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*DRAFT of paper given* at the 5th Conference of the European Academy

Wood, J. (2003), "Techné: Design Wisdom", University of Barcelona, 28, 29, 30 April, 2003

## **The Wisdom of Nature = The Nature of Wisdom; Could design bring human society closer to an attainable form of utopia?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper asks whether design could ever become a central part of a societal regulation of ethical conduct and wellbeing. Although our systems of governance have usually relied on texts, it asks whether the potential of design for facilitating good citizenship has been overlooked and/or underestimated. It challenges the static idea of design merely as the creation and planning of material objects, images, forms, or plans. Instead, it suggests that we should see designers as facilitators of the wise relations that govern wholeness and well being. It reminds us that wisdom is always in flux. It is mutually situated and actively embodied in the somatic, provisional and contingent world of actions.

In the western cultural context, language tends to emphasise distinctions and boundaries of prohibition. The dominant (Kantian) ethics derives from a notion of moral rules that apply categorical, often negative imperatives. The paper discusses differences between rule-based ethics, and what it describes as an 'ethics of form and flow'. A techné-based approach to governance would call for a new societal perspective. Although we see ourselves as a 'consumer society' we are also implicated in production and, loosely speaking, design. By changing the terms of reference we may hope to inspire a more profound level of engagement by everyone. A number of key concepts are offered as a starting point from which we might move closer to a techné-based wisdom and/or system of governance.



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## Introduction

The paper first of all asks whether the vocabulary we use is adequate for discussing issues of bio-diversity and social well being. In this context, it suggests that the common vernacular of professional design is often anachronistic, inappropriate, unhelpful, or even misleading. When we rely, for example, on terms such as 'needs', 'function' and 'form' we may find them inadequate for resolving complex issues of design. It is difficult to discuss design ethics because we can never foresee to what ultimate purposes a given design may be put. For this reason we cannot know what outcomes will prevail. Nevertheless, The paper argues that some of this problem is also a by-product of western epistemology. Hence we may question the classical dualistic distinction between two domains:

- literal categories such as laws
- formal categories such as tangible objects

In the modern world of mass communications we may find this assumption unhelpful, because names and forms lack fluency and flexibility. Design in the age of mass media has made us increasingly aware that there are no fixed boundaries between words, images, forms, habits, or values. On the other hand, the idea that legislation is the best way to tackle environmentalist problems implies that text is more powerful than form. This may not be true. Our behaviour may be altered by how we feel, and how we feel is influenced by the values of our surroundings. As Kant said, ethics is closely related to aesthetics. This reminds us how our aesthetic values guide how we see, how we feel, and therefore how we intervene in a constantly changing world. In effect, this idea may encourage us to propose a more ambitious role for design. Where we have become used to the rather mechanical system of governance by legislation, the paper asks whether a more organic notion of governance by design is feasible.

## KEYWORDS

This paper is only a preliminary sketch that is intended to generate discussion. As such, it is partial and suggestive. At the beginning, some keywords are offered in order to sketch out its context and breadth of concern. These are then used to discuss aspects of techné and wisdom.

KEYWORDS: Form, genre, affordance, meme, precession, logic of categories, conviviality, techné, wisdom

## KEYWORD: 'form'

Loosely, 'form' is Plato's idea of the ultimate prototypical 'structure' of a thing. This possibly pre-dates the western tradition of thought. Indeed, the Greeks may have inherited the idea from India, through Sanskrit. Conventionally



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speaking, we associate design with the creation and manipulation of form. The paper explores some assumptions behind this idea in order to explore a more relational and synergetic model of designing. Briefly, Plato's famous notion of form is probably inspired by some very practical observations associated with design and mass production. Plato lived at a time when prototypes were used as the means by which almost 'perfect' exemplars of a design were used to assure the quality of products. These would be used, for example, to export particular designs in order to set up new factories. Second quality versions would then be used as marketing samples to be distributed to a sales team, etc. In a sense, everyday reality became understood as a copy of a copy of a copy (etc.) of an original created by God. A problematic aspect of Platonic form is that it exaggerates the importance of static qualities and overlooks their part in the 'flow' of things.

**KEYWORD: 'genre'**

Loosely, a genre is a style or approach that came to be seen as an exemplary category. The word 'genre' is a word usually applied to well-known and established styles in the arts. It is part of a process of 'circular causality' in which certain things become increasingly well known. Often what successful designers produce will sooner or later fit into familiar categories. This because they embed a particular set of concerns within a distinctive form or schemata that, in turn, helps to make them familiar or popular. This is usually helpful because existing genres carry important clues about the possible habits and expectations of users or viewers. A problem with genres is that, once they are established they may sustain themselves beyond their useful lifespan.

**KEYWORD: 'affordance'**

This derives from J. J. Gibson's idea of what given forms or configurations make possible, available, or convenient to us. The notion of affordance can help us to move beyond the static tyranny of Platonic form and the conservative logic of genres. It may remind us that 'tools' - like all familiar products and images - already have conventional codes of purpose or meaning that guide us in how to use them without requiring too much thought. Donald Norman is good in explaining about this, pointing out that "knobs are for turning, handles are for pulling, and plates are for pushing." This is why good designers do not need to write explanatory labels on the things they design. Importantly, 'affordances' may appear to influence the particular probabilities of possible actions. They do not 'force' users into behaving in a certain way. Affordances can also be seen as intermediaries between what the designer intended, and how things subsequently happen.

**KEYWORD: 'meme'**

I am using this word in a design context to describe how patterns and habits play their part in the evolutionary process. Loosely, memes are things that



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seem to replicate themselves, whether animate, inanimate, material or immaterial. Memes can therefore be popular jokes, fashions, melodies, or myths that circulate, often without guidance or planning. Rupert Sheldrake and Richard Dawkins invented the word 'meme' as part of a theory of evolution that may include both physical and non-physical aspects of how things evolve. Evolutionary science had tended to focus on chemical or biological 'bits' such as genes and cells that can be dissected or observed in the laboratory. However, in a dynamic world, innovative ideas, patterns or techniques - for example, are also vital to the survival and successful reproduction of species. Importantly, this may remind designers that there is an extremely close relationship between a successful meme and its current environment. This raises questions about whether sustainability is sustainable within the mindset of the design culture. When a wise design is highly 'successful' (e.g. desirable, attainable, shareable and reproducible) we might describe it as a 'generous meme'.

**KEYWORD: 'precession'**

Loosely, this engineering term describes the seemingly inescapable tendency for all actions to 'curve off' to one side. 'Precession' occurs in all objects that spin. Try gripping a spinning bicycle wheel on either side of its hub. When you re-orient the wheel to face new direction, it will also try to turn itself in a direction that is sideways to the direction into which you are moving. Buckminster Fuller points out that this process is present everywhere in all situations. Metaphorically, it reminds us that all plans tend to go in a somewhat different direction from where we intend or expect them to go.

**KEYWORD: 'logic of categories'**

This refers to decisive thought or argumentation based on distinctions rather than, for example, on a quality of flow. A distinction is made when a quality is reduced to a smaller set of values. For example, a complex surface of subtle grey tones may be reduced to two categories such as 'dark grey' and 'light grey'. Sometimes these distinctions are quantified as numbers. Once we have assigned an appropriate spectrum of categories, we normally assume that those with the same descriptor are identical. Names, attributes, and classes, for example, are the basis upon which we make comparisons and come to logical conclusions.

In the conventional thinking of categorical logic, anything that moves (therefore everything) is ascribed as being static before we can analyse it. The vast majority of Western philosophers and scientists (e.g. from Parmenides and Plato and until the present day) have made time 'stand still' when calculating the effects of motion. In other words, when mathematicians and scientists try to understand movement they temporarily assume that the value ascribed to 't' (time) is 0. Because this is such a widespread technique



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we may easily forget that conventional logic only deals with the static boundaries within which we place things. This dominant notion is also inspired by the ancient Greek atomistic view of the world as discrete 'bits' rather than, say, as collective waves. However, in the ecological world, nothing is ever static including the categories themselves.

**KEYWORD: 'conviviality'**

Writing a decade or two before the advent of 'Eco-Design', Ivan Illich used this word in a very specific and literal way. It comes from two Latin words:

- cum (meaning "with")
- vivere (meaning "living")

Illich famously applied this term to describe anything that promotes or supports the well being and successful co-existence of living creatures. Hence he talked about 'tools for conviviality'. We may remind ourselves that all tools have both good and bad affordances.

**KEYWORD: 'techné'**

Science has shown us that actions and thoughts are part of the same set of events in the mind-body-world. We may therefore describe 'techné' as a subset of wisdom that emphasises coherently purposeful deeds, actions, skills, and their attendant thinking-processes. Importantly, it also (co-)sustains the active participants (and their witnesses) in a more or less consensual process. How can designers learn how to do more for the general good? This paper argues that 'techné' can be augmented with other, more strategic subsets of wisdom. Maybe (thinking and) dreaming in a positive way is a first essential step.

**KEYWORD: 'wisdom'**

This is the most problematic of our keywords, because it is probably unwise to specify what is wise or unwise, except from a state of humility and caution. Writing about wisdom is therefore problematic because text is only a small residue of complex dynamic events such as ideas and thoughts. Text may be useful for creating an agreed index of moral action and conduct, but it is always based on past generalities and/or imagined situations. Where text is mainly static and categorical, ideas and thoughts are always fluent. This is because they are part of a far larger context. Where we speak of rules we imply texts. It is very unlikely that wisdom has dependable rules that work everywhere, all the time.

Similarly, wisdom may resist any sincere attempt to attribute it to a particular individual. As such, no individual can wisely be assumed to be wise. If wisdom is emergent and transient it is probably a collective property of synergy in the



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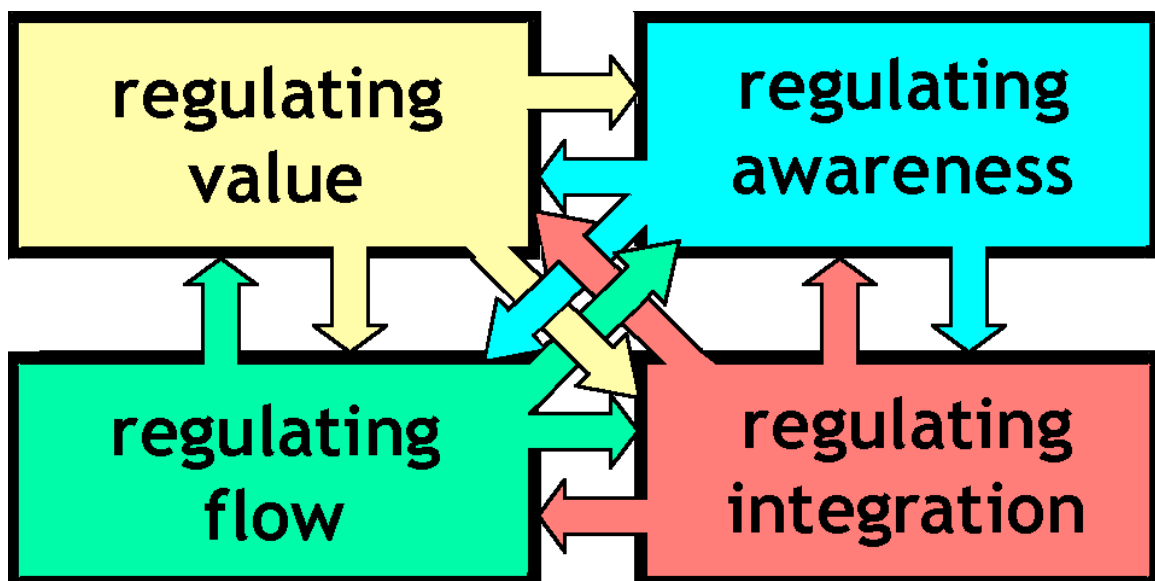
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whole system. If we expect wisdom to be bound, stored, or transferred from one place to another we may be deluding ourselves. Wisdom is probably a manifold blend of dynamic and emergent conditions within which we live. If so, it only exists in the present moment. In this sense, the nature of wisdom is the wisdom of Nature. This means that dependable categories such as nouns are less significant than transitive entities such as verbs. We may be wise, therefore, to seek a new ecology (or ethics) of flow, rather than depending on a rigid framework of moral imperatives.

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### What is design?

Unless we understand what designers actually do, will find it difficult to see what effects they may have. Unless we can identify these possible effects we will be unaware of their ethical impact. This is not easy. Design is a many faceted profession that incorporates an enormous range of different approaches and methods. This paper argues that design could be considered as the wise regulation of dynamic elements such as flow, integration, awareness, and value. (See figure 4). Design, as 'form-giving' once seemed harmless, yet we now know that different forms lead to different patterns of flow. In this sense, design plays an important part in regulating the flow of materials etc. Flow is also effected by the perceived value of goods and products, and this entails the regulation of user awareness, and how everything appears to integrate with everything else. All of these factors are subject to the affordances of whatever resources can be summoned by the designer. If we could identify design more with the regulation of affordances we would be better able to monitor its ethical outcomes.







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## **Figure 1 four interrelated aspects of design**

### **(Wise) design is less static than we thought**

Where managers may use linear methods, designers use a more fluent non-categorical approach. As we have suggested, designers indirectly regulate our levels of complexity, awareness, integration, and flow. Usually, this is accomplished by the manipulation of product affordances, and by the generation of design memes. Here, the exploration of wisdom yields an important challenge to the usual technocentric or form-centred idea of innovation. This is because governance has been virtually synonymous with legislation. It is normal to use written rules to guide the regulation of social behaviour. However, in the future, designers may be invited to design lifestyles that short-circuit some of the legislative texts that we currently use to manage resources.

### **Can rules lead to well being?**

However, instead of the categorical ethics of prohibition and legislation we may explore the more organic ethics of eudaemonia, which is referenced by the pursuit of good or happy outcomes, rather than by a rule-keeping ethics. The 18<sup>th</sup> century lawyer Jeremy Bentham is famous for proposing a category-based 'calculus' designed to produce happiness. Arguably, Feng Shui is also a system of rules that lead to a more tranquil experience for the user. However, where Bentham showed a creative appreciation of rule-centred affordances, Feng Shui appears to invoke more aesthetic terms of reference. Each approach has a potential connection to the other.

### **How can designers transform the world?**

Perhaps designers can learn to better combine more legislative thinking alongside their more familiar logic. A recent example is the ecological apartment block 'BedZed' designed by UK architect Bill Dunster. Today, we live in a bureaucratic, industrialised, consumer-oriented world. In this world, design can be seen as an effective mode of management. It can solve problems, but in a rather special way. Designs are neither 'forms-in-themselves' nor answers to questions. In its outcome, design is a kind of non-binary mode of decision-making. Designers may work with discourse i.e. grammar, forms, vocabulary, popular mythology, and the shared belief system. The modern world in which designs find themselves is immensely complex. Arguably, it requires far greater powers of understanding and imagination than were required by ethical designers of the past.

### **Design techné is a form of wisdom**

At the high point of the Arts and Crafts Movement, John Ruskin idealised the embedded set of relations between craftsmen absorbed in their task, their



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cherished tools, and the immediate environment that continuously co-produces all of these elements. Whilst the workperson enjoys a well-deserved pride in his, or her work, the materials and meanings are revealed in a new way and society is co-sustained by the shared experience. This is a fine example of practice-based design wisdom (i.e. techné). Arguably, since then the modern idea of 'technology' has become dominant. What we usually mean by 'technology' is the evolving systems of automation and other processes that overshadow our convivial presence. For this reason, designers are called upon to assist in the development or sustainment of technologies that can significantly diminish techné.

### **Wisdom is dynamic...**

This raises the question as to whether wisdom can ever be transferred, therefore whether it can viably be represented as 'data' or 'information'. More importantly, it also calls for a more ontology-centred questioning of the purpose of technology. From what basis can we understand the ethics of design? As we have said, we often judge things by the logic of categories. However, names are too fixed to remain true. Also, whilst some traditional designers may regard themselves as form-givers, the idea that form is more important than change or movement has been with for thousands of years. Unfortunately if, like Plato we believe forms to be timeless we would overlook their potential to reproduce themselves and to mutate into new and unexpected forms.

### **So 'forms-in-themselves' have no ethic**

Plato's 'idea of the idea' makes us think of an unmoving and endless reality in which forms are virtual. However, we could loosen his concept to suggest that a successful form, or idea, is a kind of meme. As we suggested, in Plato's concept of form, the imagined original was as perfect as the Divine Being. Kant's belief in the diametrical difference between (divine) perfection and (human) fallibility tended to confirm Platonic idealism. It still sometimes produces a fatalistic or cynical belief that ethics and pragmatism cannot be mixed. This belief has tended to blind us to the way that certain forms become 'memes'. As such they are therefore reproduced. Ideas and forms are more than copies of divine originals.

### **Design may comprise form-giving**

As precession is unavoidable, actual designs always afford unforeseeable actions. This creates ethical problems, so who is responsible? Not surprisingly, the answer is far from simple. If we could easily predict the long-term effects of a given design we could safely guard against its possible harm to the environment or to human well being. However, when precession adds unforeseen complexities, how can we know who should be most accountable, and when? The concentration on individual forms may be too local to create





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effective ethical genres of designing. In order to do this we need to look at the relationship involved in a given design.

### **But design is highly relational**

When design causes changes in relations it reveals its deepest ethical nature. Some forms have more capacity for reproduction and mutation than others do. This factor is increasingly visible in an age when both technological innovation and the speed of mass production and distribution continue to accelerate. In such a world, relations are paramount. Indeed, it is the relationship between form, novelty, function, style, price, and replicability that will determine the net effects of a given design. In his book on "De-Futuring" Tony Fry shows how some ordinary forms can have a truly stupendous impact on the future. The introduction of the Ford Model T is a good example. Using pioneering methods of cheap mass production, its enormous popular appeal had a radical effect on the way we did many things afterwards.

### **Design facilitates flow**

Not only has the motor car 'meme' continued to replicate itself without interruption, but it continues to inspire innovation how we organise our cities, build roads, heal accident victims, advertise tobacco, finance insurance policies, and choosing where to live in relation to our jobs, etc. This is, of course, in addition to the car's ultimate effects on global warming and atmospheric pollution. Many subsequent car designs have attempted to compensate for the disastrous effects of the internal combustion engine. Unfortunately, in some ways these improvements could make cars even more attractive to everyone, including the more ethical consumer.

### **Key concepts are also memes**

The idea of the 'consumer' is, itself, a powerful meme that confirms an existing value system from within. Although cultures in both East and West have sayings such as: "the consumer is God", corporations have an enormous influence on the way we live. In today's legislative mythologies, consumers appear to have rights but no responsibilities. In order to redeem the problems and confusion of this situation, some designers may choose to re-design aspects of language itself. In order to enhance the general well being we need memes that will lead to benefits for all, rather than for individual consumers or corporations. To do this we must understand more about the ethics of consumption, and we must re-design some of the more unhelpful terms by which we sanction harmful activities.

### **The charity meme**

All cultures are bound by the conceptual limits of their languages. New words could inspire richer insights and affordances. In some cases we can extend certain concepts to find their full range of possible meanings. Indeed, some



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words seem to polarise possibilities or, in some cases, even to mask their opposite meanings. In antiquity, rights and responsibilities were once balanced within each social group. Arguably, certain words such as 'charity', 'enterprise', or 'consumption' are one-dimensional. 'Charity', for example, could be broadened to offer an apparently greater range of meanings. It has been bound by traditional (e.g. biblical, Roman) meanings. As such it emphasises giving rather than sharing.

### **The enterprise meme**

Clearly, the balance between giving and taking is a key issue. Significantly, the word 'entrepreneur' is 'one-dimensional' in that it emphasises ideas of selfishness that dominate the concept of enterprise (c.f. Thatcherism). The current word 'entrepreneur' is unrealistic, because there is always some component of generosity within commercial money making, however small it may be. Similarly, there is always a degree of selfishness within altruism. Literally an entrepreneur is a 'taker' who works between, or with others. My neologism 'entredoneur' refers to a 'giver' who works between, or with others'. By using both words we can create an axis of affordance that will map a range of actions that qualify or include both giving and taking within a single description.

### **The lifestyle meme**

Lifestyles are memes that are reproduced around the world. In many cases their success contains design wisdom. Once designers know enough about how this works they can intervene at a more subtle, integrated, and complex level. They could set out to design, or to re-design memes. The advertising industry already does this when it introduces new myths, or manipulates aspects of the common language. As we know, patterns of behaviour may be reproduced at the global level because they have been inspired by the mass media entertainment industry. However these influential habits and memes are produced, they are hugely influenced by the role of the designer.

### **Re-designing the lifestyle meme**

In the mythology of globalised consumption, luxury is now believed to be a sovereign right for every consumer. Indirectly, this is because western individualism was invented by using monarchic life-styles as the prototype for republican citizenship. The rise of consumer rights is not just the by-product of a system created by banks, governments and trading bodies, it is also a meme that is reproduced and disseminated by the entertainment industry. Unfortunately, the idea of individual rights was based on a political ideal, rather than an ecological feasibility. 'The American Dream' is an example of a meme that cannot be reproduced across the globe without requiring more than the combined resources of the planet. Nevertheless, many aspiring societies are reluctant to face the ecological consequences of this fact.



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### **The regulation of value**

A potentially crucial aspect of design is the regulation of value. Ecologically speaking, no values can exist in isolation. Indeed, all values have a complementary relationship to other existing values. Meaning is generated as part of a process of exchange. In a sustainable system, this becomes a circular process. For example, there is an important reciprocity between consumer and producer. Obviously, although we tend to allow ourselves to be described as consumers, most of us are usually producers as well. Successful designs are memes that promote either a more or less convivial outcome. Most contain a subtle blend of shareable and non-shareable benefits and problems.

### **The selfish meme**

Adam Smith's idea that individual diligence creates prosperity for all seems to suggest that we can suspend individual responsibility in order for the Good to prevail. If, in capitalist mythology, transaction is the paramount ethical act, the idea of legitimate selfishness is crucial to the ethics of citizenship. If we wish to find accord with the status quo we must believe that capitalism will eventually deliver goodwill for all. It is partly for this reason that we willingly suspend our individual responsibility and thereby tolerate the wasteful modes of production and competition in corporate life. This is the selfish meme that perpetuates a myopic currency system.

### **Identifying selfish memes**

In his 'Tragedy of the Commons' (Hardin, 1968) shows how individual acts of greed may bring significant advantage to an individual, but cause incremental disadvantage to the community. Hardin implies that the reason why some memes are unshareable is because of a design problem within the human mindset. This is because of the way in which we tend to justify our selfish behaviour. Each individual calculates that an act that creates a significant benefit for them might only cause a tiny amount of damage - on average - for everyone else in the community. This is a tragedy, according to Hardin, because everyone in the community acts according to this assumption.

### **Making memes more generous**

Hardin's 'Tragedy of the Commons' can be thought of as a selfish meme that encourages us to pollute, over-fish, etc. In exploring this syndrome, Gerard de Zeeuw believes that this meme can be reversed. Instead of antisocial actions producing individual benefits, he shows how many positive individual actions lead to large shared benefit. If we all believed that a tiny personal sacrifice would bring major social benefits for all, we might alter our individual behaviour and the world would be a better place. This could be regarded as a 'generous meme'.



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### **Making memes more shareable**

A good example of a meme with highly convivial and shareable outcomes is the 'Walking Bus'. Although most parents understand that driving their children a short distance to school is a bad idea, the habit (meme) proves too convenient to give up. Someone designed a new meme called the "Walking Bus". The name is an important aspect of the meme, because it makes the idea of walking to school sound like fun. The idea caught the imagination of many people and became popular with many people. Indeed, it moved from the USA to other European countries in a fairly short time. The Walking Bus is a good example of a highly shareable meme.

### **Memes are never controllable**

This process is a complex one because memes have different effects on different people at different times. The 'Walking Bus', for example, is in competition with more selfish memes, such as the very large SUV vehicles that also originated in the USA. We should remind ourselves that memes are also subject to precessionary forces. We cannot have much control over whether they will, or will not be adopted. Nevertheless, they could be 'designed' and monitored for their likely affordances. Perhaps society would have to work to make sure that a given meme's affordances are 'generous'.

### **Rules connect with feelings**

NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) is a therapeutic system that acknowledges the reciprocal connection between how we feel, what we produce, and how we act. It can help us to create new tools for convivial actions/forms. If we apply, here, the logic of affordance, happiness emerges when the conditions for it are made possible. Arguably, when happiness influences atmosphere, rules become less needed. This is not, however, a linear or reversible truth. Where politics uses legislation (logic of categories), designers can work in a different way.

### **Designing meta-memes**

This paper is a meta-meme. The title of this paper is a meme. In a sense, this talk is intended to work as a meta-meme. It is designed to promote the idea that designers can design memes that will transform society in a beneficial way. The title of the paper may be important as to whether the meme becomes reproduced and passed on by others. If successful, the proposal (meme) will become contagious and replicate itself to encourage designers to create more generous memes.

### **Refining meta-memes**

Popular affordances lead to 'genetic' mutations that may lead to improvements. These may become genres because they are well-established



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memes. In a sense, affordances themselves are also memes. As I have suggested, when clusters of affordances become familiar they are known as genres. When our genres remain convivial we can make the world a more generous and beautiful place.

John Wood

February 30<sup>th</sup> 2003