Beyond Progressive Design – Part 2

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EDITORIAL

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Anne-Marie Willis (with Sean Donahue, Rama Gheerawo)

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'Beyond Progressive Design 1'**

The papers published in Part 1 of 'Beyond Progressive Design' critically engaged overt instances of socially focused or humanitarian design.* Yet progressive, and claimed-as-progressive, directions can be found across and between many kinds of design practice.

Again we ask the questions. What do we mean by progressive? How progressive?

Progressive might mean seeking to incorporate extra-disciplinary concerns or it might mean going against the grain in a more far-reaching sense, like questioning the very foundations of a practice or taking design beyond current understandings within 'the design world'. The papers in this issue range across this spectrum. Some of them push boundaries from within; others blur or refuse

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the boundaries, asking 'who counts as a designer?' or challenging professional self-definitions of the essentials of a particular practice.

Putting these papers together reveals tensions within professional practice, and implicit tension between those seeking to reform an existing kind of practice (by making it "more progressive" – as in more attentive to a wider spectrum of needs, more responsive to significant rather than trivial problems, more reflective, more caring, more aware of the designer's own biases/world views) and the more radical position of arguing that the practice of design (or a particular kind of design practice) needs to become something else altogether. Here, other values are put to the fore, like well-being, equity, participation, communication or sustainment, and if the modes of the practice – the structures in which it operates, its core expertise, and so on – are found to be obstructing those things – then it's time for a radical change. This might be a stark way of putting it. What is trying to be made clear is that it's a question of allegiance. Is one's commitment to a fixed definition of a practice? Or is there a willingness, in the face of an ethical imperative, to transform the practice into something else that may end up bearing little resemblance to 'design' as professionally understood? This is not to suggest total abandonment of existing modes of designing, rather, selective retention and reconfiguration, framed and directed by something more urgent than seeking to shore up the integrity of a profession. It's a political question – the politics of one's practice.[1]

Oliver Vodeb's paper, 'Beyond the image and towards communication: an extra-disciplinary critique of the visual communication profession' can be understood in such terms. Refusing to take visual communication design on its own terms, he examines the profession sociologically. His 'extra-disciplinary critique' frames design, visual communication design especially, in terms of its crucial role within 'cognitive capitalism' as it generates ideas, meanings and concepts that become the basis of, or get attached to, products and services. (This can also be understood as creating sign value to generate exchange value: Jean Baudrillard's 'political economy of the sign'.) Vodeb describes how the knowledge, practices and self-understanding of visual communication design get institutionalised through market relations, the nature of design education and the mechanism of competitions. He exposes, with rigour and subtlety, the ways in which creative activity, and aspirations for creatively fulfilling practice, become inducted into social relations of production and fused with capital's voracious appetite for the new. Such a critique, I would suggest, is of particular relevance to design educators and students. In discussing the contradictions that emerged in a project to create a visual identity for a changing, heterogeneous community of learners, Vodeb pulls apart 'the visual' and 'communication' showing the tension between them and how an uncritical investment in the visual can obscure consideration of the complexity of what needs to

be communicated – of 'what really counts'. He evokes the vast disjuncture between the social relations of the processes of image creation and the seamless finality of end product, and speculates on the possibility of overcoming this via the creation of 'socially responsive visual languages'. This pushes to the edge of impossibility, and as such, indicates a need for, and an invitation to, further radical thinking on visual communication design.

Jan-Henning Raff and Gavin Melles set out to consider 'design without designers', investigating the extent to which everyday practices can be considered as acts of designing. Almost provocatively, they choose to focus on an unglamorous, mundane example – how students go about organizing information in order to write an essay. Not how they organize their ideas in an abstract sense, but how they accumulate and arrange piles of paper and create a physical working space. How to understand these materialised cognitive practices? Is this just *ad hoc* coping, or are the students designing personalised micro-structures that will design them into the tasks they have to do (an instance of ontological designing)? Do they create a space for thinking? And what is at stake – and for whom – in designating such activity as design – or as 'not design'?

Pirkko Raudaskoski is concerned with communication, as is Oliver Vodeb, but in a very specific sense. In 'Beyond words: progressive design for/with people with severe brain injury' she asks what counts as valid knowledge to inform the design process. What happens when empirical methods of gathering 'user' data – surveys, interviews, focus groups – can't operate, not least because speech and writing are no longer operative? This is the situation she discusses in the case of a home/care facility for people suffering from severe brain injury.

Yoko Akama, Eva Köppen and Christoph Meinel ask questions about what they perceive as demands being put on contemporary designers – to take on problems of over-consumption versus poverty; to tackle pollution and climate change; to design for 'the other ninety percent'; to unlock the 'authentic desires' of the under-served, and so on. Is this reasonable, realistic or appropriate? What assumptions about the role and efficacy of design underlie these demands? Do they exaggerate design's or the designer's agency? Eva Köppen and Christoph Meinel in 'Knowing People: the empathetic designer', critically consider assumptions about the benefits of empathetic interaction during the design process as claimed by many advocates of user-centred design. They see empathy as a form of 'emotional labour' now expected to be performed by workers in many sectors of the economy – not just the traditional people-focused professions like social work, healthcare or teaching. They unravel the history of the idea of empathy and identify how empathy has paradoxically become a deployable technique in some genres of contemporary design thinking. They are concerned in one direction, by 'a commodification

of feelings' within the economic (bureaucratic/corporate) contexts in which design takes places, and on the other, with a misplaced faith in 'authentic customer needs' able to be extracted via empathy. They flag the latter as the subject of further investigation – about which we look forward to hearing more.

Yoko Akama in 'A 'way of being' in design: Zen and the art of being a human-centred practitioner' is troubled by prescriptive or instrumental conceptualisations of ethical design as if it were simple and straightforward; or of participatory design as a step-by-step process that can be picked up and put down as the designer enters and leaves her studio, so to speak. Her paper expresses frustration at the enormous challenge of unsustainability (as an all pervasive, structural and structuring, material and immaterial, condition) when pitted against the pragmatics of everyday, commercial design practice. Recognising the impossibility of meeting such demands within existing paradigms of commercial design, she argues that design ethics needs to focus not on product or process or professional practice but holistically, on the designer's way of being. This then connects to a different understanding of human-centred design as "a lived, embodied experience in the in-betweenness of people, objects and the world". Here Akama draws on the writings of Japanese philosopher, Watsuji as well as Goethe and Merleau-Ponty, which enables her to present quite a different understanding of empathy than the instrumentalised version that is the target of Köppen and Meinel's critique.

Each paper reveals contradictions, be they of different orders, within current design practice as it has been formed by, and is formative of, the world-at-large and not least its pervasive condition of unsustainability. In different ways, the problems the authors are struggling with, point towards a need for situated rethinking of design practice. A vital aspect of such rethinking is seeking to understand why and how particular professional practices have been constituted as they are. Vodeb's sociological take on visual communication design is one example of such an approach. Another is found in the 'voice of sustainment' piece ('Home eco-nomy: dwelling, destruction and design') by Petra Perolini and Tony Fry which explores, historically and philosophically, the contradictory figure of 'home' which, of course, is one of the claimed domains of the practice of interior design.

Note

1. See Tony Fry, *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice*, Oxford: Berg, 2009, especially chapter 4, 'Design as a Redirective Practice'; and on the politics of redirective practice see Tony Fry, *Design as Politics*, Oxford: Berg, 2011. A key point is that design itself has to be redesigned in order for it to become a redirective practice.