

State of Design Report 2

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In our first State of Design Report we asked our researchers whether, as the UK Design Council asserts, design always has an answer? In this second report we ask again whether design has any answers, or are there just questions?

In Cedric Price's lecture and slide show – "Technology is the answer but what was the question?" – technology is undoubtedly an answer but what the question might have been is a riddle. When, in the final paragraph, he says "The usefulness of this architecture is to remind its users that the major resource that should be conserved is the human spirit." it is possible that if technology is the answer then the question might have been how to conserve the human spirit? Sixty years on...what might that mean?

Design education is premised on the promise of making things better mostly on the slippery project of the better world. While the question about the better world remains 'what kind of world do I want to live in?' the answer remains elusive. Even Herbert Simon's acclaimed 'preferred state' is just another way to imagine a better world. But continuing to believe in foretelling possible future scenarios and preferred states that seem to be less and less attainable might illustrate the uselessness of knowing the answers to the wrong questions.

There appears to be a comforting relationship between the question and its answer. But perhaps we are at a point where it's no longer possible to distinguish between the question and the answer. Despite all that is known there remain unknowns and the known and unknown have a complex relationship that we illustrate below. What now provokes the question? Is an experiment still necessary to establish the answer? Is it time to stop asking questions and stop expecting answers and in their place start to guess?

The abundance of questions and paucity of answers has destabilised the act of knowing so that not-knowing is the real context of all possible decisions. The cloud is a perfect example of what Kate Crawford sees as "the strategic amnesia that accompanies stories of technological progress". This rephrases Žižek's "unknown knows" – the things we don't want to admit that we know. When Jacqueline Rose asks "What do we not want to know about the past?" she reminds us that we engage in organised forgetting. But this has consequences as Ben Lerner says "Memory invariably involves falsification, and what we repress always comes back often with deadly results".

Perhaps Cecric Price was trying to decipher Shakespeare's project for Hamlet – "To be, or not to be, that is the question" – where he is contemplating whether it is worth it to exist versus the nothingness of non-existence... to be of not to be...to be together or not be together on the one planet we share...to being together or not being together – these are the questions. As Joyce E. Chaplin states succinctly "The question of how we matter...is arguably the question of our time".

Isabelle Stengers puts this into context when she writes

Its time then, for minor knowledge, which questions the order words of modernisation. The guardians keep the floodgates—as they see them—closed to questioning. We have to learn to pose our own questions. And refuse the answers when the questions to which they answer are answers for nobody, for whoever, rather than answers for us."

If we are to refuse answers that are not for us then what are the questions? In this second State of Design Report we list just some of the questions...

References

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Questioning whether design is still the answer

How can design re-imagine & enable learning and trust [in humans? In AIs?] to counter increasingly intrusive AI?

How might students and staff co-design alternative university systems that enable other knowledges to reshape the University?

Perhaps a question that elicits many forms of questions from the readers for them to complete. I.e: If I am a designer responding to this unanswerable world, what do/does _____?

How can design re-imagine & enable learning and trust in our growing need for community?

How can design improve the safety of the vulnerable?

In what ways can design not improve ...?

Can we practice our questions rather than answer through practice?

If design is persuasion, what does it want to persuade?

Are designers becoming philosophers?

To what extent does design solve problems?

What will future generations do for me?

What would it mean to not design?

What do you want to Know?

What is the 'designer's role'?

What about the relationship between the designer and its design?

Can 'design' bring the invisible human qualities back into Design

Does design keep us together?

Does design have to be material?

Why do we seek the human behind the design?

Who is in this together?

Is there space to distance ourselves from this togetherness ?

Is design a projection of our minds or an extension of it?

Why do we need something to be “lively” to care?

Why am I here asking this question?

Are we questioning questions?

What is the role for design in the increasing artificiality of the modern project versus the dematerialisation of products and technology driven by climate and profit?

When did we go from wanting to know, to accepting not knowing; did we ever know?

[Ref. Gore Vidal's quote: 'America is the only country that has gone from barbarianism to decadence without first passing through civilisation']

Are we more comfortable not knowing as a result of 'technology knowing'?

Has technology loosened our need to know now that we have infinite knowledge harvesting, storage and retrieval?

If “the planet has projects that are in conflict with our own” - are we saying the planet has consciousness and intent?

Did any designers get involved in designing the nuclear bombs and weapons?

Did design become death, the destroyer of worlds?

(From Oppenheimer’s quote from the Bhagavad Gita on creating the atom bomb)

Can we replace need to know with need to understand?

Are designers a waste of precious energy?

Can design legitimise guessing?

Are designers just good guessers?

Are designers good guessers with the courage to revise their guesses/the humility to know they might be wrong and admit to it through iteration?

Is guessing abductive thinking for designing?

Is it because we are designers, what we did was classified as design? But what exactly did we actually do?

Signatories

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