Re-Visioning Design Practice: Hot Debate

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Abby Mellick Lopes' review of my book 'The Politics of the Artificial' (DPP no 5, 2003) was extremely thoughtful, although I don't agree with her assessment that it is apolitical. Actually, the book was intended to introduce some political elements into design discourse but not in a tendentious way. Her review, however, did lead me to reflect on some important themes that need to be made more explicit. One is how designers engage with the world as practitioners. So I offer the following brief comments with the hope of starting a dialogue on the politics of practice.

Questions concerning the ethics of practice have been on the design agenda for years. They are posed and discussed endlessly at design conferences, although the terms of the discussion have changed little. While such talk has led fruitfully to various professional codes of ethics, it has done little to open up new spaces for practice beyond the conventional market model that primarily serves the middle class, although the model also embraces the demand for luxury goods as well as low end knock-offs of quality middle-class goods.

Recognition rituals in the professional community are still based on the star system, whereby famous designers

are feted endlessly at professional congresses and by the press. Even the most serious design educators, whose concern is with such topics as the quality of user experience, tend to frame their concerns within the middle class market model. What is ignored in such a process is that there are other ways to think about design practice. Some have been documented by mavericks such as Victor Papanek, Buckminster Fuller, Gui Bonsiepe, Tomás Maldonado, John Chris Jones, Tony Fry, and others. It is also noteworthy that the two past presidents of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID), Augusto Morello and Peter Butenschoen, called for a rethinking of design's objectives. Morello's concern was to recognise design as a significant contributor to the creation of culture and Butenschoen's was to get designers to address the needs of the world's socially and economically marginalised populations.

The problem with the endless discussions of ethics is that they do not suggest ways to open up new spaces for practice. While designers are urged by leading figures in the field to resist 'unethical' or 'bad' work, strategies for working in more socially productive ways are wanting. Granted that a number of socially committed designers do pro bono work for social organisations of various kinds, few have been able to build paying careers on the basis of socially-responsible practices.

The difficulty with moving forward, as I see it, lies not only in the lack of opportunities for paid socially responsible work but within the basic foundations on which design practice has been historically constituted. Design and its concomitant discourses, schools, and commissions developed within a market model whereby designers became collaborators with industry for the purpose of manufacturing and promoting goods for sale. With several exceptions, mentioned above, the discourse has continued to support that objective and those who enter the field expect to operate within a conventional market model. At conferences, congresses, and in school curricula this is the assumption on which discussions of practice are based. In fact, the level of self-awareness within the design professions is somewhat similar to that in all social groups before the consciousness-raising movements of the 60s – feminism, the environmental movement, the civil rights movement, the Chicano movement, and many others. As a result of those movements, significant social changes have occurred. The large battles have not been won, but at least there are armies of opposition. Within the design community, with the exception of a few voices, there is great reluctance to talk seriously about alternatives to the prevailing market model. The discourse instead is about establishing the social legitimacy of design so that designers can either earn higher fees or justify those earned by their most prominent peers. To change this situation, the design community needs to undertake a massive conscious-raising effort that extends across the world.

Unfortunately, countries like the People's Republic of China that are just beginning to recognise design are copying the market model with a vengeance and replicating the very situation that its critics believe needs to be rectified.

With a few exceptions, design schools offer no resistance or alternatives to the market model. Students are preoccupied with learning a set of skills that will qualify them to get a job and they receive no indications that design is about anything more than producing goods for the market. While the best schools do train well-qualified professionals and raise issues about ethics, users, sustainability, and so forth, none that I know of deal with these topics in any way that challenges the dominant paradigm of practice. What remains mostly invisible are the ways that designers could contribute to social change, either by identifying socially useful projects within the market structure or else working as paid professionals who provide a service outside the market. To think of the latter is not so strange, given the fact that huge numbers of people, including scientists, social workers, lawyers, health experts, environmental specialists, and many others earn their livings that way. They are paid to address social needs that are recognised by governments, civic organisations, and municipalities. One reason why designers are not among these professionals is that they have not been able to imagine themselves working in such circumstances. Hence, one of the problems impeding the creation of new spaces for practice is the design community's own lack of ability and willingness to see itself in roles other than those that are given. Add to that, the reluctance of design educators to stray too far from the market model in their curricula for fear that no students will be interested in their programs.

With the emergence of an international design research community, there is a possibility to seriously address the narrowness of the prevailing professional discourse but there is also the danger that this community will simply define itself as part of that discourse. Current on-line discussions on the PhD Design list rarely challenge the dominant paradigm. If anything, they focus more on how to legitimise design and design knowledge in the eyes of colleagues in the sciences and social sciences who demand 'hard' facts and strict disciplinary foundations.

There is a great opportunity among academic design researchers to challenge the prevailing paradigm of practice and invent something new. This has actually been done in other fields and disciplines which support critical communities. The willingness of these critics to raise large questions about how their colleagues practice has resulted in significant changes in fields like anthropology, sociology, law, and social work. Thus far, design researchers have posed no challenge to professional practice and prefer to legitimate design research (a task in itself) within the dominant paradigm rather than challenge it by

investigating new subjects, making new connections with colleagues in other fields, or generally providing alternative practice models for debate.

The vision of new possibilities of practice must come from within the design community itself. This community, which embraces designers, design researchers, design critics and theorists, design educators, and design managers among others, certainly has the intellectual resources to rethink design. While this task is absolutely necessary, it appears risky to many. What then is the solution? Initially, more critical discourse. More voices who call for alternatives. Less legitimation of theorists and critics who simply reproduce or refine the dominant model. More risks in educational programs are needed. The recent on-line conference about the new design program planned for the University of California, Irvine, has given little indication that it will promote alternatives to the prevailing models of practice. In Chicago, Archeworks, a small one-year program, has produced a new social model of education and it is working. Although the program takes in fewer than twenty students a year, the directors have structured the curriculum entirely around collaborative projects with social agencies and organisations. We need more programs like this, perhaps even MA degrees in social design or socially responsible design by some other name. We need more conferences held jointly with other professionals who have more experience with social service. And more critical writing. Rather than wring one's hands in frustration about how complicit the design profession is with the market, it is much more fruitful and necessary to address alternative possibilities. What is at stake is nothing less than envisioning the future of the Titanic if it hadn't hit an iceberg.

Read further discussion on this question: 'Design as Politics' by Abby Lopes Mellick and 'Design and the Political' by Tony Fry