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DISCUSSION

Design is … Lost

Stuart Walker

The School of Design, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

Where are today's design schools and design researchers? In my experience, most design teaching is feeding the machine – sticking to the outdated playbook of modernism, training students in skills for industry now rather than preparing them to contribute thoughtfully to a less materialistic future. With some notable exceptions, there are relatively few schools where sustainable design is core to the curriculum; if included at all, sustainability is merely an afterthought, bolted onto the side of a pre-existing set of courses that serve to maintain the status quo.

And where is design research? The phrase 'rearranging the deck chairs' comes to mind. Having served for many years on the editorial boards of *The Design Journal* and similar academic publications, I have a reasonable grasp of the kinds of design research being done internationally. In my view, too much of it is uninspiring and woefully ignorant of the most pressing issues facing us today. Perhaps because design research is still relatively young, it has yet to demonstrate confidence in adopting its own discipline-appropriate methods. Instead, it frequently falls into the trap of mimicking scientific or semi-scientific methods whereby a question or hypothesis is posed, objectives set forth, data gathered and analysed, and conclusions drawn, which may then lead to recommendations, guidelines, a set of tools or some other supposedly practical contribution that other researchers and the profession are virtually guaranteed to ignore. Indeed, I have engaged in this kind of work myself, for the truth is that researchers often have little choice because these are precisely the expectations of the funding councils, the criteria for which were developed out of the sciences and engineering. This kind of stuff is churned out incessantly, filling reams of online and in-print journals, which have proliferated in recent times to fill the growing demands of universities.

What is all this for? It is certainly not rising to *the* major challenge of our time, nor is it constructively advancing design practice. It is missing the mark

by a mile. Consequently, design continues to wander in the trivial shallows of novelty – innovation for its own sake, over-designed and endlessly designed everything. It is an aimless path that is taking down all of nature – biodiversity is falling like a stone, species are becoming extinct on a massive scale, ecosystems and habitats are disappearing, and design is at the forefront. Surely, we can come to no other conclusion than *Design is Lost*.

To some readers, the language I am using might seem overblown, but as I write this short piece, the UN releases its latest Emissions Gap Report. It finds that the international community is falling far short of its commitments, that there is no credible pathway to 1.5 °C, and it calls for a "rapid transformation of societies". But what does this actually mean? The report is light on detail and does not stray beyond putting a spotlight on the usual suspects – avoiding fossil fuels and CO_2-intensive industries; developing zero-emission construction materials; creating a circular economy, transforming transportation, and so on. These kinds of measures are or should be, by now, familiar to us all, and yet we seem incapable of acting with sufficient collective will to get to grips with the magnitude of the crisis. Part of this is undoubtedly due to vested interests – corporations are making billions from simply keeping on keeping on, and their shareholders are not prepared to sacrifice short-term profits for long-term sustainability, however dire the consequences might be for their children, their children's children, and those living in poorer regions of the world. But it seems to me that at least part of this rabbit-in-the-headlights paralysis is due to a failure of the imagination.

For certain, we cannot analyse our way out of this crisis – but we can *imagine* our way out of it. This requires speculation, exploration, and ideation but perhaps most of all veneration without which we may well lose it all, by which I mean an intuitive sense of profound respect for our home, our planet: the natural world. And of all the professions, which one is best placed – and specifically trained – to imagine, speculate, explore, ideate, visualize and *show* rather than *tell* what a transformation of society might actually look like? Surely, it is designers and design researchers. Designers are trained to 'make real' what otherwise remains only in the mind's eye. And design researchers can, if they choose, set aside their emphasis on data gathering, analysis, and use of systematic techniques – such methods are not and should never be the primary approach to design research.

A century ago, in the years following WWI, designers led the struggle to transform societies for the better by using their creative skills to imagine, inspire and show what a world with mass-manufactured products might look like. Designers have the opportunity to lead again, in today's struggle to achieve a "rapid transformation of societies". Like their predecessors, they can employ their creative skills to imagine, inspire and show what a world with restored communities, better services, good work, and far less consumption might look like. But to do this, design research must throw off the shackles of science and pseudo-science. It

must be true to itself and its intrinsic strengths and weaknesses and be prepared to embrace serendipity, subjectivity, values, and beauty without being expected to provide rational justification, a priori evidence, or proof beyond the designed thing itself. Creative ideas are works of imagination and interpretation, not – or not solely – of rational argument and logical explanation. Design must also shed its tendency to hubris and be more self-reflective. After ten thousand years of settled civilization, can designers really bring anything substantially new and worthwhile to bear? Or should they first familiarize themselves with the ideas and artefacts of other times and other peoples? For there is so much extant design to learn from – design that has been refined over generations and that is skilled, insightful, place-based, environmentally respectful, and enduring. And we must also ask how designers can help address the urgent societal challenge of creating *less*, having *less*, wanting *less,* and living better with *less*.

Time is short, the need is great, and design has been wandering in the wilderness for too long. Instead of relying primarily on analytical methods, alternatives are needed that are much more relational and synthetical; that seek interconnections and opportunities for cooperation rather than competition; and that foster symbiotic interactions capable of benefitting people, communities, and nature.

Any hope of creating a desirable, sustainable future will require imaginative, well-informed design interventions that nurture sufficiency and moderation while simultaneously building back community, local solutions, high-quality services, and a wide range of non-material avenues to human fulfilment. And this has to include a renewed sense of veneration – a spiritual restoration – that values, respects, and strives to regenerate the natural world. Only then will design come home, recognize its roots, and be able to truly find its way.

Notes on contributors

Stuart Walker is Professor of Design for Sustainability at The School of Design, Manchester Metropolitan University. His most recent book is *Design and Spirituality: a philosophy of material cultures*, Routledge, 2021. His forthcoming book is *Design for Resilience: making the future we leave behind*, The MIT Press, 2023.

Disclosure statement