

CONCEPTUAL DESIGN - A POLEMIC

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The conference title, 'Design for Need', supposes that design is not at the moment for need, or for the right needs, and that we ought to change things. However, an advertisement for the conference in the American Industrial Design Magazine makes no reference whatsoever to the meaning of the conference title. Instead, above a picture of a British Airways 747, the words calculated to grab the minds of the industrial designers reading them are as follows: 'All inclusive tax-deductible professional events ... plus a super vacation in London at a remarkably low budget cost. Only \$666 from New York.'

Further, the title is, as often, ambiguous. A recent conference at Portsmouth was called 'Changing Design'. That too was perfectly chosen. We get into our planes and boats and trains full of enthusiasm - 'I'm going to Change Design'; 'I'm going to Design for peoples' Needs.' And on the way back, when boredom has set in, when the weight of papers has pressed us firmly back into our comfy chairs, we see that really we went as voyeurs. The meaning of the words changed, the cube flipped, and we listened to people talking about how design was changing, and how design is for peoples' needs, which we already knew, but fooled ourselves that we had not come to be told yet again.

I suggest that notwithstanding the few good things that do emerge from such conferences, our pretensions for them are bullshit. We know this, and appear to care very little.

We do not need to be told that the world has problems. But what is to be done about them? As with an illness, surely we want to both eliminate the cause and alleviate the symptoms? Both must be undertaken, with the first aid being directed towards the immediate problems. You might think this is obvious - on seeing someone lying bleeding in the road, we do not immediately run to petition the local council for a pedestrian crossing; rather, we try to stop the bleeding. (There is, of course, a school of thought which says that we should do nothing. As more and more people die on this road, the council will be forced to ban traffic from it, saving more lives in the long run. Similarly, the 'don't knows' should be tempted across the road by some means, when they will hopefully end up bruised or frightened enough to join the storm on the council - 'There is nothing so radicalising as a blow from a policeman's fist'.) But what does the designer do in this road accident situation?

Typically, sits down to design the form that the petition to the council might take. Or pursues a two-year research programme on the analysis of pedestrian movement near road junctions. If he or she has a leaning towards Alternative Technology, the design might be for a new sort of tourniquet made out of Kleenex tissues and lollipop sticks, and making sure everyone knows how to use it. All these stances are justifiable by

someone - they must be, since no-one does what they consider to be unjustifiable, and people certainly do things analogous to these.

We reply; 'It's not as simple as that', to someone who suggests that longterm elasto-plast research is all very well but what about the causes of today's casualties, 'It's not as simple as that'. Of course society ought to be changed so that everyone has somewhere good to live, but it's not as simple as that. Of course my designs for educational equipment and medical tools would be better if the government thought them one hundredth as important as nuclear weapons, but ... it's not as simple as that.

Perhaps someone can explain the difference between the attitude of one who says to a homeless person 'it's not as simple as that', and the 'callous revolutionary attitude' (naturally deplored by all) that says people should be left to die or to be oppressed: because only when they're at breaking point will they rise up to change things. What is the difference? What are we to say to people, on the one hand sacrificed to political expediency, on the other to our apparent inability to extract a simple major problem from a mass of minor ones? 'Half the world's starving' say the headlines; and in the stop press ... 'Designer comes up with new sort of toothbrush.'

So what happens to our ideals? How do design students with radical ideas seem to end up a few years later designing hotel interiors, lighting, chairs and so on? I suggest that they fall into the Reformist Trap. They find that if they don't suppress their beliefs to some extent, then they can't cope with what they need to do to 'make a living'. The best they can do is to try and change things within their own particular sphere of influence, harming others as little as possible, in the hope that they can help to alter things bit by bit.

The objections to this approach are as follows:

We make our sphere of influence so small. We'd feed a starving man in our house, but probably not if he was in the next street, let alone another country.

Harming 'as little as possible' is very situation-specific, yet we generalise it for ourselves, and accept others' rationalisations willingly.

Do we really hope for the big changes? If tomorrow is too soon, but the year 2000 too late for a revolution, just when is a revolution 'acceptable'?

We go berserk with rage when six people die in a bombing, yet refuse to give any meaningful amounts of money to charities helping thousands that are dying now of war, disease, famine - people we could do something about. So we have: 'hanging is too good for those terrorists', and 'I don't give very much to charities - they spend too much on administration'.

Thomas Markus' paper at the 1971 Design Participation conference (1) is the most accurate analysis of the differences between reformist and revolutionary designers that I have seen. The former, typically from a middle-class leftist background, try to make the design process transparent to the public gaze, and to provide ranges of alternative solutions so that compromises may be effected. But the revolutionary rejects both this and the conservative/patronage-oriented way, in favour of working for a real transfer of power. His clients are the end users and his work is often voluntary. He is not afraid of value judgements and he often rejects 'participation', not least for its potential for political manipulation.

Well, five years later, we begin to see the glimmerings of a recognition of this revolutionary role. The most recent New Scientist (2) carries an article headlined 'Windmill builders become political', reflecting changes in both the environmentalist and radical technology movements towards a disbelief that 'an accumulation of small changes will, by itself, lead to overall social and political changes'. Of course we all know this is true. That's the trouble with designers. You can call for Cultural Revolution Tomorrow ... or Yesterday ... and you're preaching to the converted. It's just that it never happens. Who do you want to hear ... Schumacher? 'Don't try to out-capitalise the capitalists'; and he quotes the capitalists' hallucinatory cry 'We are all socialists now' ... Illich? 'Only a cultural and institutional revolution which re-establishes man's control over his environment can arrest the violence by which development of institutions is now imposed by a few for their own interest' (3) ... Papanek? 'Design must be revolutionary and radical ...' (4)

You may say that I want to change design by or into politics. But I don't. I argue for the opposite case, of design changing society and politics, not merely seeking to diminish a misfit between existing situations.

However, there is no avoiding the fact that design as decision-making becomes political as soon as more than one person is involved. One striking example from my own experience (6) is that of a Danish charity who used a computer model to respond much more effectively with emergency disaster relief. But many of the limitations and parameters that the system could apply were political in origin - nakedly political - such as country X only giving certain supplies if they were transported by a particular airline and if certain other, completely useless supplies were bought - and only then so long as country Y's aid was not accepted until later.

But how can design change politics? Answer: we are in the unique position of dealing with potentially completely general problems - the design of everything, and not just tangible things, either. We are luckier even than the systems thinkers, the Cybernauts, who can only say what is and hope to point the way forward or to base successive operations on the new theories that emerge as they creep slowly forward along the hypothetico-deductive spiral. Designers are better off. By all means let us use the fashionable scientific paradigm - it works for biological warfare, and it can work for us. But we are supposed to be artistically creative too - we can damn-well invent our own paradigms, right out of the blue, just like that and design our dreams into reality and no-one will be very surprised.

Design's practitioners can operate inside a giant and immediate feedback system in

which hypothesis and deduction, simulation, action, thought, intuition, logic, art, polemics, creativity, objectivity and subjectivity can all thrive. Yet what does design have to say to society today? It has to say - and I paraphrase a recent metaphor by a professor of design research - that we are sailing around on a stormy sea with no particular place to go, so we'll try to design better aids to navigation, better bilge pumps, stronger sails. Design does not teach us how to swim - still less how to stop that bloody wind blowing.

Today's 'radical design' tells us to participate. 'User participation', said Nigel Cross in his preface to the Design Participation proceedings, 'by involving in the design process those who will be affected by its outcome, may provide a means for eliminating potential problems at their source'. Too right. One of the chief potential problems being that of protest and action after the event. With the magic ingredient of 'participation', all the people with the power have to do is to turn round and say 'How can you moan about this building (or whatever) - you participated in its design?' Most 'participation' is on the level of one's jailers asking if one prefers the rope or the firing squad. Many people instinctively know this, which allows the authorities to throw up their hands and say 'You see - even when we offer you a say, you don't want it'.

I cannot emphasise strongly enough how harmful I believe the notion of 'participation' to be. It is a spectacle to distract us, a sop to the masses, a manoeuvre carried out largely by hypocrites with bad intentions. No government dares carry participation to its logical conclusions ... and in practice they do not need to worry, because it is self-regulating: by definition diminishing its own energy as peoples' needs appear to get answered. When people talk about 'participation', I believe they mean 'limited participation', 'reasonable participation'. I for one do not wish to confront some of the grosser results of the world's tragedies with talk of limits and reasonableness.

So far, so destructive ...

If conferences are a con, reform is retrograde and participation placatory, what should designers do? Simple. Apart from a few special cases, they should stop designing - at least under the present terms of reference. To the people designing doorknobs, cars, hairdriers, radios, packages, chairs, beds, and tractors and bandages, we should say 'STOP - THE ONES WE'VE GOT WILL DO'. You've been so clever, such good designers, that nearly everything we make and use is just about good enough now, considering all these other problems we've got.'

Design as we know it should be replaced by what I have called Conceptual Design, so-called because I want it to relate to the true meaning of design, which is by no means necessarily object-oriented; and also by analogy with Conceptual Art.

As to the meaning of the word 'design', we can all play around with definitions, but if we refer to the Thesaurus, which lists words according to meanings, we can trace links and connections between two or more words. For example, 'design' and 'revolution' coincide at 'change', while 'design' and 'politics' give 'plan'. However, 'design', 'existence' and 'truth' give a bi-pole, involving both 'creation, uniqueness, transcendence' and 'unity, equality, oneness, not distinguish'. It is this polarisation

that I want to pursue, and which is embodied in the idea of Conceptual Design.

The relation to Conceptual Art is simple: however much that art has been incorporated into the very structures it sought to make irrelevant, it started off with a total rejection of the bourgeois notions of what art previously was. It is surprising to realise that only in the last ten or fifteen years have we come to see words as art, earthworks as art, documentation, events and happenings as art. To quote Joseph Kosuth (7) on Conceptual Art, but substituting design words for his art words, 'Being a designer now means to question the nature of design. But if one is questioning the nature of house design, one cannot be questioning the nature of design ... if you design houses, toothbrushes or consoles, you are already accepting, not questioning, the nature of design.'

Again: obviously, naturally, of course ... we claim to know this already. Let us then go on to criticise the almost total dedication of the concerned group of designers (which I take the people at Design for Need to be) to Third World, low technology or handicap-remedial situations. This group is already only a small fraction of all designers. Of the rest, that percentage who fail to respond to the call to stop 'designing' should be ignored. They are probably in it for the money, and might as well be selling second-hand cars. In an ideal world we would educate people and seek to change attitudes gradually ... but there is not time. So forget the rest. However, if only one in ten of those who say 'I'd do something if I could' really mean it, then we're OK. They should initially 1) make propaganda to increase awareness, 2) act, and 3) simulate and theorise. In doing 2) and 3) successfully, they would be doing 1) anyway.

Conceptual Design says designers should polarise, basically into theorists and activists, according to skill and inclination. Apart from an effort - and an increase in today's terms - to make at least tolerable the lives of those who are worst off, everyone else presently concerned with design, with their skills in implementing and reading structures, organisations, in practical problem solving, in decision-making, should do one of two things: First, get out on the streets, act, change, fight, recognise that we do not have time to do anything slowly, 'carefully', 'reasonably'; that these words, in the mouths of those who most often counsel their value, frequently do not mean what the dictionary says they mean. They are more laden with value-judgement than anything I say here.

Or second, they should be designing concepts, and incorporating them into systems that will enable the most effective implementation of solutions to problems, in ways that are completely open to people for their own use in solving other problems. In short, the theorists for the cultural revolution.

To reiterate, the two parts of this totally connected couple consist in recognising that we must go out and change things with what we've got, without waiting for better tools for the job; and in the radical re-appraisal of all that design might be. The relation between this idea and Papanek's 'Integrated Design' is one of a possibly reckless urgency applied to that concept, in the belief that morally, logically, and with regard to time, we have no choice.

Conceptual Design will enable us to act on the truths we already know, but are so brilliant at avoiding. If you want a conference, let's have it in Bangladesh or Guatemala, or North Kensington ... anywhere but here. And if the selfish natives have not seen fit to build a conference centre, let one of the first Conceptual Design projects be how to encourage both theorists and activists to work constantly rubbing shoulders with the problems they're dealing with. Which of us could stand surrounded by starving, homeless people and say ... 'Hang on chaps, only 137 more to die, and then I'll have your plans drawn up.' People constantly say (and this is the last line of defence) 'but we'd all go mad if we were really aware of all the suffering'. Conceptual Design must take us as far in that direction as we can bear to go.

So Conceptual Designers will produce devices, tangible or not, that will bring other peoples' problems within our range, demonstrating that physical and social distances are not the criteria to apply to decisions on aid and action.

They will also offer procedures rather than designed objects per se, so that what people do with or within them is a product of their own experience, circumstances and needs. They should be rich in analogy, so we can generate our own procedures and hence the objects, events, systems, organisations and structures that we need.

Thirdly, we will be made aware of a wholeness that we seem to have lost, and of the fact that whatever part of humanity is lost before we get round to designing our way out of it, then it is part of ourselves that we have murdered, by default.

We must persuade people away from design as it is now and, still leaving many more people than at present helping those whose lives are intolerable, work out a simple problem, each of us for ourselves. The question is, if present rates of death and horror are unacceptable, do we adopt a possibly risky revolutionary course that might work, or do we pursue the present reformist policy that most of us know in our hearts, never will? For there is not time. Ask anyone who's dying.

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