

Designing Design History: From Pevsner to Postmodernism

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Introduction: Definitions and Diversity

The history of design as embraced in specialist undergraduate, postgraduate and research studies, has had a comparatively short academic life in Britain (no more than 26 years). In general, I believe that it has developed positively in terms of acknowledgement of its importance as a discipline in its own right, one which is significant in the context of design practice and other fields of enquiry where the meaning and texture of everyday life is examined and interpreted. Whilst the comparative infancy of the subject in the higher education landscape might be seen by some to put it at a disadvantage, I am convinced that this offers considerable scope for innovation and fresh thinking. It is relatively unburdened by the inheritance of the many layers of intellectual baggage, prejudice, theoretical constructs and history that have dogged so many fields of academic endeavour – often seen as painful but necessary ‘rites of passage’. And, because of this, I would suggest that the history of design still has the scope for innovation and fresh thinking together with the excitement of discovering new possibilities.

Current British preoccupations with the ‘rebranding’ of our country as a forward looking nation charged with creative energy in the visual and performing arts has done much to cast into the shade notions of tradition, heritage, history and a genuine understanding of the material culture in which we live. The fashionability of museum and exhibition culture as reflected in the mass-media, the nurturing of the cult of design and architectural personalities, the redevelopment of cities and the creation of new buildings and products are, of course, partly driven by economic reality. Design, the creative and performing arts, film, digital technology and other fields are now responsible for almost 7% of the gross national product. Sustained by its relentless pursuit of the *zeitgeist*, design history – or what too often passed for it in the early stages of its quest for respectability in the academic curriculum – has too often been cast as a handmaiden to style, the ‘creative individual’ and the fashionable branded product. In this presentation I will consider what I believe to be the positive ways in which design history may provide rich insights into the material culture of different times and locations, intersecting with other discipline areas, from social history to social anthropology, from economic history to cultural and consumer studies.

This paper derives from a British-centred perspective. It seeks to trace certain aspects of the subject from its origins as a free-standing academic discipline at degree level in Britain in the early 1970s through to its the early twenty-first century, where it ranges across the academic spectrum, from dedicated undergraduate degrees through to post-doctoral research fellowships.

The tension between the perceived need of some to arrive at an academically secure singular definition of the term 'design history' and the relative danger, excitement and rich possibilities afforded by a wide-ranging pluralism is part and parcel of being a design historian today. So, even as I begin to recount this journey of development I am already revising the title of my talk – now, better perhaps, 'Design Histories: From Pevsner to Postmodernism' – moving away from the position of modernist certainty embraced by Pevsner towards the shadowy pluralism of postmodernism. Such ambivalence encapsulates the essence of the very real problems which teachers, lecturers and researchers, museum curators and exhibition organisers, writers and members of editorial boards have faced since the 1970s when the subject began to assume a more positive identity and sustained platform for debate. Interestingly, when I gave a keynote address to the first design history symposium for scholars in the Spanish speaking world in Barcelona in 1999, the conference documentation stated that 'there are as many design histories as there are countries engaged in modern industrial development'.

Design History: Origins and Orientation

In the early to mid-1970s, those setting out to legitimise the history of design as a significant field of academic study considered it important to differentiate clearly their new discipline area from what were still then prevalent traditional art historical emphases on artist, style, period, iconography and connoisseurship. Previously, such preoccupations had tended to dominate the majority of specialist art history degree courses in Britain. In the 1960s and 1970s these courses were located in what later became known as the 'old universities', traditional seats of learning where many of the emergent new and often younger breed of design historians (as I was once upon a time) had studied. Design history, on the other hand, had its main roots in the newly established polytechnic sector, formed in the late 1960s and 1970s from amalgamations of colleges of art and design, education and technology. It sought to assume what then seemed to be a more radical and inclusive agenda: an embrace of such concerns as popular culture and ephemeral styling, advertising and consumption, and the study of the anonymous and everyday. Such raw material was far removed from the cultural élitism generally associated with art historical studies in Britain. In the early 1970s, the idea of a new academic field – design history – was rather 'looked down' upon both by the university sector and the major museum Establishment. No doubt this disapproval was coloured by the embrace of popular culture and, perhaps, in some ways loosely tainted by the curriculum shifts engendered as a result of the student revolutions of the late 1960s). As a result, there seemed to be a real need to defend and define the potential subject boundaries of this new field of design history in order to place it on the agenda for incorporation as a legitimate academic discipline within the higher education sector. In order to achieve this, in the mid 1970s considerable energies were expended in attempting to provide a *singular* working definition for what was felt to be encompassed by design history in Britain. Today, with a range of specialist studies in the history of design, a Design History Society established for 22 years and the *Journal of Design History*, published by Oxford University Press in its fourteenth year, there are many different inflections to the history of design in Britain. There is recognition of its potential relationship with fields such as social anthropology and studies in material culture, gender issues, social and cultural history and theory, the histories of business

and economics, industry and politics, even cultural and social geography. Some may argue that this represents a position of uncertainty and the lack of a clear identity and agenda; I would see such relationships as central to many areas of debate, pregnant with possibilities and offering potential influence and enlightenment across a wide spectrum of academic endeavour.

The Framework for Studies in the History of Design in Britain

In order to understand the genesis of the history of design in Britain, it is necessary to set it against a background of significant change in the pattern of art and design education.¹ This line of enquiry is given further legitimacy by the opinionated Victor Margolin, one of the co-editors of the American periodical *Design Issues*, who was highly critical of what he saw in 1992 as the limited achievements of design history 'as a solid field of academic study'.² He sought to position design history as a discipline which contrasted significantly with the history of art since the latter had, he claimed, 'a distinct identity within academia that is independent of its relations to practice.'³ This was not necessarily a claim to be proud of and not one that is particularly useful.

Following the publication of the 1960 Report by the National Advisory Council on Art Education (the Coldstream Report)⁴, from 1963 onwards all art and design diploma students in Britain had to follow a significant percentage of their studies in art history.⁵ Such academic components were intended to remove practical studies in art and design from the supposed stigma of vocationalism and, through the addition of an apparent intellectual underpinning, endow them with university-level status for professional and salary purposes.

The content of such studies proved highly problematic for lecturers and design students alike; unsurprisingly the latter, at a particularly vibrant period of social and cultural change in the latter half of the 1960s, became increasingly interested in exploring the terrain of popular and contemporary culture. Not unnaturally, their inclinations lay in exploring territories other than that offered by the more traditional domain of art history and its generally conservative methodology, which was often still rooted in the study of the avant-garde, the work of culturally 'significant' individuals, style, movements and periods.

Nonetheless, in the field of design history an essentially modernist ethos prevailed and Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design*, first published as *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* in 1936, became a widely adopted text at this early stage of the discipline's development in Britain. Blending German art and architectural historical methods it embraced an emphasis on designers, individual creativity, styles and movements together with an implicit critique of the mass-consumption and visual encyclopaedism of the Victorian era, epitomised by William Morris's *bête-noire*, the Great Exhibition of 1851. There was a strong morally-reforming character to Pevsner's pioneers, evidenced by the work of Pugin and John Ruskin. That Pevsner's pioneers were almost exclusively male is another issue. The fact that Pevsner's book had earlier undergone a radical change in appearance in its second edition of 1949 through collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art in New York further underlined its particular aesthetic alignment and also charged it, by inference at least, with a particular ideological position.

Following further revisions in 1960, the fact that it underwent a considerable number of reprints in the 1970s further endorses its significance in this context.⁶

Many British design students studying for their Diploma in Art & Design were also working in very particular fields of design, such as fashion, graphics, interiors or industrial. Nonetheless, media-based historical research, which at first sight might have seemed to offer a way forward, was too often preoccupied by the demands of connoisseurship or the exigencies of conservative museology. Such scholarship offered limited assistance – historical or methodological – to those seeking to explore fresh insights into their disciplines.

Following the expansion of higher education in Britain in the decade after the election of Harold Wilson's Labour Government in 1964, a new type of degree-awarding institution came into being - the polytechnic. It was here that the history of design saw its most significant developments. However, as indicated earlier, such institutions were formed from the amalgamation of previously free-standing colleges of art and design, colleges of technology and colleges of education and were felt, in general terms, to offer students more vocationally-oriented and occasionally rather more radical, programmes of study. They were viewed by the educational establishment as poor relations to their university counterparts, echoed in hard cash terms by significantly less favourable funding from central government. This was further reinforced by a perceived need for academic policing in the form of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), a body that approved and regularly reviewed courses through peer group review. Nonetheless, almost all of the most important British schools of art and design, often with distinguished histories rooted in the expansion of British art and design education from the 1840s onwards, were included within this new polytechnic sector. Consequently, they suffered by association with engineers and educationalists whose work was too often an ersatz version of that conducted in the old universities.

The Open University

The role of the Open University (OU) in stimulating research and studies in the history of design in Britain was, in my view, highly significant. The OU was established by the UK government by Royal Charter in April 1969, with the express aim of being 'open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods and open as to ideas'. It commenced its operations in 1971 with a first cohort of students of 250,000. The use of contemporary media and technologies were an essential part of its development, with terrestrial television and radio broadcasts providing important means of dissemination, in addition to specially designed course units.

Centred in the new town of Milton Keynes, the Open University was also committed to the introduction of new teaching and learning media and well-designed multi-media teaching units provided fresh stimuli to degree-level studies in the UK. The history of design, albeit moderated by expertise in architectural and art history, was embraced in such developments and the first incursions into the field were made in the Third Level Course entitled the *History of Architecture and Design 1890-1939* that was launched in 1975. Considerable investment was made in the formation of substantial interdisciplinary Course Teams working together critically on a range of

courses and units of study: those involved with the formation of this new course included Stephen Bayley, Tim Benton, Charlotte Benton, Tony Coulson and Lindsay Gordon. Through the use of television and radio, documentary and other film footage, 'accompanied' site visits, designers and architects talking about their work at the time and retrospectively, could all be brought into the homes of those studying the course, giving the enterprise added life and potency. A wide and diverse range of other visual sources such as photographs, books and catalogues were also part of the courses. In addition to dedicated Course Unit books, students were supplied with a compendium of documentary source material⁷, another of illustrative material and a radiovision booklet to accompany broadcasts. As well as more mainstream themes like the Arts & Crafts Movement, Art Nouveau and Art Deco, students could study the heritage of the ordinary in 'The Semi-Detached House; the Suburban Style', debates about domestic planning in 'The Labour-Saving Home' and other similar themes distanced from progressive cultural trends.

The Design History Research Group

In 1974 the Association of Art Historians (AAH) was formed to promote the study of art history. Although today it seeks to represent the interests of art and design historians in all aspects of the discipline, including art, design, architecture, photography, film and other media, cultural studies, conservation and museum studies, its relationship with the emerging research interests in the field of design history in the mid 1970s was much more ambivalent. Seeking to establish an informal design history interest group, unfettered by the organisational ambitions of what appeared at the time to represent the interests of the art historical establishment, an informal colloquium of researchers and lecturers was established under the title of the Design History Research Group. The general aim of this Group was to meet occasionally in order to discuss common themes and concerns, often centred on key design exhibitions.

Building on such an initiative, the first free-standing design history conference was mounted at Newcastle Polytechnic (now the University of Northumbria) in 1975, where a significant number of us concerned with creating historical and theoretical study programmes for the large numbers of design students in Britain came together. The range of topics presented seemed wide, encompassing such diverse topics as problems inherent in researching German furniture design of the interwar years, American automobile styling of the 1950s, science fiction and popular culture, and design education. These were subsequently published under the title *Design 1900-1960 : Studies in Design and Popular Culture of the 20th century*,⁸ and included contributions by key figures such as Reyner Banham, Tim Benton and Adrian Forty. Encouraged by the relative success of the event, the Second Conference of Twentieth Century Design History was held at Middlesex Polytechnic (now Middlesex University) in April 1976 and was focused around the theme *Leisure and Design in the Twentieth Century*. Amongst the papers delivered (and published⁹) were 'The History and Development of Do-It-Yourself', 'Women and Trousers', 'Art and Design as a Sign System', 'Having a Bath – English Domestic Bathrooms' and 'Transportation and Personal Mobility'. Perhaps significant in terms of wider recognition was the fact that the Design Council, the state's design promotion organisation¹⁰, published the papers.

The Formation of the Design History Society

It was at Brighton in 1977 that the Third Annual Conference of Twentieth Century Design History, entitled *Design History – Fad or Function?*, was mounted¹¹. The position appeared to be relatively rosy for, as Penny Sparke, the editor of the published papers, remarked at the time:

the subject matter of the conference was design history itself, and the approach was a pluralistic one, demonstrating that there are, in fact, many design histories... The interdisciplinary nature of the subject was reflected in the range of lectures, which were in three main sections that focused, in turn, on the designer, the consumer and the object.¹²

Subsequently, the conference was noted for the fact that it led to the foundation of the Design History Society under its Chair, Noel Lundgren, with support from its inaugural Secretary, Penny Sparke. Essentially a formalisation of the Design History Research Group, it sought, through the opportunities afforded by the levying of a modest subscription, to promote a number of things valuable in the establishment of the subject in higher education. This included meetings and conferences, the production of indexes and bibliographies and, importantly, the production of a *Newsletter* which sought to carry reviews of books, films, archives, collections and activities related to the networking and development of studies in the field. Two early conferences which I organised on behalf of the DHS were the *Design, Industry and Film Archives* conference for the Design History Society in conjunction with Dunlop Limited at Dunlop House, London (1979) and the *Design History and Business Archives* conference at the Victoria and Albert Museum (1980). Both of these were early attempts to develop a field of study rooted in the realities of everyday life.

The Establishment of the First Generation of Design History Degree Courses

The first generation of seven free standing degree courses with a significant emphasis on design history began to emerge at the time of the three pioneering conferences at Newcastle, Middlesex and Brighton. They were established in Britain between 1975 and 1980, ranging from courses that were intertwined with other areas of academic activity, such as film studies, art and architectural history, and those that were specifically focused on design, as at Manchester and Brighton Polytechnics. It was at this time also that Middlesex Polytechnic framed the first postgraduate course in the field, formulating it around approaches that were to be identified later with what became known as the 'New Art History.' Such methodological approaches were hijacked by researchers at the 'old universities', which received considerable funds for research, unlike their poor relations, the polytechnics.

Critical Perspectives: *BLOCK* and Other Initiatives

However, despite such relatively auspicious beginnings, searching questions began to be asked by a number of people, including Bridget Wilkins¹³, Fran Hannah and Tim Putnam, all lecturers at Middlesex Polytechnic. Hannah and Putnam, writing in *BLOCK* magazine in 1980, felt that, despite much hype to the contrary,

art-conventional notions of design will pass as the substance of the subject while context amounts to eclectic dipping into new fields. Bits of business history, history of technology or social history find their way into an account without consideration of the problems proper to those histories or even the processes by which they have become established as knowledge... Far from being a greener pasture free from the contradictions of art history, design history is in fair danger of becoming an academic backwater.¹⁴

BLOCK magazine came into being at Middlesex Polytechnic (now Middlesex University) 'as a vehicle of communication with a small and scattered community of like-minded, Marxist and polemical practitioners and theorists... [who were involved with] establishing undergraduate and graduate degrees in art, cultural studies and design history'.¹⁵ It provided a reaction against what appeared to be the restricted cultural horizons of academic art history and provided a particularly potent force in the shaping of design history in Britain at a critical time of debate. Published between 1979 and 1989, *BLOCK* recognised the importance of the history of design as a field of study and research which was more ambitious and inclusive than the social, moral and aesthetic dimensions of Ruskin, Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. It was more critically engaged than the avant-garde's symbolic endorsement of contemporary technology and new materials at the Bauhaus, and a widespread preoccupation with the ideals of the Modern Movement. These were seen as essential ingredients of what too often passed for the essence of the subject. Conversely *BLOCK* sought to

treat design, like art, as an ideologically encoded commodity, the value and significance of which were dependent on modes of consumption. This approach was in opposition to prevailing notions of design writing which adopted untransformed art historical notions of univocal authorship, inherent meaning and received hierarchies of value. The first priority was to disengage from notions of authorship and the pathetic values of intentionalism, unself-reflexive paradigms which left little room for the complex processes of investment and desire which imbued objects with social and existential meaning.¹⁶

Influences as varied as the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University, the work of Raymond Williams, Pierre Bordieu and Jean Baudrillard, together with the theoretical concerns of Michael Foucault, Louis Althusser and others all enlivened the often provocative articles in the magazine. The many writers for *BLOCK* formed a virtual 'who's who' of emerging and challenging thinkers in the field of visual culture.¹⁷

Less radical contemporary alternatives were offered in texts such as John Heskett's *Industrial Design*¹⁸ and Adrian Forty's *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1750-1980*¹⁹. Nonetheless, the former, although essentially a concise survey of the field, introduced a number of fresh colours to the design history palette. These including themes such as play, learning and leisure and the design of military technology, and acknowledged that the values of design 'may be based on

premises different from those of the designer and producer²⁰. The latter was more direct in its down-grading of the importance of the designer as a principal focus for design historical studies. Forty felt that, in many ways, the designer was irrelevant to an understanding of an object's significance. This outlook led to considerable hostility in the design press when his book was reviewed, particularly since it was published during the 'Designer Decade' of the 1980s. This was a time when the word 'design' was applied to everything from automobiles to food and washing powder as a means of enhancing its status for the consumer. Forty felt that the customary celebration of the individual designer was a 'misunderstanding' sustained by the media and fuelled in 'schools of design, where students are able to acquire grandiose illusions about their skills, with the result that they encounter all manner of difficulties in their subsequent careers'.

Further Possibilities: Women's Studies and Material Culture

During the *BLOCK* decade other critical perspectives in histories of visual culture were also emerging, including the implications of women's studies for design history. The impetus of much of this questioning of the historical status quo derived from the 'New Art History' of the late 1970s and early 1980s, prompted by the publication of texts by emerging scholars such as Griselda Pollock²¹ and Anthea Callan.²² In tune with such thinking, 'feminist' design historians sought to shift the agenda away from the priorities of production towards the world of consumption, seen as a more feminine domain for intervention. They also sought to reassert the significance of the crafts since, as Cheryl Buckley argued in 1986, 'craft allowed women an opportunity to express their creative and artistic skills outside of the male-dominated design profession.'²³

A number of other important texts conceived in a similar vein emerged in the latter half of the 1980s, including Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham's edited collection of essays, *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*,²⁴ published by the Women's Press in 1989 and revised in 1995. Judy Attfield also contributed a chapter entitled 'FORM/female FOLLOWS FUNCTION/male: Feminist Critiques of Design' in John A Walker's primer entitled *Design History and the History of Design*²⁵. More recently, in her ambitious book *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*, Penny Sparke has examined related issues of gender and design across a wide historical period – from 1830 to the 1980s. In the opening chapter she commented that

Until recently cultural theorists have tended to view consumption as a form of manipulation, the commodity out to trap the unsuspecting consumer. The only alternative to this essentially negative account of consumption has been that of anthropologists who have studied it as a form of social ritual, a means of achieving social cohesion. However, their accounts, like those of their fellow social scientists, have underplayed the role of gender. A number of social, economic and cultural historians have addressed consumption as it emerged in the late-nineteenth century with the growth of department stores and mass-retailing. While some have perpetuated the idea that women's role in this was entirely passive, others have offered a more positive view of feminine taste,

seeing it as operating outside the value judgements imposed on it by masculine culture. The evocation in these writings of the sensations of pleasure and aesthetic delight go some way towards an understanding of consumption in specifically feminine terms.²⁶

Another comparatively recent text that explored specific case studies was a collection of essays, drawn from across a range of disciplines edited by Pat Kirkham and entitled *The Gendered Object*.²⁷ Seen essentially as a vehicle for stimulating further exploration of issues of gender, design and the gendering of design, the short individual contributions addressed, with varying degrees of conviction, such objects as the washing machine, trousers, trainers, ties, children's clothes, toys, guns, bicycles, cosmetics and hearing aid. The relationship between gender and technology has also proved a fertile field for research and publication in the 1980s and 90s in the United States and Britain and this growing corpus of work²⁸ has exerted a significant influence on contemporary approaches to design history.

As indicated earlier, a number of British design historians have acknowledged the significance of studies in material culture and social anthropology as a means of providing an alternative approach to design. This moves away from the limitations of an emphasis on named designers, periods and movements towards a focus on the consumption of design. Key texts which have been influential include Douglas and Isherwood's *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*²⁹, Daniel Miller's *Material Culture and Mass-Consumption*³⁰ and McCracken's *New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*³¹. A number of younger scholars involved in teaching and researching design history have been influenced by such thinking. These include Alison Clark who, whilst at Brighton, completed a volume on *Tupperware and Postwar Consumption*, for the Smithsonian Institution in the United States and published essays on 'Tupperware: Suburbia, Sociality and Mass Consumption' and 'Window Shopping at Home: Classifieds, Catalogues and New Consumer Skills'.³² Material culture studies have also impacted significantly upon the work of historians focusing on earlier periods, as evidenced by such texts as Brewer and Porter's edited collection on *Consumption and the World of Goods*.³³ London: Routledge, 1993.

In 1996 *The Journal of Material Culture* commenced publication³⁴ and took a refreshingly open attitude to disciplinary roots and boundaries – it is perhaps this openness that has proved attractive to a significant number of design historians. In a recent volume of collected essays, *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, Daniel Miller remarked on what he saw as 'a general renaissance in the topic of material culture studies', writing that

after several decades in the academic doldrums this has re-emerged as a vanguard area liberating a range of disciplines from museum studies to archaeology. Although there are a large number of volumes and articles which together constitute the evidence for this development in academic interests, there are still relatively few publications that have as their particular concern the nature of

material culture or material culture studies. This is in part because the subject does not exist as a given discipline.³⁵

It is not possible to review all material that has impacted upon research in the history of design in Britain. However, it would be remiss not to mention the very real shifts that have been taking place in museology over the past ten or fifteen years in innovative Departments of Museum Studies. One such example is that of the University of Leicester, out of which an impressive body of texts has emerged from scholars such as Susan Pearce. Others include the series *Leicester Readers in Museums Studies*³⁶ and developmental departments in museums themselves, such as the Research Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum which has done much to reinvigorate thought about collecting, display and exhibitions policy. I am pleased to draw attention to the work of the University of Brighton's Senior Research Fellow at the V&A, Jane Pavitt. This highly prestigious six-year post, funded jointly by the British Academy and the University, has resulted in a number of innovative exhibitions from *Design in a Digital Age* to the very recent *brand.new* at the V&A which focused on issues of branding and globalisation, attracting one hundred thousand visitors. Due to tour to Stockholm and Paris later this year, it is accompanied by a substantive publication of the same name, edited by Pavitt with related work by many scholars around the world.

A large collection of titles concerned with the theme of museums and cultural heritage have also been published by Routledge since the mid-1990s and have done much to revitalise design-related debates in the wake of the establishment of the Design Museum at Butler's Wharf, London, in 1989. A somewhat empty monument to the belief in the economic power of design so embraced in the Designer Eighties under Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government, the Design Museum at Butler's Wharf, London, set out to offer 'an insight into the role design plays in our everyday lives from the origins of mass production to the present day'. The harsh economic realities of the late 1980s and early 1990s exerted significant constraints upon its outlook and its main display galleries generally underpin an iconic, designer-led design perspective.

Visual Research and the Digitization of Archival Collections in British Universities and Institutions of Higher Education

The need to develop a richer and more comprehensive visual resource base for the teaching of design and design history had been recognised long before the radical sharpening up of slide-making policy in the 1988 Copyright Designs and Patents Act. Subsequent to this, visual resources continued to be an issue despite the mounting in 1993 of a discussion forum on 'Visual Resources for Design' by the Visual Resources Committee of the Art Libraries Society (ARLIS) and the subsequent publication of a report and directory of sources in 1995³⁷. Although many of the key themes being addressed by design historians had been identified, there was a prevailing general lack of educationally and commercially-produced slide material to support their work. However, even in the short period of time that has elapsed since the ARLIS publication the culture of debate has shifted significantly, with a radical expansion of, and accessibility to, digital technology and its means of production.

The Joint Information Systems Committee of the UK Higher Education Funding Council was established 'to stimulate and enable the cost effective exploitation of information systems and to provide a high quality national network infrastructure for the UK higher education and research councils communities'. In the latter half of the 1990s its project most relevant to the perceived lack of accessibility of design historical visual resources has been the establishment of an Image Digitisation Initiative. An ambitious pilot digital archive for the higher education community in Britain, its embrace extends far beyond the remit of design history. It includes selections from the extensive Design Council Archive in the Design History Research Centre at the University of Brighton, the archives at Central Saint Martin's College of Art & Design, London, the London College of Fashion. Also included are the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, and the African and Visual Arts Archive at the University of East London. The overall aim is to build a pool of 30,000 images from fourteen participating university-level institutions and, as an integral part of the process, to disseminate knowledge and best practice in the field, with the application of common standards, effective project management and high levels of quality assurance.³⁸

Of course, there have been a number of other initiatives utilising information technology which have become an integral part of the research landscape in design history. These include the work of CHArt (Computers and the History of Art), established in 1995 by art and design historians with an interest in computers. It includes amongst its membership personnel from relevant museums, art galleries, archives and libraries. It has its own web site (www.hart.bbk.ac.uk/chart/chart.html), publishes a journal *Computers and the History of Art* and mounts an annual conference.³⁹

The Design History Society and the *Journal of Design History*

Since its inception in 1977, with varying degrees of success, the Design History Society has sought to bring together the design history community both nationally and internationally. Its initial ambitions were modest as the first *Newsletter* of March 1978 testifies. As the Arts & Crafts scholar Alan Crawford remarked at the time:

So I find myself more definitely a design historian, but still with no strong sense of what that means, nor any strong desire to find out for that matter. And I hope that the Society will be equally tentative.

It need not concern itself with abstract issues, like what design history is, or with aggressive policies "to further the development of the discipline". It is enough that there are a growing number of people whose interests fall into this area and that we can help them by meetings, conference[s] and a newsletter.⁴⁰

Such hopes were, of course, utterly unrealistic in the changing climate of higher education in Britain. As I have said, new degrees in design history were being set up in polytechnics at a time of increasingly constrained resources. Critically important to the development or, perhaps more realistically, lack of development of design historical studies was the fact that polytechnics

and schools of art and design were not funded for research to anything like the degree that was enjoyed by the 'old' university sector. This was an imbalance that did not begin to be seriously addressed until the early 1990s, when the polytechnics were redesignated as 'new universities'. Also significant, in the 1980s and 1990s, was the emergence of an 'audit culture' in higher education, an ethos that encouraged the production of increasingly tightly-defined curricula in the history of design – for many smaller departments, the prospect of any intellectual adventure was well and truly over.

Nonetheless, studies in design history and design history research have continued both inside and outside the walls of the academy. The Design History Society now has its own website (<http://www.brighton.ac.uk/dhs/>) and an electronic Design History discussion List has been established on the internet. There is a hope with these digital interventions of further stimulating news, views and debate in a less formal and more up-to-the minute way than the more cumbersome and intermittent vehicle of the *Design History Society Newsletter* or occasional conferences. Perhaps something of the innocence, openness and informality hoped for by Alan Crawford twenty-three years ago might resurface.

The Society's *Journal of Design History*, published by Oxford University Press and now just into its thirteenth year, enjoys a wide international readership and makes a modest profit which accrues to the Society. It has a pluralist approach to design history or design histories as is suggested by a random search through the *Journal of Design History* list of keywords suggested to potential contributors for on-line searching. These include such suggestions as air travel, architectural lettering, business history, crafts theory, discourses of consumption, dress, fetishism, feminism, Feng Shui, home dress-making, museums, popular entertainment, rhetorics of need and want, structuration theory, tourism, trade literature and women's history, as well as many others which contributors may seek to introduce.

- 1 See also J. M. Woodham, 'Resisting Colonization: Design History has its own Disciplinary Status', *Design Issues*, MIT, March.
- 2 Margolin, V, 'Design History or Design Studies: Subject Matter or Methods', *Design Studies*, April 1992, p.105.
- 3 Ibid., p.112.
- 4 This was further reinforced by the 1970 Report on *The Structure of Art and Design Education in the Further Education Sector*.
- 5 This generally amounted to about 20% of the curriculum.
- 6 Pevsner also published another text, based on similar premises, for the Thames & Hudson World of Art series: *The Sources of Modern Architecture and Design*, London : Thames and Hudson, 1968.
- 7 Benton, C (ed.) A A305D, *Documents*, Milton Keynes: Open University, 1975.
- 8 Faulkner, T, *Design 1900-1960: Studies in Design and Popular Culture of the 20th century*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle Polytechnic, 1975.
- 9 Design Council, *Leisure and Design in the Twentieth Century*, London: Design Council, 1977.

- 10 Founded under the Board of Trade in 1944. It was renamed the Design Council in 1972
when it took on engineering and the design of capital goods as an integral part of its
operations.
- 11 Bishop, T (ed.), *Design History: Fad or Function?*, London : Design Council, 1978
- 12 Ibid., Sparke, P, 'Introduction', p.5.
- 13 Wilkins, B, 'Design History in Polytechnics and Art Colleges', *Association of Art Historians
Bulletin*, 1976.
- 14 Hannah, F & Putnam, T, 'Taking Stock in Design History', *BLOCK*, no. 3.
- 15 'Introduction', *BLOCK Reader in Visual Culture*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. xi
- 16 Ibid., pp.132-33.
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