1
Design History and the History of Design

It is vital at the outset to distinguish between *design history* and the *history of design*. It is unfortunate that the same words 'design' and 'history' have to be employed, albeit in a different order, to refer to different things. In other fields the problem does not arise: the science of astronomy is clearly distinct from what it studies: the universe. Design history, it is proposed, shall be the name of a comparatively new intellectual discipline, the purpose of which is to explain design as a social and historical phenomenon. It follows that the expression 'the history of design' refers to the object of study of the discipline design history. Like art history, its immediate forbear, design history is a branch of the more general academic discipline, history. And like history itself, design history has close links with other disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology (especially industrial archaeology) and sociology.

What constitutes a discipline may be hard to grasp. It can be described briefly as the ensemble of assumptions, concepts, theories, methods and tools employed by a particular group of scientists or scholars. During the early stages of a discipline, most of these assumptions, etc., will be implicit and unconscious. When they become explicit the discipline attains self-awareness. Also, of course, disciplines are defined by the particular body of material or field of research they claim for themselves. Problems relating to the character and limits of the subject matter of design history will be discussed shortly.

The awareness that a distinct discipline exists occurs when a sufficient number of practitioners become self-conscious about their activities and begin to join together to discuss common problems and interests. It is usually at this critical conjuncture that a professional organization is formed. In Britain the Design

History Society was established in 1977 even though, of course, histories of design were being written long before that date. Once an organization exists, the trappings of an academic discipline soon follow: elected officers, a newsletter, a scholarly journal, an annual conference.

Although the phrase 'the history of design' implies that there is a single, homogeneous object of study, in practice design history never supplies us with a single, complete, homogeneous account upon which we can all agree. There are always multiple histories, various histories of design. These histories are the output, the product of the discipline design history. They are physically embodied in various languages, media and forms of presentation, for example, lectures with slides, diagrams, articles, books, radio and television programmes, exhibitions.

Although various histories exist, this does not mean that there is more than one material reality – as many worlds as there are individuals. One difficulty all historians experience is that the past can never be reconstructed in its totality and completeness; every history is, therefore, a partial or simplified representation of a past situation. Selection is inevitable in history-writing. Histories differ not only because scholars tackle different facets of design but also because one historian will select and emphasize certain facts and events while another will select and emphasize different facts and events.

Two historians approaching the same subject will therefore in all likelihood produce two different accounts. For example, a survey of design since 1900 written by an Italian would, in all probability, feature Italian design more prominently than a comparable study written by an American. Similarly, a history of Soviet design is likely to vary according to whether it is written by a Marxist or an anti-Marxist. (One of the aims of design historiography is to make such differences visible and explicit by analysing texts using techniques like content analysis.) An analogy with map-making may be helpful: several maps can be drawn of the same country each of which focuses upon different features of the terrain. The various maps do not contradict one another, instead they complement one another. Taken together they provide a more complete account of the terrain

than taken singly. However, if two maps by different map-makers are produced to show transportation routes, they can be compared to the terrain in order to judge their accuracy and one map could be found more true to reality than the other. Histories can be similarly compared and evaluated, though in their case the task of estimating their truthfulness is more difficult because the terrain – the past reality they represent – no longer exists as a totality.

Design History's Problematic

'Problematic' (*problématique*) is a term employed by several French philosophers, most notably Louis Althusser, to describe the theoretical or ideological framework within which a concept or a discipline gains its specific meaning and value.[1] Besides referring to the consciously recognized theoretical problems and themes of a discipline, the term also encompasses its 'unconscious' – the problems, absences, silences which it does not acknowledge. The 'unconscious' of a discipline or a text is revealed by what is called 'a symptomatic reading', that is, attention is paid to what is *not* said rather than to what is said. For example, if a symptomatic reading of an encyclopedia of world architecture showed that African and Chinese buildings were not mentioned, then the Euro-American bias of the compilers would be revealed.

The Work of Design Historians

Rather than attempting to define design history further at this stage, it may be more useful to itemize what design historians do, the kind of work they perform:

Empirical study: design historians study and photograph designed artefacts and any drawings, models, plans or prototypes associated with them. Wealthy individuals and public museums form collections of such artefacts; however, most of the items which interest design historians exist outside museums.

Research and information gathering: design historians study

documents and images preserved in archives, libraries, museums and private collections in order to accumulate information about all aspects of the production, distribution, marketing and consumption of designed goods. Some scholars establish data banks and libraries; some interview living designers, manufacturers and consumers. All read articles and books in order to increase their knowledge of design and of its socioeconomic context.

Theoretical work: design historians categorize, classify, compare, interpret and evaluate designed artefacts. They develop concepts, theories and methods specific to design history and they also borrow ideas from other academic disciplines. They reflect upon the limits and aims of design history.

Writing and communication: design historians compile inventories, catalogues and indexes. They write scholarly treatises and more popular articles and books. They also organize exhibitions and write catalogue introductions. They give lectures and assist in the making of radio and television programmes and films about design. Their aim is to make their findings available to other researchers and to the general public.

Professional activities: design historians form organizations and hold conferences to further their discipline. They establish journals and serve on the editorial boards of scholarly periodicals and on the committees of various public bodies and educational institutions.

Employment: a few design historians are private scholars or self-employed, freelance writers or journalists. Some work as curators in museums or large firms with archives. The majority, however, teach the history of design in polytechnics, art and design colleges and universities.

The advantage of such a listing is that it suggests design history is not a unitary and homogeneous 'thing' whose being or essence can be defined once and for all, but a set of cultural practices engaged in by a specific group of intellectuals. Let us now consider some of the above topics in more detail.

Empirical Research

Empirical research involves direct experience and observation, the first-hand study by sight and touch of concrete examples. It is essential for design historians to examine designed goods and buildings 'in the flesh' whenever possible because this almost always reveals information secondary sources such as photographs fail to communicate. Furthermore, since *function* is a key aspect of design, ideally goods should be *used* as well as scrutinized. Later on, however, we shall question the conventional wisdom that the designed object is the main focus of design history.

Normally, empirical research is undertaken in respect of a predefined body or corpus of material, usually artefacts of some kind. Once such a corpus has been assembled, examined, described, categorized, classified and compared, the historian may feel confident about making some generalizations derived from the material, that is, induction rather than deduction.

Perhaps the most famous empirical enterprise in twentieth-century architectural history was Nikolaus Pevsner's systematic survey of the notable buildings of England. (Theoretical issues clearly arise in the criteria for distinguishing 'notable' buildings from the mass of unremarkable ones.) Some preliminary work was done in libraries by assistants, then Pevsner and his wife set out by car to survey selected buildings shire by shire, doing two shires per year. To complete the project took a quarter of a century (1949–74)! Findings were published in Penguin Books' *Buildings of England* series, a total of 46 volumes.

Clearly, the chief value of Pevsner's books is the detailed recording and characterization of individual buildings. This celebration of particular, unique examples is often considered to be the distinguishing feature of the discipline of history as against the physical sciences. The latter, it is argued, are only interested in concrete examples in so far as they exemplify general laws.

In the case of the *Buildings of England* series, its nature and limits were decided by Pevsner and his assistants. Museums, it could be argued, supply historians with 'readymade' bodies of

material because they usually contain several collections of artefacts. Assuming that access can be gained to them, private collections too - whether of pre-1939 wireless cabinets, scooters, 1950s' furniture, plastic products of Beatles' memorabilia - can make the historian's task much simpler.

Yet another 'readymade' source is the archives of large companies and design studios. Besides documents, such archives can include samples or prototypes of whatever the company or studio produced. Middlesex Polytechnic is fortunate to possess the contents of a designer's studio - the 'Silver Studio Collection' - which includes samples of wallpapers and textiles designed by the Silver family who practised from the late nineteenth century to 1963. The London firm of Sanderson, a furnishing fabrics, bedding and wallcoverings manufacturer founded in 1860, also maintains an archive which serves as an inspiration for its designers. Nearly 100 collections of material constitute the Archive of Art and Design, part of the National Art Library, at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Included are the papers of individual designers and craftpersons, plus the archives of relevant societies and businesses.

Exceptionally conscientious scholars include in their histories descriptions of the archive material they have used in the course of writing them. Professor Michael B. Miller, for instance, in his thorough study *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store 1869-1920* (1981) devotes several pages to the private archives of the famous Parisian *grand magasin*. He notes the gaps in the store's records and he also lists other archives in Paris which he consulted.

Besides studying artefacts and documents, historians can gather additional information by means of oral history - at least in respect of the design of the present and recent past - by interviewing designers, clients and consumers. A major twentieth-century source of observations and comments by members of the public about everyday life - the Mass Observation archive stored at the University of Sussex - is a useful resource in this respect.

Empirical research is crucial to design history but it is dependent upon a pre-existing conceptual framework of some kind. The

information it yields also gives rise to a host of questions which can only be answered by investigations conducted in other fields, for example economic history, and by theoretical work.

Classification

Categorizing and classifying are the intellectual operations by which natural scientists seek to reduce the sheer quantity of natural phenomena to manageable proportions and to impose order on infinite variety. Such operations are equally essential in regard to human material culture. To see the advantages of classification, one has only to imagine how impossible it would be to find anything in a department store if goods, rather than being organized in departments, were randomly distributed. If design historians and museum curators had to see every designed product as a unique item, they would be overwhelmed by the vast numbers and diversity of things modern industry generates.

Any complex artefact possesses a number of attributes (shape, colour, size, purpose, etc.) which means that it can be placed in several categories according to the attribute or set of attributes singled out by the scholar. Clearly, the choice of category depends upon the objectives of the historian. Often the aim is to establish a group of similar items so that comparisons can be made. Three categories have been particularly favoured by design historians: material, type and style (to be discussed individually later).

As an example let us consider the organization of artefacts in the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford. This museum houses a substantial collection of ethnographic and archaeological artefacts - tools, weapons, clothing, ornaments, ritual objects, and so on - collected by General Pitt-Rivers (1827-1900). The General's interest in this material was aroused as a consequence of a study of firearms which made him curious about cultural evolution. The collection was intended to illustrate how artefacts develop over time, hence items serving similar purposes, such as weapons, from the Stone Age to the more recent past and from different places were displayed together (instead of being arranged geographically), so that progressions from simple to complex, from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, would

be revealed. Representative rather than exceptional items were required for this purpose, so ordinary and typical specimens were acquired rather than rare, beautiful or valuable ones.

Pitt-Rivers believed that artefacts, like plants and animals, could be classified into genera, species and varieties. In the museum's classification scheme a category such as weapons is subdivided into defensive and offensive, then subdivided into kinds such as archery, blow guns, bolas, boomerangs, clubs, firearms, etc., some of which are then further subdivided into sub-types or by materials or place of origin. Overall a development can be witnessed from a simple, crude weapon such as a club to a more sophisticated, complex weapon such as a flint-lock gun. The scheme is described in greater detail in Beatrice Blackwood's *The Classification of Artefacts in the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford* (1970).

Those who have visited the museum will recall the fascination of its crammed display cases. At a glance the collection demonstrates the extraordinary inventiveness of humanity, the tremendous variety of artefacts which we have created over the centuries.

Charles Jencks, the architectural historian, is another theorist willing to apply biological ideas of evolution to his object of study. In his book *Modern Movements in Architecture* (1973) he situates all architecture from 1920 to 1970 within one of six species which he calls 'traditions' or 'movements'. They are: logical, idealist, self-conscious, intuitive, activist and unself-conscious. He claims that the last-named accounts for 80 per cent of the built environment. The basis for this classification seems to be the ideas and attitudes of architects. Jencks provides a diagram or 'evolutionary tree' which, in fact, represents the various species as streams which swell and narrow and, at times, flow into one another. Within each stream the labels of various styles and types of architecture appear along with the names of famous architects in chronological order and in differently-sized typography to signal relative importance.

Jencks acknowledges the dangers of comparing the evolution of human achievements with that of plant and animal species and admits that, unlike the latter, architectural movements never become altogether extinct because they can always be revived.

Although Jencks' classification scheme is highly questionable, it does at least enable an inclusive, comprehensive treatment of the subject; his 'plural' approach provides a more complex account than earlier, 'single strand' histories.

Taxonomy and the logical problems associated with it is too large a topic to discuss any further here. It is hoped that the two examples cited above will have been sufficient to demonstrate the advantages of classification in design history but also to indicate the disadvantages which follow from the application of any one scheme.

Theory and History

Design historians apply existing theories – such as the Marxist theory of commodity fetishism – and engage in theoretical work. The theory which concerns them is that which is going to help them to write history better, to understand design better. It is not, therefore, theory *for* design – the kind of theoretical knowledge designers themselves may use or generate – though, of course, this is of interest to design historians.

An organization which engages in theoretical deliberations about design without special reference to history is the Design Research Society, founded in 1967. Although one can distinguish between theory and history, the opposition between them should not be exaggerated because they are in fact interdependent.

In my list of design historians' work, theory and empirical research were cited separately. Such a separation is, of course, highly problematical. Philosophers of science have argued that all empirical research is theory-laden. Even if data could be gathered in the absence of theory, some theory would be needed to interpret it. David Brett, criticizing the improvised nature of design history research, writes:

> The essence of my criticism is that empirical research cannot provide explanatory structures of thought. The stress on empirical research arises *because we lack explanatory structures*. It is a sign of intellectual insecurity. In a healthy discipline, logical and conceptual enquiry starts at one end, and the

empirical research at another, and both act reciprocally upon one another.[2]

Resistance to theory is widespread among design historians impatient to practise despite the fact that one cannot begin a history of design without immediately encountering theoretical issues such as 'What criteria will limit the corpus and determine periodization?' Refusal to engage in theoretical reflection results in simplistic, crude histories which fail to do justice to the complexities of reality.[3] It is possible, however, to sympathize with those who find theory difficult and/or tedious. Theory is often extremely demanding and couched in alien vocabularies. Furthermore, while there are many theories pertinent to design, applying them is not a straightforward matter because they frequently contradict one another.

We should, perhaps, not overestimate the difficulties. What is refreshing about the writing on design and style of a cultural historian such as Dick Hebdige is his willingness to go beyond conventional modes of writing history. (Walter Benjamin's reflections on history-writing are a key source of inspiration.) The question of method is part and parcel of his way of researching and composing: he usually foregrounds methodological issues at the beginning of his articles and pauses now and then during the course of them to consider theoretical problems. Furthermore, the abstract and the concrete, the social and the personal are dialectically related in his rich and stimulating texts. His example demonstrates that theory can be combined in an exciting way with empirical research.

Language, Representation, Images

Human language (spoken or written) is, of course, the principal medium of communication used by design historians and its concrete embodiments are texts and recordings of various kinds. However, language is usually supplemented by graphic and pictorial media: slides, still photographs, diagrams, drawings, plans, films and videotapes. Most design historians generate a mixed-media discourse of words and images.

What kind of writing ought design historians to cultivate?

According to French literary theorists, a *readerly* text is one in which language aspires to a condition of transparency: language effaces itself in order to communicate a content or describe a referent. A *writerly* text, on the other hand, openly acknowledges the medium of representation (sometimes at the expense of the represented). Readerly texts, it is argued, are consumed unproblematically by the reader, while writerly texts demand work from the reader thereby turning him or her into a producer of meanings. As examples, consider the contrasting styles of writing used by Fiona McCarthy in *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (1972) (a readerly text) and by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972) (a writerly text).

Most writing on design is readerly in character. This is a sign of the unreflective nature of so much design history-writing. However, foregrounding language in the extreme way that some avant garde texts do is clearly not appropriate for an academic discipline wishing to do justice to its object of study and to communicate with an audience. Writerly writing should not serve as an excuse for confused thought and tortured expressions.

In the field of design the boundary between history and criticism is blurred. Leading design historians usually engage in topical discussions of design trends, consequently there is a marked contrast in writing style according to whether the text is a PhD thesis or a short article for a design magazine. Some writers on design – Tom Wolfe and Peter York, for example – strive to achieve a mode of writing that is as popular, witty and ironic as the design they analyse.

Most design historians aim for an impersonal, third person mode of writing – what French literary theorists call *histoire* as against *discours*, which is the immediate, personal mode in which the presence of the writer is indicated.[4] They also aim for realism in the sense that an accurate account of past events is desired. And the basis of the realist style is the patient accumulation of small, precise details.

A basic problem for any realist writing is the representation of visual/tactile artefacts in terms of a non-visual medium of expression. No visual object can be represented/described in language without loss or transformation. Objects, or rather the perceived qualities and characteristics of objects, are 'translated' in terms

of a determinate means of representation - language. As with all such representations, the question then arises: 'How truthful to reality, how accurate is this description?' Of course, design historians frequently resort to slides and illustrations to overcome this problem and to economize on lengthy descriptions. Even so, comparable problems arise when three-dimensional objects are drawn or photographed. Images are equally 'translations' of objects in terms of particular media.

A map is perhaps the ideal model for the representation of design in words and images: a map is a highly selective and schematic representation intended to serve particular human purposes. Map-makers certainly try to represent the world truthfully but without feeling compelled to include every detail; also, the sign systems they employ do not have to resemble what they represent in order to function as representations.

The role of images in a history of design book may seem a small matter. Nevertheless photographs of chairs, cars, typewriters and so on tend to enforce a particular notion of design history as the study of discrete designed objects rather than other possibilities such as designers, context and processes. Like the museum pedestal or glass case, such photographs isolate the designed object and endow it with a cult value. Furthermore, photos of objects necessarily privilege surface appearances - so, form, style and ornament are foregrounded at the expense of function or internal structure. (An exploded diagram could, of course, be used to show the interior workings of a machine or a building.)

Images are vital sources of information but, as with all representations, they form part of ideological discourses. In a slide lecture using two projectors, a design historian can alter the emphasis merely by means of the montage effect produced by different juxtapositions.

As an example of the impact of illustrations consider Reyner Banham's accusations of 'crooked argument' levelled against Le Corbusier, whose book *Towards a New Architecture* (1923) juxtaposed photographs of ancient Greek temples and modern motor cars:

> Its crookedness is disguised by the fact that the argument is

> partly verbal and partly visual. The hinge of the verbal argument is the virtue of standardization, sustained over several pages, between automobiles and the Parthenon, and the totality has been read by two generations of architects and theorists as meaning that a standardized product like a motor-car can be as beautiful as a Greek temple. In its context this is how it must be read, but the *tertium comparationis* of the argument is a disingenuous pretence – none of the motor-cars illustrated is a standardized mass-produced model; all are expensive, specialized, handicraft one-offs which can be justly compared to the Parthenon because, like it, they are unique works of handmade art.[5]

Not only are images one of the means of communication of design historians, they are also part of their object of study. Images can be studied as designed artefacts in their own right or for their depicted content. For example, few clothes from the distant past survive the ravages of time; consequently costume historians are especially dependent upon visual representation – pictorial and sculptural – as sources of information. While such images are useful, their secondary nature has certain inevitable drawbacks. In the case of a portrait in oils, for example, only a partial, frontal view of the sitter's clothes will be visible.

Today, millions of full-colour, glossy photographs of consumer goods appear in the advertising sections of illustrated magazines. These images play a crucial role in selling goods and in planting brand or corporate 'images' in the public's mind. Often these photos do not simply publicize products, they communicate a whole lifestyle and a specific set of values. Judith Williamson's *Decoding Advertisements* (1978) is a perceptive guide to the mechanisms of such images and their implicit ideologies.

Unlike those scientific disciplines which take aspects of nature as their object of study, design history is concerned with certain products of human culture. Therefore the discipline uses words and images to 'speak about' artefacts which are themselves signs, that is, statements couched in various media, forms and languages. It follows that in order to interpret the meaning of an individual designed object the historian must be familiar with its 'language',

or at least have the ability to break its code. This is the point at which the analytical tools of semiotics – the science of signs – will prove useful.

Discourse and Meta-language

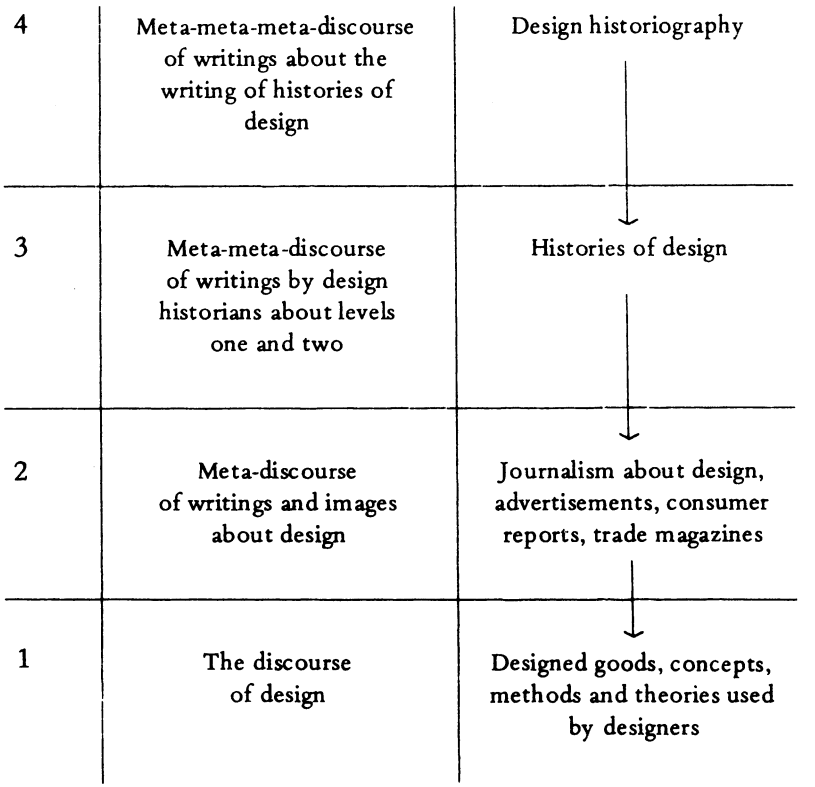
Linguistics regards a discourse as a unit of language longer than a sentence. In common usage it is day-to-day communication and conversation. Design may be metaphorically described as a 'discourse' in the sense that a flow of objects, documents and talk is generated by the daily activities of designers, clients and design institutions. Designers can, therefore, be said to be engaged in 'a discursive practice'.

A meta-language is any language or sign system which is used to speak about another language or sign system; the latter is called 'the object [of study] language'. Meta-language is a relative concept: in a French guide to English, French is the meta-language and English the object language, whereas in an English guide to French the relationship would be reversed. In a book written in English about English the difference between meta-language and object language is maintained by devices like quotation marks or italics. An infinite regress of meta-languages can also be conceived, that is, meta-meta-languages, meta-meta-meta-languages, etc.

'Meta' – meaning 'beyond', 'transcending' – can be linked to 'discourse'. Thus one can conceive of a hierarchy of discourses in which level one is the discourse of design; level two is the meta-discourse of writings and photos representing design in publicity, design magazines, etc.; level three is the meta-meta-discourse of writings by design historians which encompasses levels one and two; level four is the meta-meta-meta-discourse of writings about writing the history of design (e.g. this text).

These distinctions may seem unnecessarily cumbersome at first sight, but in the interests of conceptual clarity it is important that they be grasped.

Figure 1: *The Various Levels of Discourse*



It may, perhaps, be stretching the concept of discourse to apply it to the physical artefacts generated by the design process, but it can be argued that objects embody ideas and theories: a telescope, for instance, depends upon and embodies in its structure certain laws of optics which, presumably, could be deduced from a close examination of its parts. Nevertheless, it is the case that most writers who study discourses tend to concentrate upon texts rather than artefacts because the former are more explicit than the latter.

A number of designers and architects have written theoretical articles and books about their own practice or about issues in

design generally. This type of writing does not slot into the hierarchy of discourses very neatly. In so far as it *informs* the process of designing it belongs to level one, but in so far as it *comments* upon designing it belongs to level two.

Discourse analysis is a procedure associated with certain French philosophers, most notably Michel Foucault. Although he regards himself as an archaeologist and genealogist of knowledge rather than a historian, much of Foucault's work is highly relevant to design historians. In particular his analysis of the discourses of power in society - the formation of modes of discipline, punishment and surveillance - explain the design of penal institutions in ways conventional histories of prison architecture cannot.[6]

Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System* (1985) supplies us with an example of a second level of meta-discourse analysis. This sophisticated, semiological study of fashion is based not upon the 'language' of clothes as directly perceived but upon 'written fashion', that is, the text and captions accompanying fashion illustrations in a year's issues of two French magazines.

A third example of discourse analysis relevant to design history is Necdet Teymur's *Environmental Discourse* (1982), a complex, critical examination of the concept 'environment' as it occurs in the discourses of architecture, planning, design, ecology and the mass media.

As explained earlier, this text is concerned primarily with the meta-meta-discourse of design history rather than the discourse of design itself. This means that our principal object of study will be existing published histories of design.

The History of Design History

A detailed account of the origins and development of design history is beyond the scope of this book. Several histories would, in any case, be needed because the story varies markedly from country to country - in some places considerable numbers of design historians exist, while in others there are only isolated individuals struggling to gain recognition for the subject. All such histories would have to take into account two aspects: the

intellectual development and the institutionalization of the subject.

Britain has more design historians than any other country and the subject is, therefore, most highly developed here. Very briefly, the subject emerged in Britain as an extension of art history and was prompted largely by demands within art colleges and polytechnics in the 1960s and 1970s for courses on the history of industrial and graphic design, fashion and mass media to supplement those on architecture, painting and sculpture.

Another key impetus was provided by the establishment, in 1972, of the Open University's course on the history of modern architecture and design from 1890 to 1939. The course team, led by Tim Benton, eventually produced 16 course books plus audiovisual material in the form of radio and television programmes. A university level study of modern design thus reached a considerable audience and enhanced the prestige of design history.

Two years later the Association of Art Historians was founded and design historians met as a subgroup of this organization at its annual conferences until 1977 when they decided to establish their own society. Certain specialisms within design anticipated this development. For instance, in 1964 a Furniture History Society was formed. By the 1970s architectural history had existed as an independent subject for several decades: the Society of Architectural Historians was founded by scholars in the United States in 1940.

Various articles describe the origins of design history in Britain.[7] The most comprehensive analysis and survey of the state of the discipline is in Clive Dilnot's two papers published in the American journal *Design Issues*. They are essential reading for anyone interested in this topic.

Since design history is such a young discipline, it necessarily depends upon other, more established ones for most of its basic concepts and methods. At the beginning there was an acute shortage of publications on design to serve as student textbooks and to act as models for aspiring design historians. One of the few available texts - Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936) - indicated the intellectual roots of the discipline

in German art and architectural history. There is now no shortage of books on design but the subject is still in its formative stages and hence suffers periodic identity crises.

At the annual conferences of the Design History Society it is not unusual for much time to be spent comparing design history to architectural history, or discussing the implications for the discipline and museum curating of the various connotations of the terms 'costume', 'dress' and 'fashion'. To outsiders such debates may seem trivial and pedantic but beneath the surface, different conceptions of the subject are at stake.

Clearly, design is an aspect of human culture. For this reason it could legitimately be considered part of the subject matter of cultural studies. In terms of the development of design history in certain British institutions of higher education, the parallel growth of cultural studies courses has been an important intellectual stimulus. Cultural studies tends to be a hotbed of theories drawn from the discourses of philosophy, political economy, sociology, linguistics and psychoanalysis. The main weakness of cultural studies, as far as design historians are concerned, is the narrowness of its historical perspective: studies tend to be confined to the present and recent past. Although the interchange between cultural studies and design history has not always been productive, on the whole it has been a fruitful one. A magazine such as *Block* (Middlesex Polytechnic, 1979-), whose editors teach both design history and cultural studies, has challenged traditional divisions between subjects by publishing articles on fine art, design, mass culture, photography, feminism and historiography.

Design History, a Neutral Discipline?

Historians generally subscribe to the ideals of scholarship, independence, disinterestedness, objectivity and truth. This implies that they are non-ideological and politically neutral. Honest scholars may strive to set aside their personal beliefs, but the degree of objectivity that can be achieved is relative, not absolute. Design historians are members of society and hence their mental frameworks and attitudes are determined, to a large

extent, by their social environment. There is no escaping the fact that different design historians subscribe to different political ideologies and these inevitably affect their writings whether subtly or blatantly. The divisions evident in society at large are reflected within the discipline itself. To cite an example: since the advent of the women's movement in the late 1960s, various academic disciplines including design history have been subjected to feminist critiques which revealed a male bias. Self-consciously political, the feminist design historian of today seeks to reconstruct the discipline to take account of women's needs and interests.

Besides gender, the issues of race and wealth are also relevant. To a black person from a developing country, design history appears to be a white, middle-class profession of the world's affluent, advanced nations. As James Woudhuysen remarked in 1985: 'one of the great passions of the early 1970s – the Third World – is almost completely absent from contemporary discussions of design.'[8] Although the situation is slowly changing, Britain's ethnic minorities too are poorly represented in art and design education and in the design history profession. The role of design in the culture of ethnic minorities also receives little attention.

In the light of this, any definition of design history is likely to be temporary. The discipline is not static; indeed one could say it is a site of contest between different factions.

Design history is not netural in respect of design either because although historians may think of themselves as detached observers of design, their histories are read by practising designers and students (the influence of theory and history is particularly evident in the field of architectural design). In other words, histories of design have a feedback effect: for instance, they may unwittingly encourage stylistic revivalism and eclecticism. Realizing this, some historians write in a polemical way precisely in the hope that they will influence the direction of the future of design.

The Value of Design History

Design history's main value should be to deepen and strengthen

the writing of histories of design. It should benefit design historians by identifying, naming and discussing theoretical problems and issues.

By posing fundamental questions such as 'For whom are histories of design written?', 'Whose interests do they serve?', design history also fulfils a critical role in respect of the discourse of design. Such a critical function is all the more necessary in a period when design historians and journalists find their historical knowledge and expertise being harnessed by government and business to achieve goals they may not share.

As an example of the economic and ideological uses to which a design historian can be put by business, consider the advertisement on the back page of *The Face* magazine for June 1987: a smiling Stephen Bayley, curator of Terence Conran's Boilerhouse Project and museum of design, endorses an expensive leather sofa and fabric from the London store Liberty's. Simultaneously, he advertises one of his own books. The copy plays on the word 'liberty' and defines it in terms of the consumer's freedom of choice. Evidently, in this instance a design historian lends his authority and charisma to the selling of goods and the selling of ideas.

Whatever opinion one holds of Bayley's complicity with commerce, the fact that a design historian should be sufficiently well known to feature in an advertisement is a sign of how fashionable design history has become in the 1980s.

Notes and References

1. See B. Bewster, 'Glossary' in L. Althusser and E. Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1970) p. 316. On the use of problematic applied to architectural discourse see D. Porphyrios, 'Notes on method', *Architectural Design* 51 (6/7) 1981 pp. 96-104.
2. D. Brett, 'Directions in design history today' in *The Teaching of Art and Design History to Students of Art and Design* (Dublin: Association of Irish Art Historians, 1986) pp. 13-23.
3. For a devastating attack on blind empiricism see T. Adorno, 'Sociology and empirical research' in P. Connerton (ed), *Critical Sociology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) pp. 237-57.
4. See C. McCabe, 'On discourse', *Economy and Society* 8 (4) August 1979 pp. 279-307.

5. R. Banham, 'The machine aesthetic', *Design by Choice*, ed. P. Sparke (London: Academy Editions, 1981) pp. 44–7.
6. See M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).
7. A. Forty, 'Design history: a politique and a pedagogy', *Architectural Association* 5 (4) Oct/Dec 1973 pp. 48–9; T. Benton, 'Past should be looked at through well-designed spectacles', *THES* 10 Oct 1975 p. 7; B. Wilkins, 'Teaching design history', *Bulletin of the Association of Art Historians* (2) Feb 1976; M. Whitbread, 'Art and design history in polytechnics and art colleges', *Bulletin of the Association of Art Historians* (3) Oct 1976; D. Jeremiah, 'History of design: a problem of source material', *Art Libraries Journal* 2 (1) Spring 1977 pp. 33–9; C. Ashwin, 'Art and design history: the parting of the ways?', *Design History: Fad or Function?* (London: Design Council, 1978) pp. 98–102; J. Blake, 'The context for design history', *Design History: Fad or Function?*, pp. 56–9; B. Smith, 'Design history and the visual language of design', *Information Design Journal* (1) 1979; F. Hannah and T. Putnam, 'Taking stock in design history', *Block* (3) 1980 pp. 25–34; T. Fry, 'Design history: a debate?', *Block* (5) 1981 pp. 14–18; C. Dilnot, 'The state of design history: part one, mapping the field', *Design Issues* 1 (1) Spring 1984 pp. 4–23. 'Part 2', *Design Issues* 1 (2) Fall 1984 pp. 3–20; J. Attfield, 'Defining the object and the subject', *THES* 1 Feb 1985 p. 26; R. Kinross, 'Design history's search for identity', *Designer* Nov 1985 pp. 12–13 (this issue also lists courses in UK institutions); D. Brett, 'Directions in design history today', pp. 13–23; Toni Del Renzio, 'Mistaken identities in the history of design', *THES* 4 Feb 1977; P. Madge, 'Design analysis and design history', *Information Design Journal* 3/1 (1982) pp. 23–9.
8. James Woudhuysen, 'A new kind of nationalism in design', *The Listener* 12 September 1985 pp. 11–12.