



Design Culture: Objects and Approaches

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Design Culture: Objects and Approaches, edited by Guy Julier, Mads Nygaard Folkmann, Niels Peter Skou, Hans-Christian Jensen, Anders V. Munch

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Justin Magee

This five-person edited volume by Julier et al. shares the cultural views from twenty international contributors, which is particularly insightful from a European design perspective. At the same time, it is poignant considering the UK's current political transition. This ambitious endeavour includes fifteen articles framed in four distinct parts and emerged from a design culture conference (University of Southern Denmark, 2014). The changing voice and writing style through multiple author narratives is to be expected, however, has been edited to flow well. Most authors write in an accessible way for academia and industry alike.

The four parts take the reader on a coherent journey defining Design Culture, business and society, the positioning of design professions, and finally the locational issues of design culture. Crucially, the introductory chapter provides a welcomed context placing the value of design culture across the breadth of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, through its relationship to design practice, production, daily life and other cognate disciplines. The connected evolution of design history and design culture are outlined since the 1970s. Throughout the book, case studies consider decadal shifts and their relevance to design in the future. They capture the cyclic nature of the design process within the ethos of design culture, where new movements within design have iterated from historical movements. This shifting nature of design highlights the emergence of newer disciplines such as UX design that have inter-disciplinary relevance across different sectors. This thematic continues to be emphasized, contextualizing how designs trend of singular focused, discipline specialisms progressed to an 'orchestration of multiple things, people and actions'. This view extends other seminal research by Ortony et al (1988) identifying the role of 'objects, agents and events' within emotional design theory. Discourse on ecologies, ecosystems, their associated networks and related cultures, tease out the complexity of design. I was particularly drawn to the description of design as 'unstable' in nature and may be 'undisciplined'. This challenging language is revisited in part three discussing design professionalization.

Part one untangles the concept of *Design Culture* and firmly challenges *Design Thinking*. They also challenge the responsibility of *Design History*, that beyond retrospectively informing futures, there is a need for design historians to look to contemporary issues as a process of facilitation or configuration. It is part of a wider process they coin 'design culturing'. They insightfully propose that design history is a branch of historical scholarship and that it is now timely to make it more widely accessible across Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. A view that could improve engagement in the use of methods such as design thinking, which is often borrowed by other sectors and delivered as hierarchical managerial directives. One of the first case studies presents bedding as a cultural form. At the prospect of reading an entire chapter about the Duvet, I thought I might go to sleep! However, as with all good examples of emotional design, it engages with the five classes of product emotion (Desmet 2015) among which the element of surprise. This case study is simple, yet sophisticated. It offers the reader an excellent deep dive into the concepts of design culturing in a very accessible way. It discusses social, cultural and political issues and the changes achieved by design, symbolism and market strategy. Its analysis of function, usability, sustainability,

technoaesthetics and emotive connection at an object level creates audience reach through familiarity and personal connection. Following some precise descriptions around the systems of design culture, they conclude simply as the 'way of doing things'. For all the Android v's Apple fanatics a comparative case study is provided. Through this and other studies the individual and people-centric nature of designs ecosystems are untethered.

Part two engages with issues between market and society, central to designs consumer context. Three case studies are presented showcasing how design has a value adding role in product development. The characteristic of 'basic' as a required design approach for more diverse accessibility in society is introduced and extended later in the book. While this is only one approach, its attributes of frugality, simplicity and ease of comprehension are important especially in diverse socio-cultural contexts. At this point I reflect on discourse within the academic community; design research appears to be becoming over complicated in language and perhaps over-intellectualized where more 'basic' language may be more effective in terms of reach. The three case studies span KF the Swedish Cooperative union, Katvig the Danish clothing brand for children and Fritz-cola the German drinks brand. Each takes the reader on different societal relationships with design. Their distinct journeys of success, failure and irony through design are shared. The Katvig example focuses on user experiences, describing children as 'autonomous beings' embracing their behavioural characteristics. These simple functional clothes were designed for their practical, individual, dynamic and explorative nature. The user experience analysis indicative of product and interactive design is very apparent in Katvig's approach. As pioneers in Danish society of sustainability, their changes in production and materials focused on the long-term goal of sustainability rather than short term sales, rewarding them financially. They deployed more systems thinking, educating their customers on laundry processes, products and garment maintenance as well as repair and thrift. The personalization of clothing suggesting unused clothes could feel 'lonely' is another good example of the emotional domain within product design but applied to fashion. Katvig's social programmes and circular clothing initiatives gained social praiseworthiness, as people fell in love with the brand. This is indicative of the depth of case studies within the book.

The Fritz cola case study exemplifies the 'designed design culture' showing the manipulative power of design and how it dances with societal issues in a commercial world. A case for reengaging with the term 'Aesthetics' within design culture, is brought to light, which I agree with. Aesthetics are often misunderstood as singular or superficial when realistically they are more complex. One phrase stands out where aesthetics is framed as more than its visceral traits, rather the 'aesthetic coding as a vehicle for cultural expressions and framing of experience'.

Part three discusses the issues faced by the design industry, in context of its professional standing. It deals with several layers of professionalism, which include that of the designed objects quality and public perceptions and the tensions between trained and untrained design services. It analyses the flexible working environments of designers and the standards that uphold design professions. The first case study takes us back to the bedroom. It provides one of the most challenging cases where historically rooted, socio-cultural restrained perceptions have been positively transformed through design professionalism. Specifically dealing with the reform of sex toys, this research-led investigation paved the way for change. Through design, this work understands the true but unheard voice within its industry, the female voice. Citing Norman (2004) this work again encapsulates emotive design. It carefully rethinks products within more sophisticated feminine brand locations such as lifestyle, health and fashion. Through user needs and desires, the science of sex, production quality standards, subtle materials and aesthetics they have professionalized this product sector. They brought awareness of sexual reform through the power of design culture. Reflectively design

culturing of other products can learn from this study. Moving to the working environment of the designer and describing it as part of 'pleasure culture' some of the qualities and benefit of home working in the design sector are unveiled. I can relate to this, enjoying this book review from my garden enjoying the summer sun. The positioning of the home being a shared space for male and female alike where 'personal and professional imaginaries' formulate, certainly adds to one of special ingredients of designs identity and productiveness. Importantly this chapter teases out issues of gender balance and equality. While these continue to improve, they rightly remain the focus of the Athena Swan Charter in Higher Education and within industry. These issues need extended to consider ethnic diversity which is acutely highlighted in the latest Design Economy Report (Benton et al. 2018) and at CHEAD (2018). Much more attention is required to understand the issues and barriers to ethnic diversity within design. Despite the inclusive voices within this book, the wider issues of cultural diversity in the sector remain limited.

Typically, the hierarchies of the graphic design industry are teased out well, navigating the borders of professional and unprofessional design which coexist in the sector. The hierarchies which include variation in educational qualifications, know how, skills and experience or the unskilled worker limitations are outlined with interesting questions emerging. The graphic design industry, more than other disciplines, has been dragged in to situation where it must react to 'bad design' within its sector. It therefore seeks to assert its professional identity. Ironically, through well-designed software, templates and user experiences, graphic design as a sector has made it possible for an unskilled industry to flourish. Its success in embedding best practice through industrial technology has become its professional challenge. This echoes the post-stern report where graphic design research also reacts to external views. The Graphic Design Educators' Network currently leads action where the voice of graphic designers untangles the issues and asserts its research identity.

Sustainability is themed throughout the book and the chapter on 'repair activism' is a topic that the entire design industry should reflect upon especially disciplines, like my own, which contribute to material consumption. Framing repair through its value as a societal language is powerful and stimulates reflection. 'The Life of Objects' view that values disfunction connects well to the maker society or hacking type approaches and as a designer places an uncomfortable challenge that one cannot ignore.

The final part of the book explores the location of design culture and its challenges as the cosmopolitan nature of society continues. While BEDA (2004) explored if a single European design identity could be achieved, this current book delves into some of the intricacies of such issues. It provides something of a taxonomy of the attributes of a cultural design identity in a changing commercial and interconnected world, while demonstrating the complexity of this ecosystem.

The books aptly illustrated case studies are well chosen and are certainly valuable and highly transferable. While admirably broad many are focused on craft and making sectors of design and a few are more aligned with Art, in my view. Current trajectories in design culture extending to world building are included and wellbeing and socio-technological ecosystems are also inferred. There is potential for a future volume in this space for sure. Overall this authoritative book instils a great sense of the many attributes and values of design culture. It could well become a staple in Higher Education across Arts, Humanities Social Sciences and extending to Business schools. Julier et al. highlight how design thinking continues to remerge in response to world issues but urges a reframing of mind to 'Design Culturing'. This term certainly speaks more about the complexity, scope and challenges that design embraces. While reading Armstrong's chapter on working from home, I began to reminisce about when I was an automotive designer (late 1990s). I fondly recall how a Dutch colleague, Huib Seegers, would arrive into the studio each morning, smiling and announcing

'Design. The most beautiful career in the world'. It is indeed beautiful, but to remain so, design culturing is required.

Biography

Justin Magee is Research Director for Art and Design and Senior Lecturer in Product Design at the Belfast School of Art, Ulster University. His research and practice relate to user experience and immersion for physical and digital product applications, across the creative industries, heavy engineering and healthcare sectors.

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