Design History Futures?

Anne-Marie Willis

EDITORIAL

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Here is the long promised issue on this theme, in fact, the first of two issues on 'design history futures'. Much thanks must go to the contributors and to co-editors Karin Jaschke, Tara Andrews and Paul Denison.

The history of design is an idea that is daunting, impossible, preposterous – something you could drown in, a place where you could get lost forever. From the furniture, appliances, packaged food, clothing, toys, paraphernalia and knick-knacks that clutter homes to the complex networks and infrastructure of communications, transport, power, water and other services upon which modern life has come to depend, what today is not designed? Not much at all, as many writers have pointed out. Faced with this vastness and complexity, what should historians of design do? Is design history a discipline destined to collapse under the sheer weight of its empirical raw material? How could a history of design not end up being a history of the modern world *per se*, perhaps even, the history of everything?

Just take a look around you right now. Are you sitting at a desk? In a cafe? On a train? Everything you see and touch has a history, a design history: it's been formed by,

and has been formative of, historical processes, in ways large and small. This applies to the obvious, like the chair you are sitting in, which can be located in a history of type-forms, styles, functions and fabrication methods that have developed into, and intersected with, manufacturing systems, products, habits of body and mind, social and aesthetic meanings. Then there's what you can't see, like the tantalum capacitors, used since 2000, in mobile phones, laptop computers and other electronic devices. Tantalum is derived from coltan, the illegal mining of which, has fuelled civil wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

To what extent can design history illuminate the social, economic and cultural relations of the activity of designing and in which designed things are located? How can design history account for the mundane and the significant, the tasteful and the tasteless, the functional, dysfunctional and post-functional? Chairs, certainly, have had plenty of attention from design historians! But does design fade out where engineering and science kick in? Those tantalum components in mobile phones, for example (favoured because of the material's exceptional heat resistance) – aren't they specified by engineers, and therefore beyond the concern of designers and therefore irrelevant to design historians? This would only be the case for a design history that was limited to studying the activities of professional designers, narrowly defined. The use of, and demand for, raw materials cannot be neatly ascribed to a single profession or one group of decision-makers. The work of designers – on product styling, in developing variations and upgrades, in creating promotional materials and so on – make electronic products desirable and thus drive the demand for components and the materials out of which they are made, including rare and valuable materials in politically unstable parts of the world.

To confront the ubiquity of designed materiality and wonder where to draw lines so as to contain it as an object of enquiry – such a panoramic image does not capture the way that design history has actually been constituted. It does not reflect the history of design history. It would be more accurate to reverse it and evoke an eye focused closely on a detail. While today, design history is practiced and taught in many parts of the world, it first developed as an area of academic study in the UK in the 1970s, prompted by demands within Art and Design colleges for art history teaching to be supplemented by courses relevant to design students. Early courses were often based on existing histories of furniture, jewellery, fashion, graphic design and so on. But just as design is more than the sum of its professional practices, design history, it was thought, should also be more than an amalgam of histories of craft and applied arts.[1]

The profile of design history was raised considerably when, in 1972, the Open University, introduced a course on the history and modern architecture and design, accompanied by a large number

of course books as well as radio and TV programs. By the late 1980s, the Design History Society had been formed and its *Journal of Design History* was being published.

Design history, like all fledgling disciplines, was concerned with defining its object of study and methods – in other words its distinction from other disciplines. The kind of questions asked since the 1970s have included:

– Is design history really just a subset of art history? Or is it part of architectural history, (especially as many of its founding texts were written by architectural historians: Siegfried Giedion *Mechanisation Takes Command,* first published 1948; Nikolaus Pevsner *Pioneers of Modern Design,* first published 1949; Reyner Banham *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, first published 1960 and Adrian Forty *Objects of Desire*, 1986).
– Should design history aspire to be a discipline in its own right with a distinct field of enquiry, its own methods and approaches?
– What is more important to understand – anonymous, everyday, commonplace design or the work of exceptional, leading edge designers ?
– Should design history primarily serve the design profession, focusing upon the history of the professionalisation of design and its relationship with industry? Or should design history be conceptualised as the study of material culture, undertaken as a means of understanding culture and society?

These questions were not posed in a vacuum. Design history was trying to turn itself into a discipline at the very moment that the traditional disciplines were being dismantled. Design history's founding moment co-incided with the arrival in the academy of new bodies of thought, such as semiotics, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism and cultural-political Marxism – that challenged the assumptions underlying the production of knowledge across the humanities and social sciences. Challenges to authority extended to disciplines like sociology and anthropology, whose methods were being taken up by design historians. At the same time, and related to these shifts, new forms of enquiry were arriving, especially cultural studies, which was concerned with inequalities and struggles played out through race, class and gender, the interest being in how marginalised groups negotiated powerlessness, seeking forms of resistance and self-expression through cultural forms. Though not always addressed as design, cultural studies practitioners began observing and writing about phenomena like fashion, music, hairstyles and other forms of sub-cultural expression. This rubbed off on design history, with some productive dissolving of boundaries, overlapping of concerns and modes of enquiry, especially around the journal *Block*.

In 1981, Tony Fry debated with Fran Hannah and Tim Putnam in the pages of *Block*, arguing that their concern about whether design history would end up as an academic backwater because of its failure to transcend art history, was irrelevant, because " ... design has to be understood not just as an object of historical study and contemporary cultural and economic practice, but also as an object of current cultural politics inside and outside education."[2]

One of the most searching attempts to theorise the nature of design history and its possible futures was a two part essay by Clive Dilnot in *Design Issues* in 1984.[3] He was highly critical what he referred to as "the first generation of design historians", who were mostly trained as art historians, and their "reluctance to specify objects and subjects of study or to consider what the role of (design) history might be." The result of this "almost accidental emergence of a history of design is that design history, in the sense of a single, organised discipline with defined aims and objects, *does not exist*."[4]

In 1989, John A. Walker remarked upon the narrow range of safe topics design historians were addressing – consumer goods, advertising, the home, public transport, and asked "why are design historians so unimaginative?" He went on to claim there was "a deeply-entrenched conservatism among design historians and an unwillingness to confront the relationship between design and politics, design and social injustice" ignoring the large amount of twentieth century design "directed towards anti-social ends" such as the design of concentration camps, instruments of surveillance and torture.[5]

Walker suggested that even within the predictable range of topics, critical questions needed to be asked:

> … are there not disadvantages to the ever-expanding production of goods? Is the continual redesign of 'old' products essential in all cases? ......is the design historian's function merely to celebrate and reinforce a particular kind of commercial culture?[6]

Certainly since Walker wrote this, there has been critical activity within design history. Various approaches and directions have come under question: monographic and biographic studies that centre the designer as the source of creativity and meaning; style-based histories; privileging of iconic objects and modernism; and eurocentrism. Design historians have extended their engagement to topics and themes such as anonymous design, design and everyday life, the overlooked work of women designers, non-European design, resistance to globalising modernisation. Issues of race, class, gender and identity formation from cultural studies have continued as a definite strand.[7] Yet this has been an activity of diversification, pluralisation and dilution rather than

displacement. In the academic journals and at conferences, the more 'critical' topics and methods sit alongside papers on style, taste, artistic movements and canonised designers. Though it's not even that clear cut – 'theory' is often taken up to renovate conventional topics and well-known figures, in endless cycles of re-interpretation. Or, at worst, historical accounts of, for example, bourgeois domestic life, interior decoration, fashion and collecting are re-badged as 'gender studies' or 'consumption studies'. These observations equally apply to what has happened within art history over the same period – a veneer of progressiveness overlaying particularist, and often reactionary scholarship. Meanwhile, life-and-work monographs on a narrow range of 'heroes' and glossy picture books still dominate design and architectural publishing.[8]

Design history today embraces a multiplicity of subject matter, themes, historical periods and methods. As Dilnot pointed out, this lack of clarity is partly built upon competing definitions of design itself (is it an industrial /post-industrial profession or a fundamental human capacity? Is design a word that refers to process or to end product?) Design history is characterised by a pluralism that equally embraces discourse analysis and connoisseurship of the obscure and arcane. The *Journal of Design History* still publishes papers that are studies of style and taste (Shaker, Biedermeier, Renaissance palaces, Sevres porcelain, Georgian domestic interiors) and reappraisals of established figures and movements (Neurath, Robert Moses, Jugendtil, Arts and Craft). This year's Design History Society's conference under the theme of 'Writing Design – object: process: discourse: translation' assembled dozens of papers on disparate topics ranging across: nineteenth century census forms; hip-hop typographic ornament; northern European medieval jewellery; and 'home cultures' of Belgium and Flanders in the 1970s. How many of the highly particularist studies in such conferences and journals have a life beyond the institutional space of design history? What agency do they have?

Rather than a strength, this pluralism indicates that design history has no project. This, I suggest, is a more serious problem than its uncertain status of a discipline (though the two are linked). As indicated above, because of its emergence in an historical context of cross and post-disciplinarity, the odds were stacked against it ever becoming a discipline in its own right – a quarter of a century on, I would argue that Dilnot's assessment still holds (this, despite Denise Whitehouse's recent survey 'The State of Design History as a Discipline' which provides plenty of evidence of legitimating institutional activity[9]). In this regard, design history can be contrasted with other fields of study that have emerged over the last fifty years that did have a project emanating from a strong cultural politics – such as cultural studies, film studies or feminism as it spanned and re-shaped many disciplines (philosophy, history, literature, etc). Though their achievements have been variable (for

example, cultural studies today has all but lost its contestational edge), each of these were *projects* rather than loose assemblages of enquiry.

It was this sense of the inadequacy of design history that prompted our call for papers.

Our theme title, 'design history futures' points both to the future of the practice of design history as well as to the fact that history (of all kinds) is always written with an eye on the future, explicitly or implicitly. Histories are readings of the past from agendas of the present, and they point, in one way or another, to the kind of future the historian deems desirable, whether this be a continuation of present trends or a radical break with them – and every other permutation in between. Yet design history, so accommodating in its pluralism, so eclectic in its methods, so expansive in its objects of enquiry and so closely focused on the minutiae of research, has forgotten that history is about futures.

Design history has no future unless it engages the future.

This is some of what we said in our call-for-papers:

… modern lifestyles and material cultures made possible by design are now being seen as so deeply implicated in unsustainability ….

… Design histories have used and perpetuated ways of thinking that have fed directly into current, unsustainable design practice, including notions of progress, newness, and obsolescence, 'iconic design'….

Climate change, resource depletion, and pollution will lead to major changes in modern lifestyles in the near future. Design has a major ethical and professional stake in this transition and the direction it will take.

The kind of questions we asked people to consider included:

– How does awareness of sustainability and unsustainability affect design history?
– What insights could be gained by re-reading design's past through perspectives of sustainability and unsustainability?
– Could design history contribute to a more developed understanding of sustainability and unsustainability?
– What part has design history itself played in the development of unsustainability?

While the discussion above may indicate pessimism about the future for design history, the response to our CFP indicates very strong interest in "re-reading design's past through perspectives of sustainability and unsustainability". Because of the large number of papers accepted, we're splitting them over two issues.

We've been encouraged by this response. Thinking about, and researching, the nature of unsustainability and its other, sustainment, is precisely the kind of project that design history needs. It is diverse enough to be able to embrace all areas of design objects and practice, and furthermore, it presents an exciting intellectual challenge – because the theory of what constitutes unsustainability and sustainment is still massively under-developed.

Peter A. Hall, in 'The True Cost of Button-Pushing: Rewriting Industrial Design in America' disputes histories that characterise American design as simply a means of increasing consumption versus European design as social reformist in ambition. He considers the problematic implications of Henry Dreyfuss's self-declared design mission of "removing friction" at the points of contact between products and people.

Hall responds to the challenge of Bruno Latour's keynote address to the 2008 Design History Society's conference (the pluralism of design history sometimes pays off!) for designers to "draw things together", things, here understood in their complexity as 'gatherings' and 'matters of concern'. The examples Hall discusses – such as Dreyfuss's Honeywell thermostat control and the iPod – tellingly demonstrate the opposite – separation and de-relationality (designed-in) in the name of convenience or user-friendliness. He argues that the aesthetic narratives that transform such products into design icons or economic narratives of design as a quest for functional perfection, add further layers of distancing, making it more difficult to "examine the full extent of design's power."

The paper by **Tara Andrews,** 'Design and Consume to Utopia: Where Industrial Design Went Wrong' demonstrates why the historical analysis of unsustainable design is vital for sustainable design practice now. Like Hall, Andrews shows that more was going on with the streamline designers and that there were intimate historical links between the pata-science of 'consumer engineering' and the emergence of industrial design.

Andrews' searching discussion shows that the so-called "rational design methods" of industrial designers cannot be separated from how they promoted their services to potential clients. More significantly though, her paper casts serious doubts on the efficacy of these design methods, which have flowed on into contemporary design practice, as means towards sustainability. She asks, "how can design methods that were developed directly to counter *under*-consumption be redeployed to counter the contemporary crisis of *over*-consumption?" Furthermore, the consumerist rhetoric of Walter Dorwin Teague, Norman Bel Geddes et al was linked with a strong utopian impulse of a very problematic kind. What Andrews demonstrates is utopianism taken to a new level. In the projects, self-promotion and career trajectories of these influential designers, a highly developed ability to visualise was mixed with scientism, idealism and "their belief that the future could in fact be designed

and that it was close at hand ..." It turned out, unfortunately, that they were right.

Continuing the reassessment of the work and agency of canonised designers through the lens of sustainability, is the paper by **Carolyn Barnes** and **Simon Jackson**, 'Robin Boyd, Expo '70, Australian Design History and Defuturing: No Accounting for the Environment'. They demonstrate how the exhibition scheme for the Australian Pavilion at Osaka's Expo '70, conceptualised and executed by prominent architect and design critic, Robyn Boyd, contributed to creating the condition of unsustainability, both in specific and general ways. In a context of international competition for trade and cultural prestige (which animates all Expos) Boyd gave material and visual form to modernist utopian rhetoric: faith in science, technology, rationalism and functionalism linked to the promotion of a modern, urban culture of consumption. Barnes and Jackson argue that the promotion of Australian designers and the writing of design history in Australia has frequently ignored this, preferring instead "proselytizing for the values and benefits of the modern and eulogising designers' efforts to force change in the face of conservative cultural establishments and indifferent publics."

They further argue, in a discussion of *Modern Times,* a recent publication emanating from Sydney's Powerhouse museum, that attempts towards a more inclusive account of modernity in Australia, while giving serious attention to popular culture and mass produced artefacts, are not better equipped to address questions of sustainability because of their exclusive focus on "the rhetorical aspects of cultural artefacts". They find that these "alternative culturalist approaches" ignore the connections between designed things and "the environment, ecology, biology and nature". Nor do such accounts (inflected by the diluted cultural studies agendas and methods as discussed above) address ecologies of use, habit or "the agency and consequences of the 'already designed' for the future."

The paper by **Beverly Grindstaff**, 'The Origins of Unsustainable Luxury: Becoming Slaves to Objects' 'presents an archaeology of the idea of luxury, seeking the roots of cultures of consumption in the eighteenth century. Grindstaff examines how the idea of luxury was valorised during the Enlightenment, with the pursuit of luxury coming to be seen as a positive, civilising impulse rather than something sinful. Examining key texts such as Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and associated writings of Hume, Voltaire and Mandeville, the paper traces how luxury was linked with economic growth and national progress, as well as to new, expanded roles for artists/artisans (who, of course, were proto-designers). Grindstaff then discusses one of the forerunners of mass-produced luxury, Thomas Chippendale, who, like his twentieth century counterparts, Bel Geddes et al, was a very effective self-promoter. Chippendale's widely distributed pattern books, most particularly, *The Gentleman*

and Cabinet-Maker's Director, were virtually instruction manuals for taste and accessible luxury. Additionally, this text extols the skills and mastery of the designer, and Grindstaff argues, can be linked to design histories that cast designers as taste-makers and geniuses.

The paper then switches to discuss the radically different model of design history presented by Siegfried Giedion's "magisterial study" *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948). Grindstaff takes just one of Giedion's countless case studies of anonymous design – not, as might be expected his account of mass-produced ornament or the rise of the upholsterer, but one about as far away from luxury that could be imagined – the mechanisation of slaughterhouses and meat processing (famously, the fore-runner of Ford's assembly line). Grindstaff observes: "It is in his description of live animals converted into meat that Giedion most intimately engages design as it transforms natural resources into consumer goods."

Anne Massey and **Paul Micklethwaite**, in 'Unsustainability: Towards a New Design History, with Reference to British Utility' consider the extent to which sustainability has been addressed by design historians. This is a jointly authored paper – nothing unusual here – except that instead of submerging their identities via the neutral tone that makes so many academic papers dull, these two authors retain their voices and differences. Micklethwaite considers the claim that design history has ignored sustainability, at first disagreeing with it, noting the centrality of figures like William Morris and Buckminster Fuller who have provided inspiration to today's 'design for sustainability' movement. Then he then acknowledges that whether the claim is valid depends upon how one defines sustainability, citing Tony Fry's concept of 'defuturing' (also addressed by Tara Andrews). Anne Massey then considers the question via an autobiographically inflected narrative of the development of art history in Britain over the last few decades (which, usefully, adds to the account above). While acknowledging the inadequacy of 'hero designer' histories, Massey asserts that ways still need to be found to address individual designers (here, she might find interesting Peter A. Hall's endorsement of Latourian actor-network theory and his hints about Henry Dreyfuss as a 'conflicted figure').

The authors then jointly consider the British Utility scheme as a case study with possible lessons for today's efforts to design towards sustainability. 'Utility' was a program for the design, manufacture and marketing of furniture and clothing, responding to the conditions of scarcity of World War II and based on localised production and consumption. The historical conditions are different, but the imperatives are the same; so too is the resistance to imposed simplicity and frugality. This remains a major challenge to overcome – a challenge of design, rhetoric, policy and so much more. We hope that Massey and Micklethwaite's paper, and all

the papers in this issue, can be taken up and built on by others working on this imperative.

The next issue will continue 'design history futures', with a focus on the built environment and on design education. Papers by Jill Sinclair, Daniel Barber, Dena Fam et al, Mark Jackson, John Calvelli, Tracey Fahey and Adam de Eyto will range across: landscape design history; environmentalisation of modern architecture; infrastructure and possibilities for system change; power, space and governmentality; unsustainability, sustainable design education and history.

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Notes

1. This approach is seen in Hazel Conway (ed.) *Design History: A Student's Handbook*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1987.
2. Tony Fry, 'Design History: A Debate?' *Block* (5) 1981, p. 18.
3. Clive Dilnot, 'The State of Design History Part I: Mapping the Field' and 'The State of Design History Part II: Problems and Possibilities' in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. V. Margolin, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. (Part I was originally published in *Design Issues* Vol 1, no 1, Spring 1984 and Part II: in Vol 1, no 2, Fall 1984).
4. Clive Dilnot, 'The State of Design History, Part 1', *Design Discourse*, p. 220.
5. John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, London: Pluto Press, 1989, pp. 32–3.
6. Walker, p. 33.
7. For a somewhat promotional overview of these directions see Denise Whitehouse, 'The State of Design History as a Discipline' in *Design Studies: A Reader,* ed. Hazel Clark and David Brody, Oxford: Berg, 2009.
8. One amazing example of the fixity of the gaze on canonised figures: to date, 871 books have been published on Frank Lloyd Wright, which is double the number of buildings he designed (Martin Filler, 'Wright in Love' *New York Review of Books* Vol. 55, No. 18, Nov 20, 2008).
9. Whitehouse, op. cit.