THE DESIGNER: RECLAIMING DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Historically and contextually, the designer's role has changed and it continues to evolve and adapt to today's demands in industry and higher education. Historical conservatism, social sciences theoreticians and linguists have continued to develop our understanding and definition of design. The authors assert that design has rapidly become associated with style and populism, rather than design. There is a need to re claim the concept and definition from the glitz and glamour and return to sound products, the articulation of aesthetics and a positive correlation between the arts and the sciences, based upon methodologies with substance, methods of working that are innovative, valid and contribute to best practise. It is of importance to professional designers that the 'designer' label, assuming it exists, possesses gravitas. It is asserted by the authors that the styling of products will equalize design to the extent that design itself will become standardised, inconsequential and will mean little to the designer or discerning consumer. Design will become bland, rather than challenging, innovative and reflective. The professional designer has to have a sound knowledge base of skills and intellect; who also has the ability to apply these attributes appropriately in the process of designing to redress the balance and the practise and profession of design and reassert real values and imbue them into the systems, processes and artefacts produced by Designers.

Keywords: Adapting, ownership, innovation, progress, professionalism, training and education

1 INTRODUCTION

Design today is often referred to in a two fold way, one, as a term that adds some form of value to an object or as Heskett states,' Design has widely transformed into something banal and inconsequential' [1], secondly, the historical route or terms of design, from the industrial revolution and the schools of art aligned to industry. The evolution of design has certainly caused some confusion: almost daily the authors are able to read and hear references to methods and methodologies as though the terms mean the same thing. There is a constant tension that exists between what could be described as the traditional and contemporary approach to design by Pugh and the work of Lawson. Alongside this tension exists the area of branding, falling between graphics, design and sales, although, branding was traditionally based upon the reputation of a company and its products and the designer was almost anonymous. An example might be the work of Peter Behrens and his design work for AEG. The brand is still in existence, but how many people are aware of Behrens's importance as the 'template' for the all round designer? A company's values were embedded into the product. Technically, Behrens was the original designer. There is a need to identify and establish some form of intellectual fulcrum linked to best practice. Moreover, other areas including business and research have increased in importance in the commercial world and integrated with education are all intrinsically linked to design. Historically, there were clearer routes that identified and articulated training and education.

2 DESIGN AND CONTEXT

The traditional areas of design were qualified and quantified by validating professional bodies; these organisations such as the City & Guilds of London Institute maintained standards. But, today design equally encompasses a wide ranging number of subjects from smart technology through to the area of new media theory. The area of critical theory has become increasingly important in recent years. It is asserted by the authors that this specific area is of fundamental importance to the education of today's designer to ensure that there is meaning added to the nurturing and development of ideas. The authors do not reflect a reactionary or a Luddite view of today's designer, but a reaction to how design and

designers are perceived: consider how the term, 'designer' today is used to parody the superficial. There is a need to re-consider the role of the designer as a designer, rather than a tool of marketing and commercial interests. There is a need to be realistic, but it is also important to maintain professionalism.

3   DESIGN AND CHANGE

Change and intellectual challenges have always been an integral part of design. According to Purbick, during the 1851 exhibition a campaign to encourage drawing was initiated with the purpose to educate the eye, to be able to, 'perceive forms of objects correctly and represent (*them*) with precision' [2]. So, an essential part of the ability that designer had to master was the skill of drawing; a skill factor is equally valid in 2010 to articulate ideas and illustrate solutions. The industrial revolution dictated many of the working practices; but, apart from the everyday problem solving where did these Engineer Design professionals discover intellectual stimuli to stimulate and challenge their pre conceptions?

The domain of different philosophers and the production of radical thought was not unusual during the early 20th century Europe in politics or academia. The research of Ferdinand Saussare in 1916, for example, in the field of linguistics established his role as the author of structuralism and semiology. In his study of signs and the science of signage he suggested that there needed to be a single methodology. Some of the key theories concerning critical theory emanated from the Frankfurt School ; although, it was stressed that theory was a form of resistance to commercial impulses of capitalist production and the ideological hold of commodity fetishism. Amongst the staff at the Frankfurt School was Walter Benjamin; Benjamin's critical text concerning the aura of art and mechanical reproduction [3], focused upon the surrealists' notion of freedom, embodied in the concepts on commodity, fetishism, reification, alienation and the consumer society. All of the competing theories produced at the Frankfurt School represent an articulation of how something is perceived or how a concept can become dominant. If these terms still have meaning today, how is the role of the designer defined? It is the questioning that reflects the continual change that demonstrates our willingness to adapt to today; although the question of design ownership needing to be addressed by the profession remains.

4   DESIGN VALUES

Adorno questioned the validity, be it harshly of popular consumption and culture; his message was developed and extended by Roland Barthes in challenging the death of the author, whilst the theorist Michelle Foucault asked the question, 'who is the author'; although these statements refer to various forms of text based work, it can also be equally applied to the 'author' of a design. ' At the same time in the United States design was developing in a different way. Spark's definition and explanation of the evolving consultant designer [4] describes how 'value' aligned to a work of art was gradually colonised by designers. She states, 'Bel Geddes, Raymond Loewy, Teague, and Dreyfuss came to consult design from backgrounds in advertising and store window display, Bel Geddes had had a career in stage design' [5].The influence of design and the questioning of design shifted back across the Atlantic in the post war period and was questioned by the work of the critic Raynor Banham. The throw away aesthetic was described by Banham in negating the tradition of form follows function by stating that there was no intrinsic link between geometric simplicity and function, furthermore, he claimed that, ' the most fundamental classification of our ideas and worldly possessions is In terms of their 'relative expendability'. The developments at the ULM Ulm Hochschule fur Gestalting or the Ulm School of Design has become less important in time it seems; although its influence can be read in the work of Bruce Archer's 'Systemic method for Designers' established at Royal College of Art in 1965. The Braun company also benefited from the influence of Ulm, by employing one of its ex students, Dieter Rams.

5   DEVELOPING DESIGNERS

Moving away from the worlds of disposable culture, the IDEO company in the United States has re-invigorated the approach to design by employing as many engineers, psychologist and designers in the process of ,' observing real people', which is at the centre of their working practices. They base the developments upon a team based ethos with people sharing ideas and innovations. This is also

reflected in the statement by Julier [6] concerning, 'Designers working alongside marketing branding & consumption.' However, there is still some confusion.

The designer seems to exist in a number of domains all at the same time, from the world of fashion to engineering. In the UK there appears doubt and ambiguity concerning the designer and the designer culture. It is understandable when it is stated, by Thacara [7], 'that in the UK there are no fewer than 270 different entities in a position to send directives to schools.' Whilst McDermott reports, at the same time Dunn & Raby at the Royal College of Art are using, 'designed objects as design tools' [8].

Research today and publications concerning design are focusing upon the links between technology and design. This is reflected in the work of Dunn [9] who states, 'all electronics are a hybrid of radiation, he goes further maintaining that both the material and the immaterial lead to new aesthetic possibilities for a life in the electromagnetic environment' taken from his views expressed through his writings in Hertzian Tales [10].

6   DESIGN TODAY

Where are we now? Design and designer as words have positive and negative associations. Design today is concerned with processes and systems of thought, something that has always been the case with drawing as the conduit of developing how we see and define space. This is validated by the Bologna agreement (1999) where it is stated,' knowledge is the primary focus coupled with employability, that systems adapt to change and that there has to be a development of criteria and methodology'. Design is gaining ground in all forms of industry and not just the creative industries, this is supported by the historian Katherine Mc Dermott, [11], 'The DMI (Design Management Group) formed in 1975 is American based and has developed the professionalism of design and integrated the role into business & industry having at its roots Taylorism'.

Again according to Mc Dermott the current suggestion is one that advocates 'design change to design policy or design strategy' [12]. Some of the suggestions presented in this paper were defined, originally by Ivan S Gibson who wrote,' 'the activity of design is not solely concerned with artefacts; it encompasses the whole field of human interest. The object around which design is oriented may also be essentially aesthetic- like a new garden lay out, a new painting or a new musical composition. Equally, the end result of a design activity may be demonstrated by or through, a system; a new economic theory, a new manufacturing process or a new political theory [13].

7   CONCLUSION

Advances in engineering, John Ruskin and William Morris were all part of the industrial age. How processes of work developed, intelligent discourses on values and the correlation of market place and goods pre-occupied their thinking. Ambiguity, doubt and the challenge of definitions were an essential part of understanding the profession of engineering design. However, the definition and role of design and designers is constantly changing. The proliferation of vocational art and design programmes, within the universities appears to be exponential, for example 'in the UK, the number of first year design students has risen by 35%, from 14,948 to 20,225, between 1994 and 2001' [14] and continues to rise. The product designer within industry and commerce taking on the mantle of the 'tool designer' of the Fordism period within the UK manufacturing sector, a period of mass production, 'the American system of manufacture-production of standardized parts, interchangeable, combined with the moving assembly line' [15].

This period coincided with the birth of the HE binary system, namely Polytechnics and Universities. In a now accepted speech of great importance to design education and the binary system, the secretary of state for education and science stated, 'in Britain the system must be based on the twin traditions which have created our present higher education institutions' [16] By this, he meant Universities, extant together with the colleges of advanced technology and the parallel grouping of leading technical colleges and the colleges of education, importantly for this argument the colleges of Art and design were to be considered at a later date.

However, how was research and teaching formed in this period , relative to design, is important for the sustained argument of this paper, indeed did it influence our current practices. The need then as now to balance academic with vocational education caused much debate, 'difficult to reconcile demands of academic with vocational as with those of liberal education' [17]. The need to study broadly yet read deeply was seen as being eroded by the perceived need of drilling deep for specialisms, the nature of

which did not and does not in the opinion of the authors sustain the liberal argument when only a component part of the discipline is studied to depth.

The development of research methodologies for discrete subjects led to questioning of the benefits of such study and the argument of education and or research for their own sake. The period before and after the world war, 1939-1945, saw fundamental research activity within the universities relative to the engineering disciplines, that is the intellectual application of mathematics and physics, practised by academics of those disciplines, the undergraduates through the activity being vocationally prepared for careers in engineering in all its eclectic forms, e.g., electrical, civil etc.

However, the broadening and liberalisation of engineering particularly mechanical as a singular subject to include design, economics and ergonomics for example, has led to the creation of a variety of specialist degree programmes who supported and support research from the platform of many academic sub-subjects. This was never the intention when the scheme for Polytechnics was proposed; but the phenomena for 'academic drift' [18] has seen the disappearance of teacher training colleges, Art Colleges, Commercial Institutions and Polytechnics all in the name of aspirational education. The authors ask where is design taught and by whom in the modern landscape of HE? They argue only where technologists and artists synergise. This synergy may be found in the 'new universities' where the older style of engineering programmes has given way to technology collaborating with new design practices evolving into Product Design programmes, taught by multi-disciplinary academics.

It is perceived by the authors, indeed, believed that the subject will continue to expand into various disciplines and in that process evangelise the methods of working. However, there has to be some degree of caution applied to the definition of design and designers as there is a danger of the joint concepts being referred to in insignificant ways. Other areas such as marketing and branding will continue to be persuasive and pervasive in their presence. Nevertheless, the health of the discipline of design will continue to grow and assimilate new concepts and theories, by challenging assumptions and producing new intellectual and practical tools to maintain professionalism and retain the justifiable gravitas of being 'a designer'.

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