



Design as Politics: Hot Debate

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To cite this article: Abby Mellick Lopes (2003) Design as Politics: Hot Debate, Design Philosophy Papers, 1:6, 357-359

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871303X13965299303117>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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Design as Politics

Hot Debate

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Practicing designers and those focussing on becoming practicing designers do not need something political to do in order to become political, rather to think design differently. I don't think the problem is the lack of new spaces for consciously political design, or even new models of design practice. Design is already political. In its disciplines, processes and forms it facilitates particular ways of doing things that become habits of mind and body and structure lives and relationships. It is this power of design, and consequently the responsibility that designing entails that is mostly invisible. Currently, most products of design are agents of market perpetuation rather than of socio-cultural change. The problem for design practice is whether design's agency is understood and its effects grasped.

An extremely limited conception of practice certainly helps to conceal the political nature of design. Critical thinking, reflection and research, all of which play a key role in responding to a design brief, are often relegated to a separate 'theoretical' sphere. Donald Schön's notion of reflection-in-action is helpful in that it indicates the need

for problem solving in practical situations, in which the designer is engaged. Schön says:

A designer makes things...Typically, (this) making process is complex...(The designer) shapes the situation, in accordance with his initial appreciation of it, the situation 'talks back', and he responds to the situation's back-talk, the designer reflects-in-action on the construction of the problem, the strategies of action, or the model of the phenomena, which have been implicit in his moves.¹

Learning to listen to the 'back talk' of design is a practice that needs to be valued and fine-tuned to encourage a more reflective design disposition. The 'design process' must be stretched, for example, to involve a more rigorous study of a brief's socio-cultural and biophysical consequences, which are 'locked in' by design decisions at the concept development stage. Demonstrating the effects of design could result in a changed view of the task at hand, such as in abandoning making 'new' objects for market, and instead engaging with sustaining existing ones. Designing new lives for old things has the potential to challenge the conventional market model and the linear conception of the design process. Sometimes listening to the 'back talk' of design is built into old-for-new industrial processes. In the case of product take back for remanufacture for example, a producer has the opportunity, maybe for the first time, to methodically examine the particular ways an internal product component has worn, before it is refurbished for reuse.

Such heuristic opportunities deserve a stronger role in design education if the conventional design process is to be challenged. However I do not think that identifying such practices as 'alternative' is the answer. Badging a practice as alternative bleeds out any political agency it might have, because it lacks an operational connection to what it alternates from. A 'socially-responsible' or 'ecodesign' course will tend to attract the converted (and then often on the false assumption of a shared conceptual model, a misunderstanding that can be surprisingly resilient) as much as it may turn off market-driven designers. There is nothing wrong with providing such courses *per se* (I am in fact involved in running one), however there is a 'rebound effect', in that the presence of such optional courses means that students can opt instead to focus on 'normal' design and thus quite 'legitimately' ignore the problems introduced into the design process by socio-cultural and biophysical questions. They therefore miss experiencing the limitations of the technical processes and conceptual models they are inducted into, which can be exposed by such questions. It is important that design education works to broaden the design envelope and to normalise a more complex conception of design.

However, there is a broader issue here concerning identity politics. It is of course not just designers who practice design. Providing a view on the assumptions underlying conventional practices, such as the uncontested politics involved in inducting students into the profession of design, is itself a political practice.

If the aim of a politics of practice is to deliver change, then the capacity of ‘the designer’ to understand problems and to act on them is the issue. The solution is therefore not of massive, global proportions. The politics of practice involves the incremental reorientation of the design imagination in how the task at hand is initially conceived and responded to, how the client is strategically informed and the brief requirements negotiated, and ultimately how the knowledge of ‘the designer’ gets embodied in the practical situation.

Note

1. Donald Schön *The Reflective Practitioner: how professionals think in action* Arena: Aldershot, England 1995, 78–9.