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After the Gold Rush

Some Remarks on the Influence of Product Design on the Modification of Lifestyles

The message of this text is as follows: designers can be central actors when it comes to freeing ourselves from lifestyles that exploit the planet. The underlying logic of this argument is that certain lifestyles function as drivers of constant, exponential growth. If it were possible to redirect lifestyles from exponentially growing consumption to sufficiency, a key driver of growth would be paralysed, favouring a transition to a kind of steady-state economy. Do designers have the power - and that means the possibility and the competence - to reformulate lifestyles in this way?

What can designers really do?

The profession came into being in the Italian Renaissance, acquiring considerable repute. The term »*disegno*« denoted a drawing and, because there are also pictures in the mind, »internal drawings« or images. Designers are masters of the power of the imagination and of material performance. On the surface of their drawing boards they conjure up images of things or states that are supposed to become reality. In this, they work, on one hand, after models that they have observed: ruins and remains of the culture of the Roman Republic, which provided the aristocrats and citizens of emerging trading cities, who were striving for autonomy, the costumes and backdrops for their own democratic endeavours. Carole Cable terms this »from documentation to design«. ¹ This describes the development of skills that led from the documentary recording of ancient, especially ornamental, forms to design.

On the other hand, design is an inventive and projecting activity with its own poetic elements, ranging from free variation in ornamentation to the fabrication of technical arrangements.

I would like to adduce two reasons why designing became a profession and thus historically necessary.

In the Renaissance, aristocrats and citizens, who wanted self-determination and to engage in trade and thus did not want to abide by the boundaries laid down by the medieval system of the estates of realm, encountered craftsmen who were unable to provide them with the products they wanted. This lack of understanding concerned the form in which the products were supposed to be cast and thus the forms of their lifestyle. The craftsmen knew only how to work in terms of traditional know-how. What they could not do was to execute products in a way that deviated from or ran counter to their tradition. Those who sought forms beyond the old order, forms that fostered identification with new republican or even urban-democratic orders, had to turn to those able to think conceptually and in a position to formally direct craft production.

Designers were necessary to break free of the ossifications of craft production and to translate the formal *modes* of the resurrected antique culture for manufacturers within the horizon of their existing craft production. Whence the concept of modernity. The designers possessed cultural capital, with intimate knowledge of the forms of different cultures

¹ Cable, Carole Kay Law-Gag: From Documentation to Design. Trends in Architectural Representation During the Italian Renaissance; Ann Arbor 1983.

and the ability to elaborate this knowledge in designs and present it to conceptually inept craftsmen as rules and a programme.

On the side of the customer, designers functioned as a kind of lifestyle consultant. The basis for dialogue between customer and designer can be depicted, more or less, in terms of the following question: in what forms would you like to present yourself in future and acquire a reputation and recognition?

I would also point to a second reason why the profession of designer became necessary: the manufacture of objects, in particular valuable objects, such as cornices on houses, vases, jewellery, goblets, furniture, but also sculpture from costly materials, often required considerable investment in advance in raw materials and supplies, the extent of which exceeded the means of the craftsman.

Designs provided customers and buyers, as well as the craftsmen with an authoritative and vivid model of how the object whose manufacture had to be financed up front would look. In this second instance, too, designs functioned as a virtual reality on the basis of which negotiations could be conducted on the future of investments and thus on the matter and form of ensuing production.

Designs that presented the three-dimensional result in advance as a two-dimensional image gave the customers at least a visual idea and guarantee for their investment in the project and thus enabled craftsmen to execute the commission by advance payment. Thus to me it makes sense to view design as a suggestion of the achievable forms of the future and not this future itself.

But here a further, almost paradoxical factor is worth noting: with the object, the design does not thematise the object itself. This is because the reason objects exist is the forms of behaviour that need them in order to succeed: ladders help us to climb, buses to travel, spoons to heavenly delights and trophies to social recognition and repute. All objects that people make, serve and generate forms of behaviour. They embody programmes for behaviour and it is up to the users of these objects to comply with, vary, play with or reject these programmes. The ultimate basis of objects is the forms of behaviour that induced them and led to them. Ultimately, objects are thus mutual - they convey the reciprocity of human behaviour.

It is the form of objects that prescribe to us our everyday choreographies. We dance with our toothbrushes in a very personal and intimate manner, but a longish handle and bristles on a rounded base make it immediately clear to us which end belongs in the hand and which one in the mouth. Forms enable, evoke and shape behaviour, however, not only in this directly ergonomic sense. The decision about using a particular material confirms or provokes ideas about the value that will be attributed to the activities the object invites us to engage in. We recognise in the form whether hundreds of thousands of the thing have been made, whether it is an assembly line product, whether by hand or by machine, and how much care has gone into its fabrication and manufacturing.

Things do not speak only of acts of consumption. They are signs of the spending that made such consumption possible. This power of form to shape modes of behaviour is at least as important as a source of design as the already mentioned need to generate agreement on the purpose of investments and the difficulty arising from not knowing anything about cultural alternatives nor being able to make them trend-setting for production.

The development of industrial capitalism brought designers into a tense political situation. Their existence and the substance of their work were completely dependent on the successful sale of mass-produced goods. On one hand, that gave them the illusion of omnipresence. Observers now talk of »total design«.² In fact, designers are only partly responsible for the forms of current lifeworlds. Their task consists of overwhelming customer resistance at the point of sale and reducing the risk involved in the deployment of capital: they arm products aesthetically and semantically with experience values, promises of competence and status functions which are infected with the virus of either modish or technological obsolescence.

In the variety of designs there has always been an effort to engage the economy and technology socially and culturally. A significant part of the avant garde in the twentieth century not only believed in technology but made it their task to evaluate technological achievements in terms of whether and how they are suitable for alleviating poverty and overcoming social exclusion. The avant garde used the tendency towards serial production to socialise behaviour democratically not only for manipulation but also for emancipation from the degradations of capitalist production. For that purpose they developed design concepts in which a sovereign and more playful way of dealing with things was promoted instead of subjecting the user to style programmes and defining their personality through the possession of things. The ideal of these concepts is a space released from piling up stuff and kept free for the development of personality.³ Ideas of richness are a habitual form here; they aim at a free, liberated attitude to things, not at their increasing possession.

Some designers still keep clear of “shark business” by pursuing two strategies: they develop design concepts for durability and lasting appreciation, in other words, for products that can be repaired and are adaptable over the long term because they are subdivided into structures of long-term, medium-term and short-term use and allow insights and opportunities for intervention in the functional relationships of their parts and of the whole.

The second strategy begins with a critique of the overall scenario of modern ways of life and leads to a selection of those products that are worth reworking and revising for two reasons: first, their utility values are undeniable for a product culture based on sustainability - in other words, the designers conduct the discourse on the indispensability of products against the background of criteria of global justice (the 20 sm living space, 2000 watt society); second, the current material and symbolic forms of products are counterproductive and detrimental to a culture of sufficiency. The relevant questions thus are: What is needed from products for a sustainable lifestyle? What is it about products that is exclusive, only a matter of social status and merely symbolic to obtain social distinction? What is it about products that - as we understand things today - is insufficient in a holistic context? Can the veneer of resource consumption through superficial effects be done away with and resource-conscious behavior be fostered and evoked aesthetically, in sensual experience?

Changing to a product culture beyond growth requires key objects that unlock the new lifestyles. Because these lifestyles will be sequential, formed asynchronously over several product generations and in various product segments. Key objects are objects that initiate behaviour that

² Cf. Mateo Kries: Wollt Ihr das totale Design? Die Herrschaft der Designer droht zur Diktatur zu werden: Neben Kleidern, Autos und Möbeln entwerfen sie längst unser Leben von morgen. Plädoyer für eine neue, kritische Designtheorie; in: Die Welt, 14.04.2010.

³ Cf. Lothar Kühne: Gegenstand und Raum, Dresden 1981, especially pp. 262, 263.

draws other forms of behaviour after it. Demonstrative consumption does not take place only in relation to others. I can also prove to myself the extent to which I can withdraw from a way of life based on dissipation and wastefulness. This needs products that form an anchor, which anchor my behaviour (or behaviour in general). Such anchors can be bridgeheads, extending sustainable forms of behaviour over the whole life course.

For many people, for example, the acquisition of a laptop is the acquisition of a lifestyle in which work and free time are intertwined. That can be experienced negatively and under the conditions in which people earn their livings today can lead to burnout. However, the experience of such an intertwining of the spheres of work, which requires resources, and of recreation, which requires resources in order to restore consumed resources, as well as the sensory understanding of reproductive connections and cycles can strengthen an aversion to wastefulness and the inclination towards sustainable lifestyles. Is it not exactly because of the alienation of the experience of reciprocal productivity that makes the consumption of things a substitute for human affection? The reduction of the concept of lifestyle to consumption style blinds us to the reproductive whole of life contexts and thus neglects its sustainability dimension.

Design externalises ideas about how things could be and thus opens up the debate. For example, students of design have proposed beginning waste disposal in the kitchen with a box full of microorganisms and compost worms.⁴ Vegetable peelings fall into a box under the kitchen table shaped in such a way that it can be hung from any table. The humus can then be put into plant boxes for herbs and peppers that can fit onto any shelf. Thus recycling can be achieved at the level of culinary housekeeping. Such a solution is likely to be tiresome for individual households. Nevertheless, the projection of this prototype is a further step in making an issue of recycling in the urban environment. Here design operates first of all at the level of a vividly apprehensible proposal.

The aesthetic does not only have a tendency towards stimulation and dazzlement. The covert effectiveness of aesthetic solutions involves bringing to bear forms of behaviour from one area of experience in other areas.⁵

To take an example, in 2011 four London students asked how globally increasing calorie requirements can be met in around 30 years' time. Their answer: »The Art of Eating Insects«.⁶ Grasshoppers transform feed into body weight nine times more effectively than cows and without the methane. Insects are a dietary staple in many cultures. Can this eating culture be globalised and the cultural aversion be overcome? That is a classic design problem. In their solutions the students used the alienation that Europeans have acquired over two hundred years of the production of food of animal origin and presented the unusual food in abstract cubic form in order not to run counter to European taste habits. This project is encouraging in many ways because it shows that skills applied in consumerism to degrade users to unskilled consumers can also be deployed in the other direction.

The strength - and weakness - of product design as part of upcoming regulations of resource consumption and in the face of ever more tedious moral appeals in information media is as follows: products are life

⁴ The concept comes from Charlotte Dieckmann and Nils Ferber; see: <http://charlottedieckmann.de/parasite-farm/> (last accessed on 12.02.2013).

⁵ I call them transsemantic states. See Jörg Petruschat: Transsemantische Zustände; cc-Download at: http://www.petruschat.dlab-dd.de/Petruschat/Transsemantische_Zustande.html

⁶ The suggestion was made by Aran Dasan, Jacky Chung, Julene Aguirre-Bielschowsky and Jonathan Fraser; see http://www.core77.com/blog/case_study/case_study_onto_the_art_of_eating_insects_21841.asp (last accessed on 12.02.2013).

conditions that cannot be shut off. They are present at hand in very direct, immediate ways. Designers can, as was said recently, influence the resource use of a product by up to 80 per cent.⁷ In contrast to appeals that in the best case can anchor new ideals of value, designed products can also supply behavioural dispositions towards sustainability.

Designers, in sociological terms, belong to the »intellectual elite«. If they are in tune with the times, in their own lives they experiment with and embody patterns of behaviour that they elaborate in the form of objects, processes and environments.

Design, however, is not change itself, but only the appearance of change. Its realisation compels debate and thus requires cooperation.

⁷ See: <http://www.bundespreis-ecodesign.de> (last accessed on 12.02.2013)