

# Design Culture

# Design Culture

Objects and Approaches

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# CONTENTS

*List of image credits* vii

*List of contributors* viii

Introducing Design Culture

*Guy Julier and Anders V. Munch* 1

## **PART ONE** Developing design culture

*Mads Nygaard Folkmann* 11

1 Design culturing: Making design history matter

*Kjetil Fallan* 15

2 Taste and attunement: Design culture as world

making *Ben Highmore* 28

3 Embedding design in the organizational culture:

Challenges and perspectives *Alessandro Deserti  
and Francesca Rizzo* 39

4 Use in design culture *Toke Riis Ebbesen* 52

## **PART TWO** Addressing market and society

*Niels Peter Skou* 67

5 A brand for everyone *Sara Kristoffersson* 71

6 Buying into the future: A case study of a Danish brand of  
fashionable children's clothing *Trine Brun Petersen* 83

7 The Glowing Black of fritz-kola: Aestheticization  
in design culture *Mads Nygaard Folkmann* 96

**PART THREE** Positioning design professions*Hans-Christian Jensen* 111

- 8 Design Culture in the sex toy industry: A new phenomenon *Judith Glover* 115
- 9 Working from home: Fashioning the professional designer in Britain *Leah Armstrong* 131
- 10 On the professional and everyday design of graphic artefacts *Sarah Owens* 145
- 11 The fixing I: Repair as prefigurative politics *Gabriele Oropallo* 157

**PART FOUR** Locating design culture*Anders V. Munch* 171

- 12 Something old, something new, something borrowed: Relocating Kähler's brand heritage *Niels Peter Skou* 175
  - 13 Performing Turkish design in products, collections and exhibitions: Expanding the archive, seeking depth *Harun Kaygan* 189
  - 14 A theoretical straddle: Locating design cultures between national structures and transnational networks *Joana Ozorio de Almeida Meroz and Katarina Serulus* 203
  - 15 The challenges and opportunities of introducing Design Culture in Jordan *Danah Abdulla* 214
- Epilogue: Towards design culture as practice  
*Guy Julier and Anders V. Munch* 227

*Index* 231

# Introducing Design Culture

*Guy Julier and Anders V. Munch*

The term ‘design culture’ has emerged into regular academic and professional usage since around 2000. This has opened out in multiple ways, reflecting not just the varying locations where it is used and co-opted but also the different functions it carries. Placing itself across the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, it foregrounds the study of design in contemporary societies, paying attention to the networks and relationships between the domains of design practice, production and everyday life. This book is focused on opening it out for inspection through case studies and theoretical explorations.

Sharing some approaches and, indeed, much of its geniality with related fields of discourse and scholarly study, we nonetheless claim some distinctive territory for Design Culture studies as an academic focus of study. Design History has developed since the 1970s, broadening its historical and geographical scope, while maturing its own historical methods and key arenas of interest. Contrastingly, Design Culture<sup>1</sup> focuses intensively on design’s contemporary manifestations, seeking historically grounded understandings that are, nonetheless, relevant to emergent fields of scholarly enquiry and design practices.

Concurrently, Design Studies has grown from an initial concern with design processes to include its philosophies, theories and histories. Design Culture maintains a sharper emphasis on the deep understanding of design objects and their interrelationships with the multiple actors engaged in their shaping, functioning and reproduction. As such, Design Culture takes in – and contributes to – research and discourses in business and management studies, human geography, anthropology, media and communications studies and cultural studies, to name but a few of its cognate disciplines. It may be taken to be more outward looking and permeable in its disciplinary borders.

Design Culture goes beyond the classic dispute between Design Studies as understood in the United States and Design History as having emerged in the United Kingdom (Margolin 1992). This dispute has revolved around whether scholarship in Design Studies or Design History should serve design practice (as classically understood) or whether they should forge an independence

as stand-alone discipline (Huppertz and Lees-Maffei 2013; Fallan 2013). Contrastingly, while this book serves as an investigation of scholarly possibilities within Design Culture studies, we do not necessarily take it to represent a bounded, singular and consistent discipline. And this is consonant with the field of design itself in contemporary society. It reaches into many parts of society and culture, and there are, now, many more actors, professions and scientific disciplines that are part of its constitution, rendering normative methods and epistemologies redundant. For example, the rise of so-called user-experience (UX) design since around 2010, that engages ethnography, Human–Computer Interaction (HCI), human factors and ergonomics, data analytics, digital coding and many other intersecting specialisms, underlines the ever shifting boundaries and porosity of what design might involve. Thus, in its scholarly practices, Design Culture shares, for instance, its very broad scope with Cultural Studies of design (Highmore 2009) and Material Culture studies. But it is also informed by shifting professions, institutions and debates of design – the ‘designer culture’, if you like (Sparke 1986).

When Kjetil Fallan (2010) argues that Design History will get further impact on a broad field of historical and cultural sciences by striving towards a ‘history of design culture’ or a ‘cultural history of design’, it is in close dialogue with Design Culture. The main scope of Design Culture is the more recent developments and constitutions forming our contemporary design culture rising since the 1980s and 1990s showing new densities, convergences, mediations and disciplinary constellations both inside and beyond the professional cultures of the designers. Historical antecedents or re-uses, however, may also come into view to open out conceptions of design culture. As an example, the recent so-called New Nordic Design seems to be a re-performance of the values of Scandinavian Design of the 1950s, but, at the same time, it is also driven by new kinds of firms and ‘design-editors’ that produce and promote their outputs globally and depend on contemporary approaches to branding and new media platforms (Skou and Munch 2016).

It is not a coincidence that Design Culture studies has grown at the same time that conceptions of what design is and could have developed dramatically. We have moved beyond solely regarding design as concerned with singularities, be these spatial, material or visual or the serial reproduction of objects. Design, these days, also includes the orchestration of networks of multiple things, people and actions. This may, for instance, be found in brand strategies where an identity is deployed across several interlinked platforms. Systems that bring products and services together, such as cycle sharing schemes or smartphones, require complex interweaving of material and immaterial artefacts. Or, for example, it is manifested in city programmes where architecture, design and cultural planning are configured as part of urban boosterism (Julier 2005).

In such articulations, design cultures become the objects of study, rather than the individual objects per se that populate them. We place the term in

the plural here in recognition of the multifarious scales through which these exist. Thus, for example, they may operate through national or professional systems and identities, or may exist as implicit or explicit defining sensibilities among firms or groups. Each case may have its distinctive features and dynamics but these are not necessarily independent of each other. They exist and act in relation to each other.

At the same time, design cultures not only involve distributed and multilevel thinking and action in and about design, but also new dispositions and sensibilities on the part of their publics. In this, and in agreement with Marres and Lezuan (2011), we see publics as multi-scalar entities that are constituted through ‘socio-material settings of engagement’ rather than ‘discursive, linguistic or procedural terms’. Everyday life is ‘object-dependent’ (Marres and Lezuan 2011: 490). By extension, the social practices that are held within particular publics are entangled with their material constituent parts. Design cultures come into being through the agency of their objects and people. In seeing them as ongoing constitutions and re-constitutions, they are both beings and becomings. And this is where we see the shift from design to design culture. This takes us from the consideration of singularized objects of design to multiple assemblages and also requires a shift of conception. This also takes us from linear flows of meaning to complex, multi-linear ecologies that involve ongoing interactions between design and its human and other participants.

Design cultures offer themselves as unstable, dynamic and variegated homologies. In this, they are objects for study. They invite a particular form of disciplinary enquiry that, at the same time, reflects their plurality in the ways by which this is done. Finally, the proximity of the researcher to their everyday qualities combined with a necessity for their macro-contextual understanding produces, we suggest, a particular form of practice. Design culture may be both an object and a discipline.

Let us, for the time being, take the first two propositions and explore what they have to offer.

## Design culture as an object

If a design culture is to be viewed as an object in itself, then it invites particular methods of enquiry. Its constituent parts may be analysed in a direct, transactional sense. Visual or material ‘reading’ may take place. But as a whole, a design culture requires a more extended and, perhaps, embedded mode of investigation. It is something to be inhabited, to move within, following the connections and flows through it so that its existence isn’t just understood as the sum of its individual nodes but, in addition, the movements and translations that take place between them. The researcher thus becomes the curious traveller, engaged in multi-linear micro-journeys, with or without maps.



AQ: Please confirm the deletion of "or" in the statement "Distinctive trajectories or..." or is there missing text after "or".

As we have already noted, these ecologies exist in different scales and through distinct networks, from the home to the neighbourhood to the city to the nation and beyond. Indeed, they may not even be spatially bounded as we think of their diasporic, interlocking or hybrid instantiations. And within them, different constellations of people, interests and objects take place. Distinctive trajectories and dynamics are enacted within them.

This is partly an issue of representation that is still being argued out. Many design museums question whether the exhibition of singularized objects does justice to contemporary conceptions of design in society (Farrelly and Weddell 2016). A 2016 exhibition on ‘mediagenic’ chairs showed the massiveness of media representations, brand space stagings and social media appropriations of just a few, popular chairs – and raised the question, why should such huge material not be covered by the acquisitions of design museums to document contemporary design culture (Satell 2016)? Popular design publications continue to provide photos of reified objects, images and spaces, floating in space. At the same time, a new language of design photography attempts to ‘naturalize’ the design environment through showing it in use, held in moments of everyday life (Bouchez 2013). In both these cases, the challenge of representation is moving towards an anthropological account.

But if we release ourselves out of the museum halls or from the pages of the design magazine – if we turn ourselves back into the wild outside these rarefied environments – what is this network of design culture? What are its limits? How do its routes of enquiry differ, say, from media culture, architecture culture, the art scene or, even, political activism? There are three broad differences, as follows:

First, the *things*, the people, the institutions and so on (taken together we mean the actors) that would be the points of contact within a design culture field that would differ as would the practices among these. We’re not talking about advertisements, buildings or works of art here that might be part of the constitution of media culture, the world of architecture or the art scene. So the routes between the constituent parts of design culture would differ too. For example, Jensen et al. (2017: 144–5) identify riding on a subway as involving ‘trains, platforms, compartment design, gateways, ticket systems, CCTV systems, station architecture etc. ... [and] fellow passengers, train stewards, newspaper agents, coffee shop attendants, maintenance people and subway police’. Overlaps with other cultural assemblages do exist (news media or food retail for instance, in this case), but this example illustrates the heterogeneity and extensity of a system that may be regarded as forming of a set of (not necessarily consistent or stable) intentions, practices and experiences.

Second, and at the same time, design culture interlocks with these other cultures, providing form and content to them in ways that these others do not necessarily do for each other. In other words, design culture involves a measure of dependency and contingency on other fields of cultural practice

while also having its own field of practice. For example, as a profession architecture largely constitutes itself through distinct and normative understandings and knowledge-fields. Contrastingly, as a professional field, design defines itself relationally to other knowledge domains (Wang and Ilhan 2009). Without a singular internal professional definition, designers largely identify their work as a service to other interests (users, consumers, firms, governments etc.).

Third, design more obviously (though not necessarily explicitly) attempts to reach into multiple domains of everyday practice through its varied materializations. The other ‘cultures’ listed above are more or less optional. We can skip art exhibitions, avoid television and digital media, ignore advertisements and act contrarily to the schemes of architecture and planning. But design relentlessly intervenes into the quotidian world so that it becomes our world and we become in it.

This process of becoming relates to the complexity of the contexts within which design situates itself. Design’s multiple publics, objects and processes require it to be in a constant ‘unfinished’ state (Knorr Cetina 2001). Such is this complexity that design’s relations are in constant flux. Therefore, if design defines itself in relation to its contexts that are – in the contemporary economic and social circumstances – always on the move, so design is too. In turn, design contributes to this dynamism and is shaped by it (Brassett 2015).

Attempts to understand design cultures are therefore attempts to understand not only their internal logics and illogicalities, but their relationship to other ‘cultures’. But they are also accounts of how these relations are performed in dynamic ways. It makes for an unstable discipline as we discuss below.

## Design Culture as discipline

Following Thompson (2016: 322–3), we identify a discipline as having three key features. First, there is a unity in a discipline’s ‘problematics, categories and techniques of investigation’. In this there is a singular and uniform object of study, in this case, a (or multiple) design culture(s). Second, there is an agreed degree of rigour that is in force and is applied to its methodologies and procedures. Third, the discipline is autonomous in that it maintains an intellectual and procedural territory that is not subject to encroachment from other disciplines. In this, it carries its own disciplinary institutions such as identified departments, conferences and publishing infrastructure.

Given the unfolding, contingent and dynamic nature of design culture, it is perhaps difficult to imagine it as a unitary academic discipline at the same time. Design Culture, at least to date, shares the three prerequisites that are described above, but only partially. Degree courses in the Design Culture exist in several European universities. They largely function to educate their

students in an understanding of the complexities and meanings of design in contemporary society. However, none of these courses existed before the year 2000. Some of their pedigree, particularly among the academics who staff them, is mostly in a development from the delivery of core 'history and theory' components to practice-oriented design courses. Others come through Cultural Studies, Art History or other branches of the Humanities or Social Sciences.

Thus, in many respects, its background is historically constituted and formed through its relations to other disciplines (e.g. design studies, design history, media and communications). And it is often positioned in a balance between traditional academia and new innovative sciences. To establish Design Culture studies or research at a design school, a museum, a polytechnic or university, a business school or in the humanities is a very different disciplinary act, poised between various, and sometimes competing, intentions and aspirations of the academy. As such, we suggest that it might just have the capacity to side-step intense bureaucratization where, for example, canonical texts are established in order to provide a tick-box level of legitimation for study in order to meet targets, provide performance indicators and show that the job is being done (as in, 'I've read this or that so I now know how to *do* and evaluate my work within this academic discipline') (Smith 2005).

The hybridity of Design Culture was underlined by the 2014 conference Design Culture: Object, Discipline and Practice that took place at the University of Southern Denmark in Kolding, Denmark. This book stems from that encounter. It was mostly populated by specialists from other fields such as design studies, design history, anthropology or media and communications who, nonetheless, gathered around a core academic support of and concern for Design Culture studies. Equally, the peer-reviewed journal that currently comes closest to Design Culture studies would be *Design and Culture* that, however, also exists as the official journal of the American-based Design Studies Forum and includes, for instance, articles about design history and design philosophy.

What kind of disciplinarity does this suggest, then? It seems that Design Culture embraces three kinds.

Following Barry and Born (2013), we may take *multidisciplinarity* approach to involve bringing several distinct disciplines together to focus on a particular object from the point of view of their particular specialism. In our case, we may see design culture filtered through the lenses of human geography, media and communications, sociology, economics, management, philosophy, design history and so on. If these viewpoints are aggregated and synthesized then there is an *interdisciplinarity* going on. The strength of the specific disciplinary contributions to the object of analysis that they lend is maintained; at the same time their relationships are reassembled and reconfigured. Design Culture studies, however, becomes disruptive of the integrity of separate disciplines when practiced in *trans-* or *cross-disciplinary*

mode. In this, new ways of understanding, knowing and feeling may be enacted. And in this, new purposes for a discipline may be discovered.

These three kinds of disciplinarity echo the notion of design culture as an object, as a discipline and, as we later expand in our Epilogue to this book, as a practice. A design culture as a singular, yet complex, object with its specific materialities and socialities that can be studied from various viewpoints suggests a multidisciplinary approach. A design culture as something that has contingency and relationality with other cultural assemblages suggests the synthesizing processes of interdisciplinarity. As something that involves transcendence and disruption of everyday worlds, so a cross-disciplinarity in Design Culture studies engages new ontologies and epistemologies.

In short, then, Design Culture studies is a complex hybrid of voices, approaches and interests. As a mongrel of academia, it can also be undisciplined. And as such, it becomes propositional rather than reactive, climbing out of its service-mode to other disciplines (in particular, traditional design practice, institutions and business) to posit its own, particular form of practice.

## Contributions of this book

This book might not present all aspects of the continuously evolving design cultures. It may not represent all mentioned disciplines contributing to Design Culture either. But it presents a wide range of different approaches to the manifold challenges and possibilities of design cultures between private domesticity and public spaces, between users, professions and economic stakeholders, between markets, medias and museums.

The chapters of the first part, 'Developing Design Culture', explain the relevance and importance of investigating design to understand our contemporary culture. They point to general developments that design is part of in society: sustainability, digitalization and changes in the environments of everyday life, organizations and understandings and experiences of use. They also discuss the development of Design Culture as a disciplinary field in relation to Design History, Cultural Studies, Material Culture and the Management Sciences. In so doing, this part refines and positions Design Culture studies.

The chapters of the second part, 'Addressing Market and Society', present different understandings of design culture as cases, where design approaches market and society in different ways. Designers, and to some extent firms that are highly profiled in design culture, occasionally express reformist approaches to the relations of market forces to product culture as part of a cultural critique. This means that both marketing and professional discourses have introduced many intricate ways of addressing relations of design, market and its impacts on society, showing configurations of political agendas, professional ideologies, consumer segments and subcultures, all of which characterize design culture.

The chapters of the third part, ‘Positioning of Design Professions’, look at how designers act according to the challenges of the professional and commercial fields of design. As designers don’t count as a profession in a classic, well-defined sense and there is a heavy competition from other professional actors with different educations as well as non-designers, designers have constantly to position themselves and their educational background in the liberal market of design services. A tracking of this continued positioning in an institutional and professional field is an important contribution to the mapping of design culture.

The chapters of the fourth part, ‘Locating Design Culture’, position design culture in different geographical contexts and relations – local, national, regional and global. As such it provides an additional opportunity to push Design Culture studies beyond traditional parameters and outwards toward a mesh of transnational relations beyond the heavily branded design nations as well as beyond the Western, modernist design canon. The cases come from Denmark, Turkey, Belgium, the Netherlands and Jordan, but go beyond the frame of the nation-state in different ways, as transnational constellations and national conditions alter. The last chapter exemplifies design culture in the context of the Arab region by looking into design education and practice in Jordan. It suggests that the introduction of Design Culture studies and research would make designers more aware of their local and regional contexts and conditions – and in this way work against the Westernization and blind borrowing from Western design that characterizes both institutions and business.

This look into future possibilities is taken up in our Epilogue, where we reflect on the question of, how Design Culture could be said, not only to find its way as a discipline, but also into different kinds of practice in business and society. We see the development of design culture as object, discipline *and* practice as a vital source of understanding, critique and action in addressing the many challenges of contemporary life. This may take place in both local and global ways and in all its complexities and simplicities.

## Note

- 1 In this introduction we use ‘Design Culture’ (upper case) to signify the academic discipline and ‘design culture’ (lower case) to signify it as a phenomenon. As editors, we have left this issue of capitalization to be employed for other authors in this book as they see appropriate.

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