Defining Design

"Design" is a curious term. It can describe very different sorts of things depending on who utters it, and for what purposes. In some instances "design" is conflated with the adjective "designer," which describes a type of commodity typically reserved for the wealthy and elite, or those who aspire to such a station. In other cases "design" is a code word for "added value," as when companies like Apple in the United States, or Volvo and H&M in Sweden, explicitly prioritize an attention to detail—of aesthetics, functionality, materials, and the like—as what distinguishes their goods from what their competitors produce.

Other characterizations of design focus on practicalities. In both professional and academic conceptualizations, design tends to fall squarely in the realm of the technical. There is often a marked emphasis on design as a systematic and rigorous *method* for creating things from specific kinds of inputs. The diverse practices of engineering, architecture, city planning, and software development, along with graphic design, industrial design, landscape architecture, and a host of other design disciplines, are all based in sets of precise principles—some of which are shared across these fields, many of which are not—that when purposefully applied to raw materials allow designers to create new objects—buildings, landscapes, posters, chairs, services, user experiences, town plans, and so on. In other words, design in this sense is a kind of controlled and cultivated creativity, with a stress on the particular practices involved in planning and creation.

An even more general sense of design, one that flows from its technical connotations, is as a basic *way of making*, situated somewhere between raw labor and artistic production. Design is not simply work, not simply labor, because the effort involved is carefully considered and usually subject to reflexive evaluation. Design is also not quite art—though it often bumps up against it, as we will see in chapter 4, because the objects of design, even those that foreground aesthetic qualities, are usually made to be used, to serve some practical function. From this broad perspective, design is not restricted to those with technical training or institutionally recognized skill, but applies widely to any kind of creative action that involves planning and forethought. What follows from this view is that the differences

between various kinds of making are based less in what they make, or even how they make it, but more in the relative degrees of professionalization, institutionalization, and cultural prominence each is accorded.

Where, then, does that leave us in approaching design as a sociocultural practice? Design concerns process, an active, almost teleological ordering of raw materials into some resultant thing, sometimes conceived as a physical object, but oftentimes as things with less obvious contours, like "activities," "services," and "experiences." I say "almost teleological" because while the general kind of thing strived for in designing is usually anticipated by its makers, other contingent specifics, like forms, functions, materials, and costs, are more subject to manipulations and unexpected outcomes in the process. Autonomous expressiveness is not necessarily design's central concern, though neither is it indifferent to it. Instead design is primarily an intentional structuring of some portion of the lived world in such a way as to transform how it is used, perceived, or understood. Design both delimits and affords relational configurations between people, spaces, and things, and does so in considered and unconsidered ways. Design can also capture specific meanings, and constrain or facilitate interpretation. The meanings that adhere to the objects of design are always situated and contingent, and linked both to the form of the designed product and to the contexts in which it is embedded. In other words, design is a kind of directed creativity with meaningful social consequences, a gradual and granular enstructuring of the everyday world.

While makers—designers, in typical parlance, though any given case may involve "designers" who are not trained as such—are absolutely central to design as a sociocultural practice, design and designing do not begin and end with the human actors responsible for driving design processes. The people who cultivate design and designing are always subject to the particular cultural flows of history, ideology, and politics on which "moments of designing"—when "ideas" are transfigured into "forms"—travel. Moments of designing matter, of course, but only insofar as they are considered alongside and in complementarity with other processes that shape and form designed things. Understanding how design makes things—and makes things mean—requires understanding how objects are shaped to tolerate meanings (Murphy 2013), the processes through which they are given those meanings, and how those meanings are negotiated and argued through different suasive processes.