

Remarks on the Acceptance of the Design-Ed, Cumulus, and DRS Lifetime Achievement Award for Design Research presented at the LearnXDesign conference in Chicago 2015

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Good evening:

I am deeply honored to be standing before you tonight to accept this Lifetime Achievement Award for Design Research from Design-Ed, Cumulus, and the Design Research Society. I know that Design-Ed is a relatively new organization with a strong commitment to improving design education, while Cumulus and the Design Research Society have fostered research for many years and have consequently had a strong effect on deepening design culture. I am a longtime member of the Design Research Society and have only recently begun to participate in Cumulus meetings, while this is my first Design-Ed event. I would like to thank the committee that nominated me for the award and hope that my remarks this evening will not disappoint them.

My participation in the culture of design – and here I use Guy Julier’s term – has been rich and satisfying. I came to the study of design before it was a widely accepted and understood activity and I have been involved in its growth over the past thirty-five years. I have watched the field of design research expand from one that involved only a small number of people to a professional practice that engages scholars worldwide. On the one hand, I applaud this proliferation of academic interest in design but on the other I have some concern about its development. Despite much valuable research that has been done, I believe that we researchers still lack a clear and widespread consensus about how these research activities can relate to each other and how they can influence design practice and the world at large. These are not questions easily answered and I raise them in order to suggest their importance as we move forward.

I began my own career in design research as an historian at a time when the Design History Society in Britain – the first to bring design historians together – was just beginning to formulate a program. Most of the Society’s members were in Great Britain and I happened to hear about it at the 1979 ICOGRADA Congress in Chicago. At the time, I was contemplating an academic career and when I learned of the DHS, something lit up inside me and I decided to pursue a degree in design history.

I did so at what was then called the Union Graduate School and is today the Union Institute and University. The program was an outgrowth of the experimental University without Walls of the 1960s and afforded me the freedom to define my degree, as I wanted to. At the time there were no American doctoral programs in design history and consequently mine was the first design history doctorate in the United States.

My study was only constrained by the program’s three parts – a general education component where one mastered the literature of one’s field, an internship, for which I took a course in making artists’ books, and a Project Demonstrating Excellence, which I chose to complete as a written dissertation. Years earlier I had developed an interest in Moholy-Nagy’s book *Vision in Motion* and Gyorgy Kepes’ *Language of Vision*. I can’t say exactly why. However, when I came to Chicago in 1975, I found out that Paul Theobald, who published both of those books, had an office in the city. I went to the office, which was both a warehouse and a showroom, and met Mrs. Theobald whom I interviewed for an article I published about the press.

Some years later when it came time for me to choose a dissertation topic, I decided to write about Moholy-Nagy and then added two Russian avant-garde artists and designers, Alexander Rodchenko and El Lissitzky. My dissertation was about the three as graphic designers. Looking back, I must have had a deep seated utopian impulse, which led me to study these men, each of whom hoped to make the world a better place through art and design. I ended up spending almost a decade engrossed in their work since my dissertation became the basis for my subsequent book *The Struggle for Utopia*; Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946.

While I was completing my dissertation and working as a grant writer at Columbia College here in Chicago, I received a call from Doyle Moore. A professor I knew at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana,. Doyle taught in the design program. He was going on leave for a year and he invited me to teach one course as a part-time faculty member while he was gone. However, I managed to talk him into letting me teach for the entire year. This enabled me to create a design history course, which became the basis of my later course at UIC. It also gave me an

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opportunity to work with a small group of MA students in graphic design with whom I read a diverse collection of texts and who wrote research papers on topics that ranged from analyzing advertisements to ways that gay men signaled the kind of sex they wanted.

That year in Champaign-Urbana was significant in several ways. First, I was teaching in a School of Design rather than an art history department. Second I had a chance to put into practice the knowledge of design history I had gained in my graduate program by creating my own design history course, and third I was able to work with advanced degree students on research topics of interest to them.

It was sheer luck that while I was in Champaign-Urbana, the University of Illinois at Chicago, decided to hire a design historian. As far as I know, this was only the second full-time position in design history at an American college or university. The first was at the University of Cincinnati, which hired Lloyd Engelbrecht, a former librarian at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He had managed to save a huge collection of documents from Moholy-Nagy's Institute of Design and donate them to the Special Collections Department in the UIC Library. I was also a candidate for the Cincinnati position but was not qualified at the time since I had not completed my doctorate. This turned out to be my good fortune.

When I applied for the UIC position, my colleagues were somewhat curious about the Union Graduate School but it was and still is a fully accredited institution and my dissertation must have been good enough to satisfy them. So I was hired as the design historian in the UIC Art History Department, a position I held until I retired more than 25 years later. Not only was it my luck that UIC opened a design history position just as I was finishing my year at Urbana but simultaneously, Martin Hurtig, the new head of the School of Art and Design, along with several other colleagues, was interested in starting an academic design journal and the group invited me to join them. Thus, did I become a co-founder and founding editor of *Design Issues*, a journal that I am happy to say is still going strong after 31 years.

At UIC, I taught a yearlong design history course, unlike the single semester survey that I introduced in Urbana. It took me a while to develop the UIC course, while I was simultaneously working with my art school colleagues on the creation of *Design Issues*, which we launched in 1984 (no relation to Orwell's book). I was the editor for three years before we decided to shift the editing responsibilities to an editorial board. Working as a *Design Issues* editor, was a welcome balance to teaching art and design history.

It obliged me to think about subjects that would engage readers and to develop an interest in what would eventually be known as design studies.

When *Design Issues* started, the only other design journal I recall at the time was *Design Studies*, the British publication that had grown out of the Design Methods movement. While that journal initially focused on design methodology and design processes, we editors defined *Design Issues* as a journal of history, theory, and criticism and were interested in discovering issues that interested us and we hoped, our readers.

The four colleagues with whom I worked initially – Martin Hurtig, Leon Bellin, Sy Steiner, and Larry Salomon – were either artists or industrial designers. Over the next few years, however, we added several academic scholars, two of whom – Richard Buchanan and Dennis Doordan – are still my fellow editors today. Little by little the reputation of the journal began to grow. We had an international advisory board and we began to get articles from abroad as well as the United States. Initially, we were able to pay someone to translate articles that interested us and in our early years, we published some of the major European design scholars and intellectuals – Abraham Moles, Tomás Maldonado, Gui Bonsiepe, and Andrea Branzi. One of our most important articles was Clive Dilnot's two-part essay on "The State of Design History," which is still much referred to today. Our aim was to look for stimulating articles on many topics rather than to create a journal that was intended to prove design's academic validity. My engagement with *Design Issues* was essential to the way my career developed. I did form a relation with some members of the Design History Society and I presented papers at several of their conferences. But I was also pursuing other interests and had opportunities to speak at other kinds of events. My exposure to the range of topics that potential contributors submitted to the journal exposed me to new ways of thinking about design and surely contributed to my broad interests in design discourse and research. I began writing periodically for the journal and through the opportunities this brought about for lectures and further writing, I developed another side of my research interest – the exposure and exploration of themes that were particularly related to social issues. Among them was an early interest in sustainability about which I was writing in the early 1990s and about which I still continue to write. I also began to write early on about social design, starting with an article of 2002 I published with my wife Sylvia, then a professor of social work. When I look back at my intellectual trajectory as a design scholar, I note that the people who influenced me most were not academic scholars but rather people whom I will

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call design intellectuals to distinguish them from design researchers. Since I became a design historian at a time when the field was quite new, I found few mentors. There were none whom I knew personally though there were several whose work I admired. As design history predecessors, I was less interested in Nicholas Pevsner's quest for a modern style than in Siegfried Giedion's account of mechanization in *Mechanization Takes Command*. Later I was intrigued by the sweeping narratives of Louis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* and *The City in History*. I would not call Mumford a mentor because I never knew him but he was important for me in several ways. First, in the impressive ambition to write large narratives and second for the social concerns that underlay his writing. Mumford was a public intellectual who sometimes taught as a university adjunct professor. He also received honorary degrees but he followed his own impulses rather than the guidelines or dictates of an academic profession. He was an engaged scholar who wrote and published in order to document and promulgate his concerns for a better world. His scholarship was thorough but it was not dry. Beneath his assemblies of facts was an intense emotional force that guided his narratives.

Several of my own seminars that I recall with pleasure were dedicated to the big books of Mumford and Giedion. Each time, my students and I read the complete voluminous texts – the *City in History*, *Technics and Civilization*, and *Mechanization Takes Command* and we subjected them to close analysis that teased out intellectual arguments as they were embodied in narrative choices.

Although design was and still is my central subject, I was fortunate to teach in an art history department, especially one that was geared to instructing practitioners in art, architecture, and design as the department was and still is at UIC. My colleagues were photo historians and architectural historians as well as historians of art. During the time I was at UIC, we were anything but a conventional art history department. Although we had most of the normal coverage, some of us had interests that challenged or even refused the conventions of art history. Students in our department had access to courses on video games, vernacular architecture, and even kitsch. I will take the blame for the latter subject, which I taught in conjunction with my Museum of Contemporary Art, a working collection housed in my office. It was the basis for my course on high and low art and became the subject of a book, *Culture is Everywhere*.

I also considered myself an art historian and I read papers at the College Art Association. In that sense, I followed in

the footsteps of Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and Moholy-Nagy, all of whom moved easily between painting, sculpture, graphic design, product design, exhibition design, photography, and architecture. I was inspired by their careers and in retrospect was influenced more than I thought by the fluidity of their movements between different forms of visual culture. They also stimulated my interest in utopia, which I actually turned into a course called "The Design of Utopia," that I taught with one of my colleagues from the School of Architecture, Ken Isaacs. If you are interested, you can find the recorded sessions from the course on line. My friendship with Ken Isaacs over the course of more than thirty years engaged me with his work and thought. He was a radical designer of furniture, notably the *Living Frame*, whose work not only inspired me to write about him but to engage in a series of dialogues with him that over the years contributed as much to my sense of how to write design history as to how to think about design. Ken was no less a utopian than any of the avant-garde artists I had previously written about and our dialogues enabled me to discover what I had learned from studying their careers for so many years.

Two other strong influences on me were several colleagues who taught at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, Germany, which was a kind of successor to the Bauhaus, although it sharply distinguished its ideology and pedagogy from the earlier school, and then the Italian design culture of the 1980s and 1990s. These were, in fact, connected since Tomás Maldonado, a former rector of the Ulm school and someone whom I admire, subsequently moved to Milan and became a mainstay of the Milanese design scene. I know the Ulm school only through reading about it and talking to some of the students and professors who were associated with it but I had the good fortune to participate in the Milan design culture over the course of almost twenty years. I met Tomás Maldonado in Milan and visited his apartment on a few occasions. Like Mumford and Giedion, Maldonado is a man with strong humanistic values that he sought to instill in design discourse and pedagogy during his long career as a design educator and author. His writings about design, especially *Design, Nature, and Revolution*, the English translation of his book *La Speranza Progettuale*, are preoccupied with questions of values. Maldonado admired the European avant-garde and put forth a radical vision for our human future in his numerous books that were related directly and indirectly to design. It is his vision fused with a profound humanism derived from his deep knowledge of Western culture that has made Maldonado for me a strong influence. I also came to know and respect the work of Gui Bonsiepe, who had been a student of Maldonado's at Ulm and then a teacher there. Bonsiepe, a German, went to Chile to work

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in the government of Salvador Allende and after Allende's assassination, he remained in Latin America where he became a strong influence in numerous Latin American countries, teaching courses in design as well as design theory and reflection.

The man who brought Maldonado to Milan to serve as a consultant for La Rinascente department store was Augusto Morello, a cultivated marketing executive who was also a founder if not the founder of the prestigious Italian design prize, the Compasso d'Oro. I was fortunate to serve as a jury member for the Compasso d'Oro as well as the Brno Biennale of Graphic Design, the latter at a time before Glasnost when the Czech Republic was still within the Soviet orbit.

I met Morello when I spoke at the international design conference, sponsored by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design or ICSID in Milan in 1983. At the time, I was especially interested in Morello's ideas about service design but as I came to know him over the course of more than 25 years, we found many interests in common. Morello was a design activist, though not a designer. He hired designers when he was the marketing director of La Rinascente and he remained active in Italian and international design circles as the President of the Italian Association of Industrial Designers and then of ICSID, the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design. In those roles Morello remained in continual and sometimes heated dialogue with designers and their professional organizations.

What I have sought to emphasize up to this point in my talk is that my development as a design scholar did not follow a conventional path. When I started my career, there was little of what we would today call design scholarship. Thus the people who most influenced me were not scholars embedded in long traditions of academic research but rather people who influenced the course of design in other intellectual ways. However, as an editor of *Design Issues*, I had and still have an opportunity to help define the qualities and values of academic design scholarship. My career as a scholar within academia and as a participant in the wider design culture has informed what I have been able to bring to the major project of my career, my world history of design. Inspired not only by the monumental works of Mumford and Giedion but also by Arnold Toynbee and William McNeill, both pioneers in the writing of world history, I have created a narrative of design's history that did not exist before. It is a thick narrative, even encyclopedic, that has made a strong ideological bias impossible. Nonetheless my values play an important part in how I have shaped the narrative. I write

about design with a big D – the design of professionals since the Industrial Revolution – and with a small d, which is what people at all times and in all places have done to manage their daily lives. I include African-American designers and incorporate design by those without professional training but for whom design is simply a part of their respective cultures. These include Maoris, Aborigines, Native Americans, and Inuits – among others. I have also found many more women designers than have been included in previous histories and consequently for the first time, design professionals as well as design historians have an inclusive history that demonstrates how design in its varied forms has been possible for all people.

I am currently working hard on the third and final volume of the book, while also continuing to engage with other design-related projects. Those most important to me concern sustainability, pedagogy, and the quality of the global design research culture. It is in the latter that I see the hope that design can make a difference in the world and contribute to addressing its problems and improving its conditions. To do so, however, every design researcher needs to ask herself or himself, "What is the value of my research? Why should anyone care about it and how can anyone use it? As we find answers to those questions, both individually and collectively, we can build a culture of design research that can truly make a difference and put design at the center of those human activities we can most look to in order to make a difference in this troubled world we inhabit.