

Design History or Design Studies: Subject Matter and Methods

Author(s): Victor Margolin

Source: *Design Issues*, Spring, 1995, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 4-15

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1511610>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Design Issues*

JSTOR

Design History or Design Studies: Subject Matter and Methods

Victor Margolin

This is a slightly revised version of a talk that was presented at the conference "Design: Storia e Storiografia" (Design: history and historiography) which was held at the Milan Politecnico on 15–16 April 1991. It was first published in *Design Studies* v. 13 no. 2 (April 1992): 104–116, and is reproduced here with the permission of Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, UK.

Judging from the number of publications, conferences, and exhibitions in recent years that have focused attention on design in the past, one might assume that design history is a flourishing enterprise. There are now active societies of design historians in Britain, the United States, and Scandinavia and several international conferences of design historians have been held. The first was in Milan in 1985 and the most recent was at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in December, 1990. The Design History Society in Britain has had its own publication, the *Journal of Design History*, since 1988 and design history articles also appear in other journals. Numerous design exhibitions have also been held in major museums in Europe, Japan, and North America.

Design history as an academic subject received a strong impetus in Britain in the early 1970s as the result of a Ministry of Education report that mandated all studio training programs in polytechnics to have historical components. This was the case for art, crafts, film and photography as well as design. Teachers of design history were drafted from other fields such as the history of art and then set to work developing curricula. These courses established an initial narrative for the field, particularly as course topics were translated into textbooks as well as publications for popular audiences. In the introduction to the proceeding of an early design history conference in Brighton, Penny Sparke wrote:

As an academic discipline it [design history] is undoubtedly the child of the art schools, where the increasing number of design students need a historical perspective more relevant to their immediate needs than the one provided by traditional fine art history, and it is largely within their confines that it has blossomed and yielded fruit.¹

Independent of the teaching activity in Britain, design history courses were established in the United States, Scandinavia, and perhaps elsewhere. Through the initial organization of the Design History Society in 1977, along with the series of conferences it has organized over the years, its excellent newsletter, and then its journal, an international community of design historians began to coalesce.

¹ Penny Sparke, "Introduction," *Design History: Fad or Function?* (London: Design Council, 1978), 5.

The importance of design history has also been increasingly recognized by design professionals. Sessions conducted by historians have been held at national and international design conferences such as those organized by the International Council of Graphic Design Association (ICOGRADA) and by the Industrial Design Society of America. ICOGRADA formed a Design History Working Group which met for several years, although it made little impact on the organization.²

And yet, despite these activities, there is little to show that could gain recognition for design history as a solid field of academic study. I do not wish to take away from the benefit it has had on thousands of design students on several continents who have come to understand the wider cultural context in which designers work. But I do want to address the issue of what has or has not been accomplished to establish design history as a productive scholarly enterprise.

Among the issues that had to be confronted when the field began was that of subject matter. It became important to mark the subject “design” with boundaries that would shape the development of historical accounts. In the late 1970s, John Blake, an administrator at the British Design Council, urged that design history become “a kind of coagulation of ideas” that could develop into “a recognizable body of knowledge which can be unequivocally labeled ‘design history’—not as an appendage of the history of art, not as an appendage of the history of architecture, not as an appendage of the history of technology or of anything else for that matter—though with obvious connections with all these things.”³

Today we are no closer to achieving this objective than historians were in 1978. Since that time a body of research has accumulated but, seen in retrospect, this material, which is of the most diverse sorts both in method and topic, does not explain to us what the boundaries of investigation are for a design historian. We have, however, advanced beyond the limited boundaries established by scholars who first began to write historical accounts of design activity.

I would argue that design history has not developed on the basis of a well-understood subject matter or a set of methods and principles to guide research. Instead it has grown as a response to the initial literature in the field, first celebrating it and then criticizing it. I think, particularly, of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner’s, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, first published in 1936 and later revised as *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius*. I would like to look more closely at this book for several reasons. First, because it initially proposed a narrative for design history that has been extensively criticized by many design historians working today; and second because it raised the question of what contribution any historical narrative can make to the understanding of design.

2 Victor Margolin, *Design History Bibliography*, International Council of Graphic Design Associations, London (1987), distributed by ICOGRADA.

3 John Blake, “The Context for Design History,” in *Design History: Fad or Function?* (London: Design Council, 1978), 56.

For my analysis, I have used the revised edition of 1960 which still contains the basic premises that Pevsner stated in 1936. It is a testament to his firm conviction about his initial views that he did not substantially change his views in the intervening years. Trained in Germany as an art historian, Pevsner was one of a small group of historians who sought to identify a distinctive quality of modernity in selected art, architecture, and functional objects of their day.

Like many of his predecessors in Germany, Pevsner infused his narrative with a high sense of morality. He was concerned with establishing firm grounds for aesthetic discrimination, an enterprise which he expanded from its source in connoisseurship to signify a sense of belongingness to one's age. For Pevsner, there were certain objects that were modern and others that were not. Facing a photograph of the model factory that Walter Gropius and his partner Adolph Meyer designed for the 1914 Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne, we find this statement by Pevsner in *Pioneers*:

It is the creative energy of this world in which we live and work and which we want to master, a world of science and technology, of speed and danger, of hard struggles and no personal security, that is glorified in Gropius's architecture, and as long as this is the world and these are its ambitions and problems, the style of Gropius and the other pioneers will be valid.⁴

In order to sustain this moral high ground, Pevsner had to set up a Manichean relationship between virtue, represented by the work of Gropius and the other pioneers, and vice, which he found embodied in the cluttered and hyperornamented style of British goods at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Pevsner accounted for this horrible state of affairs in the following manner:

Economists and philosophers were blind enough to provide an ideological foundation for the criminal attitude of the employer. Philosophy taught that the unthwarted development of everybody's energy was the only natural and healthy way of progress. Liberalism ruled unchecked in philosophy as in industry, and implied complete freedom for the manufacturer to produce anything shoddy and hideous, if he could get away with it. And he easily could, because the consumer had no tradition, no education, and no leisure, and was, like the producer, a victim of the vicious circle.⁵

4 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (UK: Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1960) 217.

5 Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, 46.

Pevsner's method is a very traditional one in German philosophy. He established a Kantian category for the sublime, which he equated with the style of the Modern Movement, and he then told the story of a quest to achieve it. The book ends in a triumph.

Pevsner found the sublime in the work of Gropius and his fellow pioneers and by 1960 still believed that it embodied the true principles of design.⁶

The examples of design that Pevsner included in his narrative do not form the subject matter for further research. They are united only by Pevsner's own a priori judgement that they represent stages of the quest for truth. Thus his book does not contribute to the challenge of John Blake that design history become "a recognizable body of knowledge." It was Pevsner's entanglement of morality with subject matter that still makes his book problematic. The agenda which underlies the book excludes most of what we would accept today as appropriate subject matter for design history. Not only did Pevsner establish strict geographic limits to his investigation—its focus was Western Europe and Britain—but he also excluded all the objects of daily life used by ordinary people. For Pevsner, the study of design was an act of discrimination by which ordinary objects were separated from those which embodied an extraordinary quality. An emphasis on discriminating taste could also be found in one of the major art history survey texts of the post-war years.⁷

Pevsner did, however, find support for his values after he moved to England in 1933. Critics of Britain's industrial products such as John Gloag and Herbert Read saw in Pevsner's method a means to argue for the improvement of British design. In *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, the results of a survey of manufacturing in the Midlands, Pevsner concluded that 90 percent of British industrial art is devoid of any aesthetic merit.⁸

Given Pevsner's restrictive view of objects worthy of historical investigation, it is no wonder that there have been so many efforts to broaden the subject matter of design history since his book was published. In England, Reyner Banham was one of the first to promote an infatuation with popular culture, particularly that which originated in America. Banham, a member of the Independent Group, a circle of artists, architects, and critics who gathered at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in the early 1950s, was an important link to Pevsner since he had written his dissertation, later published as *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, under him at the Courtauld Institute of Art.⁹ During the 1950s Banham was active as a critic of architecture and design for the *Architectural Review* and other publications. In this capacity he conveyed an enthusiasm, infused with critical intelligence, for mass produced objects as well as the diverse products of contemporary popular culture.

In a now-classic essay, "Who is this 'Pop'?" Banham made an important connection between Pevsner's discerning approbation of modern architecture and design and the enthusiasts of popular culture.¹⁰ Distinguishing between a "Pop Art connoisseur," and a "fine art connoisseur," Banham states that, "The opposition is only

6 Despite this statement in *Pioneers*, Pevsner had begun to rethink some of his views in the 1950s. See P. Madge, "An enquiry into Pevsner's Enquiry" *Journal of Design History*, 1: 2 (1988): 122–123.

7 H. Janson, *History of Art* (2nd edition) (New York and Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Abrams and Prentice Hall, 1977).

8 Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, cited in P. Madge, "An enquiry into Pevsner's Enquiry," 122.

9 D. Robbins, (ed.), *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

one of Taste, otherwise the training required to become a connoisseur is the same." Although, as a critic, he wrote many articles about mass culture, Banham did not associate with the design history movement in England until the early 1970s when he contributed a volume on *Mechanical Services* to the Open University course on modern architecture and design and participated in a conference on design and popular culture at Newcastle Polytechnic to which he contributed a paper on American cars entitled "Detroit tin revisited." In an obituary of Banham, published in the *Journal of Design History*, Penny Sparke¹¹ stated the importance of this intervention. For her the paper "served to bring into the context of the newly forming subject, the history of design, the work in the area of mass culture with which he (Banham) had been involved since the mid-1950s." Noting its further significance, she said that:

Not only was it not dated, but it served to introduce into the new discipline an element which did not depend entirely upon either the historical period or theoretical underpinnings of the Modern Movement. This was an important message, the full significance of which has still not been totally grasped, and to which those design historians who are today grappling with such areas as consumption, feminism, taste, and object semantics are still totally indebted.

Penny Sparke is correct in attributing to Banham a seminal role in opening up the subject matter of design history. His work gave younger historians the confidence to explore the history of mass-produced goods of all kinds. But Banham provided no principles for defining design as a subject with defensible boundaries.

John Heskett brought a new set of concerns to design history when he wrote about military airplanes, tanks, and armored vehicles in a history of industrial design which was published in 1980. With a particular interest in understanding the conditions for design innovation, Heskett noted that the design of weapons was "heavily conditioned by military attitudes."¹² Opening up a line of inquiry that few design historians have followed since, Heskett declared that:

The aesthetics of fear are rarely discussed, or even acknowledged, yet the powerful impersonal forms of military weaponry are among the most widespread and evocative images of our age.¹³

We must also note that from a feminist point of view the subject matter of design history, despite its enlargement to include popular culture and military weaponry, still seems rather narrow. Cheryl Buckley cogently argued in 1986 that:

10 Reyner Banham, "Who is this 'Pop'?" in Banham, *Design by Choice*, (Ed. Penny Sparke) (London: Academy Editions, 1981), 94.

11 Penny Sparke, "Obituary Peter Reyner Banham 1922-1988," *Journal of Design History* 1: 2 (1988): 142.

12 John Heskett, *Industrial Design* (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 190.

13 Ibid.

To date, design historians have esteemed more highly and deemed more worthy of analysis the creators of mass-produced objects...To exclude craft from design history is, in effect, to exclude from design history much of what women designed. For many women, craft modes of production were the only means of production available, because they had access neither to factories of the new industrial system nor to the training offered by the new design schools. Indeed, craft allowed women an opportunity to express their creative and artistic skills outside of the male-dominated design profession.¹⁴

What I have demonstrated thus far is a progressive opening up of the subject matter of design history to include topics well beyond what Pevsner would have been willing to recognize as valid. As further material for inclusion we could cite design in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other regions of the world outside the European and North American orbit. But even having done that, we would still be faced with the nagging problem of whether and how we might establish boundaries for the field. We already have a fragmentation into histories of craft, graphic design, and industrial design. While these divisions serve expedient purposes in the education of students who are preparing careers in one or another of the design professions, they have no legitimate correspondence to fundamental categories of design activity and are simply stop-gap measures to hold off the inevitable problem of trying to define "design" itself.

In the first chapter of his book *Disegno Industriale: Un Riesame* (Industrial Design: A Re-examination), which he entitled "Definition," Tomás Maldonado made an attempt to define industrial design, which is only one aspect of the larger topic.

By industrial design is meant, normally, the planning of objects fabricated industrially, that is, by machine, and in series.¹⁵

But Maldonado notes that this definition is not quite satisfactory since it fails to distinguish between the activity of the industrial designer and that which traditionally belonged to the engineer. It is difficult, he says, to demarcate where in the design of an industrial product the work of one ends and the other begins. Maldonado also finds problems with past attempts to produce a single history of modern design and concludes that "Strictly speaking, it is not a question of one history but of multiple histories."¹⁶

Maldonado is correct in pointing out the difficulty of demarcating distinctions between different kinds of design activity. The definition of what an industrial designer does has changed a

14 Cheryl Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design," *Design Issues*, 3:2 (1986): 7.

15 Tomás Maldonado, *Disegno Industriale: Un Riesame*, (revised and expanded edition) (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1991), 9, (translation by V. Margolin).

16 Maldonado, *Disegno Industriale*, 16, (translation by V. Margolin).

number of times in the past and will most likely continue to change in the future. Yves Deforge has described the 19th century training of the engineer thus:

During the transition period, which lasted in some cases until the beginning of the twentieth century, the training of engineers still included the knowledge of construction technology or industrial science, as well as *an initiation into the knowledge of styles* and to academic art design. This training let them conceive of interesting ensembles in which the sign function was manifested by forms and decorations inspired by classical styles or by the imitation of architectural effects.¹⁷

After many years of separation in the twentieth century between training for what Deforge calls the *utility function*, represented by the technical training of engineers, and the sign function, exemplified by the more aesthetic education of industrial designers, we now have a few designers who have revived the more comprehensive 19th century practice by obtaining degrees both in engineering and industrial design.

The point I want to make here is that “design” does not signify a class of objects that can be pinned down like butterflies. Designing is an activity that is constantly changing. How then can we establish a body of knowledge about something that has no fixed identity? From a 19th century point of view, this is a troubling question. The 19th century mind thrived on classification. During this period, great museums were built to house collections of discrete objects such as flora and fauna, high art, decorative arts, and technology. Boundaries between the natural and the artificial were clearly drawn, Art was also differentiated from craft and the two were distinguished from technology. This is the legacy that clearly informed Pevsner’s history and it still continues to bedevil the rest of us today.

But today in the museum world, as in the universities, there are powerful intellectual forces that are breaking down the boundaries between fields of knowledge that once seemed immutable. Let us take art history as an example. So long as it was based on the appreciation of a narrow canon of great paintings and sculpture, it was clearly demarcated from mass culture, technology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and a great many other topics and methods that now are considered to be well within its realm of inquiry.

In a cogent essay entitled “Blurred genres: the reconfiguration of social thought,” the anthropologist Clifford Geertz¹⁸ has stated that:

the present jumbling of varieties of discourse has grown to the point where it is becoming difficult either to label authors (What is Foucault—historian, philosopher, political theorist? What Thomas Kuhn—historian, philosopher, soci-

17 Yves Deforge, “Avatars of Design: Design Before Design,” *Design Issues* 6: 2 (1990): 46.

18 Clifford Geertz, “Blurred Genres: The Reconfiguration of Social Thought,” in Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 20.

ologist or knowledge?) or to classify works (What is George Steiner's *After Babel*—linguistics, criticism, culture history? What William Gass's *On Being Blue*—treatise, causerie, apologetic?).

Geertz continues:

It is a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map—the moving of a few disputed borders, the marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes—but an alteration of the principles of mapping.¹⁹

Seen from Geertz's view of how intellectual discourse is changing, the expansion of design history's subject matter since the mid-1930s when Pevsner published his *Pioneers* seems to be just another redrawing of the design map. Although this expansion has continued in recent years to include current material as well as new topics such as design in Asia and Latin America, these topics have not yet contributed to a radical rethinking of the discipline.

For the most part the development of design history has remained closely tied to specific pragmatic ends, notably courses for young designers and future teachers of young designers, the preparation of museum curators, or the training of design journalists. There are no formal doctoral programs in design history anywhere in the world, although a number of individuals have received doctorates in Britain and the United States through programs of independent study. This is in contrast to the history of art, for example, which has a distinct identity within academia that is independent of its relations to practice.

Art history also exemplifies a discipline that is in the midst of a momentous change as a result of the many theories from other fields that are now being brought to bear on the interpretation of art. Sociology, philosophy, anthropology, history, psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and literary criticism have all contributed to the discourse about art in recent years. It is even questionable whether the term "art history," still describes the discipline if we mean by a discipline a common set of assumptions about what the subject matter is and what the methods for its study are.

I would argue that we no longer have a discipline of art history but rather a field of art studies. The changes of terminology are important. Art history has shifted from a discipline to a field through a new emphasis on the subject matter rather than the methods which have simply become too heterogeneous to constitute a discipline. And I have dropped the term "history" because much of the reflection about art today addresses questions of interpretation rather than historic location.

19 Ibid.

When Geertz writes about “an alteration in the principles of mapping,” he is referring to the contemporary suspicion of long standing methods of interpretation in disciplines as diverse as ethnography, philosophy, and even economics.^{20–21} Basic interpretive methods in what were once established disciplines are now being challenged and in some instances rejected. This is not simply a temporary phenomenon but a fundamental revolution in the kinds of reflection we want to engage in as human beings. What we regard as knowledge is simply the codification of our collective experience in the world. As the nature of our experience changes, so does our conception of knowledge.

To think of design history as a discipline based on firm assumptions of what design is and how we might study its past is to ignore the dynamic crossings of intellectual boundaries that are occurring elsewhere. Given the intensity of these activities and the blurred distinctions that already exist in so much current intellectual practice, we should ask ourselves whether design history as it has been constituted up to now is a viable enterprise.

Having begun with such a limited subject matter as Pevsner provided, it is understandable that significant energy would have been expended in the postwar years to broaden the range of topics that design historians might study. Although we have begun to incorporate new material from the less developed regions of the world, we have also learned from a number of feminist historians that entire categories of objects, regardless of where they were designed or produced, are suspect because of their relation to patriarchal culture which extends across all geographical regions.

Feminism is the most powerful critique of design history thus far, although feminist historians are divided among those who have maintained a static definition of “design” and history’s relation to it and those who are interested in using history to explore what a new feminist design practice might be like.^{22–24} Despite these differences, however, feminists have had to break down the distinctions between history, theory, and criticism in order to establish a different vantage point from which to view design and design history.

But even looking at design from new vantage points we must still ask ourselves whether we are studying a specific class of things that are stabilized in categories such as industrially produced objects or whether the subject matter of design is really much broader. I think the latter is true. The history of design in the 20th century shows us that designers, unlike architects, have not worked with a set of principles and rules that have proscribed the scope of their work. Rather they have invented the subject matter of their profession as they have gone along.

Let us take the example of the American consultant designers of the 1930s. Raymond Loewy began as an illustrator, restyled the casing of the Gestetner duplicator for his first design job and

-
- 20 J. S. Nelson, A. Megill, and D. N. McCloskey, (eds.), *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Public Affairs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).
- 21 D. N. McCloskey, *If You're So Smart: The Narrative of Economic Expertise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- 22 J. Attfield, and P. Kirkham, (Eds.), *A View from the Interior* (London, UK: The Women's Press, 1989).
- 23 Shelia Levran de Bretteville, “Feminist Design: At the Intersection of the Private and Public Spheres,” in R. Langdon, and Nigel Cross, (Eds.), *Design and Society* (London: The Design Council, 1984), 86–93.
- 24 A. Franck, “A Feminist Approach to Architecture: Acknowledging Women's Way of Knowing,” in E. Perry Berkeley, (Ed.), *Architecture: A Place for Women* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 201–216.

then went on to design the Hupmobile and subsequently a train for the Pennsylvania Railroad. The experiences of Norman Bel Geddes, Henry Dreyfuss, and Walter Dorwin Teague are similar. Both Dreyfuss and Bel Geddes moved from designing products to creating model cities for the New York World's Fair in 1939, while Loewy designed a Rocketport of the future for the same fair. In retrospect we can fit them neatly into a history of industrial design but they no longer serve as models for what industrial designers do. In the postwar years Franco Albini, Charles and Ray Eames, Mario Bellini, Richard Rogers, and many other designers invented entirely new projects that were not imagined by the earlier generation of consultants.

Given this process of continual invention that expands our prior understanding of what designers do, it makes more sense to conceive of design as broadly as possible in order to lay the foundation for its study. For several years my colleague Richard Buchanan and I have been working with the following theme,

Design is the conception and planning of the artificial, that broad domain of human made products which includes: material objects, visual and verbal communications, organized activities and services, and complex systems and environments for living, working, playing, and learning.²⁵

We recognize that the artificial as a category is not fixed but is changing rapidly as human invention is turned to phenomena that were once thought to be natural. We see this in artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology, for example. To grasp the significance of these new activities, we must be continually changing our understanding of what design is while we are simultaneously pre-occupied with establishing its historical narrative.

The momentous changes the world is currently undergoing are forcing us to revise our old categories of thought and to pose new questions for research. Rather than think of design as we once did, we need to reconsider the way we approach design as a subject for study. I would argue that it is the broad activity of designing, with its multifarious results, that can open up a range of new important questions about design that have not been coherently posed before and at the same time can enable us to consider new possibilities for practice.

Using an enlarged conception of the artificial as the basis for our inquiries, we can thus raise new questions about what designing is, how it affects the way we organize possibilities for human action, and finally, what a product is. We can ask what a word processing program and an easy chair have in common or how a nuclear power plant and an income tax form function similarly as forms of material culture.

25 Richard Buchanan, and Victor Margolin, Program statement for the conference, "Discovering design," held at the University of Illinois, Chicago, 5-6 November 1990.

Since we cannot isolate a fixed class of products—whether material or immaterial—as the subject for design history, and because we need to think instead of designing as an act of invention that is continually creating new products, it is not realistic to think that we can mark out a stable terrain which can be claimed by design history.

What I foresee instead is that design can serve as a powerful theme around which the most diverse kinds of inquiries, related to history as well as to the contemporary situation, can be organized. Instead of developing design history as a field, or discipline as some would hope, I would prefer to think of *design studies* which includes history but also invites a dialogue with other specialists as well as historians.

I define design studies as the field of inquiry which addresses questions of how we make and use products in our daily lives and how we have done so in the past. These products comprise the domain of the artificial. Design studies encompasses issues of product conception and planning, production, form, distribution, and use. It considers these topics in the present as well as in the past. Along with products, it also embraces the web of discourse in which production and use are embedded.

Scholars in a number of different spheres of research are already contributing to a wider discourse about design. I have mentioned feminism and its critique of design in patriarchal culture. Mary Douglas, Grant McCracken, Daniel Miller and other cultural anthropologists have written extensively about consumption although they focus on it as a symbolic act while ignoring questions of how products are designed and made as well as how they are actually incorporated into the daily activities of users. In his important book, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, published in 1987, Miller was particularly critical of the kind of design history that is “intended to be a pseudo art history, in which the task is to locate great individuals such as Raymond Loewy or Norman Bel Geddes and portray them as the creators of modern mass culture.”²⁶ (Since his book was published, however, Miller has participated in several conferences that have been sponsored or cosponsored by the Design History Society in the UK and his book has been cited by some design historians as being an important work for the field.) Miller, a cultural anthropologist, has focused his attention on the consumer and asserted, along with other anthropologists, that consumption is not a passive act but a creative project through which people put products to use in ways that were not necessarily intended by those who designed and produced them. Miller has thus broadened the context within which to study products in contemporary culture.

A good example of such a study is the catalogue *Household Choices* which was produced by the Household Choices Project in the UK.²⁷ It includes essays by historians, anthropologists, urbanists, and specialists in housing and features several photographic essays

26 Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 142.

27 T. Putnam, and C. Newton, *Household Choices* (n.p.: Futures Publications, 1990).

as well. John Murdock, in his introduction to the catalogue, noted the influence of new methods in art history and literary criticism on the study of design:

The idea that the product, usually at the point of sale, might pass beyond the control of its manufacturer into a realm of variable understanding, interpretation and use, seemed less familiar than it had recently become to art historians, and certainly less familiar than it was to critics of written texts.²⁸

This project has brought us a considerable distance from Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, a book from which it differs in many ways. It does not moralize about the quality of products nor does it privilege the artifacts of the Modern Movement as worthier of our attention than others. At the same time, it does not give primacy to the designer's intentions in defining the meaning of a product. It suggests a more complex identity for the product than simply the outcome of a design process. The product is located in a situation and its meaning is created in part by its users.

I do not wish, however, to privilege cultural anthropology as the disciplinary base for design studies. It is only one of a number of established fields of study—the philosophy of technology, general systems theory, cultural studies, among them—whose scholars are now slowly beginning to recognize the significance of design in contemporary life. As I reflect on the form that design studies might take in a university setting, I do not envisage a new discipline that will close its boundaries to interventionists from elsewhere. I would follow the lead of Robert Kates who was instrumental in establishing a program on world hunger at Brown University. Instead of focusing on the problem of disciplinary boundaries, Professor Kates emphasized the definition of problems for study:

But we are not a discipline, nor should we be one, despite our proto-theory, scholarly materials, or university courses. We need to be inclusive, not exclusive; we will need new skills and insights as our current inquiries change.²⁹

The challenge for those of us who study design at the end of the 20th century is to establish a central place for it in contemporary life. This requires bold new conceptions and the kind of openness Professor Kates advocates rather than the more limited thinking that has characterized much of design study thus far.

28 John Murdock, "Foreward," *Household Choices*, 5.

29 Robert Kates, "The Great Questions of Science and Society Do Not Fit Neatly into Single Disciplines" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Section 2 (May 17, 1989): 81.