The Politics of Design Conversations: Review of Victor Margolin's Politics of the Artificial

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REVIEW

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Politics of the Artificial

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This essay presents a review of *The Politics of the Artificial: Essays on Design and Design Studies* by Victor Margolin (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2002, 284 pages).

Design theory, as it reflects upon the nature of design and its world-making power, is very much a closet preoccupation in the industrial design education milieu in which I work. Design history doesn't even rate a mention unless it can be unpacked in relation to a contemporary technical product with some glamorous appeal. Consequently, much time is spent trying to create legitimate space for design thinking in this least reflective of design disciplines. In such a milieu, design activity struggles to be about more than the acquisition of technical know-how in the production of inert, marketable things. Certainly, the political nature of design as it shapes ways of being with things, in environments with others, remains practically unacknowledged.

So it was with some delight that I opened this book with such a promising title, particularly as it is by respected design historian Victor Margolin, whose long relationship and editorial involvement in *Design Issues* has overseen the development of a vital discourse in design history, theory and criticism since the mid-eighties. The task of engaging with theoretical ideas has been made so much more possible for many design students, educators and practitioners through this journal and the two texts Margolin has edited with his *Design Issues* colleague, Richard Buchanan – *Discovering Design*, an important collection of papers from the 1990 conference of the same name and *The Idea of Design*, a collection of key *Design Issues* essays from the mid-nineties. Both of these texts have become design theory education staples and quite comfortably infiltrate the scant reading lists of technical design courses.

The Politics of the Artificial is not the theoretical book promised by its title. It does not offer a comprehensive meditation on the complex political nature of design. Instead, it is a quite disparate and for the most part a-political collection of essays divided into those on design and on design studies. The book is however driven by a desire for a far more reflective design practice; one open to a cooperative discourse that can negotiate the 'intersection between domain knowledge and shared knowledge' (p. 4), one that more fully recognises the significance of user experience in the product environment, and one that accounts for the practical importance of historical reflection and cultural analysis. Most of the essays in the design studies section meticulously catalogue the events, practices, publications and ideas that constitute particular views of the history and practice of design studies, stitched together evenly with a non-interventionist historian's hand.

The design essays pursue more dynamic angles, however the non-interventionist approach is consistent. It is important to note that the book is also a history of Margolin's own thinking over the decade of the nineties, and on occasion, the internal relevance of some of the essays beyond this claim is difficult to determine partly because of this even-handed, somewhat remote style of narration. Margolin's arguments appear driven by a desire for a consensual and inclusive discourse that might be seen to stand in the way of one of the key issues he raises; the ongoing failure of the development of a fruitful design discourse that could make an intervention into expansionist industrial culture. While he calls for a 'thick discourse' of multiple conversations in design, pluralism is not renowned for effective agenda setting. Margolin's frustration with the 'Edge of the Millennium' symposium's failure to develop as a 'productive conversation community' in the book's opening review, would appear to support this. Most rhetorical events fail to generate the momentum and specificity of actual, effective conversations, and in this light, the 'engaging plurality' Margolin calls for is certainly a landscape to be invented.

A different impetus for such inclusive discourse emerges from Margolin's primary area of knowledge – design history. All of these essays are enlivened by rich historical detail and are full of wonderful and obscure references that span many decades of design practice and thought, demonstrating the interdisciplinary relevance of design and offering new insights on familiar themes. Some of the essays invite particular connections to pressing contemporary design issues; an example here is the essay on Ken Isaacs. Isaacs' odd, life-time commitment to the matrix model and his frugal, 'space amplifying' matrix-based structures such as the Microhouse, are certainly interesting to reflect upon in this time of the rise, in Sydney at least, of expansive, treeless new suburbs of faux-mansions that are only fit for human dwelling by way of extensive greenhouse gas emitting climate control.

Margolin is keenly aware of the tendency toward historical amnesia in the study and practice of design. He argues for the significance of 'narrative building' in design history (p. 169) and suggests that it is only with an historical understanding of design that design thinking and practice are linked to their consequences (p. 252). He says that while design history is maintained as a distinct and self-referential field of study, the powerful role it could play in shaping design reflection as an activity grounded in historical experience as well as current technique is neglected (p. 229). These comments are highly suggestive, and inspire one to read them into other essays in the book. However the evocation of Herbert Marcuse's notion that history can provide an outside perspective on the prevailing values of society (p. 240), a space outside the system rather than a further explanation of how the system came to be as it is from within it, diminishes for me the power of Margolin's argument for the agency of historical understanding in design. History needs to be recognised as embodied in things, practices and ideas.

A related theme is explored in one of the best essays in the book, 'The Experience of Products'. Here Margolin draws on the work of John Dewey to argue that design transforms the environment of experience in ways that are significantly underplayed in design practice and research. Experience is not restricted to the internal life of a person, but is conditioned and shaped by the environment of things and people who have in turn been shaped by past human activities (p. 40). In turn, one's experiences have the capacity to modify the experiences of others. The implication here is that designers have a far greater responsibility than is currently realised to critically reflect upon how designing conditions experience, including their own.

The power of what Margolin calls the product milieu – "the aggregate of material and immaterial products, including objects, images, systems, and services that fill the lifeworld" (p. 45) – is that it draws attention to the shifting ontological status of things in

meaningful interaction with users. The lives of products are more cultural than technical and have more to do with engineering relationships and situations between people than in delivering functions. At a time when it is usual for design to promise the delivery of individual freedom over all else, Margolin offers the useful observation that "(w)e have become the managers of large product webs that require knowledge, energy and finances to operate and support". Consequently, the time we invest in the management and maintenance of our 'product webs' becomes an ever-larger part of our experience with products (p. 46). The quality of design should, he suggests, be better mediated by an understanding of this social destiny of design. A more adequate reflection on user experience in design research, from which designers and those working in other disciplines touched by design might draw, would enhance this understanding.

Sustainability is an area of thought that raises significant challenges to the culture of product making and the ever expanding product milieu. There are two essays here on sustainability. The call of the first for a design-led negotiation between 'two models of social development' – expansionism and sustainability – feels dated. It is time to begin the conversation beyond this point, in recognition that the reality of the situation is that the expansion model is complexly and unnoticeably implicated in the material world we depend upon everyday and the sustainability model is composed of a very different, rhetorical substance.

Rather than evoking conflicting values, 'the culture of sustainability' is most often a struggle for legitimacy in expansionist terms. In both this essay and the next, which plots a history of design's response to the call of social need, Margolin points out the inadequacy of design's understanding of, and response to, the issues of environmental and social consequence. He suggests that engaging with such difficult, indeterminate problems – 'wicked' problems in Richard Buchanan's terms – require a greater recognition of design's generative agency both within and outside the design community. This is certain, however the first essay's concluding suggestion that design's 'demonstrative form of problem solving' offers an actual way to ameliorate the stand off between expansion and sustainability is a little quick. The complex ways in which design's problem solving regenerates the expansionist problem, are far from adequately understood or considered. Design is defined throughout the book as 'the conception and planning of the artificial'. Perhaps the wicked problem for design thinking in this context is the appropriate sustainment of the existing artificial environment, not least because as Margolin notes "(t)he world expects new things from designers" (p. 88).

As 'the conception and planning of the artificial', design redefines the limits of the natural. In the essay from which

the title of the book is drawn, Margolin calls for a new design discourse the central theme of which would be the artificial and its boundaries (p. 109). Following Herbert Simon, Margolin holds that it is important to consider the natural and the artificial as distinct and non-interchangeable realms (p. 120). By identifying nature with a value missing in the artificial, a source beyond the socially constructed, the distinction between them is preserved. Margolin argues that 'meaning' and 'reality' can again be secured after postmodernism by embracing a nature-derived spirituality, 'a transcendent form of accountability' that will help us in a unified way to set limits on the incursions of the artificial and its unthought consequences. Yet it is the artificial, as design, that governs our perceptions and thus experiences of the natural, an argument that confuses the delineation significantly. We live in and depend upon environments that as Ezio Manzini has said are extensively and intensively artificial, and in this light, the project of wresting the real from the artificial (p. 118) is misdirected. The more promising task would be learning to discern and take responsibility for design's role in shaping real experiences.

Margolin's reflections on the artificial are also, I suspect, marked by a legitimate historian's concern with the erasure of origins. The politics of the artificial is a politics of the seemingly innocuous and a-political. Divested of history and ecological agency, the artificial is regenerated in a vacuum of understanding, wherein the integration of design history and thinking in things and their path-making agency is erased. Without knowledge of these conditions, the political nature of the artificial remains unnoticed and unavailable while it continues to shape lifeworlds and to resource 'liberal democracy'. A politics of the artificial that engages with the agency of these incursions is yet to be written.

Margolin's book presents design as a flow of events and moments rather than as the operative undercurrent of the everyday. Yet this perspective proves eminently useful for the study of design. This book exhibits a strong desire to communicate, to fill in the cursory and faint delineations of design history and to create 'full' narrative experiences. Consequently, there is much here for the design student and design educator alike to lay their hands on. There are numerous research problems posed and nearly every essay explodes the insular conception of the domain of design by making reference to a plurality of relevant contexts. Design is concerned with science, language, politics, culture, and most significantly, social reality. Margolin promotes the development of designers as interdisciplinary thinkers as well as makers. Importantly, his book can help legitimate the nascent space for thoughtful design conversation in the technical design milieu. It demonstrates that design thinking is as productive a form of designing as the thing-producing enterprise mostly considered to be the domain of design.