

# ECONOMIES OF DESIGN

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GUY JULIER



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Cover design: Jennifer Crisp  
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the UK

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First published 2017

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2016948132**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-1885-6

ISBN 978-1-4739-1886-3 (pbk)

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The research for this book has gathered pace through many years. Back in that fateful year of 1986, the economic and social historian John Styles had a considerable influence on me in thinking about the triangulation of design, production and consumption. I thank him for introducing me to this approach and for his enthusiasm then and since. By the 1990s I had considered writing an account of design in the context of Thatcherism and Reagonomics. During this period, my research on design and marketisation in Spain, Hungary and elsewhere also made me realise that many other local developments were taking place within global processes of neoliberalisation. Transitions were going on within transitions. Time passed until thinking about economics, design and the dynamics of change began to lurk more heavily in the background as I wrote revised editions of *The Culture of Design*. Julia Hall and then Mila Steele at Sage Publishing were thoroughly supportive commissioning editors through its three iterations.

Like so many commercial products, this book could not have come into being without state support. My role as the University of Brighton/Victoria and Albert Museum Principal Research Fellow in Contemporary Design has allowed me to devote paid time to it. I thank my colleagues in both institutions – particularly Anne Boddington and Bill Sherman – for agreeing to my prioritisation of this project.

Parts of this text have been developed through more focused articles and book chapters. Some of the earlier sections in Chapter 2 took shape in an essay I wrote for the accompanying book to the V&A exhibition ‘British Design since 1948’. Approaches to the idea of the neoliberal object have been shaped in various ways elsewhere, including a chapter in *Designing Mobilities, Mobilising Design: intersections, affordances, relations* (Spinney et al., forthcoming). Fragments of Chapter 8 appear in articles for the journals *Knowledge Technology and Policy*, *City*, an article co-written with Malene Leerberg for the *Finnish Journal of Urban Studies* as well as a chapter in *Human Smart Cities: Rethinking the Interplay between Design and Planning* (Concilio and Rizzo, 2016). The Design Culture Salon that I have convened at the V&A has been a particularly fertile ground for ideas, some of which I have blogged separately but have also worked their way into this publication.

Three Arts and Humanities Research Council funded projects have influenced this book. ‘China’s Creative Communities: Making Value and The Value(s) of Making’ (AHRC Newton Fund, 2016) produced valuable, first-hand viewpoints that underpinned part of Chapter 7. I thank Cat Rossi and Justin Marshall who led this excursion. The issues around *shanzhai* innovation and its relationship to open innovation and governmental policy in China were unfolding very

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

rapidly as this book was finalised. The findings presented here are thus very much a snapshot in time. The other two projects ‘Mapping Social Design’ (2013–14) and ‘Developing Participation in Social Design: Prototyping Projects, Programmes and Policies’ (2015–16) led to material that appears in Chapter 8.

Through these latter two projects, Leah Armstrong, Jocelyn Bailey and Lucy Kimbell have been stalwart colleagues. Leah Armstrong dependably undertook some background research for this book as well. Lucy Kimbell has been a critical friend, providing immensely useful comments as my text developed. In addition, anonymous reviewers have supplied important feedback on early plans and drafts, while Michael Ainsley and Delayna Spencer at Sage Publishing have masterfully coordinated these. Viviana Narotzky has also generously provided constructive and clear-sighted advice. Carolyn Burke, Ian Cochrane, Mark Green, James Mair, Simon May, Sabina Michaëlis and Jeremy Myerson shared important insights from their various backgrounds in the design professions. My thanks also go to Divia Patel at the V&A, who introduced me to *jugaad*. Ultimately, however, any shortcomings in this book are entirely my responsibility.





# 1

## INTRODUCTION: CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM AND THE RISE OF DESIGN

Since the 1980s there has been extraordinary growth and visibility of design throughout most of the world. This is connected to fundamental developments in capitalism. This period may otherwise be termed 'neoliberalism'. Chapter 1 explains some of the ways by which the rise of design and neoliberalism are connected. In particular, it shows how neoliberalism is played out in multiple ways and, relatedly, how design is varied in its practices and outcomes. The reach and complexity of design objects has also extended in the era of neoliberalism and some of this chapter considers the new kinds of artefacts that have emerged. The overall approach of this book and its chapters are also explained.

Economics and design have never been particularly good bedfellows. One suggests certainties and statistics or, at least, attempts to get a clear understanding of what is going on in the big picture of world events or the smaller one of firms and individuals. The other proposes sensations and aesthetics, opening up myriad ways of doing things, of living, of functioning *in* the world. One tries to demonstrate the knowable, the other is constantly pushing towards the unknowable. Putting these together creates a seemingly impossible nexus.

This book is concerned with the various economies in contemporary capitalism that make design and the ways by which design contributes to the making of economies. In so doing, it seeks the complex and varied meeting grounds of these two fields. Some interrogation of their terms and conditions may help to set the scene.

‘The economy’ (singular) is a construct. It is an idea that is made up to fit a dominant way of organising the economy of a location – usually emanating from the respective politicians who are in power. ‘The economy is ... booming/in need of stimulation/needs a lower taxation regime and public spending cuts’ are all declarations that express political and spatial interests. ‘The economy’ means various things. But in its reduction to a singular entity it comes to express an homogenised view of financial and commercial arrangements that conforms to, basically, how politicians and those who agree with them see that they should be run. It then becomes unchallengeable, unalterable, immutable it seems.

Design, meanwhile, is also presented as a singular idea. Although less talked about than ‘the economy’, design is frequently presented as if it were a coherent whole (e.g. Nelson and Stolterman 2003; Cross 2006; Heskett 2008; Verganti 2013). It is common for headline speakers at design conferences to claim that ‘Design is ...’ followed by a few sentences of unerring certainty that place this pursuit fairly and squarely into a particular worldview which itself is not actually declared but lurks beneath the surface.

As a starting point for this book, here is my definition of design.

Design is far too variegated in its practices, far too widely deployed and far too diverse in how it is understood and used for us to be able to express a singular definition for it. Instead, we have to take into account the different temporalities and territories that it operates in. We have to understand its various and, sometimes, conflicting purposes. We must recognise the many formats it appears in and the conjunctions of objects within these and between them. No object is an island. No one definition of design is enough.

Economies (plural) sit in, overlap with and operate outside that construct of ‘the economy’. Inside ‘the economy’, there are activities that usually do their best to thrive within the legal structures that are set by it. They make their money, pay their taxes, calculate their loss and profit and find ways to operate formally and informally without breaking the rules or messing up. Sometimes grey areas are sought, though. This is where spaces open up to do something; that is, it takes advantage of the structures of ‘the economy’ while also doing something counter to or alternative from its overarching aims. And then there is wilful distancing from them.

Thus, to talk of ‘economies of design’ is to pursue the different contexts and processes where design functions and investigate the different ways it does this. At times, these may become ‘design economies’. In this change of emphasis, we find design to be more clearly and self-consciously central to activities – where design is the driving force of the way that a context is organised. It is where design is a project in itself that garners various motivations, interests or forms of investment.

The historical parameters for this book are built around two related factors. One is an understanding of the priorities and impacts of neoliberal economic practices from the 1980s. The other is the growth of the multiple ways that design practices have grown, accumulated and intensified through the same period. Putting these together, I would argue, has received little attention in design history, design studies or elsewhere. It necessitates an analysis of the economic processes that take place within design practices, those around it and how each of these interact.

Broadly speaking, design works in two ways in relation to neoliberalism. First, it makes stuff that is used within its systems. Products are fashioned for sale, environments are configured for use, images are formed for viewing, services are designed and rolled out and so on. These form part of the neoliberal pressures of marketisation and differentiation. Second, design also plays a more symbolic role. As a thing that is intended to be at the leading-edge of cultural production, it points towards the possible. It shows what it is *in potentia*. It materialises the probable. Design plays a semiotic role in making change appear reasonable.

To briefly expand on this secondary, semiotic, role of design, the signalling of transformation may be carried out in various ways. This symbolism produces subjectivities that are disposed to particular economic processes and logics (Jessop 2004). Getting excited about a new design also infers getting excited about economic transformation. In the public sphere, for example, a new urban design scheme works as part of a neighbourhood regeneration scheme in order to tidy streets up. It also shows to property investors or companies looking to re-locate that this area is ‘on the up’ and worth considering. The academic specialism of cultural political economy provides some theoretical starting points for thinking here (Best and Paterson 2010; Sum and Jessop 2013). We can take political economy to involve the relationship of politics, economics and law. This might include the study of such things as civic resource allocation, legal frameworks, trade agreements or taxation systems. Cultural political economy is more concerned with the *meanings* that are formed through policy and business and how and for whom these meanings function. How design works to get us used to certain economic processes and ambitions is a question at stake here.

This process of habituation to ways by which contemporary capitalism functions may work in quieter ways as well. Artefacts come into use and become part of routines. In this, they may seem very ordinary – their apparent significance may fade a little. Nonetheless, through repeated contact and use the meanings of things go deeper, are performed, get re-enacted and embodied. Thrift (2008: 187) goes further to describes this within a processes of *microbiopolitics* – small-scale actions that are undertaken in tiny slices of time but which are, nonetheless, sensed and that connect to a broader disciplining of the self (Foucault 2008). Thus it is important to think about the influences of design objects at various levels, from the bigger narratives to intimate actions in everyday life.

The next section considers the ways by which design has developed in this neoliberal age, drawing further attention to its diversity and its porosity in relation to other practices. There follows a section in which I describe some of the overarching qualities of neoliberalism, again opening up its unevenness, its hybridity and functionings. Neoliberalism is seen more as a process of change than as an end – hence it is more accurate to talk about *neoliberalisation*. Further detail is given thereafter where I break down this process into four key components: deregulation, new economy, financialisation and austerity. How design is entwined into these is briefly opened up. Some of the kinds of design objects that I am mostly interested in paying attention to in this book are then pursued further before finishing this chapter with an outline of the succeeding chapters.

## THE RISE OF DESIGN: QUANTITIES AND QUALITIES

Design is on the exponential rise. Copious graphs and tables – such as in Table 1.1 – demonstrate the growth of design around the world over the past three decades. Indeed, the quantifying of design professionals and turnover has become a minor industry in itself. Local and national governments, transnational groups like the European Union and even the United Nations have all taken part in this as well as institutions dedicated to promoting the design profession and consultancies whose job it is to inform business and policy (see Julier 2014: 24–5).

**Table 1.1** Top design exporters in developed and developing economies (UNCTAD 2010)

Exporter	Value (in millions of US\$)	Market share (%)	Growth rate (%)
	2008	2008	2003–2008
China	58,848	24.32	15.45
China, Hong Kong SAR	23,874	9.87	5.01
Italy	23,618	9.76	10.35
Germany	16,129	6.67	16.71
USA	12,150	5.02	14.25
France	10,871	4.49	13.11
India	7,759	3.21	18.57
United Kingdom	7,448	3.08	10.93
Switzerland	6,938	2.87	16.09
Thailand	4,474	1.85	10.80
United Arab Emirates	4,464	1.84	49.80
Belgium	4,339	1.79	8.72
Poland	3,855	1.59	13.72
Japan	3,783	1.56	17.21
Netherlands	3,773	1.56	13.91
Turkey	3,543	1.46	11.72
Malaysia	3,186	1.32	12.87
Viet Nam	2,687	1.11	23.44
Mexico	2,535	1.05	1.40
Singapore	2,392	0.99	16.21

With this have come debates as to how to identify and quantify what design does. Who and where are the designers? The United Nations has side-stepped this by referring to ‘design intense’ products such as fashionware, souvenirs and toys; they have then looked at global trade statistics to track the growth of exportation of these items, and then concluded that this must mean that there is more design around in the world than ever (UNCTAD 2010). However, this can only deliver a very partial picture as the analysis only refers to product-based design. Where is graphic or interior design here, for instance?

Other problems arise when we quantify design by counting the number and output of professional designers. How do you identify designers? Professional associations provide lists and contacts for researchers to survey, but these will usually only cover their membership. Furthermore, these are often limited by the particular reach of that association. Legions of designers who work in-house for companies or as freelancers are often missed. And in any case, there are constantly emerging design specialisms which are either unknown or overlap with other professional activities so much that it is difficult to disentangle them. A service designer may also be a strategist, a business consultant, a digital technology developer or an ethnographer.

The key point here is that emphasis on quantities in the rise of design often misses fundamental developments in its qualities. It has become an orthodoxy to talk of the growing complexity of design in our ‘complex world’ (e.g. Thackara 2006; Norman 2010). But it is important to not just accept this notion as a given, but to try to unpick what the constituent parts of this ‘complexity’ are. Let us consider what these might be.

First, the growth of design has by no means meant ‘more of the same’. Until the 1980s, its mainstay had been in its sub-sectors of industrial, graphic, fashion and interior design. Since then, as Table 1.2 illustrates, the design profession has constantly atomised into more and more specialisms. Unlike, for example, law or architecture, design has never been subject to normative curricula or any kind of externally certified professional attainment levels. The downside of this has been that, historically, it has always struggled for recognition outside. The upside is that this has meant that design education and the design profession has been able to move swiftly, inventing new sub-sectors and approaches as it goes along.

**Table 1.2** The accumulation of design specialisms

1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
interior design	corporate identity packaging	branding		
textile design fashion design				
interior design	retail design exhibition design	leisure design experience design		
graphic design	multimedia design design management	web design user-centred design participatory design	interaction design service design design thinking design activism	mobile application design social design design for social innovation strategic design design for policy
furniture design			design art critical design	
industrial design engineering design transport design building design	green design	concurrent design sustainable design		
		urban design		

Second, and as already intimated, the boundaries between design and other professional disciplines have become ever more porous. This has largely been in response to market and technological changes. In the 1980s, this porosity was driven by commercial considerations, in particular around corporate identity and retail design where increased efforts were made to present a unified design language across visual, material and spatial elements. This was consolidated in the 1990s, in particularly through branding, where in addition to coordinating the physical attributes of a service or product offer, digital presence became increasingly important and greater attention was paid to customer experience; thus issues such as staff training and management styles began to be mixed into the branding equation. The increased overlapping of design disciplines has also been driven by ethical considerations, such as environmental sustainability. Design for sustainability in its early days of the 1970s to the mid-1990s focused principally on material questions such as recyclability (e.g. Papanek 1995). Latterly it has incorporated more complex questions of social arrangements and participation in the design process itself that enhance carbon neutrality (e.g. Manzini 2015).

Third, in its intensification design has become more knowing of itself, more reflexive and more self-conscious in its various ways. Aside from the proliferation of design webzines, blogs and print publishing we must also note the growth of semi-formal gatherings of designers through talks and panel discussions at, for example, trade fairs and design festivals. The fora that are available for the debate of design have grown with it. We must also note the growth of design schools, design research and attendant conference circuits, symposia and peer-reviewed journals.

Fourth, the temporalities within which design operate have become more varied. At one extreme, the processing of design has speeded-up. Not least, this has been facilitated by technological change. Computer systems allow for far more rapid development, negotiation and deployment of designs. It has also been driven by increasing velocities in the global economy as a whole. This is not usual to the whole of design practice, though. At the other extreme, many designers have moved into much longer-term relationships with their clients or users. This means that they might work in more iterative ways, developing successions of designs and projects with them that go deeper in terms of their contact points. Typically in commercial contexts, they may be involved in the design of a wider suite of objects that encompass both the 'above the line' features that the public see and 'below the line' aspects relevant to the internal workings of the client, such as training manuals or brand guidelines. In more socially oriented design practices, there has been a move to building long-term processes with stakeholders. Here, the designer engages in deep understanding of the make-up of organisations or populations and what constitutes their specific cultures.

Fifth, the territories of design have altered since the 1980s. An obvious example of this has been in growth of design in the former Soviet bloc or in so-called emergent economies such as in East Asia and Latin America. These come with their specificities in terms of their material and technical resources but also in their politics as to the uses of design or in the economic structures within which they operate. Beyond this, we must also consider the transnational, border-crossing that takes place on the one hand, while on the other, movements occurred where a very conscious relocalisation of economies and design has occurred.

Sixth, and to combine points four and five, in many contexts design has taken up a role not just in providing goods and services to satisfy current requirements, but has increasingly functioned to indicate sources of future value. Design is used to leverage value outside itself – to build

on other assets and/or to point towards these. Further, many forms of design have become just part of networks that are under continual adjustment and modification. An example of this is in smartphone technologies whose running systems, apps, handsets and signal provider systems are under constant redesign in relation to each other. In this, the objects of design are often ‘unfinished’ while the broader ‘culture of design’ of a location, a design specialism or a corporation, for example, can also be said to be in an ongoing state of becoming. Here, there has been a rise in maintaining or even protecting the ‘territories’ within which design operates through time against the competition. Hence, intellectual property (IP) has taken increased prominence in the discourses of design.

Through these six points I have focused on the design supply side. It is important to appreciate, however, that this is also about how design is experienced, consumed or known in the everyday routines and experiences of work, leisure, mobility, survival, disappointment or aspiration. Where and how design is encountered; for how long one engages with a product or service of notable designerly input or the time taken between discovering a desire and its realisation; what one thinks or knows about whoever designed it: such factors have become more intensified and variegated as they have become more numerous and widespread.

The next section considers a firmer theoretical foundation through which we can understand this unfolding of design. Specifically, it does this by consolidating an understanding of the processes of neoliberalisation.

Studying economies of design involves an investigation into the multiple ways that design is configured within different economic processes. At the same time, it pays attention to the broadening and deepening of design’s meanings and functions.

## NEOLIBERALISATION

‘Neoliberalism’ is a relatively recent term. It is generally attributed to the economist Alexander Rüstow who, in response to the German economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s, advocated that the marketplace should be free of any direct state involvement; rather, the state should be strong in setting the rules within which market operations take place (Hartwich and Razeen 2009). It wasn’t until the 1970s that the capitalist world fully returned to consider this idea. In the meantime and in the aftermath of the Second World War a different global economic landscape emerged that – in the capitalist world – was concerned to engineer a balance of state, market and democratic institutions to ensure peace and wellbeing. The so-called Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 and afterwards aimed at a stable system of global trade where the US dollar worked as the reserve currency against which others were fixed.

In 1971, President Nixon unilaterally pulled the USA out of the Bretton Woods agreement by ending the convertibility of dollars to gold. The costs of the Vietnam war and public spending programmes were producing America’s biggest deficit of the twentieth century and the ‘Nixon Shock’ performed a fiscal shuffle to stabilise the national economy. In short, this meant that international currency exchange rates could no longer be pegged against reserves and ceased to be subject to internationally agreed controls. Currencies could now be traded more openly and flexibly in the financial markets which, in turn, would determine their value. In the longer term, this would usher in a new era wherein a liberalised marketplace, in terms of trade of goods, services and finance, would dominate the expanding capitalist world.

Marxist geographer David Harvey makes the case for the years 1978–80 in the acceleration of neoliberal policies (Harvey 2005). This is when Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping began the process of liberalisation of his country's economy in competition against the rise of Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea. In the UK, Margaret Thatcher was elected as Prime Minister in 1979 with a mandate to curb trade union powers, liberalise the labour market and break a decade's economic and inflationary stagnation. In the USA, Ronald Reagan was elected as President in 1980 who, likewise, looked to a series of deregulatory measures on trade, agriculture, industry, mineral extraction and labour protection. Such measures led Harvey to provide the following, succinct definition of neoliberalism:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (2005: 2)

As a term in common usage, however, 'neoliberalism' has only circulated more widely in the last decade (Peck et al. 2009). In particular, the global financial crisis of 2008 has provoked closer inspection of neoliberalism by academics in order to understand its complexities and contradictions. To extend from Harvey's definition, neoliberalism is typified by the following features:

- the deregulation of markets and the privileging of market forces, free of state intervention;
- the privatisation of state-owned enterprises;
- the foregrounding of financial interests over others (e.g. communitarian, civic, social, environmental etc.);
- an emphasis on competitiveness and on individual, entrepreneurial practices.

Harvey (2005) points out that it is more accurate to see neoliberalism as 'a theory of political economic practices' rather than a complete political ideology. *Neoliberalisation* as a transformative and variegated process might more accurately describe this. Indeed, neoliberalism has been deployed across a range of political frameworks (witness, for example, its vigorous application within Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile from 1973). Thus, neoliberalism is slippery. Indeed, just as designers 'dodge and weave' to find new marketplaces for their skills, create new needs and desires, so neoliberalism is constantly on the move, finding new territories and combinations. Neoliberalism, like design, is a process of change more than an endpoint.

Neoliberalisation is commonly associated with globalisation. It certainly depends on the easy movement of finance, goods and services across national borders, unhindered by legal constrictions. It takes advantage of the integration of technological supports around the world, some common cultural understandings and aspirations, the dissemination of knowledge and strong infrastructures, such as transportation, to facilitate the movement of goods. This paints a picture of an even, homogenised world. And yet, neoliberalism '*necessarily* operates among its others' (Peck et al. 2009: 104, emphasis in the original). It is parasitical in that it attaches onto a variety of localised contexts as a transformatory process rather than an end. As such it is always hybrid, messy, diverse and unfinished. It claws into places in different ways, finding points of resistance, friction, slipperiness and ingress. Jamie Peck puts this patchiness more poetically:

Chronically uneven spatial development, institutional polymorphism, and a landscape littered with policy failures, oppositional pushbacks, and stuttering forms of malregulation are all consequently par for neoliberalism's zigzagging course. (Peck 2013: 140)

Finally, for this section, neoliberalism as a programme emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, thus giving it more than four decades of activity, spreading irregularly across seven continents. In this, we must see it as uneven in its historical trajectories through different geographies. But just as design has accrued specialisms that appear in various conjunctions through these years, so a series of overlapping and accumulating neoliberal policies and practices have occurred. The next section explains these and the role of design therein.

## DEREGULATION, NEW ECONOMY, FINANCIALISATION, AUSTERITY

Neoliberalisation is indeed varied in its processes and outcomes. However, there are four historical, structuring elements that have been important to it. These have emerged into dominance in the West roughly in the order of deregulation in the 1980s, New Economy in the 1990s, financialisation in the 2000s and austerity from 2010. In other geographies, this decade-by-decade development is not so clear-cut. Similar accumulations have taken place in different timeframes and with varying emphasis, though.

The 1980s saw successive waves of **deregulation** in the West as the result of the influence of so-called Reaganomics in the USA and Thatcherism in the UK (Ehrman 2006; Peck and Tickell 2007). 'Deregulation' is a term employed in the context of political economy to describe the relaxation of legal constrictions regarding finance, trade and commerce. Part of this has included privatisation of state industries and services. It has presented a multitude of new possibilities for design. Global trade, for example, has been subjected to progressive deregulations that undermine economic protection of territories. In turn, this has produced new locations for design to thrive in as places respond to global competition. We may also read deregulation to be active in labour relations. The growth of flexible working and project-based employment has been a key aspect in the supply end of the creative industries in general and design work in particular. There have been other processes going on that are linked to these, such as the consumer and credit boom, shifts towards homeownership or the greater presence of women in the workforce. These have been indirectly enabled by changes in national and international laws and, subsequently, have had profound effects on design. Equally, the speeding up of digital communications have produced new ways by which design ideas are circulated and new audiences created for them. Thus, we may read deregulation as both an output of political economy and an input of social practice, with design working between them.

These rapid historical shifts set the scene for the emergence in the 1990s of the so-called 'New Economy'. This term was coined in the magazine *Newsweek* in 1995, a year that coincided with the establishment of Amazon.com and eBay.com. Around the New Economy, the employment of digital information technology networks for inventory and supply was crucial. After all it was during the 1990s that the World Wide Web was established. Between 1993 and 2000, it is estimated that the amount of information moving through two-way telecommunication that was carried globally by the internet (as opposed to other means such as surface mail) leapt from 1 per cent to

51 per cent; this figure had risen to 97 per cent by 2007 (Hilbert and López 2011). The internet made recording and analysing consumer preferences, sourcing and communicating with suppliers, controlling stock and tracking delivery processes easier. In other words, a more flexible and tighter system of provision could be ensured. Thus, New Economy practices are centred around the notion of ‘faster, better, cheaper’, a slogan that has its origins in American defence spending policy of the Reagan era (McCurdy 2001). This mantra was adopted into the New Economy: ‘faster’ meant the compression of the supply chain to deliver ‘mass specialisation’; ‘better’ meant that with more distributed and supple supply chains, companies could concentrate on their core capabilities through design, innovation and brand building; ‘cheaper’ meant that new manufacturing and service bases in Eastern Europe, the Indian sub-continent and the Far East could be exploited for their cheaper labour and material costs. In short, the geographies and temporalities with which designers would engage would change radically. This also meant significant changes for the ways by which they worked. ‘Faster, better, cheaper’ also transformed the expectations and practices of creative labour.

The roots of **financialisation** can be traced back to the early 1970s, but were accelerated through the deregulation of banking and stock market systems in the 1980s. It was in the late-1990s and 2000s, however, that this mode of economics became most dominant and intense in the West. Deregulation and New Economy combined the flexibilisation of labour and infrastructures for the production and distribution of goods as well as service provision in a global context with the affordances provided by digital information technologies. Likewise, financialisation involved swifter and more complex transnational movements of finance. Briefly, it is typified by greater emphasis being laid on strategies being played to maintain the value of shares, brands, real estate or capital flows. This is done in three ways: first, through the rise of shareholder value within corporate governance; second, through the rise of profit through financial rather than commodity production systems (e.g. deferring on pension systems, sub-leasing a truck fleet, liquifying the real estate of a corporation to lease it back while investing the capital elsewhere); and third, through the rise of financial trading (Froud et al. 2000; Froud et al. 2006). In all these, there is a constant exchange between tangible and intangible assets and this is where design must be understood in three corresponding ways. First, it helps to shape those fixed, tangible resources to add value. Second, it plays a symbolic role in pointing towards sources of future value – things whose worth can be leveraged. Third, design is employed in the actual systems and technologies that facilitate processes of financialisation. Furthermore, it is not surprising to learn that intellectual property has grown as an asset and process alongside financialisation. Design is used strategically to differentiate and provide protection on assets through law. It is therefore also something that generates future value through the licensing out of designs for others to use or through its use in the protection of corporate assets. Design may also be mobilised in the more private sphere, for example, in improving the value of domestic real estate. Thus while financialisation is associated with jargon-heavy practices in banking and investment, it also finds its ideological way through to many other levels of everyday life (Martin 2002).

**Austerity** springs from financialisation as financialisation emerges from New Economy and New Economy derives from deregulation. Classically, we associate it with the measures introduced by governments around the world in the wake of the 2007–8 global financial crisis. Briefly and bleakly, this largely came out of over-leveraging – financial institutions, including government ones, raise money against assets. If, for example, the value of that asset falls, the cost of borrowing rises and drops in productivity impede the ability to pay down debts

(as happened in 2007–8), this provokes financial crisis and economic recession. Governments then attempt to reduce their deficit and stimulate the private sector by making heavy cuts in their own spending. This is austerity. In recessionary periods, it might be understandably assumed that designers suffer strong pressures as commercial operations reduce their costs. The austerity programmes of governments in the 2010s produced two responses within the very broad rubric of ‘social design’ (i.e. socially-oriented design for collective benefit that deals largely with non-commercial clients): one has been for service designers to specialise in helping local, regional and national governments develop cheaper and more user-focused services; the other has been in a strengthening of politicised, activist design practices that propose alternative economic and social frameworks to austerity.

It is tempting to view these four components as discreet ‘moments’ that conveniently fill out respective decades from 1980 onwards. Economic practices are uncertain and uneven, however. Evidence of all four was discernible in the UK and the USA during the 1980s. They bottlenecked into the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe. Versions of these coursed and lurched through several Latin American economies in the 1990s and 2000s. And so on. So while they do exhibit some sequencing in terms of how they were most intensively practised and talked about in Western capitalism, we may also see them as accumulative, iterative or even kaleidoscopic, depending where else you look. The schema in Table 1.3 is meant as a guideline, seen from a mostly Western viewpoint and to be rearranged and challenged according to where you are as a reader.

The next section follows up on this view by identifying three clusters of design activity that weave across the four components of deregulation, New Economy, financialisation and austerity. These are sourced from Nigel Thrift’s opening salvo in *Knowing Capitalism* (2005) and are then developed further in terms of the chief forms of design that articulate these. In the context of this discussion of economies of design, they each confirm a distinctive conceptual challenge presented by this book.

## DESIGN OBJECTS OF CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

Beyond the accumulation of more specialisms in design since the 1980s that is presented in Table 1.2, there have been more general changes in the culture of design, its objects and the practices that course through it. These changes coincide with what geographer Nigel Thrift (2005: 5–10) argues are three crucial arenas through which contemporary capitalism has developed and continues to do so. Below, I explain them and develop on their significance in terms of design.

The first is in the discursive power of what Thrift calls the ‘cultural circuit’ of capitalism. In particular, he refers to the critical appraisals of capitalism that are produced through business schools, management consultants and gurus, and the media. These dissect the log-jams, vagaries, inefficiencies or other challenges that hinder business. Their critiques feed back into ways of ‘doing capitalism’ that modify it, add to its repertoires but also provide further orthodoxies for it. Design is also replete with its gurus, blogs or institutions that do this work. Books, webinars and master-classes provide no end of advice to design managers, practitioners and students.

This cultural circuit extends to the actual things that bridge between singular analysis and multiple or serial implementations. By this I refer to the more meta-level activities that produce brand guidelines, corporate visions, best-practice handbooks, procurement manuals, design method

**Table 1.3** Features of neoliberalisation, examples in everyday life, relevant design disciplines and examples

Economic feature	Key components	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Examples in everyday life	Relevant design discipline	Examples in design
<b>deregulation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>privatisation of state-owned industries and services (e.g. transportation)</li> <li>elimination of global trade and financial barriers</li> <li>elimination of state regulatory controls e.g. on finance, property, transportation media content</li> <li>competitiveness as commercial and civic driver</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>growth of consumer credit</li> <li>growth of out-of-town shopping as leisure activity</li> <li>growth in home ownership</li> <li>drop in relative cost of consumer goods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>retail design</li> <li>corporate identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>shopping malls</li> <li>own brand clothing stores</li> <li>corporate reports</li> </ul>				
<b>New Economy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reduction of stock inventory and move to just-in-time production and delivery</li> <li>globalisation of manufacture and distribution</li> <li>online inventory and purchasing</li> <li>adoption of 'best-value' principles in public sector (New Public Management)</li> <li>increased outsourcing and subcontracting of commercial and public sector operations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>further drop in cost of consumer goods</li> <li>online shopping</li> <li>growth of international travel and short break vacationing</li> <li>rise of more flexible working patterns</li> <li>rise of creative industries as career option</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>branding</li> <li>digital design</li> <li>concurrent design</li> <li>experience design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>brand strategy for multiple goods and services</li> <li>fast fashion</li> <li>placebranding</li> <li>creative and cultural quarters</li> </ul>				
<b>financialisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the dominance of shareholder value within corporate governance as the central force</li> <li>the rise of profit through financial rather than commodity production systems</li> <li>rise to dominance of the finance industry</li> <li>real estate closely bound into global flows of capital and speculation</li> <li>strategic use of intellectual property rights to produce value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'investments' for the future</li> <li>gentrification of neighbourhoods</li> <li>personal financial planning</li> <li>growth and consolidation of tax havens</li> <li>private finance initiatives (PFIs) to produce public-private partnerships for welfare and education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>urban design</li> <li>strategic design</li> <li>design art</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>urban design as part of regeneration processes</li> <li>product design detailing driven by shareholder value</li> <li>design art as investment opportunity</li> <li>exploitation of intellectual property rights (IPR)</li> <li>crowdsourcing of creative labour</li> </ul>				
<b>austerity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>further privatisation and outsourcing of state functions</li> <li>further shrinkage of welfare state</li> <li>increased wealth of elites</li> <li>further consolidation of financialisation processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>civil society (NGOs, charities, neighbourhood groups) filling government policy void</li> <li>growth of 'sharing economy'</li> <li>alternative currency systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>social design</li> <li>design for policy</li> <li>design activism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>participatory design methods in social innovation</li> <li>design and innovation labs in government policy making</li> <li>hacktivism, craftivism</li> </ul>				

toolkits, masterplans and local design statements. These do the work of codifying, organising and mediating analysis and expertise in relation to various scales and publics; they are developed to provide organising principles for specific, but multiple contexts of application. Thus they play a ‘meta’ role in being designed as systems and understandings that script design further downstream. Design criticism has a tendency to focus on the ‘finished objects’ of production – chairs, posters, interiors, uniforms and so on. This book frequently goes back upstream to consider the role of design in shaping certain business principles and outlooks through those codifications. These play a discursive role in that they reinforce certain overall conventions of, for example, how a firm concerns itself with the interface between its internal culture and how it is seen from outside in the case of brand guidelines. They circulate, are read, acted on or even legally enforced, thus feeding back into the wider operations of design and the operations of capitalism.

Second, there are new forms of commodity and commodity relations. Thrift (2005: 7) claims that these forms are ‘intimately bound up with the increasing mediatization of everyday life’. This can be an unhelpful reading as it runs the risk of stating the obvious that, simply, we spend more time looking at screens than before. Certainly, mediatory technologies such as smartphones, tablets and plasma screens are more pervasive, as is their interconnectivity. Thrift goes on, here, to identify the ubiquity of brands as well as increased attention given to the affective register in goods and services that constitute the ‘experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999). It is here that we can push further in terms of thinking about design’s role in commodity relations.

Certainly, as Thrift asserts, the boundaries of many commodities are redefined. Thus, for instance, goods such as mobile phone applications or computer software require routine upgrading which makes their usefulness time-limited. However, these are also contingent upon other objects (for example, app stores, operating systems, memory capacity in the hardware, data networks, wireless hotspots, electrical provision) (Julier 2014: ch. 11). Objects are unfinished in that their performance is contingent on complex linkages that are forever shifting (Knorr Cetina 1997). This means that there is never a fixed meaning of the object (Folkmann 2013: 141). Rather, objects form part of a series of open-ended systems that are dynamic and constantly subject to incursions and modifications. Sometimes these multiplicities are unified within the singularity of a brand (Lury 2004). Object constellations also reposition the consumer. A product website featuring a short video where its designer talks about their inspiration for it; an SMS that gives you tracking information on the delivery process of something you have bought online; the service designer’s mapping of a customer journey before, during and after their use of an amenity: these all purport to forge closer, distinctive and routine relationships between people, things and organisations. It is this relational function of design – both in how it fashions individual parts and orchestrates these as unities – where many newer design specialisms have emerged, including service design and brand strategy.

The third significant development of contemporary capitalism for Thrift (2005: 8–10) is in the construction of new spatial forms. This may straightforwardly be through the subcontracting of goods production and service delivery to form new systems of provision. Outsourcing may produce new geographies where supply lines stretch across and between territories. This other spatiality may also include shopping and leisure centres or new housing developments that are premised on easy mobilities. Notions of time–space compression enter into the frame here (see Julier 2014: ch. 8). Logistics and the analysis and ordering of the movement of things, finance and people is also a feature here.

In design terms, this new spatiality produces gated communities, tax havens, privatised waterfront developments, business parks, technological development zones, creative quarters – all manner of ‘clustering’. These are transformative of places due to their connectivity to others rather than, perhaps, their co-location with other urban functions. In other words, their function and value is realised because they are like, or *seem like*, other such spaces elsewhere in the world. Again, then, the design of these spaces works to give form to them in terms of providing their bricks and mortar, glass and brushed steel, signage and benches; and it also works semiotically to signal an asset. By association with other such iterations elsewhere, it works competitively to align that place, to help it appear to ‘go up a league’ or to place it in an international order.

Having established that neoliberalisation involves a drive to ongoing transformations, that contemporary capitalism is uncertain and multifarious and that design is equally multi-coloured and variegated, the task now is to consider how the rest of this book is structured in order to provide at least some narrative.

## ***ECONOMIES OF DESIGN: STRUCTURE AND APPROACH***

How do we make sense of this intensity and diversity? How does this book progress an argument to contribute to our understanding of the interrelationships of economies and design?

In *The Culture of Design* my chief aim was to open up a cross-disciplinary approach to understanding, largely, the cultural processes and meanings of design. In so doing, I was able to centre much of the book around specific design examples, starting with them and then opening out onto different viewpoints, taking in varying emphases given the economic work of designers, the systems of production, mediation and distribution and the world of consumption and social practices. By starting with the object, I was able to reveal its polyvocality, its multiple meanings and contexts.

In this book, I am treating design objects the other way around, mostly. Here, my approach is to build up a consideration of different forms and processes in economies, hanging design examples onto these. At times, I use what I call ‘counter-factual’ examples: cases where deliberately alternative design approaches are taken that throw dominant activities into relief. This is done in part to disrupt any narrative that accepts the absolute dominance of any singular models of design practice or of economic frameworks.

Chapter 2 primarily focuses largely on the cognitive processes that are active in neoliberal, capitalist context. In particular, it makes a case for a specific ‘design culture turn’ that took place in the 1980s. It features an analysis of a range of design objects and spaces that emerged, specifically around 1984–86. These, I argue, illustrate a particular set of activities and expectations concerning discreet, experiential environments, expectations and measurement and the rise of the individual sovereign consumer. Here I am distancing myself from accounts of design drawing from cultural studies that emphasise identity construction within postmodern and post-structuralist readings. Instead, I bring issues of cognition and social practice in line with key economic trends of the time. In this way, the overarching aim of the chapter is to drive links between macro-economic policy, micro-economic practices and their enactment in everyday life.

Chapter 3 takes up the question of working in design. It picks up on the networked, cognitive qualities that the previous chapter focuses on to explore the specificities of design work in contrast to academic and policy approaches to creative and cultural industries. In particular, it discusses two aspects of design labour: one is its intensely performative characteristics where expectations of what it means to ‘be creative’ or ‘designerly’ are played to; the other is in the downward pressure on design to cut costs, thus reproducing themselves as a precariat. The economic and geographical disparities that exist more broadly in capitalism are also to be discovered in design.

Chapter 4 focuses on issues of globalisation, trade and mobilities and the volatility and unevennesses that these produce. Rather than take globalisation to be an homogenising process, I show how design functions in two different but related ways. One is in the production of intensities, where a tight fit of design, production and sometimes consumption cluster around locations. The other is in design’s role in extensities: serially reproduced systems and nodes that encourage easy flow of goods, people and capital.

Chapter 5 considers how design functions in relation to assets. Design is often rolled into various versions of ‘capital’, such as social, cultural and creative capital; it is used to indicate the wellbeing of a location in terms of knowledge economies. Beyond this, we see how design is entwined with financialisation. Noticeable, yet highly readable design features are incorporated that maintain the interest of shareholders in the case of mobile phones, or future purchases in the case of private homes. The role of media is important here. From this we go on to look at how the design of shopping centres is handled to align with the requirements of institutional investors. These provide destinations for surplus liquidity that circulate in the global flows of finance.

Chapter 6 considers the uneven relationship of design to intellectual property rights (IPR). The growth of global corporations works in parallel with the competition of monopolies. Brands and technologies are developed to ensure differentiation and so intellectual property is a guiding principal here. This logic works in smaller scales within economies as well. Design works both to shape the content of IPR and communicate it. However, differentiation is unstable and short-lived, which is why designers are embedded into temporal cycles of product renewal. These cycles are structured by external forces such as trade fairs. At the same time, there are elements of performativity going on as business orthodoxies format standard ways of doing things.

Chapter 7 takes us outside more ‘official’ forms of practice to discuss design in informal and alternative economies. The former is where practices lie partly or wholly outside legal, governmental constraints. Here, we see how copying and ‘tinkering’ takes places within looser attitudes to intellectual property. What happens when this develops towards more officially recognised economies of design is considered here. The chapter progresses to review more politically charged approaches to using design in alternative economies and how it is dealt with in horizontalist self-management approaches and within timebanking systems.

Chapter 8 pursues the role of design in the weakening of state bureaucracies. Government has given way to governance in which politics has become about managing the interfaces between private and public interests. Design has been implicated into the presentation of policy but, increasingly, it has also been a tool to be used in its very formation. This finds its way into ‘behaviour change’ approaches in public policy which draws, in part, from ‘choice architecture’ of the marketplace. However, more explicit use of design has emerged in the

growth of governmental policy design labs that use design thinking and strategic design. While these place much emphasis on putting the users of policies before the systems that format and deliver public services, their strategic role in delivering public sector cost-savings shouldn't be overlooked. More radical forms of governance can take place, such as in participatory budgeting or planning where citizens have a more direct role in policy priorities and planning. This may open onto forms of 'design citizenship'.

Chapter 9 pulls the main themes of the book together to build on some of its key arguments and suggest directions for further study of economies of design. It begins with a critical discussion of design management, arguing for the need for more grounded and situated analytical approaches to be taken through the fields of design culture and economic sociology. It then reflects on three questions that have sat behind preceding chapters. First, it recapitulates on the the broader relationships of design and neoliberalism. Second, it discusses some of the ways that design functions in terms of the qualitative elements of economics. Third, we review how design works to materialise finance.

Some of the text that follows involves historical analysis so that we might develop a sense of the some of the origins to the state we're in. However, in its thematic approach, this book is not intended to provide anything near a complete design history of neoliberalism. In dealing with the dynamics of change in design and economics, I tend to adopt something of a 'backward glance' as advocated by Thrift (2005: 2). This involves projecting oneself into the future and then looking back at the present, picking up on what I see as some of the key contemporary trajectories to hand while also understanding their historical formation. Just as the historian opens out the complexity and contradictions of the past, so we must be alive to the unsettled, dynamic multi-directionality of the present.