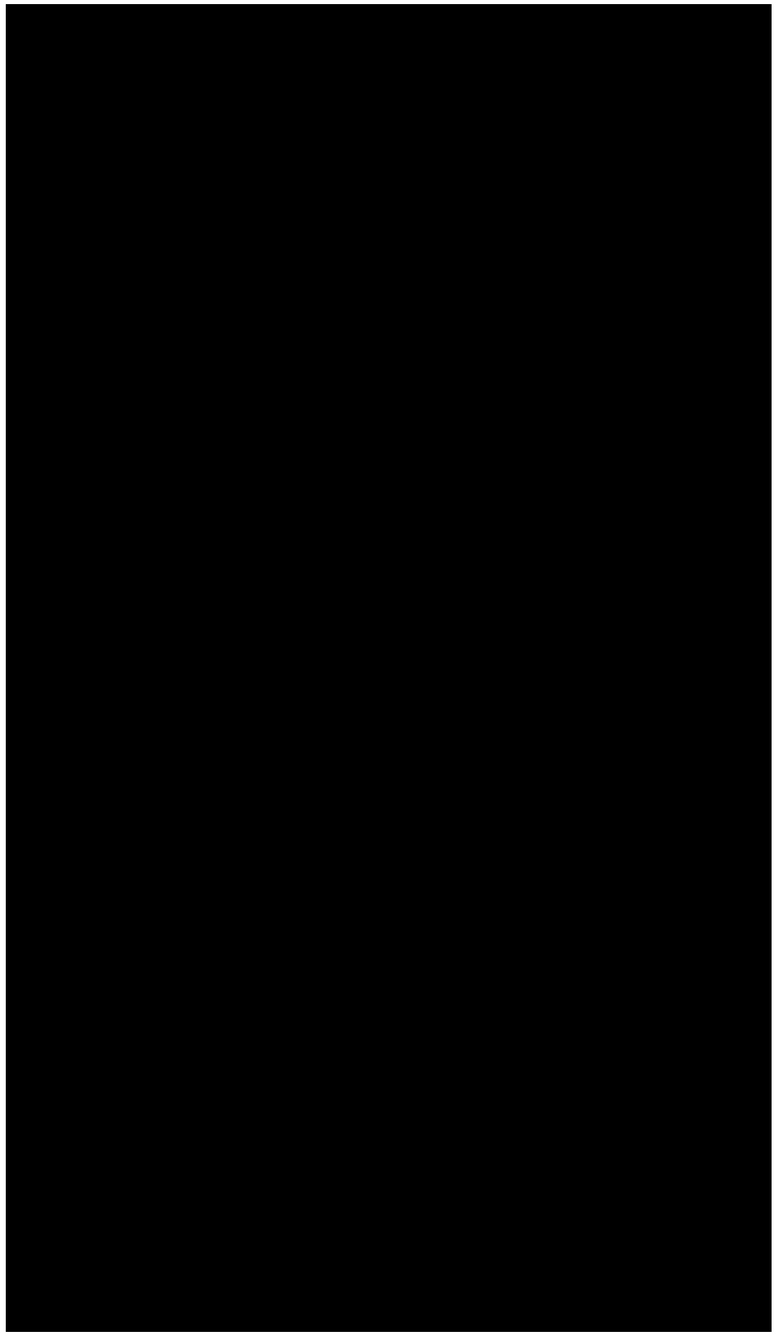
THE RESPONSIBLE OBJECT

A History of Design for the Future

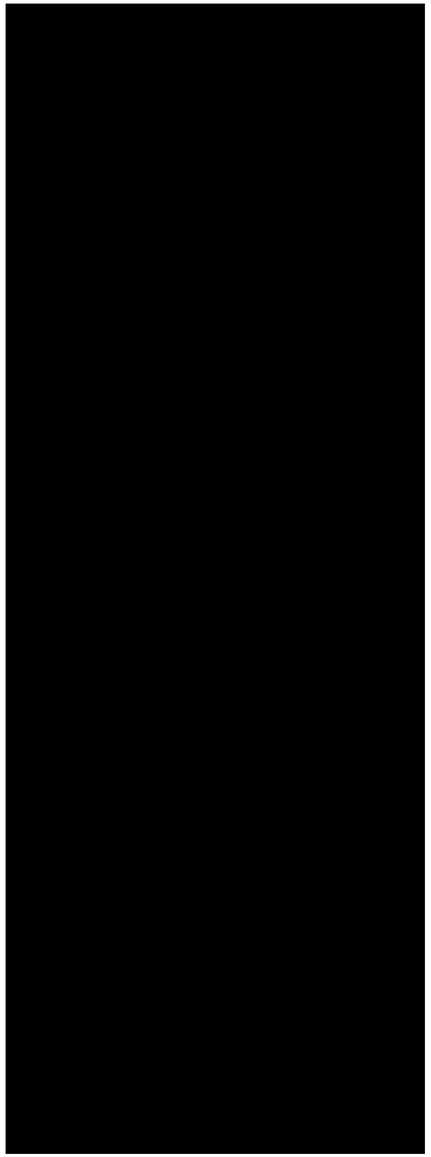
Marjanne van Helvert



01 Introduction

What would future archaeologists think of our time, if they were to dig in the places that used to house our long gone civilization?

Operating from some dystopian, post-apocalyptic ‘desert of the real’, full of menacing artificial intelligence, zombies, or post-human humanoids, or alternatively from the green, clean, utopian oasis of a more optimistic future, they would certainly have no trouble finding stuff. Once, the only physical leftovers of forgotten times were bones, stones, and later metal pieces, all of the more perishable materials such as wood and textiles having long since decomposed.



01 Introduction

Digging for treasure from the twentieth century, however, would result in the discovery of countless dumpsites of things we threw away: plastic and metal objects, still smouldering heaps of discarded electronics, synthetic textiles, and other things that do not decompose within a foreseeable passage of time. Then there would be the boneyards of automobiles, ships, and aircraft that have accumulated over the past century, and perhaps there will be ruins of abandoned cities and shopping malls full of crumbling concrete and asphalt. What the archaeologists of the future would find are

the leftovers of an age of rampant, imperishable, man-made objects.

Today, in an economic system that revolves around producing and consuming these objects, we are starting to review their role in a series of challenges that lie ahead of us.

Through global warming and environmental pollution we have been transforming essential life-sustaining systems on our planet on such a scale that a dramatic impact on the quality of life of future generations is unavoidable. In reaction to the growing awareness of these issues, some designers are taking responsibility for developing more sustainable products and systems, and for promoting a more equitable distribution of resources that might allow for everyone to benefit equally from increasingly necessary strategies to cope with climate change, loss of biodiversity and material scarcity. Within the design discipline, sustainability and social responsibility have become some of the most prolific buzzwords of the past decade, generating countless new products, materials, and technological implementations, as well as books, exhibitions, and conferences on these subjects. Often grouped together under popular adjectives such as sustainable, green, eco, humanitarian, critical, and, most encompassing, social design, they represent a new wave of socially committed design that expresses itself in objects and concepts designed to improve people's present-day lives and futures, and products and initiatives that endeavour to change the world.

01 Introduction

Despite the focus on contemporary issues as new challenges for the design discipline, most of these design problems and solutions are not new.

They are not unchartered territory but have been part of the canon of industrial design history, as well as of world-wide, vernacular design traditions. Needless to say, many of the recent social design practices are based on ancient developments and techniques that have proved their merit in the centuries before industrialization. During most of human history, natural materials and renewable energy sources were the only ones available, and recycling and repairing artefacts has always been indispensable considering their material value, as it still is for many people all over the world. These practices are now being reinvented and adapted for a new age and are transformed through new production and communication technologies. Many examples of what we call social design also, though perhaps unconsciously, build on western traditions of idealistic, ideological, utopian, sometimes noble-minded and sometimes quite patronizing or even neocolonial design solutions of the past century or so. Quite often present-day design concepts reproduce ideas that have appeared several times before in the history of design, and are, for example, reminiscent of the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement, of the techno-optimism of the space age, or the humanitarian design of the 1970s. It is good to be aware of this history, to take note of the successes of the past, and of possible pitfalls of seemingly simple solutions. Furthermore, there may be interesting designs, attempts, and ideas that run the risk of being forgotten, because they were not considered relevant at the time or were not as spectacular or aesthetically pleasing as their contemporaries that did end up in the history books.

Any recorded history not only reflects the values, ideals, politics, and preferences of the past but also those of the time in which it was written.

As we presently live in a world dominated by capitalism, the design canon generally emphasizes the designers and designs that fit capitalist ideals, such as wealth, growth, innovation, and status. Yet there are key moments in history when design was dominated by socialist and environmentalist narratives and ideals, such as emancipation, equality, durability, and ecology. This book gathers a number of examples of designers and movements from the past century and a half that combined ethical and aesthetical ideals, with the idea of changing the world for the better through their designs. Long before the long-term effects of unbridled industrialization and consumption became as clear as they are today, these designers were already concerned about disposability, waste, and toxins, and about the grossly unequal distribution of resources and rights, both locally and globally. They thought about what design could do to improve the durability, functionality, and availability of products, as well as improve the circumstances under which they are made, and the well-being of their users.

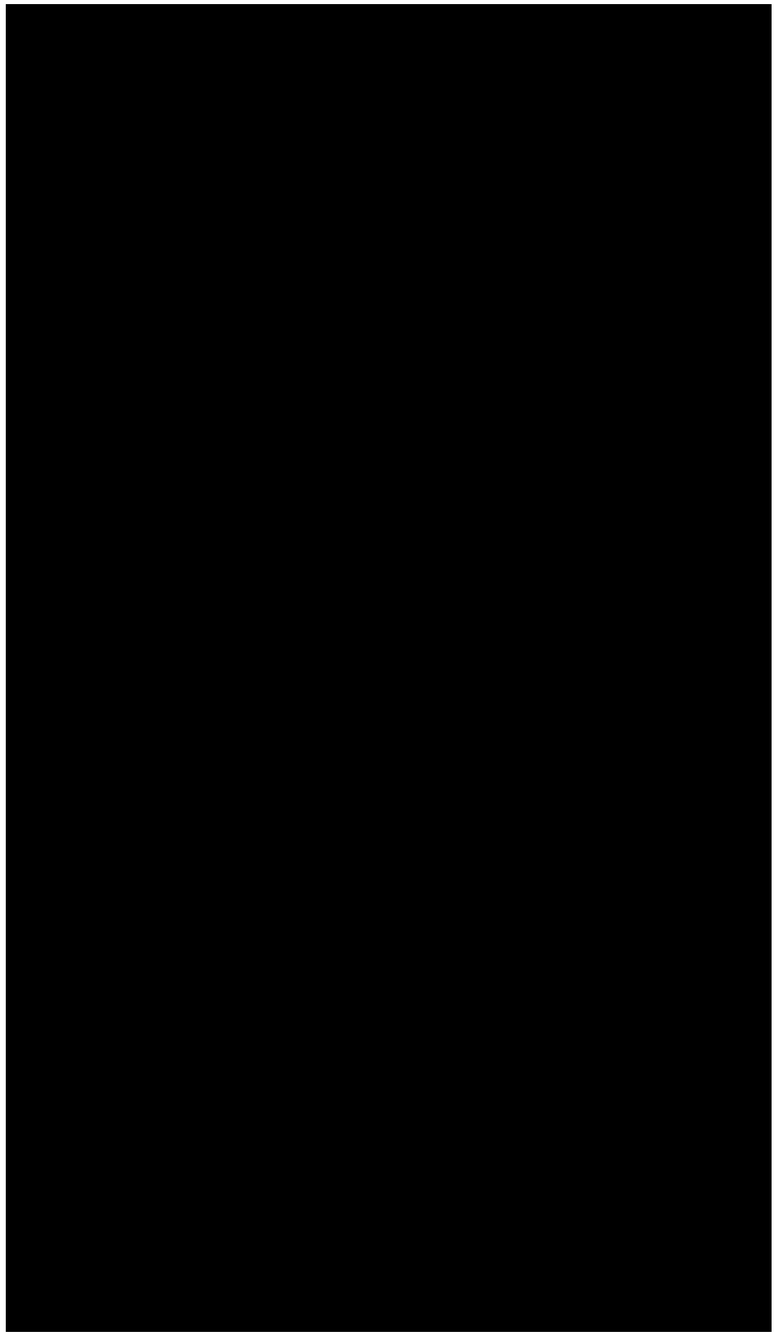
01 Introduction

This book presents a selected history of socially committed design within the Western design tradition since early modernism.

It is therefore limited, as is any design history that only looks at Western traditions, to a small group of mostly white, mostly upper- or middleclass, mostly male, mostly educated, mostly professional persons. This necessarily means it excludes, as design history conventionally has done, the achievements of women, minorities, non-Western practitioners, amateurs, and other groups and individuals that have not been considered part of the industrial design canon. A history of socially committed design from a wider, more inclusive perspective would be invaluable and much needed as well,2 yet in this book the choice has been made to focus on the intersection of design and consumer society in the history of the industrialized world.

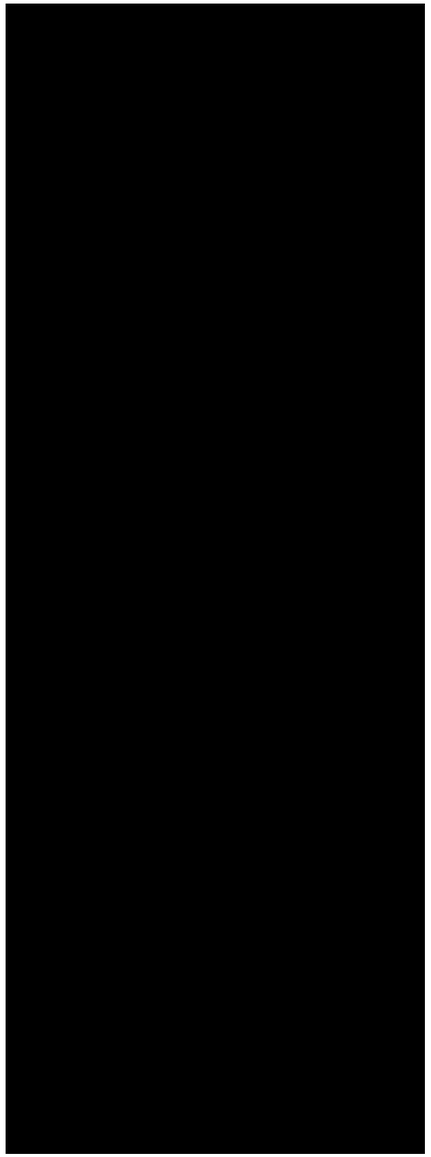
Many of our biggest challenges appear to be heavily embedded in our current system of industrial production and consumption of designed and manufactured goods, and it is time for a reconsideration of what that same design tradition has put forward to alter and subvert this system.

Moreover, to avoid framing social design as something that exists only outside of mainstream design, as something separate that can easily be ignored, it is important to call attention to socially committed practices within conventional design history as well. The following chapters offer a chronological selection of designers and design movements whose ideals, dilemmas, and designed solutions show significant parallels with those of designers today. Some of them have long been part of the Western industrial design canon, while others are perhaps less well-known. The subjects have also been selected to represent recurring themes within socially committed design practices and theories, such as craftsmanship, techno-optimism, scarcity, labour conditions, repair recycling, renewable materials, mass production, consumerism, counterculture, modernism, postmodernism, obsolescence, humanitarianism, and ecology.



William Morris (1834–1896) and the Arts and Crafts movement

appear in the first chapter of many design histories, as they can be seen to represent the beginning of product design as an independently recognized discipline, and were highly influential in the development of early modern design in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Arts and Crafts was in part an attempt at reconfiguring the role of design and craftsmanship within a newly industrialized society. Morris was one of the fiercest critics of mass production, and his preference for craftsmanship over industrial production has recently led to comparisons with the current craft revival and the maker movement.3 Despite being a passionate socialist, Morris worked almost exclusively for a wealthy elite, as his hand-crafted, durable products were not affordable to the average consumer, which is a dilemma that many designers

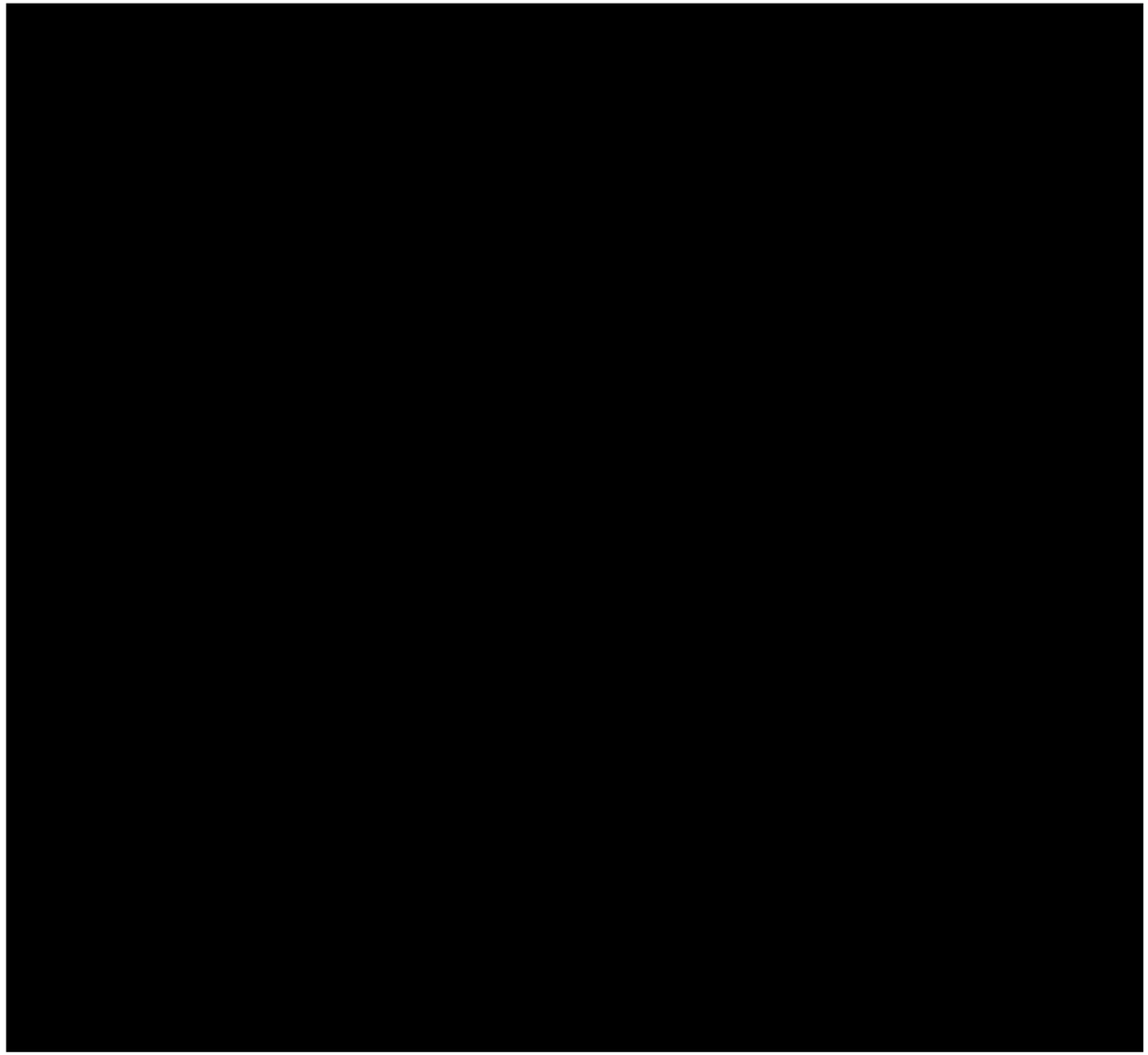


02 The Past

In her contribution, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller focuses on one of the ventures of Morris's later career, the Kelmscott Press (1891–1896), which published and produced exclusive books, and allowed Morris to put many of his ideals into practice. His visions are perhaps most inspiringly realized within the fictional setting of his utopian novel News from Nowhere (1890), which describes an ideal society having overcome all of our social, environmental, and design problems, most of which are as relevant today as they were then.
Arts and Crafts ideas were adopted and advanced throughout Europe and North America in the early twentieth century, and were further developed through design organizations such as the Wiener Werkstätte and the Deutscher Werkbund. A next big step in the relation between design and industry was taken by the

Bauhaus (1919–1932).

In what was perhaps the most famous design school in history, the goal was set at bringing industry, design, and craftsmanship together in an effort to make good design available to everybody.



At the same time in post-revolutionary Russia, a design school called

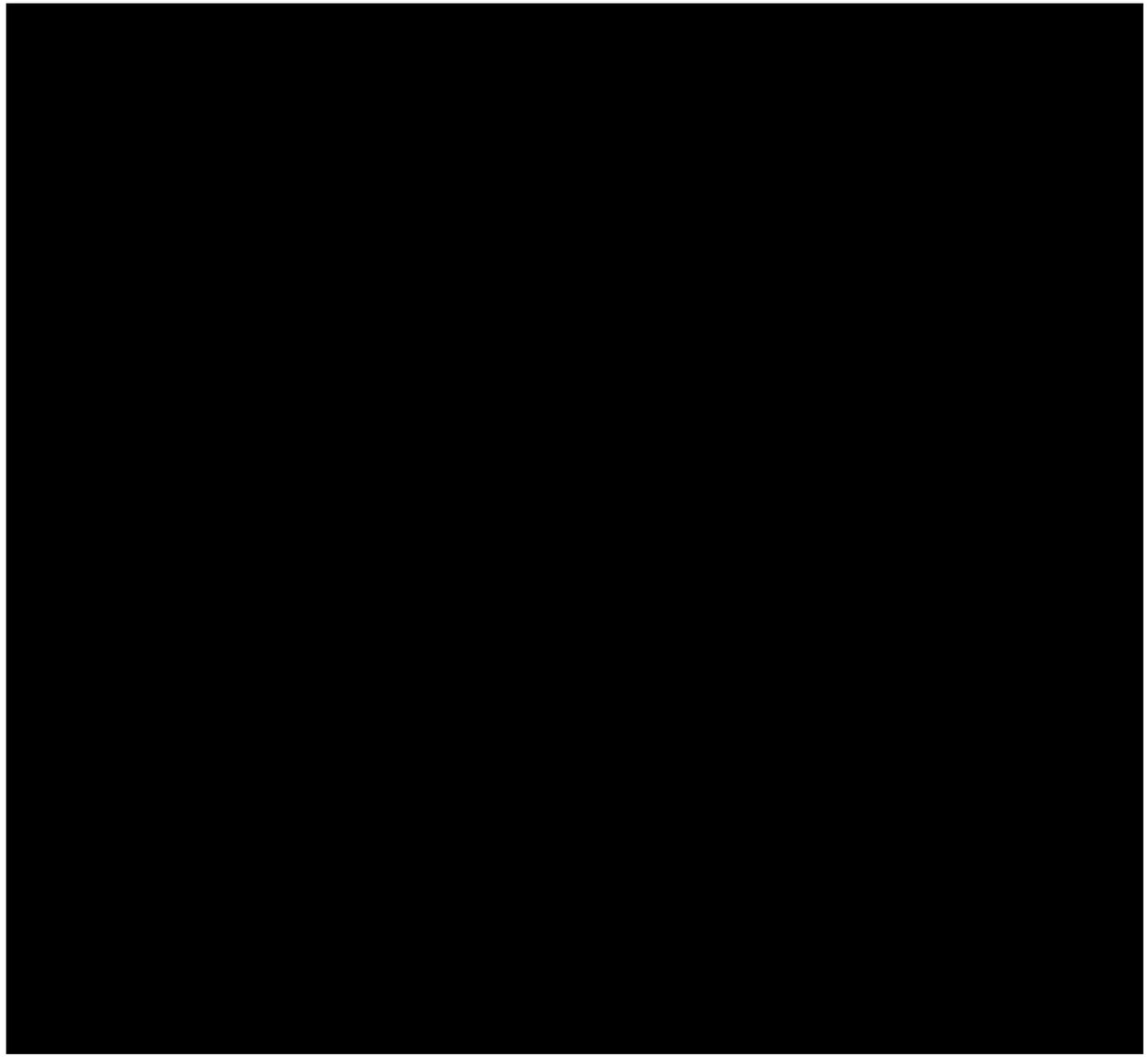
VKhUTEMAS (1920–1930)

was founded with quite similar ambitions, yet in a completely different political setting.
Éva Forgács recounts how

both schools evolved their revolutionary influential design principles amidst tempestuous social changes and material

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, (1897–2000)

was another decidedly left-wing designer and architect. Although forgotten and virtually erased from history for almost half a century, today she is most recognized for her Frankfurt kitchen of 1927, a milestone in modern, standardized kitchen design. With her progressive vision she designed apartments for single women, schools, nurseries, and modular and built-in furniture, and went to Soviet Russia to help design whole new cities in the 1930s. Susan R. Henderson describes how not only Lihotzky's impressive career has been largely ignored because she was a woman, and a communist with many of her works in Eastern Europe and Russia destroyed in the Second World War, but also that she was exemplary of the type of designer that always put her political ideals first and mostly worked on the design of the everyday.



During and after the Second World War, many countries were confronted with material scarcity.

To prevent a rampant price increase of products such as furniture, crockery and textiles, some governments developed elaborate schemes in order to counter shortages and ensure the availability of affordable, good quality products. The British CC41 Utility clothing scheme was in effect from 1941 to 1949 and employed high profile designers in an attempt to not only provide sufficient goods at reasonable prices, but also to promote modern, functionalist design to all citizens. It provides an interesting case study on the effects of designing with the idea of using the least amount of raw material and as little labour as possible, as well as on a systematic redistribution of scarce resources in order to ensure equality in times of crisis, in which the burden always rests heavier on the shoulders of the economically deprived. The attempted democratization of what was considered good design continued in post-war Europe and in the US as well, and this promotion of modern taste had a lasting effect on the design discipline.

The post-war economic boom in North America and later in Western Europe fostered a growing middle class, and lowered the prices of commodities through increased mass production. Consumer society was flourishing, and designers became stars of modern living, creating design icons that hold their status to this day. Industrial designers were assigned the task of plugging into commercial success and increase product turnover by employing styling and other forms of designed obsolescence. These techniques soon came under fire because of their implications of disposability and waste. Much of the concerns about overproduction, low-quality products, fast fashion, and planned obsolescence that we hear today were already voiced loudly in the 1950s and 1960s.

A different voice and one quite dominant in the design discipline today is that of the techno-utopian, arguably fathered by

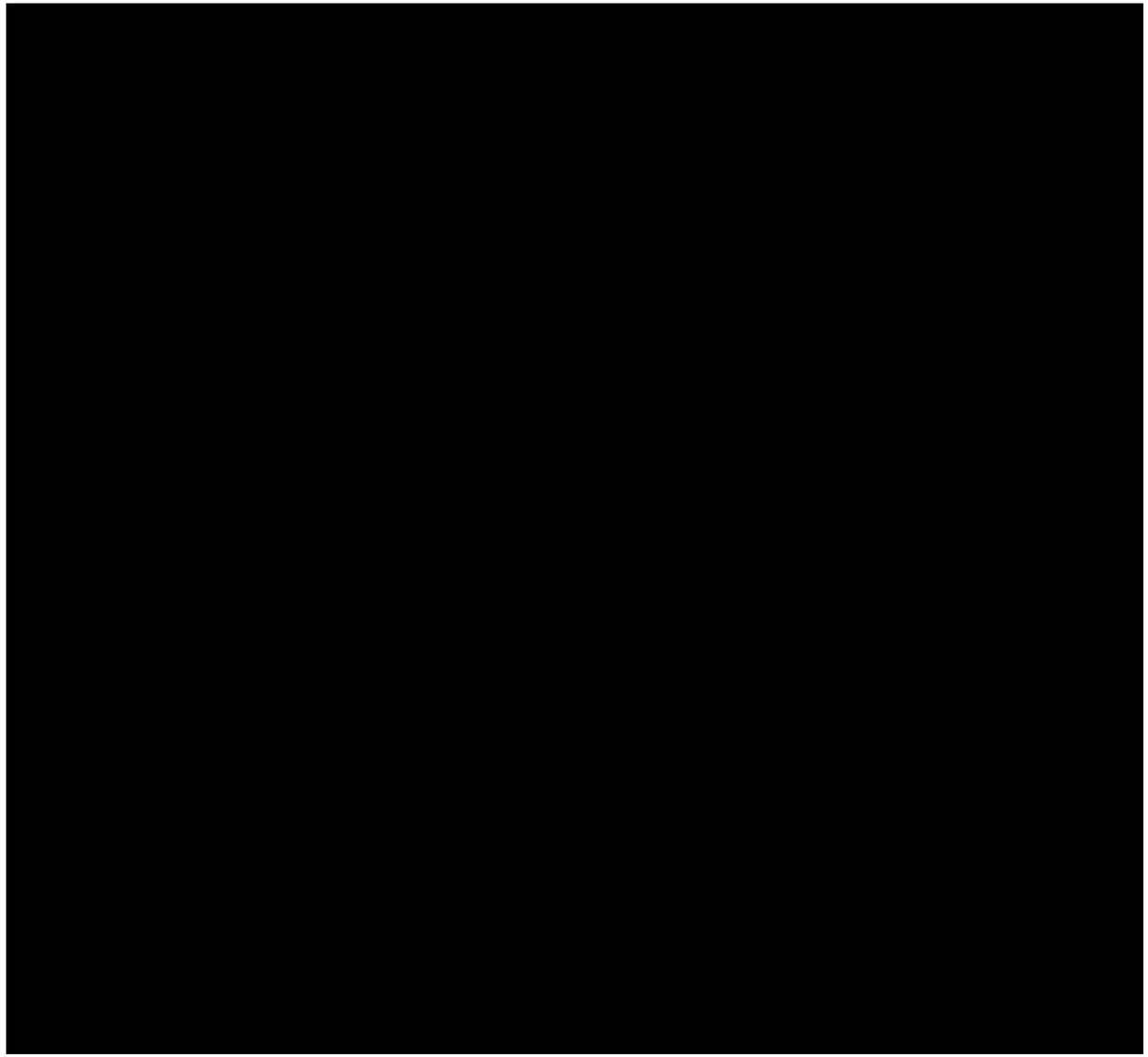
Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983).

After going through an existential crisis in his early thirties, Fuller, according to himself, decided to dedicate his life to changing the world and improving the condition of all humanity. In his contribution, Ed van Hinte recounts how Fuller invented, or re-invented, principles for efficient and lightweight constructions that save material and energy, and how he created such iconic structures as the geodesic dome and the aluminium, prefab Dymaxion House. He also popularized the term ‘spaceship earth’, which is the idea of regarding our planet as an independent vessel in space with ultimately finite resources. Fuller’s unconventional inventions went on to influence a range of counterculture and experimental designers in the second half of the twentieth century, and both his designs and his ideas remain visible inspirations to this day.

One of the most vocal critics from within the design discipline has been

Victor Papanek (1923–1998).

He argued that designers seemed to have gotten lost in creating useless and even dangerous objects, while their skills would be so much more useful in areas that design had neglected. Papanek is one of the main protagonists of the humanitarian design movement of the 1970s, of which much of today's social design can be seen as an extension. Alison J. Clarke provides insight into Papanek's ideas and how they were received in the established design community. He was not only uncompromisingly committed to the social responsibility of design, but also very concerned about the role of designers in environmental issues. Going against mainstream principles, Papanek did not believe in the workings of copyrights and patents and often published his designs for free to be copied and used by anyone.



While some designers worked decidedly from political conviction, or were persuaded by the spirit of the age, others went downright against the grain.

The work of William Morris, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky and many people from Bauhaus and VKhUTEMAS was highly influenced by the political changes happening around them, this being a time of massive social housing projects and working class emancipation in many industrialized countries, which provided important state commissions to architects and designers. Victor Papanek and many other socially committed designers in the second half of the twentieth century found themselves, purposely or not, in a more countercultural position. Design had come to be recognized as a mature and influential discipline and was thoroughly internalized by the commercial industry. The counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s, spreading from North America to much of the Western world, proved, paradoxically perhaps, a testament to the success of consumer capitalist society, as the latter quickly appropriated the aesthetics and values of youth culture and of alternative social and cultural movements as marketable strategies.

After several decades of predominantly modernist design, a plethora of pop culture influences took over.

At the same time, hippies and back-to-the-landers in the US experimented with alternative ways of building and living, in a pragmatic attempt to construct DIY utopia outside of mainstream society. In Europe, the conceptual designers of the Radical or Anti-Design movement dealt utopian modernism its final, hyperbolic blow with their megalomaniac, dystopian visions of future urban structures. . In the postmodern era that followed, which lasted roughly two or three decades, political content was highly subverted by irony and pastiche. Humanitarian and ecodesign continued to exist in the margins, but the star designers of the economically booming 1980s and 1990s were not primarily known for their social responsibility or environmental awareness.

It was not until the multiple crises of the early years of the new millennium that the search for responsible design resurfaced in its current shape and scale.

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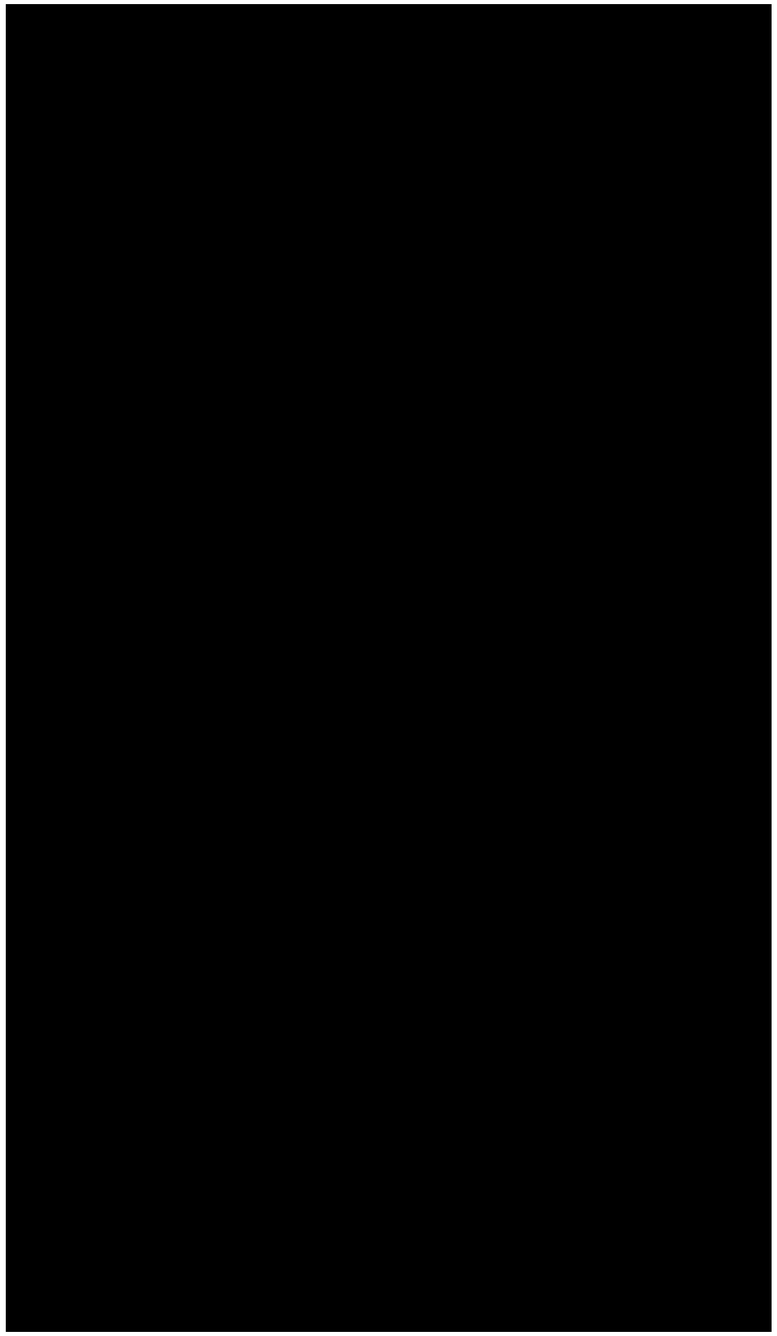
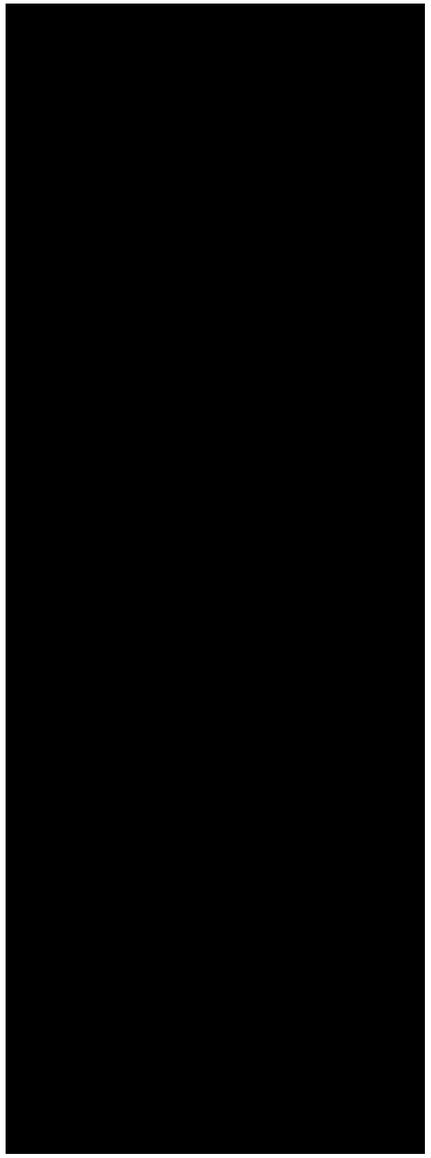


03

The Future

The final three chapters in this book offer a glance at possible futures of socially committed design, conceptualized today.

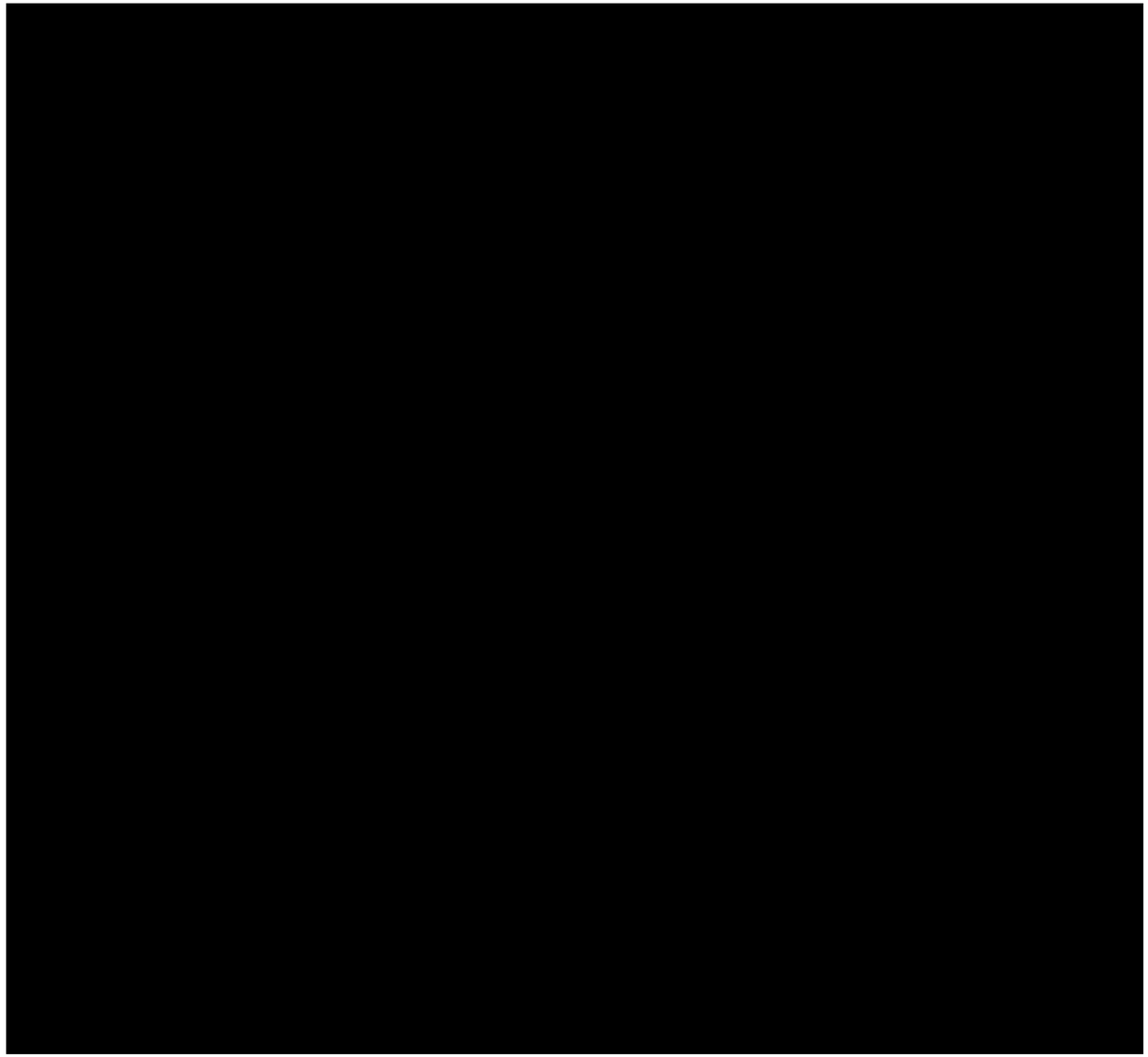


02 The Past

Ece Canlı offers a perspective on queer design culture, recounting how oppressed minorities and identities are slowly gaining visibility within the historically uniformly white, male design discipline and within culture and society as a whole.

Starting from feminist design practices in the past, she proposes queer theory as an inclusive and subversive strategy

for resisting discriminatory norms and values within design.



In the following chapter, Andrea Bandoni analyses the presently much hyped maker movement from the perspective of a series of newly installed fabrication laboratories (fab labs) in economically deprived areas in Brazil. The publicly available technologies of

fab labs are meant to emancipate citizens to design, customize, and produce artefacts themselves, and have inspired some to proclaim a third industrial revolution based on decentralized production that could yield a more equal and sustainable society.

Finally, Luiza Prado de O. Martins and Pedro J. S. Vieira de Oliveira conclude with

a speculative vision on the potential dangers of some social design projects, reminding us that design is always political.

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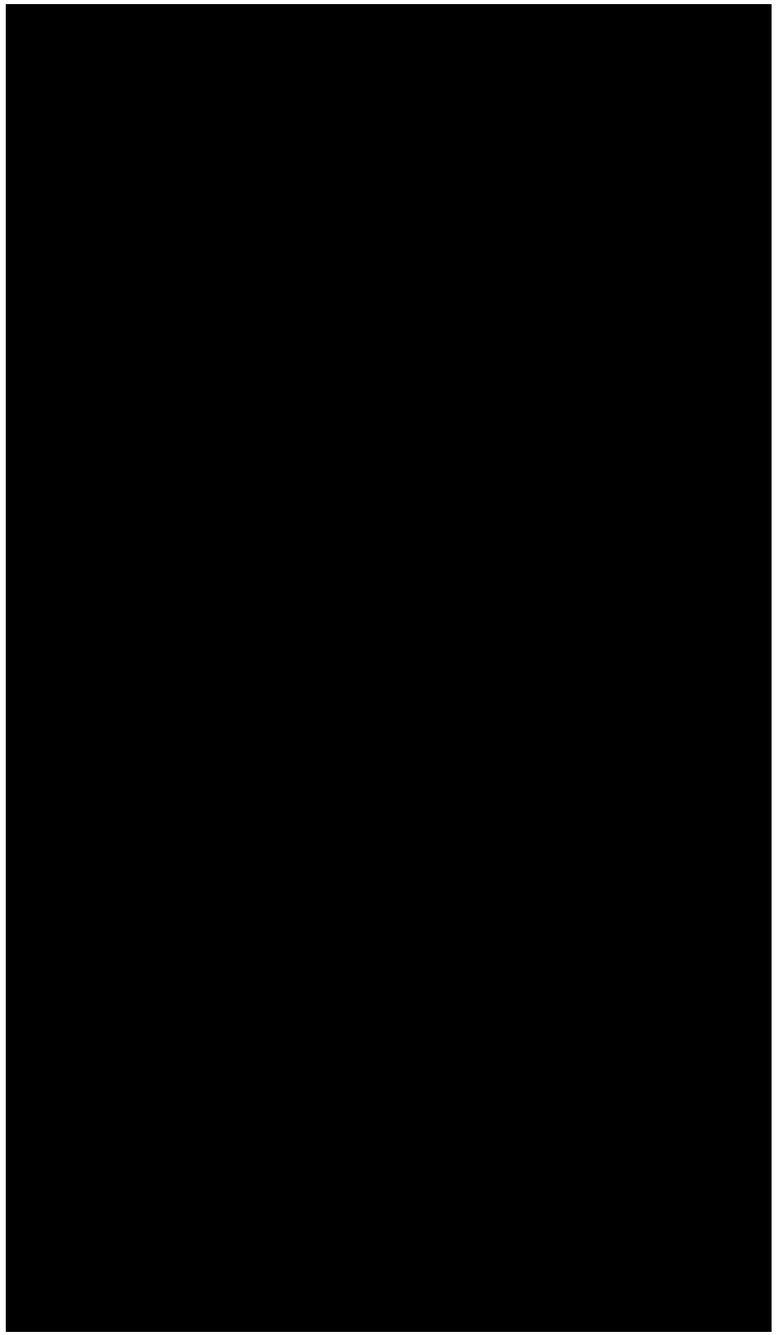
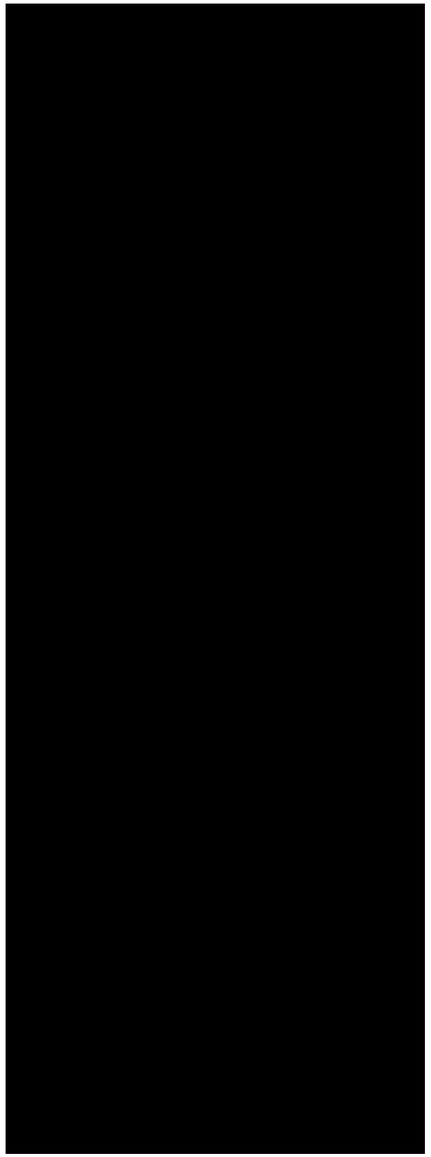


04 Conclusion



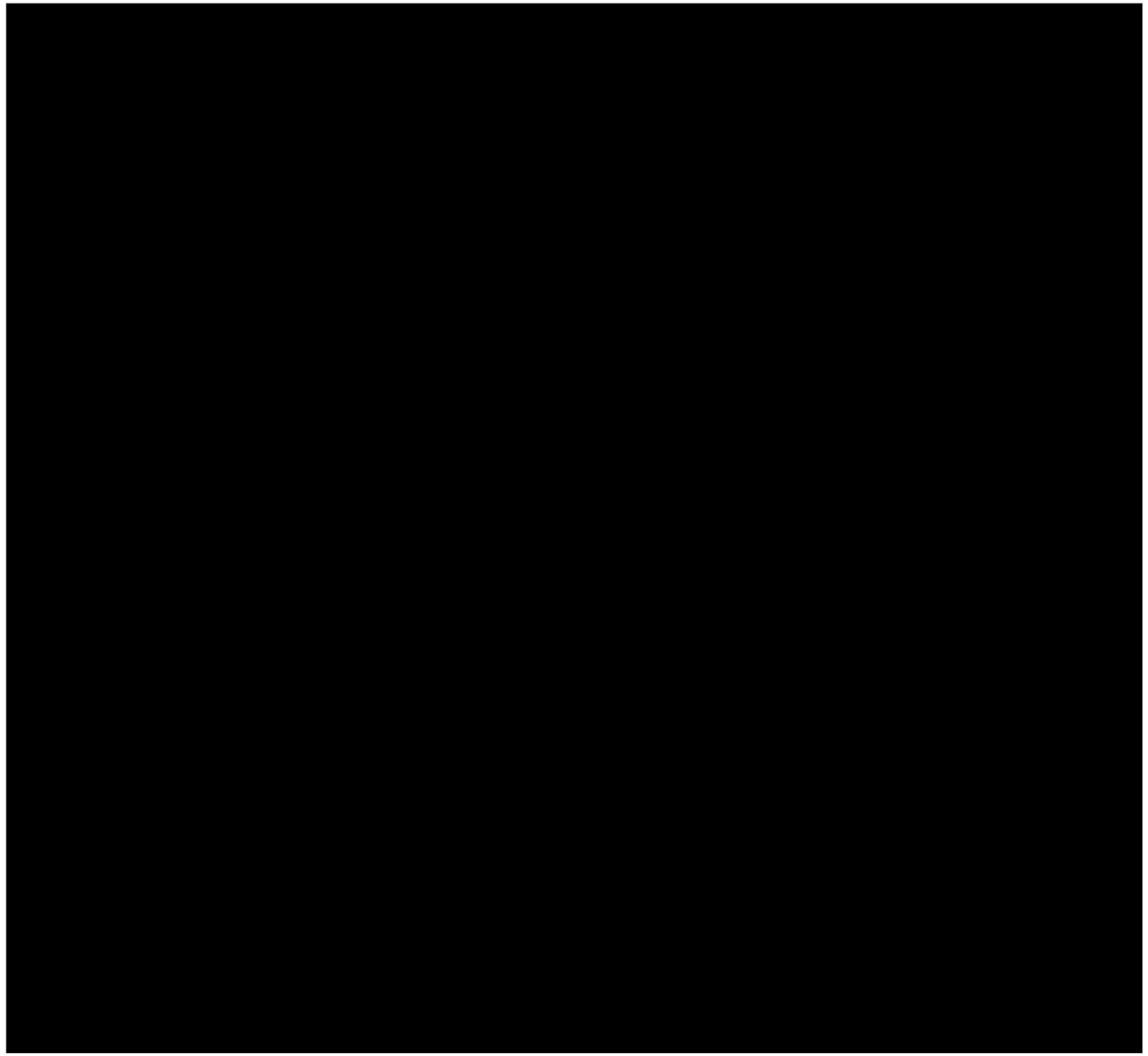
Today, a rather technocratic approach dominates social and sustainable design,

as it does the design field at large, in which problem solving does not seem to require any active political awareness, and designing as an activity is attributed with a kind of transcendental quality. The ideology that speaks from many examples of socially committed design today is one that is based on the belief in the power of design and technology as the determining forces in solving the most challenging issues before us. ‘Design thinking’ is being promoted in countless possible situations, fields and professions. It assumes that designers possess unique and universal problem solving skills which can offer creative solutions in any discipline.

04 Conclusion

Designers are being asked by governments and corporations to brainstorm about ‘wicked problems’ such as terrorism, climate change, or unemployment.

In such instances, the derived solutions often only target symptoms rather than confront the complex problems themselves, as that would require a long-term immersion into the social, economic, historical, geographical, political, and many other sides of the problem.



Historically, designers have largely worked in service of the minority of the richest people on the planet.

They have, so far, not deployed their talents and skills on a similar scale to turn around such pervasive issues as institutionalized socio-economic inequality or climate change. Wherever considerable strides forward have been made—such as in the case of halting the dwindling of the ozone layer in the 1990s or, further back in time, lifting up millions of working class citizens in European cities out of the poverty and hopelessness of slums—it was surely not without the help of political legislation and social change.

04 Conclusion

However, if design in itself is not the solution, it will certainly be part of any solution, in much the same way as it is also part of the problem.

Design is always influenced by its social and political context, and by the cultural assumptions and history of the designer, the client, and consumer. It is shaped by all of our values and desires, and in turn it is always in the process of confirming, evolving, or, less commonly, subverting the way we live, eat, move, look, communicate, work and play.5 Therefore all design is laden with political ideals, whether they are purposely bestowed on it or carried unconsciously. Despite the ambitions of the modernists, it can never be universal, neutral, or innocent, and is on the contrary often concerned with promoting some values over others. Wherever design is employed as a solution to a problem, politics are irrevocably involved, be it in the choice and formulation of the problem, or the aesthetical, productional, and material values in the designed solution. We have to see design as something that is never above ideology, but instead needs a stronger political awareness if it is to constructively move forward on complex social and environmental issues.

Design theory and design history are relatively young fields of research. They have only recently started to become recognized as serious academic disciplines,

and there is still a large gap between the worlds of design practitioners and design theorists. Unlike architecture, which has a long-standing, profound, and widely valued academic tradition, design does not yet fully profit from theoretical foundations and critical, historical analysis.

Because of its urgent nature, the field of socially committed design would benefit considerably from a more widespread historical awareness and more developed critical theory. This is therefore not another book about social or sustainable design today.

This is a book about learning from its rich history, so that we are better prepared for the future.

It is about designers who have dedicated their lives to changing the world, and about confrontations between ideals and reality. It is about revolutionary failures and invaluable steps forward. It is simultaneously a critique and above all a celebration of the tireless spirit of idealism and creativity.