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General Problems of History-writing

Since design history is a branch of the discipline history, design historians encounter in their practice the same basic methodological and theoretical problems as do all historians. The study of these problems is known as 'historiography'. Historians have been reflecting on their discipline for a long time, so a mass of literature and a complex body of theory now exists.[1] All that is feasible here is a summary of some of these fundamental issues.

History and Histories

From the point of view of clarity it is unfortunate that the word 'history' has two meanings: first, those events which actually happen and secondly, writings about those events. History (in the second sense) is a discipline whose object of study is the behaviour of human beings, human societies through time. Natural forces and events have also to be considered, to some extent, because they clearly shape human action.

Historians writing about times before living memory must necessarily rely for their information on objects, documents and other kinds of evidence surviving from the past. Using this material as a basis, historians attempt to reconstruct what happened and why. This activity has been called 'retrodiction' (i.e. the opposite of 'prediction'). Since the historical reality described in such reconstructions can never be known to the scholar or reader directly, judging the truth or accuracy of histories is highly problematical. Even when two historians agree upon the facts, they may not agree about the significance to be attached to them.

Although historical reconstruction is based upon evidence which has survived destruction, the aim of that reconstruction is, of course, to describe people, events and social formations which

no longer exist. The first responsibility of design historians is, therefore, to reconstruct the meanings and significances which designed goods had for those for whom they were made. However, their task does not end there because it is also important to trace their subsequent history and consider what meanings, if any, they have for people now.

Only some of the artefacts which a society produces survive into the future. Some survive in greater numbers than others – because they were made of precious metals, more durable materials, or were habitually hidden underground – thus creating, at a future date, a partial picture of the original culture. Similar kinds of 'distortion' can occur if the authority of ancient documents and their authors is not regarded sceptically. Furthermore, documents can lie; they may even be later forgeries. The unavoidable reliance of the historian upon the artefacts of the past has always to be tempered by a sense of the inevitable gaps and biases in the record. Wherever possible, evidence should be cross-checked.

Facts and History-value

Every recorded item of information, however trivial, is a fact surviving from the past. Billions of facts are available to scholars but not all can be cited in a history, not even a history of the world. A drastic process of selection has to take place. In order to be selected a fact must be considered significant in some way and significance varies according to the conceptual framework and objectives of the historian. Facts do not speak for themselves, they have to be contextualized, evaluated and interpreted. Speculation and theories about what happened in the past drives historians to search for further information to confirm or refute their ideas. And the discovery of new facts modifies or overturns existing theories. It is a continuous, reciprocal process. All conclusions reached are provisional in the sense that new evidence may cause them to be revised.

Incidents considered important enough to be reported by the daily press are said to have news value. It is obvious from the varying amounts of space allocated to different stories within

the same newspaper, and by different newspapers, that the news values of particular stories varies enormously. A similar process is at work in history-writing: different scholars assign different history values to the same facts or events. Although historians assign history values as they write, this does not mean that any construction will carry conviction. Some events are so cataclysmic they are recognized as important by virtually everyone. A general history of the twentieth century which omitted the two world wars and the Russian revolution, for instance, would be regarded as perverse, to say the least.

The Past/Present Distinction

Most historians assume that the dimension of time is uni-directional and irreversible, like the flight of an arrow. They also assume that the passage of time can be divided into three phases: past, present, future. (The idea of the present is, of course, relative to the observer: we think of this period as the present age while the people of Renaissance Italy thought of their time as the present.) What concerns us here is the past/present distinction.

This distinction is often used to justify the division of labour between critics and historians: the present is the concern of the critic, and the past the concern of the historian. Historians are generally thought incapable of writing the history of their own times because the closeness and involvement of historians in the material precludes scholarly objectivity. There is certainly a problem here but there are also advantages: the easy access to information; the fact that the historian can draw upon first-hand knowledge and subjective experience of people and events. Since design history is a relatively new discipline and tends to focus upon the industrial design of the modern age, design historians frequently write about the present and the recent past.

If one asks 'When does the past begin – five minutes ago, five years ago, fifty years ago?', the arbitrariness of past/present distinction becomes obvious. It is also a line which is constantly being shifted forward as today becomes yesterday. The general

ideological function of the past/present distinction appears to be that it enables historians to situate themselves in an a-historical vantage point called 'the present' from which they can observe a historical realm called 'the past'.

What is valuable about this distinction is that it marks a recognition of difference: that human life was different then from now. Knowledge concerning the past can thus serve as a critique of present conditions; it can make the present seem less immutable. A disadvantage of the distinction is that it can deceive historians into thinking that their vantage point is outside history whereas, in fact, the present is part of an ongoing historical process; indeed the present is the culmination of a historical process. It follows that the present is not a privileged position which by itself can guarantee absolute objectivity. Historians writing about any period predating their own are, of course, remote from those periods, but since preceding epochs contributed to the very intellectual apparatus the historians are deploying, a total separation of the present from the past is impossible. What the historian needs to be conscious of are those differences which separate the past from the present, and simultaneously, those continuities which link the two.

The main advantage enjoyed by historians over critics may be called 'the hindsight advantage'. As the Belgian historian M. J. Dhont explains:

> The historian never sees the facts in the way that the *contemporaries* saw them. He sees their development as an infallible prophet; what distinguishes the historian completely from any category of people who were contemporaries to the facts about which he speaks rests precisely in that the historian knows the future. This deprives him completely of the possibility of looking at the facts with the eyes of the contemporaries ... It follows from this remark that the historian always writes history as a function of the point of arrival of development. This will incline him to interpret as important those events which constitute a line of development towards

> that result, events, which in a majority of cases, did not make the least impression on their contemporaries.[2]

Evidently, hindsight is a mixed blessing. It makes it difficult for historians to put themselves in the place of historic peoples, to judge how the conjunction of forces appeared to them at the time.

Chronology and Narrative

One of the earliest forms of history-writing – the chronicle – was based upon the idea of chronology: the arrangement of certain facts and events in a temporal sequence. Even today history books often include chronologies which take the form of charts listing events in date order. The chief drawback of such 'one damn thing after another' accounts is that a context and rationale for the listed items is missing. Readers are left with the impression of a random succession of events which seem to have no causes, meanings or connections.

Significantly, the word 'history' includes the word 'story'. The idea of narrative seeks to overcome the limitations of chronology by weaving brute facts and events into a coherent line of development and fleshing them out with sufficient contextual material so that the reason why things happen as they do becomes clear.

Hayden White, in his book *Metahistory* (1973), calls the process 'emplotment'. What the historian does, White maintains, is to arrange 'the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle and end'.[3] Some events, therefore, are characterized as 'inaugural motifs', some as 'transitional' and some as 'terminating'. As White points out, 'the same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterization of the set to which it belongs.'

Because of the similarities between the techniques and devices of writing history, fiction and story-telling in films, the critical

examination of narrativity taking place in literary and film theory is being extended to history-writing.

What critics object to about the narrative mode is that it appears to depend upon an omnipotent storyteller whose single, linear tales with their clear beginnings, middles and ends are too coherent and comforting. Stories with transparent meanings, in which conflicts are resolved, seem to mystify the reality of human history. Other ways of writing history have thus been sought. Walter Benjamin, for example, advocated a discontinuous approach employing fragments ('the fragment is the gateway to the whole'), pastiche, aphorisms, quotations and 'constellations' (i.e. striking juxtapositions of images). Benjamin rejected the Rankean conception of history-writing as 'telling it the way it really was'; his alternative was 'to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'.[4] He also proposed a kind of archaeological excavation partly dependent upon a plan and partly a matter of chance: 'for successful excavators, a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the space in the dark loam ... remembrance must not proceed in the manner of the narrative or still less that of a report, but must ... assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever deeper layers.'[5]

For a brilliant application of Benjamin's notion of excavation see Dick Hebdige's essay on the history of post-1945 British culture and design, 'Digging for Britain' (1987).[6]

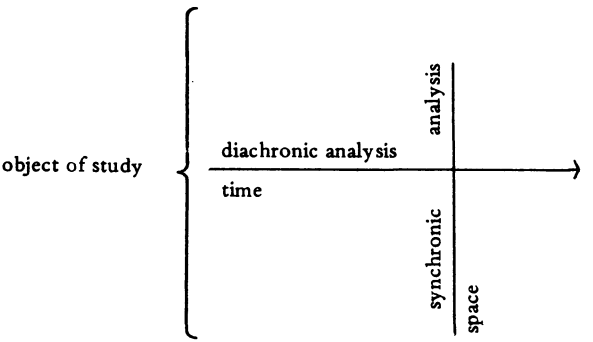
Synchronic/Diachronic

Historians have been characterized as those concerned with developments taking place through time. However, all historians have to pause now and then to describe what was happening simultaneously with the particular fact or event under review. In other words, historians tend to alternate between the diachronic (time, or chronological-evolutionary) and the synchronic (space, or descriptive-systematic).

These two terms were introduced by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his influential text *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). A language, Saussure maintained, can be studied in two

ways: first, by looking at changes taking place through time; and secondly, by looking at a language as a logical system. The two modes of analysis are different ways of dissecting the same object of study. They are generally visualized in terms of a diagram with two axes (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Synchronic and Diachronic*



Nevertheless, Saussure held that the two perspectives were radically different: 'One is a relation between simultaneous elements' (the synchronic); and 'the other the substitution of one element for another in time, an event' (the diachronic).[7] Each approach, Saussure believed, generated different truths and therefore demanded different disciplines; scientific rigour would be lost if the two approaches were conflated or confused. He assigned priority to the synchronic perspective and as a result has been accused of neglecting history, even though his book includes a section on historical linguistics. One can argue that the two modes of analysis are interdependent. Only by comparing synchronic analyses of British society in, say, 1900 and 1950 would it be possible to judge what changes had occurred between those two dates.

Saussure's interest in the synchronic mode of analysis was based upon the premiss that to understand how any system works one only needs to examine the relationships between parts and the whole at a particular moment in time. A garage mechanic could certainly explain the operation of a modern car's engine to a customer without bothering to recount the history of the

evolution of motor car engineering. Historians need to know how systems function but they are also curious about their development.

Books about design with a diachronic emphasis are common enough. Less common are synchronic ones. Michael Farr's *Design in British Industry* (1955) can perhaps be considered an example of this: it is a systematic survey of British industrial design and design institutions undertaken at a specific moment – the midpoint of the twentieth century. A text directly influenced by the linguistics of Saussure which is explicitly and self-consciously synchronic in its conception and method is Barthes' *The Fashion System* (1985). Wishing to analyse a particular state of fashion without having to consider the extra complication of change over time, Barthes confined his study to the written matter appearing in the magazines *Elle* and *Le Jardin des Modes* between June 1958 and June 1959. In his introductory reflections upon method, he remarks: 'the synchrony of fashion is established by fashion itself: the fashion of the year' (that is, the 'line' laid down annually).

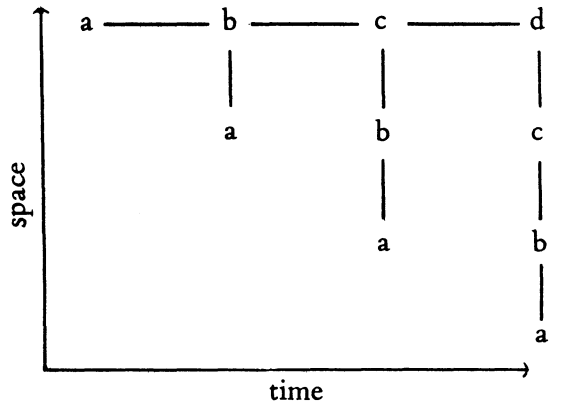
If the diachronic can be said to be concerned with change and the synchronic with system or structure, then it is not simply a question of the historian alternating between the two modes of analysis but of explaining the relation between change and structure. As Peter Burke remarks: 'Change is structured, and structures change.'[8]

The Prague Prism

A tourist visiting a long-established European city will notice that although all the buildings exist in the present, they differ in their ages and styles. Ancient Gothic piles stand next to ultra-modern office blocks. Such cities can be regarded as a spatial display of the history of architecture.

To represent the way in which material from the past is carried forward to be experienced subjectively as simultaneous and co-existent J. Mukařovský (of the Prague school of structuralism) devised a diagram called 'the Prague prism' (Figure 4) to supplement the cross-design of Saussure.

Figure 4: *The Prague Prism*



One misleading feature of the diagram is the assumption that as time passes all elements from the past are carried forward, whereas of course many disappear from the record altogether. Also, the fact that a medieval building survives today does not mean that it is exactly the same building for a modern person as for a medieval person.

The value of the diagram is that it highlights the density and complexity of any historical moment: a multiplicity of styles, designers at different stages of their careers, a mixture of the old and the new, the ascendent and the descendent, all coexisting.

An awareness and acceptance of the simultaneous existence of the styles of many ages has been one of the factors leading to the eclecticism of post-modernist architecture and design.

Periodization

Few historians are foolhardy enough to tackle the history of the world; most of them focus upon segments of time. The questions 'When to begin and end? Should historians impose limits upon the material or should the limits arise naturally from the material itself?' are the problems of periodization.

Units of time such as centuries used as the basis for histories are purely arbitrary impositions; the course of history does not alter just because the date changes. As a way of coping with the

art, design and fashion of the twentieth century, a 'decades' approach has proved popular. Almost invariably 'decades' historians feel compelled to detect a unique style or spirit of the age in each decade whether there was one or not.

Historians who decide to periodize according to the material of history are faced with an embarassment of riches: natural disasters, wars, revolutions, economic crises, technological changes, political reforms and so on. The design historian can elect either to use general economic/technological/political segments such as 'the era of capitalism', 'the epoch of the industrial revolution', 'the Victorian age' (assuming their limits can be agreed), or to use boundaries more specific to design itself, for example, the lifespan of a particular style.

Each branch of history-writing tends to periodize the past differently according to the relative autonomy of their chosen subject. In some instances, massive economic and political changes will affect all aspects of a society; in others, developments will occur in one field which are 'out of step' - more advanced or retarded - than in society as a whole. (The latter is an instance of what Marxists call 'the law of uneven development'.)

An inevitable concomitant of singling out a period is the disruption of the continuity of history. Of course, dramatic ruptures and watersheds in human society occur but however extreme these may be, there are also continuities which span them. A period has a beginning and an end, and therefore there is a strong temptation to impose a neat storyline. Yet no matter how firmly the line is drawn at the beginning and the end, most historians find it necessary to review what preceded and what followed their chosen period. But how far backwards and forwards should they range? The search for origins can be highly problematic since there always seems to be an earlier cause which could be cited. In the case of histories of the immediate past - those which come right up to date - terminating dates tend to be completely arbitrary: the narrative simply breaks off at the moment the typescript is due at the publishers.

It is not infrequent to find a design text whose title cites very specific limits - 1750–1980, for example - only to discover that

no explanation of why these dates were chosen is provided. In contrast, Nigel Whiteley, the author of *Pop Design* (1987), does consider the vexed question of periodization. At first sight his book is a 'decades' example (the 1960s) but, in fact, the span of time in which he finds it necessary to define pop design extends from 1952 to 1972. Also, instead of arguing that during the 1960s there was a single, uniform style of pop design, he divides pop into three phases: early pop (1952-62), high pop (1962-6), and late and post-pop (1966-72). Whether one agrees with this periodization or not, or with the grounds upon which it is based, it is refreshing to find the issue explicitly discussed in his book's introduction.

Causation and Determination

Whenever design historians ask 'Why is this product the way it is? How do we explain the emergence of this style of design?', they raise questions of conditions, causes and determinants. In the case of a building or designed object the number of causal factors tends to be multiple. (Hence the value of Freud's concept of 'overdetermination'.) This makes the design historian's task difficult: need they all be cited? In what order of importance should they be ranked? Is primacy to be given to factors external to design or those internal to design?

Some early scholars felt compelled to be systematic and comprehensive in their descriptions of causes. For example, Banister Fletcher in the early editions of his history of architectural styles, was in the habit of citing six 'influences' upon the character of a style, namely, geographical, geological, climatic, religious, social and political, historical.

Enumerating conditions, causes and determinants render the role of the designer's will problematic. Are designers simply the agents or bearers of forces beyond their control? On earth the force of gravity restricts human action; it is a constant background condition. However, it has not prevented us from inventing machines - space rockets - capable of overcoming it. This example suggests that humans are not simply the victims of conditions and forces. In the case of a natural force such as the

wind, humans can use it to speed the passage of an aircraft, or they can fly into it. Alois Riegl's theory of *Kunstwollen* similarly suggested that artists can decide to work with or against the natural propensities of the tools and materials they employ.

Human thought and action can thus overcome natural forces or turn them to our advantage. There are, however, always limits to our powers (though these vary from age to age). Most individuals find they can only change the world in minute ways. Collectively, of course, we exercise much more power, but the very forces we unleash as a species – economic ones, for instance – usually strike the individual as alien and inexorable. Millions of people take millions of piecemeal decisions. They may all be rational and reasonable ones and yet the end result may be unplanned, unwanted crisis. In short, our control over our collective destiny is still far from perfect. Even rational decisions are fraught with uncertainty and actions are constrained by factors of which humanity has only partial understanding or control.

If a theorist repeatedly cites one cause – such as the economy – as the dominant one, then what is being proposed is what Pitirim Sorokin called 'a main factor' theory. What needs to be guarded against in such discussions is an economistic reductionism, that is, reducing design, in Raymond Williams' words, 'to a direct or indirect expression of some preceding and controlling economic content'.[9] This is because design has a relative autonomy from the economic base and the effects of this are always mediated via the practices specific to design. Furthermore, since a new design can increase sales, it is not merely passive in respect of economic forces.

Karl Popper and E. H. Gombrich have argued for a 'situational logic' in which humans are constrained by time, place and circumstance but even so have a degree of freedom to pursue alternative directions.[10] Certainly, whatever the limits imposed on a designer by money, technology, the brief, and so on, there is usually more than one way of solving a design problem.

Normally, natural factors such as the climate are taken as read when discussing design but in the case of architecture, for example, climate and geography are relevant. (Nature's determinations, it is worth adding, are more final even than the

economy's.) Some theorists, for instance Hippolyte Taine, have resorted to biological factors (race, heredity) to explain the character of the design of particular peoples. In his case the racial factor was modified by two others: milieu and moment. Despite the suspicion in which racial theories are generally held, the theory of biological determination still seems to underpin discussions of the type 'the Englishness of English art and design'.

Since the preceding discussion has been highly generalized, let us consider two examples. The first concerns 'primitive' cultures while the second concerns an emergent industrial society.

James Fitch and Daniel Branch's article 'Primitive architecture and climate' (*Scientific American* 207, 1960) is helpful in regard to the environmental determinants of design. 'Primitive' peoples, such as the Eskimos and the North American plains Indians, depend upon the natural materials specific to their homelands: snow in the case of Eskimos and animal skins and branches in the case of the Red Indians. To survive they must construct shelters with materials which are appropriate to their local climates.

Fitch and Branch tabulate a range of different regions throughout the world. The combination of different geographies/materials, climates and peoples gives rise to a wide variety of types of shelter which, the authors argue, achieve a high level of performance and comfort, higher indeed than many contemporary buildings. Performance, they claim, is a function of both form and material: the hemispherical dome shape of the Eskimos' igloo offers maximum resistance and minimum obstruction to Arctic gales; in a region of heavy seasonal rains, steeply sloping roofs and water-shedding materials are needed.

'Primitive' architecture, it seems, is the result of pragmatic wisdom evolved over many centuries. For the native peoples there is only one way to build - the traditional way - hence the modern idea of choosing from a spectrum of types and styles is inconceivable to them. Although climate and materials are the central themes of the article, the authors acknowledge the influence of additional factors such as the cultural: warfare between tribes could add walls and moats to a village; the practice of polygamy could result in a space set aside for a harem; a nomadic

culture could require portable rather than permanent structures; and so forth.

Modern architects, Fitch and Branch argue, could learn much from the principles of 'primitive' buildings because our assumption that the same skyscrapers are suitable for all climates results in inefficiency, discomfort, a waste of energy resources and a sterile uniformity of design. The major difference between 'primitive' and modern cultures is that Western technology has enabled the mass production of a huge range of materials and goods which are distributed around the globe. In other words, the link between design and place, design and the natural environment, has been broken. On the one hand, this means the choice of materials, forms and styles available to the designer has expanded immeasurably; on the other, it means an organic relationship to place and necessity has been lost.

Our second example concerns the eighteenth-century British pottery manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood. Adrian Forty, in his book *Objects of Desire* (1986) accounts for Wedgwood's success as follows: a growth in Britain's population and colonies increased the potential market for pottery. The new popularity of drinking hot tea created an increase in the demand for ceramic cups. Forty also cites a taste for classicism amongst the British upper classes.

So far, then, Forty identifies demographic, social and aesthetic factors. One could add there must have been economic growth to sustain the increased population. These general preconditions existed for all British pottery manufacturers. How then does Forty explain Wedgwood's exceptional achievements? Wedgwood, he argues, rationalized production methods in his factory, devised new, imaginative advertising and marketing techniques, introduced new products and new glazes, improved the quality and consistency of his wares, gave a high priority to design and employed artists as designers, used and developed a neo-classical style that appealed to upper-class customers whose taste for the antique was an antidote to disturbing aspects of change in early industrial Britain.

Evidently, Wedgwood exploited existing conditions better than his business rivals but he also went far beyond those

conditions in his active innovations and experiments. Forty's explanation for the appeal of the neo-classical style - a reaction to progress, an ideological response to change - is an interesting one even though, in his text, no supporting evidence is given.

What Forty's account of Wedgwood takes for granted (it is discussed elsewhere in the book) is the socioeconomic system within which the manufacturer's activities took place, that is, the free market, private property, capital/labour system; in short, the capitalist mode of production. The particular relevance to design of this reference is as follows: underlying socioeconomic systems crucially influence the character of design taken as a whole. For example, under the conditions of capitalist competition, design is one of the ways an excessive variety and differentiation of products is achieved. In a non-competitive, socialist, planned economy such undue variety is unnecessary, and as a consequence design's role is different.

The example suggests a solution to the external/internal problem. Design historians need to take account of the general conditions within which design takes place, but in particular how those conditions, forces and determinants are exploited and overcome in the design, production and marketing processes.

Theories of Change

If societies did not change as time elapsed historians would be redundant. Change is the *raison d'être* of history. Yet, describing and explaining change is highly complex because it pervades every aspect of nature and society (though it takes place at different rates - fast or slow, suddenly or cumulatively - in different spheres). Because human life on earth is a total ecological-cultural system in which every part interconnects, every change has its effects and these in turn prompt further changes. Where then should the historian's explanations begin and end?

Natural processes - ageing and decay - necessitate the periodic renewal of goods and the built environment but, also, certain human economic systems have a built-in propensity for change. In other words, such systems do not simply respond to external change, they instigate it. The free-market system, for

example, is based upon the struggle/competition of individuals and companies, ever-expanding production and the maximizing of profits, by means of creating new wants and new products to fulfil them. Devices like planned obsolescence and periodic style changes ensure that a constant renewal and upgrading of goods, images and expectations takes place.

So far the neutral word 'change' has been preferred to terms like 'development' and 'progress' because of the controversial connotations of betterment and improvement associated with them. When art historians describe the 'lifecycle' of a style in terms of phases like early, middle and late, it is hard to escape evaluative or even moralistic implications, e.g. a late phase equals decline, decay and decadence.

Another problematical word is 'evolution'. Can the theory of natural selection based on random mutations formulated by such scientists as Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer in respect of nature's processes be used to explain change in a human cultural activity such as design? Is the development of design, like that of nature, a process of ever-increasing complexity and differentiation? A text exploring these possibilities is Philip Steadman's *The Evolution of Designs: Biological Analogy in Architecture and the Applied Arts* (1979).

In traditional craft cultures, Steadman argues, change can take place in a way directly analogous to natural evolution: an artefact is copied by successive generations of artisans and since the copying process is never perfect, small variations and adaptations occur which in the long run cause significant alterations in the artefact's form and decoration. It is assumed that the process is unselfconscious, that later artisans will be unaware of the degree of change which has taken place. Changes which prove impractical or are disliked by their users will be rejected, hence a 'survival of the fittest' type of selection takes place. As Steadman acknowledges, design in modern societies is different: it is self-conscious, deliberate; change is actively pursued and often the design challenge is not to copy something which already exists but to solve new problems by means of new designs.

One could argue that evolutionary change is not historical even though it takes place over time. Evolution in the crafts is a

process internal to design: it assumes a stable social and physical environment within which minor changes occur naturally over long periods. Historical change, on the other hand, is induced from within by self-conscious decision and from without by radical alterations in the world beyond design.

Just as it seems inappropriate to assign history values to the minor changes in the evolution of a craft, so it seems inappropriate to assign them to the myriad fluctuations of modern fashion (even though these are decidedly the result of conscious human decision). Fashion only seems to become historical, Barthes has argued, in the long term: 'Changes in fashion appear regular if we consider a relatively long historical duration, and irregular if we reduce this duration to the few years preceding the time at which we place ourselves ... Fashion thus appears to possess two durations: one historical, the other what could be called *memorable* ...'[11] He then cites the work of Alfred Kroeber and Jane Richardson – 'Three centuries of women's dress fashions' (1940) – which detected rhythms and cycles occurring at 50-year intervals. Barthes comments: 'History cannot act on forms analogically' (he is making the disconcerting claim that there is no correlation between, say, the Napoleonic era and high waistlines in women's dresses), 'but it can certainly act on the rhythm of forms, to disturb or change it. It follows that, paradoxically, fashion can know only a very long history or no history at all; for as long as its rhythm remains regular, fashion remains outside history; it changes, but its changes are alternative, purely endogenous' (that is, growing from within) '... in order for history to intervene in fashion, it must modify its rhythm, which seems possible only with a history of very long duration.'[12] Annual fashion variations he characterizes as 'microdiachrony' and says that within it 'no law of change is perceptible'. Economic factors give rise to 'neomania', this in turn produces random, arbitrary variations in hemlines, and so on (it does not matter what changes are wrought so long as they are different from what went before).

Given Barthes' dependence upon the article by the two American anthropologists, Richardson and Kroeber, it deserves consideration in its own right. An ambitious study, it set out to

define stylistic change in a quantitative manner – the article abounds in tables and graphs. Women's evening or formal dress was taken as the object of study because it had served a fairly constant decorative function for several centuries and was free of utilitarian motivation. The authors regarded the style of this dress – a slender waist, a long skirt ample at the bottom, a low neckline – as a kind of ideal-type or archetype. Fashion they conceived of as the endless fluctuations to which the ideal-type was subject over time: 'fashion . . . demands change, and, when it has exhausted the possibilities of material, colour, and accessories, goes on to alter fundamental proportions, in other words the basic aesthetic pattern. With such alterations there comes strain, simultaneously pulling forward and back; violent jumps in opposite directions within one or two or three years . . .'[13]

For practical reasons the authors did not study actual dresses but fashion plates depicting them. The time span was from 1787 to 1936. Having assembled as many images with exact dates as possible, six dimensions of the dress were measured, that is, such things as length of skirt, depth of decolletage and width of waist. (It was the silhouette of the dress they were focusing upon, so changes of material, accessories and decoration were ignored.) Once the figures had been tabulated it was possible to construct graphs recording the changes in dimensions through time. An immediate conclusion was that each dimension of the dress had a more or less independent history. As indicated earlier, cyclical patterns or periodicities in, for example, the narrowing or widening of skirts were detected at 100- and 50-year intervals. Richardson and Kroeber observed: 'Women's dress fashions change slowly, as regards the fundamental proportions of the silhouette or contour. On the average, any one proportion is a half-century swinging from its extreme of length or fullness to extreme of brevity or narrowness, and another half-century swinging back.'

According to their figures, there were long periods of relative stability in the form of the dress, and shorter periods when it became more volatile. 'Was this the result of changes taking place in society at large?' they wondered. Tentatively, they suggested that unsettled times could unsettle fashion, thereby

increasing its variability. But, they added, there was nothing to show that disturbances external to design would cause a particular change, such as shorter skirts, to occur.

Regarding periodicities, Richardson and Kroeber were unwilling to claim that they had discovered any general laws of cultural evolution. They remarked: 'There is no reason why style in general, or even dress style should necessarily swing rhythmically back and forth. Our findings apply only to the material analysed.' In a postscript addressed to his critics, Kroeber also denied the study enabled any predictions about the future to be made.

Richardson and Kroeber recognized that individual designers do contribute to fashion change and that psychological factors such as imitation, emulation and competition may have been at work, but they excluded these factors from their study on the grounds that they were not amenable to their scientific method. Furthermore, they took a proto-structuralist position when they argued that in the long term styles transcended individual consciousness and will; the general drift of change was not perceived by the participants. According to Kroeber: 'As far as individuals are concerned, the total situation seems overwhelmingly to indicate that their actions are determined by the style far more than they can determine it.' He also cited large-scale economic trends and argued that no one attributes these to individual initiatives.

One could argue that by taking a type of dress worn by upper-class women, one likely to remain stable over a long period, Richardson and Kroeber took an exceptionally simple example. Would their methods work equally well with the complex gamut of clothing worn by all classes - some items of which appear and disappear with great rapidity? In spite of the questions the article poses, it remains an important landmark in the attempt to apply social scientific methods of analysis to an obdurately enigmatic cultural phenomenon.

Another writer who has commented upon women's dresses is the British zoologist Desmond Morris. In a popular book about human behaviour and body language called *Manwatching* (1977) he records changes taking place in the length of skirts between

1921 and 1977. He then claims that there has been a 'rather precise correlation' between skirt-length and economic conditions, namely: 'Short skirts appear at times of high national production and long skirts during periods of austerity and recession' (i.e. the opposite to what functional logic would suggest). That the relatively autonomous realm of fashion should respond so directly to economic fluctuations seems farfetched and certainly Morris is vague as to the causes of the phenomenon: 'Exactly why females should want to expose more of their legs when the economy is healthier, it is hard to understand, unless a sense of financial security makes them feel more brazenly invitatory towards males. Perhaps the general atmosphere of financial activity makes them feel more physically active ...'[14] He adds that many fashion trends are no more than 'novelty changes' based on the need to signal up-to-dateness. Such minor changes modify or reverse the fashion of the previous season.

There is no attempt in this account to investigate the micro-economy of the British fashion industry to see how it responded to the more general economy, nor to compare the female fashions of other similar countries to see if they demonstrated the same pattern. Nor does Morris pay attention to other aspects of female attire: is it only one feature - hemlines - which correlates with economic conditions? If so, why?

Both Morris and Barthes seem to agree that explanations of change can vary according to the span of time under review: those appropriate for the short term may be inadequate for the long term. The French historian Fernand Braudel (of the Annales' school) has identified three levels in which change takes place at different rates: (1) *events* (the short term, a rapid rate of change, the concern of traditional history); (2) *conjunctures* (intermediate, a slower rate of change involving cyclical movements and rhythms in demographics, trade and economics operating at, say, five, ten, twenty or fifty years); (3) *long duration* (a very slow rate of change taking centuries to accomplish, the domain of biological, geophysical and climatic processes).

Braudel thinks of long-duration phenomena as 'structures'. His mode of history-writing explores the interrelationships between structures and events. However, in his view structures are

much more significant than events (if history is a sea, then events are the waves, and structures the tides), because they are the decisive factors in human affairs.[15]

Most design historians concern themselves with events and conjunctures. The discipline has yet to generate a historian capable of the magisterial overview of impersonal forces Braudel demonstrates in his volumes on the history of *The Mediterranean in the Age of Phillip II* (1972–3) and *Civilization and Capitalism* (1981–2).

Certain historians have considered that the development of human history is governed by laws and that if these laws could be discovered then our control over our destinies would be increased immeasurably. If this did turn out to be the case then firms and designers would be able to plan for the future far more effectively. It would also enable design historians to predict future design trends! Charles Jencks, the architectural historian, once devised a time-chart of modern architecture from the 1920s onwards which divided architecture into six major traditions or species. Using his analysis of the past as a basis, Jencks predicted the future of architecture up to the year 2000. The flaw in such models is that humans can decide to contradict whatever predictions have been made, thereby invalidating them.

Historicism

Readers of books on design and historiography are highly likely to encounter the word historicism, and therefore a discussion of its various meanings may be useful: the word tends to be used differently in different discourses, that is, in art and design history, philosophy and history.

1. An eclectic tendency within the arts, especially architecture, to revive past styles instead of developing new ones appropriate to the age in which the artist lives. The term is used in this sense by Pevsner. Artistic historicism, in his view, is retrogressive: 'All reviving of styles of the past is a sign of weakness, because in revivals independent thinking and feeling matters less than the choice of patterns ... Historicism is the belief in the power of

history to such a degree as to choke original action and replace it by action which is inspired by period precedent.'[16] Architectural historicism in the twentieth century is thus criticized by Pevsner because it marks a retreat from the ideals of modernism.

Hans Evers, a German art historian, has taken issue with Pevsner's argument on the grounds that it depends upon a unilinear, progressive conception of history. Evers claims that stylistic eclecticism/pluralism is the more 'normal' state of affairs than that in which a monolithic modern style dominates. In the past, he argues, there has always been a plurality of styles coexisting at any given time and there have always been stylistic revivals.[17]

Similarly, the architectural historian Charles Jencks has criticized Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936) because it outlines a single-strand theory of architectural development from William Morris to Gropius (ignoring on the way futurist and expressionistic movements) and then presents it as *the* style of the twentieth century. Jencks even characterizes Pevsner's approach as 'historicist' (in the sense of definition four). This critique occurs in the introduction to *Modern Movements in Architecture* (1973), a book in which Jencks presents modern architecture as a plurality of traditions.

2. A theory which asserts the priority of historical development. The view that everything changes with time, that there are no absolute, static or eternal entities. It follows from this view that the standards of one age are not transferable to any other and that therefore each epoch has to be studied in terms of its own values and not those of the historian. This conception of history produces a sequence of time boxes - 'epochs' - each of which is self-contained and insulated from all the others.

3. 'The recognition that each of us sees past events from a point of view determined or at least conditioned by our own individual changing situation in history.'[18] This definition, supplied by Amaldo Momigliano, is really a logical consequence of (2) above. In its most extreme form - Croce's remark that 'all history is contemporary history' - it can lead to what is called 'presentism'.

If all history is written from the vantage point of the present of the historian, then there is a danger of projecting back attitudes and ideas that were unknown to the past, for example, characterizing the Gothic style as 'expressionist' as a result of an awareness of modern German expressionism.

This danger can be avoided by identifying the ideas and attitudes current during the age in question and by highlighting any differences between then and now by comparing them to today's norms of behaviour. Of course, it would be absurd for the historian to refuse to use modern methods of analysis, such as psychoanalysis, just because they were unknown in the past. Full justice should be done to a past culture, it must be understood in its own terms, but even so it cannot be judged by its own standards alone for, as Marx pointed out, one does not judge a person according to their own evaluation. Carried to its logical extreme, the view that an ideology should be judged only by its own standards would lead to an approval of Nazism, for instance.

If every age rewrites history according to its own values, does this produce total relativism? Is it possible to achieve an objective, truthful account of the past? These questions raise complex philosophical issues which it is impossible to discuss at length here. However, it is worth pointing out that there are two safeguards against complete relativism: not all accounts of the past are equally plausible - it is possible to discriminate between them; and secondly, the acquisition of historical knowledge is a cumulative process in both a quantitative and qualitative sense, therefore later generations can build upon the researches of their predecessors and gain insight from previous debates about the merits of contending interpretations.

4. 'The view that the story of mankind has a plot, and that if we can succeed in unravelling this plot, we shall hold the key to the future.'[19] This is Karl Popper's definition of historicism. He has attacked Hegelianism and Marxism - both of which he regards as historicist philosophies - on the grounds that a study of the past cannot be used to predict the future because history never repeats itself. Instead of invoking a mythical 'spirit of the age',

Popper argues, historians should look to the 'logic of situations' to explain events. Gombrich, Popper's follower in the realm of art history, has used situational logic in various books of his. What it seems to involve is reconstructing the context in which the artists found themselves and explaining artistic innovation in terms of a response to that state of affairs or to a problem inherent in it.

One can agree with Popper that the future is never exactly the same as the past without concluding that it is not worthwhile trying to anticipate and control events. In fact, modern businesses and industries regularly plan new projects and expansions on the basis of forecasts and projections drawn from an extrapolation of current tendencies. The future can be determined, in part, by human action: the designs and plans of architects and designers are evidence of this – they are often realized.

Notes and References

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