

The Social Life of Design

THE DESIGN OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Most ordinary people do not experience their social worlds as either planned or designed. They experience these worlds as given, as external to them, as relatively fixed, and as largely indifferent to their own preferences or desires. In reality, however, daily order is produced by social actors who elect to comply with certain rules, fulfill certain obligations, meet certain expectations, and make various deliberate social efforts. Of course, others choose to contest or violate these expectations, but that is a part of the subtlety of human social life.

Social scientists have looked at these activities in a variety of interesting ways. Some, usually anthropologists, have stressed the force of culture and the local understanding of a world that people are brought into as very young children and whose prejudices they quickly take to be part of ordinary life itself. Others, more sociologically inclined, stress the place of roles, statuses, interactions, and institutional rules, which are likewise learned in the process of what is tautologically called socialization. For some great thinkers, like Émile Durkheim, God was just another name for the moral force of society, experienced as so powerful, abstract, and unquestionable by individuals that they projected it into the cosmos as the sacred. Others, like Charles Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and Erving Goffman, were more matter-of-fact, and saw self and society as engaged in a perpetual give-and-take in which actions and reactions acted as a generative mirror, both teaching individuals how to behave and producing social order in its institutional forms. More critical thinkers, like Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, saw in the dramas of ordinary social life the workings of deeper machineries of class, psyche, and power. But none of them quite characterized the production of daily life as an endeavor that requires effort and imagination as well as an uncommon amount of deliberate investment. Those social scientists who today work in the idiom of rational choice come closest to this recognition, but they suffer from the dogma that all the world's a market and that those ordinary actions that assure and create social order are largely comparable to those that govern the behavior of economic actors transacting in the marketplace. This is the irrational narrowness of rational choice theory.

My own view of the design of social forms took shape in the mid 1990s, when I was trying to understand globalization and found myself forced to

ponder its antonym—the local.¹ I saw then that locality itself was a creation that required effort, imagination, deliberation, and persistence, and that it was quite the opposite of a default state or condition. To capture this insight, I coined the phrase “the production of locality,”² which I took to refer to the imaginative work that ordinary persons, throughout history, have engaged in to assure that today was as near to yesterday as it was possible to make it. This insight led me to see that the local was as much of a deliberate human construction as the global, and that the differences were differences of scale, texture, volatility, and participation rather than of kind. More important, this was the beginning of my own understanding that even the simplest societies, the ones that looked most stable, traditional, unreflective, and unquestioned, were products of continuous effort on a daily basis. Ordinary life was in fact the product of unrelenting efforts to make sure that catastrophic change, entropy, disenchantment, and weak attachment did not take the toll they so easily could. Thus, daily life in even the simplest societies must be seen as an outcome of design.

From this point of view, design is only partly a specialist activity, confined to an artisanal or digital class, and is better seen as a fundamental human capacity and a primary source of social order. This claim is not as farfetched as it may appear. In most social sciences, social order is not treated as a primary product, but rather as a byproduct of established systems of etiquette, law, religion, or some combination thereof. And byproducts are not usually seen as results of design.

If we change our perspective and view social order as a primary product, it becomes easier to see it as the most important result of design and as a capacity that we all exercise, all the time. In building our careers; in fine-tuning our dealings with our parents, children, and peers; in deciding how hard to party or how selflessly to work; in how to save and how to spend: we are daily engaged in deploying our energies, our resources, our ideas, and our bodies so as to accomplish results that meet our aspirations. These may include hard bodies, good wines, and long vacations as well as such social ends as strong friendships, fruitful careers, and social change. These design processes are the backdrop and social ground from which professional design, the making of iPods and glassware and houses and book covers and toys and watches, actually takes off.

DESIGN IN THE *LONGUE DURÉE*

Human history, from this perspective, could be re-written as a history of design. The ethnographic story of small, pre-state societies is primarily the story of habitation, hunting and gathering, marriage and reproduction, all done with

1 A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

2 Ibid.

enormous attention to the relationship between habitat, technology, climate, and social priorities. The story of pre-state societies is never only a matter of simple survival (and survival is hardly ever simple); it is also the story of intricate forms of tool making, body art, ritual creativity, storytelling, and mythmaking of which we might well be envious today. True, not all pre-state societies were successful, and many succumbed to disease, internal conflict, or massive environmental catastrophe. But that is no reason for us to be contemptuous of the immense range of design solutions found by low-tech societies throughout human history, any more than global warming today leads us to despise silicon chips or the genome project. And early state societies, which preceded the colonial, imperial expansion of Europe—whether in Latin America, Africa, Asia, or the Islamic world—were veritable treasure houses of design, both quotidian and spectacular. Mayan calendars, Chinese silk garments, Islamic calligraphy, and Benin sculpture existed simultaneously with Australian aboriginal kinship systems (that still defy our ability to analyze their intricacy), South Asian mathematical and philosophical systems (which rival any the world has seen), Pacific systems for trade and exchange (that showed exquisite calibrations of status and reciprocity across large distances), circumpolar adaptations to sub-zero temperatures (which required human beings to buttress sociality against the harshest possible climactic conditions), and so on.

Such examples can be indefinitely multiplied from the anthropological record. They show us that long before industrial capitalism, human beings designed sociologies and cosmologies of immense intricacy and did so with an infinite sensitivity to the ever-changing equilibrium between habitat, environment, technology, and social forms. Like all designs, the social designs of these pre-industrial societies were neither perfect nor unchanging. They sometimes led to dysfunctional outcomes, harsh environmental consequences, brutal forms of warfare and gender exploitation and institutions of oppression including *corvée* labor, slavery, domestic abuse, and tyrannical exploitation. But these are still part of the story of human social life.

With the first signs of the industrial revolutions of the West and the closely allied ventures of Western sailors, merchants, and warriors in search of wealth and power across the globe, a new chapter unfolds in the history of social design, one in which the capacity of new machines to speed up manufacture, trade, and transport inaugurates a new relationship between design, fashion, and the market. This change, which has a variety of tributary histories, is not wholly or solely a product of changes internal to the Atlantic world. It picks up great speed in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, which witness the largest comprehensive world systems known to human history, powered largely by the incessant demands of industrial capitalism. Many of the massive technologies for the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities on a global basis were tied to human interests in new tastes (sugar,

pepper, tobacco, tea, to name a few) and to the search for cheaper ways to fulfill basic needs, like textiles in England in the nineteenth century. This period, roughly from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, inaugurates the birth of fashion in its contemporary form, and thus also of "design" in its current sense.

As design and fashion become quasi-independent forces closely connected to the movements of capital and the rapid growth of specialized technologies for manufacture, the world of commodities undergoes a galactic expansion. Starting in about the seventeenth century in Europe, we may properly begin to speak of the "birth of the consumer" and the worldwide reign of the commodity. Over the last four centuries or so, the design of social forms has grown gradually separate from the world of professional design, the latter becoming connected to markets, money, and merchandising with the former becoming substantially the province of rulers, administrators, and armies.

What is relevant to this context is that this period witnessed the gradual emergence of design, fashion, and merchandising as forces with a life of their own, a change which tends to obscure the fact that ordinary human beings continue to be designers of social forms, especially of those forms that define and reproduce the everyday. This is also the period, roughly the epoch of industrial capitalism, in which we can begin to observe a double gap: first a gap between professional design and the quotidian design of everyday life; and second, the subject of a later part of this chapter, a growing gap between design, as substantially confined to the realm of the marketed commodity, and *planning*, an activity connected with cities, states, and empires.

OBJECTS AS AGENTS

The relationship between objects offers a different angle on the tension between fashion, style, and rapid change, on the one hand, and old wealth, status, and lifestyle conservatism, on the other; it is full of paradoxes. At the heart of this tension is our commonsense view of the relationship between the things that surround us and the objects that we design. To refine this commonsense view requires a deeper understanding of the grammar of objects, a topic to which I will return.

It may help to recall the broad argument of chapter 1 about the relationship between things, values, and knowledge (originally formulated in 1986). That argument helped to reshape certain key ideas in the cultural analysis of material life; and among these, now fairly well absorbed into our commonsense, are the following propositions. The first was the idea that things are hard to classify, for example, as being gifts rather than commodities because they are ever-changing. The second idea was that this shape-shifting quality was both cultural, in the sense that objects could be seen to have biographies, lives, and trajectories;

and social, insofar as these biographies were themselves products of long-term shifts in regimes of value. The third perhaps had the most widespread traction, and that was the idea that things could usefully be regarded as having not just itineraries, but also intentionalities, projects, and motives independent of their human handlers.

Now, twenty-five years after these observations have been refined and extended in numerous directions, and across a broad range of disciplines, we are all suffering some degree of object fatigue. And just as we seem to have rung the changes on every canonic problem of this field, from iconography to garbology, we are also faced with changes in the spaces of technology, sociality, and media that appear to challenge the very commonsense of our previous understandings of materiality. Among these are virtualities of every type: mediations without distance, memories without time, clones without originals, and ersatz socialities beyond our pre-cybernetic imaginations. Furthermore, the big ideas of the 1980s and 1990s, loosely gathered together under the label of “post-modernism,” seem themselves to have been old-fashioned humanist efforts to contain the coming anarchy of things. So it seems like a good time to revisit the matter of materiality, so as to open up a new line of thinking that leads from the social life of things to the connected issues of fashion, design, and planning. None of these topics had played much of a role in my earlier thinking, and one of them—namely, fashion—had come to interest me in relation to the subject of consumption, which I partially addressed in *Modernity at Large*.

Let us revisit the idea of the social life of things. My starting point here is Bruno Latour’s argument, developed over the last decade or so, which amounts to a playful and damning critique of social science, based on his earlier readings of the archive of sociology and anthropology. The critique is simple: if the things that surround us, especially the machinic things, can be shown to have entelechies of their own (swinging doors, subway trains, and the like), may it not be said that social science has committed a huge anthropomorphic sin by omitting nonhuman actors from its consideration, what Latour called “the missing masses”?³ And if the confusion of human sociality with all sociality was a huge oversight, what must we do about it? The broad answer shared by Latour and Michel Callon was to announce and exemplify the practice of what they call “Actor Network Theory” (ANT), their major claimant to being the next big idea in social science.

I offer here some thoughts about my unease with the Latourian dispensation about the sociality of things. I have no objection to that part of Actor Network Theory that overlaps with important arguments from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,⁴ extends the insights of *The Social Life of Things*, and

3 B. Latour, “Where are the Missing Masses? Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” in W. Bijker and J. Law, eds., *Shaping Technology, Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

4 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,

seeks to develop the idea that the things around us make claims upon us that are not mere ventriloquial socialities, reflecting our own claims upon them. But Actor Network Theory takes a huge sociological tax on earlier ideas of sociality in order to extend the idea of sociality to the empire of things. The tax is this: like all pendulums, ANT has now fixed itself at the other end of the pendulum, and, in its preoccupation with the agency of the device, has evacuated from its accounts of sociality all the things that make human sociality so fascinating in the first place. These occluded elements include: ethical anguish, irrational exuberance, self-fulfilling prophecies (or failed ones), hypocrisy, sour grapes, rising expectations, bottomless wants, and selective receptivity to propaganda, to name just a few. In other words, the cost of extending the idea of sociality in this manner to the empire of things has been to require a truly narrow picture of sociality, shorn of those things that make human sociality worth studying. Some of these criticisms have been raised by other critics of ANT.

The key site of the occlusion of the properly human—or the interestingly and distinctly human—in ANT is to be found in its massive dependence on the idea of the “network,” which has now spread from the physical and biological sciences to anthropology, economics, epidemiology, geography, and a host of other social sciences over the last fifty years or so. The image of the network has doubtless had many positive effects on a social science that tended to be atomistic on various scales ranging from individuals to nations. But this benefit has come with a cost, which is the view of the nodes in any network as being relatively passive points of transfer and connectivity. This view has had its own problematic effects because it predisposes us to ignore the possibility that the materiality of nodes makes its own active demands.

The primary problem with images of object agency, network, and the device is not just that they tend to lose the soul of objects, in spite of their intention to reanimate the object, but that they have no real grip on the deepest problem of objects, which is their capacity to generate contexts. The problem of context is one of the black holes of current social science, and this black hole opens new possibilities for thinking about design processes from a social and cultural point of view. This argument about context is what I turn to next.

OBJECTS AND CONTEXTS

We might begin by adapting John Donne’s famous line: no object is ever an island, entire unto itself. But here we need to make a small definitional rule. Objects are not things; objects are *designed* things. Or more loosely, objects are

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987; W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005; J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

things as humans have brought them into the orbit of social life. Thus, some trees are objects, while others are just things. To recollect the philosopher George Berkeley, who famously discussed trees falling without anyone hearing them, we may say that such falling trees, outside the human gaze, are merely things. But other trees—the objects of logging, painting, dreaming, pruning—are indeed objects, in the double sense of being objects of a human interest and objects in some sort of social milieu.

If this distinction makes sense, it is not hard to see that objects, due to their long association with human projects and contexts, rarely present themselves in isolation. In this regard, they are like words. They appear in sets, and those sets have some sort of logic. The reason for this is that design is essentially about making categories, sets, and sequences. Design is not about isolated objects.

Before I elaborate on this observation, let me note that the single biggest error in designer thinking is to imagine that the designer works over a single type of object: a watch, a building, a shirt, a video game. This may be called the illusion of singularity, produced by a mistaken overemphasis on the idea of the designer as an artist. It is not, of course, that there is no connection between design and art; it is rather that design mediates the relationship between art, engineering, and the market, with the last two stressing repetition and commodification, the first stressing singularity. The slippage here is from designing a category of object to designing a truly singular member of that category—for example, a watch that is one, and *just* one, of a kind. The extreme step in this “one of a kind” thinking is that it can lead to an interest in producing not just a brilliant new brand, but an object that is truly singular, which only one consumer can buy, own, and enjoy. At this point, the designer has become totally identified with the artist, and has lost his or her links to merchandising and engineering, which are the hallmarks of design as a vocation.

For now, let us simply observe that all objects are designed and that design always implies sets and sequences. Think of an object—any object—and try to think of it all by itself. This is a very hard mental exercise. Objects invariably call forth associations with other objects, sooner or later. A shirt evokes a tie. And then a tie evokes a collar, a collar evokes a bone, a bone evokes muscle, a muscle evokes yet other things. Start somewhere else. Consider the moon, the subject of so much poetry, music, and human observation. Can you think the moon without thinking sooner or later about stars, and once stars enter the picture, can the rest of the visible cosmos be far behind? Or consider something more ordinary, but nevertheless the product of human intervention, like salt or steel. These dumb objects, lumps of materiality, also come with their links, their associations, their sequences, their trajectories, their families of affinity and affiliation.

At this point, it might be objected that I am reinventing Freud and simply suggesting that all objects have associations and that associations, being free,

are also arbitrary human creations that have nothing to do with what objects want or how they seek meaning. In fact, Freud's real insight was that what looked like free association to the patient on the couch was the key to underlying patterns, signs, and repressions that were anything *but* free in the realm of the unconscious. The sets and sequences of which objects as designed things are the elementary units, the products of association, are—like linguistic forms—both arbitrary and predictable. That is, they are cultural and conventional. And, as with language, our job is to find out how these sets connect into larger sets and systems. Though conventional, these sets and systems are not simply the product of individual fantasy or whim, any more than a grammatical sentence in English is.

Nor am I simply offering a remix of Proust, who with his celebrated “madeleine” reminded us that objects can evoke moments, periods, and entire biographies through their sensory properties. What Proust neglected to do was to observe that this sensory fact is partly owed to the first loyalty of objects, which is to their own kind, that is, to other objects. As the chain of what I would call “object memories” multiplies, their role as apertures for more abstract recollections kicks in. We do not likely go directly from our response to a “madeleine” to the moment we first tasted of them, but rather through some more obscure chain of material associations that mushroom into the sensation of nostalgia, loss, or melancholy, which object memories sometimes induce.

Since design is surely a part of culture (seen as some sort of local, historical, generative system for producing meaningful actions and legible social forms), we need to be careful not to commit the mistakes of an earlier social science by making the linguistic analogy too mechanical or literal. As far back as the 1970s, linguistically oriented anthropologists showed that language and culture (words and meanings) did not behave in parallel ways and that the point of real connection between language and culture may lie, not in the dictionary (or in one-to-one correspondences between words and meanings), but in the way that words point to or signify things that cannot be deduced from their meaning alone.⁵ Since then, anthropologists have tried to look at language less as a model for culture and more as a partial and irregular guide to how cultural systems actually mobilize meaning, affect, and behavior. This has led to a fairly stable consensus that meaning lies less in semantics (the dictionary) and more in pragmatics (what is actually supposed to be accomplished by saying or doing something in a particular way).

So far the relationality of objects has found a loose echo in the idea that objects, like words, also have a grammar. But what sort of grammar are we talking about? How is it related to the meanings of individual things? How do

5 M. Silverstein, “Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description,” in K. Basso and H. Selby, eds., *Meaning and Anthropology*, New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

people in a particular historical moment recognize proper sequences of objects, meaningful arrangements as opposed to nonsensical ones? The beginnings of an answer to these questions lie in recognizing that the search for grammar in this realm is not well served by looking for the smallest possible unit we can find—unlike, say, in physics, where the quantum revolution showed that the laws of nature were truly built on the behavior of extremely small particles and elements. Today's nanotechnology is based on this strategy. Likewise, in social thought, Claude Lévi-Strauss (building on the insights of the great linguist Ferdinand de Saussure) argued for the importance of very small units (morphemes) whose relationship (through contrast, opposition, etc.) laid the foundation for those distinctions that could be extended to bigger contrasts (night and day, white and black, good and evil, etc.). This was the elementary genius of European structuralism.

This formal miniaturism held sway for some period in anthropology and literary criticism, but gradually came under fire, in the first place because it tended to have difficulties with change and history, and secondly because it tended to ignore the vast range of distinctions that were not oppositions in the structuralist sense. Most important, the erosion of confidence in structuralism as a method came from the growing attention to context among socio-linguists, literary critics, and others (some of them structuralists themselves). Once we concede that all linguistic elements require context for their animation, structuralism becomes inverted and upended. In Jonathan Culler's aphorism, "Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless." What this means is that even in regard to linguistic forms, especially those that compress meaning in the way that poetry typically does, interpretation requires the widening of context and not its reduction to ever smaller elements.

Thus, applied to objects (defined as designed things), we need to ask how objects demand contexts for people to enjoy them, buy them, use them, and interpret them. In human history, for the most part, these contexts were relatively slow to change and thus were fairly straightforward to build and to interpret. Take one well-studied, low-technology context, the world of Melanesia, which till recently experienced little dramatic change in basic technologies of survival, reproduction, and communication. In this world, there was a great deal of long-distance traffic in bird's feathers, which played an important role in the aesthetic and political lives of quite small, isolated societies. These feathers were a kind of luxury good, but they ended up nesting into fairly stable cosmetic and personal patterns in particular kin-based localities. Context, in this case, was relatively stable and relatively legible, both for the people in these communities and for those who now study them.

Once the world of sumptuary laws begins to break down and the relationship between groups of objects and groups of people is no longer tightly controlled by law or public opinion, fashion and design come properly into play

as essential elements of social life. Design and fashion, in this changing world, become the infrastructure through which the demand of objects for contexts becomes channeled and stabilized to some extent. This is a vital point, for it allows us to recognize that objects (designed things, by definition) demand contexts that can never be rigidly derived or deduced in advance from any inherent property of the object.

And in a post-sumptuary world, objects have an indefinite multiplicity of possible contexts. A designer tie might suggest a shirt to accompany it. But it may also suggest the fabric for a suit, or for a hat, or for shoes, to take a very simple example. Consider a more nuanced example. An expensive Jaguar may suggest an expensive mountaintop home (as in the popular TV advertisement where a corporate high-flyer says goodbye to his wife at the door of their designer home and skydives off his front porch to the bottom of a canyon, brushes himself off and gets into his car). Thus, a sexy car could also segue into a scene of physical adventure and prompt associations with travel, adventure, conflict, and war. Likewise, diamonds are indeed "forever," but they can support all sorts of ensembles of lifestyle, romance, discretion, or display, in combination with carefully selected scenes involving furs, tiaras, glass and steel lobbies, flowers, and men attired in their own ensembles of context-seeking objects. It is design that renders this potential infinity of contexts into something finite, grammatical, and seductive.

So here is an unconventional answer to how objects demand contexts (and therefore seek meaning). They do so through the regulative and selective work of design, which reduces the range of possibilities and makes a particular designed possibility appear both credible and grammatical. In other words, unlike with language, the grammar of objects is emergent, improvised, and indeed constantly designed and redesigned. This is why we cannot get carried away by the linguistic analogy, so far as objects are concerned.

In the world of design and fashion (which is roughly coterminous with the world after the breakdown of sumptuary societies in many parts of the world after the seventeenth century), objects can seek the company of other objects in a promiscuous and relatively unlimited way. This is even truer in the last thirty years, in what could be called the age of "designer humanity." What I mean by this—following the proposal that we live in a world in which objects and humans are not sharply opposed, but loosely different—is that the combinations of company in which objects (designed things) find themselves has become indefinitely open. And design comes into being to police this infinite variety and bring it into the realm of the possible—and the plausible. Design exists to tame the endless arrangements into which objects may find their way, and to police the imagination of fashion, which is the high-octane force to which design is opposed. So here is an idea worth pausing over: *design exists not to serve fashion, but to limit its infinitude.*

The point is to question the cliché that design as a social practice multiplies material possibilities. Fueled by fashion, in the industrial and post-industrial world, design is seen as producing infinite combinations and contexts for things, marrying colas to perfumes, cars to carnivals, foods to designer homes, drugs to retirement resorts, and so on without limit. In fact, it may be more useful to see design as trying to regulate fashion by slowing down the infinite play of combinatorial possibilities, the dizzying vista of new arrangements of bodies, materials, forms, and functions that advertising daily puts before us.

And this insight may lead us closer to the logic connecting design and context than the conventional idea that design, being the loyal servant of fashion, simply adds technique to the lust for change that defines fashion. Design certainly involves the imagination, but it is defined by the imagination as a source of discipline and not imagination merely as a source of new possibilities for combination and cohabitation among objects. The contemporary joke about the “fashion police” in fact disguises from us the subtler reality of the “design police.” To understand the discipline behind design we need to reopen the ways in which designers typically handle objects.

THE CONTEXT AS OBJECT

I have already argued that designers most often think of themselves as having to design a single—and sometimes singular—object: a building, a shirt, a city, a drug, a façade, an interior. But this is a professional illusion that has no future in the age of designer humanity. The fact is that designers—makers of designed things—design contexts for objects which are subsequently sold as self-standing objects. In order to see how designers construct contexts, let us more closely examine a field that is, on first glance, all about context: the field of interior design. Interior design is an interesting field, because it refers to an implicit context—the house or the home—which is already an object, a designed thing. So, the “interior” is a designed object in two senses. First, it is the interior of another object; and secondly, it is itself an object, though a peculiar object, being simultaneously an object and a context. As a context, it contains other objects: lighting, painted surfaces, fabrics, furnishings, fixtures of all sorts, more or less exposed utilities, and instruments. At its outer shell or skin—the house—interior design meets another discipline, architecture. This shell is an object for architects, since it is the thing on which they operate their design intentions. But for interior designers, it serves as a container or context for other objects.

In fact, I want to suggest that this dual identity pertains to all objects of design, not in the literal scalar logic of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls, neatly contained within one another, but in the less literal sense that all objects are simultaneously objects of design and contexts or partial contexts for other objects. The difficulty at the heart of design is how to balance these two aspects

of the identity of any designed thing. If you will permit me a hypothesis, I would suggest that great designers know how to blend and balance these two aspects of any object.

The explicit knowledge that underlies design education tends to focus on the property of the object in itself—the lamp, the wine glass, the watch, the room, the house, the gated community, even the city. Younger fields focus on different sorts of objects, such as the logo, the font, the image, the screen, the signal, or other digital objects. But in all cases, the context tends to fall into the unconscious of design education and is rarely consciously discussed by designers themselves. This is natural, since the context in itself looks empty, as if it were not any sort of thing, but merely the blank space between things. It is not a random space, however. Context is a space that generates meanings by generating real and possible relationships and intended and unintended effects for viewers and users. But because contexts cannot be fully anticipated, they fall out of the conscious thinking of designers.

The challenge for designers is that the market does not organize itself through the principle of assemblage, and neither do the methods of industrial and post-industrial manufacture. Both manufacture and merchandising typically tend to concentrate on single categories and reward virtuoso design of the single object, leaving it to a different class of tastemakers to assist customers with making the right assemblage. However expert the advice, the tastemaker (such as Martha Stewart or any number of lesser lifestyle gurus) is swimming uphill against the object, which is usually designed as a competitor with its own kind (watches against watches, fabrics against fabrics). The brilliant impulse behind the Martha Stewart empire, which few have been able to fully imitate, is the insight that one design intellect needs to design all the objects and all the contexts, including the biggest context of all, a lifestyle of glamour for the entire global middle class. The challenge with this sort of ambition to produce a species of “designed humanity” is that it requires intense personal charisma to adhere to the brand, which in this case is the person himself or herself.

Thus, if we closely examine the three-way relationship between design, context, and fashion, we could make the following interim conclusion. Fashion provides the force that stirs the pot by unsettling contexts, just as design defines contexts for objects by defining what objects can relate to each other in a plausible, legible, teachable way. The secret of the great design empires is that they discovered how to keep this cycle of stimulation going for long periods, without much friction in the machine and without allowing the impulses of fashion and design to confuse each other. This is the key to the designer names with long lives: Chanel, Bill Blass, and Christian Dior are only three examples of this genius.

But the problem with fashion, which is also its seduction, is that it is by definition ephemeral. It is made for supersession and obsolescence. Hence my

observations about fashion, design, and context cannot be mechanically applied to design in relation to social planning—the building of habitations, streets, cities, and those products which are the tools of community at all levels. So the question I pose today is this: if fashion is the imaginative fuel against which design exercises creative discipline in the realm of consumer products, thus creating new forms of designer humanity, how does this work with buildings, streets, elevators, engines, pipes, parks, cities, highways, and other material tools for social life? What fuel can social design draw on for making our world healthier, more equitable, and more peaceful, if fashion is not quite right for this job? For an answer to this question, we have to reexamine what happens when we replace the joys of ephemerality, which are the key to fashion, with the imperatives of durability, which are the key to social sustainability in design. This brings us to the subject of planning.

PLANNING AND THE FUTURE OF DESIGN

I argued initially that design and fashion define their relationship through a creative tension. Where fashion opens infinite possibilities for the combination of bodies, spaces, and objects, design limits this infinitude by providing a system for making some possible arrangements more credible than others. How, then, is design different from planning?

As with design, it could also be said that planning is as old as humanity, combining as it does the elementary need to predict and forecast and the long and varied history of such techniques as astrology, divination, and seasonal rites with other modes of foresight and calculation involved in migration, settlement design, and marital alliances between groups. At a more abstract conceptual level, all planning carries with it the magic of its roots in the universal inclination to utopias, to images of future perfection, which are to be found in all societies, including the simplest. Likewise, planning can also be seen as a modern solution to the fear of disaster and dislocation that has haunted all human societies, to some degree. So we should not take too short a view of the long-term human practices out of which planning emerges.

But unlike design, which primarily emerges from the explosion of industrial techniques, machines, and social systems, and their direct link to the growth and expansion of world markets through the workings of empire and capital, planning emerges in the early twentieth century mainly under the sponsorship of the state. The intimate connection between planning and the state has been richly discussed by James Scott in his important work, *Seeing Like a State*.⁶ Others have made rich contributions to this tradition of analysis, by

6 J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

looking at the general relationship of states to statistics⁷ and the links of nationalism to the birth and flourishing of many fields of social inquiry, from geography to literary criticism. Especially important for our purposes is the relationship between colonial governments in Asia and Africa, and the birth of the fields of demography, planning, and development economics. Of these, the closest attention has been paid to the field of development economics, and how it evolved in the wake of the Depression and World War II as the United States began to define a massive role in applying Keynesian economics to the task of reconstruction in Europe, and soon after, in the less developed world. Today, development economics has been encompassed by a wider field of development studies, which includes an interest in health, governance, infrastructure, education, and conflict resolution, as well as in primarily economic subjects like technology transfer, savings, investment, and commerce. Yet planning, as a field, is in an uneasy space, partly claimed by schools of architecture and design, partly by schools of public policy and administration, and partly by departments and programs in applied and development economics. This is because planning, as a field, has not yet achieved an independent disciplinary status, with an independent set of core ideas and texts, methods and techniques, data and hypotheses. It is a hybrid space. This is not a bad thing, and it is indeed an opportunity, since some of the most exciting developments in the natural sciences are occurring across traditional fields, in fields like materials science, biomedicine, nanotechnology, and molecular biology, which do not worry much about recombining the traditions of physics, chemistry, and biology.

The divorce of planning from design has some good justifications. Design has tended to be oriented to objects, to consumers, and to markets. It is built on the triangle between art, engineering, and merchandising. Planning is about collective goals, long-term benefits, and bigger contexts than the individual product, consumer, or household. Planning is more explicitly concerned with sustainability—both social and environmental—than design, and so it has a regulatory relationship to design, just as design has a regulatory relationship to fashion. Where design can be caught up in an immediate need, trend, or material opportunity, planning aspires to be design with a social conscience and to connect the world of goods to the world of politics, justice, and long-term resource constraints.

Thus, the key word that brings design and planning together in this sense is the word “sustainability,” a vexed word for which we nevertheless have no good substitute. The main doubts about sustainability arise from two sources. The first is internal, based on the paradox that sustainability is about the long-term,

7 J. Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990; I. Hacking, “Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers,” *Humanities in Society*, 1982, 5(3–4), 279–95.

but not about eternal life, the latter being God's business. So sustainability is always about social designs that might work for a relatively long time, and this relativity opens up much room for high-stakes debates about costs, priorities, and uncertainties. The second source of doubt about sustainability is that it confuses two different matters, namely the market and our relationship to nature. Those who believe in the market as a natural regulator of all human transactions and as a somewhat magical source of perfect solutions to most social problems worry that sustainability introduces nonmarket issues into social choice, thus putting glue in the engine of the market rather than high-octane fuel. Market-oriented policymakers believe that desirable long-term outcomes are the likely cumulative result of desirable short-term outcomes, and that the market is best on short-term outcomes in regard to anything that involves scarce resources. The fact is that markets fail quite regularly, and their capacity to deliver desirable social outcomes, even in the short run, has convincingly been shown to be doubtful. Hence, we need to think through how planning, sustainability, and design can best work together, both as correctives to market failure and as sources of social policy that do not rely entirely on efficiencies measured by price and consumer demand.

... If we recognize that ordinary human beings have significant capacities to plan and design their own futures, we will find stronger connections between our ideas and the values and motives of those whom we actually claim to serve and to represent. We need to make better designs for planning and improve the planning context for our social designs, so that these two activities become more fruitfully meshed in developing solutions for the short- and long-terms. In both regards, we would do well to recognize that ordinary people are already involved in both planning and design as part of their efforts to achieve dignity and equity in their lives in hard cities like Mumbai (see part 2 in this volume). Neither of these goals can be achieved without addressing two subjects, which are the subjects of the following two chapters. In chapter 14, in an effort to place ordinary human beings back at the center of the project of future-building, since humans have always been both planners and designers, we need to build a different model of research as a democratic activity, one which is not restricted to the sphere of high science, policy experts, or other elites. We also need to revisit the project of anthropology, which has so far focused too much on humans as bearers of the force of history, custom, and habit. If anthropology is to make a true contribution to the ways in which human beings can flourish as future-makers, it needs to make the future as a cultural fact an equally important part of its mission. This latter project, which is in many ways the main ethical impulse behind this book, is the topic of the last chapter.

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