Design Observer

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Andrew Blauvelt | Essays

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Towards Relational Design

Bionic Hamster, using the iRobot Create kit, c. 2006

Is there an overarching philosophy that can connect projects from such diverse fields as architecture, graphic and product design? Or are we beyond such pronouncements? Should we even expect such grand narratives anymore?

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I've spent more time in the field of graphic design, and within that one discipline it is extremely difficult to pinpoint coherent sets of ideas or beliefs guiding recent work — certainly nothing as definitive as in previous decades, whether the mannerisms of so-called grunge typography, the gloss of a term such as postmodernism, or even the reactionary label of neo-modernism. After looking at a variety of projects across the design fields and lecturing on the topic, new patterns do emerge. Some of the most interesting work today is not reducible to the same polemic of form and counter-form, action and reaction, which has become the predictable basis for most on-going debates for decades. Instead, we are in the midst of a much larger paradigm shift across all design disciplines, one that is uneven in its development, but is potentially more transformative than previous *isms*, or micro-historic trends, would indicate. More specifically, I believe we are in the third major phase of modern design history: an era of relationally-based, contextually-specific design.

The first phase of modern design, born in the early twentieth century, was a search for a language of form that was plastic or mutable, a visual syntax that could be learned and thus disseminated rationally and potentially universally. This phase witnessed a succession of "isms" — Suprematism, Futurism, Constructivism, de Stijl, *ad infinitum* — that inevitably fused the notion of an avant-garde as synonymous with formal innovation itself. Indeed, it is this inheritance of modernism that allows us to speak of a "visual language" of design at all. The values of simplification, reduction, and essentialism determine the direction of most abstract, formal design languages. One can trace this evolution from the early Russian Constructivists' belief in a universal language of form that could transcend class and social differences (literate versus oral culture) to the abstracted logotypes of the 1960s and 1970s that could help bridge the cultural divides of transnational corporations: from El Lissitzsky's "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge" poster to the perfect union of syntactic and semantic form in Target's bullseye logo.

The second wave of design, born in the 1960s, focused on design's meaning-making potential, its symbolic value, its semantic dimension and narrative potential, and thus was preoccupied with its essential content. This wave continued in different ways for several decades, reaching its apogee in graphic design in the 1980s and early 1990s, with the ultimate claim of "authorship" by designers (i.e., controlling content and thus form),

and in theories about product semantics, which sought to embody in their forms the functional and cultural symbolism of objects and their forms. Architects such as Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's famous content analysis of the vernacular commercial strip of Las Vegas or the meaning-making exercises of the design work coming out of Cranbrook Academy of Art in the 1980s are emblematic. Importantly, in this phase of design, the making of meaning was still located with the designer, although much discussion took place about a reader's multiple interpretations. In the end though, meaning was still a "gift" presented by designers-as-authors to their audiences. If in the first phase form begets form, then in this second phase, injecting content into the equation produced new forms. Or, as philosopher Henri Lefebvre once said, "Surely there comes a moment when formalism is exhausted, when only a new injection of content into form can destroy it and so open up the way to innovation." To paraphrase Lefebvre, only a new injection of context into the form-content equation can destroy it, thus opening new paths to innovation.

The third wave of design began in the mid-1990s and explores design's performative dimension: its effects on users, its pragmatic and programmatic constraints, its rhetorical impact, and its ability to facilitate social interactions. Like many things that emerged in the 1990s, it was tightly linked to digital technologies, even inspired by its metaphors (e.g., social networking, open source collaboration, interactivity), but not limited only to the world of zeroes and ones. This phase both follows and departs from twentieth-century experiments in form and content, which have traditionally defined the spheres of avant-garde practice. However, the new practices of relational design include performative, pragmatic, programmatic, process-oriented, open-ended, experiential and participatory elements. This new phase is preoccupied with design's effects — extending beyond the design object and even its connotations and cultural symbolism.

We might chart the movement of these three phases of design, in linguistic terms, as moving from form to content to context; or, in the parlance of semiotics, from syntax to semantics to pragmatics. This outward expansion of ideas moves, like ripples on a pond, from the formal logic of the designed object, to the symbolic or cultural logic of the meanings such forms evoke, and finally to the programmatic logic of both design's production and the sites of its consumption — the messy reality of its ultimate context.

Design, because of its functional intentions, has always had a relational dimension. In other words, all forms of design produce effects, some small, some large. But what is different about this phase of design is the primary role that has been given to areas that once seemed beyond the purview of design's form and content equation. For example, the imagined and often idealized audience becomes an actual user(s) — the so-called "market of one" promised by mass customization and print-on-demand; or perhaps the "end-user" becomes the designer themselves, through do-it-yourself projects, the creative hacking of existing designs, or by "crowdsourcing," producing with like-minded peers to solve problems previously too complex or expensive to solve in conventional ways. This is the promise that *Time* magazine made when it named you (a nosism, like the royal we) person of the year in 2006, even as it evoked the emerging dominance of sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Wikipedia, Ebay, Amazon, Flickr and YouTube, or anticipated the business model of Threadless. The participation of the user in the creation of the design can be seen in the numerous do-it-yourself projects in magazines such as *Craft*, *Make* and *Readymade*, but they can also be seen in the generic formats for advertisements and greeting cards by Daniel Eatock.

Even in most instrumental forms of design, the audience has changed from the clichéd focus group sequestered in a room answering questions for people hiding behind two-way mirrors to the subjects of dogged ethnographic research, observed in their natural surroundings — moving away from the idealized concept of use toward the complex reality of behavior. Today, the audience is thought of as a social being, one who is exhaustively data-mined and geo-demographically profiled — taking us from the idea of an average or composite consumer to an individual purchaser among others living a similar social lifestyle community. But unlike previous experiments in 1970s-style community-based design or behavioral modification, today's relationship to the user is more nuanced and complicated. The range of practices varies greatly, from the product development methods employed by practices such as IDEO, creators of the famed *Nightline* shopping cart, to the "social probes[,]" of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby who create designed objects, not to fulfill prescribed functions but instead use them to gauge behavioral reactions to the perceived effects of electromagnetic energy or the ethical dilemmas of gene testing and restorative therapies.

Once shunned or reluctantly tolerated, constraints — financial, aesthetic, social, or otherwise — are frequently embraced not as limits to personal expression or professional freedom, but rather as opportunities to guide the development of designs; arbitrary variables in the equation that can alter the course of a design's development. Seen as a good thing, such restrictions inject outside influence into an otherwise idealized process and, for some, a certain element of unpredictability and even randomness alters the course of events. Embracing constraints — whether strictly applying existing zoning codes as a way to literally shape a building or an *ethos* of material efficiency embodied in print-on-demand — as creative forces, not obstacles on the path of design, further opens the design process demanding ever-more nimble, agile and responsive systems. This is not to suggest that design is not always already constrained by numerous factors beyond its control, but rather that such encumbrances can be viewed productively as affordances. In architecture, the discourse has shifted from the purity and organizational control of space to the inhabitation of real places — the messy realities of actual lives, living patterns over time, programmatic contradictions, zoning restrictions, and social, not simply physical, sites. For instance, architect Teddy Cruz in his Manufactured Sites project, offers a simple, prefabricated steel framework for use in the shantytowns on the outskirts of Tijuana — a structure that participates in the vernacular building practices that imports and recycles the detritus of Southern California's dismantled suburbia. This provisional gesture integrates itself into the existing conditions of an architecture born out of crisis. The objective is not the utopian *tabla rasa* of architectural modernism — a replacement of the *favela* — but rather the interjection of a micro-utopian element into the mix.

Not surprisingly, the very nature of design and the traditional roles of the designer and consumer have shifted dramatically. In the 1980s, the desktop publishing revolution threatened to make every computer user a designer, but in reality it served to expand the role of the designer as author and publisher. The real "threat" arrived with the advent of Web 2.0 and the social networking and mass collaborative sites that it has engendered. Just as the role of the user has expanded and even encompasses the role of the traditional designer at times (in the guise of futurist Alvin Toffler's prophetic "prosumer"), the nature of design itself has broadened from giving form to discrete objects to the creation of systems and more open-ended frameworks for engagement: designs for making designs. Yesterday's designer was closely linked with the

command-control vision of the engineer, but today's designer is closer to the if-then approach of the programmer. It is this programmatic or social logic that holds sway in relational design, eclipsing the cultural and symbolic logic of content-based design and the aesthetic and formal logic of modernism's initial phase. Relational design is obsessed with processes and systems to generate designs, which do not follow the same linear, cybernetic logic of yesteryear. For instance, the typographic logic of the Univers family of fonts, established a predictive system and closed set of varying typeface weights. By contrast, a Web-based application for Twin, a typeface by Letterror, can alter its appearance incrementally based on such seemingly arbitrary factors as air temperature or wind speed. In a recent design for a new graphic design museum in the Netherlands, Lust created a digital, automated "posterwall," feed by information streams from various Internet sources and governed by algorithms designed to produce 600 posters a day.

Perhaps the best illustration of this movement toward relational design can be gleaned through the prosaic vacuum cleaner. In the realm of the syntactical and formal, we have the Dirt Devil Kone, designed by Karim Rashid, a sleek conical object that looks so good it "can be left on display." While the vacuum designs of James Dyson are rooted in a classic functionalist approach, the designs themselves embody the meaning of function, using color-coded segmentation of parts and even the expressive symbolism of a pivoting ball to connote a high-tech approach to domestic cleaning. On the other hand, the Roomba, a robotic vacuum cleaner, uses various sensors and programming to establish its physical relationship to the room it cleans, forsaking any continuous contact with its human users, with only the occasional encounter with a house pet. In a display of advanced product development, however, the company that makes the Roomba now offers a basic kit that can be modified by robot enthusiasts in numerous, unscripted ways, placing design and innovation in the hands of its customers.

If the first phase of design offered us infinite forms and the second phase variable interpretations — the injection of content to create new forms — then the third phase presents a multitude of contingent or conditional solutions: open-ended rather than closed systems; real world constraints and contexts over idealized utopias; relational connections instead of reflexive imbrication; in lieu of the forelorn designer, the possibility of many designers; the loss of designs that are highly controlled and prescribed and the

ascendency of enabling or generative systems; the end of discrete objects, hermetic meanings, and the beginning of connected ecologies.

After 100 years of experiments in form and content, design now explores the realm of context in all its manifestations — social, cultural, political, geographic, technological, philosophical, informatic, etc. Because the results of such work do not coalesce into a unified formal argument and because they defy conventional working models and processes, it may not be apparent that the diversity of forms and practices unleashed may determine the trajectory of design for the next century.

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