

Guy Julier

Nothing Special? Design Skills for the 21st Century

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As the University of Brighton Principal Research Fellow in Contemporary Design at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London my job is to develop a programme of research, events and exhibitions that link the museum to the contemporary creative industries. Currently, about a third of its visitorship is made up of students and practitioners of art and design, and with over three million visitors overall, this is a sizeable number.

The museum's founding director, Henry Cole, saw the institution's role as primarily a didactic one. Using the vast profits from the Great Exhibition of 1851, the South Kensington museums were established to stimulate enquiry and knowledge in the sciences and arts. Under Henry Cole, the V&A had a distinct moral purpose in promoting canons of good taste in the face of industrialization but also in embracing and disseminating new technologies and forms. Hence, for example, he was passionate about the museum collecting new photographic technologies of the time. To say that Henry Cole was an 'activist' advocate of design might be overstating things, but he certainly believed in the museum's role in bringing about social betterment.

What if, at the age of 205, Henry Cole was to come back to the V&A? What would he want to see the museum represent in terms of new thinking in design?

I think that he'd be looking for how the museum dealt with systems and structures as much as, or perhaps more than, showing historical forms through amassing individual objects from all corners of the globe. He'd be interested in how technologies and ingenuity

are combined to create new ways of living and being.

Henry Cole would want to know how to curate Facebook and Twitter. He'd be interested in representing peer-to-peer systems that allow for collaborative consumption. These might include Whipcar through which people can rent their cars out when not using them, Ecomodo that does the same for personal effects. Equally, private room rental systems such as AirBnB would be interesting to him. Perhaps the interventionists like Makrolab or Platoon – who ask questions about urban space and its use would appear in the galleries. Digital and artistic fora such as Mediamatics would feature. The urban agriculture systems of Dakar and Havana might get a look in. The many transport systems that mix smartcards, digital networks and cycling would appear. Curitiba's metrobus would somehow be represented.

All these examples point toward the existence in the 21st century of an expanded field of design that embraces new configurations of professionals and new ways of conceiving how design functions. Many of these exciting examples have been developed outside what one might view as mainstream, commercial practices while not necessarily being independent of them. Indeed, I contend that the museum should act as a conduit between such 'peripheral' practices and the mainstream, constantly importing innovations that challenge and delight us.

This move isn't just a challenge for the design museum of the 21st century, but also for policy, education, design research and the professional itself. They suggest that design is

embracing new sets of skills that not only require extended thinking but also new networks of social interaction. So I'd like to offer some personal thoughts on what characterizes this quantum shift in design and consider what skills this demands.

Reactive and activist practices

Designers have always innovated their practices. They've flexed and reinvented themselves in a constant struggle, mostly for professional survival. As economic, political, social and cultural conditions and processes have changed, so designers have been quick to respond, re-skilling and providing new services in order to maintain clients. While not always being too aware of larger global forces, designers have often moved intuitively in response to changing contexts.

Consider this context:

- a superpower and its allies entrenched in protracted and expensive conflict far from its own territories;
- this conflict and previous state expenditure commitments causing unprecedented high national debt;
- economic recession leading to wage stagnation, particularly for the middle-classes;
- the rapidly rising price of oil and other commodities causing high inflation and therefore a huge loss of expendable outcome;
- resulting political unrest that includes a turn away from party politics to issue-based concerns;
- a growing awareness of the connectivity of everyday concerns to global ones, particularly in relation to environmental issues.

I am talking about the early 1970s. And it was this context that gave us the radical design of Italian – groups like Superstudio who theorized the idea of a possible network society where information systems would provide alternative structures for consumer culture. The early 1970s gave us 'community

architecture' wherein end-users of planning and building would have an active role in specifying form, itself pre-figuring co-creation and participatory design. The early 1970s saw the publication of key seminal books that influenced design thinking such as Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World* and E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*.

These gave way to developments in appropriate technology and social innovation models for design. Within this thinking, the impact of Meadows et al's *The Limits to Growth* was also evident. Here, the finitude of natural resources was calculated, including what we now know of as 'Peak Oil'. Permaculture, another invention of the early 1970s, developed design and planning models for low energy input food, sustainable food production.

All these innovations in design thinking took place in a context of resource scarcity and intellectual emancipation. It is intriguing to think of how many of these ideas have resurfaced in the very similar economic, social and political circumstances of the 21st century.

Indeed, I would suggest that innovations in design processes and thinking more often take place in recessionary contexts than in economic booms. Design business expands in periods of economic growth, but doesn't necessarily change its core way of working. By contrast, in periods of economic stagnation or contraction, designers have to find new ways of carrying on in order to ensure their commercial and creative survival. In the USA and United Kingdom, at least, the following developments in design have taken place in recessionary moments:

- 1930s development of product styling (Raymond Loewy etc.);
- mid-1940s development of design in the context of the welfare state (eg. Design Research Unit);
- early 1970s (examples already discussed);
- early 1990s development of digital design and branding (eg. Deepend; Interbrand);

- 2008ff design activism, social design, co-creation, service design, critical design.

It would be foolish to try and universalize this argument. After all, the current recession that we talk about in Europe is by no means global. Colombia has registered growth of up to 2.6% in the past year. China's GDP growth is at a staggering 9%. The *Times of India* newspaper recently reported some consternation that growth there was down to 6.8%! And all of these are within widely differing political and social arrangements. The global map of design is not at all flat, therefore.

But the key idea I wish to push here is that design produces innovations and innovates *itself* at the same time. It makes new things but also reorganizes the ways by which those new things are conceived of and executed.

For many designers, life goes on: brochures get designed; prototypes are built; client presentations are made. However, it has become increasingly evident that they are having to work to ever shorter schedules, on tighter margins with decreasing opportunities for professional development within its dominant modes. Design, for many, has become a treadmill that is disciplined by workflow systems, accounting for billable hours and a general deference to evermore demanding clients in an overheated marketplace.

So, while the growth model of neo-liberalism still drives much of the growth of design itself – particularly in the Far East and Middle East – new, post-liberal models are emerging. In South America it will be particularly interesting to see how this might play out in the differing social, environmental and political arrangements of countries like Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela. In the USA and Europe, many designers are beginning to see that the game is up on an entirely commercially driven, profit-motive kind of practice. Different priorities are afoot in the design world. Some of these are to do with thinking about design as part of a wider social welfare and well-being. Some of these seek to

provoke how everyday, public life might be lived. Some looks at re-thinking our sense of place and locality and how we use these.

The two states of design – the reactive and the activist – exist side-by-side. Take just two examples of how the 'clean-slate' of a post-disaster context are dealt with. For Naomi Klein in her best-selling book *The Shock Doctrine*, disasters such as those that follow tsunami waves, lead to a rapid colonizing by globalizing forces, eager to 'redevelop' by the building, for example, of Armani-styled hotels to replace traditional hospitality services that had been there before, or in the case of St Louis, by privatizing the city's education system. Contrastingly, for Rebecca Solnit in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, local populations seize on such situations to rethink their environments in a more participatory way, to build the utopias they always talked about. Here, a 'post-liberal' order is designed.

These are spectacular examples, however. The changes in design I am referring to are, on the whole, quieter. They don't involve such a sense of rupture. Rather they are about inflections and reorientations that feed off the conditions of late neoliberalism but also invent something different. In sociological terms, we might think of these pre-existing conditions and what has developed from them as engaging four features: intensification; co-articulation; temporality; and territorialisation.

From neoliberal to post-liberal design

There are many reasons for the rise of branding as a central feature of design practice in the past 40 years. In his book *Intensive Culture*, Scott Lash draws attention to the ways by which, under neoliberalism, economies become about the competition of monopolies: hence, Microsoft v Apple; Google v Bing; Sony Ericsson v Philips; Ford v Toyota; Coca-Cola v Pepsi; Unilever v Procter & Gamble; Zara v Benetton; Exxon v BP v Shell; Virgin Airways v British Airways; Nokia v Samsung; Goldman Sachs v Morgan Stanley

and so on. In all of these, competition is not just between products or services for market share but between brands. Brands work through difference based on knowledge that is constructed relationally through multiple sites. Each brand is singular in that while it may deliver a product that is relatively undifferentiated in its performance (petrol is just petrol), its way of operating, its way of interfacing with other clients or customers, its 'instruction manuals', if you like, is distinct to those competing brands. Thus, designers are involved in the design of 'meta-data' or scripts. More basically, the corporate identity, brand or franchise manual is what the designer develops, itself to be rolled out and implemented by others. They are fashioning singularities. Intellectual property is therefore core to this. In so doing, the emphasis is on highly intensive products that seek maximum affect, emotional attachment and, following on, brand loyalty. This is why design involves **intensification**. It is about reducing features down to easily reproducible and understandable elements that are deployed or orchestrated into a coherent whole.

In smaller ways, even public services are involved in this process. If neoliberalism includes the shrinkage of the state in daily life, part of this is to outsource its service delivery. Thus, health, social welfare, education, street-cleaning and so on are provided by a range of private companies, NGOs, trusts, charities and agencies. The result is that they provide discrete services rather than an overall social programme. Their fragmentation means that most innovations that take place within them are very precisely focused on parts of a service rather than the service as a whole. Service design has developed in this context. With its user-focus, it looks more precisely at the affective elements of service delivery. How do users feel as they move through a service? How do they actually experience it?

This emphasis on the affective in design can be taken a few steps further so that the cognitive and embodied engagement with material becomes a way of transforming outlooks. Hence, Thomas Markussen observes

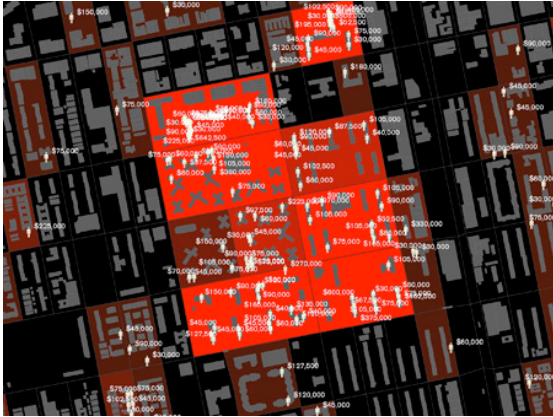
that Santiago Cirugeda's placing of skips in the streets of Madrid, and turning them into play objects, questions and challenges ideas of public space and the street through their actual use. Likewise, Heads Together's turfing of a street in the city of Leeds in the UK was a tool to open up the imagination of neighbourhood inhabitants and provoke a debate about what the street could be there for. Laura Kurgan's famous Million Dollar Blocks project visualized the costs of the imprisonment of criminals to influence local council policy in New York and reallocate expenditure on prevention through health and education programmes.



Santiago Cirugeda 'Recetas Urbanas', Seville, 1997



Heads Together, Methleys, Leeds, UK 2002



Laura Kurgan 'Million Dollar Blocks Project', New York, 2005

These projects pre-date the current economic recessions of Europe and the USA, but much of this kind of thinking is now being taken up as an increasingly urgent call for activist intervention is made. They go beyond design in the public realm that reinforces mainstream conceptions of how space and place are reproduced. They feature attempts to disrupt the divisions between 'above' and 'below the line' design. They engage both end-users and policy-makers at the same time through the affective domain. They also try to create new relationships and marry up interests by engaging existing but untapped interests, political concerns, everyday preoccupations and ethical surplus.

In short, the designer here is involved in the production of the meaning of what is consumed. As such, they seek a wider, systemic level of intervention than the mere delivery of discreet public services. Here, the design – its material outcome – gives focus to wider concerns that might be articulated in general, rhetorical terms: 'I'm worried about the ways that private cars create pollution and global warming'; 'There should be more possibilities for the community to meet'; 'Crime is caused by poverty and a lack of opportunities for the young'; and so on. But it also provides something through which these concerns can be acted on and thought through more. This is where design works in a process of **co-articulation**.

These examples were implemented at a very local level. They allowed the designer to see the project through, building relationships with end-users and policy-makers. In this way, the designer can make adjustments to them, improvise and prototype. They involve the designer not merely as form-giver but as project manager, broker, matchmaker and facilitator. In so doing, the designer has to draw on a new set of skills in people management. In mainstream commercial design, they are often acutely aware of the challenges of managing their clients expectations and ensuring they understand a need for the service being provided. Here, in this more activist scenario, those skills are extended as the range of people and institutions that the designer works with broadens.

In this context, the designer's timeframe is different as is, therefore, the **temporality** of the design. Rather than seeing the lifetime of a project as being determined by client commission, through development to delivery, the designer is working in a more open-ended way that goes beyond the materialization of the design. Instead, the designer works with and alongside the user and other interests. Implementation also involves a series of re-designs that doesn't necessarily mean that the design reaches an optimum point. Rather it aims toward ownership and stewardship on the part of stakeholders.

This approach has, again, its roots in the 1970s. More precisely, Rittel and Webber's 1973 notion of 'wicked problems' advocated that technological and social challenges cannot be definitively solved. Instead the designer should develop open-ended structures and unfinished objects. It could be that such an attitude exonerates the designer from political responsibility – that by avoiding any declared endpoint, they pass the responsibility on to citizens. If, however, the designer remains embedded with their public, that responsibility becomes a shared one and one that gives space for the designer to usefully contribute their expertise while

engaging users in taking on and continuing to develop results. This kind of partnership might be called 'interaction centred design' rather than 'user centred design'.

In this post-liberal way of working, the spaces that the designer works in change. The former territorialisation of design might have involved more discreet locations where it is practised. Within this, clients and users and the boundaries between them might be more clearly defined. A designer undertakes a job for a client who has an idea of who their market is. Marketing intelligence has progressively sought to identify with increasing accuracy and clarity who might be in that market niche and how they live. While much has been said about sovereign consumer choice over the last 40 years, it is largely the marketplace itself that has created and defined consumers. Thus while there has been a move in marketing approaches from identifying consumers according to their profession to their lifestyle habits. These in themselves are not neutral and freestanding but produced. As such, the territories they inhabit – starting with the home as the base unit of the consumer but moving to the city, the nation-state or the global market – are set out and formed according to the ability of people to pay for these.

An activist approach to design disrupts this kind of structure. Thus, for example, peer-to-peer room rental systems like CouchSurfer or AirBnB circumvent the structures and relationships that are made by mainstream economics. New spaces, in this case for tourists and travelers to stay, are defined. Relationships of exchange are created that cut out corporate profit-motives. Finance moves directly into localities. It has been estimated that if the organizing body for the London Olympics used AirBnB rather than hotel chains to lodge visitors, £215m would be saved and the £185m spent through AirBnB would go straight into communities rather than into global corporations. A new **territorialisation** of design, production and consumption is therefore produced.

Design culture and new design skills

I have deliberately focused on the more entrepreneurial, innovative and activist practices of design for these are where design is less reactive to dominant market conditions and where designers are taking more control of their practices.

One might ask whether some of the examples I have quoted are, in fact, design. AirBnB, for example, is an entrepreneurially driven idea whose main feature is a web-based financial model. But it is also concerned with a system of provision that encompasses aesthetic choices. Deciding where you stay while travelling is a financial decision, but also one based on visual and material questions. AirBnB is exploiting a contemporary change in terms of the ethics of consumption.

It is hardly a new thing to say that design involves collaboration with specialists in many fields. It is, though, more recent that non-design specialists are working in designerly ways. Here, firstly, the affective elements of life are more central to decision-making. Secondly, ideas are developed through an iterative process of prototyping, testing and adjusting, even when the service or product taken 'above the line' and in the public domain.

Design has undergone enormous expansion in its sheer commercial weight and numbers involved during the neoliberal period since the 1970s. In countries that continue to grow economically, such as China, India and Brazil, this massification continues. Elsewhere, where this massification has already taken place, one finds a gradual fragmentation of design practices. New specialisms are invented that are more complex and that demand a reassessment of what the designer is, their skills, training, support and the ways by which they might be represented. This is where designers take advantage of changes in the macro-economic, technological or political environment to re-design their own practices.

In my book *The Culture of Design*, I was attempting to move beyond the idea that design was just about the fashioning of discreet objects. Instead, I wanted to show how it is entangled in the creation of relationships and networks that work through different systems of production and consumption.

Within this I wanted to consider how design cultures function. These work at a variety of scales. A studio contains and produces a design culture as an assemblage of professionals, their tools (eg. computers, pencils, noticeboards etc.) and resources (eg. design magazines, capital, knowledge etc.). A design culture can also exist, for instance, at the level of a city where urban form, cultural infrastructure, political support, consumer behaviours, notions of tradition, educational resources and so on add up to produce particular relationships and ways of working and being.

At whatever scale, this way of thinking about design culture should encourage creative practitioners to see themselves as active participants in such systems. Their action can go beyond playing a passive role within systems, to changing them.

In terms of the idea of ‘nothing special?’ that appears in the title of the paper, this is intended as a provocative play on words. In fact, design skill is about a very special attention to the material, visual, spatial and temporal components of everyday life. But it also increasingly involves thinking and acting in the immaterial domains of social relationships. The designer takes part in the creation and orchestration of various ‘fits’ between material and immaterial features.

Currently, and to recapitulate, it seems that there are four fields in which design may be re-conceptualized. They are summarized as follows:

- by finding new ways of working in the affective domain by influencing embodied behaviour and engaging the emotions (intensification);

- by developing ways by which interests can be married up and by which these can be made material to provide action and feedback loops (co-articulation);
- by finding ways of designing that allow for open-endedness, where the designer is closely embedded with users in iterative and on-going interactions (temporality);
- by developing and defining new spaces and scales for the material and human, thus forming new kinds of relationships and opportunities for human action and identity (territorialisation).

These may be ways by which design cultures are not just taken as givens, but can be acted upon.