NEW REALITIES, NEW ROLES FOR DESIGNERS

**Essay Competition
Design Academy Eindhoven
April 2011**

INTRODUCTION

This publication contains three texts, written by Design Academy Eindhoven students in response to the essay competition 'New Realities, New Roles For Designers'. The competition was organized by the *Lectoraat* (Professorship) Design Theory in late February in order to encourage design students' extending their expertise and developing a vision on design. Because the subject ties in with 'My Way', DAE's presentation during the Salone del Mobile, Milan (13–17 April 2011), we set the deadline for entries for 28 March 2011. A month to describe a view on future roles for designers – no easy task! The essays are short and therefore do not provide an extensive overview of the subjects they address, nor do they give an extensive list of references, generally speaking. However, the authors have devoted all of their attention to establishing a clear perspective on some future roles for designers.

The world today is struggling with a range of problems and challenges, which in turn offer young designers a wealth of opportunities. How will they respond to the economical and ecological crises? How are they dealing with the digital revolution, the increase in open-source solutions and technological innovations such as the 3D-printer? Will the designer of the future still perform an autonomous, artistic role? Or will the designer of the future focus more and more on designing social strategies? Will the designer of the future work alone? Or will he or she collaborate extensively with others, including designers, urban planners, architects, academics and social workers? What will the relationship between designers and consumers be like? Today's world offers new realities and demands new roles for designers. This is what has prompted the thesis for these essays: New Realities, New Roles For Designers.

Seven students sent in their texts anonymously. They were judged by a panel of 5 jury members, all involved in the DAE curriculum in different ways: Danielle Arets, Ilse Crawford, Anne Mieke Eggenkamp, Bas Raijmakers and Louise Schouwenberg. The jury panel has judged the essays on their originality, innovative points of view, style of writing, and the extent to which the piece addresses the thesis. The jury has appointed one winner and two honorary mentions. The winner: **THE TABULA RASA AND THE LABYRINTH.** Honorary mentions: **THE UTOPIAN LENS** and **WHAT WILL IT MEAN TO BE A DESIGNER IN THE FUTURE.**

Members of the Jury

—Danielle Arets, head of DAE's White Lady Lecture programme and teacher/coordinator of the Bachelor's Kompas Department Forum

—Ilse Crawford, head of the Bachelor's Design Department Man and
Well-Being and Curator of the DAE exhibition at the Salone del Mobile
in Milan, 2011
—Anne Mieke Eggenkamp, Chair of the Executive Board of Design
Academy Eindhoven
—Bas Raijmakers, head of the CRISP research programme (Creative
Industry Scientific Programme), a partnership between DAE and various
Technical Universities and the creative industries in the Netherlands
—Louise Schouwenberg, *Lector* (Professor) of Design Theory at DAE
and head of the Master's research programme Contextual Design

Jury Report

How many essays were the jury members expecting to receive? It was
difficult to project; after all, there was only a limited amount of time to
write the essays. We received seven essays. Their high standard was a
pleasant surprise. Without exception, the authors had come up with some
interesting and relevant views on the design profession, and without
exception they were well-informed on the challenges the current generation
of designers is facing. There were three essays that stood out in the eyes
of all the members of the jury. Therefore, this publication contains not
only the winning essay, but also the two others.

Jury Report: THE TABULA RASA AND THE LABYRINTH

This text describes two different views on design; the 'tabula rasa' of
unprecedented technological possibilities, and 'the labyrinth' of actual
challenges questioning the relevance of design solutions. A confrontation
between Potential Design and Existential Design. The author's beautiful
use of metaphors and her mix of scientific source material with personal
observations and thoughts combine to form a coherent and original line
of argumentation. Although the essay only touches lightly on certain
subjects, the text continues to offer an exciting read right to the very last
line. The author's style is clear, the storyline well-structured, and the essay
comes to a perspicuous conclusion.

Jury Report: THE UTOPIAN LENS

The author sets out from a clear starting point, which reveals a conscious
and committed attitude towards the profession. The text is highly personal
and offers a balanced perspective on the role of designers in today's society.
Provided that designers acknowledge the limitations of their profession
and maintain a certain level of modesty, the profession will continue to
be an important cultural force, according to this author. The text is
highly accessible and the writing has been executed with great precision.

Jury Report: WHAT WILL IT MEAN TO BE A DESIGNER IN THE FUTURE?

In this text, almost every contemporary theme in design is passed under review. The author shows that he is well-informed about every relevant question and eloquently phrases his well-founded points of view and wonderful observations. The text is a testament to the author's true commitment to the profession.
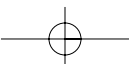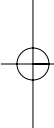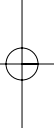
THE TABULA RASA
AND THE LABYRINTH Tamar Shafrir

The future of design rests in the paradox of simultaneity: too many and too few limitations confront the designer of tomorrow. As technical barriers to achieving every imaginable form disappear, new problems arise through economic, social, and moral dictates. In this sense, the future designer works within a context of the tabula rasa (that is, the blank slate of producible possibilities) and the labyrinth of reality (the thorny considerations of who makes things, with what and how they make them). Therefore, the role of the actor operating amidst this polarity will increasingly bifurcate into the realm of the possible and the realm of the actual.

The abstract nature of these two focal points in no way makes them irrelevant, for the designs that fulfil them the least are, on one hand, superfluous and short-lived, and on the other, depressingly bound to the status quo of consumer capitalist market values. Rather than working blindly between the tabula rasa of possibilities and the labyrinth of actual challenges, the designer of the future must occupy these two realms in the mode of potential design and existential design. Although these fields are not mutually exclusive, they hold divergent motivations and opportunities, and resolving the two spheres will inevitably become the aspiring designer's challenge.

Potential Design
What does one do when (almost) anything is possible for (almost) anyone? This is a formidable question not only in terms of the end product, but equally with respect to the tenuous role of the designer in the current state. The idea of the death of the designer has gained traction as methods of production have decentralized through technological advances, promising a three-dimensional printer in every home and obviating the need for officially educated and sanctioned designers.

Yet this is hardly a new subject; Walter Benjamin had already raised the issue in his 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," when he discussed the changes effected by the improvements in printing press technology at the beginning of the twentieth century. Benjamin concluded "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character" as "literary license…becomes common property."

Though a parallel transition may steer design in the same way in the future, it is important to remember that the author has hardly disappeared since Benjamin wrote his words. The coming ubiquity of three-dimensional

printers does not entail the decline of the role of the designer, any more than the rise of two-dimensional printers has caused the extinction of writers, publishers, and graphic designers. However, Benjamin's prescient observation about a change of character means that the future designer's function must transform.

As the means of fabrication become more accessible, users will demand more personally tailored objects and environments. In the field of architecture, the importance of mass production has already lost sway to mass customization in forward-thinking designs. Furthermore, product design presents the additional possibility of enabling consumers to physically output their own objects. Potential design, therefore, deals not with striking signature forms, but with the definition of frameworks, tools, and systems with which designs are realized.

Potential design will redefine notions of authorship that currently position the personality of the maker as the utmost in design identity. Rather than defining themselves through iconic physical manifestos, potential designers will instead engineer the variables and constraints of fabrication in such a way that the consumer feels the freedom and fractal diversity of nature, rather than the patronizing limitation of colour palette and size.

In a way, the challenge of potential design is to create products so seamless that they seem to have been made with the particular consumer in mind – though there may be thousands of other unique consumers with their own genetically related products. Still, the need for potential design cannot be quenched through a sheer variety of options. Aleatory experimentation in purely digital design will become less defensible as the process grows to include more meaningful determinants. Price, scale, material availability, and local concerns such as climate and habit will seep into the customizability of potential design.

The tabula rasa will be inscribed with context.

Existential Design
As much as the future of design will be characterized by the potential of technology for contextual adaptation, it cannot be the only factor. Again, in Benjamin's words, "the destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ." The tragedies of World War I that informed Benjamin also inspired the German artist Hugo Ball to say, even more succinctly: "men have been mistaken for machines."

Though these statements were made in response to the physical destruction of people and buildings, they can alternatively be interpreted in relation to the erasure of cultural customs, locality, and meaning caused by the hegemony of automated mass production and economies of consumer

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manufacturing. Human behaviour is increasingly being defined by the incidental effects of industrial design, rather than by the habits and needs that inspired this design in the first place. This criticism cannot be dismissed as Luddite nostalgia when the consequences are so far-ranging: the alienating influence of activity stripped of ritual is a contributing cause of the many sensory, communicative, and cognitive disorders facing a growing number of children in modernized countries.

The Finnish architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa proposes an alternative to this desensitized situation in *The Thinking Hand*. He asserts that "beauty is not a detached aesthetic quality; the experience of beauty arises from grappling the unquestionable causalities and interdependences of life." The recent resurgence of craftsmanship in design reveals that in the future, beauty situated in the details of life will not be considered a superficial quality. In fact, most people are desperate for meaningful moments in their lives, whether they are found in built environments, communication tools, modes of movement, or protocols of eating and drinking. The sensual opportunities of these daily habits have only begun to be explored with an aim of creating new rituals, yet this territory demands deep investigation in the future.

Existential design, therefore, is a complement to potential design; it is immersed in the emotional, haptic present. It offers future designers the chance to preserve the accumulated knowledge of craft, traditional customs, and collective memory as globalization and technological progress work to flatten out these cultural idiosyncrasies. These personal and rooted narrative elements transcend mere sentimentalism; they must be viewed as valued assets in the physically manifested future.

If potential design asks, "Can it be?" existential design demands, "Is it good?" This question must be situated in specific cultural and material landscapes; as the citizens of emerging economies command a stronger consumer voice, designers will have to focus their research on the minute aspects that distinguish one place from another, lest these cultural idiosyncrasies be smoothed over. Future designers have the power to determine which vernacular traditions will be salvaged and which invented rituals will gain embedded significance.

Existential design must also confront and utilize new technological potential to develop a diverse palette of materials, colours, smells, textures, and operations. At the moment, the marketing of design rests almost exclusively within the visual field, as images are so easily transmitted between distant locations. The other senses have thus become secondary; future designers must rectify this imbalance if they wish to create resonance between users and things or spaces.

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The labyrinth will be inhabited in loving detail.

Conclusion

If the simultaneity of too many and too few possibilities is the obvious problem of the future of design, then the undercurrent is the problem of meaning. The technological advancement of the past few decades has begun to crack open the field of realizable dreams. Even so, it is still unclear why things *should* be the way they *can* be. Potential design and existential design are two strands interwoven into the discourse of our common future, presenting the designers of tomorrow with a dialectical tool of inquiry. Without such a tool, designers are wandering blindly through a maze. They must choose instead the synthesis of tabula rasa and labyrinth in their pursuit of a contextually situated future.
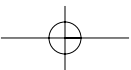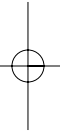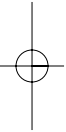
THE UTOPIAN LENS Taylor Gilbert

Designers see the world through a utopian lens. This lens is our greatest strength and greatest weakness. Even when we try to approach a problem or situation in the most pragmatic and realistic way, we cannot help but create a more utopian idea of it in our minds. It gives us the ability to dream, to imagine how something could be different and better.

Without our utopian lens, the myriad problems of any real life situation would overwhelm us and cripple our ability to find radically new solutions. It is not that we imagine that the world is perfect; we imagine that the world could be perfect. We imagine that everything could be beautiful, functional, and imbued with meaning to enrich our lives. While this dream cannot and will not ever be fully realized, our pursuit of it is our strength.

As the world becomes more and more specialized with few people working outside of a narrow field, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find people who can connect the dots, people who can see patterns in the midst of the apparent chaos. Designers are uniquely suited for this role. Our utopian lens allows us to see these patterns, rather like our ancestors seeing patterns in the stars. They imagined patterns, constellations, among the seemingly random stars and then used these patterns to tell stories, remember their history, and navigate the oceans. We can imagine the patterns between seemingly unrelated disciplines, technologies, and everyday human experiences. Without a utopian lens, how can we see patterns that do not yet exist?

The danger is that we reach too far, too high, and find ourselves unsuited to the tasks we have claimed. Design cannot solve all problems. Design cannot provide all solutions. Design cannot be applied to all situations. To fully utilize the strengths of design we must understand its weaknesses. Designers must remember humility and not claim what belongs to other fields while continuing to move forward and look for new opportunities.

The applications of design are multiplying exponentially, but the risk is that design spreads too far into areas where it does not belong. In the article "Design + Culture: a Return to Fundamentalism," David Carlson wrote,

"In many cases design is flaunted as the true measure of culture, rather than belonging to part of the cultural context of the society. . . Culture embraces complex ways of living, value systems, traditions, beliefs and habits." (Carlson, 2011)

Design is only one part of a larger culture. We should not imagine we can contribute to every aspect of society.

Unfortunately, I believe that design will continue to spread until it fractures, showing hidden weaknesses and potentially losing credibility

as a cultural force. Design will continue to push into new fields and find new applications, including many for which it is unsuited. It will be like watching a mathematician perform theatre or a writer construct a house. As design becomes increasingly influential, in other words more powerful, the hubris of designers will grow until we genuinely believe that design truly can do all things, guide and improve all things. Leo Tolstoy wrote about the way art is perceived in *What is Art?*, and I think the description also applies to design.

"The majority of people who are not only regarded as intelligent but are indeed intelligent . . . are very rarely capable of understanding a most simple and obvious truth, if it is such as requires that they admit that a judgment they have formed about something . . .which they have taught to others . . . may be wrong." (Tolstoy, 1897)

Now that we have declared the vast potential of design to the world, designers will not retreat from that position.

This process has already begun. Designers have gone from helping to sell products by improving aesthetics, to reassessing the entire user experience, to redesigning whole systems of distribution and use. This shift into increasingly abstract areas has produced fantastic results and radically new approaches, but there seems to be no end to the abstraction of our role. Painting became increasingly abstract and eventually hit a wall made of empty black squares and random splatters before recoiling onto itself. The role of the designer is on a similar path as we begin to apply our efforts to society overall, even trying to reorganize social structure or transform culture.

In the most abstract areas of design our utopian lens begins to fail us, tempting us to interfere with things too far beyond the fundamentals of design, diluting our role in society. When we can no longer define our role we risk losing it. Design is undeniably an influential and important cultural force, but it has not always been recognized as such and will not necessarily be seen this way in the future.

While we work to define the specific context for our objects, we forget to define the proper context for ourselves. We should continue to push design in new directions and search for new applications, but we should explore carefully and try to understand the limitations of our field.

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WHAT WILL IT MEAN TO BE A DESIGNER IN THE FUTURE? Adrian Madlener

The roles of designers have significantly altered over the past century, and even more so over the past decade. Design is no longer a question of products and their implementation, but has become a bridge between clear communication and expression. Artists will either deny this fact by claiming a lack of substance or intellectualism in design, or praise it for the ability to solidify ideas so well. Where can designers place themselves in this climate? The future can only be predicted by seeing it as the result of radical reaction, or as a clearly defined lineage that has been proven in the past. The things we can attest to are the dreams or, more rationally stated, the aspirations, and these tend to promote a positive agenda. In the current global situation, designers are at the forefront of the grand notion of 'the future', due to a rapidly changing sense of purpose in the creative domain that has not been clearly defined and never will be.

Design has always formed an interesting link between practicality and romanticism, perhaps even between the contrasting entities of engineering and fine art. The idealism has been challenged and broadened to understand the position of being a designer in an ephemeral world of exponential growth and accelerating speed. There is, of course, no denying our heightened awareness of the world around us and the daily effects it has on our processes. It is both a blessing and an omen. For some, it is important to briefly disconnect before placing ideas in the context of their social, physical, and mental environment.

The importance of social responsibility should be beyond discussion and become a standard. Phenomena such as overzealous teenage morality, on a par with political correctness, can sometimes overrun the mark. Social responsibility must be manifested with wit; it can be approached with a sense of humour, but not with recklessness. In 'the future', social issues will not need to be addressed directly, but acted on intuitively. New situations, such as the distribution of water, climate-induced migration, and the urbanization of suburbia (Dunham-Jones) will arise; they will either take the place of problems we will have solved or join the list of unsolved issues, but a raised level of resolution will become more prevalent in our methods on a global scale. A critical approach might be one such method: communicating a total negation or a slight deviation appeals directly to human emotion and sparks awareness much more effectively

than a pure stating of fact. The critical commentary might even become a function on its own. So-called 'Critical Design,' based on the philosophy and pedagogy of Dunne and Raby, the London-based couple and professors at their own 'Design Interactions' department at the Royal College of Art, is the first stage in this way of thinking, but it has much more potential in a social direction (Puolakka and Sutela). The thin line between 'Critical Design' and art can only be redrawn by understanding that design must always remain functional. Not in the traditional sense of the word, but functional in the sense of a broad consideration of the user in any context, whereas art can also be a self-expression or a commentary. Max Bruinsma, a Dutch design philosopher and critic, claims that design can differentiate itself through its awareness of the consumer, but this position limits the possibilities. It is the end result that demonstrates how the two domains differ. The perfect situation would be to incorporate the extreme and sometimes, but not always, fallacious means of art, and apply them to the user consideration that seems to be the only defining factor for design today and in the future. There is a slight difference between shock and sensationalism, and this is what makes subtlety so effective. It is much more interesting to investigate what is generally conceived as the mundane, than to assess the most current trends.

In relation to trends, understanding the *zeitgeist* of a time period is not only smart for business but also vital in being part of a collective spirit. There is no doubt that it should be scrutinized constantly, much more than is currently the case. We should not forget the value of analysis, especially when we seem to be making ever more room for instant gratification. *Zeitgeist* will always be a tool but nothing more, it functions as either something to be completely debunked or to be followed in a more generalized sense; in determining our position in time as 'the future' progresses. Designers will become more individualized and perhaps isolated; having a sense of the common threads that link society will ground them. As with any phenomenon with mass appeal, different levels of specification can determine the demise or success of a common goal. Interestingly enough, the domain that considers itself the most timeless in nature also applies the notion of 'feeling the times' when expressing political concern or as a means to determine the sentiment of a period. For example, The Whitney Museum Biennial in New York City attempts to capture the essence of art today, or at least of the previous two years (Davis). The museum uses certain titles and labels to group work together, but they are broad enough to avoid marginalization. The beauty of this exhibition is that multiple current ideas can be shown together even if they clash. It provides a complete picture that can be an unavoidable advertisement of the curator's subjectivity, but that is careful not to make too many unfounded assumptions.

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At the risk of seeming avant-garde, I believe the value of the process must be re-established. Its reinstitution does not only have to be practical, or exist merely on a material level, but also on an intellectual or analytic level. Not necessarily slowing down the process, but putting a stop to the social epidemic of instantaneous gratification. The ultimate goal, which incorporates the ideas of standardized social responsibility, an analysis of the *zeitgeist*, and the revival of the intellectual process, demands a nuanced implementation. This would be more effective than radical intervention. Since insightful inspiration can be hard to come by, we should not be subjected to systematic input and output. After all, there is no avoiding the effect of what makes us human. The romantic idea that more time allows for more care and consideration, but also for room to find the best solution, is appealing. Such processes are not limited to creativity but also apply to the life of a product. Following the lines of the immortality metaphor, objects that gain value over time prove that personalization can be attained from mass marketed items and that a design can never be complete. And although equally subjective, common threads prove that collective taste exists and that it is sometimes the most valid, however commercially induced it might be. In some situations, quality is valued more, but quality is becoming an endangered notion. Though somewhat of a pipe dream, slowing down the process of thinking, and perhaps of production, is a goal for the future. If society does not slow down as it is predicted to do, we will have to come to some sort of compromise in which process and realization collide but also combine. Hopefully designers will be able to create products and services, simple enough to surpass their basic value and able to gain substance and meaning with the passing of time.

The future is unknown, and we can only prepare ourselves with the resources and tools that we have developed and acquired in the past. Designers are emphatically ephemeral and our role can never be clearly defined. This painfully romantic irony, in contrast to our generally accepted purpose as thinkers and makers, is not devoid of contradiction. The rarity of sublime, timeless objects, given our basic shared purpose, shows that something more complex lives inside the designer's undeniable urge to re-position himself within his context. Being aware of one's surroundings and feeling the need to be part of an era is also difficult and can be at odds with self-expression. We all have epiphanies about society. But perhaps we are not "the philosophers of the future," as Paula Antonelli, the chief curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, once eagerly proposed as the potential direction of this profession. Design is nothing without more dreams coming to fruition. These principles for the future act more as notions

that may not always be feasible, but that describe the reason for the passion and desire to recreate, comment, analyze, and express through this strange but exciting medium.

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