

POSITION STATEMENTS & RESOURCE REVIEWS

DESIGN: AN INDETERMINATE ZONE OF PRACTICE

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Editorial Note

Jenny Toynbee Wilson, Adjunct Professor of Visual Communication at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), retired from fulltime academia in 2004 after 27 years. She was a founding staff member of the Bachelor of Design (Visual Communication) degree at UTS and remains a passionate design educator. Her career spanned an era of unprecedented change in Australian higher education, an era that radically transformed the nature of design education. Anticipating these shifts she completed her masters, in teaching and learning, at UNSW in 1995. These papers are a combination of edited excerpts from her thesis and reflections upon the nature of design education in this changing environment. A combination of limited outlets at the time and Jenny's enthusiasm for lots of teaching and curriculum development has meant that this material has never been published. Though some of the issues raised are more familiar to us now than they were at the time, the publication of these papers provides both an important historical snapshot, via Jenny's experiences at UTS, and a timely reminder of the issues that still confront us.

visual:design:scholarship takes great pleasure in publishing these papers and hopes that in doing so the contribution to design education by this remarkable academic may be shared more broadly than it has to date.

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Design is losing its identity. Cynics may claim it never gained one, but the role and responsibilities of designers and their practice are becoming more, rather than less, obscure. Why has design become an “indeterminate zone of practice” (Schon 1987) with a big identity problem?

The product of design is all around us. Every material object, built space, engineered structure, software package, TV program and take-away meal offers constant evidence of design activity. This may be the core of the problem. Design has become so integral to our existence in the ‘unnatural’ world of our own making that the social recognition of designer and the discrete identification of design practice has become lost in the glut of our own mass production. Since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, two centuries ago, and now at the beginning of a new, possibly more significant digital era, many new breeds of designer have been spawned. The exponential growth of new technologies has expanded the demand for technically proficient expertise and has offered easy access to ‘do-it-yourself’ software has served users into a false sense of confidence resulting in a proliferation of substandard design which has discounted the value of expertise...visual junk, so that the title of designer and the means of design production has become dispersed amongst an increasing number of technically competent but otherwise uneducated practitioners.

The “traditions of the calling” (Dewey 1974) have become confused by the input of many levels of different expertise into the total process and production of design. As design tasks become more sophisticated and complex and specialists are introduced into interdisciplinary design teams, the role of each individual designer has become obscure with responsibilities effectively removed from public scrutiny. Who is, or who is not a designer becomes a contentious issue for those who believe they are and for those who perceive deficiencies in others. The previously clear boundaries of socially perceived and professionally protected territory have become indistinct. This more pluralist approach to design decision making may be indeed preferable as it presents opportunities for more democratic participation in the process and leads to wider support for the ultimate outcome. The down side is that it does inevitably lead to blurred roles, vague responsibilities and a level of unaccountability for ultimate outcomes. Either we accept that the more clearly defined identity of designer and practice will erode further or we must redefine the role.

We may be witnessing the demise of the designer who realises ideas in the production of useful products and can claim ownership or at least make a claim of intellectual property rights on a dream turned into reality. Perhaps we have designed enough stuff to do us for the next decade. Carl Rogers stated years ago that as an educator he saw his role not as teaching but of facilitating learning. If we apply this model to design we would see a change. Designers would not design but facilitate in the process.

As a process that leads to a product, design remains a mystery to the non-designer. Most often design is a hidden factor until identified by default. Only when a product fails to work, a message is ambiguous, a building destroys our view, the VCR is impossible to program and every bathing costume fails to flatter, does the average user turn his/her mind to designer and design. Its absence makes its pres-

ence felt.

Design then becomes identified through failure, inadequacy, insensitivity or non-existence. In other words, we more often find it easier to define design that is bad or does not work, than identify design at all when effectively and efficiently executed. When a product is acknowledged as 'good design' or 'well designed' the comment is most often a reflection of its aesthetic appeal or overt style and commodification.

This is not to suggest that on occasions/sometimes (in specific cases) this should not be the desired outcome. On the contrary, a positive emotive response to a well conceived design specifically aimed at evoking aesthetic pleasure is often crucial to the effectiveness of a designed product whether space, structure, object, garment or message. However, appreciation at only this level tends to promote the drama of difference and the visually bizarre at the expense of other approaches to design which are devised with a very different set of criteria for evaluation.

Much design activity is focused on production with an agenda which may not be incompatible with that of aesthetic appeal but which uses a very different value system and prioritises these accordingly. Criteria such as: comfort, safety, clarity, legibility, affordability; ability to be recycled; environmental sustainability may top the priority list for the designer but go unrecognised and unappreciated by the user. No regard is paid to significance of the aim of the designer and the objectives of the design in the context of an oversupply of obsolete consumer goods.

It is regrettable that alternative appreciative systems have failed to be promoted at any serious level beyond that which provokes comments based on notional tokenism. The commonly accepted declaration of what constitutes good design in the eye of the public and the marginal place attributed to design that fails to exhibit its features overtly is a symptom of our traditional status and alliances. This is a reflection of the symbiotic relationships previously operating between design, art and craft. Although on occasions, attempts have been made to extract one from the other and divorce the relationship to find a new partner, few have been successful and the memory lingers particularly in the mind of the public. While acknowledging that this issue remains contentious there is now much evidence that old quarrels are being resolved and relationships revitalised.

As new partnerships have not resulted or have failed the compatibility test, the position of design remains in a state of flux. The eroding public profile of professional practice reflects this state. Attempts to provide some meaning must either return to the time when the model was more stable or be redefined as new, viable alternative forms of practice.

It is ironic, but probably inevitable, that the discrete identities of design as a number of separate, non-aligned professions (they never belonged to one), are now an anachronism. It may be time for design to seek many different partners and add value to other professional activities. Design is defined as a process deliberately made to affect change from an existing state to one most preferred. What is preferred is the question.

The digital era may provide some answers or at least a way of some projection of changes that may occur. The ultimate design task, presently being undertaken, which will ensure anonymity for designer and design must be that of designing

an effective machine/user interface. In simple terms, this requires a design to be devised which ensures optimum ease of use in operating a piece of equipment. Visual communication designers are now involved in screen/user interface design which similarly demands a design which enables users maximum ease of access to digitally stored information. It is interesting to speculate on the peculiar identity that will evolve of a visual designer whose primary task is to design in such a way that their practice is totally invisible. This indeed presents a pretty paradox.

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