

# New design

*New design needs new designers, say Robert Young and Sean Blair, as they outline the need for a new kind of design school, one that they hope will be as pioneering today as the Bauhaus was in the 1930s*

Here is an irony. Design, the activity of creating the new is stuck in an out of date orthodoxy. We can design glossy brochures, yet struggle to really communicate, we can design fabulous offices, but not happy workers, we produce startling advertising and bulimic youngsters, design sexy cars, yet choke in the rush hour and create amazing things for the world, seemingly at the cost of the world. Many now agree design is in turmoil and 'designers' today are unconsciously part of the problem.

Design education seems particularly stuck in its orthodoxy, our ability to design design, and design design education seems limited, how is it that we can produce so much wonderful looking stuff yet utterly fail to create real connection, peace, harmony, balance with each other and the world we stand on?

Design (mindlessly?) serves businesses in the pursuit of profit. But what is the shape of the world business asks us to design? What do we mean by success in design? Why might we need a new breed of creative professional? What will they design? What are the forces or context driving the need?

Design, as we know it today, stands on foundations, in large part created by the Bauhaus pioneers, their bold 'out-of-orthodoxy' thinking created the base for design education today. The critical environmental challenges and the powerful forces of globalisation, demand that we pick up the ultimate design challenge to design design itself. The starting point is to re design design education.

The Design Praxium is bold initiative to deepen the educational experience available to create a new generation of designers able to design beyond the current context, shaping new contexts. Its time to tap into the pioneering creative spirit of the founders of the Bauhaus and revolutionise design education.

Why? What is going on, what is the big picture? Let's look at the BIG changes in the context that design is having to operate in.

## **The changing context – globalisation and World Trade**

Few people, groups or governments oppose globalisation as such. However, there are many protests against the disparities that it creates. The richest 20 per cent of the world's population receives 83 per cent of the total world income, while the poorest 20 per cent receives only 1.4 per cent. The top 1 per cent of households in the US have more wealth than the entire bottom 95 per cent: "Extreme poverty is an affront to our common humanity" Kofi Anan (Sharing the world UN 1998).

## **The changing context – ecology/environmentalism**

Mankind is changing the climate. The Kyoto Agreement recognised this fact. Greenhouse gases (carbon-dioxide) are natural – we would be 30degrees colder without them – yet there have been drastic increases in carbon-dioxide emissions since the pre-industrial era. The effect of this increase is a corresponding increase in temperature: 0.6degrees C since 1860, and the warmest four years since this date have been 1999, 1998, 1997 and 1995.

Science now firmly believes (only George Bush does not) that there will be a rise of 3 to 6degrees C this century. Three degrees does not sound like a lot but it is a massive change. Mankind's use of fossil fuels is warming the world up: the effects are already bad for many, and they will be catastrophic for millions. Is design in service of business part of the problem or part of the solution?

## **The Changing Context – demographics and resources**

There were 2billion people in the world 1950. There are 6billion now. The UN estimates that there will be about 10billion of us by 2050. This is another massive change, especially when you think about resources such as water. Global freshwater consumption rose six-fold between 1900 and 1995. One third of the world's population lives in countries that regarded as 'water stressed'. One billion people already suffer from water shortage and it is estimated that this will rise to two thirds of the world's population within twenty five years. (Cadillac Desert 1993, UN 2000)

## **The changing context – food**

Nowadays, 75 per cent of food costs in the developed world lie in processing, packaging and distribution, and every year we give design awards to the stuff that the bin men take away. Our intensification of the industrialisation of food production has led to many unforeseen problems: in the context of health, these include BSE, e-coli, and the rapid spread of foot and mouth. Our systems of food production are complex and dynamic and we have not understood the time lags associated with the ecology of the processes. When we wake up and suddenly cod is an endangered species it is clear that we only tend to act when it is too late. Do you really trust the food you eat today? (even if it is in a nice box?)

## **The changing context – genetics**

The driver for most of the research into genetics is financial. However, as Mae-Wan-Ho remarks in Genetic Engineering, "We should in all humility question if we will ever fully understand life and where our experiments with genetics will lead. History is full of our mistakes – but mistakes with life will have a life of their own!"

## **Corporations rule the world**

Business is one of the most powerful forces in the world. It wields awesome financial power, the turnover of the largest global corporations vastly exceeds GDP of many poor countries. The wealthiest 227 people alive today own assets equivalent to the yearly income of half the worlds population. This raises serious questions of responsibility. It also points to questions about the appropriate place and role of design and the new breed of designer. In service of corporations that rule the world or in service of humanity?

This is the thinnest sketch of the context that design is increasingly operating in. We seem to be designing a world of disparity: we measure only economic cost, not social or ecological cost, while at the same time the 'happiness index' of the affluent west is at an all time low.

It is time to move on.

In moving on we need to become mindful of the way we unconsciously see the world. Every society ever known rests on some largely tacit, basic set of assumptions about who we are, what kind of universe we live in and what is ultimately important to us.

We can begin to appreciate something of our current context by taking a look at previous worldviews of thinking in civilisations. This review, based on that depicted by Henryk Skolimowski, shows that the industrial era that we now live in could be called 'Mechanos'.

**Mythos** – The ancient Greeks of Homer's time saw the visible presences of gods in the stories of their lives.

**Logos** – At the transition from the 6th century to the 5th century BC, Greek Logos appeared: new form of understanding based on a view of the universe as coherent and harmonious.

**Theos** – Out of the ruins of the Roman Empire a new worldview emerged, pre-ordained by the monotheistic Judaeo/Christian God.

**Mechanos** – A new view of the universe based on a clock-like metaphor, moving according to rational and deterministic scientific laws.

The telling feature of mechanos was the movement to detach thinking based on ethics and values from those of rationality, logic and science.

OK we've had about 500 years now of mechanos. How are we doing?

Many commentators would say, not that well. Some of the crises that feature regularly in the newspapers suggest that mechanos is struggling to create the kind of world we would want our great grandchildren to inhabit. Yet the upside is the quest seeking a new depth to the universe, and a believe system that is moving beyond a (Newtonian) mechanistic way of being and living.

If we really look at the changes happening in the world, created by living in this time some would call 'mechanos' we can see that a more-of-the-same, way of viewing design will not create a wealthy and healthy future. Design has so much more to offer in shaping the world than glossy shops full of wonderful trinkets.

If we return to the original questions posed, and in consideration of just some of the constellation of problems that our societies face, perhaps our responses ought to run along these lines.

**What do we mean by success in design?**

Perhaps we could say that a new ideal of success would be: design that operates with full awareness of context, honouring a world we would want for our children. We could use the Native American definition of longevity that takes into account not just our succeeding generation but a total of seven generations. This would mean two new challenges for design - greater awareness and holism in meeting real needs, and longevity and sustainability in practice.

**Why do we need a new breed of creative professional?**

The obvious response would be to design a better context, not just better products and artefacts, and to rise to the challenges of designing better schools, better democracies better ways of living.

**What will they design, and what are the forces or context driving the need?**

They will have to 'design' the ideology, policy, process and meaning, as well as the things that then flow from these.

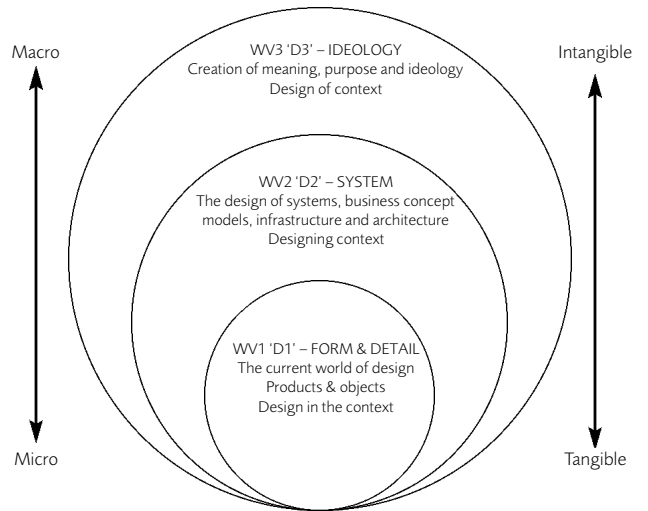
**Beyond 'Mechanos'**

Following in the footsteps of Skolimowski, a bold step would be to suggest that the next paradigm should be based upon an attempt to unify the split which has previously appeared in Western civilisations as

a result of mechanos: to reconnect value and logic in our approach to the perception and design of our world. This would require a new form of education or learning to prepare the designer or 'new creative professional' for the context of their practice.

Perhaps we can refer to such a new paradigm of learning and practice for the designer as 'Praximos'. Keywords that denote the thinking system upon which this paradigm is based would include human-centeredness, field-perspective, sustainability, inclusivity and equity, holism and appreciation.

We need to move from design at the level of form and detail to design at the level of ideology and policy.



The role of design within society follows these three states of activity, which also represent different states of consciousness on the part of the designer. These states are mapped out in two dimensions and their relationship can also be set against two sliding scales: from a macro worldview at D3 down to a micro world-view at D1. Conversely, they also move from the tangible and physical at D1 to the intangible and metaphysical at D3.

So is design education equipping us with designers who will unquestioningly feed the current orthodoxy, or with designers who will help us create a new, better context? Will design remain in the domain of the 'art school' trained designer, or will communities of people learn to co-create better systems, infrastructures and ideologies? Critically will design step into its full potential and become a way and a metaphor for social, cultural and economic innovation?

As Demos pointed out, it's democracy, stupid. 'Our schools and universities retain basic structures which are centuries old' explains the think tank. 'The ability to connect new ideas and radical aspirations with practical, concrete outcomes calls for far-reaching processes of learning and transformation in all areas of organisational life'. This captures the challenge that design education faces, it is for these reasons that we are creating the Design Praxium.

The Design Praxium is being designed by creative professionals from many fields, tapping into the spirit of the Bauhaus, and is intent on becoming an instrument of social change. Our ambition is to offer a revolutionary alternative to current design education, not because it does a poor job: it does a good job within the current context. It just does not seem able to move beyond 'mechanos'.

We will publish a book later this year animating insights into the changing context that the Design Praxium will address, it will be a resource for all of those creating the future.