

Design Peripheries, Hidden Histories and the Cartography of Design.

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Design History: Change and Challenge

The world of design history has changed irrevocably since those heady days of the early 1970s when it made a dash for independence from the hegemony of what has often been termed the 'old' art history, practised in many university departments and the intellectually conservative, connoisseur-oriented and medium-centred infrastructure of museums. In Britain, the incipient drive towards a new generation of specialist undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in design history had been given momentum by the French student revolution of May 1968, heralding a strongly felt need for educational reform and more transparent governance of higher educational institutions. There was considerable unrest in the art and design sector, most particularly at Hornsey College of Art (now a part of Middlesex University), Guildford School of Art and a number of other institutions, including Brighton College of Art. At Brighton, students protested that "the existing type of visual education is not relevant to the present requirements of society", demanding that "immediate consideration be given to the problem of Complementary Studies⁽¹⁾ which in our view is in urgent need of reform". Key reports on art education (the Coldstream Report, 1960, the Summerson Report on Diplomas in Art & Design, 1964, and the later joint Coldstream-Summerson Report, 1970) had brought the issue of new curricula to the fore, proposing that all art and design students with aspirations to university degree equivalent qualifications should spend 20% of their time undertaking historical and complementary studies. Much debate centred upon what this actually meant and opened the way for design history. Within a decade or so, it was being offered as self-standing degree programmes in the newly-formed Polytechnics, most of which had absorbed the formerly independent colleges of art and design as major constituents. The disciplinary boundaries of the subject were under constant debate from the 1970s onwards, alongside early recognition of the significance of popular culture, the everyday, and the harnessing of more progressive technologies for the dynamic presentation of evidence (such as television and radio interviews and programmes, documentary film, and oral history recordings).

These were especially promoted via the media-driven course delivery of art, architectural and design historians and researchers at the youthful Open University⁽²⁾. However, there was also anxiety that the ambitions of the emergent discipline of design history, with its eagerness to encompass other approaches (such as social, cultural, economic, political, business, technological and other histories), ran the risk of calling into question its academic credibility through annexation of materials and methods that its detractors might claim that it did not fully understand.⁽³⁾ Criticism was not always well-informed: fashionable academics such as Daniel Miller, an anthropologist with a keen interest in studies in material culture and consumption, even as late as 1987 still saw design history as concerned with celebrities and hero-figures⁽⁴⁾.

Hidden Histories

Nonetheless, contemporary notions of 'hidden histories' of design included considerations much closer to home: the contribution of women and the relationship between women, design and the history of design, the importance of the consumer, and the significance of the ordinary and the everyday. The embrace of disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography and material culture studies did much to extend the design historical agenda. An added dimension of 'hidden histories' related to ideas about disciplinary peripheries in terms of social inclusiveness, a theme rarely broached in design history. For example, in 2006, Jonathan Tooke drew attention to museum objects as "evidence of our shared culture and heritage as the physical embodiment of our society", before going on to suggest that interpretation in museums rarely tells stories that are representative of society. Many people are marginalised through physical or mental disability, ethnic origin, sexual orientation or social class. But the objects themselves contain "hidden histories", capable of telling the stories of people who are not represented in museum displays.⁽⁵⁾

In Britain the charge of 'hidden history' could even be laid at the door of British imperialism, a field ignored by many

long after the imperial sun had finally set. Even as late as 1989, John Mackenzie related how:

A J P Taylor [had] created a school of 'Little Englander' historians which saw imperialism as essentially an irrelevance to domestic British history, a view which continues to be reflected in the writings of many historians today. Max Beloff noted that 'the British were not an imperially-minded people; they lacked both a theory of empire and the will to engender and implement one'. The proponents of these views were men whose intellectually formative years coincided with the thirties and the Second World War. They were either concerned to demonstrate that the British working class were interested in more hard-headed domestic affairs or to distinguish the British from the aggressive and imperially minded Germans.⁽⁶⁾

However, during the following decade 'hidden histories' also took on a more complex set of socio-geographic and cultural issues after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 in the Czech Republic, the disintegration of Communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Through examination of contemporary art in her book *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*⁽⁷⁾, Irma Rogoff asked: "in an age of 'ethnic cleansing' and forced migration, of contested borders and nations in turmoil, how have issues of place and identity, and of belonging and exclusion, been represented in visual culture?" The challenge for design history is to find an appropriate means for examining similar questions in relation to design, material culture and consumption.

The Wider Context: the Cartography of Design

Despite such implicit challenges, by the 1990s the discipline could be said to be firmly established, having achieved a level of academic respectability, most particularly in Britain with the establishment of the Design History Society in 1977 and publication since 1988 of its *Journal of Design History* by Oxford University Press, with an international audience. Nonetheless, regardless of the size of global readership, this

position of apparent health masked a major question: how far can an academic discipline be effectively represented and promoted by a Society and journal, the centres of gravity of which are firmly based in the Anglophone world? Mounting the Design History Society's annual conference for the first time outside Britain in Delft in 2006⁽⁸⁾ was perhaps a tacit but belated recognition of 'something in the air'. Whilst it is the case that the size of the English-speaking world (over 1000 million speakers) is second only to that of Mandarin Chinese, and substantially greater than the Hindustani (650 million), Spanish (500 million), Arabic (300 million), Russian (280 million) and Portuguese (230 million) worlds, it is immediately clear in the face of such realities that the peripheries and the prevailing cartography of design are somewhat limited. There are also about 200 countries in the world, the vast majority virtually untouched by design history. Added to this is the fact that many minority languages may disappear quietly alongside the much more widely trumpeted loss of biological diversity: it has been suggested⁽⁹⁾ that nine out of ten of the 6,000 languages that still exist today in the world will die out within the next century; in many regions cultural traditions may be swept away irrecoverably in the name of progress and globalisation.

Those who have followed the series of international conferences devoted to design history and design studies, of which Osaka is the sixth, will have been aware of an underlying concern: a burgeoning collective desire to challenge the conventional geographic and intellectual boundaries that design history had conventionally occupied, thereby bringing greater focus on, and recognition of, the often 'hidden (design) histories' of a wider range of countries, regions and cultures. Rejecting the geographical and linguistic design historical imperialism of the Anglophone world, the pioneering University of Barcelona conference of 1999, addressed the central theme *Historiar des de la Perifèria, Historia i Histories del Disseny* from a largely Spanish-speaking perspective; its successor in Havana (2000) explored the significance of *The Emergence of Regional Histories*. What was in effect recognised as the 3rd International Conference of Design History and Design Studies (ICDHS) was held in Istanbul. The theme was *Mind the Map: Design History beyond Borders* (2002) in which

peripheries were again interrogated around a number of concerns: colonialism; the impact of imported products and industries in developing countries; the potential of newly industrialised countries; and traditional crafts and the threat to them from globalisation. It was in Istanbul that I first articulated some thoughts⁽¹⁰⁾ about 'minding the map' although, more significantly Istanbul also recognised formally the establishment of the ICDHS. Two years later the conference moved continent to Guadalajara, Mexico, to address the theme Coincidence or Co-occurrence. As suggested by the organizers, 'the nature of design history still requires substantial debate which is now being enriched by those matters derived from, local/regional/peripheral interests and concerns'; also that 'the development of design history in those areas hitherto not studied or not widely known, offers new items for the agenda of unresolved issues'. The University of Art & Design Helsinki and the Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn worked on the theme of Connecting; the *Multivocality of Design History & Design Studies* (2006), bringing the work of the Nordic Design Forum into a wider international discourse. In Osaka, 2008, we are addressing the international implications of *Another Name for Design: Words for Creation*.

Nonetheless, in parallel with the growing preoccupations of ICDHS, there were also initiatives in Britain that sought to address the restricted nature of the geographical map delineated through teaching and learning in the history of design. The most significant of these was the three-year project entitled *Globalising Art, Architecture and Design History* (GLAADH, 2001-2003)⁽¹¹⁾ initiated in response to the Quality Assurance Agency's *Subject Review: Overview for Art, Architecture and Design History* (1998) that had drawn attention to what it reported as an overwhelming emphasis on western art and culture. Spearheaded by academics and researchers from Middlesex University, the Open University and the University of Sussex, GLAADH sought to support the strategic re-shaping of the curriculum in ways that reflected the realities of a multicultural society within a global context. Providing financial support for initiatives in ten higher education institutions, many of GLAADH's achievements were recorded on its comprehensive website⁽¹²⁾ although, viewed from a five-year perspective, its impact appears modest. A

positive methodological contribution was made by Viviana Narotsky, then at the Open University and a member of the GLAADH project management team. In her introduction to her GLAADH bibliography, *Stories of Things: History of Design and Material Culture*, she proclaimed that:

Quite appropriately, multiculturalism and cultural diversity in the History of Design arise from the hybridisation of the discipline itself, and many of the texts mentioned below can barely be described as design history. However, they all raise essential issues that the discipline is facing as it broadens its field of enquiry.⁽¹³⁾

She drew attention to the fact that design history had increasingly engaged with ethnography, consumption studies and material culture, interrogating new themes such as the transformation of the meanings and value of goods across time and space, re-appropriation and the role of cultural context, as well as the 'cultural biography of things'. Such contributions notwithstanding, in 2005 one former GLAADH Research Officer and Research Fellow at the Open University felt that, despite the project's identification of a range of usefully expansive references, 'the advances made in the past few years did not overshadow the question that far more remains to be done', and also noted a 'feeling of unease that the dominant paradigms in art, architecture in design history seem at times not to be shifting'.⁽¹⁴⁾

As I have argued previously, one potential vehicle for undertaking a global design historical mapping exercise would be to enlist the help of major design organisations such as the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) and the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID): the former has 174 independent member associations in 67 countries, the latter over 150 member organisations in more than 50 countries. However, just as the dissemination of modernism was ultimately largely driven by the imperialising ambitions of global corporations rather than the internationalist socialist utopianism that originally generated it, so major design organisations may, albeit inadvertently, be assisting in the erosion of local,

regional and national cultural identity as a consequence of their global outreach. The challenge is to enlist systematically and comprehensively the help of local, regional and national design organisations and practitioners in contributing to a meaningful understanding of complexities of cultural diversity in design practice and consumption, both now and in the past.

NOTES

- (1) Such studies provided an intellectual complement to what were seen as the more vocational aspects of the art school curriculum.
- (2) Established 1969.
- (3) My writings about this include 'Recent Trends in Design Historical Research in Britain' in A Calvera & M Maillol, *Historiar des de la Perifèria, Historia i Histories del Disseny/Design History Seen from Abroad: History and Histories of Design*, University of Barcelona, 1999, pp.85-97; 'Resisting Colonization: Design History Has Its Own Identity', *Design Issues*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1995, pp. 22-37.
- (4) D Miller, *Material Culture and Mass-Consumption*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.
- (5) Jonathan Tooke, 'Hidden Histories: Discovering Disability in Norwich's Museum Collections', Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service, 2006.
- (6) John M MacKenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, Manchester University Press, 1989, p.2.
- (7) Irma Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*, London: Routledge, 2000.
- (8) It was hosted by the University of Technology and the Henri Baudet Institute.
- (9) Marqués de Tamarón, 'No Getting Around It: English Is Global Tongue', *International Herald Tribune*, 16 November, 1995.
- (10) Subsequently developed as 'Branding and Mapping: Design History & Colonization' at the *Globalization & Representation* international conference, Brighton, 2005, and published as 'Local, National and Global: Redrawing the Design Historical Map', *Journal of Design History*, volume 15 (3), 2005.
- (11) GLAADH was launched under Phase 3 of the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) programme, under the aegis of the National Coordination Team working on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).
- (12) <http://www.glaadh.ac.uk/>
- (13) http://www.glaadh.ac.uk/add_bibliogs.htm

- (14) Emma Gieben-Ganal, 'Diversifying the Design History Curriculum: A Review of Recent Resources', *Journal of Design History*, vol.18, no.2, 2005, p. 295. For a brief summary see also Marion Arnold, 'Conference Report: The GLAADH Project (Globalising Art, Architecture and Design History)', *The Art Book*, vol.11, no.2, 2005, pp.53-53

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