Nothing Special? (Activist) Design Skills for the 21st Century

Abstract

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This isn't just a challenge for designers, but also for policy, design research and the representation of design through its exhibition or publication. Design is embracing new sets of skills that require extended thinking. In terms of design education, which plays a role in defining the skills necessary to designers, this dynamic is particularly challenging.

In this article, rather than pursue traditional disciplinary fields – either to be found in the design profession or in its educational institutions – I move toward four conceptual frameworks that might help structure a way into considering where design skills for the 21st century might be directed. I do this in the context of increasing global resource constraints, the need to address climate change more thoughtfully and issues of social inequality and injustice that have become greater and more widespread over the past 30 years. These years have seen the growth of design in the context of the neoliberal economic and social system. Building away from this, we may see design as an active agent in forging post-neoliberal ways of living, acting and being.

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The Challenge to Design Education

The creation of disciplines within the bureaucratic structures of universities encourages their 'ossification' (Smith, 2005). Upon the development of an academic discipline, so standards and norms of teaching delivery are established and 'canonical' texts are developed that provide a 'tick-box' level of legitimation for study in order to meet targets and provide performance indicators. In its turn, this then restricts the field of study, tying it down to a specific *modus operandi* that ignores the very flexibility and instability of its own object of study. Equally, as design rapidly evolves, re-organizing its professional make-up, entering into new contexts of application, innovating relations with its clients and users, being positioned into new ideological structures, so a fixity of analytical and pedagogic approach becomes less and less appropriate.

Historically, educational establishments have provided laboratories for the experimentation of new modes of design thinking. A brief glance through the history of design education suggests that it has always harboured self-problematizing discussion. This runs through, for example, Lethaby's rejection of the term 'dessinateur' in favour of 'industrial artist' during his directorship of Central St Martin's in 1912. The former suggested that the designer would be a technician, the early 20c. version of a mouse monkey. The latter suggested, perhaps, a more elevated, intellectually driven professional status. Equally, the frequent schisms at the Bauhaus during the 1920s or the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm in the 1960s or at the Eina school in Barcelona in the 1970s mostly revolved around a struggle for definition. Should design pedagogy be a vocationally driven activity, oriented toward industry, or should it engage a more humanities-driven approach that welcomes critique and experimentation?

Challenges to traditional design disciplines have also come from within the industry itself. As the shift toward service economy, or rather a tighter, more orchestrated

fit between product and service delivery, has come about in the developed world, so design's relationship to other forms of business, and indeed other academic disciplines, has shifted. Here are some examples drawn from the United Kingdom that demonstrate the way that this has impacted on design practices.

In some cases the work of the designer has become 'dematerialized'. For example, David Scothron of Product First states that since most of their clients these days have their own in-house technical product design teams, the work of his small consultancy has moved in recent years toward developing product strategies, concepts and ideas. So they don't do so much product resolution anymore. Instead, they have become product, management, brand and marketing consultants rolled into one (Scothron, 2007). TheoryB, is a management consultancy that engages designers in helping companies develop their creative thinking. This is where they are involved entirely in the 'below the line' aspects of a company – the part that the public doesn't see (see www.theoryb.com). Scandal and debate broke out in the UK in 2005 as Hilary Cottam achieved the Design Museum Designer of the Year Award. With a background in anthropology, her work is in managing teams in developing new public sector service deliveries such as in schools and prisons. She admits to not ever having specifically designed anything herself. Her role is as in design research, ideation and management.

In other cases, the material outcome of design has become less pre-defined. Heads Together, a Huddersfield-based group, work strategically as catalysts by putting communities at the centre of the decision-making process in the regeneration of their localities (see www.headstogether.org). Their role is not in deciding the end-form for improving neighbourhoods, but in facilitating the interface between end-user and a constellation of creative experts. Designers play a role when needed. This may be in helping communities to imagine alternative environments for themselves. It may be resolving the visual or material outcome of those aspirations.

103

This all suggests a turn toward designers working in more strategic ways where their ideas and innovations play a significant role in relation to the role of the objects. The 2006 British Design Valuation Survey (Horn et al., 2006) claims that there is a ever widening gap within the design industry between those consultancies offering more traditional design services – such as designing layouts for brochures or retail interiors – and those that are engaged in more strategic thinking.

This Janus-like quandary of design pedagogy is reflected both in theory and reality. The Italian sustainability doyen, Ezio Manzini argues that:

Today design, understood not only as an operative method but also as culture, is oriented in two directions: the one aiming towards isolation, focusing on the formal qualities of products with the most evident aesthetic content (the predominant trend during the 1980s). The other approach consists in facing the present-day challenges, and intervening on the strategies that determine the social and environmental quality of the changing world of today. (Manzini, 1998: 57)

Manzini views the foundation of the more multidisciplinary, strategic designer through the lens of a requirement for social and environmental change setting this against (high) design that is concerned with the fashioning of the object.

104

By contrast brand designer, Simon Myers, sees this duality more as a function of its changing commercial context. In order to offer a viable service and therefore to make a living, design expertise must be concentrated in one of two ways. The first is in finding ways of delivering cost-efficient design through, for example, materials sourcing, the optimization of manufacture and/or assembly processes or building distribution efficiency and balancing these against utilitarian, legal or aesthetic demands. Here, the designer's offer lies in their organizational and technical as well as creative prowess. Typically, the concentration is high volume, low cost graphic, spatial or industrial products. The second, alternative model

of design consultancy focuses much more on design's strategic role for clients. Its offer lies in the high value, sometimes low volume end of design to deliver bespoke projects and provide personalised insight (Myers, 2007).

As we shall see later on in this article, the designer may even bring these together. This is particularly the case in the development of brands where their focus is on creating a singular script for a client that is rolled across a large marketplace. As Lash (2010) explains, this is where 'intensities' are turned into 'extensities'.

Whichever pathway the professional designer takes, much of their work is in fact about getting work. Driven by 'needs production' (Bourdieu, 1984), designers have necessarily adopted a precarious professional identity. Driven by the need for differentiation, re-invention and flexibility, designers, design educationalists or design policy makers have rarely dared nail it down to normative curricula, professional body approvals systems and agreed working practices as, for example, architecture has.

So much for this, late-20th century, neoliberal paradigm of design and design education. In the 21st century, where design skills are concentrated isn't just a question of educational or professional dogma or opportunism. There are new drivers that challenge us to rethink the skills we should be learning or using. This might take us beyond the dualistic *impasse* of 'objects v. strategy', 'technical v. humanistic education', 'normative v. market-driven professional standards' and so on.

Reactive and activist practices

As we have seen, designers have always innovated their practices. They've flexed and reinvented themselves in a constant struggle, mostly for professional survival. As economic, political, social and cultural conditions and processes have changed,

105

so designers have been quick to respond, re-skilling and providing new services in order to maintain clients. While not always being too aware of larger global forces, designers have often moved intuitively in response to changing contexts.

Consider this context:

• a superpower and its allies entrenched in protracted and expensive conflict far from its own territories;
• this conflict and previous state expenditure commitments causing unprecedented high national debt;
• economic recession leading to wage stagnation, particularly for the middle-classes;
• the rapidly rising price of oil and other commodities causing high inflation and therefore a huge loss of expendable outcome;
• resulting political unrest that includes a turn away from party politics to issue-based concerns;
• a growing awareness of the connectivity of everyday concerns to global ones, particularly in relation to environmental issues.

I am talking about the early 1970s. And it was this context that gave us the radical design of Italian – groups like Superstudio who theorized the idea of a possible network society where information systems would provide alternative structures for consumer culture. The early 1970s gave us 'community architecture' wherein end-users of planning and building would have an active role in specifying form, itself pre-figuring co-creation and participatory design. The early 1970s saw the publication of key seminal books that influenced design thinking such as *Design for the Real World* (Papanek, 1972) and *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher, 1973). These gave way to developments in appropriate technology and social innovation models for design. Within this thinking, the impact of Meadows et al's T*he Limits to Growth* was also evident (Meadows et al., 1972). Here, the finitude of natural

resources was calculated, including what we now know of as 'Peak Oil'. Permaculture, another invention of the early 1970s, developed design and planning models for low energy input food, sustainable food production (Mollison, 1978).

All these innovations in design thinking took place in a context of resource scarcity and intellectual emancipation. It is intriguing to think of how many of these ideas have resurfaced in the very similar economic, social and political circumstances of the 21st century.

Indeed, I would suggest that innovations in design processes and thinking more often take place in recessionary contexts than in economic booms. Design business expands in periods of economic growth, but doesn't necessarily change its core way of working. By contrast, in periods of economic stagnation or contraction, designers have to find new ways of carrying on in order to ensure their commercial and creative survival. In the USA and United Kingdom, at least, the following developments in design have taken place in recessionary moments:

• 1930s development of product styling (Raymond Loewy, etc.);
• mid-1940s development of design in the context of the welfare state (e.g. Design Research Unit);
• early 1970s (examples already discussed);
• early 1990s development of digital design and branding (e.g. Deepend; Interbrand);
• 2008ff design activism, social design, co-creation, service design, critical design.

It would be foolish to try and universalize this argument. After all, the current recession that we talk about in Europe is by no means global. Colombia registered growth of up to 2.6% in 2011-12. China's GPD growth was at a staggering 9%.

107

The *Times of India* newspaper reported some consternation that growth there was down to 5.5% in late 2012! And all of these are within widely differing political and social arrangements. The global map of design is not at all flat, therefore.

But the key idea I wish to push here is that design produces innovations and innovates itself at the same time. It makes new things but also reorganizes the ways by which those new things are conceived of and executed.

For many designers, life goes on: brochures get designed; prototypes are built; client presentations are made. However, it has become increasingly evident that they are having to work to ever shorter schedules, on tighter margins with decreasing opportunities for professional development within its dominant modes (see Design Industry Voices, 2011). Design, for many, has become a treadmill that is disciplined by workflow systems, accounting for billable hours and a general deference to evermore demanding clients in an overheated marketplace (Dorland, 2009).

So, while the growth model of neo-liberalism still drives much of the growth of design itself – particularly in the Far East and Middle East – new, post-neoliberal models are emerging. In South America it will be particularly interesting to see how this might play out in the differing social, environmental and political arrangements of countries like Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela (see Kennedy & Tilly, 2008; Escobar, 2010).

In the USA and Europe, many designers are beginning to see that the game is up on an entirely commercially driven, profit-motive kind of practice. Different priorities are afoot in the design world. Some of these are to do with thinking about design as part of a wider social welfare and well-being. Some of these seek to provoke how everyday, public life might be lived. Some looks at re-thinking our sense of place and locality and how we use these.

The two states of design – the reactive and the activist – exist side-by-side. Take just two examples of how the 'clean-slate' of a post-disaster context are dealt with. For Naomi Klein (2007), disasters such as those that follow tsunami waves, lead to a rapid colonizing by globalizing forces, eager to 'redevelop' by the building, for example, of Armani-styled hotels to replace traditional hospitality services that had been there before, or in the case of St Louis, by privatizing the city's education system. Contrastingly, for Rebecca Solnit (2007), local populations seize on such situations to rethink their environments in a more participatory way, to build the utopias they always talked about. Here, a 'post-neoliberal' order is designed.

These are spectacular examples, however. The changes in design I am referring to are, on the whole, quieter. They don't involve such a sense of rupture. Rather they are about inflections and reorientations that feed off the conditions of late neoliberalism but also invent something different. In sociological terms, we might think of these pre-existing conditions and what has developed from them as engaging four features: intensification, co-articulation, temporality, and territorialisation. I have discussed these themes elsewhere*, but they bear repeating.

From neoliberal to post-liberal design

109

There are many reasons for the rise of branding as a central feature of design practice in the past 40 years. Lash (2010) draws attention to the ways by which, under neoliberalism, economies become about the competition of monopolies: hence, Samsung v Apple; Google v Bing; Sony Ericsson v Philips; Ford v Toyota; Coca-Cola v Pepsi; Unilever v Procter & Gamble; Zara v Benetton; Exxon v BP v Shell; Virgin Airways v British Airways; Goldman Sachs v Morgan Stanley and so on. In all of these, competition is not just between products or services for market share but between brands.

Brands work through difference based on knowledge that is constructed relationally through multiple sites (Lury, 2004). Each brand is singular in that while it may deliver a product that is relatively undifferentiated in its performance (petrol is just petrol), its way of operating, its way of interfacing with other clients or customers, its 'instruction manuals', if you like, is distinct to those competing brands. Thus, designers are involved in the design of 'meta-data' or scripts. More basically, the corporate identity, brand or franchise manual is what the designer develops, itself to be rolled out and implemented by others (Fallan, 2008). They are fashioning singularities. Intellectual property is therefore core to this. In so doing, the emphasis is on highly intensive products that seek maximum affect, emotional attachment and, following on, brand loyalty. This is why design involves **intensification**. It is about reducing features down to easily reproducible and understandable elements that are deployed or orchestrated into a coherent whole.

This emphasis on the affective in design can be taken a few steps further so that the cognitive and embodied engagement with material becomes a way of transforming outlooks. Hence, Thomas Markussen (2011) observes that Santiago Cirugeda's placing of skips in the streets of Madrid (see www.recetasurbanas.net), and turning them into play objects, questions and challenges ideas of public space and the street through their actual use. Likewise, Heads Together's turfing of a street in the city of Leeds in the UK was a tool to open up the imagination of neighbourhood inhabitants and provoke a debate about what the street could be there for (see Julier, 2008). Laura Kurgan's famous Million Dollar Blocks project visualized the costs of the imprisonment of criminals to influence local council policy in New York and reallocate expenditure on prevention through health and education programmes (see www.l00k.org).

These projects pre-date the current economic recessions of Europe and the USA, but much of this kind of thinking is now being taken up as an increasingly urgent call for activist intervention is made. These go beyond design in the public realm

that reinforces mainstream conceptions of how space and place are reproduced. They feature attempts to disrupt the divisions between 'above' and 'below the line' design. They engage both end-users and policy-makers at the same time through the affective domain. They also try to create new relationships and marry up interests by engaging existing but untapped interests, political concerns, everyday preoccupations and ethical surplus.

In short, the designer is involved here in the production of the meaning of what is consumed. As such, they seek a wider, systemic level of intervention than the mere delivery of discreet public services. The design – its material outcome – gives focus to wider concerns that might be articulated in general, rhetorical terms: 'I'm worried about the ways that private cars create pollution and global warming'; 'There should be more possibilities for the community to meet'; 'Crime is caused by poverty and a lack of opportunities for the young'; and so on. But it also provides something through which these concerns can be acted on and thought through more. This is where design works in a process of **co-articulation**. Objects function as a 'materialization of participation' (Marres, 2011: 516); they facilitate a performative engagement in public life without disembedding from the everyday. Users do not have to go 'out there' to demonstrate their concerns. Instead, the (activist) object is something through which these concerns are looped through in everyday practice.

111

The examples of Santiago Cirugeda, Heads Together and Laura Kurgan cited above were implemented at a very local level. They allowed the designer to see the project through, building relationships with end-users and policy-makers. In this way, the designer can make adjustments to them, improvise and prototype. They involve the designer not merely as form-giver but as project manager, broker, matchmaker and facilitator. In so doing, the designer has to draw on a new set of skills in people management. In mainstream commercial design, they are often acutely aware of the challenges of managing their clients expectations and en-

suring they understand a need for the service being provided. Here, in this more activist scenario, those skills are extended as the range of people and institutions that the designer works with broadens.

In this context, the designer's timeframe is different as is, therefore, the **temporality** of the design. Rather than seeing the lifetime of a project as being determined by client commission, through development to delivery, the designer is working in a more open-ended way that goes beyond the materialization of the design. Instead, the designer works with and alongside the user and other interests. Implementation also involves a series of re-designs that doesn't necessarily mean that the design reaches an optimum point. Rather it aims toward ownership and stewardship on the part of stakeholders.

This approach has, again, its roots in the 1970s. More precisely, notion of 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973) advocated that technological and social challenges cannot be definitively solved. Instead the designer should develop open-ended structures and unfinished objects. It could be that such an attitude exonerates the designer from political responsibility – that by avoiding any declared endpoint, they pass the responsibility on to citizens. If, however, the designer remains embedded with their public, that responsibility becomes a shared one and one that gives space for the designer to usefully contribute their expertise while engaging users in taking on and continuing to develop results. This kind of partnership might be called 'interaction centred design' rather than 'user centred design' (Christensen et al., 2010).

In this post-neoliberal way of working, the spaces that the designer works in change. The former territorialisation of design might have involved more discreet locations where it is practised. Within this, clients and users and the boundaries between them might be more clearly defined. A designer undertakes a job for a client who has an idea of who their market is. Marketing intelligence has pro-

gressively sought to identify with increasing accuracy and clarity who might be in that market niche and how they live. While much has been said about sovereign consumer choice over the last 30 years, it is largely the marketplace itself that has created and defined consumers. Thus while there has been a move in marketing approaches from identifying consumers according to their profession to their lifestyle habits. These in themselves are not neutral and freestanding but produced. As such, the territories they inhabit – starting with the home as the base unit of the consumer but moving to the city, the nation-state or the global market – are set out and formed according to the ability of people to pay for these.

An activist approach to design disrupts this kind of structure. Thus, for example, peer-to-peer room rental systems (e.g. see www.airbnb.com) circumvent the structures and relationships that are made by mainstream economics. New spaces, in this case for tourists and travelers to stay, are defined. Home-owners define and design their individual offer for the service. Money is paid straight into local economies rather than into the global flows of finance that maintain multinational hotel chains. Relationships of exchange are created that cut out corporate profit-motives. Finance moves directly into localities. A new **territorialisation** of design, production and consumption is therefore produced.

For the activist designer, it is not a question of choosing between focusing on the form of objects or design thinking. It needn't be about just the concrete or the abstract, the fashioning of artefacts or becoming a 'creative consultant'. Intensification and co-articulation are about the strategic deployment of the affective power of things into social networks. Temporality and territorialisation are about speeds and scales, but these are partially defined by both the design process and the design things that are produced through them. In all four cases, therefore, both the formal languages of design and its contextual qualities and quantities must be deeply understood. Skill resides in the each component but also in their synthesis.

113

Design culture and new design skills

I have deliberately focused on the more entrepreneurial, innovative and activist practices of design for these are where design is less reactive to dominant market conditions and where designers are taking more control of their practices.

One might ask whether some of the examples I have cited are, in fact, design. AirBnB, for example, is an entrepreneurially driven idea whose main feature is a web-based financial model. But it is also concerned with a system of provision that encompasses aesthetic choices. Deciding where you stay while travelling is a financial decision, but also one based on visual and material questions. AirBnB is exploiting a contemporary change in terms of the ethics of consumption.

It is hardly a new thing to say that design involves collaboration with specialists in many fields. It is, though, more recent that non-design specialists are working in designerly ways. Here, firstly, the affective elements of life are more central to decision-making. Secondly, ideas are developed through an iterative process of prototyping, testing and adjusting, even when the service or product taken 'above the line' and in the public domain.

114 Design has undergone enormous expansion in its sheer commercial weight and numbers involved during the neoliberal period since the 1970s. In countries that continue to grow economically, such as Brazil, Russia, India and China, this massification continues. Elsewhere, where this massification has already taken place, one finds a gradual fragmentation of design practices. New specialisms are invented that are more complex and that demand a reassessment of what the designer is, their skills, training, support and the ways by which they might be represented. This is where designers take advantage of changes in the macro-economic, technological or political environment to re-design their own practices.

In my book The **Culture of Design,** I was attempting to move beyond the idea that design was just about the fashioning of discreet objects. Instead, I wanted to show how it is entangled in the creation of relationships and networks that work through different systems of production and consumption.

Within this I wanted to consider how design cultures function. These work at a variety of scales. A studio contains and produces a design culture as an assemblage of professionals, their tools (e.g. computers, pencils, noticeboards, etc.) and resources (e.g. design magazines, capital, knowledge etc.). A design culture can also exist, for instance, at the level of a city where urban form, cultural infrastructure, political support, consumer behaviours, notions of tradition, educational resources and so on add up to produce particular relationships and ways of working and being.

At whatever scale, this way of thinking about design culture should encourage creative practitioners to see themselves as active participants in such systems. Their action can go beyond playing a passive role within systems, to changing them.

In terms of the idea of 'nothing special?' that appears in the title of the paper, this is intended as a provocative play on words. In fact, design skill is about a very special attention to the material, visual, spatial and temporal components of everyday life. But it also increasingly involves thinking and acting in the immaterial domains of social relationships. The designer takes part in the creation and orchestration of various 'fits' between material and immaterial features.

115

Currently, and to recapitulate, it seems that there are four fields in which design may be re-conceptualized. They are summarized as follows:

• 	by finding new ways of working in the affective domain by influencing embodied behaviour and engaging the emotions (intensification);

• by developing ways by which interests can be married up and by which these can be made material to provide action and feedback loops (co-articulation);

• by finding ways of designing that allow for open-endedness, where the designer is closely embedded with users in iterative and on-going interactions (temporality);

• by developing and defining new spaces and scales for the material and human, thus forming new kinds of relationships and opportunities for human action and identity (territorialisation).

These may be ways by which design cultures are not just taken as givens, but can be acted upon.

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117

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119