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Design History: The State of the Art

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Introduction

Design is a rich word. Its core meaning is a plan, so it refers by extension to evidence of the activity of planning, such as blueprints, technical drawings, and sketches on the backs of envelopes. However, it is also used to refer to the products of the activity of designing, such as designed objects, systems, and behaviors. Design history encompasses the study of design in order to find out about the past, and the study of the past in order to better understand design. Here I will briefly sketch the development of design history for those unfamiliar with it, including the international spread of the subject, and then focus on the current state of the field with reference to several key topics and work currently in progress.

Out of Art History? The Development of Design History

Some people understand design history as an offshoot of art history, or a subfield (Fallan 2010: 4–10). Given that art and design are not really related activities or outputs—design performs a function that is tangible for the user, whereas art (and design/art and conceptual design) function to invite reflection in the audience—this association is perhaps best understood institutionally. In the United States, design history is principally studied within departments of art history. In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, though, design history is usually accommodated within design schools, as contextual studies for design-practice programs. It was in the United Kingdom, at the conference of the Association of Art Historians in 1977, that design history emerged as a discrete field of study in a process of secession from art history (Woodham 2001). Design history was thereby formed in contradistinction to art history. This secession led to the establishment of the Design History Society in the United Kingdom, as I have described previously (Huppatz and Lees-Maffei 2013). Add to this design history's intellectual promiscuity, in that the subject is underpinned by its interdisciplinarity (about which more below), and it becomes clear that design history is not merely a subfield of art history.

This was demonstrated at a 2011 conference at London's Courtauld Institute of Art, "At Cross Purposes? When Art History Meets Design History," convened by Anne Puetz (Courtauld Institute of Art) and Glenn Adamson (then based at the Victoria and Albert Museum). Rather than representing a meeting of two equal entities, the conference showcased the work of art historians that engaged more or less with material culture, whether through an emphasis on materiality or process, while the work of design historians addressing art or art history was less well represented. But, design history is not reducible to an emphasis on materials or processes; rather it emphasizes the range of contexts (social, cultural, economic, geographical, political, etc.) through which design can be understood.

Design history's development out of, and away from, art history is probably at the root of a disdain for aesthetics in the field. While designers have a professional concern for aesthetics, because beautiful things are more attractive to buyers and users, design historians consider the economic, business, labor, sociological, and theoretical contexts through which design can be understood. We consider these along with markers of identity including gender and sexuality, ethnicity, age, and so on that impact on the ideation, production, mediation, and consumption of design in a way that perceives these social relations as distinct from aesthetics. (Mediation is used in design history to refer to the discourses that exist between designers and manufacturers on the one hand and consumers and users on the other, including for, example, advertising, marketing, museum displays, retail design, the work of bloggers and vloggers, etc. [Lees-Maffei 2009].) Recent work on aesthetics in design has begun to recoup the notion for design studies and design cultures (Folkmann 2013) and for philosophy (Forsey 2013), while design history remains almost entirely mute on the subject for reasons, I would argue, related to the field's relation to art history (Lees-Maffei 2014). An approach to understanding design as principally an aesthetic phenomenon has been regarded by design historians as associated simultaneously with the field's roots in art history and with the fact that it has been dogged by its association with the active and profitable presentation of design in coffee table, or principally pictorial, books. Aesthetic treatments of design have been accordingly critiqued and rejected, although this is now being addressed in current, as-yet unpublished work by Folkmann, among others.

The quest to understand design within sociohistorical contexts has meant that design history and design historians thrive on linkages with sister fields including art history, of

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course, but also visual culture, material culture, anthropology and design ethnography, museum and heritage studies, architectural history, craft history, and the aforementioned business and labor studies and economic history, to name but a few. Design history's prescient and integral interdisciplinarity has been regarded as a given by design historians, so that attempts to capture these connections have been few and piecemeal. While Victor Margolin posited "design issues" as a more inclusive term than "design history" as far back as 1991 (Margolin 1992), Guy Julier has offered the alternative of "design culture" (2000), also referred to in the plural as "design cultures," for example in the MA Design Cultures, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. Design issues and design culture(s) essentially perform the same purpose of uniting theory and practice (see Kimbell 2011, 2012) along with placing design and its understanding firmly within a broad contemporary context, as distinct from design history's foregrounding of history. As an example of the productive relation of design history with related fields, we can point to Alison Clarke's promotion of design ethnography (Clarke 2010) as one of a small number of related titles seeking to bring design and anthropology together in ways more direct than the positively capacious approach of material culture studies.

At the micro level, design history's small scale and its status as an emerging field mean that many design historians have close connections of various sorts. So, it is impossible to write a review of the field which does not refer, where relevant, to the work of one's friends and collaborators, such as Kjetil Fallan (University of Oslo, Norway), Rebecca Houze (Northern Illinois University, USA), Daniel Huppatz (Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia) and spouse (Nicolas P. Maffei, Norwich University of the Arts, UK), and even to one's own work.

The health of the field is sometimes measured with reference to the number of undergraduate and postgraduate programs, the number of PhDs being awarded, and academic and research jobs being advertised. By these yardsticks, design history in the United Kingdom is receding. However, a recent snapshot of the state of design history around the world suggested that complaints about the subject being in remission in the United Kingdom (because single honors undergraduate programs have shut down as a result of cost-cutting and/or streamlining efficiencies in host departments or as a result of lack of student recruitment) are matched by optimism about the subject's growth in the United States, Western Europe, and East Asia (Huppatz and Lees-Maffei 2013). Certainly, if the number of monographs, textbooks, and anthologies being produced in a field is regarded as a measure of that field's health, then design history is blooming. The field has shifted from being principally a teaching subject to being a research topic with great potential in the United Kingdom; in the other regions mentioned here and in my earlier article on the state of the field (Huppatz and Lees-Maffei 2013), it is now emerging and growing.

Surveying Design History

Now is a particularly good time to reflect on the state of design history because the field has recently benefitted from a stream of survey texts. The year 2009 saw the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Design History* (22, no. 4) on "The Current State of Design History," edited by Hazel Clark and David Brody in tribute to Clive Dilnot's landmark essay in two parts, "The State of Design History," which had been published twenty-five years previously as part of the field's definitional phase. Dilnot argued that "The more design and designing are studied, the more important a broad context becomes," meaning that we should focus on social and historical contexts (Dilnot 1984a: 19). In their reprise of Dilnot's project, Clark and Brody gathered a range of views about the development of the field, and identified in these some gaps and issues for future examination, including the notions of absence and otherness (Clark and Brody 2009a). My own contribution to the volume outlined the development of design history along the lines of a "Production-Consumption-Mediation Paradigm" in which these three directions have predominated in design history albeit while also forming continuous foci (Lees-Maffei 2009). Here I argue for the utility of a focus on mediating discourses and practices that exist between producers and consumers for understanding the meanings that accrue to design. My arguments have been echoed by, for example, Fallan in his textbook *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method* (Fallan 2010); more recent work on mediation includes studies of the museum display of design, for example (Farrelly and Weddell 2016).

The same year that Clark and Brody published their assessment of the state of design history saw the publication of their anthology, *Design Studies: A Reader* (Clark and Brody 2009b), and two other anthologies examining design historical topics: Ben Highmore's *The Design Culture Reader* (Highmore 2009) and Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins's *The Object Reader* (Candlin and Guins 2009). Lees-Maffei and Houze's *The Design History Reader* appeared the following year (Lees-Maffei and Houze 2010). These anthologies make clear design history's interdisciplinarity through selections of texts that are considered core in the field and yet derive from material culture studies, anthropology and ethnography, the histories of art, craft, business, economics and labor, sociology, historical sociology and cultural studies, among others. Taken together, they show a field sufficiently distinct as to warrant dedicated anthologies and yet thoroughly enmeshed with neighboring fields in freeing and intellectually productive ways. These overview anthologies were accompanied by a number of field anthologies, including an early example on fashion and subsequent titles on graphic design and crafts (Welters and Lillethun 2007; Armstrong 2009; Adamson 2010).

The flurry of anthologies published in 2009–10 prepared the market and the field for a number of monumental design history texts that followed. The bibliographic evidence shows that publishers are sufficiently convinced of the robustness of the design-books market to produce major, costly, volumes. Bloomsbury is in the vanguard of this trend, having published the *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Design*, edited by Clive Edwards in 2015, and Huppatz's four-volume *Design: Critical and Primary Sources* (2016), both priced for the library market. The former is not the first encyclopedia of design, but it is

the most extensive. The latter uses its monumental scale to reproduce complete articles rather than abridged versions. Huppatz tries to avoid the "history" in design history, presenting historical texts for their relevance to contemporary design practice, design studies, and design cultures. These two titles represent a desire to map the field, which springs from a general sense of its increasing scope, expansiveness, and confidence in the market for academic design books as well as the more popular titles sold to a wider readership.

A significant driver for the extension of the field has been the critiques of design history's Western focus. Design historians have examined the industrial West at the expense of regions that have industrialized at different times and in ways divergent from the United States and Western European model. An early approach to this was Adamson, Giorgio Riello, and Sarah Teasley's edited collection, *Global Design History* (2011), in which commissioned essays were presented in a call-and-response arrangement that was nevertheless concise and highly selective in its treatment of the topic. A more inclusive approach to globalization is found in Pat Kirkham and Susan Weber's *History of Design: Decorative Arts and Material Culture, 1400–2000* (2013), published as a textbook for their Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture program at the Bard Graduate Center, which covers six centuries of design across four continents (excluding Australasia). This approach allows a more inclusive understanding of design practice that incorporates industrialization but is not circumscribed by it. The same applies to Margolin's *World History of Design* (2015) which is unparalleled in the field for both its temporal and geographic scope. As the work of one individual, Margolin's *World History of Design* necessarily displays the interests and biases of its author, but this synthetic approach is a usefully inclusive corrective to the Western, industrial preoccupation of many previous textbooks of design history. Efforts to globalize design history have sometimes threatened to dismiss national studies as no longer relevant, but the national is a tried-and-tested category of analysis that informs, as well as being informed by, local, regional, and international foci (Fallan and Lees-Maffei 2016). The critical mass of work on national identities and globalization speaks to the international spread of the subject.

Current Directions in Design History

The large inclusive survey texts and anthologies that have characterized design-history publishing in recent years are necessarily reflective, but current and ongoing work in design history may be seen as responding to one or more of a handful of directions. These are the mediation turn and the globalization imperative already discussed, plus three more: sustainability, food design, and performance.

One intellectual trajectory not represented well in the group of survey texts is an emerging focus on sustainable design. Sustainability is a particularly acute issue for design historians to tackle because climate change is associated with industrialization and mass production, issues of considerable importance to design and its histories (Houze 2010). Sustainability has been examined within design studies, which is a (quasi-) social-scientific field concerned with quantitative and qualitative studies undertaken to improve design practice (Fuad-Luke 2009; Fry 2008), but has received very little attention from design historians, notwithstanding the considerable influence of Austrian-born designer and design educator Victor Papanek (1923–1998) (Papanek 1971; 1983; 1995; see also Fiender and Geisler 2010). Pauline Madge's historiography of design and ecology (Madge 1993) was an early call to attention, and recent published studies indicate a growing concern for sustainable design (Anker 2010; Keitsch 2012; Pyla 2012), yet some ongoing research on sustainable design remains as yet largely unpublished, such as the results of the University of Oslo research project, *Back to the Sustainable Future*. This work promises to make clear the value of design history in that historical study of sustainability initiatives can provide the long view about their efficacy and can work in this way to confront myths and misconceptions about design and ecology.

Another relatively unexplored area of design that is currently attracting increased interest among design historians is food design. The International Food Design Society was founded in London in 2009 by Francesca Zampollo, who has since convened symposia and a conference on the topic and served as founding editor of the *International Journal of Food Design*. Zampollo defines food design loosely to incorporate work across design practice, design history, and design culture (Zampollo 2013, 2016). Margolin provided an early reflection on the relationship between design studies and food studies with reference to a shared history for each, in that some of the earliest tools and technologies (each the products of design) were made for the purpose of obtaining and/or preparing food. Margolin also notes, "Both design studies and food studies have profited from the development of interdisciplinary research in other fields that has occurred since the 1960s" (Margolin 2013: 385).

A final direction in current research in design history that I want to draw attention to here is the increasing concern for the history of performance. Theater history is of course a discrete field that predates design history's interest in performance. Similarly, performativity has been a focus on work across the arts and humanities for some time. Design historians have joined this discussion very recently with, for example, the preparation of postgraduate programs in performance history and allied curatorial practice such as the record-breaking exhibition *David Bowie Is* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2013, curated by the museum's theater and performance curators, Victoria Broackes and Geoffrey Marsh.

Conclusion: Design History Futures

In 1984, Dilnot argued that history is significant to design futures and that an expanded understanding of design is essential for realizing the idea of a designing society (Dilnot 1984b: 20). The necessarily brief survey of design history provided here has aimed to demonstrate something of the field's richness and future. It is fitting that *caa.reviews* should cover developments in design history and that the organization's commitment to

the subject will be developed under the auspices of a dedicated field editor.

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