Shrugging Shoulders or Grasping Nettles: What is to be done?

Angharad Thomas and Mirjam Southwell

Abstract

The idea that design can improve “quality of life” has been promulgated from the Bauhaus to ICSID. How far this has influenced mainstream design practice is questionable. Products continue to be too often designed more for the needs (whims?) of the designer than the user. As such product design as it is currently practised reinforces patriarchy and concomitantly capitalism – both of which inhibit if not prohibit social design from becoming ‘mainstream’. It is easier to ignore the wider consequences of design; forgetting local and global economics, social structures, environmental impacts etc. Shoulders are shrugged, defiantly or apologetically “What can we do, we’re only the designers”.

Design has the power to generate and reproduce patterns of dominance through objects and representations (Attfield, 1989). This ensures the perpetuation of the belief that “certain power relations are merely a matter of taste and culture” (Enloe, 1989). Perhaps this observation goes some way to explaining why social design, design for need, participatory design etc. remain on the periphery of mainstream design practice. A feminist perspective as Rothschild (1981) has argued, “is freer to explore alternative ideals”. It is with this in mind that the paper argues for a feminist perspective to be applied to design practise. Recognising the intrinsic relationship between the individual and society, feminist theory offers a way of exploring the personal and the public that does not isolate the one from the other (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Social design is being done eg. the Design for Our Future Selves and Design Against Crime initiatives in the UK but it remains on the periphery, tinged by the aura of “do-gooding”. As Rich (2001) asks “If we really care about the power of design, shouldn’t we care more about who we do it for?”

Gibson-Graham (1996) emphasises the global and pervasive belief that there can be no alternative, noncapitalist economy. The paper argues that design is well placed to undermine this capitalist hegemony if it chooses to do so, the design profession being “one of the key sites of struggle over the production and distribution of meaning” (Lasn, 2002). We can acknowledge that we have a desire for things and more things (Legrain, 2002) whilst at the same time designing alternatives to the “imperatives of production” (Davison, 2001). Designers could grasp the nettle and become really important – central to the processes that address major global issues in the 21st Century.

Text of paper

The idea that design can improve or contribute to an improved quality of life is an enduring one. In the early days of industrial production, the provision of industrially manufactured, and therefore designed, goods played an important part in raising standards of living and indeed, could do so today for the sizable proportion of the world’s population that live in poverty. As design as a formalised activity grew in tandem with industrialised forms of production, during the nineteenth century, its potential for giving a competitive edge and for adding value to manufactured goods was promoted. This was done in the UK in many ways, including the setting up of institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum as a store of exemplary design and inspiration for manufacturers.
The idea that design can be a tool making an essential contribution to quality of life has been promulgated by many movements. The Bauhaus, 1919 - 1933, saw design as an improving force with the potential for bringing attractive goods and living conditions to a mass audience. Its members had a vision of an improved life for all through the industrial production of well designed goods.

‘The fact is that the Bauhaus offered renewed hope and inspiration in its struggle to contribute to a more humane future and a contemporary, rather than a historicist, physical environment.’ (Weltge: 16)

During the Second World War in Britain the Utility scheme promoted goods that were designed with economy, function and aesthetics in mind.

‘It was a time when designers felt a real sense of agency - that it was possible to effect progress through good Design. ...the Utility phenomenon is representative of an ongoing search for a design practice that does not prioritise the visual at the expense of ethical concerns but is animated by a sense of purpose which does not require a beautiful solution.’ (Attfield 1999: 8 and 9)

At the end of the Second World War in the UK, design was again used as a major part of government campaigns to promote consumption and to enhance quality of life. The ‘Britain can Make It’ exhibition of 1946 and the founding of the Council for Industrial Design in 1949 had strong messages for an improved standard of living through the manufacture and consumption of well designed goods, although the message was put across in a very prescriptive manner. (Maguire and Woodham 1997) The regenerative qualities of design were again promoted by the Festival of Britain in 1952, acting as a showcase for contemporary interiors in addition to the design of the Festival itself. The Council for Industrial Design became the Design Council in 1962 and still acts as a champion of ‘good design’. The Design Council’s stated purpose is ‘to inspire and enable the best use of design by the UK, in the world context, to improve prosperity and well being’. (Design Council 2001)

The influence of all these movements on what we might term ‘mainstream design’ has been minimal. The overwhelming ethos of product design, and other forms of design such as interior, fashion and graphics is preoccupation with the aesthetic and visual at the expense of other contextual aspects. They are also inextricably linked to global profit-driven industrial production and as such, implicitly reflect, reinforce and echo its values. The cult of the celebrity is a feature of the world of design with named designers promoting their wares in an extensive system involving retailing, exhibitions and media coverage. Products continue to be designed more for the needs and whims of the designer than the user. Of course this has long been a tradition in fashion and it is also strong in architecture where the prestige projects are those for the small number of big names in capital cities of the world. Design as it is currently practised reinforces patriarchy and concomitantly capitalism – both of which inhibit if not prohibit design of other sorts – design with a concern for society, for minorities, for low income economies - from becoming ‘mainstream’.

The design education system perpetuates these models; being staffed by people educated in the ‘system’, the system continues to reproduce itself. While designers work across a range of areas, much design education continues in patterns set many years ago. Design education is notoriously conservative, as Barry Jackson has suggested:

‘...design education suffers from a defensive narrowness of vision, intimately connected with assumptions about the nature of design, art and learning ....We seem wedded to a 40 year old model of design education’ (Jackson: 37, 38) Despite 30 years of social change, legislation, and considerable shifts in the gender balance in some professions - notably medicine and law – gender patterns remain stubbornly unchanged in the design world. Product design is still overwhelmingly male dominated, staff and students, and fashion and textile design, overwhelmingly female. In other
respects too, attitudes are slow to change; the user is very often barely regarded while environmental considerations are at best reserved for perhaps one special project a year in education or grudgingly paid lip service to by practices and consultancies. It is easier to ignore the wider consequences of design; forgetting local and global economics, social structures, environmental impacts and so on. The designer and the design student, not usually forced to acknowledge the wider consequences of their activity - economic, social or environmental, can shrug their shoulders. ‘What can we do - we’re only the designers.’ (Southwell, N.D.) The dominant value is the aesthetic or visual at the expense of acknowledging broader contextual issues.

These attitudes are challenged by some however. Human-centred design acknowledges the social and political aspects of the design process (Pain et al, 1993) and says the design profession ‘must look at its practices and values and their implications; and it must look at the condition of society and the world.’ Whiteley (1993:3). However, Walsh et al (1992) point out that it is in fact easier to ignore the wider consequences of design, forgetting the importance of the user, the product environment and social structures. Deforge (1995) asserts that interactive and alternative design results from designers having a ‘scrupulous respect for culture and diversities.’

Design has become an expert profession which is able to be both exclusive, predominantly white, Western, male, yet at the same time claim inclusively through designing products used by many. As a consequence, designers have power and influence over large numbers of people, while remaining only partially conscious, if at all, of their place in the existing capitalist hegemony and their contribution to its continuance.

We now want to look at some of the relationships between design and society their consequences for the sort of design that is done and the resulting hierarchies of types of design. Design has the power to generate and reproduce patterns of dominance through objects and representations (Attfield, 1989). This ensures the perpetuation of the belief that ‘certain power relations are merely a matter of taste and culture’ (Enloe, 1989). Leslie Weisman, in her book, Discrimination by Design, makes a comprehensive argument to show that the forms of our buildings, towns and cities exactly reflect the power relationships in the patriarchal and capitalist society of North America.

‘Logically, those who have the power to define their society’s symbolic universe have the power to create a world in which they and their priorities, beliefs, and operating procedures are not only dominant, but accepted and endorsed without question by the vast majority. (Weisman, 1992,10)

We want to look at the relationships between design and society in order to understand what it is that prevents design from taking its place as a major force for world change and why it is that any ‘other’ forms of design practice – for minorities, participatory and collaborative design for example – are seen as peripheral by many in the design world.

Design is embedded in complex systems that include global economies and technologies, political systems and societies. It has relationships with manufacturing, marketing, advertising and distribution, regulators and government agencies and consumers. Design and society are intimately linked in as much as design comes out of the particular society in which it happens, existing within a particular societal context and reflecting this through and through. As we said in the introductory paragraph, design as an activity separate from making is a product of industrialisation and is now firmly located in the dominant world capitalist order. Design owes its existence as a professional activity to the need to plan for mass production as opposed to craft workshop production and this development of design as a recognised and separate activity is well documented. (JC Jones)

The following writers emphasise the point that design has to be seen in the context of the society in which it exists:
Design reflects the predominant values of the society which gives rise to it. Thus with profit maximisation as its central concern, emphasis is placed upon the notion of an ever-increasing rate of production and consumption based on disposable products with significant wastage of energy and materials.’ (Cooley, 1982)

‘The most significant aspect about design is that it is produced, received and used, within an emphatically social context... Design Values, whether they are defined as utility, functional form, or an aesthetic of appearance, are produced by cultural, social, and economic priorities, policy and action.”’ (Dilnot, 1989)

Design exists within a system of world organisation that is largely, since the fall of the Wall in 1989, capitalist and profit driven. It is therefore no surprise that it is so closely involved with activities related to this - the constant renewal of products, the fashion driven consumption, the commoditisation of large portions of human life and the rise of global branding. This implicates design very heavily as a complicit partner in many things that are now being held up for criticism by writers and social commentators such as Naomi Klein. In her book, No Logo (Klein 2000) she describes variously the commoditisation and branding of place, the poor conditions of garment workers and the relentless rise of the global corporation.

Perhaps the above observations go some way to explaining why alongside, or should it be underneath, the glossy and appearance driven world of ‘design’ there are other design worlds . These include universal design, ‘green’ or sustainable design, feminist design, user led design, participatory or collaborative design, design for minorities, design for aging or for our future selves, design against crime and design for economic development in the poorer regions of the world. These vary in status and how far they have recognised remits and influence, in other words, the degree to which they have been embedded and institutionalised. They can be marginal, often small scale, not supported or recognised by the mainstream design community or perhaps recognised by legislation - Universal design in the USA is an example of this - but still on the margins of the ‘design world’. The structures and power relations of the broader society are reflected in the status of these groups in relation to the ‘mainstream’ design community.

We suggest that the values exemplified by feminist thinkers offer a model for ways in which the mainstream design world could develop more inclusive ways of working, embracing the ‘other’ design worlds while giving more status and meaning to its own work. A feminist perspective as Rothschild has argued, ‘is freer to explore alternative ideals’. (Rothschild 1981) It is with this in mind that the paper argues for a feminist perspective to be applied to design practise. Recognising the intrinsic relationship between the individual and society, feminist theory offers a way of exploring the personal and the public that does not isolate the one from the other. One of feminism’s early tenets was ‘the personal is the political’ which is explained as follows:

‘This argues that power and its use can be examined within personal life and, indeed, in some senses that the political must be examined in this way. It also emphasises that ‘the system’ is experienced in everyday life and isn’t separate from it. And so feminism argues that systems and social structures, whether concerned with the economy, the family, or the oppression of women more generally, can best be examined and understood through an exploration of relationships and experiences within everyday life.’ (Stanley and Wise: 63)

What are the implications for designers? A feminist way of going about any activity would mean that personal values and interests come to the fore in ways which could bring different attitudes to bear. Feminist perspectives – theory and experience - offer and suggest ways in which design practice could be explored. The shift in attitudes that a feminist perspective brings to the design world are indicated in these quotes:

‘The promotion of inclusionary practices from all disciplines so that we may re-vision and create a new web.’
‘Designs more sensitive to the needs of women are designs more sensitive to the needs of a diverse population.’

What would feminist design mean in practice?

‘It means exploring topics such as the New Urbanism, participatory design, housing in the inner city, subverting symbols in the urban landscape, and designing tools that are marketable and sustainable. It means seeking to deal with and overcome a number of divides: the distinctions between the professional designer and the non-professional user, those within the professions and those among them.’ (Rothschild, 1999: 2)

Designers and architects with feminist beliefs have been involved with user led and resident led projects, especially in the USA challenging the power base of conventional architects and designers. Feminist analysis of design has argued that design is both gendered and reflective of power structures as much as any other human activity and that more democratic ways of involving users should become part of the design process. The example of the involvement in a participatory design process of the residents of a public housing project in Wentworth Gardens, Chicago, is given by Roberta Feldman. She describes how the residents have become involved in long term planning, construction and maintenance of the built environment. She goes on to comment: ‘Such strategies have been shown to achieve greater user satisfaction, social well-being, and empowerment, as well as a greater sense of and commitment to community.’ (Rothschild 1999: 135)

Using a feminist model into some design practice and education would start to break down barriers between client and designer, student and staff and would lead to the acknowledgement of local expertise and knowledge, as well as the wishes of users being more fully considered. Of course, this would mean that a radical reappraisal of the power relationships vested in professional positions would have to be undertaken, not a comfortable process we suggest for many in the design world. Feminist values – social justice, user involvement, enhanced quality of life, concern for the environment and issues of sustainability – are at the heart of many of the ‘other design’ practices discussed above but they remain outside the dominant culture of design.

However, there are signs that these peripheral practices are becoming brought into the mainstream, or at least starting to pose a challenge to the dominant models. As Rich asks in Design Week in 2001, ‘If we really care about the power of design, shouldn’t we care more about who we do it for?’ (Rich)

Is the zeitgeist moving away from, or at least being critical of, the glossy world of design awards? There is some evidence that questions about usability, price and the real value of design are being asked. This new mood is exemplified by Charles Jennings writing in the Guardian, the UK newspaper. As he says, the design world seems to be preoccupied with overpriced objects of interest only to other designers. He then goes on to argue that there are in fact, many examples of good and appropriate design but that these are not generally considered to be part of the ‘designer’ world.

‘While the rest of us want things that work, that don’t break, that are pleasant to use, the design world frets over shades of plywood, the significance of a screw, the ludic pleasures of welding.’ He concludes by asking the reader to compare the Philippe Starcke lemon squeezer with ‘the old-style version your mum used to use.’ Which works better? Which looks better simply because it works better? Which one is good design and which simple showbiz?’ (Jennings)

Gibson-Graham (1996) emphasises the global and pervasive belief that there can be no alternative, noncapitalist economy since the fall of the command economies of the Eastern Bloc. The paper argues that design is well
placed to undermine this capitalist hegemony if it chooses to do so, the design profession being “one of the key sites of struggle over the production and distribution of meaning” (Lasn, 2002).

Recent debate in the design world has focussed on the social responsibility that designers could choose to engage with. In 1999/2000 several international design magazines, including Blueprint in the UK, reprinted the 1964 Ken Garland piece First Things First. It is worth quoting at some length.

‘We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, photographers and students who have been brought up in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective, and desirable means of using our talents.....We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on. There are signs for streets and buildings, books and periodicals, catalogues, instructional manuals, industrial photography, educational aids, films, television features, scientific and industrial publications and all the other media through which we promote our trade, our education, our culture and our greater awareness of the world......But we are proposing a reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and lasting forms of communication. We hope that our society will tire of gimmick merchants, status salesmen and hidden persuaders, and that the prior call on our skills will be for worthwhile purposes.’ (Garland)

Following pages on the website continue the theme of deep dissatisfaction with the designer’s lot:

‘Many designers of old - followers of Constructivism, Bauhaus, De Stijl - believed design could change the world. ... Today we reject manifestoes and grand narratives out of hand. .... The truth is that the grand narrative is not dead. It has just changed, grown harder to read. .... Now our very souls are under siege. Spontaneity (sic) and authenticity are threatened. The planet is dying. In choosing to ignore or downplay these issues, designers have struck a bargain with the status quo. We've embraced the comfortable small picture while ignoring the uncomfortable big one. ... You have a choice. You can continue knocking about in the postmodern hall of mirrors, winning design awards and creating warm nuclear glows around your client's brands. You can continue to spend the best, most creative years of your life massaging corporate egos and celebrating the cause of consumer capitalism. Or, you can opt out - come over to the other side - and join the search for a new kind of meaning.’ (Adbusters web site, accessed 12.10.01)

Designers are change agents under any circumstances, design being an activity with change at its heart. What kind of change we are instrumental in bringing about will be determined by our values and beliefs. Many of the major problems facing the world now, global warming, increased divisions between rich and poor, nationally and internationally, could be addressed in a very large part by design solutions. This has been recognised for well over a decade, as this extract from the 1994 UN Human Development Report indicates the global nature of economic opportunities and responsibilities:

‘1. Poor nations and rich are afflicted by growing human distress, the weakening of social fabrics, rising crime rates, increasing threats to personal security and the spread of narcotics.

2. The question of human survival on an environmentally fragile planet affects all countries.

3. Changes in transport and technology, which have helped unite the world, also bring many problems: drugs, AIDS, terrorism, pollution and nuclear proliferation.’

Although the above was written nearly a decade ago, the points are depressingly familiar and now even more acute. We can see how designers could be key in instigating a move to a steady state economy. Problems such
as the spread of crime, the fragile environment, even AIDS and nuclear proliferation could be, and in some cases are, being addressed by design – led solutions. The involvement of designers in the teams tackling these problems could bring useful and different insights and skills to bear. The Design against Crime project led by the University of Salford, is one example of this and design solutions to environmental problems are shown in places like the Findhorn community, Scotland, and the Centre for Alternative Technology, Wales.

Issues of sustainability are crucial to the discussion of the role of design and designers could have in playing a part in developing solutions for a longer term future. Implicated so heavily as a driver of the consumer society, perhaps this role will not be taken up comfortably by all design professions. We can acknowledge that we have a desire for things and more things (Legrain, 2002) whilst at the same time designing alternatives to the “imperatives of production” (Davison, 2001). The design world as we have described it, is after all predicated on continued consumption. Sustainability, in both an environmental sense and a societal sense is now a globally urgent problem. Designers could play a central role in facing this challenge and there are signs that some parts of the design community are now taking this up. In his book, ‘The total beauty of sustainable products’ by Edwin Datschefski shows a range of goods that make a contribution to environmental well being and reduced environmental impact while being aesthetically pleasing and, perhaps as importantly for the appearance obsessed world of design, beautifully presented. (Datschefski 2001)

This is the sort of development envisaged in the Green Party’s 1989-90 manifesto for a sustainable society in which they support the idea of a steady state economy - an economy of stock rather than flow. “A sustainable society can be quite prosperous, but cannot have continually rising affluence. The accent will be on co-operation, not competition [...] there will be scope for individuals with initiative to improve their material wealth, provided they use their ingenuity to do it in ways which conserve resources and cause no pollution [...] Working in small units and making higher quality, long-lasting products, people will find their work much more enjoyable that at present” (The Manifesto of the Green Party, 1989-1990:5/6). There is little evidence that any of these changes are happening very quickly but legislation such as the land fill tax in the UK does seem to be forcing some changes in institutional and consumer behaviour since its recent introduction.

Global and sustainable design have become key concepts for the future of planet Earth. It is clearly contradictory to argue that either globalising or working towards sustainability can happen without the involvement of society, the community, global or local. What we do in private has a public impact, whatever we choose to design as designers, has an impact on society, local and global that we as a profession, should not be choosing to deny. We need serious rather than cosmetic changes, rather than superficial ones that will be themselves recycled as marketing ploys. For these to be fully embraced by the ‘mainstream’ design professions will need a sea change in attitudes and values.

The potential of design as a transformative activity and the potential power of designers as change agents is argued by Clive Dilnot:

‘Design is then more than design...... paradoxically not only does design become the only possible means of saving the human species (and I mean this very seriously; I can think of no other approach which could enable us to transcend the dichotomies - between reason and emotion, technique and meaning, power of technical systems against impotence of ethical systems, and so on - built into our dominant culture) but it ‘finds itself’ at just this moment; at this point the contradictions that run through present forms of design practice, contradictions that we can now read as the distortions of the holistic and embracing matrix of design, cease to exist. Design then becomes truly social; and the social becomes a matter of what is designed and formed socially. At that point the phrase design-and-society will finally become redundant.’ (Dilnot, in Langdon and Cross, p105)
Designers could grasp the nettle of the complex challenges presented above and become really important – central to the processes and actions that will address major global issues in the 21st Century. The ‘peripheral’ forms of design provide models that the wider design profession could adopt. Resistance to change coming from the design establishment will deny design its key role in conceptualising and organising for the future.
References


Datschefski, Edwin. 2001. The Total Beauty of Sustainable Products. Rotovision, Switzerland


Deforge 1995– look for ref


Southwell (no date) personal communication with designers


1994 UN Human Development Report ADD REF

Whiteley, N. 1993 Design for Society. Reaktion books
Brief Biographies

**Angharad Thomas (presenting author)**
Senior Lecturer
School of Art & Design
University of Salford, UK
a.thomas1@salford.ac.uk

Angharad Thomas
Angharad Thomas is a Geographer and textile designer with a research interest in design for social responsibility. She is a founder member of The Cardiff Group, an action research group for design and development. Angharad Thomas is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Art and Design at the University of Salford where she is head of the Critical Studies area.

**Dr Mirjam Southwell**
London
UK
Consultant and Researcher
mirjam@southwellrobbins.plus.com

Dr Mirjam Southwell
After studying industrial design at Coventry Polytechnic (now University), Dr Southwell worked for Voluntary Service Overseas in Sudan as a designer working with Ethiopian refugees. She has dealt with practical design aspects through an MDes (RCA) in Product Design and theoretical issues related to design and development through an MSc in Comparative Development and International Policy. Dr Southwell's research interests include the relationships between gender, technology, design and development and sustainable design.