Reviews

The Design Experience: The Role of Design
and Designers in the Twenty-First Century
Mike Press and Rachel Cooper. *Ashgate, 2003. 224
pp., illus., £35 cloth. ISBN 0 5660 7891 0.*

If one of the jobs of the design historian is to
investigate the relationships between what design
theorists say in an epoch and the artefacts of that
age, then Mike Press and Rachel Cooper's book *The
Design Experience* will be plundered as evidence of
the seismic shifts of the early twenty-first century.
Giving their work the subtitle *The Role of Design and
Designers in the Twenty-First Century*, Press and
Cooper present a lively and optimistic argument for
a re-orientation of design practice. Their stated
motivations in writing the book are: (a) the need
for more self-definition among designers; (b) to break
designers' self-constraint and open up their potential
contributions to society, and (c) the fact that 'the
world is changing at an ever-increasing rate' (p. 5).

Normally, I recoil when I hear this last utterance. It
is one of those truisms purveyed by politicians, brand
managers and technological determinists alike, often
as a fuzzy justification for badly thought-through
decisions. But the authors do have a point here.
Their opening shots feature Wendy Brawer's *Green
Apple Map for New York* (1991)—a system for high-
lighting the city as a sustainable resource, providing
information on cycle paths, community gardens,
green markets and such like. This is followed by
recounting Patricia Moore's pioneering ethnographic
research of the 1980s into ageing and the hitherto
unappreciated material obstacles of everyday life that
relate to this inevitability. Jane Harris's 1990s digital
textiles that incorporated new media with garment
design follow. Thus, three new(ish) challenges for the
twenty-first-century designer are recorded—sustain-
ability, inclusivity and digital technologies. Later in
the book (pp. 93–7), the authors expand on a number
of current live issues at stake, including changes to
family structures, consumer values, crime, and copy-
right and smart systems. These stimulate a reappraisal
of what design is for, how it is done and where it will
go. A new agenda for designers is in the offing.

Press and Cooper are by no means alone in this
belief. A plethora of conferences, publications and
research centres have sprung up in recent years
dedicated to considering this issue. For example, the
Cumulus 2003 conference in Tallin, Estonia brought
designers together to consider inclusivity in relation
to sustainability and new technologies issues. Spear-
heading this enthusiasm has been Enzio Manzini,
whose numerous recent publications and presenta-
tions have called for designers to engage the nexus of
these three vectors. Currently, the Ikon Project
within the Interdisciplinary Studies Center at Trond-
heim University, the 'New Design Culture' project at
the Technical Research Centre of Finland, and the
'Massive Change' project at the School of Design at
Toronto City College, to name but a few, are
dedicated to innovating new forms of design practice
and intervention.

No doubt these movements have been given
impetus by critiques of design and branding, from
Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, through Rick Poyner's *Obey
the Giant* to Hal Foster's *Design and Crime*. Not since
Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World* (1972) have
such diatribes had an effective impact on designers
and design students while also achieving wider,
popular audiences. There is a youthful generation
out there carrying 'cynicism with optimism' (as
Gramsci once implored) which is hungry for words
to articulate this feeling and models to act on it. Press
and Cooper are clearly in the business of providing
for this demand.

In tackling this, the authors aim to bridge design
management, design theory and cultural studies. This
is a laudable ambition (and one I attempted in *The
Culture of Design*). The convergence of these dis-
ciplines in a text about contemporary and future
design that is critical, analytical and generative is a
necessary process. The 'cultural turn' of First World
economics—as mapped, for example, by Lash and
Urry's seminal *Economies of Signs and Spaces* and
followed more recently by Scase and Davis's *Mana-
ging Creativity*—demands a panoptic view of practices.

Press and Cooper's lens ultimately focuses on a
not-so-distant view that, beyond shaping products
and services, designers are to create meaningful

experiences. And when they do, the experience of designing changes to one that embraces 'new roles, methods and activities' (p. 8). Here is where 'creative methods, effective communications and proactive entrepreneurship' meld. Hence, a good dosage of design, a bit of cultural analysis and some business studies are thrown into the pot.

Chapter 1 stridently maintains that the growth of consumer culture provides new grounds for fashioning interactions between design producers and consumers. In introducing the 'consumer culture' notion—and associated Bourdieuan concepts of 'cultural intermediaries' and 'habitus'—the job is well done. The chapter concludes that, 'People today have a greater need for emotional, sensual and expressive experiences' (p. 32). (Should 'need' read 'want'? And who are these 'people'?) Certainly the design historian of the future will be interested in mapping this shift and knowing whether this project becomes, in fact, a kind of reflexive designer's trope—as in, 'they keep telling us about that "aestheticization of everyday life" thing, so it must be true!' Will texts such as The Design Experience encourage this process?

Chapter 2 lays a parallel foundation by explaining the structures and processes by which the design industry gives cultural value and economic weight to products and services. The synthesis of these first two chapters comes in Chapter 3 where the authors argue that the designer can re-structure traditional cycles of production and consumption. More research and understanding of contextual issues can provide cues for design interventions that resolve asymmetries of creation and use. The authors do not refer to activities of de-alienation, for example through customization or domestic curation, explored by material studies specialists. Rather, new forms of product and service encounter are in potentia.

Chapters 4 to 6 gently take the reader through ways of achieving this 'design experience' ambition. First we learn a series of approaches to researching for design, amply illustrated by recent industry examples of consumer-based research. The shift to design as a team-based, iterative process that triangulates a range of players is highlighted. We therefore find out how important language and communication are in negotiating the dynamics between designers, their clients and their publics. The book concludes by mapping the current breadth of the design profession. The argument is then pushed into a concept of 'the new

designer' (pp. 196–200). Here, the professional works at the hub of a wheel of sensibilities, taking in skills such as being 'internationalist', 'ecologist', 'networker', 'creative problem solver', 'active citizen' and more. Press and Cooper's text balances carefully recorded information with flights of inspiration in an accessible manner.

Design history has a long history of interest in design reformers (Arts and Crafts, Werkbund, Bauhaus, etc.). Each of these moments is the product of historically specific circumstance. And all these have been critiqued for their totalizing tendencies, as Press and Cooper might be in their account. Mark C. Taylor's most recent book, The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture (2001), argues for an appreciation of the interdependency of systems in the twenty-first century that are nonetheless dynamic and adaptive. Thus the specificity of situations is also rolled into a bigger but multi-layered picture. In its favour, The Design Experience has something of this attitude about it: the thesis is far from despotic.

If, however, from the point of view of this journal, there is to be one key criticism to be levelled at Press and Cooper's approach, it is in its evident lack of historical consciousness. This may be viewed as a strength, as the narrative refuses to get bogged down in explanatory details; instead it zips lightly along to maintain the reader's interest. Lengthy case studies are reserved for text boxes. Conversely, the absence of detailed analyses as to how the issues that the authors touch on have come about gives the text a slightly one-dimensional feel in places. For example, we are given a brief history of the rise of design management (pp. 181–2); but this is not contextualized against recent developments in management theory and its own emergent rhetorics of 'creativity'. This would surely help expand the critique of the discipline.

Similarly, the book's Anglo-centrism is curious given the international reputation of its authors. The research case studies that are cited come mostly from UK university design departments, although much of the most challenging design research (such as Product Service System innovations that strike at the heart of the authors' thesis) is currently taking place in mainland Europe. Globalization gets a brief discussion (pp. 16–17), but issues of transculturization, hybridity and disjuncture that occur in non-Western or diasporic cultures are not

considered. An opportunity for posing useful and challenging questions, particularly pressing post-9/11, is missed.

The publishers, Ashgate, have presented this book as an academic text. Lavishly produced and expertly edited it is not, though. Eleven tables, 20 text boxes and 44 figures—almost one for each page spread—appear. Some of these will make for useful teaching resources. Others are either unnecessary or bear insufficient relationship to the main text to make them fully comprehensible. Footnoting and referencing are incorrect or mis-spelt in places. A conflicting definition of 'product lifecycle' is given (compare p. 88 and p. 206). The book's own design is miserable: its grim black and white, poorly-scanned photos, lamentable typographic layout and the dreary jacket design do nothing to convey the excitement of the authors' proposals. If the publishers have sought to distance this output from the legions of 'coffee-table styled' design books that clog our libraries and bookshops, then they have succeeded. But its form hinders its content and the authors must take some responsibility for allowing Ashgate Publishing this approach.

The reality of design practice moving into an innovative and dynamic engagement with its actor-networks in the way that Press and Cooper articulate may still seem a long way off. As one designer cited by Kotro and Pantzar in *Design Issues* (2002, 18, 2: p. 40) says,

Compared to design based purely on user needs, there is one undefeatable advantage in copying of [artefactual] ideas. Ideas already are expressed in the language of solutions, as opposed to user needs, which are abstract and have to be translated into design solution—a task that is anything but simple.

This explains much about the continued gap between the aspirations of design critics and the realities of design practices. It is quicker and more lucrative, in the short-term, for designers to elaborate on given material and visual typologies than to take the plunge and engage in the multi-faceted approaches that these authors propose.

The Design Experience will be a useful text book for undergraduate teaching purposes, if read alongside other sources to bolster its claims. It remains to be seen whether this book, and indeed many of the others cited in this review, manage to generate

effectively new practices and attitudes in design. But let us hope so.

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Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America, Australia and Britain

Linda Young. *Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 245 pp., 24 illus, £50.00 cloth. ISBN 0 333 99746 8.*

Linda Young's *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century* is an enjoyable study of Britain, America and Australia during the period 1780–1840, examining middle-class gentility as a transnational Anglo-cultural system. Drawing on her experiences as a museum curator in Australia, Young begins her account with a discussion of the problems surrounding the meaning of historical objects. Identifying the practical constraints of studying and understanding material culture, Young explains her arrival at the 'culture of gentility' as a methodological approach, and highlights the need for comparative and contextualizing research.

Young's first three chapters offer a valuable historiographical survey and theoretical discussion of the culture of middle-class gentility. Stressing the centrality of class in contemporary debates about gentility, she draws upon and extends earlier studies that explore class formation. Of these, the most significant are E. P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory* (Merlin, 1978) and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle-Class, 1750–1850* (Hutchinson, 1987). Mentioning the impact of the processes of industrialization and urbanization, the emulation and subversion of aristocratic models, the spread of wealth, and the rise of evangelical religion on the formation of the middle classes, Young identifies the middle classes not through economic status or political opinion, but through 'unity of aspiration and commonality of expression' (p. 14).

Young's central theme is the ideological work of the culture of gentility. Thus, she draws upon the work of Norbert Elias, in particular *The Civilizing Process* (Blackwell, 1994 [1939]), and the importance of self-control to middle-class behaviour. She describes some problems associated with the term 'gentility' and the embarrassment of studying the