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# The Need for Design History in HCI

Last summer I had the opportunity to visit the Triennale di Milano, an Italian design museum. One of the exhibitions was “Italian Design Beyond the Crisis: Autarky, Austerity, Autonomy,” which proposed and examined the idea that economic crisis might generate creative designs. It included work from three decades: the 1930s, the 1970s, and the 2000s. The show was amazing, with an abundance of objects and material that helped make sense of the items individually and connected them in a stream of historical design practice inextricable from social and political context. It’s cliché to say, but I left the exhibition inspired.

In addition to providing inspiration, the show reminded me of the value of cultural history, specifically of design history.

Design history is a field with all of the trappings as such: It has a journal, a conference, and several edited readers and graduate programs to educate the next generations of design historians. Most design programs require at least one design history course. In addition, the objects of design history (posters, toasters, and the like) are often included as part of a general studio education, at least through examples provided in class lectures. All of which is to say: Design history isn’t some arcane academic practice, but rather something fairly common.

Except in HCI.

It struck me that there is very little design history in HCI and that this is a problem.

Now, before I go further, let me acknowledge a couple of other arguments and set them aside. One could argue that there isn’t much design history in HCI because there

isn’t really much design in HCI. That might be the case, but that’s another essay. And *Interactions* covers design, so we should at least be chatting about design history here. One could also argue there isn’t much design history in HCI because there isn’t much history at all in HCI. This is true. As HCI scholars, students, and practitioners, we *should* study and be more familiar with the history of computing, generally, and the history of HCI, specifically. But what I want to focus on here is design history.

For the sake of brevity, I’ll cut to the chase. Design history is important to HCI for at least two reasons. First, it can help us understand the practices and products of contemporary design. Second, it can help us identify inventive moves we might make in our own designs.

Why do Apple products look the way they do? Many would answer it’s because of the designers at Apple, specifically Jonathan Ive. But Ive’s decisions are neither random nor personal whim. They are clearly and explicitly informed by traditions in design, specifically the work of

Dieter Rams. Lest someone accuse me of armchair history, Ive himself has made clear the influence of Rams on his thinking and making [1]. This



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connection between Ive and Rams is not news, but it’s illustrative of the value of design history. If we take the influence of Rams on Ive seriously, we get insight into not only the formal characteristics of these products but also the thought, the reasoning, behind these forms. Spend an afternoon reading Rams, watching him speak, tracing his work over several decades, and it becomes clear that these aesthetics express an articulate design philosophy—one that we can better appreciate, interpret, and comment upon with an understanding of design history.

Back to the Triennale and the exhibition. One of the things I gained

from it was an appreciation of the fact that crisis is a recurring affair. From the perspective of the curator, there are three notable decades of economic crisis identified within 100 years. The subtitle “Autarky, Austerity, Autonomy” refers to not the *conditions* of the economic crisis but rather a set of *responses* to economic crisis. These responses become historical motifs, repeated patterns of design activity. In addition to providing interpretation of the work in the past, we might also use such themes as starting points for work in the present. If we chose to do so, it would not be because there is some empirical or theoretical validity

support of sustainability. I had never seen the work of Enzo Mari before the exhibition. This is a loss for me because his work could be so informative to HCI, particularly to those areas of HCI design concerned with sustainability. Mari, who at 82 just recently closed his Milan studio, developed a furniture series that could be made by anyone. Well-designed furniture available to all. Mari had a value-laden DIY design approach to producing everyday products that would have real use value—the same kind of approach many strive for in sustainable HCI.

Perhaps if I had taken that course on the history of Italian design I would

to attend to history even more, and specifically to design history. If we want to understand how the world is made, we need to develop a better appreciation for the history of that making. And if we want to make the world differently (and isn't that really what much of design is about?) then we should try to learn from those who have made before us.

#### ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/anthonykosner/2013/11/30/jony-ives-no-longer-so-secret-design-weapon/>
2. Wyche, S., Sengers, P., Grinter, R.E. Historical analysis: Using the past to design the future. *Proc. of the 8th International Conference on Ubiquitous*



to them, only so we could say, “This is what designers have done repeatedly in the past. Might that be an appropriate strategy for today?”

We might even look at the specifics of a single designer, someone whose response to crisis in the past was especially notable. In the same way that I've turned to Rams for design thinking and a formal language to shape our appreciation of and interaction with modern technology, we might, for example, look to designers such as Enzo Mari to help us craft a design strategy for practices and products in

have known of Mari's work. Or perhaps if I had kept up with reading design history as I delved into the “current” research of sustainability I would have come across his work sooner and been able to draw lessons from it for my work. What is important is the recognition of the importance of history. I'm not the first to say this. Susan Wyche, Phoebe Sengers, and Beki Grinter wrote a fantastic paper on the use of history in HCI [2]. And Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell have also made good use of history in their work on ubiquitous computing [3]. But I think we need

*Computing*. P. Dourish and A. Friday, eds. Springer-Verlag, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2006, 35–51; DOI=10.1007/11853565\_3; [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/11853565\\_3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/11853565_3)

3. Dourish, P. and Bell, G. *Divining a Digital Future: Mess and Mythology in Ubiquitous Computing*. MIT Press, 2011.

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