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REVIEW

Design Unlimited – Reviews of *The Design Culture Reader* (ed. Ben Highmore) and *Design Dictionary: Perspectives on Design Terminology* (eds Michael Erloff and Tim Marshall)

by **Anne-Marie Willis**

The Design Culture Reader edited by Ben Highmore, published by Routledge, 2009, 375 pages.

Design Dictionary: Perspectives on Design Terminology edited by Michael Erloff and Tim Marshall, published by Birkhauser and Board of International Research in Design, 2008, 465 pages.

“To take account of design as a sprawling and saturating phenomenon is to imagine a field of inquiry that is ludicrously ambitious. It extends design studies beyond the realm of goods (the products of industrial designers, fashion designers, architects and so on)

and into the whole panoply of interconnections between the material and immaterial, between humans and things, between the organic and the inorganic.” Ben Highmore

“Ultimately, design is not about the study of existing phenomena, but rather it proposes, intervenes, changes, and restructures the future of the designed world.” Tim Marshall

These two books deal very differently with the challenge of making sense of something as ubiquitous and sprawling as design. Where one embraces this and makes this its starting point, the other, as a dictionary of design, is driven by the opposite logic – one of limit and definition, though as we shall see, this can easily unravel.

From a cultural and media studies background, Ben Highmore, editor of *The Design Culture Reader* arrived at design via the study of everyday life. He realised he’d stumbled into something vast (“The designed environment, it seems, is now so extensive that it could encompass almost the entire modern world”) and was underwhelmed when he encountered academic design history with its concentration on canonised designers and design movements. Instead, he advocates that design culture be studied without designers, without objects as finished products and with an emphasis on the ordinary rather than the novel. These points, laid out in the introduction he calls ‘A Sideboard Manifesto’ inform the eclectic mix of texts he has assembled.

The book includes essays by philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, art theorists, cultural historians and even a few design theorists/historians (Siegfried Giedeon, Tony Fry, Ellen Lupton). There’s a chapter from a novel (Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*) presenting a relentless narrative description of an office-worker’s interactions with commonplace things (tying shoelaces, using a stapler, freeing a band-aid from its wrapper, the feeling of carpet through sock-clad feet, etc). This is included because the excessive writerly attention lavished on the mundane reveals the extent to which designed things make up our environment and orchestrate everyday life. In introducing *The Mezzanine*, Highmore offers a tantalising thought: that “a novel might provide the most analytic approach to design culture – a paradigm for design culture research.”

Some essays have been chosen because they provide analysis essential for understanding design as it operates within the social and the cultural – thus the inclusion of classic pieces such as Karl Marx ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret’ (1867), Marcel Mauss ‘Techniques of the Body’ (1934), Michel Foucault ‘Space, Knowledge and Power’.

The Design Culture Reader is based on a two-way proposition: that the perspective of the everyday can contribute to the way design is understood; and that other phenomena can be productively looked at from the perspective of design. Thus the essays deal, on the one hand, with designed things like the gramophone,

typewriter, telephone, electric carving knife, shop window, 'zoot suit', and on the other, with design as inscription – modes of bodily comportment, architectural space as gendered, war as an extreme case of ontological designing, the meta conditions of designing such as technological obsolescence and global marketplaces. Other essays deal with ways in which designed things and spaces – souvenirs, knick-knacks, houses designed for suburban families – are appropriated in idiosyncratic ways and come to take on significance for people in a variety of social situations.

The essays are divided into six thematic sections with introductions, as well as introductions to each essay. In some cases, the quality of Highmore's commentary exceeds the quality of essays included, this being more so with many of the more recent essays. There is also an excellent bibliography that extends well beyond the works referenced.

Overall, this is a substantial reader. For designers and design students it provides a rich introduction to understanding their activity in the frame of culture and the social, allowing them to see design as pervasive and able to be found in even the most unlikely places, thereby opening up possibilities for practice going well beyond the familiar notion of designer as stylist. For those in fields like cultural studies, the book doesn't just position design as something to sit alongside – it recasts a good deal of what is already studied (media, film, fashion, music, shopping, leisure, etc) as design and therefore in need of rethinking as such.

A major criticism must go to the publishers. The essays have all been printed in a miniscule font size, making reading a real chore. This was probably to save costs, but really, a book of dense essays like this, moreover, *a book about design*, requires to be extremely well designed.

In contrast, the *Design Dictionary: Perspectives on Design Terminology* is beautifully designed – very readable type, plenty of white space to rest the eye, elegant, logical cross referencing, and saddle-stitch binding. My guess is that this was a subsidised publication – that would explain its high quality. Such is the state of academic publishing now.

Given its excellence as an object, it's a pity then, that the *Dictionary's* content is so uneven.

This is not a dictionary of definitions, rather it offers 'perspectives' on some of the terminology of contemporary design discourse. After several decades of deconstruction, postmodernism and the unravelling of master narratives, this is all any editor would dare to offer now. And indeed many perspectives are offered. With some 250 entries by 110 contributors (designers and design educators from a range, but not all, design disciplines), pluralism reigns – and sometimes collapses into incoherence.

The editors state that the *Dictionary* "documents various trends and, in certain cases, contradictions within the global design

discourse.” I would modify this to say “the discourse of some design educators and designers of the developed world.” The self-imposed limitation of this discourse is revealed in several ways. One instance: the entry on Architectural Design, tells nothing of architecture and discusses only examples of architects straying into ‘design’ by which is meant industrial design, justified by the assertion that architecture is “a closely associated but distinct practice to design.” Does this mean architects don’t design? How else would you describe what they do? I have always found it curious the way many designers believe that architects and engineers are not actually designers.

Roughly, the Dictionary’s terminology fall into four categories (obviously with overlaps), i.e., those to do with:

- (i) Design Movements/key ideas (such as Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Affordance, Bauhaus, Cross-Cultural Design, Functionalism, Streamlining, Universal Design – but wisely, no entries on individual designers – can you imagine the can of worms that would have opened?);
- (ii) Professional Design Practice (such as Branding, Brief, Ergonomics, Design Process, Prototype, Product Development, Typography, Usability, Visualisation, plus accounts of different types of commercial design – Automobile, Audiovisual, Graphic, Information, Communication, Fashion, Textile, Industrial, Urban, Architectural, etc);
- (iii) Marketing and Management (such as Added Value, Benchmarking, Intellectual Property, Knowledge Management, Just-in-Time, Market Research, Trademark, Target Group);
- (iv) Ideas from Philosophy, Humanities, Social Sciences and Science (such as Aesthetics, Beauty, Ethics, Form, Haptic, Globalisation, Modernity, Need, Postmodernism, Perception, Performance, Rhetoric, Semiotics, Sustainability, System, Synergy, Synthesis).

Category (iv) is infinitely extendable, where, for instance are: Economy; Efficiency; Nature; Natural; Phenomenology, Ontology, World? One answer is that the editors had to stop somewhere, the other is that the terminology chosen reflects what is currently in circulation within design education, and not necessarily what needs to be.

Some contributors adopt an even-handed, descriptive approach, others a more polemical stance. Some entries give an overview and brief history of the term under discussion, others are idiosyncratic, merely picking up on a contemporary issue surrounding the term – though you have to be already informed about the term in question to be able to pick out the difference – and if that’s the case, you probably wouldn’t be using the *Dictionary* anyway.

The editors emphasise the variety of perspectives assembled and the fact that definitions are debated and never finally fixed.

All well and good and to be expected. However, what is not so easy to gloss over, is the insubstantiality of so many entries. For example: the entry on 'Design and Politics' deals only with design and government; the one on 'Consumption' gives no history of the concept, instead launching into a hyped account of consumers as "active players in the construction of commodities"; the definition of 'Style' is limited to discussion of stylishness; and the author of 'Simplicity' so hankers after the simple life, that he writes hardly anything at all and tells us to go and read his book instead!

Many entries are not very useful because they present a limited meaning of a term from the perspective of just one area of design practice. Thus what is common across all areas of design rarely emerges. For example 'Visualisation' is treated as if it is nothing more than a technique within Visual Communication. The connection between prefiguration, as a fundamental characteristic of all design activity, and visualisation as a means of expressing what is being prefigured, is just not made.

Some entries are more substantial and could provoke thoughtful debate in studios and classrooms, such as 'Brand', 'Cross Cultural Design', 'Discipline', 'Ethics', 'Globalisation', 'Gender', 'Non-Intentional Design' and 'Theory'. There are some odd omissions – for example, where is Alternative Technology, Technology itself, Design Life or Lifespan relating to products, or Utility or Waste? And it might have been more useful to have included critical accounts of design adages like 'Less is More' and 'Small is Beautiful' than vacuous terms like 'Flop', 'Gimmick', 'High Tech', 'Look and Feel', 'Nostalgia' and 'Credibility'. The latter refers only to corporate credibility, which, like so many desirable things (e.g., identity or tradition) only becomes an issue when lost or under threat. Not that the entry says this, instead it tells us that this is where design is so valuable – because it can come to the rescue of corporates with credibility crises! By a stroke of serendipity (or by design?) this thoroughly uncritical entry is followed by one on 'Critical Design'.

So what is the point of this dictionary? It's not a technical manual or a book of theory or a guidebook for commercial practice. Even those who have praised it have asked this question. This is what one blogger said:

even though clients aren't going to be picking this up, there is still a decent chance it'll be in their peripheral vision.. ie, they'll see it on our bookshelves or desks or in bookstores ... maybe people will start to go 'wow, if there is a need for a book of this size and detail relating to design, maybe there's more to it than I thought?'¹

He's hit the nail on the head. The *Design Dictionary* is a symbolic object, a piece of strategic design, an exercise in branding the

design profession. If you were a client who picked it up and flipped through it, you'd be none the wiser of what design is or how to go about doing it. But you would get a fair idea of what people who call themselves designers are talking about at the moment.

Dividing up the contents of the *Design Dictionary* into the four categories as I have done above, brings home the eclecticism of design education and the service-bound nature of professional design (i.e., taking on the client's language). This is not surprising, given the vastness and ubiquity of design culture and the dispersal of the activity of designing across the economic, social and cultural landscape (which is the starting point for Highmore's *Design Culture Reader*). Given this, a dictionary of design would seem to be an impossible task, one of an infinite regression of terms, and, without guiding principles (which the dictionary doesn't offer) liable to dissolve into babbling incoherence akin to Borges' renowned Library of Babel.

It's not possible (nor desirable) for design to have a unique 'body of knowledge', nevertheless, there does need to be more than just fashion and opportunism driving the generation and selection of the ideas that inform practice. Otherwise designers will be no more than people who float around, filling in the spaces and joining the dots between the hard-edged professions and between clients and markets.

PS: I wonder why the entry on Futuristic Design never got to questions of the future?

Note

1. Alex Charchar <http://www.underconsideration.com/speakup/archives/004629.html> accessed November 2008.