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The Notion of Relational Design

by John Wood

(Photograph - WOODCUT of ALCHEMIST -library on left hand side, tools and furnace on the right hand side)

A Design historian would probably argue that the origins of design owe more to the practices of the mediaeval Craft Guilds than to the Monastic tradition of contemplative thought³². Nevertheless, there is a sense in which creative designers are always at the very crossroads between making and thinking, with one foot on each road. This paper proposes that, in these turbulent times of ecological crisis and political change, we now need to find a wiser balance between the two approaches.

(Photograph of NASA space ROCKET taking off)

Our Scientific age evolved from the Alchemist's spirit of subjective inquiry which developed into the more objective, rationalistic, and deterministic world which we recognise today. To characterise its development, we could say that it is chiefly the worldviews of Newton and Descartes which have underpinned the industrial revolution, and which have led to the production methods of the twentieth century.

(Photograph of an ELECTRIC IRON, 1937)

In the popular imagination, the central paradigm of designing is probably still the object - usually a functional, wearable or decorative article. In the eighteenth century, when Sir Isaac Newton was Governor of the Royal Mint, it was customary to weigh money. Weight and power are still associated concepts, but it is good to see that Slovenia has got rid of its metal coins. Perhaps this is a sign of a very enlightened and progressive society. In our materialistic culture, designed objects are acquired as gifts, as tokens of transaction, badges of identity, status symbols, souvenirs, relics, or simply as shopping trophies. Consumerism was invented as the engine of perpetual motion behind economic growth; a dependable mechanism to provide more jobs, more objects; in fact, more of everything.

And in order to sustain the pace of economic activity, designers have accepted a central role in the cycle of obsolescence. An inescapable canon of consumerist production is that every new product must soon be overshadowed by a newer, more irresistible, model.³³ The summary destruction of new products is now so habitual that it has become unremarkable. It is ritualised in every thriller film in which the premature 'product-death' of the car is celebrated by an apocalyptic crash landing, burning, and ultimate detonation.

Can the role and purpose of design be redeemed? The Latin concept of 'setting something apart'³⁴ is at the heart

³² *The Design Studio, Schon, D.*

³³ *Raymond Williams reminds us that the concept of 'consumption' is based on a French word signifying the act of pillage: "To take up completely, devour, waste, spend."*

³⁴ *Latin - Designare; 'to mark out and to name'.*

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of our current use of this rather diffused and overstretched word 'design'. Fairly recently the static, visual connotations are giving way to more dynamic and systemic ones. We no longer think exclusively of discrete 'objects' when we use the word 'design'. Doctors are now said to 'design' a course of treatment, computer analysts 'design' software systems, and military strategists 'design an attack'. The word is often used in this way to epitomise the certainty of intention³⁵, in contradistinction with the idea of happy chance, or the inventive management of serendipity. The familiar concept of design is still a confident, predictive one. Unfortunately, it is the very confidence behind the connotation of planning and strategy in design which makes us surprised by disasters such as Three Mile Island, and Chernobyl.³⁶

(Photograph of VW VAG Germany GOLF UMWELT)

So how much influence can designers have in this runaway world? How can designers help to sustain the rich ecology of the planet? If the current technology of the motor car is environmentally unsustainable, for example, should the responsible designer participate in its slow and difficult evolution, or try to promote its even more painful devolution? Consumerism has trapped us into concentrating on necessary but largely palliative measures such as 'green design', when the central issue is the addictive nature and the scale of consumption itself. Many designers lament the fact that it is the patrons of design, rather than the designers themselves, who wield most power.

(Photograph of TURBULENT SEA)

We live in an age of Chaos. In the 1950s and 1960s, scientists were convinced that they would be able to predict the weather if only they had powerful enough computers. Now it is recognised that this intention is not only a practical impossibility, but that it is based upon a serious theoretical misunderstanding. New ideas in science are at odds with the stability and certainty of Newton's, and Einstein's findings, and perhaps this new spirit of uncertainty³⁷ is a healthy reminder to all designers that we must be prepared for change, and that our own habits and desires are an integral part of each design problem. Two and a half thousand years ago, Heraclitus argued that you cannot 'step into the same river twice' and he implied that we should not be surprised by events which do not conform to linear, predictive logic.³⁸

(Photograph of BUTTERFLY)

In global, ecological terms, we may not be able to step into the same river again. We cannot wait for patrons of design, government agencies, and international bodies to deal with the problems which threaten world ecology. The ecosystem of the Earth is an enormously complex system, and designers are often given small latitude for making human activities sympathetic to the environment. Nevertheless, we must be optimistic. Popularisers of Chaos theory have given us the emancipatory idea that small effects can sometimes have a decisive influence over

³⁵ Recently (*Daily Telegraph* 18/4/92) a company in San Diego was reported to have 'designed' a new drug, 'atom by atom' in the laboratory. A spokesman declared that: "these are completely novel chemical entities, not to be found in nature".

³⁶ Machiavelli: "I believe that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be governed by ourselves."

³⁷ Heisenberg's famous Principle of Uncertainty implies that it is impossible to observe events without affecting some measure of change upon them.

³⁸ "Contradictions do not consist by themselves, but are an integral part of the logos". (Heraclitus)

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much larger ones. Thus the butterfly stirring the air in one place might actually be precipitating violent storms several weeks later in another country. Designers therefore need the wisdom and imagination to understand the interactive, relational aspects of designing on every level; material, social, and cultural. Design is not just the shaping of objects³⁹, but is also an important mode of social communication.

(Photograph of NEW YORK City)

Design is a form of rhetoric, and as such may have more persuasive influence than the immediate aura of a specifically designed object or discrete system.⁴⁰ Design should therefore be seen as a relational activity. The fifteenth century German monk, Nicolaus von Kues⁴¹ was possibly the first person to believe that the world is infinite. He saw it as being holistic and multi-dimensional. If someone told him something - even something quite commonplace - he would always want to know more about it. He believed each situation to be a network of innumerable parts in which everything is connected to everything else. He said that without the notion of multiplicity, we have no wholeness, harmony, or unity. Conversely, it is only by virtue of the whole that we are immersed in a world of multiplicity.

(Photograph of SHOPPING MALL)

Today, we are only too aware of the multiplicity and complexity of the universe. Even the simple word 'nature', a term used by both the advertising industry and by environmentally concerned consumers, is used in a variety of ways to mean different things at different times for different people. It has been said⁴² to have at least three separate and distinct meanings. Our word 'Nature' also carries strong emotional, religious, and ideological overtones which derive from the culture and belief system in which we are part. It is understandable, therefore, that some people adopt a moralistic stance about design and the environment. Nevertheless, we should avoid adopting a narrow judgmental position⁴³ because the extent to which individual conscience will directly affect change is limited. Perhaps we should even resist thinking of "green design" as a separate category, because this may focus our attentions upon the "already green" consumer. We must try to comprehend the broadest picture and act opportunistically. We must continue to think globally and to act locally.

Designers should assume the role of wise interventionists, choosing when, where, and how much to influence alternative trends and codes of behaviour. The primary consumer concepts of acquisition and ownership must be

³⁹ Massimo Iosa Ghini: "The design project is basically an exercise in finding the solution to a problem, and the object is the end-result of such problem solving. However, contemporary design no longer identifies and provides solutions. It is not that the problems have all disappeared, but rather that design is restricting itself to the creation of chairs and tables, whilst the corporations with the real problems are turning to others to do the problem solving."

⁴⁰ Richard Buchanan has suggested that designers "...have directly influenced the actions of individuals and communities, changed attitudes and values, and shaped society in surprisingly fundamental ways. This is an avenue of persuasion not previously recognised."

⁴¹ Also known as Nicolaus Cusanus (1401-1464)

⁴² Williams, R., *Keywords* 1976, Fontana. To paraphrase Williams' three categories: i) the essential quality and character of something ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings.

⁴³ Machiavelli is "it seems that in the actions of man...bad should always be associated with good, and it so easily grows up with that good that it seems impossible to avoid the one while wanting the other" *Discourses* iii,37, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mazzoni & Casella.,p.251

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usurped by alternative, environmentally tolerable dreams and desires. Perhaps 'narrative' in the broadest sense could replace 'production' at the transactional heart of an enlightened economic system. It is said⁴⁴ that the developed world has already become an 'information economy', and we are accustomed to novel recursive marketing and advertising strategies which straddle genres within film and TV, fashion and music; strategies which give us nameless advertising campaigns, faceless corporate identities, cross-product sponsorship, promotional ephemera, public relations reportage, partwork publications, public endorsement of causes such as health, safety, culture, and sport, and all the less oblique marketing of goods or services by direct retail, mail catalogue and credit card phone-in⁴⁵. In this predatory world, everything seems to sponsor everything else.

(Photograph from 1906 copy of the Daily Mail depicting spectre of "TELEPHONE SHOPPING")

The futuristic vision of a cybernetic world in which the central commodity is software, rather than hardware, is becoming increasingly feasible. The expanding market for interactive computer game systems have already had a significant deleterious effect on the sales of more palpable products for the youth market. The social impact of such changes is a vexed question⁴⁶, however, and beyond the scope of this lecture.

(Photograph of MARIO BROS products)

With the advent of High Density TV and its likely integration within networked, interactive computer technologies⁴⁷ a revolution is likely. The direction and tenor of the changes are very difficult to predict, however, as they will mobilise many interests and provoke powerful forces. The uncertainties of the situation will put designers at another crossroads, requiring them to take a decisive role in the responsible deployment of the new discursive systems. In very general terms, one might characterise two alternative scenarios:

The first, and more likely, eventuality⁴⁸ is that the most mesmerizing popular TV genres will become even more beguiling with bolder technical format and the enhancement of sound and image quality. With an interactive user interface^{49, 50} they would become psychologically addictive and socially damaging⁵¹ for many consumers. By

⁴⁴ Bell "In terms of the US economy, it has been estimated that more than half the labour force already consists of information workers. It is on the authority of such figures that Bell claims that we have become an "information economy".

⁴⁵ 'The New Networking & Database Technologies', Wood, J., O2 Magazine, Sept. 1991

⁴⁶ 'The Mode of Information', Poster, M., 1990, Polity Press

⁴⁷ Eventually, this is likely to use concepts such as Virtual Reality. Cf. New Scientist, May 1992

⁴⁸ "Pay and Play", Wood, J., Design International Magazine, August 1991

⁴⁹ An Easier Interface, in BYTE magazine, pp.277-282 February 1991, Clarkson, M.A.

⁵⁰ "Technologies of Control: The New Interactive Media for the Home", Wilson, K., Madison:
University of Wisconsin Press

⁵¹ Foucault: "Behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralisation of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorage of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies. - From 'Discipline and Punish', Foucault, M., trans. Sheridan, A., New York: Pantheon, 1977

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carefully targetting and manipulating consumer groups *interactively*, commercial interests could easily push economic growth to new heights. This is almost certain to cause serious repercussions for the environment. The more utopian possibility is based on the McLuhanesque idea of Electronic Village in which an energy-efficient, convivial, cafe-society weaves polymerised narratives across a global network⁵². Cooley⁵³ has qualified the notion of 'wisdom' in a computer age as the human capacity to comprehend data as information, and to contextualise the information within tacit terms⁵⁴. This fusion of 'thinking knowledge' and 'action knowledge' he calls 'wisdom'. He suggests that society should only countenance action based upon such wisdom. It is on the important crossroads between thinking and action that responsible designers⁵⁵ will have a unique and vital role to play.

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⁵² Ted Nelson has mooted one version of this notion in his vast 'Project Xanadu'. (Cf. 'Managing Very Large Databases', Nelson, T., Byte Magazine, 1988)

⁵³ 'Architect or Bee, The Human Price of Technology', Cooley, M., Hogarth Press, 1987

⁵⁴ 'Tacit Knowing: its Bearing on Some Problems of Philosophy', Polyani, M. Review of *Modern Physics*, vol. 34, October 1962, pp. 601-605

⁵⁵ 'The Socially Responsible Designer', Wood, J., Design Magazine, July 1990