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Open Door or Closed Shop?

Review of Nelson and Stolterman *The Design Way*

Anne-Marie Willis

This essay presents a review of *The Design Way: Intentional Change in an Unpredictable World: Foundations and Fundamentals of Design Competence* by Harold G. Nelson and Erik Stolterman (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Education Technology Publications, 2003, 325 pages).

The two subtitles indicate a tension at the heart of this clear, careful, systematic, but nonetheless problematic book. On the one hand Nelson and Stolterman want to define design very broadly, as something that is inherent in, or can be brought to, all acts of 'intentional change', while on the other hand they work with a more restricted understanding of design as it has developed as a service profession within industrial culture.

Design is positioned as "the first tradition" of humanity, as:

the ability to imagine that-which-does-not-yet-exist
(and) to make it appear in concrete form as a new
purposeful addition to the real world. (10)

It is this capacity to design that distinguishes us from non-humans, according to the authors, a position that

echoes Karl Marx's famous maxim that what distinguishes even 'the worst of architects' from the 'best of bees' is that the architect raises first in his mind an image of what is to be built.

We design our cosmologies, our homes, our businesses and our lives, as well as our material artifacts. As such, design touches nearly every aspect of our experienced world. (10)

Thus the authors convey throughout a strong sense of the pervasiveness of design – which is asserted rather than argued for. They do not explore in any detail how design and the designed acts to shape the nature of the worlds we occupy (as, for example Tony Fry does in *A New Design Philosophy: an Introduction to Defuturing*). Their book explores what distinguishes design, as a mode of enquiry, from the traditional and more fully articulated disciplines of arts and sciences. Their aim is to encourage the development of a design culture – a nurturing environment in which “designing as a tradition of inquiry and action” can flourish. (2–3) They claim design has its own tradition, that it's not just “a variant of science, art, or technology, or spirituality”. (3)

Opposite to Vilem Flusser who in *The Shape of Things* (reviewed in DPP no 6) and his other writings refused to systematise his thinking into a 'coherent meta-theory', Nelson & Stolterman attempt to do just that.

While they claim not to be proposing a particular theory of design (4), clearly the very structure of *The Design Way* presents such. The book is divided into 3 sections:

- (i) Foundations – claimed 'first principles' of design, namely 'the real', 'service', 'systems' and 'the whole' (this section alone clearly adds up to a theory of design);
- (ii) Fundamentals – “core concepts of the design approach that can be learned and improved through practice”; and
- (iii) Metaphysics or “issues (that) arise as a consequence of the interaction of the foundations and fundamentals ... with one another and with the larger domains of human existence”. (4)

A good deal of designers, design educators and students will find *The Design Way* useful and illuminating, perhaps recognising aspects of their own practice described anew by Nelson & Stolterman. Others may find it lacking in concrete specificity. There are no case studies and the occasional examples are hypothetical, sketchy and nearly always concern immaterial design, reflecting the authors' locations in organisational systems design and informatics. You don't get any sense from this book of design activity being prompted, as is often the case, from needs encountered in specific material situations.

And while the book tends towards the abstract, a good deal of philosophers (if they were to read it) would find the ways the

authors mobilise their ideas over-simplistic and even irritating. The way ‘the real’ is dealt with, and the authors’ definition of metaphysics [in (iii) above] which ignores the more than a century-old tradition of the critique of metaphysics, are two unambiguous examples.

Nelson and Stolterman are explicitly and implicitly critical of technophilic design. They reject the idea that science and technology alone can meet urgent imperatives. They argue that what’s needed of leadership today is not more and more information so that an ‘empirically true’ solution to a problem at hand may be arrived at, but good judgement, so as to achieve ‘good compositions’ (5) by which is not simply meant visual compositions, but an arrangement of any elements according to a system of order. (Though, disappointingly, their chapter on Composition is in fact underpinned by a notion of aesthetics order, which is sought to be generalised.)

Usefully, they are critical of the more common characterisations of design, like design as a form of creativity or an activity of problem-solving. It may involve these, but is more (“design is constituted of reflective thinking, productive action and responsible follow through”. (5)

They suggest that although design may utilise “science-based tools and methods”, it needs to avoid “analysis paralysis” caused by over-indulgence in information gathering, and the flawed assumption that the ‘right answer’ or solution will emerge from accumulated data. So, while “design knowledge” might be produced by the use of reason (science’s way of knowing) as well as via intuition and imagination (art’s way of knowing), they claim that design knowledge is distinctive because it emerges from “a conscious not-knowing”. (44–5) Of course artists would probably want to claim this too. But boundary setting is not really the point. What are being evoked are different dispositions of mind that may or may not correspond with an individual’s designated professional role. Conscious not-knowing is described as:

very much like the Taoist ‘empty mind’ or the Buddhist ‘new mind’. It is the quality of mind that is present during play, when it is important to be completely open to what is emergent at the moment, rather than being completely preoccupied with past experience, or anticipating a future event. (44)

While one might want to argue with Nelson and Stolterman’s categories of ways of knowing, there is value in making such distinctions, in terms of: becoming aware of one’s own dominant mode; being alert to others’ ways of knowing, especially in collaborative work (e.g. in design teams); and developing an ability to move between modes as circumstances change.

The service relation is presented as the defining feature that separates design from the arts and sciences, which are “self-serving, in the best sense”. While a more complex version of this is presented in the chapter on ‘Service’, extending the idea of ‘client’ to encompass other stakeholders, customers and end users, the centrality of the traditional client-designer relation gets re-inscribed throughout the book, with problematic consequences. The exemplary designer is presented as someone who listens attentively so as to identify the deeper desire underneath the client’s stated brief. The designer then seeks to meet this discovered “authentic self-interest” of the client in ways that exceed the client’s expectations. (50–51)

Types of designer-client relations are explained via diagrams (diagrams of varying usefulness are used heavily throughout), with the two extremes of designer-as-artist and designer-as-facilitator being criticised by Nelson and Stolterman for leading to an unbalanced client-designer relationship. The ideal relationship is presented by that popular figure of western cultural appropriation, the Chinese yin-yang diagram. Here the desire for mutual respect and balance (in a context of difference and tension) obscures what the authors refer to elsewhere in the text as “the environment” of design activity (conditions which cannot be changed) and the “context” (factors chosen to be taken into account in a particular design task). The attachment to resolution-via-diagram and enthusiasm for composition makes *The Design Way* an uncannily detached book. It is as if the authors’ desiderata (to use their term) is to induct the world into their formal version of design thinking, rather than taking a new design thinking informed by the complexity of world-shaping forces to the intractable problems of worlds.

There is an ethical vacuum at the heart of the project. Nelson and Stolterman admit that authentic outcomes of design activity will not always also be “virtuous” as client’s desire’s can range from base greed to philanthropic altruism. (50–51) Yet at the same time they place ethical responsibility squarely with the designer. This, not in terms of making choices (which are inevitable, and political in the broadest sense) about which clients to work for or what kind of commissions to take on, but via a self-focused (and de-politicised, as they present it) effort of character development (the subject of the final chapter), which at times sounds not too distant from the self-improvement slogans of 19th century moralist, Samuel Smiles.

The negative consequences of design are acknowledged at various points and in a whole chapter titled ‘The Evil of Design’, where a distinction is made between unintentional and intentional ‘evil’ design outcomes. More problematic is their category of ‘natural evil’, by which Nelson and Stolterman mean the destruction that always accompanies creation and the way in which that which gets designed excludes other options. More useful than such a

stretching of the concept of evil here would be an understanding of dialectics (see Tony Fry's 'Dialectic of Sustainment', DPP no 5). Instead of movement, they give us stasis via bland balance, thus the following chapter is titled 'The Splendour of Design'. Even-handedness and the refusal of the political paralyses *The Design Way* in other ways. Thus respectful co-operation with the client (no matter his/her 'desires' or character) and the advocacy of design as an effective means of intentional change (no matter what is being sought to be changed, why or for whom) are the book's core values that masquerade as value-free. The inevitability of ethical choice within design processes is not confronted; instead, ethics is hived off to the no-go zone of the individual and personal.

In claiming a certain primacy for design, much else is flattened out. Design ranges across the totality of culture, thus they give examples such as:

the formation of public policy, the creation of new educational programs and curriculum, the design of one's own life, the formation of intentional communities of interest, the development of entrepreneurial business plans, or the development of a new philosophy of life, are all compositional designs.

This is both going too far and not far enough. Yes, design is present to varying degrees in all such activities and structures, and yes, a design sensibility and design thinking can be brought to all such endeavours, and in fact enhance them, but this doesn't mean 'all is design', let alone 'compositional design'. Such activities are already over-determined by much else, such as social relations (including, importantly, relations of power) long before they arrive as objects of conscious design. Given that intentional design activity is always prefigured by conditions of limit, the need becomes more urgent to better understand the nature of those conditions and how they have arrived in such powerful pre-designing positions.

The choice for designers is whether to treat those limits as a boundary for containing their activity or to seek to explore and understand what's on the other side of the boundary, what designed that territory and discover how it could be designed otherwise. That of course takes design well beyond the service relation so central to Nelson & Stolterman's conception of design. Such an exploration would also shift intentionality away from the designer/designing subject and look for it instead as embedded in the designed. But such a decoupling of design from the designer would result in a very different book to *The Design Way*.

Nelson and Stolterman's "ultimate desire" as they put it, is to encourage a design culture, and to do this they believe that setting boundaries is necessary, as is the uncovering of a "fundamental

core of ideas” of this tradition. (3) Thus they justify their own, often idiosyncratic uses of big concepts (such as the real, or judgement), as being drawn from “within the design tradition”. (7) This also explains the limited range of writers they reference. But if design culture is to flourish, it can’t be a ‘closed shop’. Is it possible to gain an understanding of design as a distinctive mode of enquiry and action (their claim) without engaging with epistemology (theories of knowledge) and ontology? I think not. Can design philosophy develop without an understanding of philosophy? Only if “philosophy” is reduced to homespun banalities.

The Design Way has had a number of favourable reviews, and no doubt, many designers and students of design are finding it informative and readable, if abstract; ultimately, its serious limits and flaws will arrive for them by further reading – beyond the bounds of the not-yet-a-tradition of design thinking.