

REVIEWS

MIND THE MAP: DESIGN HISTORY BEYOND BORDERS

3rd international conference on design history and design studies, Istanbul Technical University, 9-12 July 2002

It is not good practice, in a straightforward conference review, to indulge in metaphor. But international design history conferences seem to be particularly prone to use symbolism in their presentation and content. A seminar series held in the US in 1991 advertised itself with images of rotative devices from all periods to underscore its theme, A planetary language – industrial design and society. In Istanbul, the attractively designed conference pack for *Mind the Map* came embellished with geometer's tools from a 19th century copybook, while the title punned 'map' with 'gap' from the antiquated recorded warning to unwary travellers on the London Underground. Both events implied a unified global perspective, a cartographer's projection within which everything makes sense. The many agendas of the conference ranged far wider than this, but much of the crowded programme inevitably fed my own rumination on what a truly international practice of design history would be like.

Accounts of 'world history' are usually based on a single narrative structure. Take, for instance, Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*, the breezy sub-title of which is 'a short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years'. In his paper in a session called *Design History Narratives: Local, National or Global*, Victor Margolin described his own starting point for a history of world design. His careful elaboration of the reasons for the gaps in many past accounts, such as a limited definition of design, or the dominance of style as an organisational principle, emptied out a space for a new kind of history, but left me in some doubt as to how he would fill it. Although critical of the historical social science of Immanuel Wallerstein, the doyen of so-called 'world history', Margolin nonetheless put his faith in the authoritative voice within a single universal system.

Illustrations of the implicit power relations that confer this authority were swiftly provided by Jonathan Woodham in his crude but effective bibliometric analysis of the national origins of design historians and, implicitly, of design history. It would be valuable to see this hypothesis tested against a larger sample of writings and writers. Anna Calvera followed this with a discussion of the power relations between the centres and peripheries. Her paper was one of several to suggest that comparative methodology would serve to explain the relationship between different historical trajectories.

Istanbul itself is rich in poignant examples of contrasting and clashing cultural histories. One resulted from the pillaging from the Hippodrome of a pair of fourth century porphyry carvings showing embracing Imperial figures, which were taken to their present site on the south façade of the basilica of St Mark's in Venice. A single severed foot, which resisted the Venetian crowbars, remains in Istanbul, where it is displayed in a fine archaeological museum built specifically to stem the export of objects from Turkish

classical antiquity to European collections. Yet along the Bosphorus you can see the vast palazzi of merchants determined to outdo anything on the Grand Canal in style, opulence and vulgarity. If culture is treated as a pseudo-economic commodity, we miss out essential dimensions of this sort of exchange. What might a credible cultural balance sheet for Venice and Constantinople look like?

Elsewhere in the conference, speakers provided accounts that stood somewhere on the spectrum between map/gap-filling and comparative method. A highly illuminating paper by Douglas Lloyd Jenkins showed how the textile designer Avis Higgs exploited an Australian identity in her work in Britain, while her designs also functioned as a cultural bridge between the Maori peoples and the white *pakeha* in her native New Zealand. Lucila Hernandez plunged us into the theory of cultural hybridisation, in her discussion of material and musical culture in Cuba, to show that 'the spread of modernism' is quite unlike the viral plague it is sometimes imagined to be by post-modern writers.

So, if not to epidemiology, where should we look for a metaphor? One of the authors quoted by Hernandez, Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, contrasted the cultures of "sweetness and smoke", the links between the sugar and tobacco industries and the cultural forms that arose around them. Other scholars have built their accounts of Latin American culture on this work. But botany is not destiny. A better explanation for the differences between cultures may instead lie in the interactions between them. The work of another anthropologist, David Efron, finds some models for a genuinely comparative design history. Efron's work in the 1940s, on first and second generation Jewish and Italian New Yorkers, showed that patterns of bodily and facial gesture, although deeply embedded in their communities' sense of identity, was not racially determined, as the theorists of the right had argued, but constantly shifting in response to the gestural practices of the neighbouring group. Within a generation, new forms had emerged that neither parent group could recognise.

The sequence of international design history conferences that began in Barcelona is a remarkable project on which the international design history forum is to be congratulated. *Mind the Map* succeeded on this occasion in attracting 175 delegates from 30 countries. It is important for the development of the discipline that more design historians from around the world are drawn into the ambit of the DHS. By the time of the next international meeting, which will take place in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 2004, some of the theory that has yet to have its rightful impact on a predominantly Anglophone discipline will be translated and its lessons learned. Perhaps more of us should learn Spanish.

Chris Bailey

As a meeting place of many cultures, and on the boundary of two continents, Istanbul was, without a doubt, a most suitable setting for a conference looking to explore an inclusive discipline of design history for a global population.

Conferences on this scale are always a fantastic opportunity to open one's mind to new possibilities and be exposed to different cultural perspectives, but the usual reality of so many papers, delivered in such a short space of time, and addressing so many agendas made it difficult to follow a coherent thread of thought. On the other hand, the variety of papers saw designers talking about practice, historians discussing methodology and educators of practice, theory and history exploring pedagogy. Consequently, the papers ranged from a trio of Mexican industrial designers delivering a theoretical discourse on design history education with the pragmatic aim of solving the problems of preserving local cultures and their artefacts in difficult economic situations; to a Chilean professor of mathematics reassessing Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design*.

The difficulties of organising events on this scale can inevitably cause problems in the selection of papers. The use of a large number of referees can lead to inconsistencies in the quality of papers selected and rejected, especially when it is only the abstract being considered. The problem is confounded when, for reasons it is difficult to understand, the abstract sometimes bears so little resemblance to the paper actually delivered. Bearing this in mind, it was encouraging indeed to see the speakers ranging from the internationally renowned keynotes to doctoral researchers speaking for the first time. The validity of such a range was being supported in this instance by the inclusive nature of a conference searching for a way forward for its discipline. So, while Jonathan Woodham highlighted the lack of appreciation of world history in much of the writing of a "western design history" canon, and Victor Margolin called for a broader definition of design as "any social activity around material culture" in order to construct a world history of design, Gulname Özdemir, a research assistant at Istanbul Technical University and one of the main conference organisers, explored possible methodologies with which to analyse Turkish craft and design and called for the development of a new design history appropriate to the 'periphery'.

As might be expected, the plenary session raised more questions than it provided answers about the nature of an inclusive international discipline of design history. But there was, for me, a clear feeling that a large floodgate had been opened, with a huge weight of will behind it. The difficulty would appear to be how best to decide if and how to channel such a force without it disappearing altogether.

Paul Atkinson, University of Huddersfield

THE UNCANNY ROOM

Exhibition at the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, County Durham, 12 October to 8 December 2002

This exhibition explores the theme of the uncanny - the unsettling and strangely familiar - in a domestic context. While recognising that an uncanny experience is essentially a subjective response, we suggest that certain things can seem especially potent in their ability to stimulate a feeling of uncanniness, but also that the context in which they are encountered has an important role in producing this effect. The central proposition is that a sense of the uncanny can be particularly intensely felt when it arises unexpectedly within the surroundings of the home, when the homely is eclipsed by an impression of strangeness.

The project subverts the popular conception that the most laudable objective of the design, craft or applied art object in the domestic setting lies in a combination of beauty and utility. Seen in this way, design and the applied arts do not have the permission accorded to fine art production to probe the darker side of human experience.

As Adrian Forty writes in his foreword to the accompanying book *The Uncanny Room*: "In the modern era, the normal expectation of objects for everyday life was that they should above all be useful...The excessive rationality of modern design was only possible because at some level there was a fundamental belief in the magical power of objects. The exhibition encourages us to ask questions about objects that have generally been avoided. Do objects live a life of servitude dedicated to the satisfaction of human needs and desires, or do we in some sense serve them? Are they there for us, or we for them?"

The exhibition draws on ideas of the unsettling domestic discussed by Freud in his essay *The Uncanny (Das Unheimlich)*, in which he suggests that an uncanny experience "...is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced". Such an experience can arise when a repressed memory is partially recalled or when we are confronted with ideas we may well have believed our rational minds had laid to rest.

Designers and artists whose work is included in the project include Ralph Ball (furniture and lighting), Caroline Broadhead (installation), Carl Clerkin (furniture and lighting), Gitta Gschwendtner (furniture and lighting), Mah Rana (jewellery and installation), Richard Slee (ceramics), Hans Stoffer (surrealist objects) and Emma Woffenden (glass and installation).

The exhibition was staged at Pitshanger Manor, Sir John Soane's country villa, between 19 July and 25 August 2002 and it will be re-staged at the Bowes Museum from 12 October to 8 December 2002. Tel: 01833 690606. Email: info@bowesmuseum.org.uk.

Janice West