

THE CULTURE OF DESIGN

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CHAPTER 1

DESIGN CULTURE

What is 'design culture'? How might an academic approach to design culture be undertaken? How might this differ from other, related disciplines such as Visual Culture? Does the study of design culture require a particular scholarly sensibility? Chapter 1 provides an introduction to thinking about Design Culture as an academic field of enquiry and also the notion of design culture as a phenomenon. It reviews different usages of the term 'design culture'. It then goes on to identify design culture as involving networks of interaction between design, production and consumption and beyond this, the relationships of value, circulation and creation and practice. There follows an explanation of the structure of this book

Design is a highly entrepreneurial profession. It is also a maturing academic discipline. As a focus of leisure and consumption, it has become a source of public entertainment. It is and has been a vehicle of political coercion and symbolism, appropriated and employed by the darkest or most benign of power structures. It serves as an informal indicator of economic performance, cultural regeneration and social well-being. Spectacular displays of youth subcultures, the accumulation of wealth, mid-life crises and retirement plans all produce design. Few practices of intellectual and commercial human activity reach into so many areas of everyday private and public life. Few professions in the industrialized world have grown in terms of economic presence and cultural import as much as design has in the past three decades.

Design has become a global phenomenon. Thus to take Central and Eastern Europe alone, following the collapse of their state socialist systems in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some 350 million citizens have been drawn into liberal democracy and market capitalism. The economic rise of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) in the 21st century has added exponential impetus to this turn. A new global generation of consumers of design within a capitalistic context has emerged. The remit of design practice itself has extended during the same period. It is no longer a 'value-added' extra applied to a restricted range of domestic objects; rather it extends, for example, to the planning and shaping of digital interfaces in computer games and websites, to large-scale leisure and retail spaces and even to the creation of a country's public image.

Design is represented and talked about at a range of levels. A more conservative notion of it as a commodity that signifies modernity and desirability resides in the pages of lifestyle magazines. On the television, the plethora of home-improvement shows which emerged in the late 1990s, while drawing something from this notion, also began to represent design as a process of expert decision-making and implementation. Since the early 1980s a range of professional journals has become firmly established with the growth of the industry. They have presented design variously as business news (e.g. *Design Week*) or an avant-garde cultural activity (e.g. *Blueprint*) and all points between. Design history and design studies have taken their place as discrete academic disciplines in universities with their own scholastic journals, conference circuits and key figures.

At the same time, academics from other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have, though often tentatively, stepped into design territory. The emergence of 'science and technology studies' that investigates the interrelationships of society, culture, politics and technological innovation similarly has incorporated design into its accounts (e.g. Latour 1987; Shove et al. 2012; Marres 2012). This has also stemmed from discussions of consumption in Cultural Studies, Anthropology and Geography (e.g. Miller 1987; Jackson and Thrift 1995; du Gay et al. 2013). Some sociologists and economists have recognized the importance of design in a wider global economic growth in the first world of 'cultural goods' and creative industries within this (e.g. Lash and Urry 1994; Molotch 1996; Lash and Lury 2007). In either case, they have provided a wealth of theoretical frameworks for the investigation of design. Generally speaking, however, many of them do not approach specific design examples against which these formal perspectives may be contextualized and deconstructed.

It is hoped, then, that an academic focus on design culture will have a two-way use. For those with a specialist knowledge of design it should broaden the field of their enquiry by relating it to a wide set of theoretical discourses. For those with an interest in Cultural Studies, Sociology,

Anthropology, Ethnography and Geography, it should introduce them to the more focused activities and issues of design and the way that it brokers the material and visual relationships of production and consumption.

The interdisciplinarity of this project is in parallel with a similar trend in design practice itself. This precarious, creative activity has in recent years undergone perhaps its most fundamental revolution yet. It has shifted from being a problem-solving activity to a problem-processing one, and thus from a multidisciplinary to an interdisciplinary activity. A typical larger design consultancy may bring ‘together materials, manufacturing, software and “futures” specialists, with the big ideas flowing from that chemistry’ (Hollington 1998: 63). Designers also work closely with product managers and researchers, marketing specialists, advertising agents, public relations consultants and many others involved in the generation, mediation and control of the flows of images, objects and information around a product or service. Technological change, the globalization of economies and the growth of the importance of the brand (all three of which are in themselves related) have played vital roles in this process. Many design consultancies have also moved from the consideration of objects, images and spaces to the investigation and provision of relationships and structures. The traditional demarcations between disciplines such as graphic, product and interior design have receded. Designers increasingly market themselves not by the visual style they create, but by their business approach or, more loosely speaking, by the way they structure and manage the design process. Meanwhile, studies in design history and criticism have struggled to keep up with these changes. The richness of contemporary design must be met in its discussion by a strident and robust spectrum of academic disciplines.

Much work in Media and Cultural Studies takes an overly reductionist approach to the discussion of the strategies of producing and selling things. Often the study is narrowed down to skilful, but limiting, image analysis. In particular, the dominance of advertising analysis, stemming from literary criticism, has served to divert attention from the fact that these days it only represents just one of many strategies employed by corporations and institutions to colonize the consumer’s world. So, for example, despite their insightful and worthy exploration of the production and meanings of Nike’s advertising campaigns, Goldman and Papon are forced to admit that this approach ‘nonetheless risks leaving other aspects of the story in the background. Matters central to the operation of Nike, such as sports marketing and shoe design [both of which are highly inter-related], remain out of sight’ (1998: v). As I argue in the final chapter of this book, the centring of production, the designer’s labour and, indeed, consumption around brand values in the 1990s drastically reconfigure the role and status of advertising.

In view of these shortfalls, my interest in writing this book is in the instigation of a concept of design culture – both as an object of study and as an academic discipline. In the first instance this is animated by the ever more pervasive role of design in contemporary society. It takes design as a culturally specific practice which is driven almost entirely by strategies of differentiation. This process appropriates and employs a wide range of discursive features: not just ones of modernity, but also risk, heritage, subculture, public space, consumer empowerment and many others. Design culture is not fixed, homogeneous or homogenizing; rather it embraces a complex matrix of human activities, perceptions and articulations. Careful analysis of its visual, material, spatial and textual manifestations provides routes into this complexity.

DESIGN CULTURE AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY

Daniel Koh is a Singapore-based art director. He maintains a personal website (www.amateurprovokateur.com) that profiles his own design work and that of others. He divides his own into two categories: ‘commercial’ and ‘non-commercial’ work. A page is devoted to what he calls ‘design culture’. Here, Koh curated over 120 links to the work of designers to ‘showcase their sensibilities ... and to stimulate the creativity within the design community’. Profiles of practitioners in Caracas, Montreal, New York, London, Amsterdam, Rome, Krakow, Tokyo and Singapore are included in this gallery. I asked him what he meant by the words ‘design culture’. He replied that it was ‘a term I define as [the way] designers think and work through different mediums. Different thought processes/approach but one common objective: to communicate. Design is a way of life; it’s all around us. We should all make things better’ (Koh 2004).

Koh’s brief exposition of ‘design culture’ provides a neat synthesis of many of the positions that have been taken up in relation to this term. According to Koh, design culture is located in communication. It is both something designers do but is also something that is ‘all around’. Design culture, then, is part of the flows of global culture. It is located within network society and is also an instrument of it. It also expresses an attitude, a value and a desire to improve things.

The word ‘design’ denotes the activities of planning and devising as well as the outcome of these processes, such as a drawing, plan or manufactured object. It is both a verb and a noun. However, the term ‘design culture’ also gets close to being adjectival. It suggests the qualities by which design is practised – and I use the word ‘practised’ very deliberately to infer not only the ways that it is undertaken, but also the ways that it is lived, perceived, understood and enacted in everyday life. As such, design culture exists at a very local level. It may be embedded in the working systems, knowledges and relationships of designers or in the quotidian actions of design users. But it may also work more widely and publicly, fostered within discursive systems of power, economic structures and dynamics or social relations. A brief review of some of the ways by which the term ‘design culture’ has been treated may help to explain its multi-levelled existence and map out some of its qualities as an object of study. These are taken from the most particular to the more general contexts.

DESIGN CULTURE AS PROCESS

Design culture as a process is perhaps the most established usage and stems from architectural and design criticism. In particular, it describes the immediate contextual influences and contextually informed actions within the development of a design. A close term that throws light on this is the Italian usage of *la cultura di progetto* (in English, ‘project culture’). The word *progetto* implies something broader than simply the form-giving within design, but extends to the totality of carrying out design: for example, from conceiving and negotiating artefacts with clients, to studio organization, to the output of the design and to its realization. Within all these there is an implied interest in the systems of negotiation – often verbal – that conspire to define and frame design artefacts. This understanding may be broadened by placing the idea of studio activity into a framework of immediate influences. Thus the project process is

understood to be produced within and by a network of everyday knowledge and practices that surround the designer (Calvera 2000).

DESIGN CULTURE AS CONTEXT-INFORMED PRACTICE

The use of design culture as context-informed practice is concerned with a wider notion of ‘design culture as process’, to imply collectively held norms of practice shared within or across contexts. More specifically, this usually refers to the way that geographical context may influence the practice and results of design. This can fall in two ways. One is how the everyday specific features of a location – availability of materials and technologies, cultural factors that affect business activities, climate, local modes of exchange and so on – produce particularized actions. This might be contrasted with perceived globalized, dominant, mainstream forms of practice. The second may equally engage a consciousness of difference or peripherization but views design culture as a platform for communication. Design culture thus becomes a forum (often supported by the Web but also by other channels such as magazines and conferences) by which globally diasporic actors connect, communicate and legitimate their activities.

DESIGN CULTURE AS ORGANIZATIONAL OR ATTITUDINAL

When design culture is organizational or attitudinal the focus remains tightly within the scope of the producer-agents of design, though it is not exclusive to designers per se. It stems from management studies and sociological texts that have sought to analyse and provide models for human resources within innovative industries. Thus, flexible, horizontally networked, transaction-rich activities that, in particular, deal in symbolically charged products become dominant in this discourse. Within this, creative industries have begun to serve as paradigms for wider shifts in business organization, both internal and external. Team-working, creative empowerment and innovation become key words in this situation. Furthermore, in seeking coherence between the internal ethos of a company and its interactions with its public, the role of brand stewardship becomes increasingly important. Within this mode, then, the idea of a ‘design culture’ as an attitudinal and organizational spine within a company that concerns itself with both innovation and formal coherence has been used (Cawood 1997). Leading on from this, it may also be used to signify the ‘cultural capital’ of a company – its facility to qualify, critique and thus deliver distinction and differentiation.

DESIGN CULTURE AS AGENCY

If the term ‘design culture’ can be used as an attitudinal marker of an organization to maximize its market position, this may also be appropriated into attempts to reform the aims, practices and effects of design towards greater and more direct social and environmental benefit. Here, the emphasis is also on design culture as a ‘way of doing things’ but looks to be active in changing the practices of those outside its main actors. It therefore takes context as circumstance but not as a given. In this account, the world can be changed through a new kind of design culture (e.g. Mau 2004). The term is certainly not used to signify design that strives purely for commercial advantage. It implies design practice that is ‘encultured’ in the sense that it strives towards a higher moral ground.

DESIGN CULTURE AS PERVASIVE BUT DIFFERENTIATED VALUE

Leading on from this last observation, one might detect a spirit of openness, or almost random connection in the same way that magazine-thumbing, web-browsing and conference-networking produce chance ‘pick-ups’. It involves practice within a particularized environment. Design culture engages a conceptual breadth that goes beyond traditionally used notions of ‘excellence’, ‘innovation’ or ‘best-practice’. Thus singular instances of design value, as for instance exemplified through individual works of design, are subordinated in favour of a generalized setting for design culture. The locations, artefacts or practices that harbour design value become ever wider and more various as they become swept up to constitute this situation. Their connectivity implies the possibility of immersion in a specific and distinctive designerly ambience (e.g. Lacroix 2005).

A recapitulation on some of the above themes, giving examples of related discourses and actions, might help explain and account for the ascendance of design culture.

Design culture as a form of agency, as *encultured* design, may emerge in various guises. It may be viewed as a way of garnering a more general sense of innovation within a commercial firm and thus a form of management through design. An employee’s everyday enthusiasm for design – as much as a consumer as a producer – in turn provides a disposition towards newness (Cawood 1997). Bruce Mau has directed a sense of design culture towards future global change, attempting to expose the ways by which the intersections of new information, bio- and materials technologies with attitudinal changes can be directed at combating climate change, social alienation or poverty. In early 2004, his website (www.massivechange.com) acted as a focus for debate towards ‘The Future of Design Culture’ (see also Mau 2004). In such ways, design culture is therefore a generator of *value*.

The mobilization of design culture exists within a wider framework that relates to both a quantitative ascendance of the creative industries as a sector of employment and national revenue generation within developed countries, and to their qualitative development in terms of their symbolic role in signalling advanced economic development. For example, in the UK the number of first-year design students rose by 35 per cent, from 14,948 to 20,225, between 1994 and 2001. According to a 1998 European Commission report, ‘cultural employment’ – that is, work in advertising, design, broadcast, film, internet, music, publishing and computer games – grew by 24 per cent in Spain (1987–94) while employment in Germany of ‘producers and artists’ grew by 23 per cent (1980–94). Into the 21st century, statistics from beyond Europe underpin an even more global view of this ascendance. For example, by 2011, Brazil’s creative industries represented 2.7 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product – higher than Italy (2.3 per cent) and Germany (2.5 per cent) and most other European countries – with design making up 12.7 per cent of the sector’s employment (FIRJAN 2011). By the same year, China was producing a reported 300,000 industrial design graduates annually (UK Trade and Investment 2011).

Arguably, the creative industries indicate, or even herald, wider changes in the meanings and processes of work. In her study of London-based fashion designers, for example, sociologist Angela McRobbie (1998) shows how their working patterns were typified by the requirement to network, to be visible and available virtually on a 24-hour basis – patterns of labour that resonate with the emergent entrepreneurialism of the New Economy. Meanwhile business studies academics Scase and Davis take this notion further to claim that the creative economy is at the ‘leading edge of the movement towards the information age [as] their outputs are performances,

expressive work, ideas and symbols rather than consumer goods or services' (2000: 23). They are paradigmatic of broader changes in economic life. Such authors may well be accused of uncritically deriving an ideal model of creative industries and accepting the coming dominance of an information age (Nixon 2003). Nevertheless, both the growth figures and the emergent debates suggest a shifting emphasis in the modern economy to a specific mode of *creation*.

Design culture also emerges through strong changes in its contexts and localities. For example, design curatorship has, it seems, moved from a differentiated dominance to a de-differentiated model. The history of contemporary design curatorship reveals a tendency towards the exhibition of objects as paradigmatic examples of 'good design'. By contrast, exhibitions such as New York's Cooper-Hewitt Museum's show, 'Design Culture Now', are conceived to represent contemporary design activities without recourse to didactic commentary (Lupton and Albrecht 2000; Lupton 2005). Design culture was conceived here to represent a ubiquitous presence rather than a point of aspiration. Equally, there have been attempts to establish urban agglomerations such as Montreal, Glasgow and St Etienne as 'design cities' (Lacroix 2005). These are characterized not solely by a high concentration of designers or design production systems but are places where design becomes a more prominent and commonplace feature of everyday life. A more localized version of this phenomenon, for example, may be found in the corporatization of urban night life in cities, where an intensity of designer bars and clubs stakes out a particular city zone (Chatterton and Holland 2003). These locations may be differentiated from each other, but within their locale the overall effect of a pervasive design culture is implied. Design culture, then, becomes a form of *practice*.

Design culture as an object of study therefore includes both the material and immaterial aspects of everyday life. On one level it is articulated through images, words, forms and spaces. But at another it engages discourses, actions, beliefs, structures and relationships. The above concepts of *value*, *creation* and *practice* that motivate design culture as an object of study are processes that relate, respectively, to designers, production and consumption, and we shall return to these later in this chapter.

In the meantime, having established that the term 'design culture' has come into frequent, commonplace usage, the question arises as to how it might be studied. How can its object of study (lower-case 'design culture') be turned towards the development of an academic discipline (upper-case 'Design Culture')? In the first instance, it is important to try to establish how the objects of study within design culture are viewed. I do this through an assessment of a related field of study: Visual Culture. A critique of approaches within Visual Culture – and a particular *way of looking* that is found within the discipline Visual Culture – offers disciplinary starting points for developing the study of Design Culture. Subsequently, this chapter offers a structured approach to dealing with the complexities of design culture that forms the conceptual basis of the rest of this book.

BEYOND VISUAL CULTURE: DESIGN CULTURE AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

Visual Culture is now firmly established as an academic discipline in universities across Europe and the Americas. It sports two refereed journals (*Journal of Visual Culture* and *Visual Culture in Britain*) and at least five student introductory texts (Walker and Chaplin 1997; Mirzoeff

1999; Barnard 2001; Howells 2001; Sturken and Cartwright 2001) and three substantial readers (Mirzoeff 1998; Evans and Hall 1999; Jones 2003). Undergraduate and postgraduate courses have been established. While differing in their approaches, Visual Culture authors generally include design alongside fine art, photography, film, television and advertising within their scope. Visual Culture therefore challenges and widens the field of investigation previously occupied by Art History. This project was instigated in the 1970s within the then-called 'New Art History'. Its proponents turned away from traditional interests in the formal analysis, provenance and patronage of art to embrace a more anthropological attitude to the visual in society. Thenceforth, all visual forms were admissible for academic enquiry – a notion spurred on by the rise of Cultural Studies, Popular Culture Studies and Media Studies, and indeed Design History.

The periodization of visual culture – when and for how long does it exist as a recognizable object of study – is understood in two ways. One is that the visual has come to be the dominant cognitive and representational form of modernity. This is certainly the position that was taken by Mitchell (1994) and Mirzoeff (1998). In this account, the emergence of a 'visual turn' in Western society is the result of the creation of mass consumer markets and urbanization during the industrial revolution. Indeed, the proliferation of images became a key characteristic of modern social organization (Evans and Hall 1999). From a design point of view, commodities and services needed to be made more self-consciously visual in order to advertise and market them to a wide, anonymous audience. In Europe and North America, the 19th century saw the growth of the department store, catalogue shopping, mass tourism and entertainment as spectacle – all of which hinge on the mediation of visual experience. And, of course, this was also the period of new visual technologies such as film, animation and photography.

Alternatively, we might view the issue of visual culture as a hermeneutic one. It is a question of how we interpret visuality itself. This is not to say that there is a clear historical break between, say, a literary era and the visual era. Vision is neither hegemonic nor non-hegemonic (Mitchell 2002). In the first instance, all media are hybrid or, as Bal (2002) claims, 'impure'. They do not merely engage one expression – visual, textual, aural, material – but are dissolved within the contexts through which they are mediated. Hence, for example, one cannot talk of the Internet in terms of either visual or textual culture but, perhaps, as screen culture. It therefore does not follow that the advent of a new visual technology – from oil painting to the Internet – means the strict dominance of one cognitive form over another in any era. Forms of visual presentation emerge and indeed occupy, however, some prominence at various historical junctures.

From this, it follows that an era of visual culture, Mitchell argues, is where the perception of the visual becomes commonplace, something that is mentioned casually (Mitchell 2002). In doing so, assumptions are automatically made about the ubiquity and role of the visual in society. Through this more nuanced notion of visual culture, we slip from an essentialist view (the visual is *the* medium of our times) to a complex view (we regard the visual as an intrinsic and important social and cultural expression of our times).

While proponents of the latter position may indeed acknowledge the visual as part and parcel of a complex, interlocking web of cultural production, the visual still plays a lead role in cultural formation and representation. These proponents are concerned with images, pictures, visual things and what they are doing. The focus of interest is on them as representations and in the relation of viewers and practices of vision. The dominant transaction of interest is between singularized object and individual viewer, between produced object and consuming subject. Issues

of ‘scopic regimes’, vision, ways of looking, the gaze and semiosis crowd the literature. The ‘reading’ of the image is a central skill in this discipline.

This ocularcentricism in Visual Culture studies therefore renders the viewer almost inanimate in relation to the viewed. A sensibility is embedded in its practices whereby things external to the subject are seen, analysed and contemplated. This rigid process of looking is underpinned and promoted by the habit of disembodiment of images from their primary contexts of encounter (Armstrong 1996). Adverts or photos are quite literally cut out of newspapers and magazines for analysis, a process that is not dissimilar to those undertaken with traditional art history that Visual Culture studies critiques. Mass media images are abstracted away from their usual contexts for study in the same way that historical works of art are presented in books or in galleries, regardless of their original framing or locations. How one looks and how looking is represented may be a multifarious performance. Indeed, Martin Jay identified three common historical forms. The first is embedded in the perspectivalist Cartesian relationship between viewer and viewed that relates to Renaissance painting. Here a single, static position for the viewer is expected. Second, observational empiricism that was embedded in Dutch 17th-century art does not make the assumption of three-dimensional space external to the viewer, but revels in the particularity of surface detail. Third, the multiple and open-picturing of visual phenomena prevalent in Baroque art demands the viewer to piece together visual objects into a coherent narrative (Jay 1988). These are useful starting points for exploring visual encounters and may be transferred into the exploration of designed objects and environments. After all, we shall see in Chapter 8 on branded leisure that museums, shops or leisure centres are often designed as a series of episodes that add up to a narrative experience. This argument, it seems, still foregrounds the practice of viewing as the prior function that such objects fulfil, however. Furthermore, his interest is in whatever is, quite literally, within the frame rather than around or behind it. The notion that such artefacts also function as things in space or circulation, or in individual or collective reproduction, memory or aspiration is absent.

As visual information has become more ephemeral and immediate, so the ground on which culture is played out has shifted up a gear. The growing ubiquity of design as a self-consciously distinguishing feature in everyday life expands the grounds on which visual values lie. As Lash notes, ‘Culture is now three-dimensional, as much tactile as visual or textual, all around us and inhabited, lived in rather than encountered in a separate realm as a representation’ (2002: 149). He describes an architectonic, spatially-based society where information is reworked in these planes. Culture is no longer one of pure representation or narrative where the visual conveys messages. Instead, culture formulates, formats, channels, circulates, contains and retrieves information. Design, therefore, is more than just the creation of visual artefacts to be used or ‘read’. It is also about the structuring of systems of encounter within the visual and material world.

Academics at the core of Visual Culture studies are not oblivious to this development. Hal Foster’s writings on design, in particular, resonate with Lash’s ‘architectonic’ conception of culture, albeit that they are attitudinally distinct. Foster places himself at the end of discursive tradition that recognizes the remaking of space in the image of the commodity, itself a prime story of capitalist modernity. In the same way that the commodity and sign appear as one (through, for example, branding), so, he contends, does the commodity and space. This is nowhere more evident than in the use of design to define the cultural value of locations – place branding, in other words. Thus for Foster, Frank O. Gehry’s design for the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao creates a spectacle that is ‘an image accumulated to the point where it becomes capital’ (Foster

2002a: 41). This observation closes the loop instigated by Debord where it was argued that the spectacle was ‘capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image’ (1967: 23). Here design is used to establish symbolic-value over a location; or, as Foster would have it, image and space are ‘deterritorialized’ (2002b).

Equally, Camiel van Winkel speaks of a ‘regime of visibility ... that permeates all levels of culture and society [so that] increasingly works of art and other cultural artefacts are no longer simply made but designed ... a productive model dominates that is all about styling, coding, and effective communication with an audience’ (van Winkel, cited in Bryson 2002: 230). This pervasiveness of design is, in such accounts, however, matched by its authority. In agreement with van Winkel, Bryson argues that as they proliferate, ‘a primary experience in everyday life is that of being engulfed or overwhelmed by images’ (2002: 230). Alongside Foster, such Visual Culture writers express a profound and enervated anxiety as to what to do about design in contemporary culture.

At the heart of these narratives concerning the instrumentalization of design in the commodification, corporatization and formatting of culture is a telling diffidence and anxiety as to how to deal with this. The imperative of modern capitalism to make things visual in order to commodify them implies a flip-side: that more and more things are passed from a non- or pre-visual state into this aestheticized state. There is an implied ‘before’ and ‘after’ here, and equally there is an implied ‘them’ and ‘us’. ‘They’ are the forces and objects of modern capitalism and design therein, and ‘we’ are viewers and subjects of them. Visual Culture then becomes a project in how to deal with this asymmetry.

The commentaries of van Winkel and Foster seem to assume an alienated position on the part of the subject, therefore. In this account, modernity has entailed a shift from a bodily, practical relationship with the world to a more abstract and intellectual one, and the ‘disembedding of aspects of life from the social relationships and activities with which they have previously been implicated’ (Carrier 2003: 10). This process began, according to Marx, with the passivization and routinization of labour and the process of objectification whereby human values are invested into alien processes of capital, exchange and the commodity (Marx 1964). This discourse emerges in Weber’s account (1978 [1922]) of the spread of legal-rational thought and the resultant processes of disenchantment that form the basis of Ritzer’s ‘McDonaldization thesis’ (Ritzer 1996). Systems are orchestrated and routinized for maximum perceived efficiency, leaving the consumer as a passive participant. Equally, it has influenced studies of alienation, from the urban milieu discussed by Sennett (1976) to those that subsequently have influenced Urry (1990) in his conception of ‘the tourist gaze’. Here the conceptual emphasis is on tourism as a form of spectacular consumption in which sights are arranged for visual pleasure. Tourist spaces are produced and viewed as an alien ‘other’.

The insistence on the singularization of the objects of analysis within Visual Culture accounts for the discipline’s inability to make substantial contributions to the study and understanding of design. The presumption is that visual objects are intrinsically alienating. To follow a parallel Material Culture studies argument, their singularization through consumption is what interrupts and reverses this process of alienation. Its quest for meaning is in the investigation of the transactional relationship between seeing and the thing seen.

But this leaves out the possibility, even more probable in design culture, that the object can be encountered through a range of media or even that its multiple reproduction itself produces

meaning. By extension, it does not necessarily follow that the primary experience of design is that of being overwhelmed or engulfed by it. Indeed, the multiplication of its artefacts may even be what makes it meaningful. They may be orchestrated into an architectonic structure, serially reproduced through a range of media.

A range of visual technologies that emerged during the 1990s has perhaps broken this relationship between viewer and viewed. Among these, the idea of virtual reality in its raw state (before it was sublimated into applications such as computer games) indicated a direction for an alternative conception of how we might handle visual culture. The discourse of ‘immersion’ (discussed further in Chapter 9) – whereby the subject ‘steps into’ the object – signifies a paradigmatic shift of the ground on which visual culture might be played out. Thinking about virtual reality shifts us away from an ocularcentricism into an account that takes on board the embodied nature of engagement (Chan 2006). Furthermore, virtual reality becomes an, albeit extreme, metaphor for change in the rules of engagement between subject and object. The emergence of mobile technologies in the 21st century, such as smartphones and tablets (discussed further in Chapter 11), adds further complexity and problematics to any assumptions of looking as a static, disembodied practice. These devices encourage a range of gestures and movements that interact with the visual experience. Furthermore, through, for example, such things as their mapping facilities or QR (quick response) codes, they present visual information that is related to spatial elements.

In the new conditions of design culture, cognition becomes as much spatial and temporal as visual. Information is presented within architectonic planes rather than in the bounded, two-dimensional space of representation. The processes of encounter go further and are more complex than the analytical tools of Visual Culture can fully aid. The last decade has seen the ascendance of a range of overlapping and interdependent visual technologies. These promise not so much convergent media, but rather simultaneous and concurrent experiential moments. The same visual information may be generated and encountered via a range of platforms: picture phones, DVD cameras, webcams, video screens, smartphones, tablets and so on. Thus imagery and information are ‘played through’ varying sites. Each one provides its specific form while also relating to other moments and points in a network.

So how do the ways that the term ‘design culture’ is articulated signal an alternative approach to Visual Culture? How might we construct a model of analysis that respects the specificities as well as the more general effects of design culture?

MODELS FOR STUDYING DESIGN CULTURE

Qualitative change in what drives the design profession and the meaning of design in society adds weight to the contemporaneity of a design culture concept that takes us beyond Visual Culture studies. The rise of branding as the key focus and driver of much design practice signals two clear challenges. One is that design culture requires its observers to move beyond visual and material attributes to consider the multifarious and multilocational networks of its creation and manifestation. Brand management rhetoric tells us that producer agents – be they corporations, institutions or individuals – are responsible for controlling a coherent brand message throughout its circuit of culture, from production through mediation to consumption to consumer feedback. If a brand is typified into a clear, simple message, which is often crystallized as a slogan, then this should be

reflected in all its manifestations. This might include the way corporate workers dress, talk and act with customers and clients. Branding obviously extends into more traditional designed elements such as promotional literature graphics or the design of retail spaces, reception areas, websites or other points of corporation and consumer interface. In this way, the systems of branding inhabit much of the space of design culture, turning information into an ‘all around us’ architectonic form.

The rise of branding may partially account for the growing interdisciplinarity of design within the profession as designers seek, and clients demand, a greater integration of product, graphic and interior design in order to create more coherent and filled-out design solutions. It also explains the design profession’s increased integration with marketing, management and public relations, mentioned earlier. Branding is by no means the only driver and expression of contemporary design culture, but it is indicative of design culture’s multidimensional qualities.

I use branding for illustrative purposes, and its domination may not be permanent. Ultimately, the creation of value through design hinges on articulating ‘the cultural reconstruction of the meaning of what is consumed’ (Fine and Leopold 1993: 4) by various means. Designers engage in a series of repeated adjustments of the material, visual and spatial world. They reconstruct it. But they also work for clients, be they private companies, public institutions or civic groups. They source materials and processes, commission or delegate making. They enter into systems of distribution and exchange. Value is continually adjusted in response to changing everyday and global practices and systems of product and information circulation. Thus it is unstable and relational. Value is dependant on so many constantly changing factors within the culture of design – which themselves are in constant flux – that it varies continually.

No design object is an island. Rather, its meaning, function and value are dependant on a complex patchwork of other artefacts and people. The interpretation of design artefacts within a concept of design culture that goes beyond a mere visual ‘reading’ first requires one to both undertake close analysis of that object while also keeping another eye on its relationship to other visual, spatial and material expressions that contribute to the constitution of its meaning. Margolin expressed this contextualized thinking in terms of a *product milieu* by defining it as ‘the aggregate of objects, activities, services, and environments that fills the lifeworld’ (1995a: 122). Second, then, in order to develop an understanding of the conditions that form designed artefacts as well as how these artefacts themselves come to bear on these activities, their relationship with a triangulation of the activities of designers, production and consumption requires investigation (see Figure 1.1). The chapters of this book are therefore structured into two sections. The first section further develops on key issues relating to designers, production and consumption.

The *designer* is clearly bound up in this process but is given a separate nexus in this triangle. This honours the designer’s role in shaping the form and content of the visual and material artefacts which are produced and consumed. However, it also allows us to pay special attention to the less conscious features which inform and structure this process. Thus heed to the peculiarities of the professional status of design and the discourses which influence and mediate among designers and between them and their public must be paid. Chapter 3 largely focuses on these aspects through a discussion of the professional, historiographical and discursive questions that are articulated by design historians and critics and which provide a set of reference points for designers. Thus while the rise of design is bound up in recent economic change, related factors such as its struggle for professional recognition and a sense of its own history provide interesting and productive inroads to design culture analysis.

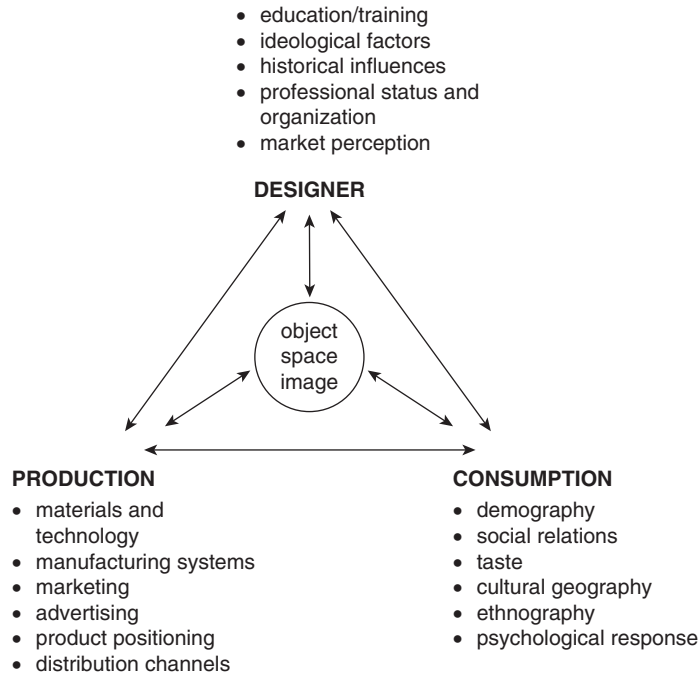


Figure 1.1 Domains of Design Culture

Production not only includes manufacture but also all forms of conscious intervention in the origination, execution, distribution and circulation of goods and services. Thus it would incorporate the influence of materials, technologies and manufacturing systems as well as the effects of marketing, advertising and distribution channels. The design industry is structured within this both to reproduce it and to modify it. Chapter 2 concentrates mostly on the interaction of design practice with wider changes in commerce and industry. In particular, it traces how design has grown as a sector in response to post-Fordist manufacture and distribution and the related processes of globalization.

Consumption completes this triumvirate. This would not only include quantitative data regarding, say, the degree of acquisition or use of particular designs in relation to demographic trends, it also involves the discussion of qualitative questions concerning the reasons and meanings of consumption. Why are certain goods which do not perform a utilitarian function accorded a special status over others? Does consuming involve an active or even a subversive practice? How are places consumed? These are some of the many questions that have interested academics in the humanities and social sciences in the past two decades. Chapter 4 outlines some of the key thinkers in this area and considers them alongside the practice of design. In particular, then, it argues for design consumption not to be analysed on its own, but to be seen as a dynamic process, to be understood in its interactions with the forces of production and the work of designers.

None of these three nexi of designers, production and consumption exists in isolation, therefore. They constantly inform each other in an endless cycle of exchange. Equally, they all have

some influence to play on the form of objects, spaces and images. But these in turn are not neutral: they play an active part in influencing or making sense of the systems of their provision. Furthermore, contemporary conditions of design, production and consumption bring the three domains ever closer so that at times aspects of them may even overlap. It is the interaction and intersection of these domains and their interactions with designed artefacts that are of prime interest to the study of design culture.

To embrace Design Culture as an academic discipline requires, therefore, a different sensibility from that of Visual Culture. In the first instance, it forces one to move beyond the enervated position of the detached or alienated observer overwhelmed by images. Instead, a Design Culture enquiry traces a cartography that exposes and analyses the linkages of artefacts that constitute information flows and the spaces between them. Second, while one might dwell on individual artefacts, this process requires these to be seen relationally to other artefacts, processes and systems. Third, it may be mobilized not merely as analysis but as a generative mode that produces new sensibilities, attitudes, approaches and intellectual processes within design.

Each domain of design culture – designers, production and consumption – can be broken down into the analysis of its possible sub-elements. Thus, for example, one might look at the professional status of designers to ask how they legitimate their role in a competitive marketplace. This in turn may be analysed in relation to the way that they shape artefacts or carry out processes, bringing into view the possibility that designs are formed specifically in such a way as to underwrite that bid for professional status. Equally, domains and their sub-elements may be regarded in relation to each other. In the realm of consumption, for instance, the way that the cultural geography of a location and how this shapes taste patterns may be discussed in relation to the way that the aspirational outlooks of designers or others more involved in production activities are structured. Thus the complexity of design culture may be broken down and viewed through the various lenses of its sub-elements. Much of this book takes this approach.

However, the bigger picture of design culture, in which its totality is appreciated in terms of the active processes that bind the field together, may be understood as the relationship between the processes of value, of creation and circulation and of practice. As already indicated, these respectively map on to designers, production and consumption and are expanded on in the following three paragraphs.

The designer's role is in the generation of *value*. This most obvious value is commercial, but the concept may also include social, cultural, environmental, political and symbolic-value. This is not restricted to notions of 'good design' as value: as we shall see in Chapter 5, I argue that 'good design' itself is an unstable and contextually achieved process. Value generation involves the origination of new products and product forms, as well as their value augmentation. This occurs in an expanded field of activity that orchestrates and coordinates material and non-material processes results. A key feature of this value creation is the reproduction of 'product nodes', whereby cultural information is filtered through a range of platforms and moments. These might include, for example, retail outlets, museums, design magazines and catalogues, websites or even through the promotion of the designers themselves. Creative action may indeed originate, position and differentiate product forms and 'product nodes' to increase value.

With regard to *creation and circulation*, a range of straightforward elements underpins and shapes the productive processes of design culture, including available technologies, environmental and human factors. But non-material elements, such as existing knowledge networks,

legislation, political pressures, economic fluctuations and fiscal policies, are also contextual factors on which these draw. Beyond design manufacture or production issues – whether we are talking about material or information products – ‘downstream’ flows of product information and distribution are channelled, formatted, interrupted or facilitated to influence their movement and/or reception through the system of provision. Within this, the specificities that produce a ‘fit’ or disjuncture of global/local nexi invariably play crucial roles – how comfortably a design or its production and distribution system sits in a location will impede or promote its circulation.

By understanding consumption in terms of *practice*, its contingent and dynamic characteristics may be appreciated. The engagement of design products, processes and systems in everyday life is not merely a function of consumer culture in its traditional sense. Beyond individual, privately orientated activities of use, ownership and maintenance, focused on the domestic sphere, are layers of socially constituted activities where individuals are carriers of collectively held practices and may comprise sets of conventions and procedures. Practice may be conceived as specific types and ranges of activities, which Bourdieu (1992) termed ‘fields’. Here, the distinction between the two is debatable (Warde 2004), but the notion of ‘field’ at least implies that different practices are governed by their specific, respective rules. Practice involves routinized behaviour that is both individually enacted and socially observable (Shove et al. 2007). Consumption is therefore a part of practice.

As will be argued in more detail in Chapter 4, traditional surveys of consumption largely focus on the social role of goods in private, everyday life. Even where the relationships of consumed goods are synthesized into an exploration of concepts of lifestyle, discussion invariably falls into matters of personal choice. However, design is mobilized and encountered at both material and non-material expressions distributed across a range of platforms. Service orientations in private and public sectors, for example in corporate consumption, health provision or leisure practices, provide structures of engagement that are acted on at different bodily and mental levels. In effect, design culture contributes to the structuring of practice and the formation of the rules of engagement through the provision of interrelated elements that give meaning to these. The competition between brands, for example, reflects and contributes to their distinctions through providing differentiated rules of engagement. Brands articulate fields of their respective practices.

The model and key terms presented above offer a theoretical framework for the study of Design Culture. Beyond this, it must be stressed that this possible academic discipline demands of the researcher an open-ended sensibility in the face of the increasing complexity of design environments (Pizzocaro 2000). In Chapter 12, I come back to questions and challenges in the study of design culture.

DESIGN CULTURE BEYOND DISCIPLINE?

In this chapter I have critiqued a more conservative version of Visual Culture as a springboard to defining a sensibility that is sympathetic with the varying conditions of design culture as an object of study and that underlines the complexities inherent in Design Culture as a possible academic discipline. Visual Culture needn’t be so fixed in its thinking by adopting a more flexible approach to visual phenomena. More radical views within Visual Culture studies, however, suggest that the creation of disciplines within the bureaucratic structures of universities encourages

their ‘ossification’ (Smith 2005). Upon the development of an academic discipline, so standards and norms of teaching delivery are established and ‘canonical’ texts are developed that provide a ‘tick-box’ level of legitimation for study in order to meet targets and provide performance indicators. In its turn, this then restricts the field of study, tying it down to a specific modus operandi that ignores the very flexibility and instability of its own object of study.

Equally, as design rapidly evolves, reorganizing its professional make-up, entering into new contexts of application, innovating relations with its clients and users, being positioned into new ideological structures, or in changing its overall aims to go beyond mere commercial aims and prioritise social or environmental values, so a fixity of analytical approach becomes less and less appropriate. Thus Design Culture, as presented in this book, adopts a flexible reasoning. It moves across traditional design disciplines, plunders other academic traditions (particularly in the humanities and social sciences) and is promiscuous in its coupling with their related theoretical perspectives.

Having examined the key overarching issues and debates to design culture in the first section, this book devotes its subsequent chapters to a thematic exploration of design culture. The following chapters dispense with traditional disciplinary boundaries of product, interior or graphic design. Instead, different theatres of design culture are identified and discussed. The demarcation here is not so much on what specific design things are discussed; rather, the emphasis is on what they are doing – how are they functioning? Naturally, some of these lend themselves to privileging one form of design expression over others; for example, consumer goods involve higher degrees of product design concentration than, say, branded places. On to each of these the interactions and intersections of designer, production and consumption are mapped, although one or other of these is perhaps given more focus in each case. The chapters are arranged, more or less, in terms of the chronological order of their emergence as themes that have driven developments in design. Hence ‘High design’ – with all its pedigree in the decorative arts – appears first while ‘Communications, management and participation’ and ‘Networks and mobile technologies’ are historically more recent themes to consider in design culture.

Chapter 5 discusses the more conservative conception of design in what has been termed ‘high design’ and the manoeuvres of the avant-garde in design to mediate that meaning. In particular it challenges notions of ‘high design’ or ‘design classics’ as being intrinsic to the object by tracing the ways that these are constructed; sometimes, through the actions and reputations of their designers, their mediation by producers and other representational platforms such as magazines and museums and how their functioning (or non-functioning) in consumption works to underline this construction. It concludes by looking both at how risk and the avant-garde become a promotional device and how, conversely, the speculative in design can be used to critique design culture.

Chapter 6 considers developments in the design of consumer goods. It reveals the design processes by which material artefacts are shaped within the framework of achieving coherence between the use of contemporary materials, manufacturing systems and marketing practices. In particular it shows how quantitative and qualitative consumer information is reconciled with brand identities of clients by designers. In a final section, the discussion sets this against the more experiential world of using products.

Chapter 7 continues to investigate the role of designers and design managers in orchestrating coherence between different manifestations, but this time in the context of the shaping and selling of geographical locations. Initially it considers the city as design product, arguing against

architecture as the primary expression of urban identity; instead, a web of features including the material and visual design hardware of cities and their emotional and experiential software interlock and vie with each other. This is further problematized in the context of shifting regional, national and global power structures.

Chapter 8 investigates branded leisure spaces and the challenges of designing and consuming place and placelessness in locations which are largely disembedded from traditional spatial geography. It considers the problems of differentiating leisure experiences when they are dislocated from place identities and consumed by a progressively critical and knowing audience.

Chapter 9 looks into the design of interactive digital environments, including computer games, educational packages and websites. It begins by discussing the effect that this area is having on the structural organization of design practice itself. It then contrasts some of the exaggerated expectations of these media with the pragmatic realities of its limitations. Much of this chapter hinges on the relationships this digital world has with the material world.

Chapter 10 discusses case studies where design is used to communicate and consolidate the internal identity of corporations or neighbourhoods. This is something that the public does not see, but it indirectly influences the external corporate image. Furthermore, this strategy reconfigures employees of organizations as both its workers and consumers. As such it adds further credence to the notion of design conspiring to blur the distinction between producer and consumer. A critical discussion of creative quarters, where both design production and consumption are purportedly nurtured follows. It leads on to discuss how the engagement of the end-users of design in its formulation helps to open up the imagination of how it can function.

Chapter 11 returns to questions of digitization that were instigated in Chapter 9. This time, though, it extends the discussion into mobile technologies such as smartphones and tablets. This is done by an exploration of the notion of networks. The analysis is directed both at the way that these are governed in terms of the design of software and the way that these impact on the everyday lives of users.

Chapter 12 provides a concluding recapitulation and discussion of some of the key themes that have been introduced and expanded within this concept of design culture. In particular it focuses on questions of scale and dynamics. How do we define a design culture? Does it have different registers of intensity? How do we deal with a design culture's own dynamics of change? Leading on from this, I return to a consideration of historical periodization and whether, indeed, we can identify a 'design culture turn' just as a 'visual culture turn' has been argued for elsewhere.

Each chapter in the second part of this book features a key case study. At times my authorial voice of the text shifts towards a more literary style, acknowledging the subjectivity of experiencing these design artefacts. I also discuss subsidiary case studies. This acknowledges that the key examples cannot provide an exhaustive platform to explore all the issues that are part of the chapter's theme. I hope that the debates which relate to the specific examples discussed may subsequently be carried to others outside the scope of this book. I have chosen particular examples for the richness of data they bring to their respective theme. They are also all relatively well-known ones. I hope that the reader may have some personal experience of them to compare with, or of closely related examples. Nearly all of them were experienced by myself as a consumer before being considered for this book. This is not to declare any experiential neutrality. Clearly, as a specialist in the design field my response to goods and services may be coloured by my own academic baggage: I am a 'knowing consumer' whether or not I like the feelings this brings up.

THE CULTURE OF DESIGN

Nonetheless, the examples are not presented as paradigms of either good or bad design. Much publishing has been devoted to establishing expert canons of good design taste and criticism (e.g. Bayley 1979; Sudjic 1985). Conversely, some critics have drawn up vehement attacks on this canon and offered alternative approaches to the practice and appreciation of design framed by environmental concerns (e.g. Papanek 1972; Whitely 1993). Some important discussions of the role of gender in both design production and its consumption have emerged (e.g. Attfield 1989; Sparke 1995; Buckley 1998). While questions around gender emerge lightly within the text of this book, I am concerned not to separate it out as an issue and thereby restrict it. In choosing case studies, then, my primary interest is that objects, spaces and images exist in the mainstream of design production and consumption, and because they exist we are required to build a measure of objective understanding of their purpose. After all, only by understanding the current state of design culture can we then begin to look at routes towards its ethical and practical amelioration.