

The Depths of Design

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Guy Julier and Liz Moor, eds. *Design and Creativity: Policy, Management and Practice*. Berg, 2009.

It must have been inconceivable to the audience at the 8th International Design Conference, held in 1958, why the sociologist C. Wright Mills was invited to give a lecture. Only a few sentences into his speech, Mills thrashed the design industry for pulling art and craftsmanship under the umbrella of the market, and for joining the ranks of ad men, PR flacks and market researchers to ally “the struggle of existence with the panic for status” (Mills, “The Man in the Middle” 70):

The silly needs of salesmanship are thus met by the silly designing and redesigning of things. The waste of human labor and material become irrationally central to the performance of the capitalist mechanism. Society itself becomes a great sales room, a network of public rackets, and a continuous fashion show...and in the mass society, the image of beauty itself becomes identified with the designer’s speed-up and debasement of imagination, taste and sensibility (73)

As members of what Mills called “the cultural apparatus” – those artistic, scientific and intellectual institutions that mediate the “second-hand worlds” of human experience – designers were supposed to translate the political potential of culture to the public. His speech was meant as a warning bell, a shake of the design industry’s (white) collars: by squandering their responsibility as “observation posts,” “interpretation centers” and “presentation depots,” designers succumbed to the commercial imperatives “which use ‘culture’ for their own non-cultural – indeed anti-cultural – ends” (74).

Over fifty years later, Guy Julier and Liz Moor’s edited volume, *Design and Creativity: Policy, Management and Practice*, lands rather more softly into its cultural context. Not because the book isn’t relevant or insightful – it is – but because in the contemporary setting, the gap between “commercial” and “culture” is harder and harder to discern. Terms like “creative industry,” “experience economy,” and “nation brand” have ceased to be oxymorons and instead become symbolic manifestations of the imbrication of culture and the economy in everyday life.

As *Design and Creativity* makes clear, the contingent meanings of these terms make them fertile sites for intellectual investigation. While the book's primary focus is on the ways in which work deemed to be "creative" has been incorporated into economic systems and public projects, it is also an indication that the social sciences are starting to take more seriously the work of design (as well as related industries of advertising, marketing and branding) as a constitutive part of culture rather than as its antagonist. It is simply no longer realistic to point to these industries as the "debasement" of all things creative, as classical cultural theory has done; recent work has rather acknowledged their impact – for better or worse – as sources of knowledge, technique and expertise within political and societal spheres.

The book's introduction offers a provocative and detailed summary of these shifts, situating the massive expansion of the design profession over the past twenty years in the contexts of the aesthetic demands of advanced capitalism, the adoption of "creative industry" paradigms in public policy, and the need to adopt an instantaneous and internationally recognizable shorthand to convey global market imperatives. The turn in urban, regional and national settings toward so-called New Public Management (NPM) – an approach to governance that applies private sector methods and metrics to the delivery of public services – is an important factor in design's ascendancy. If an earlier generation of design work emerged *from* production, as an overlay of form after the establishment of function, contemporary production processes in both private and public sectors now rely on design at every stage of development (Julier and Moor 3). The ballooning of the industry is a direct outcome of this production perspective: design consultancies now sit at the table for decisions around conception, strategic planning, communications and delivery systems.

The strongest features of the book emerge in the analyses of how these worlds collide. As creativity becomes the watchword of 21st century governance, business, and culture, the term's radically different interpretations make for unintended outcomes. Traditional notions of creativity as individual, organic, and unstructured rub up against injunctions to render creativity measurable and transparent for the purposes of economic accountability, government policy, and corporate planning. Chapters such as AnneMarie Dorland's "Routinized Labour in the Graphic Design Studio," reveal how designers are regularly caught between the Scylla of providing scripted, systematized, and auditable material and the Charybdis of modeling behaviors and approaches that are "unstructured," "authentic" and "improvised." Meanwhile, business and government leaders themselves are increasingly encouraged to think and work more "creatively," absorbing lessons from the world of design. As Julier and Moor point out, the tensions that arise in these instances reveal "a sense in which the actual practices of creative workers are always both more and less systematized than they appear to be, and more or less 'free' than they appear to be" (266).

The book is divided into three sections, each of which addresses this cross-pollination of design culture, the public sector, and the corporate bottom line. Part I, “Design and Policy,” explores how design has been instrumentalized to meet the requirements of NPM. Liz Moor’s chapter, “Designing the State,” shows how the current climate of political leadership in the UK places emphasis on citizens as active “users” who ought to take responsibility for acquiring the government services they need. In this context, communications design is used to promote the “empowerment” of citizens as active agents in their self-management, while service design is used to mediate interactions between government and citizen in the form of branded websites, helplines and text message interfaces. The problem with such techniques, as Moor deftly points out, is that “they provide a proxy measure for ‘effectiveness’ (by proving that someone has taken an action in response to a message), whilst also fostering some kind of agency – even if that agency is only sending a text message” (36). In other words, such technological and design innovations in government service delivery can often mask a real decline in accountability, a decrease in the responsibility of government toward its citizens, and the depoliticization of citizen participation.

In Part II, “Managing Design in Context,” various authors explore the ways in which design, as concept and as profession, has been affected by new commercial environments. Here the contradictions of the creative industries loom large: Paul Springer’s chapter, “Auditing in Communication Design,” notes that the emphasis on speed of delivery and a focus on sales have led to increasing digitization of design work, which orients creative output toward customer profiling. In “The Turn to Service Design,” Lucy Kimball demonstrates what happens when design interfaces are used to mediate relationships and modulate consumer practices, echoing developments in the corporate sphere to value the “informational capital” provided by consumers to promote commercial goods and services.¹

The book bravely includes a number of perspectives by designers themselves, both in the analytical case study chapters and in full force in the third section of the book, which is devoted to interviews with design practitioners. I say “bravely,” because despite social scientists’ recognition of the need to take seriously the activities of the persuasive professions, there remains a categorical divide between the kind of analysis conducted from within the industry and that emanating from the academic realm. Writing by designers about design, advertisers about advertising, and marketers about marketing can sound – to this social scientist at least – a lot like hyperbole. Though the authors in this volume do not go as far as the manifestos by designers like Bruce Mau to claim “the legacy and potential, the promise and power of design in improving the welfare of humanity,” some of the chapters read suspiciously like promotional pieces (*MASSIVE CHANGE*). In “Design, Innovation and Policy at the Local Level,” Katie Hill and Guy Julier’s chapter on the influence of NPM on a public

sector project to develop a children's playground, the story is told as one of the good (sensitive, innovative, collaborative) design consultancy versus the bad (bureaucratic, audit-oriented, over-regulated) government. Though C. Wright Mills might have enjoyed this classic good-versus-evil fable, the narrative would have been more convincing were Hill not a design consultant with the firm under discussion. Similarly, in a chapter on the integration of creative industry policy into the practices of the Victoria and Albert Museum (a design museum in London), author Jane Pavitt, one of its curators, describes how the museum's adoption of creative industry approaches has led to its successful modernization and ongoing relevance, while "return[ing] full circle to the intentions of its founders" in the nineteenth century to serve a civilizing function as educational and moral influence (93-94). If these chapters make for an insider perspective, they do so at the cost of more rigorous critical analysis.

Given the background and research interests of the editors, it is not surprising that the book's case studies are largely situated in the UK, though some chapters do attend to design practices in Canada (Dorland) and in the U.S. (Sutton; Waisberg), with a few of the interviews in Part III covering locations farther afield. Waisberg's chapter offers a particularly interesting perspective. She explores the contributions of the "people people" to American design – the anthropologists, psychologists, statisticians, market researchers, and others whose work "anchors the constraints of design in the realm of human experience" (139). Like the other chapters written by or with design practitioners, Waisberg's remains a relatively uncritical piece (she is a market researcher), but her insights on the nature of the work help to underscore an important aspect of her argument: that "researchers are just as much of a creative force as designers." In one section, Waisberg describes how researchers spend a lot of time undoing the tendency to lump people into categories of "consumer" or "user" or "baby boomer." The chapter exemplifies many of the shifts Julier and Moor identify in their introduction – the influence of systematization and audit within design fields, for instance, or the ways in which notions of creativity are reworked within the context of current public and private sector imperatives – but it does so in a way that defies an unhelpful us-versus-them binary.

At the end of his speech in 1958, C. Wright Mills called for designers to return to the principles of craftsmanship. "As ideal," Mills insisted, "craftsmanship stands for the creative nature of work, and for the central place of such work in human development as a whole. As practice, craftsmanship stands for the classic role of the independent artisan who does his work in close interplay with the public, which in turn participates in it" (74). For Mills, the true craftsman makes no distinction between work and culture; his self-expression is at once a societal contribution.²

Some readers may see a parallel between Mills' view of craft and recent critiques of

the role of labour in the creative industries, where the division between work and leisure is increasingly blurred. There is a fundamental difference. In the creative industry paradigm, individuals are encouraged to think of themselves as brands, rolling their profession, their proclivities and their personalities into the flexible figure of the “cultural entrepreneur.”³ In my view, Mills’ understanding of craft is more akin to a distant, albeit nostalgic ideal: one of working for the satisfaction of a job well done, without regard for the accumulation of social or reputational capital.⁴

In at least one respect, *Design and Creativity* is not far from Mills’ ideals. By giving us perspectives on design from within and outside the academy, Julier and Moor provide a portrait that is much more honest, and ultimately more revealing, than many academic works that profess to know what such “creative” industries are really up to. One of the more important contributions of this book is to humanize not only the world of design but also the people engaged in it. In this way, the contradictions and inconsistencies that arise seem less like the trivialization, distortion and marketization of culture and more like the contingent, relational, and dynamic product of – dare I say it? – creativity.

Notes

¹ See Adam Arvidsson’s *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture* (Routledge, 2006), which examines the ways in which consumer communication about a product or service, such as blog posts or online forums, are increasingly identified as sources of economic value (“informational capital”) for a corporation.

² See Richard Sennett’s *The Craftsman* (Yale UP, 2008), for a discussion of the legacy of these ideas.

³ See, for example, Andrew Ross’s *Nice Work if You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (NYU Press, 2009) [reviewed by Sarah Brouillette in this journal]; and Sarah Banet-Weiser and Marita Sturken’s “The Politics of Commerce: Shepard Fairey and the New Cultural Entrepreneurship,” in *Blowing Up the Brand: Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture*, ed. M. Aronczyk and D. Powers (Peter Lang, forthcoming) for a detailed description of the contemporary cultural entrepreneur.

⁴ Indeed, in a 1946 essay, Mills decried the rise of the “competitive personality” that accompanied postwar industrialization. See C. Wright Mills, “The Competitive Personality (1946),” *Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills* (Oxford UP, 1970).

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