The Scenario of Design

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How are critical thinkers to deal with the pressing questions that challenge design? Questions like:

- What future scenarios of design can be imagined?
- How do existing or emergent imperatives of 'contemporary existence' influence the form and content of such design scenarios?
- Who speaks for design and who is spoken to?

And even more contentiously:

- Why does the existing design community have such a restricted view of design as a domain and agency?

The case made for 'design intelligence' in the previous issue of *DPP* was one trajectory that passed through the conceptual space created by these questions, what follows below will be another. Our starting point is to consider the multiplicities of design's voices.

Who Speaks for Design and its Futures?

Quite clearly, **designers**, individually and collectively, via professional bodies, are one constituency that speaks

for design. In both cases, with few exceptions, what is said is uncritical, often inflated, and very much within the framing of design as a service industry. The language of 'design communication', in this context, is dominantly visual and complicit with the media's reduction of design to aesthetics. It also reinforces design having a celebratory relation to technology. Such design communication manifests itself in magazines, awards and professional conferences. Dominantly, it is an internal dialogue.

The popular media's characterisation of design as style and as an embellisher of hyped technology is even more crass. Notwithstanding the rise of 'designer products', the media reinforces perceptions of a designer as a compliant service provider obsessed with the delivery of 'sexy things' to the market place. The promotion of this kind of 'design consciousness' among consumers has exactly the reverse effect. It also obscures the fact that often the most important design decisions have been made even before the designer comes on the scene.

While this may be somewhat of a caricature of how the 'designer community' is represented, and certainly overlooks how a small minority of 'aware' designers recognise social and environmental responsibilities, it does shed some light on the dominant modes of design's appearance. Alongside this, is the underdeveloped ability of designers to be able to articulate what they do, why they do it and above all with what consequences.

Non-designer **promoters of design**, especially marketers of product, interior and fashion (who are often miscast in the media as 'design critics') can be accused not only of trivialisation, but also of contributing to the general arrested development of how design is understood by the public at large. This also applies to the vast proportion of design journalism.

Likewise, the design industry's professional bodies are also profoundly conservative and without any culture of critical inquiry, or a transformative political agenda. Notwithstanding this situation, there are, and have been from time-to-time, a few organisations that have sought ways to expand the vision of design(ers) and promote a progressive agenda. For example: the Intermediate Technology Development Group in the UK; Archeworks in the USA; O2 in Northern Europe; Eternally Yours and Doors of Perception in Holland; the EcoDesign Foundation and Society for Socially Responsible Design in Australia. Yet these organisations ever struggle for economic and political recognition. Those that still exist largely remain on the margins.

Design educators, who may equally be designers, design theorists and design promoters, also obviously speak for design, most notably to prospective designers. There are undoubtedly a lot of committed and good educators, be it mostly in the area of the 'technical transfer' of 'design practice'. Unfortunately, there are even more bad or mediocre teachers of design.

In general terms, what defines a good design educator can be argued to be grouped around three levels of overlapping knowledge and expertise:

(i) the ability to induct student designers into the competencies, habits and skills that enable them to functionally realise and mobilise their inherent/tutored designing capabilities applied to defining and resolving design problems;

(ii) the ability to bring student designers to a comprehension of design as a historically and theoretically constituted discourse that has been overdetermined by specific economic, political and cultural forces (this so that all conceptual and practical knowledge gained is able to be critically and contextually situated in 'current conjunctures'); and,

(iii) the ability to install a sense of responsibility in student designers toward the world that they will, as practitioners, contribute to extending. This final area of education is essentially an amplified notion of 'design ethics'.

Researchers and authors of design history, design studies, theory, management and philosophy may also occupy positions in institutions of design education; they may equally well be practitioners. While such work can be directed toward design education, it can also be deployed to engage other disciplines and audiences beyond the academy.

Dominantly, **design history** has either stayed attached to its particularist, historicist and aesthetically grounded connoisseurship predilections, or it has embraced a popular cultural celebration of kitsch, style, the trivial, and the fetishisation of objects. This is to say that design history has failed to socio-politically situate design contextually (a very different activity from supplementing design with socio-political contextual information). The bulk of design history just does not recognise how design has been a significant agent of historical change beyond micro-impacts. It certainly also lacks a sense of how design inflects futures.

While **design studies** overlaps with design history, it operates with a broader, pluralist agenda. While it eclectically throws up interesting material, that examines design in a broader frame of reference, structurally its multi-directional and pluralist character means it is unable to provide any clear sense of direction or purpose.

Design theory (including **design research**) is predominantly an instrumental discourse, uncritically embracing science; it is totally preoccupied with design process, design methods and empirical studies of design in use. As such, it embraces the likes of systems theory, cybernetics, psychology and the most reductive modes of cultural theories and semiotics. It also sets out (in formalised and instrumentalist fashion) to exposit models of, for instance, design knowledge, creativity, talent, meaning, quality, intention. *De facto*,

design theory and design research function with restricted horizons of what design is and can do.

Design management speaks from and to managerialism. It provides a conduit between design expertise and corporate commercial objectives. In so doing, it has supported corporate avant-gardism pioneered by corporate design strategies, and extended design's ability to be a 'value adding' agency. It has equally promoted the strategic application of design to, for example, user centred design studies, the creation of 'customer centred organisations', the 'loading of design with emotional value' and 'design as a feature of core corporate philosophy'. All these are indicators of design's progressive induction into 'corporate capital logic'. While having currency in mainstream design circles and in business culture, design management assists in creating a new order of design's subordination to service provision. What design management actually speaks to is a future with a continually growing gap between 'use and sign value'. Implicit in this tendency is design increasingly becoming a means of concealment.

Design philosophy is the least established, and is thus a still inchoate, area of design scholarship. However, it has the ability to ask the most critical questions of the nature of the design object, its practices and above all its past and present futuring agency in the world. Likewise, it also has the potential to considerably increase the dialogue with other disciplines, not least on the issues of ethics. More than any other area of the study of the field, design philosophy can ask question of other ways of understanding, thinking and deploying design, and without being subordinate to design's institutionalised cultural and economic structures of support. It can thus not only open up discussions of design futures or design's future, but interrogate the very notions of both the future and design.

Summing up: what currently speaks for design does so in ways circumscribed by design as a service industry, or the design object as aesthetically framed and projected into the sign economy of the market place. The internal discourse of design profession(s) and design education is preoccupied with the problem of designing. Notwithstanding a small critical community within design, the overall voice is uncritical and deeply implicated in extending the unsustainable. There can be no directional change in this situation without design, but of course, for this change to occur design itself has to be transformed.

Who is Listening?

Obviously, the answer to this question differs geo-culturally – the level of interest in design in Italy is, for instance, different from that in Korea, Australia or Mexico. At the same time 'globalisation', the 'world' product and the universal brand aim to flatten and conceal this difference. Having acknowledged this situation, one can

generally observe that when those who speak for global design do so, it is with an illusory sense of unified perception. Few hear what is said, even within the design community itself.

Some industries have a longstanding relation to design, most notably the car industry. Others, like the producers of electronic goods, have acquired this relation more recently. Clearly, there are significant implications in the move from objects lodged within a history of forms to 'black box' objects that rely on supplementary signs for their valorisation and how they are perceived. While industry in general has become: more receptive to design innovation; aware of the market advantages of product and promotional design; aware of the need (be it very unevenly) to recognise bio-physical environmental problems and an emergent 'green' market , *it still fundamentally fails to embrace the critical function of design in creating or negating futures*.

Sustainment not only demands major efforts in resource conservation and impacts reduction of an order of magnitude that makes current measures associated with 'sustainable development' pale into insignificance, but equally it requires as much effort expended on a cultural and psychological program of transformative action.

Currently industry it is still overwhelmingly deaf to those voices that speak of the complexity of unsustainability, the poverty of current responses to it, the misplaced faith in technological solutions, the myopia of present political and corporate leadership and the extent of changes that are required if a psychology, culture and economy of sustainment are to ever arrive.

This deafness also extends to the mass of the design community. In this situation, there are no passive or neutral positions. Service providers who timidly subordinate themselves to the will of clients who trade in the unsustainable are enemies of viable futures. This is not to say that designers should commit economic suicide, it is to say that they need to learn

(a) how to design in a far more complex and critical frame, while developing a language of engagement with the ability to constitute dialogues of transformation with 'clients' or communities and

(b) how to develop new and economically workable path finding and service practices.

The current service sensibility, especially when combined with the design community's uncritical mindset, establishes a condition of limitation, viewing design from 'the wrong end of the telescope'. Rather than the knowledge that designers mobilise bringing design's world-formative nature closer to view it sends it further away. As a result of this limit of vision, designers, design educators and design theorists fail to see what they bring into being or the necessity of developing a political literacy of design able to make sense of what

is observed. Without this structuring of understanding 'design intelligence' will always be restricted.[1]

We exist in cultures in which design is implicated in extending unsustainable lifeworlds that turn as much of the content of everyday life into entertainment as possible – education, making a phone call, using the washing machine, driving, the workday, watching TV, keyboarding a letter, mowing the lawn, shopping, taking an aeroplane flight – increasingly, everything has to be a 'fun, pleasurable or meaningful experience'. Now, for almost a century, capital, via the commodification of culture, has conspired to negate 'the serious'.[2]

What of the Questions of Design and Futures?

As I have argued many times, in many ways and in many publications, including the pages of *DPP*, 'design is on the line'. It can either continue to be deeply and directly implicated in, mostly unwittingly, 'sustaining the unsustainable', or it can confront the challenge of bringing sustainment into being.[3]

There are clearly many 'environmentally aware' designers, architects and engineers who no doubt believe they are making positive change. They are, unfortunately just as much victims of deception as consumers. This not because of blatant, evil intent but because of the nature of market determinism (the response to manufactured market demand) – which ambiguously is never purely reactive, given that the sign economy of the marketing machine exists to construct desires.

For design(ers) to really become a force for change toward sustainment, the stakes have to be dramatically upped. The development of 'design intelligence' has to be turned into a major, multi-disciplinary intellectual project; thinking the problem of what design designs has to be grasped and rigorously interrogated; design education and practice has to put a process in place which enables the displacement of 'sustainable design' as one genre of designing and the designed, and then, its comprehensive remaking as 'sustainment design' – so it may then be reintroduced as design's foundation and overarching objective.

Obviously this implies a radical transformation of how design is thought, conducted and perceived, as well as the very nature of the design object itself. For instance:

– questions of users' relations to the designed have to be liberated from functionalism and redirected towards the formation of 'a materialism of care' and 'a culture of responsibility';
– design leadership has to arrive to dramatically change the designer/client relation and dialogue;
– a major new domain of 'independent design practice' has to be opened up to develop and mobilise new uses of design

skills that are not product-orientated, or based on existing models of service.[4]

Design Scenarios vs Scenarios of Design

The kinds of changes indicated are not going to occur spontaneously; most of the design community is not going to strive to transform its commercially grounded practice. The hype of 'managerialism', 'new creativity', 'globalisation' and the 'romance with technology', the vacuousness of the world of fashion – none of these features of the current 'world of design' are going to evaporate.

No powerful organisation is going to 'come over the hill' to drive radical change to the nature of design. Nevertheless, if the rate of expansion of the unsustainable is to be curbed; if the injustice and material and social damage of our inequitable 'being-in-the-world' is to be addressed; and, if the imperative of sustainment is to be taken seriously, then the transformation of design has to be among the massive changes that has to occur.

Fundamentally, design has to become a form of decisionism toward futures able to demarcate between acts and objects of creation and destruction. Such action cannot be predicated on moral judgement (idealism), rather it has to be the consequence of a neo-materialist hermeneutics underpinned by ontological inquiry (radical empiricism).

Against this propositional backdrop is obviously the pressing question of 'where is the agent of change going to come from'? It will not come from one source, but it is suggested, from 'an uncoordinated convergence of the fragments'. Undoubtedly many of the readers of *DPP* are nodal links to projects striving to think and mobilise design differently in various countries around the world. Many of these projects will have overlapping agendas of change. Few, if any would claim substantial efficacy in the face of the scale of the problems against which they pose themselves. Yet a vital culture of learning is emerging, that can grow and strategically connect.

While there is no assured, pre-determined arrival of sustainment (which, as indicated, is a project that cannot be instrumentally delivered), or, for that matter, any sure-footed evolutionary track carrying humanity to its future being, one can confidently say that unless the 'challenge' of sustainment is met, we will not survive in ways that we currently recognise *as* humanity.

Certainly, the establishment of sustainment is beyond the reach of technology, even as it is inscribed within us. The socio-ethically ungrounded 'nature of technology', as it ever reveals itself to be metaphysical, transports the very foundations of unsustainment. If the move to the 'age of sustainment' is to happen there has to be an ability within the cultures of fragments to recognise and respond to opportunities evident in a deepening crisis (itself a situation that demands considerable hermeneutic facility combined with the

courage to act prior to the fate carried by crisis being sealed). Bringing this kind of thinking into visibility and engagement is no easy matter – not least in the dominant cultures where naming and confrontating the problem of the unsustainable is denounced as 'being negative' (rather than what it actually is – being willing to accept responsibility).

One specific answer to the question of visibility, and the exploration of sources of change, is provided by scenarios – their potential is still just starting to be acknowledged. However, this needs to traverse a movement between scenarios of design (an exploration of how design could be other than it is) and design scenarios (projections of possibilities by design). Scenarios, so approached are neither about trying to characterise possible futures from existing forces or trends, nor about projecting possible solutions to the unsustainable by design. Rather what they afford are confrontations with the possibility of objects of common focus, collectivity and critical encounter.

As an object of common focus and collectivity, a scenario can initially facilitate the gathering of conjunctural forces (crisis, critical actors, knowledge and potentialities). This to form a nascent, and even transitory, de-institutionalised community of communication and change. In circumstances of institutional stasis and pacified socio-cultural resistance (the educational and political status quo in so many parts of the world), scenarios can provide a mechanism for politico-practice assemblage in which dialogues and narratives of change can be rehearsed in ways that enable participants to re-educate themselves via critical confrontations with how thing are or could be. For this to happen, scenario creation needs to be prefigured by a coherent change agenda, a structuring of modes of cooperation, a deconstructive methodology that undercuts working from existing unexamined foundations of thought, a rigorous understanding of the problem(s) to be engaged – negotiating this activity itself being socially and conceptually constructive.

It is from this perspective that scenarios of design can examine what design could be as a 'remade and remaking' applied intellectual practice created out of appropriation and transformation. Such scenarios could be considered as a profoundly anti-utopian means to extend and develop the critical facility, intellectual influence and political muscle of the existing and slowly growing, if fragmented, critical design community.

Design scenarios thus could be seen as a sub-set of scenario practice in general, and, as such a means for a more socio-political, environmentally dynamic, engaged way of thinking, developing and employing design to break into a public sphere.

Imagine, for example, supplementing the idea and frequency of design conferences and symposia with, on an equal scale, scenario events that, in contrast to exchanging ideas, explored the methods and possibilities of how things can be other than they are

on the basis of how they 'need' to be. Clearly, as already implied, this activity would have to be shielded against technological romanticism, wild fantasy and unchecked utopianism by being grounded in 'imperatives and transformative process' rather than 'fictions'.

Notes

1. See Tony Fry 'Design Intelligence' in the previous issue of *Design Philosophy Papers (DPP)* 4/2004.

2. Carl Schmitt, as perhaps the most controversial and astute critic of liberalism, argued the demise of seriousness as a major threat to 'human civilisation'. These views were documented in Leo Strauss's notes on Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* archived in 1932 and then published by Strauss in the 1960s – these notes are cited by Heinrich Meier *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: the hidden dialogue* (see editorial note p.120 and pp.111–12).

3. Dominantly, 'green' or 'sustainable' design fails to fully embrace the impacts of unsustainable 'end-use' – for instance: 'green buildings, energy and products' can only be claimed as sustainable if this is what their use brings into being. Likewise, claims of 'eco-efficiency' are only a valid if supported by a total accounting that show 'savings' are not reinvested in other forms of unsustainability. The other deception is when 'green products or services' are created to simply create new niche markets. For example, the car industry strategically deploys the production of 'green cars', but equally aggressively invests in expanding the market for the unambiguously unsustainable product. In actuality, the existence of the 'green product' assists this by deflecting criticism. Of course, there is no simple division between concerned consumers and devious producers.

4. 'Elimination design' – a practice recognising that there is much which is unsustainable that requires to be removed by design is one example that has been previously outlined. See Tony Fry 'Elimination Design' in *DPP* 4/2003.