



# CHAPTER 3

## DESIGNERS AND DESIGN DISCOURSE

How are different definitions of design and images of the designer used by different people? Chapter 3 is devoted to exploring the professional and cultural construction of the designer and, subsequently, the difference between these and the representation, self-representation and actual practice of designers. The discourses of professionalization, marginality and authorship need to be addressed in order to understand the relationships between designers, their clients and their public. The chapter concludes by looking at some attempts to update this discussion in the face of new contexts and practices of design. In particular, it reviews the ways by which design has found its way into and been used by management discourses. This does not mean that all design has moved in that direction. The profession constantly accumulates new areas of practice, adding to its diversity and fragmentation.

In the previous chapter the recent changes in the organization and commercial context of design practice were explained. It concluded by arguing that on the one hand these conditions of production meant that designers were involved in a constant positioning and repositioning of themselves in response to these changing conditions, and that on the other hand their practice increasingly pushed them towards a more complex relationship with the culture of consumption. In both these cases an amalgamation of creative and strategic skills was at play.

This complexity leads us to the possibility that a solely production-based account of design is insufficient and the objects of its production must be interpreted through the interaction of information and values between the realms of production, consumption and the designers themselves. Thus under each of these headings we can identify the different causative elements we might take into consideration in creating an account of design objects, images and spaces. Scholarship and journalism in fields that relate to design have predominantly tended to isolate one approach from another, concentrating either on the business practices of design, the authorship of the designer or the reception of design goods and services by consumers. Chapter 2 began to suggest, however, that the conditions of disorganized capitalism imply that the culture of design integrates these categories so that their interaction becomes increasingly vibrant.

## DEFINITIONS OF DESIGN

The meaning of the word 'design' is much contested. The debate concerning its origins is unlikely to be resolved given the breadth of interpretations that the word takes. John Walker reminds us that:

it can refer to a process (the act or practice of designing); or to the result of that process (a design, sketch, plan or model); or to the products manufactured with the aid of a design (design goods); or to the look or overall pattern of a product ('I like the design of that dress'). (1989: 23)

It has therefore accumulated several different uses. Meanings of design are many and shift according to the context in which the word is used.

Some critics seek a consciously open definition of design. In his cult book *Design for the Real World* (1972), Victor Papanek began with the words:

All men [sic] are designers. All that we do, almost all the time, is design, for design is basic to all human activity. The planning and patterning of any act toward a desired, foreseeable end constitutes the design process. Any attempt to separate design to make it a thing by itself, works counter to the fact that design is the primary underlying matrix of life. (1972: 3)

Papanek takes an agitational standpoint, attempting therefore to denude design of any separateness. 'All men are designers', he tells us. By contrast with Papanek's proclamation, much of the history of design may be read as the history of individuals and groups who have striven to

separate design from other commercial and cultural practices. In doing so they have attempted to identify themselves and their practice as something that bestows things, pictures, words and places with 'added value'. Within this paradigm, design becomes the range of goods, spaces and services that are shaped by the intervention of professional designers. It no longer refers to the countless objects that are formed and consumed within everyday life and which do not, of themselves, carry that level of cultural capital.

The connection with Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (1984: 12) here is important. Put most briefly (Bourdieu's theories will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters), 'cultural capital' refers to one's ability to make distinctions between cultivated and vulgar taste. This notion effectively pushes design into a reflexive mode whereby its value becomes self-consciously recognized. Design thus links the economic to the cultural. Indeed, design emanates from the discourses of a culturally dynamic sector of society, an avant-garde metropolitan bourgeoisie. In his discussion of Veblen and Bourdieu, Hayward (1998) articulates the role of the avant-garde in a 'symbolic struggle' to 'step ahead' as cultural goods slip from left to right, from the 'cutting edge' into the mainstream. As such, varying degrees of 'designeriness' are inscribed into its practice.

The study of design history is embedded into institutions that largely support the reproduction of this meaning. It is mostly taught in art and design colleges as a support to practice-based courses. Unusually, it may be mobilized to challenge dominant practices of design through, for instance, feminist or ecologically inspired critiques. More often, however, it acts to reinforce very specific, and indeed restrictive, understandings of what design is and how it should be carried out. Much of the history and criticism of design therefore falls within a specific formal canon, thereby giving it a refined language to legitimate itself and a self-perpetuating logic that identifies 'good design' as against 'bad design' or 'kitsch'. It therefore conspires to maintain the highly reflexive, self-conscious nature of design. Chaney puts this forcefully:

Designers' use of a language of style to ironically evoke or play with other contexts of use makes style a reflexive medium: a way of talking about itself and a way of talking about modernity. The logic of a process in which the self-consciousness or reflexivity of design grows more important is that the goods of economic exchange begin to lose any foundation in intrinsic value or function. ... It seems that an inevitable consequence of a reflexivity of production is that style comes to supersede substance. (1996: 150)

Perhaps there is a creeping pessimism in his words here. The suggestion is that the manoeuvrings of contemporary design require it to abandon all hope and purpose in addressing real human needs; that it becomes an end in itself, the mere producer of 'desires', possibly losing all relevance to its public. A view of design culture, following Chaney's reasoning, is that its world of design production and consumption is self-serving – that design culture produces its own way of justifying itself, regardless of real societal need.

In this line of thinking, the object and its mediation become one. The way by which an object is communicated to its public – as a *design* object – in turn becomes its primary value and subsequently the object itself becomes part of that communication. Equally, this is how a designed product works within a brand ethos. The object carries an emblematic status as an image. This may be part of the late-20th-century shift in design whereby the product has increasingly aspired

to the graphic, or, as Lash and Urry put it, 'What is increasingly produced are not material objects, but *signs*' (1994: 4).

It is true that all man-made things, images and spaces are designed in some way. Or to put it another way, design is anything that doesn't happen by accident. They have all been subject to some level of planning and thought no matter how conscious or unconscious this might be. However, within the argument I am advancing in this book, we have to consider that definitions of design can also be discursive. In other words, how, when, where and why something is termed as being 'design' indicates something about its position or status that is generated by and for it. In respect, Judy Attfield (2000) draws a distinction of 'objects with attitude' as compared with everyday things. However this distinction may be described or the processes that produce it are analysed, a key issue is that of the delineation of the professional from the amateur designer and the historical debates that have formed this.

## THE WORD 'DESIGN' IN HISTORY

In the same way that we have seen the practice of design under continual revision, so the definition of design is constantly and self-consciously not only being constructed, but also decentred, dispersed and disorganized. An historical overview of the development of the word 'design' as a practice is useful in exploring the tension between the establishment of design as a 'value added' activity and its intrinsic disembedding mechanisms.

Walker (1989: 23) draws our attention to the Renaissance use of the *disegno*, which literally meant 'drawing'. During this period drawing was the tool employed in the planning, conceptualizing phase that preceded the making of paintings, sculptures and so forth. Thus the practice of *disegno* involved intellectual thought and effectively separated conception and execution. A division of labour in the studios of artists did exist: apprentices would execute some of the more menial tasks, such as the preparation of the canvas and even the painting of backgrounds, leaving, for instance, the 'master' to paint faces and details. While, then, this division of labour did not go so far as to completely separate mental and manual tasks, it nonetheless inferred that a hierarchy existed between the planning and the making aspects of cultural production. This notion of *disegno* coincides with what Balcioglu (1994) terms the 'first phase' of design of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. During these periods, he argues, design had a more open, widely used definition connected to purposes, aims and intentions.

It is clear that the word has stood at the fulcrum of a struggle for professional recognition. In discussing the origins of typography – a subset of design in general – Robin Kinross (1992) argues that it comes into being as it is brought into consciousness through language. He locates its origins in the Enlightenment via an early treatise on typography: Joseph Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises* (1683–84). Kinross cites the following words:

By a typographer, I do not mean a printer, as he is vulgarly accounted, any more than Dr Dee means a carpenter or mason to be an architect: but by a typographer, I mean such a one, who by his own judgement, from solid reasoning within himself, can either perform, or direct others to perform from the beginning to the end, all the handy-works and physical operations relating to typographie. (Moxon, cited in Kinross 1992: 15)

This fascinating passage indicates a struggle to position the typographer against the more 'vulgar' practice of the printer. It marks a step in the profession of design to delineate itself from that of a trade. Notably, in order to fix an identity, Moxon begins by describing what typography is *not*.

During the 'second phase' of the 19th century, this discussion of word usage becomes further refined and effectively causes the term 'design' to lose some of its potential power. The debate in Britain revolved around an awareness of the misleading parallel between the English word 'design' and the French word *dessin*. While the French 'Ecoles de Dessin' were exclusively directed towards the teaching of drawing – using the word *dessin* in its literal sense – from the mid-19th century the British 'Schools of Design' were dedicated to a broader curriculum to promote visual innovation for manufactured articles. It is not surprising that henceforward, mid-19th century reformers such as Henry Cole replaced the word 'design' with 'industrial art', 'decorative art' or 'applied art' to avoid its reductionist connotations and express greater practical and professional complexity. It also allowed the 'designers' to momentarily hijack the word 'art' to lend further status to their activities.

There was a serious disadvantage to this linguistic manoeuvring. 'Applied art' suggested that the profession was involved in the superficial addition of aesthetic measures to objects, rather than in the creation of the article itself. The 'third phase' of the early 20th century saw the retrieval of the word 'design' in order to separate it out again from art. Thus some individuals, in particular W.R. Lethaby, who was founder of the Design and Industries Association in 1915, struggled to keep the word 'art' at bay. Meanwhile, the Americans Walter Dorwin Teague, Raymond Loewy, Norman Bel Geddes and Henry Dreyfuss were calling themselves 'industrial designers' from the late 1920s, and it was mostly their influence that helped to re-establish the use of the word 'design' in Britain (Balcioglu 1994).

## THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF DESIGN

The word 'design', then, is intimately bound up in an historical process of the professionalization of its practice. It was important that it was recognized as a pursuit that required specific education and training and could thus meet certain expected standards of knowledge, intellect and skill. As we have seen, it did this by aligning itself with other intellectualized disciplines such as fine art and differentiating itself from other trades such as printing.

This professionalizing process has involved the proliferation of institutions dedicated to the promotion of various aspects of design and the systematizing or safeguarding of its practice. These have been state or regionally funded organizations, usually instigated by designers yet highly responsive to the greater demands of government policy. They have proliferated and by 2012, across Europe, for example, there were some 78 of these; among the European member states, only Bulgaria, Cyprus, Malta and Romania were without national representation for design (European Design Innovation Initiative 2012). These various design centres have therefore frequently altered in their aims and organization as state and regional policies have changed (Whitely 1991; Julier 1995), but they are also active in debating and shaping common understandings of what the professional status and requirements of designers might be.

Professional organizations to support and validate the work of designers that are funded mostly through member subscriptions have also proliferated. A calculation put the number of these



across Europe at 50 (European Design Innovations Initiative 2012), although the actual number is probably much higher. National and regional design centres may provoke a regional, national or even international homogenizing of understandings of design, while professional organizations may splinter and fragment these. As design has developed further specializations, so new professional design organizations have come about. Thus, for instance, with the rise of exhibition and museum design in the 1980s came a series of calls in the UK to establish an association for designers specializing in that field. This in turn would consolidate that discipline as a profession and help to identify its particularities, distinguishing it not merely as an extension of graphic or interior design.

The effectiveness of both national or regional institutions or independent organizations in securing and safeguarding the professional status for designers has been variable. From 1992 to 1994, for example, the UK Design Council facilitated the award of the British Standards Institution's 5750 mark to design consultancies. This awarded an 'objective' recognition of their qualities in management, client service and efficiency. Thus the institution of the Design Council was acting to establish professional standards in design. Take-up of this procedure among design consultancies was mixed, with some seeing the British Standards system as far too simplistic for application in the design industry (see, for example, Letters to *Design Week*, 23 October 1992).

Equally, the issue of 'free pitching', which arose in the late 1980s, showed that design practice in a market economy could also evade professional regulation. Free pitching involves a situation where a prospective client invites several consultancies to put forward design proposals for a scheme; out of this just one consultancy would be invited to complete the design project and collect a fee. In this system, consultancies risked spending time and resources for no financial return if they did not win the pitch. If the design industry had had a single institutional representative, then a blanket agreement among designers regarding the acceptability of this approach may have been arrived at. But with a proliferation of representative bodies, a consensus could not be achieved. Furthermore, free pitching might be resisted in buoyant times, but when there is a struggle to find clients, consultancies may not be so choosy. In whichever case, regulation, as design commentator Jeremy Myerson noted, 'points up the folly of trying to engrave regulation on tablets of stone for a business as fluid and fast-changing as this one is' (1990).

Fluctuating client demand and the design industry's own lack of institutional cohesion have meant that it has been largely unable to establish its own professional norms. This has been met by a pressure from below in terms of 'design entryism'. Briefly put, while other professions, such as law, architecture or accountancy, have norms and systems of conduct that are established by both the state and their own institutional arrangements – educational and professional bodies, in other words – design has no such normative systems. There is no minimum standard of attainment of training required for individuals to call themselves designers and practise commercially. This pressure from below has been exacerbated in recent years by the development of digital technologies. For instance, desk top publishing programmes provide easy-to-use templates for designing to different formats, thus obviating the need for a specialist to do the layout. New technologies have allowed a partial 'democratization' of design through allowing access to its tools: tasks which were once the preserve of trained specialists now become almost menial. Neither is there an agreed fee system for design services. The only known instance of such a situation was generated under Martial Law in Poland in the mid-1980s as a way of regulating entrepreneurial designers, and was short-lived and ineffective (Crowley et al. 1992: 87). This means that a rife

system of fee undercutting is possible. In a climate lacking any professional and educational norms, the 'outer edges' of design practice – either the highly conceptual ends of design consultancy bordering on other professions or the low end of print design and production – are vulnerable to 'entryism' by non-design specialists. In these circumstances there is even greater demand for the designer to identify his or her services as both professional and specialist.

The problems of professionalization are not restricted to the design industry. American sociologist Nathan Glazer (discussed in Schön 1991: Ch. 2) identified an historical split between what he called 'major' and 'minor' professions that are held in tension. Major professions have 'normative curricula' in their training in that there are agreed national standards in their content and assessment. They are also professionally regulated with standard agreed working procedures and norms of commercial conduct. They also often have an agreed, but not fixed, structure of pay. For example, in the USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the UK, as in many other countries, the architecture profession is standardized by registration or licensing requirements from a recognized institution. In the UK this is the Royal Institute of British Architects, and in the USA it is the American Institute of Architects. Norms of content and quality assurance in architectural education are under approval from its respective registering body. More rigorous codes of professional practice and conduct are enforced than those we have seen in design.

Meanwhile, the 'minor' professions, such as design, exhibit diverse curricula, are not professionally regulated, and their pay structures are largely market-driven. In many cases the minor profession historically has referred to a major profession for its research paradigms and its norms and procedures. At the same time the minor occupation has been engaged in a struggle to build its own discursive structures, to free itself of dominance and develop its own professional culture.

Wherever design is practised, professional organizations are established to promote and safeguard the activities of designers. For example, the UK sports the Chartered Society of Designers and the Design Business Association, as well as numerous regional groups such as the South Coast Design Forum, the Cornwall Design Forum, the West of England Design Forum and so on. But their chief focus is on the general promotion of design, rather than in the generation of self-regulatory norms or 'best practice' models. They do not lead to their establishment as normative bodies overseeing and validating professional and educational processes. The American Institute of Graphic Arts publishes 'Standards of Professional Practice' that its members sign up to. This covers broad business ethics issues such as responsibility to clients and to other designers. But it doesn't lay down any minimum expectation of educational achievement to practice or stipulate the levels of continuing professional development required. The Society of Graphic Designers of Canada publishes a broadly similar 'Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Graphic Designers', as does the UK-based Chartered Society of Designers. However, membership of such organisations is not a prerequisite to professional practice, although it may accord some status and recognition with clients.

Design has historically been held as a minor profession to architecture. Certainly this was the case in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. However, in more recent years, its points of professional reference have been more diverse. We have seen in Chapter 2 how the design industry has taken many cues in its management from advertising, marketing and management consultancy. Furthermore, while in the modern age some other 'minor' professions, such as nursing, are essential to social well-being, design's necessity has been a harder case to argue.

## DESIGNERS AS 'CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES'

Beside the questions of professional recognition through education systems and its own supporting institutions, it may well be that designers occupy a sociologically determined position. This means that this is not a permanent state, of course, and we must be cautiously aware that this is not going to be identical in all geographical contexts. If the self-image and status of designers are 'sociologically determined' in part, then the process of this determination will change according to the different cultural and social factors. However, Pierre Bourdieu provides a useful starting point for thinking about this.

As a social class, designers may belong to what Bourdieu calls the 'new petite bourgeoisie' (1984). For Bourdieu this class includes 'all the occupations involving presentation and representation' (1984: 359) that are involved in the 'symbolic work of producing needs' (1984: 365). Jobs in advertising and sales would fit this description, but so would some public sector or non-governmental organization (NGO) occupations in social and health care, such as marriage guidance, sex therapists, dieticians and vocational guidance, where the need for these services has to be argued in order to *create* their jobs. They are involved in 'needs production'. Bourdieu also notes that certain sectors of this new petite bourgeoisie, such as in media, advertising and design, by dint of working as 'cultural intermediaries' are taste-creators. Their own preferences tend to be in marginal culture such as the jazz, cinema and painting of the avant-garde. As such, these particular professionals tend to be the people who mediate 'cutting edge' cultural forms to a wider audience.

This identity may bring these 'cultural intermediaries' into conflict with any aspiration for solid, professional recognition, for, as adherents to this 'new petite bourgeoisie', designers only half-heartedly aspire to a *conservative* professional status. There is something of a self-marginalization going on here that runs through design's educational and commercial system. In their sociological analysis of British art and design school culture, Frith and Horne (1987) note that, unlike other subjects in higher education, art does not lay emphasis on academic qualifications (e.g. GCSEs, A-levels) for its entry requirements. Instead, much emphasis is laid on the student's portfolio and interview as evidence of their creative potential; beyond the basic skills of drawing and visualization, greater emphasis is laid on personality attributes in the selection process. Once the student is enrolled, the relative lack of strict timetabling, the provision of personal studio space instead of classrooms, and the emphasis on individual creativity alongside the cultivation of a group, studio-based atmosphere conspire to produce a working practice 'which assumes the status of lifestyle' (Frith and Horne 1987: 28).

As such the art school ethos separates itself from other educational cultures and actively resists incorporation into the mainstream. This has certainly been the case through much of Western Europe and the USA, but in the UK it has been particularly pointed. Frith and Horne argue that successive governments have attempted, and failed, to make art and design education more vocational, more 'responsive' to the needs of industry. Instead, the art school experience continues, largely, to promote a Romantic, marginal vision of itself, celebrating 'the critical edge marginality allows, turning it into a sales technique, a source of celebrity' (Frith and Horne 1987: 30). Thus the art and design education system itself is a sociologically determined recipe for the manufacture of Bourdieu's 'new petite bourgeoisie'. It continues to reproduce and promote specific attitudes to what being an artist or designer means and how their lives might be lived.

It is important to reinforce here that designers draw on this system to differentiate themselves from other professions and educations, to identify and distinguish themselves and their skills. But they are also involved in constant manoeuvrings to differentiate themselves from each other. This differentiating system draws on myths of individuated creativity inherited from art education in particular and fine art culture in general. I self-consciously use 'art' instead of 'art and design' for, in the first place, the design student's first contact in post-school art and design education is in the more generalized art-and-design foundation studies. Here the majority of tutors come from a fine art background and draw on individual (largely male) artist myths as a motivating factor (Clegg and Mayfield 1999). Furthermore, as we shall see in the next section, the system of design curatorship, publication and thus stardom draws predominantly on a fine art tradition of representation. In both these cases, the search for and production of novelty and difference are important.

Differentiation is also necessary for the commercial survival of design consultancies: after all, they are competing with each other in order to achieve market share. Ultimately this results in design consultancies who position themselves as brands rather as if they were products or services in a competitive market (Barnard 2000). This may be done through their reputation for thoroughness, efficiency and cost-effectiveness, their experience, breadth and depth of knowledge, but they may also use their creative profile. They have to be recognized as taste-makers. One of the techniques towards this aim is to 'curate themselves' through the production of catalogues, books and exhibitions about their own work. Similarly, Wally Olins suggested in an article entitled 'Getting New Business' in 1981 that an effective design consultant should ensure that they published articles 'in influential publications like *Management Today* or *The Director*' (Olins, quoted in Baker 1989: 276). Consultancies might also develop their own slogans (such as Elmwood Design's 'There Is No Finish Line') or mission statements as part of this self-identification process, or highlight a specialism within their own 'corporate' approach to designing. So, for instance, in 1998 design consultancy The Partners began to promote itself as a consultancy which offers 'third brain thinking': mixing the logical (left brain) with the intuitive (right brain). They claimed that designers are adept at combining these two characteristics and subsequently developed this 'third brain' concept for recruitment and teambuilding the consultancy for clients (Valentine 1998). Meanwhile, design consultants Michael Wolff and Piers Schmidt developed 'The Fourth Room', aimed at using creative design principles to help companies plan future strategy (Thackray 1999). In doing so, designers and design consultants are not only curating themselves, but also effectively writing their own histories: 'historicizing' themselves.

## HISTORICITY AND MODERNISM IN DESIGN DISCOURSE

Much of the history of design has been written and disseminated to effectively support this system of professionalization and differentiation. Many of the earlier design history texts focused on the successive attempts at public recognition of design as both a profession and a product (e.g. Carrington 1976), and this turns the narrative into a discourse of 'pioneering modern design heroes' in the face of a largely uninformed public. Part of the point of many of these texts was, then, to *inform* them and build a respectable status for their profession. This has privileged a particular process and product in design: the account of design has been progressively separated from the reality of its practice.

Central to the historiography of design has been the emplacement and refutation of modernism. This dates back to Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, first published in 1936. It traced a linear, progressive perception of design history, a steady development of architectural style, based on the work and aspirations of individual architects and designers, from the historicism of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement to the 'machine aesthetic' of Walter Gropius and the Modern Movement. In this book, Pevsner established the canon of 'form follows function' as the governing design ideology of the 20th century. His view no doubt reflects the dominance of German art and architectural history wherein, as Gropius himself professed, architecture is the leading edge in the development of design.

Pevsner's text is essentially teleological in that it strives to explain everything in terms of an historical inevitability. This again is derived from Pevsner's Germanic training. A Pevsnerean account therefore requires a selective, straight-line approach to history. Clearly his text privileges modernism as the apotheosis of design: the narrative builds towards its conclusion at the Bauhaus where the resolution of conflicts between art and industry are resolved. As Heskett remarks, '*Pioneers* imposed a linear interpretation upon an age that was diverse and plural in nature, taking part of a complex picture and representing it as the only significant element' (1986: 7). It should be noted that Pevsner was not neutral in this account: he was an editorial member of *Architectural Review*, a journal largely dominated by the modernist canon from the 1930s. Interestingly, as if to reinforce the 'design = modernism' equation, the book was published from 1949 as *Pioneers of Modern Design* rather than *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*.

While many subsequent texts rework Pevsner's narrative through different routes, the structure remains the same. Sigfried Gideon's *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*, published in 1948, eschews Pevsner's great designers' view to foreground the history of industry, technology and social customs. Nonetheless, the notion of progress towards a maturity guides the narrative. Likewise Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* of 1960 reworks notions of functionalism, but still discusses the same objects, people and lineage as Pevsner.

This system supports what John Walker calls 'the canon of design', whereby 'the baton of genius or avant-garde innovation passes from the hand of one great designer to the next in an endless chain of achievement' (Walker 1989: 63). Meanwhile, Richard Buchanan (1998b: 260) reminds us of the vast void between the aspirations of some reforming designers and the activities of the consuming public: the acres of publications on William Morris, the Bauhaus and so on, do not explain that public taste often went in quite the opposite direction! For example, while the design of tea-sets was a frequent design exercise for modernists (see Julier 1998), it does not explain why the world's biggest selling product of this type was Harold Hadcroft's distinctly historicist 'Old Country Roses' – featuring floral patterns and a neo-Rococo form – which has sold 100 million pieces since its introduction in 1962 (Woodham 1997: 217).

The representation of design has been dominated by the achievements of individuals in the first place; second, by the aesthetics and ideology of modernism; and third, via specific objects of a certain type. Product design in general only accounted for 8 per cent of design business in 1995–96 (*Design Week* 1996) and yet it has dominated the pages of design history books and the minds of design historians alike. Moreover, this narrow account is in itself dominated by the discussion of furniture design.

The cabinet or bureau was a standard exercise of the 19th century, when furniture was the preserve of cabinet-makers. In the 20th century the chair had taken its place: it had assumed an educational and emblematic status. The design of a chair's success can be judged both by the volume of production and sales and also by its 'publishability'. A highly successful chair, which returns to the designer between a 1.5 and 6 per cent royalty commission, can ensure a steady income to a studio. Furthermore, a chair may be readily turned into a two-dimensional photograph for publication in magazines. Indeed, a designer has admitted to me that he photographs his chair prototypes to see what they look like 'on the page'. Another product designer has agreed that he only does furniture to achieve some public profile for himself in order to get his name around. Designers use objects to ensure and mark their place in the 'canon of design'.

Certain events and locations conspire to support this system. The various international furniture fairs such as at Valencia, Cologne and, in particular, Milan provide an opportunity to reinforce a star system of designers rather like the film festivals of Cannes and the Oscar awards. Each of these events includes design awards, the presentation of new designer products, and are heavily marketed to design journalists. The system resonates into design curatorship. The Vitra Design Museum, opened in 1990, is exclusively dedicated to exhibiting the furniture of 'name' designers. Significantly, the museum's collection of over 1,200 chairs included few examples of industrially produced office chairs, which form the major part of global chair production. Instead, it was mostly devoted to more experimental forms that are manufactured on a small scale. London's Design Museum has mostly featured monographic shows, which furthermore support a modernistic conception of design: itself supported by the heavily retro-modernist 'white cube' of the building's architecture. Finally, the design shelves of high street bookstores are dominated by glossy monographs which reinforce this curatorship. One bestselling publication is an exhibition catalogue entitled *Pioneers of Modern Furniture* (Fischer Fine Art 1991), picking up on the Pevsnerean tradition. For its mediators, for its writers, journalists and curators, design comes to mean modernism, or even, modernist furniture. Thus in her round-up of a year's style, Abrahams suggests that 'the public are finally coming to appreciate the value of good design' (1998: 52). Her examples of 'good design' were all pieces of furniture that exist in the modernist pedigree of Charles Eames and Robin Day.

In all these cases the object of design is progressively reified. In other words, all aspects of the design, production and distribution are concentrated in the object as if they exist *in* it. The material form stands in for these invisible processes. Acknowledgement or analysis of these need not be explained otherwise. This reductionism in turn builds myths of design history by stripping 'its subject matter to an unproblematic, self-evident entity (Design) in a form that also reduces its historical specificity and variety to as near zero as possible' (Dilnot 1984: 7). Interestingly, a favourite motif in monographic design books and exhibition catalogues is to place the photograph of the object alongside a curriculum vitae of the designer. Subsequently, all one is left with is the designer's career situated within the historical 'canon of design' as a way of legitimating the present.

Thus the system of design publishing is exploited for the designer's own ends. More broadly, this form of self-representation can be called 'historicity': the designer is building on the way history is written in order to provide a discursive framework for and legitimate his or her own activities. Victor Burgin has called this 'history-writing as underwriting' (Burgin, quoted in Blauvelt 1994: 209). 'Historicity' is a term used most lucidly by the French sociologist Alain Touraine. He



uses it to define 'the set of cultural models a society uses to produce its norms and its domains of knowledge, production and ethics' (Touraine 1995: 368). Thus it is concerned with 'the creation of historical experience, and not of a position in historical evolution' (1995: 369). It is therefore subjective and open to contestation.

Meanwhile, Poynor argues that graphic design is either excluded from the history or 'gets a limited walk-on part' (1999: 7). Where graphic design has been represented, again this has been according to the Pevsnerean model. So, for example, Meggs's history of graphic design (1983) concentrates on the influences and styles of individuals, building a narrative tending towards the development of modernism and its dismantling in postmodernity. This process of history writing serves to separate graphic design out as a profession, as against its 'vernacular' activity carried out by anonymous contributors (Blauvelt 1994). It also provides a self-legitimizing structure for individuals to take up a moral position. For example, a letter from a graphic designer published in *Design Week* complained of 'design's very breath of life ... suffocated by perpetual mediocrity and highly questionable work' (Argent 1998). This despondent correspondent then went on to cite the work of 'design-greats' Paul Rand and Abram Games as inspiration for the revival of its 'integrity'.

Classical approaches to design history and discourse are thus restricted and restrictive in approach and the objects of its study. Walker raises the rhetorical question as to why design historians don't study military weapons, police equipment or sexual aids – surely three great domains of user investment in a planned product (Walker 1989: 33). Furthermore, as we have seen in the Chapter 2, the vast majority of designers are involved in the planning and implementation of communications. Design is about concepts, relationships, ideas and processes. It is also a collaborative venture which is supremely intradisciplinary in that it unites specialists in two- and three-dimensional communication, visual and material culture, and it is interdisciplinary in that it brings different professional domains together. As Victor Margolin notes:

Design history ... has not had much success in engaging with current practice. These issues involve new technologies, innovative collaborative efforts among design professionals, a concern with the impact of complex products on users and the relations between the design of material objects and immaterial processes. (1995b: 20)

## SECOND MODERNITY VERSUS DESIGN MANAGEMENT

It is interesting to note how the most virulent critiques of the way design history has been written – ostensibly by British design historians – have come from American-based critics (see Dilnot 1984; Blauvelt 1994; Margolin 1995b; Buchanan 1998b; all cited above in this chapter). It seems that they are sharply sensitized to the tensions between theoretical positions and practical action in design.

There is a manifest separation between the actual practices of the design profession and some of the discourses that are mustered to explain and legitimate itself. On the one hand, there is the complex, multidisciplinary industry, accustomed to teamwork, stylistic and operational flexibility and active in a broad range of domains of use and exchange. On the other hand, individual biography focusing on the designer's creativity and the modernist canon as

a benchmark of ethical and formal development predominate in the articulation of historical experience. This may explain how the same design critic can write, along with others, in the academic *Design Management Journal* about the need to develop a design education system which eschews individual creative genius in favour of nurturing teamwork and collaboration (Morris et al. 1998), while in the professional weekly magazine *Design Week* he gives a top ten of the century's best designers, apparently seeking homage to just those values rejected in the earlier article (Myerson 1999).

During the 1980s, some critics close to the design profession attempted to revise the 'canon of design' approach in the context of theoretical and commercial developments of that decade. An example of this was the publication of *Design after Modernism: Beyond the Object* (Thackara 1988), which amalgamated a wide range of essays dealing with technological and social changes and their impact on modernity, the city, questions of functionalism, manufacturing systems and design practice. It opened up a range of issues which the Pevsneristic reading was not equipped to consider. Perhaps given the breadth of subjects covered and writers contributing, this publication did not reach a consistent position. Nonetheless, the book clearly honoured the diversity of practices and positions available in design by this date.

At the same time in Italy a focused group of designer-cum-commentators developed a stridently coherent ideological stance and expressed it in a refined and sometimes impenetrable language that championed a second modernity in the void left by the retreat of modernism. This was most thoroughly articulated by Andrea Branzi (1984, 1988, 1989, 1993). In his published texts, Branzi acknowledges the end of the era of modernism as a unifying system of ideology, technology and aesthetics. Nonetheless, he does not relinquish the idea of modernity altogether, but rather he envisages its transposition into an 'ecology of the artificial'. In this 'second modernity', Branzi embraces the attributes of a post-industrial society – that flexibility, differentiation but also industrial internationalism will prevail. This productive system provides a basis for the exercise of a 'new tribalism', an 'ensemble of linguistic families' (1989: 38) in which cultural preferences – and thus tastes in design – are independent of ideological and national structures. The outcome is a 'new functionality of objects, that has to correspond to uncontrollable parameters of poetry, psychology and spiritualism' (1989: 38). Furthermore, he champions the Italian *Nuovo Design* (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 and of which he was a practitioner), which was based on small-scale production of goods with new technologies as emblematic of an appropriate response to this demand (1993: 127).

No doubt Branzi was attempting to develop a discursive field for design which acknowledged the ideological, industrial and commercial shifts of the late 20th century and which was not shackled by the need for any 'homage to modernism'. His American critics point out that while he identifies new criteria for designing, both in production systems and consumer demands, his proposals for a design to meet these are rooted in a Eurocentrism and that it is laced with a paternalistic bent (McDonough 1993: 129; Buchanan 1998a: 6). Flexible specialization, supported by information networks, may well cater for diversity of taste but Branzi, they opine, still suggests a design response from a position of high cultural goods. Buchanan points out how Branzi describes his second modernity 'as an artificial system based neither on the principle of necessity nor on the principle of identity but on a set of conventional cultural values that somehow make it possible for us to go on making choices and designing' (Branzi 1988: 71, and quoted in Buchanan 1998a: 5). Both McDonough and Buchanan are therefore wary of Branzi's position, interpreting



the 'us' in Branzi's statement as 'we designers'. To put it bluntly, the view is that market segmentation and diversity is okay as long as it falls within the taste parameters of a particular, refined aesthetic sensibility: you can have any shape kitchen implement you like as long as it comes from the catalogue of a north Italian manufacturer.

It is interesting that Branzi's critics come from a self-consciously declared American position. Both Buchanan and McDonough regard modernism as somewhat alien to the American conception and practice of design. Their objections are founded in a conception of the culture of design as being a differentiating and responsive activity in which overarching theorems are untenable. McDonough speaks of 'design's lack of theory, its vulgar link to real people's lives', and concludes that 'Design is, almost by default, too vast, too fragmented, too chaotic a system for benign management, for organized reform' (1993: 131).

While these American commentators come from a broad range of opinion and backgrounds, they do seem to promote a more pragmatic vision of design. Buchanan (1998a: 10) in particular draws the debate away from Branzi's linkage of culture as an expression of ideology to reintroduce it as an activity, as cultivation. He is therefore interested in the processes of design as a search for understanding and values. As such he emphasizes that 'the history of design in the twentieth century is not merely the history of products or of *personal styles of expression* or even of *broad cultural ideas*. It is also the history of the *character and disciplines of design thinking as they are formed through encounters with new problems*' (Buchanan 1998a: 13, original italics). In this way he sees design as being engaged in rethinking the nature of products in the context of action.

Buchanan is not necessarily specific about what he sees as 'products', stating that they can incorporate communicative symbols and images as well as physical objects (Buchanan 1998a: 13), but he also goes on to consider design in its role as shaping systems, environments, ideas and values. In this mature state it may be involved in the external presentation of goods and services to the public, but also in the internal systems that manage their development and distribution. He is thus shifting the debate from material form to immaterial processes, from design as a purveyor of objects to the shaping of structures and relationships.

There are some resonances with Buchanan's argument in Ezio Manzini's elaboration of the concept of 'dematerialization'. Manzini (1992, 1998) explores ways by which material goods may be supported or even substituted by immaterial systems (hence dematerialization). He proposes information-products (typified, for example, by internet-based entertainment), results-products (where their efficiency is measured by the 'absence' of other material products), community-products (for example, collective kitchens organized in the form of clubs) and duration-products (where, for instance, the manufacturer plays a role in the recycling or disposal of products) as strategies for integrated products and services (Manzini 1998: 50–7).

Manzini's position is blatantly forward looking and contains a strong dose of social and environmental advocacy. It is also tempered by an extensive understanding of materials and information technologies. By comparison, the rhetorics of much American design discourse, at least as evidenced in the *Design Management Journal*, are driven by pragmatic desires to maximize market share and profit. But in common with Manzini, there is a clear enthusiasm to move beyond the object to consider a range of interrelated communicative and material relationships. In the former case this might be expressed in terms of ensuring brand authority, loyalty or engagement through the careful ensembling of marketing, design and advertising. In the latter, Manzini

demands intervention 'on the strategies that determine the social and environmental quality of the changing world' (1998: 57). In whichever case, design is not regarded just as a profession or an historical result, but is seen as something that requires management. Its effectiveness is judged more in achieving the most appropriate combination and use of different disciplines and the best relationship with end-users. This contrasts obliquely with a discourse that invests its values solely in the formal characteristics of the object.

## SERVICE DESIGN

The backgrounds and overall aims of Branzi, Buchanan and Manzini discussed in the previous section are varied. What binds them is the consideration of the relationships between material, immaterial and human elements. In their different ways, they have tried to attend to shifting roles for design within contemporary economic, social and environmental realities. More specifically, these include a move to more flexible and responsive production methods, the impact of digital technologies and the fragmentation of social groupings and lifestyles. In their texts, they analyse, describe and develop a language for talking about design in these circumstances.

Their concerns are in shifting the discourse of design beyond products. But this doesn't mean to say that they envisage the total replacement of tangible with intangible items. Rather, their work has grown out of an increased interlocking of the material and immaterial in contemporary life. As described in Chapter 2, the rise to dominance of the service sector in post-industrial economies has been particularly important in reframing what design can do. It is mostly to do with this fact that these authors' considerations have come about.

Services are typically described by what they are *not*. Services are not like goods that can be exchanged and moved through various locations; they are regarded as involving processes (such as interacting with your bank) or performances (for example, going to the cinema or the theatre) rather than being about owning specific objects. They only come into being in their use (Morelli 2002). This contradistinction between goods and services is problematic, however, for it often implies that services are concerned only with intangible or immaterial elements (Vargo and Lusch 2004). All services involve material elements, though. These may be the tightly orchestrated within a brand identity, for example within fast food where the staff training systems, provision of ingredients, design of the kitchens, point of sale, customer seating, buildings as well as graphic communication elements all entail paying careful attention to the coherence of its material parts. Alternatively, the provision of stockbroking services, while dealing in the relatively intangible movement of money, still takes place within a constellation of objects and spaces, including office furniture and equipment (Mackenzie 2009).

From around 2000, a new specialism called 'service design' began to be defined. A strong literature on service design emerged (e.g. Saco and Gonsalves 2008; Kimbell 2009; Stickdorn and Schneider 2010), testimony to the interest that was shown from a variety of sources.

The rise of service design may broadly be seen as a response to the growth of the service sector in post-industrial economies. Its pedigree lies in a range of related specialisms such as branding, interaction design (which includes the design of digital interfaces and systems) and product design. In particular, it analyses and designs the user's journey through a service provision, qualifying the important moments of that journey as 'touchpoints' where particular attention is given



to the customer experience. These touchpoints may be, for example, the check-in desk or flight information provision at an airport. It therefore involves the orchestration of multiple artefacts (such as a combination of web, smart-card, products) and their positioning and sequencing. It is very much concerned with the *relations* and *exchanges* that go on between actors and artefacts within a system. In terms of design process, particular notice may be taken of small-scale innovations that users and producers of services create themselves, seeing that their 'unofficial customization' may be of significance and applicability that can be up-scaled.

Like branding, service design is often both inward- and outward-looking in that it attends both to the processes and experiences within the organization and its end-users, seeing that the interface between these two is highly important. However, service design takes the role of the design beyond a brand ethos to consider the interlocking of material design elements and the systems and structures by which a service is constructed and delivered more systematically. It follows, therefore, that in this model of practice design takes a more active role in corporate or public sector organization and their approach to management. While branding largely involves the production of organizational guidelines that usually have to be rigorously adhered to, service design's approach is looser and more iterative in its engagement with a problematic. The service design process involves lengthy periods of producer and user research, prototyping, and implementation as well as an ongoing adjustment of outcomes.

With regard to design discourse, the emergence of service design first demonstrates, again, the constant fragmentation and differentiation of design disciplines as new specialisms are developed. Second, service design takes design, in general, another step further in embracing considerations that lie beyond the discreet object and into the relations and arrangement of human and non-human elements. This more strategic role for design itself suggests a continual upgrading of the ambitions of its professionals as they seek not just further recognition for the importance of the forms they create, but also to be understood as consultants who intervene on the direction and structure of an organization, though very much as seen through the interface of service producers and users. Third, a fully resolved outcome is not always considered optimum in service design: as organizations, contexts and publics are in continual change, so is the design of services. This opens out the role and status of the designer in that it invariably entails longer client relationships. It also repositions the focal concern of designers to be in process and relationships.

## DESIGN THINKING

Another way by which design has overlapped into different fields and discourses, and also opened out a conception of what design might be, has been through so-called 'design thinking'. This acquired greater visibility from about 2005, as it began to be taught in a number of business schools such as the University of Oxford's Said Business School, Stanford University's d.school and the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, USA.

The adoption of design discourse in management schools may be read as an attempt to make themselves fashionable as design takes on an increasingly public significance. Alternatively, it represents an interesting admission that all management decisions are indeed design decisions. More compellingly, design thinking suggests that the techniques and formats of designing can be imported to management as a way of confronting challenges and stimulating innovations.

Kimbell (2011) provides a useful analytical taxonomy of theories of design thinking, noting that the term is understood in various ways and has quite a long history. First, she shows that design thinking has already been identified within theorizations of more traditional approaches to designing, for example in the analyses of Cross (1982), Schön (1991) and Lawson (1997). Here design requires a special kind of problem-solving ability, which is a skill in itself. This is where reflection-in-action is mobilized and the design problem itself gradually gets more refined through the processing of a project. Design thinking in this context is a 'cognitive style'; it is a way of perceiving, understanding and interacting with the world. It is what designers have always done, but it could be a skill that is taught in other fields.

Second, for Buchanan (1992), design thinking – as we've already seen in this chapter – forms part of a generalized way of grasping the nature of the modern world. Drawing on the work of John Dewey (1934), it is seen as an attitudinal framework that pays attention to aesthetic experience. Objects do not 'express'; rather, they are experienced. Buchanan opens out the field in which this takes place, although not necessarily being specific about what is experienced; but these can include signs, things, actions or thoughts. Furthermore, in this openness, the design problem itself may be constantly redetermined, as it is in itself under continual evolution. This notion is drawn from Rittel and Webber's (1973) notion of 'wicked problems'.

Third, Kimbell (2011, 2012) identifies a more recent wave of writing that distinguishes design thinking as an organizational resource to stimulate innovation. Martin (2009) sees design processes as a way of creating entirely new approaches and concepts rather than having to choose between alternatives. Brown (2009) is more specific about what designers do, claiming that their heightened sense of empathy allows them to understand what users find desirable, what is technically feasible and what is viable for the producing organization. In this paradigm, design thinking involves the processes of visualisation and prototyping, inferring a more exploratory approach through creatively trying out and testing ideas rather than being bound by the predetermined routines of process.

These three clusters of thinking on design thinking have, in common, a refusal to separate cognition and action. Thinking about something is embedded into doing something, and vice versa. As such, and according to Bauer and Eagan (2008), design thinking can provide a counterpoint to a perceived over-analysis that takes place in management. It was notable that design thinking should emerge from 2005, when it was increasingly recognized that traditional management teaching was not equipped to deal with the complex contemporary challenges of recessionary economies, resource scarcity and climate change. Design thinking also represents a growing appreciation of the contributions that design can make to confronting organizational and global dilemmas, even if much of this potential still remains to be explored and identified. Finally, as we have also seen with service design, the discourse of design shifts here to reflecting and embracing it as a problem processor rather than the solver of more fixed and easily observable challenges.

## CONCLUSION

While much of designers' work has been concerned with the prosaic rigours of running a business, on a larger level, some of their energies have been directed at establishing their occupation as a profession. In doing so they have reflexively constructed an image of themselves and the

design they produce for public consumption. The Pevsnerist writing of design history has partially supported this system in giving primacy to the individual designer in the shaping of goods and in the privileging of particular forms and types of design over others. The reception, use and consumption of design are afforded little attention in these accounts, even though, again, we have seen that design practice is intimately bound up in an understanding of its audience and market.

As we saw in Chapter 2, the production of design, however, involves a more complex system of alliances between groups of professionals and is directed at a much wider range of goods, services and spaces than some popular accounts recognize. In the face of these changes some attempts have been made to develop alternative frameworks for considering design. These may attempt to update and adjust traditional conceptions to a contemporary reality of modern manufacture, distribution and social pluralism. Alternatively, discussion has shifted away from material objects to a more integrative view of design, which in turn may challenge the designer's traditional role.

Ultimately, the history of the discourses of design evidences a 'layering up' of what design is perceived to do, how it is practised and the roles and statuses available to the designer. In other words, it is erroneous to think of discreet phases of design, where specific types of professional practice supersede each other. Attempts to reduce the whole of design to single definitions and logics are therefore unviable. Rather, it is subject to an accumulation of meanings and significances as it fills out various corners of everyday life in different ways.