



Design-in-Action

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EDITORIAL

Design-in-Action

Anne-Marie Willis

We wish all our readers the best for the coming year, in this, the final issue of *Design Philosophy Papers* for 2005. Here are a few quick news items before introducing the issue:

- We are very pleased to announce that Albert Borgmann has joined the Editorial Advisory Board. As many of you will know, Albert is a distinguished philosopher who has consistently engaged the relations between society, culture and technology and is the author of several ground-breaking books and essays. He is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Montana, Missoula.
- *Design Philosophy Papers Collection Two* has just been published and is being mailed to subscribers now. We believe it to be a very strong selection of papers, presenting a distillation of key concerns over the last year and more – concerns such as the social relations of design, the connections between design and ethics, the nature of consumer culture, information technology and architecture. (It can be purchased online by non-subscribers – see

homepage latest in print. There is also a special offer for purchasing Collections One and Two together).

- Upcoming issues for 2006 include an issue to be jointly edited by Will McNeill and Tony Fry on 'Design, Ethics and Technology' and a dedicated book review issue. See coming issues for more details.

The four papers presented in this issue deal with the question of design-in-action. This concordance has arisen fortuitously rather than being prefigured with a brief, which is how DPP's themes usually arrive. Yet the concern with design and action is not just coincidental, as it further develops ideas already introduced in previous papers – on topics such as design ethics and user-centred design; on philosophies such as phenomenology and ontological designing; and on critiques of instrumentalism and of mainstream discourses on sustainability.

Design-in-action is approached from three perspective by the contributors. They discuss:

- How designed things act in the world;
- How designers should act in certain situations, particularly those where relations of power are unequal (such as between the able-bodied and the less-able bodied or between the wealthy and the dispossessed);
- The nature of acting as compared to making, and how designers can be actors rather than makers.

The first paper, 'Ethics in the Making' by **Bodil Jönsson, Peter Anderberg, Eva Flodin, Camilla Nordgren, Arne Svensk & Lone Malmberg** is the result of collaboration between designers and researchers across two quite different spheres: rehabilitation engineering and arts/communication. They take designing for disability as an example of where situated ethics is essential, arguing for the efficacy of a phenomenological approach that is attuned to 'the lived body' as defined by French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Their paper challenges some fundamental assumptions about designing for disability, and some of the real life examples they discuss are not only illuminating, but also moving. Their disposition and advocated methods are far from being patronising, and have the character of 'being alongside'. They are attentive to the fine grain of embodied experience and lifeworlds, something they share with previous contributors such as Stella Boess in 'Designing Towards Ways of Living'. Like Cameron Tonkinwise in 'Ethics by Design or The Ethos of Things' they have a strong sense of what Tony Fry refers to as 'the designing of designed things' (in, for example, 'Design betwixt Design's Others').¹

The designing of design is a central concern of **Carleton B. Christensen's** paper, 'The Material Basis of Everyday Rationality: Transformation by Design or Education?' which explores the

vital question of how behavioural change towards sustainability might be most effectively realised. Christensen teaches in the Philosophy Department at the University of Sydney and we are particularly pleased to publish his paper, as it is exemplary of DPP's advocacy of philosophers engaging with questions of design and sustainment.

By invoking specific examples of the operation of 'everyday rationality', Christensen subjects environmental education and its more recently posed alternative, 'behaviour-steering design', to relentless critical scrutiny, finding both strategies wanting. He elaborates the contradictions and huge barriers that exists between individual efforts to behave in more environmentally responsible ways and the overwhelmingly unsustainable inclination of material culture. Via exposition, critique and a reworking of Japp Jelsma, Bruno Latour and, via Neil Maycroft, Albert Borgmann and Ivan Illich, he proposes a reconciliation between 'behaviour-steering design' and environmental education.

Where these first two papers focus strongly on designed things and designed environments which the authors regard as having strong agency, even ethical force, the third paper by **Rabah Bousbaci & Alain Findeli**, 'More Acting and Less Making: A Place for Ethics in Architecture's Epistemology' presents a different schema, which returns the ethical to the human subject (which is not to suggest that the location of ethics is a question of 'either/or'). The context for this, is their historical over-reading of how 'the project' of architecture has been understood within architectural theory. They argue that the emphasis has shifted from the building itself, to its designing/making through to the 'actors' (client, user, architect, etc). Drawing on Hannah Arendt's distinction between making (which is always towards an end/product) and acting (an end in itself), they present a case for the transformation of the social relations of design rather than of the design process or of designed things *per se*.

Tony Fry's essay 'Design, Development & Questions of Direction' goes to the issue of the actions of designers in a particular setting – that of international economic development and the colonial history out of which it emerged. The essay itself could be taken as an example of 'action', as its writing was prompted by a debate about a proposed book on design and development in an online discussion list of the same name. Fry argues that there is not a single, unified understanding of 'development', though there is a dominant one, that comes out of a history that needs to be understood before designers-with-good-intentions go plunging into aid projects and the like. The recent embracement of globalisation as either inevitable or an unquestioned 'good thing' has obscured earlier critiques, such as that of André Gunder Frank, who demonstrated that 'under-development' was not an empirical condition, but a naming of non-development by developmentalist discourses and their promoters.

Also critically discussed by Tony Fry are the development theorists, Thomas Friedman, Jagdish Baghwati and Amartya Sen, as well as the role of various agencies of the United Nations (which do not necessarily act in concert with each other) and the compromised context in which Bruntland's notion of sustainable development was formed. The essay ends by presenting three possible relations designers can have to development. The third, most ambitious one is "an opening into an 'other development' – the development of the moment of a culture of sustainment." This large cultural project which designers could, in fact lead, if sufficient numbers of them were prepared to move beyond design as a service relation, is a theme Tony Fry has developed over a number of essays.² Here it resonates with Carleton Christensen's argument that "... sustainability is not simply a technical notion. Rather, it displays the logic of a *virtue*, specifically, of an entire social order," the central question then becoming what it would take to create such a social order.

Anne-Marie Willis

Notes

1. All of these appear in *Design Philosophy Papers Collection Two* (Ravensbourne, Qld, Australia: Team D/E/S Publications, 2005). Also previously published in *DPP* online: Stella Boess *DPP 1/2004*; Cameron Tonkinwise, *DPP 2/2004* and Tony Fry *DPP 6/2003–4*.
2. A succinct statement of the idea can be found in 'The Sustainment and its Dialectic' *Design Philosophy Papers Collection One* (Ravensbourne, Qld, Australia: Team D/E/S Publications, 2005). Also see *DPP 1/2003* and *DPP 5/2003*.