The Redundancy of Design History

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Abstract

At the inception of art and design as a degree subject in 1961, the 20% of historical and theoretical studies they incorporated was what was meant to give it its Honours status. Traditionally, then, design history, in particular at undergraduate level, has provided the contextualisation for research practice. Meanwhile design history itself has developed as an autonomous academic discipline. This in turn gave rise to the development of design history and the new art history in the early 1970s. By the the early 1980s design history had firmly established itself with the potential to be a stand-alone subject.

The result of this development has been that the preoccupations of design historians have increasingly divorced themselves from design practice. Meanwhile, design practice has sought a more complex and challenging set of paradigms. This paper contends that whilst this autonomy may be advantagous for its own terms, it renders the subject no longer viable as either the provider of useful empirical data for or theoretical approaches to design practice and research. In short, design practice both as a field of academic enquiry and as a profession has outstripped the paradigms and critiques of design history.

This paper was prompted by conversations with a member of the editorial board of a respected academic journal on design. He was dismayed to find that, according to the research we were presenting to the journal, no amount of radical design history was affecting the on-the-ground experience and practice of design undergraduates... Can the same be said for academic research in design at other levels?

The structure of the paper is as follows: the historiography of British design to date; a review of some key branches of its historiography which might be of relevance to contemporary design research and discussion of their efficacy; discussion of the relationship of history and discourse; discussion of relevant trends in design research.

The Redundancy of Design History

This paper is mischievous and ungrateful. We are so-called 'second generation' design historians, taught in the 1980s by the 'first generation' design historians. They in turn became established in the 1970s. We would also precariously describe ourselves as design practitioners in that we are involved in the teaching, research, commissioning or management of design.

We wish to demonstrate how so many members of the older generation of our extended family of design historians, and some of their offspring, our cousins, are dangerously out of touch with the activity they seek to analyze. This nomadic tribe has wandered so far from its roots that we question whether design history has made itself redundant as a contributor to paradigms of practice.

The plot begins with an exchange of e.mails between our colleagues Clegg and Mayfield and an editor of the American design journal *Design Issues*. They concerned responses to an article submitted for consideration which sought to argue that women's place in design is still defined by patriarchal discourses of creativity in education (Clegg and Mayfield 1999). The respondent was impressed by the way their study drew on the real-life, real-time experience of young designers and that, 'despite a decade of solid feminist scholarship about design... there continues to be a gap between the critically informed scholarship about design and design history and the popular perception of young women and men attracted to design as a career' (Doordan 1998). Thus, as the repondent's surprise testifies, those hopes of the historian's deconstruction and analysis are dashed against the rocks of reality.

Of course, this failure of design history to affect practice may be explained by the fact that most designers, on the whole, don't read. But some do, and particularly those engaged in postgraduate or other research. So this paper is not another clarion call to practitioners to underpin their practice with more history and theory. We have had enough of such ill-defined, badly informed invocations. Read? Read what? Appreciate your traditions? Whose traditions? So, the key problem is not more design history but better design history.

Neither do we wish to critique design history in itself. Much scholarly work has been produced in the past 20 years to establish it as a rich and varied academic discipline, of use to social historians and museum curators. And hey, some of our best friends are design historians.

What is at stake here is a continued myth and fetishization of modernism as a dominant paradigm of design history which by default skewers conceptions of design practice by professionals and their public. Secondly, an alternative narrative to modernism in design discourse, derived from material culture and consumption studies, falls short of a fully rounded appreciation of contemporary practice. We shall take each of these in turn.

Central to the historiography of design has been the emplacement and refutation of modernism. This dates back to Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: from William Morris to Walter Gropius* first published in 1936. It traced a linear, progressive perception of design history; a steady development of architectural style, based on the work and aspirations of individual architects and designers, from the historicism of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement to the 'machine aesthetic' of Walter Gropius and the Modern Movement. In this book Pevsner established the canon of 'form follows function' as the governing design ideology of the 20c. His view no doubt reflects the dominance of German art and architectural history wherein, as Gropius himself professed, architecture is the leading edge in the development of design.

This is common knowledge. But it is re-stated because with this in mind, the yoke of Pevsner becomes heavier the more one looks. Hardly a design history text appears without confirmation or refutation of the Pevsnerean model of history. Of course many design historians have become resistant to the 'heroes of modern design' approach-- the relative merits of a biographical approach have been long debated. More crucially, however, this discussion has diverted attention from their primary crime on their insistence in a teleological conception of history.

This again is derived from Pevsner's Germanic training. Essentially it strives to explain everything in terms of an historical inevitability. (As a footnote it is worth reminding ourselves that the two words 'historical inevitability' are often tacked onto the word 'socialism'. This is a transposition of Marx's notion of the historical inevitability of class struggle. The popular misrepresentation of Marx has a structural resonance in the discussion within this paper since we also

wish to divert attention back to processes rather than outcomes.) A Pevsnerean account therefore requires a selective, straightline teological approach to history. Clearly his text privileges modernism as the apotheosis of design. At the end of the day, the fact that this development is traced through a moral debate carried by certain individuals has probably more to do with the wordcount of the book, the need to focus the narrative down and keep it clear than to a lack of breadth in Pevsner's thinking.

Whilst many subsequent texts re-work Pevsner's narrative through different routes, the structure remains the same. Sigfried Gideon's *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* published in 1948 eschew's Pevsner's 'great designers' view to foreground the history of industry, technology and social customs. None the less, the notion of progress towards a maturity guides the narrative. Likewise Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* of 1960 reworks notions of functionalism, but still discusses the same objects, people and lineage as Pevsner.

Design history in Britain was largely established as a rejoinder to practice-based undergraduate courses from the early 1970s and the above texts provided the dominant discourse. It is popularly understood that it was tacked onto them in order to give them degree-awarding status: they represented the 'academic' bit. Further folk history of this period tells of staff being appointed to teach this subject according to the number of Thames & Hudson World of Art books they had on their shelves. Additionally, in 1972 the heavily Pevsnearean history of design units were added to the Open University art history course.

By the late-70s it was clear that the above texts did not give sufficient detail to base a day a week's teaching on and the alternatives, such as Bevis Hillier's style books, were entertaining but did not necessarily raise ethical questions about design. Thus postgraduate courses were established to develop the research framework and produce more design history. A vigorous discussion took place within design history circles at this stage in order to establish the nature, shape and boundaries of the discipline (see, for instance, Dilnot 1984).

The modernist canon has been maintained partly out of a genuine desire by design historians to promote a political and social agency into practice. Thus proto-modernist occurences such as Utility design are unearthed to lend credence to the possibility that a reforming style is still possible (Attfield 1998). It is also interesting to note how the historical analysis of eco-design is also coloured by a modernist hue.

Meanwhile, Richard Buchanan (1998: 260) reminds us of the vast void between the aspirations of some reforming designers and the activities of the consuming public. One might add that there is also a yawning gap between the the desires of design historians and the actions of designers.

Modernism was not the only discourse at stake in design history. But the time-lag of research to publication to dissemination to reproduction ensured the continued conspiracy. So whilst plenty of alternative approaches may have been developed, the insistent 'Bauhaus lecture' is still anually turned out on pre-degree art and design courses. The damage is done early on.

At worst this has also maintained the 'form follows function' mantra-- a misused and misunderstood adage if ever there was one -- as the only discursive recourse for studio-tutors and psuedo intellectual designers, hard pressed to give scholarly kudos to their activities.

This sustained damage may be due to the ignorance of populist publishers who continue to insist on glossy homages to modernism (see for instance, Julier 1997). It may be the popular media's recent discovery of modernism as part of the aesthetic of New Labour's Cool Britannia. This system supports

what John Walker calls the canon of design, whereby, 'the baton of genius or avant grade innovation passes from the hand of one great designer to the next in an endless chain of achievement' (Walker 1989: 63; see also Bonta 1979). None the less it remains the designer's dream to appear in this kind of book, which is the worst thing possible.

Writing a production-led history of design is okay, but it is only of use to researchers in and of design practice if the processes and objects of design are accurately understood. Why then, first of all, is design history dominated by three-dimensional objects of a certain type? Furniture design, and in particular the chair has exercised design historians for rather a long time and yet product design in general only accounted for 8% of design business in 1996 (Consultancy Survey 1996). John Walker raises the rhetorical question as to why design historians don't study military weapons, police equipment or sexual aids-- surely three great domains of user investment in a planned product (Walker 1989: 33). Furthermore, the vast majority of designers are involved in the planning and implementation of communications. Design is about concepts, relationships, ideas and processes. It is also a collaborative venture which is supremely intradisciplinary, in that it unites specialists in two and three-dimensional communication, visual and material culture, and it is interdisciplinary in that it brings different professional domains together. As Victor Margolin notes, 'Design history...has not had much success in engaging with current practice. These issues involve new technologies, innovative collaborative efforts among design professionals, a concern with the impact of complex products on users and the relations between the design of material objects and immaterial processes' (Margolin 1995: 20).

Design practice and research-- and often they are the same thing --is concerned with both figuring out where it is going and also providing interventions, inflections and instruction on that direction. Design history could provide useful structures to build in a reflective component into this process. However, the majority of production-led models for the discussion of design in history are so seriously flawed that it renders the whole subject redundant for the practitioner. In the meantime, the designer's point of reference continues to be Pevsner's, Banham's, McDermott's (1997) or Sparke's (1998) heroes or heroines of modern design.

A recent dispondent correspondent with *Design Week* wrote of 'design's very breath of life (...) suffocated by perpetual mediocrity and highly questionable work' (Argent 1998). So what was this design depressive's point of re-sale? How could design of Paul Rand and Abram Games. Come on Patrick Argent of Scarborough. Get real! Learn to love the complexity of your activity. Embrace its mediocrities. For only by understanding it as it is can you grow from it. You've obviously been listening to how Rand, Games and probably F.H.K. Henrion produced superb solutions to problems rather than how they exploited the institutional structures of design discoure, and possibly the patience of their 'associates', in order to legitimate and promote their particular take on what good design should be. Or perhaps, more benignly, they were operators and pragmatists.

We do not wish to overplay these points because it would churlishy disregard an important counter-movement in design history, the study of consumption. Deriving from the 'new social history' and anthropology in this country and American studies elsewhere, the sub-discipline seeks to understand the experience and meaning of design objects among their users. Its rise in the mid-80s was concurrent with Thatcher's notions of consumer empowerment as part of the Adam Smith Institute driven project of 'sovereign individuals of late-capitalism'.

Perhaps the key concept of use to designers and design historians to come out of this is Daniel Miller's discussion of alienation (Miller 1987). Using Marx, Weber and Durkheim he argued that objects are intrinsically alienating. Consumers then appropriate them through

their use and customization. Likewise, Dick Hebdige (1979) wrote of active consumption-- again refuting Frankfurt School notions of a compliant, mass audience --in the context of youth culture, arguing for its spectacular, resistant project.

Thus designers can begin to consider the processes of this consumer appropriation as a way of understanding their end users. They can design to such activities as did the originators of modular furniture and some computer software packages which allow a modicum of personal interpretation and intervention on the object. They can also move in the opposite direction and invite their public to become part of the corporate cultures they represent, thus narrowing the gap between producer and consumer. Hence they indulge in what economists Fine and Leopold (1993: 4) call, 'the cultural reconstruction of the meaning of what is consumed'. Hence Ikea's flat-pack culture, Benetton's appeal to consensual politics, offical supporters' clubs and product helplines.

The analysis of consumption, it should be stressed does not originate in design history. Often design historians have taken it on board to claim an ethically and intellectually higher moral ground, ending up sometimes with an ingrained antipathy towards the consideration of practice (see Buchanan 1998: 261). Otherwise, attempts have been made to redefine what design practice may be in order to fit a consumption model. For instance, Cheryl Buckley (1998) looks at homeworking among women in the north-east, connecting their folk knowledge as consumers to the innovation of clothing styles. But these are isolated incidents.

Fine and Leopold address design in terms of 'systems of provision', looking at the interactions which take place along the axis of conception, production, mediation and use. This tracing of material and visual culture along a vertical axis from production to consumption, from origination, organisation and processing to social meaning, is one

increasingly adopted by other sociologists such as Chaney (1996), Lash and Urry (1996).

Meanwhile, some observers have pointed out how design historians who take a consumption approach do not clarify what they understand by the point of consumption (Meikle 1998: 197)): is it at the moment of decision making about acquisition, the point of sale, use and re-use? This criticism isn't about academic pedantry, it is about a refusal to come to terms with the questions raised by making that definition. It maintains a myth of consumer empowerment and avoids considering consumer interactions with production values. It avoids acknowledging the possibility that consumption is never static on the vertical axis of systems of provision, that consumption takes place at different points, often at different levels, in the life of products.

In the same way that design historians need to bridge production and consumption, so other binary domains require reconciliation. The divisions between material and visual culture, or dominant design history and graphic design history need challenging. As consultant designer Geoff Hollington tells us, 'Design today is very often about creating a product that fits in some way into a brand ethos, ideally evolving and stregthening the brand as it goes'. He goes on to note that Dieter Rams's great contribution to Braun was not his styling of white goods, but his creation of a brand identity for the company (Hollington 1998: 63).

Likewise, the consumption discussion has focussed almost exclusively on the private domain without either considering or linking it to the public sphere. The acquisition of goods is connected to economic position-- as Miller has finally admitted (Miller 1997: 14). But it is also about the articulation of identity. This is intimately bound up in conceptions of place or, otherwise, self-knowledge in terms of a public habitus. In addition, the creeping privatisation of space-- shopping malls, leisure and theme parks, toll roads --demands further enquiry.

We do not question the value of history as discourse, particularly following the era of Thatcher's ignorant historicism or during Blair's stifling of historical consciousness in 'New Britain'. But we do ask design history to return to its roots and bed itself with practice. And in doing so, the fascinating reflexive nature of design will be revealed.

Periodic transatlantic debate has taken place regarding the relative merits of design history and design studies. We propose the study of design culture wherein economic decisions in the marketplace are read as being culturally informed, and the cultural practices of design are critically understood. To construct an economic sociology of design practice would be a useful starting point.

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