CHAPTER 9

DESIGNING DESIGN TO DEATH

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We're in the midst of a design glut. The other day I was paging through a magazine and saw a picture entitled "raindrop design" — a pattern in sand made by a passing sprinkle. Later that day on the web I encountered a photo of a piece of driftwood labeled "natural wood design." Then a book called *Designing Your Life*. And a set of courses called *Design Thinking*.[1]

We include methods of design that include random action, we speak of "designs" that are the result of happenstance; we include, under the term "design," the play procedures of toddlers, paint markings made by elephants, stochastic number sequences: in short, whatever actions unexpectedly result in some material object (c.f. Dunne and Raby, 2013).

Is there anything that is *not* design?

There is a simple concept in semiotics: when everything is a sign for x, nothing is a sign for x. When everything is design, nothing is design. Design becomes meaningless.

For the word to have any import, "design" must be *restricted*, differentiated from things that are *not* design.

Now, the people ramping up this design glut mean well. They are no doubt impressed with the methodologies and effectiveness of design processes and they want to bring them into their own sphere of influence in whatever discipline they work in. Or, in an amplification of the deep-seated human drive for aesthetic experience, they conflate that which is designed with that which gives us a sense of the beautiful. But not all that imparts a sense of wonder has been designed, and not every object is the result of design methodology. Even some useful things are the result of complete random

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[1] Stanford University d school: "Getting Started with Design Thinking" (online: https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/getting-started-with-design-thinking)

chance, that, unless you are a literal believer in Genesis, has in no way been designed.

There was a time when to figure out a solution to a problem with a bit of thought and a lot of trial and error was known as designing. This is a more narrow application of the term, and gets closer to the core of what design is. It's what Wilbur and Orville did with their airplane, what the Egyptians did with a succession of ever-larger tombs, what Miedinger and Hoffmann did with the Helvetica typeface, what the team at Apple under the direction of Steve Jobs did when developing the iPhone. Less famously, it's what people do when they lay out a garden or arrange a living room.

Whether grand or humble in scale, the key to all of these actual incidents of true design is that they involve *planning toward a particular purpose*. The fancy word for this is "teleology." Teleology means having some end or purpose in mind; it describes a process of moving toward some goal, striving to find a good fit. That is why we say design is a problem-solving activity. It's a simple enough concept and worth preserving as a starting point for design. After all, there are times when happy surprises happen — raindrops make a beautiful pattern, an elephant swashes interesting marks with a paintbrush held in its trunk, the rustle of a branch against the side of a house scratches out a catchy rhythm — but these happy surprises are not *designed* to delight or inspire us, even though we may find joy in them or take inspiration from them.

Purposeful material utility

Design is always purposeful, the planning of something. Design always moves toward a future, from a state of want, from need, to a state of fitness, achievement and greater fulfillment.

Indeed, the words design and planning are almost perfect synonyms; "planning" places a stronger connotation on the narrative, sequential, durational part of the process, while "design" places stronger connotation on the mental, the creative, on ingenuity. Design is a process of *working through* a problem, seeking satisfaction for solving something that is perceived as a *creative* challenge.

Design is creative but not every creative act is one of design. It's informative to think of the ways we use such language around various creative pursuits. We think of Brunelleschi *designing* the dome of the Duomo in Florence, but Ghiberti *sculpting* the reliefs that adorn the doors of the baptistry, or Michelangelo *painting* the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Of

course, the doors and the ceiling were also, in a sense, designed; they were made to fulfill their purpose according to the imagination of the artists, but isn't it peculiar that using that word seems slightly off? So what does that tell us and why should that be?

I think there are two reasons. First, the sculptor and the painter are working in a particular medium; they are fashioning the substance of that medium (bronze or tinted plaster) into particular forms and compositions. So we say he sculpted or painted the form or image. In other words, the emphasis is on the decisions that are made in the translation of substances into compositional forms.

The second reason is that they have narrative content, they tell stories, they call attention to their content which they deliver by becoming the representation of subjects. Or, in the case of non-objective art, the painting or sculpture is taken to be — in itself as formed material — an object to be studied *in itself*.
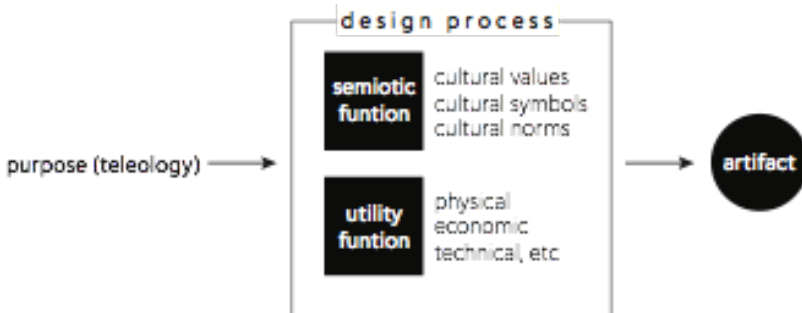
The work of fine art calls attention to itself (Skaggs and Hausman, 2012). We call this an *intransitive* function. Notice that if we take the example of the baptistry doors in Florence, the functionality of the doors themselves — how well they swing open and closed for example — is not what we refer to when we speak of Ghiberti's artistic achievement. It is the bronze panels that are placed upon the doors of the baptistry that are in the art history books.

Unlike the piece of fine art, a designed object serves a *transitive* purpose, a utilitarian need that does not attract attention to itself itself as a narrative but puts attention toward the external problem for which it—the "design"—serves as mediating solution. The doors of the baptistry must be strong for security purposes yet light enough for a man to open them; the Duomo's dome must span the nave and support itself without the need for additional pillars; the party invitation must tell where and when the party is while suggesting that the party will be fun to attend.

As a result of this implied utilitarian materiality, this transitivity in which they act as go-betweens, most designed objects go unnoticed in our lives. Even though the best designed objects may be noticed (especially if they are novel) and some of them eventually considered remarkable creative achievements, they are *primarily* remarkable not for what they are in themselves, but rather for how well they fulfill their purpose. Almost all designed objects are life-assists. A designed object is always helping you to achieve something else, persuading, informing, or perhaps (in the case of a shelter, dome, or package) protecting. If a designed object entertains

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you, the enjoyment of the entertainment is a by-product of, or sometimes a device in service of, a utilitarian purpose. The piece of fine art is an end in itself while the designed thing is a means for doing some other work in the world.

The distinction between a work of design and a work of fine art can be diagrammed (figure 1) by whether the object has a single, semiotic, function, or whether the semiotic function is joined by a utility function. A work of fine art has a semiotic function. It has meaning within itself, draws attention to itself as an object that is, in a sense, its own purpose. The designed object has a semiotic function, too, in the sense that all made things communicate cultural values, symbols and norms through some combination of presence, expression, denotation and connotation (Skaggs, 2017); but in designed artifacts this semiotic function is joined by the utility purpose, and it is the utility purpose that is foregrounded. Even in fashion design, probably the design field closest to fine art, the appropriateness of a particular article of clothing to the circumstances of its wearing is vitally important. When those norms are violated, so that the article could never reasonably be worn in the implied circumstance, the article of clothing immediately becomes a fine art vehicle rather than a work of design.

Having said this, a designed object's utilitarian *raison d'etre* does not preclude it from becoming a representative, or sign, of the character of a culture. Far form it. Entire works have been devoted to spelling out the cultural connotations signified by utilitarian objects (c.f. Floch, 2001). But when we address only the cultural connotations of a designed artifact, connotations that lie adjacent to, but not directly within, the teleology of the problem the designer was given, we leave the world of design criticism and enter the world of cultural criticism.

Distinguishing design criticism from cultural criticism

This cultural embeddedness of designed objects can blur the lines between the teleology of the designed object and later critical appraisal ascribed to it within the cultural matrix. That is, there can be a disconnect between what the object was "designed to do" and what the object is "taken to represent." The holding up of designed artifacts as signs of cultural attributes by critics who are often distant from the time and place of the making can lead to problems. In the Introduction to their *Graphic Design History—A Critical Guide*, Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish fall into this trap, stepping back and forth from design critique to cultural criticism: "Graphic design is never *just there*. Graphic artifacts always serve a purpose and contain an agenda, no matter how neutral they appear to be. Someone is addressing someone else, for some reason, through every object of designed communication." (Drucker and McVarish 2009, xiii-xvii) True enough, and good to be reminded of it. But by their use of the phrase, "serve a purpose and contain an agenda," Drucker and McVarish conflate these two areas of criticism. When they speak of the purpose or agenda, they could be speaking of the client brief which sets the target teleology for which the artifact was consciously created. That would be design criticism. But they are also referring to a kind of systemic purpose, perhaps an insidiously covert, hidden agenda, one that would situate the McDonald's brand system, for example, within a certain strain of corporatist capitalist culture. That is cultural criticism. In terms of design criticism, you cannot validly claim that the golden arches are a bad design because they so successfully badge a company that sells not-so-good nutrition, any more than you can claim that Leni Riefenstahl was a poor filmmaker because she worked in the service of the monstrous ideals of the Third Reich.

Failure to disentangle design criticism from cultural criticism leads to significant erosion of the meaning of the word "design." If, one assumes the cultural critic's perspective, that any material artifact (whether designed or randomly derived) can serve equally to tell a story about the culture within which it is embedded, then the narrow and specific utilitarian problem of the designed artifact is being ignored. And that which is being ignored is precisely the necessary condition that distinguishes something as having been designed. After all, it may be true that a Marlboro advertisement from the 1950s is evidence of America's suppression of health information in deference to the profit motive, but that cultural gloss has nothing to do with the immediate teleology of that design: to entice consumers of tobacco products to purchase this particular brand rather than another. Design criticism would speak to the success or failure of the designer's efforts to attract attention, identify with the appropriate consumer, deliver denotative

information, irrespective of what the advertisement as a category within a period of Post-WWII consumer life might have to say as a meta-cultural or ethical motif.

Design actions: sifting and nudging

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2013) call design *a method for doing*. They are doubly correct: it is both doing the "figuring-out" of what some some object should be — and simultaneously it presages the way that object will be doing its work in the world. The object will do its work on the basis of being just the way it is, and it is the planning of that particular way of being that is the heart of the designer's work.

But if you think of design as a "method for figuring out," you have what would seem to be a tautology. After all, why don't we just say design is simply the "figuring out"? What saves Dunne and Raby from tautology is that one could figure something out by random chance or some other (likely unsuccessful) method. Design is the sifting method. We entertain ideas, thoughts, experiments, trials, and then we sift through them, choosing on the basis of the teleology. We use data, our reservoir of experiences, and an understanding of context, to select the kernels of ideas that offer the best chance of success. Design does the sifting according to a sometimes implicit sense of fitness, the rightness-for-the-work-at-hand. We see this rightness because we have established a problem and we sense a goal. In the planning, there is always this purposeful movement forward toward that goal, even if it cannot be wholly attained or if, after a month or a year, the goal may shift.

There is always this process of "nudging nearer." In design, we move towards an end, even if we do not reach it, even if it is indeed unattainable in the end. The felt problem, and the sensed release of that problem (achieving the goal) become the energetic current that nudges us ahead as we sift through available choices and potential solutions.

Sometimes a designer might say the idea "just came to me" almost as if she were completely passive or asleep. Yet, how different is this process than daydreaming or sleeping. Sleep comes upon you, takes you over, and you have no sense of control over the it. Designing, even when a great idea "comes to you" when you are in that creative flow and solutions seem to stream in from outside your awareness, always has the sense of active moving forward.

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Design does its sifting and nudging through a series of iterations. Iterations are attempts, essays, sallies, tries. Not all succeed to the same degree, and sometimes none succeed ultimately. Even those iterations that do succeed are probably not the only possible successful outcomes. All we have in design is a set of attempts to have an object harmonize with its purpose as best we can. It's a game with a few winning solutions and an endless number of losing solutions.

For those of us who practice it, design is a valuable and fulfilling enterprise. But design is not everything. If design were everything there would be no word to distinguish it. When something is everything it is reduced to nothing. So let's not use the word "design" too casually. Let's not use the word for everything. If we let our lingo get too loose with the concept of design, we'll lose it. We will have designed design to death.

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