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Afterword: Practicing Theory

The claim that ‘practice without theory is blind’ has been ascribed to Kant, Marx and Deiderich amongst others. Regardless of whoever originally thought this, the notion that practicing design requires theorising, and thus a critical mindset is both foundational to it and, as Claudia Mareis’s text concludes, more important than ever. In this, theorising becomes active for and in design such that it equally functions as a practice. The suggestion, then, is that theory and theorising is integral to designing. This may not necessarily be an explicit activity. It can also be a tacit skill: an embodied disposition; a way of seeing and feeling as much as thinking.

This Afterword explores what value theory might have in the practice of doing and thinking about and in design. It picks up on some of the ideas that are shared in this book to explore different benefits in design for engaging seriously with theories. It therefore is a beginning with the ‘what next?’. How can we extend theoretical understanding into designing effectively? Within this, it is useful to understand the of culture of design as a divergent set of practices, with differing priorities and processes. Accordingly, theoretical understandings and applications may also be multifarious. Here are three examples from the past that provide a starting point for this enquiry.

Barcelona’s avant-garde art and design school, Eina opened in 1967. Soon after opening, it hosted a workshop with Gruppo 63, the Italian collective of cultural theorists that included Umberto Eco and Gillo Dorfles. Students, staff and invited participants spent three days discussing linguistics, semiotics and contemporary life. The idea was that this event would act as a marker in establishing a critical attitude of enquiry and action in art and design in the context of consumer society for the school. It was also intended to awaken a more politicised perspective towards the effects of Spain’s repressive Francoist regime on everyday life and thus help in constructing creative pathways away from it.

Sometime in the mid-1990s, I attended a design research conference in Stockholm. Most participants came from academia, but I was struck by a presentation given by a professional product designer who drew inspiration from the work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. As we walked to the coffee-break together, I asked him how he found time to engage with philosophical enquiry while practicing as a designer. ‘It actually saves me time’, he replied, going on to explain how it brought him to new ways of thinking around problems.

A well-known furniture designer used to take photos of his prototypes. This was so that he could see what they look like as images, on the page. Further, though, he wanted to think about how they were communicating – what symbolic associations do they result in.

Multiple Kinds of Design; Multiple Theories

In these above examples, theoretical perspectives were intended to function as part of the designer's toolbox, either explicitly or implicitly. The ambition of each was also different. The first was motivated by deep, political convictions and how theory can expand the range and effect of design practice. In the second, a designer was using readings of philosophy as a personal workout to improve his own mental dexterity. And our prototype-photographer was instrumentalising a knowledge of semiology so that he could consider the effects his designs may have.

Similarly, the theoretical range of this book reflects the promiscuous undertakings of design itself: a discipline without a subject; a specialism of everything; a field of infinite possibilities. It is difficult to know where to start or end when it comes to approaching theory in design. Claudia Mareis's text therefore gives us a routemap with which to start this journey. It also demonstrates that studies of and for design have few original theories of their own. Instead, they adapt, hack or extend from a panoply of fields and disciplines. Beyond philosophy or linguistic theory, theoretical sources for design come from cultural studies, psychology, critical human geography, anthropology or science and technology studies, to name but a few.

Why such unrestrained plundering? If we are to take design not as a singularity, but as an accumulation of multiple techniques, aims, outcomes and, therefore, meanings then its heterogeneity is also reflected in its theoretical sources. Here are some instances of parallel relevances of design and theory at different moments that may help explain this claim.

Accepting that the birth of design emerged in the nineteenth-century context of industrialisation and mass consumption, then Marx's discussion of the commodity seems entirely apposite to that era, but also still highly relevant for thinking about the manufacture, circulation and reception of goods today. Moving onto mass cultural forms of the earlier twentieth century, and, for example, design's role in popular events such as film or expositions, Adorno's articulation of so-called cultural industries becomes relevant. As the post-war spectacle of consumption gathered pace – when at the same time design moved closer to marketing and advertising – so the semiological insights of Barthes came into play. With the digital revolution, the globalisation of value of chains and the distribution of design into more and more channels of everyday life in the late-20c, we find the prominence of Latour's thinking about networks and Foucault's about power and the body of particular use. As the hegemonic domination of the West – in design and in other power systems – is challenged, so Escobar's invocation of pluriversal thinking and action enters the debates. Finally, as the grave threat of ecological catastrophe becomes a reality, and as the beginnings of design that considers the interweaving of both human and non-

human requirements emerges, the feminist work of Haraway and Puig de la Bellacasa gathers even more importance.

This schema leaves out many of the twists and turns and much of the detail of theoretical scholarship that has entered the design frame. However, what is striking here is how none of these theories have become redundant. Instead, it shows the accretion of perspectives that are available to analyse and act on in design. Just as the design profession itself has amassed multiple ways of doing design in recent decades and multiple outcomes, so even more theoretical tools appear to be relevant. As I have argued in my own book *Economies of Design*, the conditions of contemporary global capitalism – otherwise called neoliberalism – have seen to the exponential expansion of the design profession and to its remarkable diversity.

The rise of competitiveness as a driving ideology, the progressive privatisation of state capacities, the assetisation of goods and services through, for instance, intellectual property, branding and reputation management and the opening of new territories for capitalist production and consumption such as the former Soviet bloc, have all conspired to intensify and widen what design does. Design has accordingly extended from its earlier dominant focus on shaping products for manufacture for mass consumption into an expansive and ever-expanding panoply of applications. Thus, nowadays we find specialisms such organisational design, strategic design, design for policy and UX (user-experience) being added to its offer. Design therefore reaches beyond the hard facts of industrial production to such softer complexities as identity, behaviour, service provision, stakeholder engagement or brand loyalty. At the same time the need to draw from an ever-widening array of theoretical perspectives, and their disciplinary backgrounds, becomes progressively more apparent.

Optimisation v. Critique

If there has been a broadening of the influence of design into new territories of everyday life in recent decades, then its temporalities have also shifted gear. In part, this may be explained by the development of digital technologies that allow for ever faster transference of information and more complex archiving of data. The shift to segmented markets and ‘just-in-time’ manufacture and distribution has no doubt added to a sense of pulsing, fluxing and speeding up of possibilities. In this hyper-networked, algorithmic reality, goods, services and systems are permanently unfinished. Upgrades and re-designs ensure that design culture is in a continual state of becoming. The current verve for prototypes, experiments and start-ups reinforces an ideological adherence to impermanence. Thus, as Claudia Mareis traces, the design theory of Adolf Loos regarding ornament is still relevant when thinking about product form (witness the success of Apple products), but also Deleuze’s exposition of rhizomes and emergence may come into play in considering network systems in contemporary design culture.

This breathless, intensified state of design culture may not leave much room for the slow, methodical and disciplined work of reading, thinking about and discussing

theory. Certainly, spaces exist where design is otherwise – where different rationalities exist for and through it – and where there may be more deliberation over what version of design applies. But if we are already part of a speeded-up culture, Claudia Mareis’s text asks us to take several steps back to find our own critical starting point through the discussions that she provides. How might this function, though?

The three cases that I gave at the beginning of this essay have different starting points. The first had its emphasis in laying groundwork for a more critical and politicised viewpoint onto design. How this might be translated into action was left to the individual. The other two engaged with theories in order to improve the design process or its outcome. Notably, the designer I refer to in the third example had, in fact, attended that Gruppo 63 workshop all those years before. In these latter examples, theory becomes a tool for optimisation in practice.

The drive towards optimisation plays a prominent role in design culture. Herbert Simon’s view of design’s role as moving something to a ‘preferred situation’ might also be taken as a meta-statement about the profession. Designers design better things, but they also strive for better designing. The burgeoning of professional associations for design around the world is testament to its growth and expansion into new areas. It also reflects a need to explore and share professional knowledge for self-improvement.

This meta-impulse to improve design exists, not least, because, as Donald Schön has argued, design belongs to a category that has never had normative curricula or foundations for professional knowledge. Architects or accountants usually have to take exams that are set by a professional body. By contrast, there isn’t an official list of things that designers should be able to do before they can call themselves designers. In this more open, always temporary and less-controlled situation, continual improvement of thought and action in design becomes a source of anxiety. This is not least as technologies, business conditions or state structures evolve such that designers are required to constantly keep up or even show themselves to be ahead of structural trends. But it also reflects this lack of clear guidelines concerning what it is to be a designer. Knowledge is therefore constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed. This always-temporary state of affairs in design may appear as an insecurity or it can be taken as a healthy, continuous state of self-problematism.

Theory can therefore be instrumentalised in improving design processes, resulting in more considered approaches but also greater agility in creative thinking. Equally, though, in the search for new ideas to underpin design’s development, engagement with political, moral or ethical perspectives can get endlessly deferred. Or they are taken as threats or obstacles to the smooth running of the design project. And yet, critique is needed more than ever as the yawning chasm between ‘business as usual’ and the urgent necessity to re-direct design towards, among many of our current crises, equitable carbon neutrality or better social inclusion becomes increasingly obvious.

In here, is a struggle for what is 'good design'. Is it solely about shaping the best forms to serve users or customers? Or might it include ensuring that equitable, democratic and planetary dimensions are incorporated into designing? Does it therefore extend to improving the configuration of systems of distribution, the creation of new forms of making, the structuring of communitarian and policy discussions or the development of new conjunctions of materials and processes? If the latter, then it may be that there is even more demand for re-designing design, that is for developing new ways of undertaking design and new meanings for it. Critique, informed and sharpened by theoretical perspectives, may in fact help in this venture of re-imagining and planning what design can do. This engages design as both a mediator and a pathfinder.

Connecting and Mapping

In Mareis's text, we are reminded, by reference to Vilém Flusser, of how design works as a connector between spheres of knowledge. Designing is an act of synthesis between, among other things, art and technology or the hand and the machine. New specialisms in design produces even more detailed and complicated meetings of domains. In Human Computer Interaction, this may be between the arrangement of information on a screen and complex health information, for instance. What clinical information might be safely foregrounded and clearly communicated is balanced against understanding or determining 'typical' human behaviour of the target group of users might be a design decision here. This work would involve detailed, technical understanding of the computer interface and of health matters.

In such an example, the designer is working in a service mode to the client – in this case, possibly a healthcare provider. There is a point in design where the work sometimes tips over to a propositional mode. This is where the designer is extending, adjusting or contesting the brief such that its content might change. In such a case, the brief's *raison d'être* is reconsidered – who it addresses, what economic model it supports or what is even being designed, for instance. The brief may, according to Kees Dorst, be re-framed: its narrative is given a new perspective such that its meaning is adjusted while keeping the original problem in view. Or, in an even more adventurous propositional mode, the designer may be the one developing a brief in the first place, pro-actively intervening into a situation they have identified through careful analysis and critical thought. How radical this mode gets obviously depends on the opportunities that are afforded, including, for instance, the client relationship, its financial security or socio-political acceptability.

In these instances, theorising is an essential tool that works across both instrumentalist and critical approaches, sometimes bringing the two together. It is where independent thought is brought to a situation that is built on a deep understanding of how generalised observations can be brought back to the specific. Blind spots, missing factors, grey areas, contradictions, quandaries or under-represented interests can be highlighted and brought more solidly into the frame. Working in this propositional mode is where design leadership comes into being.

Design leadership that doesn't reproduce dominant orthodoxies and realities. Rather, it explores new possibilities for design, new ways of doing it, new design objects and new ways of connecting to its publics. This may be in the designing itself or in the creation of settings where the latter can begin to take shape. Design leadership can extend thinking and action beyond the studio. But it also requires a keen understanding of its direction and impacts.

Ultimately, design is only as good as its effect. It is what happens in Herbert Simon's end 'situation' and whether it ends up as the 'preferred' one and, indeed, whether that 'preferred' is an appropriate 'preferred'. This is rarely straightforward for there is the *designing* of something and there is the *shaping* of it. The first is what we classically think of as the conceptualisation. The second is where the idea (the design) gets modified and adjusted as it is settled into operation. Design doesn't stop at ideation, and its execution doesn't stop at the point of its realisation. It continues to have lives that are changeable and often difficult to predict. Power interests, unanticipated factors, new external influences or other creative possibilities, among others things, intervene on the bringing of design into use and beyond. This is the passage of the design object – in all its manifestations – that is fascinating to observe, but also fascinating to travel with. Understanding that journey, or the numerous possible directions that the journey may take is where maps come in handy. This book provides multiple conceptual maps for these, to see where we are going and recognise features along the way.

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