Design, Philosophy and Ethics

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EDITORIAL

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This Special Issue is edited by Tony Fry and Will McNeill, and introduced here by Tony Fry.

We started out with the intent of doing this issue on design, ethics and technology. What has eventuated is enough material for two issues. We are perfectly comfortable with this situation for it goes to the core of the ambition of the *Design Philosophy Papers* (DPP) project, which is essentially about raising the level of the theorisation of design and widening the intellectual community thinking and writing about it.

There are plenty of people within design education and practice concerned with designing, designed objects, design research, design history, and design theory. For this constituency, the objective is to learn more about design for the advancement of design practice and design education. Some of this activity breaks through its condition of constraint, but mostly it suffocates the interest of disciplinary 'outsiders' who are more interested in what design does in and on the world rather than how the 'world of design' thinks about itself and its practices.

Modern human beings overwhelmingly live in a designed world, or a world marked by what has been designed. Put baldly, one cannot understand the world of our dwelling unless one can understand design. Great slabs of the design community seem unable to grasp the fact that the implication of this situation means that a general theory, understanding of, and debate about, design needs to take place in the community at large. For all this to occur, a constituency committed to such action needs to be created. In this context, it should be remembered that DPP is the product of an independent organisation not affiliated with any institution. As such, it is one activity among several all serving the same aim.

The position adopted, and remarks made, in no way suggest that specialist knowledge and practices are not needed from a productivist perspective – of course they are. But so also, and increasingly, a broader, more general knowledge is required that is able to analytically engage design philosophically, politically, socially and environmentally. To make a better world, design needs to be better understood, directed and made demands of.

The objectives that framed the call for papers for this issue recognised the context outlined in relation to how design, ethics, technology and philosophy can be thought together. The editors of the issue, myself and William McNeill, wanted to encourage philosophers to engage design and ethics to up the stakes on how these issues are addressed. In so doing, we wanted to demonstrate the worth to both design and philosophy, of abandoning the philosopher's comfort zone while weakening the perception of a divide between 'real' philosophy and 'instrumental/applied' philosophy. More prosaically, we wanted try to draw more philosophers into writing for DPP so they discovered how important it is to think design philosophically.

These remarks clearly lead to making a distinction between, on the one hand, design philosophy or a philosophy of design (as a nascent area of inquiry alongside philosophy of science and the newer philosophy of technology) and, on the other, the appropriation of philosophy by design and the often even worse ramblings of some designers that they call their philosophy.

Finally, there was the intent to try to show the design community why it needs to confront critical and rigorous thought. Obviously, we recognise that philosophy, and theory in general, meets resistance when placed before both intuitive and scientistic designers. This resistance both layers onto, and is reinforced by, the anti-intellectual culture of instrumentalism that has been fostered by economic rationalism. In this respect, the diminishment of critical thought is elemental to unsustainability. There is little choice but to confront this resistance head on.

Bearing this comment in mind, something now needs to be said on the question of Heidegger and design.

Martin Heidegger is the most significant philosopher of the 20th century not simply because of the influence of his own writing, or

even because of the other thinkers who were influenced by him (many of whom remained silent about his influence, until late in their careers, as with Michel Foucault, or never acknowledged him at all) but because his thinking is an unavoidable object of encounter in its pure and derivative forms. It is thus not a question of liking or disliking Heidegger, or agreeing or disagreeing with him, but rather if you attempt to question how things are in the world, and your own being in relation to them, and turn to thinkers on such concerns, he will arrive in his own voice or in the voice of another.

More specifically, as DPP aims to show, and as this issue in particular indicates, the reason why Heidegger's philosophy is taken seriously is that it has a great deal to say to design, especially in terms of its world-transformative agency.

Anne-Marie Willis demonstrates this by over-reading and translating ideas whereas **William McNeill** shows what a close reading of a Heidegger text with design very much in mind can deliver. Many readers will find the demands of following McNeill's argument challenging on the first reading, but there are rewards for those who make the effort.

Contrary to the philosophical journey taking the reader away from the materiality of designing or the designed, it actually does the reverse. It provides a means to illuminate what is enfolded but unexamined within a practice and the consequences of the encounter between designing, non-designed environments and the designed world. Technology arrives here in this setting not as artefactual equipmentality but as an environment – the euphemism that we live 'in a technological world' is literally true.

Ethics of the Inside and Outside

Purely by chance our four papers fall into a particularly interesting pattern: two look at design from the perspective of the designed, two from the position of the designer. Within these pairings, and in both cases, one finds that at certain points that the papers are in dialogue with each other. The sum of the material leaves the reader productively having to reflect on where the emphasis of an ethics principally rests: on the one hand, with the directing of, or within, the design process, and on the other, with the designed object; or with both?

What Anne-Marie Willis' exposition of ontological design does is to displace the dominant focus on the designer as the causal agency of the designed. The paper recognises, and explicates, the process by which the designed goes on designing. In so doing, the designer is shown to be prefigured by this process as well as being a contributor/producer to its circularity. Quite clearly, the status of the designer as a relatively free agent, and as an ethical actor, is seriously brought into question by the underlying presuppositions of ontological design.

From a close reading of Heidegger's notion of world, and specifically the world as enigma, William McNeill illuminates where

following the thread of a thinking of world as 'simply there' takes us. We find ourselves confronting the enigma of the world that simply is, together with that condition of possibility that is the world from which all that we know and name arises. At its most basic then, the enigma of the world is exposed as simultaneous presence and absence. In this setting, design is seen at its most fundamental level as it is situated in relation to the becoming of worlds and humans. In this respect, design, as work, as art, is both the production of disclosure of the enigma and its concealment

What happens when one reads Willis and McNeill is that the ideas they are working with dialogically meet and the enigma of the world that design can expose transmogrifies into the enigma of design itself. The ontological nature of design is not merely that the designed always itself designs but equally whatever design brings into Being arrives as what the act and object of design both reveals and conceals. In this respect design masks, covers over and hides as it constitutes worlds. The nakedness, functional elements, method of making, the materiality of materials, and so on, are all wrapped in design as style, fashion, packaging – effectively the ethical gaze is deflected.

One of the deflections is toward the designer him or her self. It is this self, as an ethical/unethical agent, to which **Wolfgang Jonas** and **Carlton Christensen** turn their attention. Again the two pieces speak to each other

Jonas argues for a specific mode of bringing ethics and the ethical to design. In so doing, he asserts that existing ethics are sufficient, although he does say that they require a new context and attitudinal change. He holds that it is possible for ethics as they are, to be applied to direct a regime of values – this he indicates as it takes the form of planning – which then guides designing to its ethical end result. Effectively this ethically informed 'planning' over-determines, prefigures, the act of designing. The designer is *de facto* designed to ethically design. Here, readers may like to consider how this argument differs from the intent of existing standards, building regulations, design codes and the like.

In reviewing John Thackara's 2005 publication *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*, Christensen lays out Thackara's argument and then subjects it to a rigorous critique. In taking issue with Thackara, Christensen exposes serious flaws in his position and in so doing repositions two crucial questions: what is it in the power of designers to ethically do – where do the limits reside? And, where is it appropriate to demand ethical responsibility in design to be situated?

As said, the discussion is to continue. There is still a lot to say, not least how can designing be slowed or halted as an instrument in the production of defuturing excess (this is equally a question of the locus of the unethical). Another key question is how do we ethically eliminate so much that is already designed?