'Conclusion'

This text has attempted to delineate the fledgling discipline of design history and to identify and explore its central theoretical and methodological problems. A wide range of literature from many disparate fields of knowledge has been cited and this has required a synthesis which may not always have been achieved. Any conclusion would be premature because a host of issues remains underdeveloped and unresolved. There is thus plenty of scope for further reflections upon the discipline's problematic and aims.

If a single finding emerges from this study it is the extent to which the issues confronting design historians are comparable to those which have been faced by scholars in other disciplines far more venerable than design history. It follows that design historians can avoid crass errors, gain insight into their own practices, and save themselves time by attending to debates within the social sciences and by studying the writings of major anthropologists, sociologists, general historians, and so on. Such a task should not be antipathetic to them because it is, in large part, one of historical investigation.

What of the future? One dilemma which could well become more acute as time passes is the question of whether or not design history belongs with the humanities or with the social sciences. This argument has arisen in respect of art history, which some scholars regard as a 'humanistic' discipline akin to the study of language, philosophy, literature, the classics, etc., while others think of it as a social science akin to sociology, anthropology, geography, etc. Both sets of disciplines are concerned with humankind and human values but social science aspires to the scientific rigour of the natural sciences. Although this issue cannot be resolved without regard to the institutional contexts within which design history now exists, my own prediction is that the influence of theoretical developments in the

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research methods of the social sciences will inevitably pull design history in that direction. A considerable number of design historians already exhibit impatience with the impressionistic and anecdotal history-writing typical of so many design publications.

In recent years a significant growth in the number of design historians has taken place, especially in Britain. Given the British government's present restrictions on education, no more design historians are likely to be appointed; however, employment prospects may be brighter in the realms of book publishing and design journalism. There has certainly been a remarkable increase in the number of books and magazines about design in the 1980s. The British Design History Society annual conference held in Brighton in 1987 was notable for the participation of foreign delegates from a spectrum of countries (though all were advanced countries). No doubt in the near future we shall witness a further internationalization of the discipline. Professional contacts and discussion will also be facilitated by the presence of the specialist journals *Design Issues* (USA) and *Journal of Design History* (UK).

In terms of the discipline's intellectual trajectory, the greatest danger it faces at present is that posed by external pressures to become an adjunct of the commercial system of design. If design history becomes merely a servant of the design system – an instrumental form of history-writing whose only function is to celebrate – then the discipline's critical potential in respect of society as a whole will remain unfulfilled. As Theodor Adorno once remarked: 'The simple existence of disciplines and modes of thought does not amount to their justification.'