultancies became smaller, keeping overheads down, while embracing a broader range of design disciplines. Indeed, this is a pattern that has been repeated in the shorter-term recession in the past two years (see Design Council 2004: 14).

Subsequently, design growth returned with even more energy. An array of statistics bear this out. By 1994, the Netherlands Design Institute was optimistically predicting a growth of the European design market from $9.5b. to $14b. by 2000 (NDI 1994: 9). In the UK, the number of first year design students has risen by 35%, from 14948 to 20225, between 1994 and 2001 (Design Council 2004). It is in this decade that we see the emergence of the term 'creative industries' or 'cultural industries' - of which design forms a significant proportion - and measurements and forecastings of them taking place. According to a 1998 European Commission report, 'cultural employment' - that is work in advertising, design, broadcast, film, internet, music, publishing and computer games - grew by 24% in Spain (1987-94) while employment in Germany of 'producers and artists' grew by 23% (1980-94) (cited in Hesmondalgh 2002: 90).

To this production-centred view, we must add the notion of a growing, design-aware and design-critical audience. A mere glance at the global rise of Ikea evidences. This 'McDonald's of modern domestic furniture' moved its annual turnover from € 4b (1994) to €12b (2002), achieving outlets in 31 countries. In addition, the collapse of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989 has drawn some 350m. people into liberal democracy and market capitalism. To this we must also consider the effects of business liberalisation in China and the startling economic boom in India. A new global generation of design consumers within a capitalist context has emerged.

Out of these trends the study of creative industries has emerged as a new branch of sociology. This is partly in response to the increased growth of their economic importance. But their relevance to global change in the nature of individual identity, work and the role of cultural goods has also been noted. This awareness began with the publication of Lash and Urry's ambitious study of global flows of commodities, information and people, Economies of Signs and Space (1994). They map the dissolution of industrial society and the freeing of individual subjects from its structures. Moving beyond the traditional rules of family, religion, fixed community and the workplace, individuals are required to take up a more knowing, self-conscious and reflexive negotiation of their lives. For example, shopping has come to be regarded not just as the instrumental acquisition of goods. It also implies the creation of identity through acts of choice and consumption.

From these observations it has been a short hop for many sociologists to regard the activities of creative industries workers as emblematic of these changes (see, for example, Davis and Scase 2000). The creatives' relatively unstructured work patterns and the facilitation of creative freedom, their emphasis on fluid networked transactions with project partners, their sense of 'self-creation' in terms of positioning themselves in a competitive market and the importance of negotiation with others all add up to underline this sense of 'reflexive modernity' (see Beck 1992 and Giddens 1991).

Design is not only a professional activity or artefactual outcome but a 'way of being'. It is about task- rather than time-based jobs - the result being that designers work long hours. Designers not only design things but to some degree have to design themselves and communicate their particular way of working in order to get noticed - look at any designer's website and you'll see how they brand

themselves. Design requires working across cultural boundaries - designers may not only work in international markets, but design to many user groups outside their everyday experience. And finally, the aim of design is to breach the yawning gap between production and consumption - fashioning beautiful spaces, things or forms of communication that are of use to and appeal to consumers ensures the designer's weekly wage.

At one level, then, we might attribute the rise of design in recent years to local and global economic and political change. At another it is about an increase in the value of the aesthetic in everyday life and a growing awareness of design as a form of cultural distinction. Government ministers, university rectors, television presenters and high-street shoppers are all keen to talk about design. With the massification of design as both a professional practice and a consumer consciousness, its future terms of reference will alter.

From Visual Culture to Design Culture

We are moving from an era of visual culture to one of design culture. The era of visual culture firmly belongs to the period of post-enlightenment, modernity and industrialisation. The era of design culture, I would argue, is just upon us, itself belonging to post-industrial, information society.

The emergnce of a 'visual turn' in Western society was the effect of the creation of mass consumer markets and urbanization during the industrial revolution. Indeed, the proliferation of images became a key charactersistic of modern social organization (Evans 1999: 16). Commodities and services needed to be made visual in order to advertise and market them to a wide, anonymous audience. The Victorians saw the growth of the department store, catalogue shopping, mass tourism and entertainment as spectacle - all of which hinge on the mediation of visual experience. And, of course, this was also the period of new visual technologies such as film, animation and photography.

This era is far from over. Things continue to be made visual in order to be 'sold' to us, be they dream holidays or illegal wars. But the quality by which these are conceived, by which they are circulated and the sensibility by which we live with visual phenomena is shifting. We are experiencing a 'design turn'.

As visual information has become ephemeral and immediate so the ground on which culture is played out has shifted. The increasing use of product semantics in consumer goods turns them into information goods. We unconsciously encounter some 3000+ brands daily. The muzak in our shopping centres, endless consumer satisfaction surveys and junk mail all add up to an invigorated design culture. The growing ubiquity of design as a self-consciously distinguishing feature in everyday life expands the grounds on which visual values lie. As Scott Lash notes, 'Culture is now three-dimensional, as much tactile or textual, all around us and inhabited, lived in rather than encountered in a separate realm as a representation' (Lash 2002: 149). We are an architectonic, spatially-based society and information is reworked in these planes. Our culture is no longer one of pure representation or narrative where visual culture conveys messages. Instead, design culture formulates, formats, channels, circulates, contains and retrieves information. It is all around us. Design is more than just the creation of artefacts. It is also about the structuring of systems of encounter within the visual and material world.

To give you an anecdotal example of how this shift has taken place in the context of global economic and political change, let me cite a conversation I had with a friend in Budapest in 1996. At the time, the Coca-Cola Company were offering the then city mayor, Gabor Demszky and his impoverished office a large sum of money for permission to decorate the famous Chain Bridge across the Danube in the national Hungarian colours of red, green and white for Christmas. The catch was that the red was to be 'Coca-Cola' red, not 'Hungarian' red. Naturally this ignited a heated debate

throughout the city over the potential compromise of national values to a multinational corporation. 'But isn't this the same as the statues of Lenin and Marx that filled every city corner during Communism? Isn't one form of propoganda being replaced by another?', I naively asked. 'No, there's a big difference', my friend replied. 'The Lenin and Marx statues were separate from us. We could ignore them if we wanted. Coca-Cola is everywhere. It is designed into every part of ordinary life. You can't get away from it. You drink the stuff - at least you couldn't drink Soviet leaders!'.

So ideological markers have been replaced by brands, for the time being.

The Rise and Fall of Branding

The rise of branding in the 1990s has played a fundamental role in promoting this quality of design ubiquity. It is also partly responsible for decentring the focus of design away from objects to experiences and systems.

Brand management rhetoric tells us that producer agents - be they corporations, institutions or individuals - are responsible for controlling a coherent brand message throughout its circuit of culture, from production through mediation to consumption to consumer feedback. If a brand is typified into a clear, simple message - which is often crystallised as a slogan - then this should be reflected in all its manifestations. This might include the way corporate workers dress, talk and act with customers and clients. Branding obviously extends into more traditional designed elements such as promotional literature graphics or the design of retail spaces, reception areas, websites or other points of corporation and consumer interface. The expectation is that the consumer will then understand and feel that same message. So in this way, the systems of branding inhabit much of the space of design culture, turning information into an 'all-around-us' architectonic form. The rise of branding accounts for the growing interdisciplinarity of design within the profession as designers seek and clients demand greater integration of product, graphic and interior design in order to create coherent and fullsome design solutions. It also explains the design profession's increased integration with marketing, management and public relations, mentioned earlier.

The quasi-religious quest for coherence around brand values certainly ends up in some idiotic language spoken by brand management gurus, particularly in the United States. While brands only really exist in their design manifestions, they talk about them as autonomous beings. They talk of, 'the heart and soul' or 'personality' of a brand as if it were intrinsic, self-sustaining and autonomous. (People have personalities, brands cannot.) It is expected that brands relate to us in deeply emotional ways, 'stroking the senses' (Artus 1999). And as if a brand was some appalling Disney cartoon character, some branding experts believe that they will command our utmost loyalty and dominate our belief systems. Brand websites, for example, can become, 'deep gravity wells', which offer, 'bright compelling cyberspace destinations around which stakeholders can take orbit' (Moon 1999: 61).

The hyperbole on branding momentarily masks the brittle nature of much of its reality. Fortunately it is highly unlikely that branding will continue to dominate design thinking in the way it has done. It is just a phase on the way to somewhere else.

Branding has two major internal contradictions. Here is the first. The creation of simple messages allows consumers to make choices more easily. If what a brand stands for - through, for example, graphics, copywriting and product semantics - can be quickly read, then the content has to be straightforward and reasonably generic. This immediateness means that they can be just as easily relinquished as adopted. If brand loyalty is to be subsequently built, then the message has to have subsequent layers of complexity to maintain interest - a bit like any relationship,

really. But how do you develop complexity within the stifling boundaries of branding whose priority is coherence? How do you keep a conversation going with a limited common vocabulary? The superficiality of much branding, as currently practised, makes it very dull.

Secondly, brand management rhetoric places its emphasis on the consumer experience. As brand strategist Paul Southgate argues, 'brands are no more and no less than what the consumer believes them to be' (Southgate 1994: 19). This interest in consumer sovereignty might be a noble aim. The ambition to engage consumers in a meaningful relationship with corporate interests should provide useful feedback systems wherein the consumer feels some measure of control and is not alienated from production. The invitation to fill out a customer feedback form at the end of a hotel stay is a neat way of showing that your corporate hosts care about what you think. Brand museums or 'experience centres' such as Niketown in Chicago, New York and London, celebrate their own histories and provide a glimpse into a corporation beyond the transaction at the point-of-sale or following an ad campaign. But branding can only go as far as providing only a distant relationship with a corporation. Corporate openness and responsibility often makes them vulnerable. Witness the cat and mouse relationship that Nike has had with its critics. As soon as criticism is levelled at it for its subcontracting policies in the Far East - the alleged use of exploitative working conditions - then it makes a feature of its self-evaluation of these conditions and the positive contribution it makes those communities. Meanwhile a design-literate public becomes increasingly adept at reading between the lines. Design is not perceived as a brokering mechanism between producer and consumer - so that they can get to know each other better - but as a gloss over understanding the real conditions of production (see Nixon 2002). An informed, design-aware public can just as easily be a questioning or even cynical public.

In its defence, branding has instigated many qualitative shifts in favour of a more vital role for designers. At a basic level, awareness of its importance among business managers has forced them to think more frequently about the aesthetic dimensions of their organizations. At its best, branding has engaged designers and managers in closer proximity within strategic decision-making processes when launching new products or services. At its very best, designers have also become strategists, sometimes taking decisions about corporate or insitutional policies that do not appear to be aesthetically important on first examination but help to shape consumer response and action.

The last of these is still rare. But it points in a direction where design might go. Design culture is just beginning. Read on.

Design futures

If the branding model for design has largely been imported from America, then its more interesting extension in the future may come from Europe. In its favour, branding has de-centred design thinking away from the alienated formation of products and services to a more engaged and strategic view of the role of aesthetic experience. It has forced managers to talk to designers, thinkers to engage with makers. Designers, as imaginative, interested people, can be innovators, not merely in the sense of technical or formal advancement, but also innovators of the relationship between producers and consumers. At this point it is worth quoting something by the Italian professor of Environmental Design, Ezio Manzini that has become a mantra for me in recent years:

Today design, understood not only as an operative method but also as culture, is oriented in two directions: the one aiming towards isolation, focusing on the formal qualities of products with the most evident aesthetic content (the predominant trend during the 1980s). The other approach consists in facing the present-day challenges,

and intervening on the strategies that determine the social and environmental quality of the changing world of today. (Manzini 1998: 57)

What are the challenges that Manzini is referring to?

I need hardly repeat the seriousness of the environmental and social time-bombs set to go off within a generation. For every tonne of product that reaches the consumer, there are 30 tonnes of waste in production. And then 98% of those products are thrown away within six months (Datschefski 2001: 17). Most design artefacts have a hidden ugliness.

But as design for sustainability consultant Edwin Datschefski maintains in his upbeat message, low environmental-impact goods and services can have both outer and inner beauty (Datschefski 2001). Likewise, environmental campaigner George Monbiot argues that, surely, isn't beauty alone a strong enough reason to protect biodiversity (Monbiot 2004)? Concern with sustainability goes beyond a mere instinct for survival to quality-of-life issues. Similarly, we might see inclusive design for an increasingly complex demographic structure of the European population as an interesting opportunity rather than a debilitating threat. Dealing with these challenges requires designers to be as much strategists, innovators and managers as form-givers.

One of the most exciting opportunities for the future of design is through a more rigorous integration of products and services that ensures more effective use of material resources. Innovation and testing of so-called Product Service Systems has been most advanced in The Netherlands and Germany. They involve, 'a marketable set of products and services capable of jointly fulfilling a user's need' (Geodkoop et al 1999). This means that a company may be responsible not just for delivery of products, but for their maintenance and disposal - taking care of the cradle-to-grave product lifecycle. Within this, a Product Service System may re-organize the

system of consumption of a product through its service support. Examples are various. One combines apartment tenancy in the German town of Wolfsburg with access to a car-pooling systems managed by the automobile manufacturer Volkswagen. The Dutch office furniture producer, Gispen has piloted the provision of office hardware management. Not only will they provide furniture, but they will maintain, repair it and redesign and install new layouts in case the demands of users change. These are pragmatic business innovations to maintain market share which also have environmental benefits. Through providing a car-sharing system Volkswagen allows a lower financial threshold for new clients. Gispen ensures that their products always come first when new office arrangements are laid out. They are also able to retrieve, re-cycle and reuse their products more effectively.

This requires a more nuanced and informed understanding of consumer practices. Traditional approaches to products typically involve undertaking market research to ascertain target audiences, designing the product accordingly, manufacturing and launching it and then hoping for the best. Product Service System thinking involves not only the origination of products but for the designer and manager to study and change patterns of use at highly localized levels. Branding foregrounded consumer experience, but in rather vague, superficial and brittle ways. Product Service Systems follow the same concern for consumer engagement, but breach the producer-consumer divide in more meaningful ways. As consumers have more interactions with the product-service provider, so a closer and potentially more loyal relationship is built. Finally, beyond the innovation of these systems, there is a more obvious design intervention in providing an integrated approach to the product, graphic and spatial elements that support them.

The emergence of the Product Service Systems concept is symptomatic of the increased prominence of service over manufacturing industries in Europe. But it

may also signal a quantum shift in what consumption means. Household expenditure on service-based consumption has continued to rise and outstrip expenditure on material goods (see, for example, Mintel 2003). Material consumption is being replaced, in some quarters, by non-material service-based consumption. We might be gradually moving away from the twentieth century notion of fetishized ownership of utilitarian goods - that was the century of cars, washing machines and entertainment products. The focus of individual European lifestyles might turn further away from these private, domestic material goods - itself an American import in essence - to a more public engagement with immaterial activities.

The present and future role in this, to repeat, is not just about giving visual form to these habits, but re-structuring what these might be and mean. The promotion of this new model for design requires a determination for social and environmental agency on the part of designers. It is not just a question of design culture as a ubiquitous expression of society, but design culture as an encultured practice. Hansjerg Maier-Aichen has referred to the development by designers of a 'Utopia of less..but better' that requires them not only to create compelling design products, graphics or interiors, but, 'to find innovative ways of communication, materialising and dematerialising things' (Maier-Aichen 2004: 10). European design schools have a fundamental role to play in this direction.

Design Education for the Future

Design education is in its infancy. Schools of art and design have only existed for little more than 150 years. The first 70 years of this history were primarily dedicated to design as dessin or disegno, with an emphasis on the hand, emphasizing artesanal, psycho-moto skills to lubricate the wheels of industry. Only since the Bauhaus has design education self-consciously dedicated itself to the production of an avant-garde that attempts to lead society rather than be merely responsive to the demands of political economy. Design

therefore became more of a focus for intellectual debate - as much head as hand. How to form an avant-garde in design and what role that might have is a methodological debate that has subsequently rippled through design schools ever since. This was felt most acutely in the schism within the Ulm Hochschule für Gestaltung during the late 1960s. But the crafts revival, among many other factors, added the third dimension to this debate - that of expression. Indeed, this uneasy triangulation of head, heart and hand indeed was replicated in debates over pedagogical direction within Eina in 1971 where one faction of the staff and student corpus demanded a greater technical component in addition to what was already on offer while the other half campaigned for the retention and strengthening of its theoretical base in order to respond to and challenge society with increasing efficacy (see Rafols Casamada 1987).

If the schools of design have been held up in their development to some degree by their constant internal, but highly necessary debates, then the external administrative climate of many has frequently unnecessarily blocked progress. With little subject expertise, many national governments have adopted a myopic, dynastic and overly rigid view of what should constitute their curricula. Spain's central and regional adminstrations are notable cases of this problem.

The result has been that while design schools preach innovation in practice, they have not often been allowed to practice innovation in their academic direction. A design industry that is about invention, but also about constant re-invention of itself, largely does these as a responsive act. The dodging and weaving of designers is a self-preservation tactic. Moving into new domains of practice - be it reducing studio size into flexible creative interdisciplinary groups, developing digital media applications, straightforwardly embracing the rhetorics of branding or designing integrated produce and service systems - have been intelligent ways of moving with the marketplace.

The intellectual and cultural ambience of many design schools (but not all, thankfully) has been unable to equip its graduates with the power to move from being responsive to being pro-active and responsible. Art and design schools could provide a solid base from which new methods of practice can spring to then lead the wider design industry. Technical skills such as visual sensitivity and plastic expression will be no less important. But we will also see the orientation of design education around cross-disciplinary platforms, where the role of design in response to specific contemporary problematics - for example, changing demographic structures, transcultural lifestyles, health promotion or community participation - can be investigated. They could provide a deep well of enquiry into the world not only as it is, but also show what the world could be.

This bigger future, then, is about embracing design culture not as an overwhelming and ennervating postmodern condition, but as a project of analysis and creation. Design culture is a field of academic enquiry, reaching into an understanding of the role of design in contemporary society. It studies the motivations and structures of economic, social and cultural interests and subsequently where and how designers can engage in these. Furthermore, though, it can appropriate 'pure' academic disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies, anthropology and cultural geography toward a more informed, critical and productive practice in design. The designer of the future's toolbox will necessarily have to be more extensive, taking in a wider set of both technical and conceptual skills.

Eina was born in 1966 of deep ideological motivations. The school's first student briefing maintained that, 'Its syllabus is directed towards implanting in [professionals] a deep humanistic consciousness and to awaken a responsible conscience before society' (cited in Rafols Casamada 1987: 50). During these early years, Eina became a magnet for artists, designers and cultural theoreticians. Out of this generation came those largely

responsible for establishing Barcelona's reputation as a European centre of design excellence. In many respects, Eina was a test-bed of ideas, a place to explore possibilities. It would seem to be an apt location to continue in this vein.

Finally, versions of this new kind of design profession can be found on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States it is commonly referred to as 'strategic design' and implies the designers' role in brand and new product development strategies. It remains very much a minority activity and is mostly motivated within the parameters of the profit motive. But as a European strain emerges, there is the opportunity for it to be more deeply embedded in social and environmental agency. The longstanding idealism of designers may find greater opportunity for expression in the context of communitarian, civic and environmental realities rather than the conservative orthodoxy of free market capitalism. As such, the bigger future of design resides in Europe - one that is capable of embracing diversity and complexity, while being sure of its own values. European design can be both politicized and pragmatic.

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