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Design and Political Economy in the UK

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Abstract The period of the United Kingdom's Labour government, 1997–2010, saw two strident policy vectors. One was in the promotion of the creative industries as a lever for urban regeneration and national renewal in the face of the decline of its manufacturing base and the globalisation of its economy. The second was in the increased emphasis on financialisation to underpin both corporate and public sectors. Both of these were, in fact, intensifications of former Conservative policies developed through the early 1990s. This paper reviews some changes in the UK government policy on design, principally through its Design Council, as a function of the political economy during this period. It draws attention to important shifts in the professional practice of design and governmental promotion and use thereof—especially of service design and “design thinking”—that suggest a new attitudinal approach as to its role. It then places these shifts next to changes in public sector management and thinking. In particular, we see how certain conceptions and practices of design become embedded in its signalling of value in potentia rather than in putting value into things.

Keywords Service design · Public sector · Creativity · Financialisation

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Design and Political Economy in the UK

If the cultural avant-garde's role is to open up enquiry and to forge new subject areas of aesthetic reflection, then, arguably, its engagement with the world of finance has been sporadic and even, a late arrival. There are exceptions, however.

In 2003, artists Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan, working in Sheffield, turned their former warehouse studio into a show flat. Theirs was an ironic comment on the mobilisation of creative industries in culture-led regeneration. Rather than wait for artists and designers to produce a “Soho effect” (Zukin 1995), Hewitt and Jordan were short-circuiting the system. The symbolic role of creative industries in this context was invariably important in generating developers' and investors' interest in a location. Creative workers demonstrate its up-and-coming status which would eventually lead to increased real estate value. By remodelling their studio with the bland fittings of a voguish city-centre apartment development, they were revealing the way that the avant-garde may be mustered to lever future value. Be this as it may, 4 years later, up to 35% of such apartments in Britain's city-centres lay empty following the credit crunch (Hencke 2008).

London-based artists Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska worked in 2001 on a series of encounters between the Bank of England and the Tate Modern in which the consideration of issues of giving and reciprocity were activated. Visitors to both institutions were gifted a limited edition print. By using these key

centres of, respectively, global financial markets and the economy of art, this act worked to highlight the ways by which trust was a key component that maintained stability in financial and cultural markets. They revealed, as Simmel had posited (Canto Mila 2005), the relational aspect of value—that it depends on understandings and interactions between actors. Six years later, the weakening of trust bonds in financial markets would have catastrophic effects.

These two art works introduce two core themes at stake in this article, namely the relational qualities of value and the notion of creativity as being concerned with value in potentia. This article reviews shifts in the practices and meanings of a particular strand of the creative industries in the UK—design—to open up a discussion as to its role within these two questions. Roughly speaking, it takes the period of the New Labour government, 1997–2010, as its historical framework. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that many of the policies and ideological outlooks enshrined in this era were instigated within John Major's Conservative government of 1990–1997 as, indeed, were the favourable economic conditions of the earlier part of this period an inheritance. Nonetheless, gross domestic product growth of the UK's economy was the strongest in Europe, apart from Spain's, until the credit crunch of 2007. This period of relative financial stability allowed for a consolidation of many policies, including governmental promotion of the creative industries and public sector reform.

Three popular books written by journalists provide scathing critiques of New Labour's pathway. These also touch on the role of design and the creative industries in its policies. Even before the credit crunch bedded in, Dan Atkinson and Larry Elliott's *Fantasy Island: Waking Up to the Incredible Economic, Political and Social Illusions of the Blair Legacy* (2007) argued that Tony Blair's policies of limitless growth and high debt merely melts into air. In their discussion of the role of innovation and creativity in the UK economy, they, by comparison, note how France has a strong base specialising in food and drink, that “Scandinavians [sic] are a dab hand at mobile phones; the Americans do computers, aircraft and Hollywood” and the Italians do upmarket designer clothes. So, they ask, “Where does the UK fit in this world of changing economic geography in which nations will increasingly follow the dictates of David Ricardo and concentrate on the things they do

best?” Their answer is, “We count the money and do the bullshit” (Atkinson and Elliot 2007). In other words, if the UK's much celebrated and promoted creative economy has any application, then it should be in supporting the nation's manufacturing base; instead, it is in fact a kind of promotional culture in itself, they argue.

Financial journalist Robert Peston asks “who runs Britain?” in his exposé book of the same name (Peston 2008). He states that New Labour policy prioritised and privileged the nation's financial markets. While avoiding discussion of their impact on public sector policies, he picks apart the personal relationships between financiers, businessmen, and the Labour government that have led to this situation.

Meanwhile, Anna Minton analyses the privatisation and financialisation drive of urban planning. In *Ground Control* (Minton 2009), she shows how the planning of cities to foreground the requirements of retail centres and business districts as well as the design of gated communities, housing renewal, and public spaces has conspired to intensify social divisions. While not entirely central to the core of this article, these books emphasise the unstoppable force of financialisation and its arrangements that frame UK political economy and that should, as its backdrop, be kept in view.

My chief focus is on the little analysed realm of design in the public sector. One might speculate that design in the commercial, corporate sectors is more reactive by responding to client demands. Meanwhile, in the public sector, design is managed according to more clearly articulated guidelines of use and usefulness. Commissioning and processing design in the public sector at all levels in the UK is redolent with design compendia (e.g. Sheffield City Council 2004), manuals (e.g. City of Edinburgh Council 2007), codes (e.g. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2005), and procurement guides (e.g. NHS Design Review Panel 2007). Such documents provide advice to specialist and nonexpert public sector employees. But they also implicitly and explicitly reveal the specific priorities that are given to design there: what kind of design, how it should be applied, how it should be evaluated, and so on.

Design is more transparently bureaucratised in the public sector, and thus, its documents provide a useful way into understanding the broader relationships of design and political economy within various political regimes. Conversely, the adoption of private sector

processes and thinking in the public sphere suggests that we may be able to achieve a clearer perspective on the intended roles of design in the political economy as a whole. In other words, how design is conceived in the public sector, particularly in its innovations, reflects a wider discourse that is embedded in economic and ideological change.

In this way, one must pay attention to the shifts by which design has been promoted, most notably through the UK government's Design Council. Its role is in, "Helping businesses become more successful, public services more efficient and designers more effective" (Design Council 2009). While several organisations for the promotion of design exist in the UK (e.g. the Design Business Association and the Chartered Society of Designers), the Design Council, as a government funded entity, provides the closest connection between UK government policy, the design industry, and the promotion of design for both private and public sectors, the latter of which became increasingly important from the early 1990s. Discussion of the Design Council may also be useful as, historically, it has been of influence on design promotion in other countries (Woodham 1997).

The UK Design Council

The emergent, modern conception of design in the latter half of the nineteenth century located it in terms of an "added value" that was to temper a Kantian notion of endless production that filled out the later industrial revolution. Design was an ethical challenge that harnessed taste and control, produced differentiation of commodities, and the professionalisation of its practice (Dutta 2009). However, the subsequent history of design in the UK, and indeed much of the world, is that of a progression from its mediating place in a linear format linking production and consumption to its dispersed, multilevel distribution and intervention across a number of nodes that make up network economies. This is a history that is also reproduced within the Design Council.

A review of the UK's Council for Industrial Design (founded 1944) and subsequently, the Design Council (founded 1972), provides a view into the prevailing ideological concerns of ensuing decades. During the 1950s, it promoted functionalism and a certain morality around fitness for purpose. The 1960s saw

an interest in championing the white heat of technology coupled with a mixture of the seduction of fashion and adherence to notions of human need. By the 1970s, design with a social conscience was promoted. These themes reflect changing societal priorities through the three decades (Whitely 1991). However, the focus of their application was almost entirely on the manufacture of industrial products. In line with its nineteenth century conception—and indeed, reflecting the Design Council's own historical lineage—design was to provide the lustre, in various shapes and forms, that gave artefacts, and thus, companies and the UK economy as a whole, competitive advantage.

The Thatcher decade of the 1980s saw a more strident adherence to the rules of profit that might govern design. This revealed, also, a much closer linkage between the ideological priorities of the government of the time and the Design Council. Indeed, on 25 January 1982, Margaret Thatcher hosted a seminar at 10 Downing Street entitled, "Product Design and Market Success" (Thatcher 1982). The Design Council adopted the rubric of "Design for Profit", and it is at this point that there is a distinct tendency towards framing design more abstractly in terms of "value" rather than privileging a specific kind of material outcome such as products or graphics.

The recession of the early 1990s led to a radical overhaul of the Design Council. John Sorrell, who was chair of the branding company Newell and Sorrell, produced a review and policy document for it (Sorrell 1994). This brought in a leaner version, scaling down from 200 employees nationally to just 40 located in a new London office. The Design Centre, which exhibited examples of "good design" was closed. Instead, the Design Council was to act more as a think tank for the dissemination of new knowledge in design. It was also to carry a greater emphasis on its role in the public sector.

By the late 1990s, the Design Council was clearly embedded in the headier context of early New Labour. In 1997, it authored *Britain™: Renewing our Identity* and *New Brand for New Britain: The Countdown to the Millennium*, two papers that proposed a new characterisation of UK's identity to be led by creativity, inventiveness, and progressive thinking. Henceforward, the Design Council steps away from its traditional concern with marrying design and industry to a wider remit. It is disembedded

from “design as product formation” and implicated into the downstream questions of nation formation, promotion, and representation and upstream to concerns of education, skills, and training.

In the latter case, for example, the Design Council became the lead organisation in the Creative and Cultural Skills Council, founded in 2004. This formed part of the government's initiative, the Sector Skills Councils that reporting to the Sector Skills Development Agency. Made up of 25 employer organisations, this represented 90% of the economy, and its chief remit was to reduce skills shortages and boost productivity, in part through “National Occupational Standards”. The Design Council launched a national consultation (Design Council 2006) that led to a plan setting out the triangulation of schooling, university education, and industry (Design Skills Advisory Panel 2007).

The details of this report are not as relevant to this paper as the overall political vector of which it was a part. Comparing the speeches of Prime Minister Tony Blair with John Major, Mulderigg (2008) shows how the Conservative government's recurrent keywords were such things as “UK”, “competitiveness”, “investment”, “quality”, “markets”, and “world”. By contrast, Blair emphasised “we”, “skills”, “support young people”, “learning providers”, “programme”, and “regional”. Major's speeches adhered to a dominantly business-driven, output-orientated set of issues; Blair focused on governance-centred, input questions. In a similar way, the Design Council shifted away from a straightforward notion of “design for profit”, inherited from the 1980s, towards more complex understandings of its role in a knowledge economy by the late 1990s and 2000s.

Creativity Fix

Two linked ideological schema are discernible within UK government policy on the creative industries. The first is in the subsequent linking of notions of creativity and innovation, and thus design, into regeneration strategies. Thus, for example, on a visit to Newcastle in February 2008, Tom Bewick—chief executive of the Creative and Cultural Skills Council— noted the low numbers of workers in the creative and cultural industries in England's northeast region, adding that there was a dire lack of creative skills amongst potential employees (Creative and Cultural Skills

2008a, b). In response, a National Skills Academy presence in the northeast would be established. This is representative of a plethora of reports and initiatives that looked at the role of creative skills and industries at regional levels (e.g. Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2008; Creative and Cultural Skills 2008a, b).

This concern for regional roles reflects, in fact, a greater balancing out of the geographical distribution of creative industries. Through the 1980s and 1990s, growth in the creative industries and in particular, design, were heavily concentrated in London and the southeast. By the 2000s, while the latter still accounted for nearly 50% of the nation's design industry turnover, the regions, in particular Scotland, the northwest and the southwest accounted for much higher levels of growth in this sector (British Design Innovation 2007). But this also resonates with the policy influences of Landry (2000) and Florida (2002). The latter's notion that the creative industries, with, for example, their low overheads, employment flexibility, and multiplier effect on enterprise, provide a fast fix for ailing local economies was a seductive trope for regional development (Heartfield 2005; Peck 2009).

The second level of ideological discourse that the Design Council's involvement with the Blairite agenda of skills relates much more to a notion of individual transformation. A review of two decades of development in school and college curricula reveals an increasing importance being laid on the individual students' profiling, on the notion that a student builds up a distinct repertoire of attributes, both academic and personal, that are “saleable” within the world of work. McRobbie (2007) argues that this is, “bound up with deeper social transformations which involve re-defining notions of selfhood and which encourage more expansive forms of self reliance...[that relate to]...new more flexible forms of selfhood [that] are institutionally grounded in education.” Creativity could thus be one of those personal, saleable assets that is evidenced in the individual's portfolio through such things as examination certificates or voluntary work experience. Design and technology experienced massive expansion in the UK school curriculum in the late 1990s—the Design Council (1999) reported a 63% rise in students opting to study Design and Technology at secondary school.

Just as regions or urban agglomerations might lever design and creativity as a “unique selling

proposition”, it becoming both a source of economic advantage but also a way of indicating the symbolic value of knowledge and creative capital at relatively low cost, so this concept was also transferable to the individual. Elsewhere, McRobbie (2002) has argued that the cultivation of the flexible, project-focused, and socially networked worker—as embodied in the designer—fits the labour demands of the New Economy, hence, in turn, the symbolic power of design in representing its potential success. The organisation of the design industry may be viewed as paradigmatic of the kinds of labour arrangements and sensibilities that lie at the heart of the functioning of the New Economy.

Similarly, the work of Jordan and Hewitt, cited at the beginning of this paper, is not solely concerned with exposing the dynamics of real estate value and creative industries. It also reveals the values in potentia that designerly attitudes carry—the presence of creative people points in a direction of a localised asset that favours success in the sphere of advanced neoliberal economics. Design thus plays out two related roles. At a basic level, it, alongside other forms of creative labour, is a source of reskilling and employment in postindustrial contexts. Secondly, both for localities and the individual, it carries a symbolic level in the way it points towards broader notions of capital in the New Economy. As such, this represents a “downloading” process. Rather than being routed in resources or macroeconomic arrangements, value is located in notions of the potential transformations that can take place both within the locality and of the individual.

Downloading

This downloading process in the public sector goes beyond symbolic notions of regeneration and transformation. It is also expected to be operationalised at the very functions of public sector actions.

Let us return to the Design Council. In its role as a think tank on new knowledge, it cultivated a particular approach to the processes and uses of design that keyed in with changes in public sector discourse. Between 2004 and 2006, the Design Council housed “RED”, a unit set up to tackle social and economic issues through design-led innovation. Spearheaded by its director, Hilary Cottam, RED

developed cocreation approaches to the design of public services such as health, schools, and prisons. Such projects foregrounded the intermediary role that design may play between citizens and the state. This way of thinking was set out in RED's document *Touching the State* (2004). It argued that,

Design, after all, is not just about producing effective and attractive objects.. Designers... are trained to analyse and improve processes, exchanges and encounters – between customer and products, clients and services or, potentially, between citizens and States. They are, or should be, rehearsed at looking at the larger picture, and identifying where an object, or process, fits in the user's life... government institutions don't for the most part look at civic encounters in this way. No one seems to be thinking about the citizen's journey through even a single encounter – from, say, the arrival of the first summons letter from the jury service, to the final goodbye – let alone through the course of a life.

This statement reflects the growing importance of service design as a specialism. Indeed, arch proponents of service design such as the agencies Engine and Live|Work had close relationships to many Design Council projects from 2000 onwards. Service design focuses on the user experience through a set of actions such as checking in at an airport, diagnosing and treating diabetes, or undertaking jury service. It therefore involves the orchestration of multiple artefacts (e.g. a combination of web, smart-card, products) and their positioning and sequencing. It is very much concerned with the “relations” and “exchanges” that go on between actors and artefacts within a system. The importance and value of one aspect of a one of these is thus highly dependent on others. Drawing on science and technology studies and practice theory, in design theoretical terms, this might represent a turn from “design thinking” to “design-as-practice” (Julier 2007; Kimbell 2009).

Within service design, the notion that, in order to get the best fit of user and service, delivery may have to be highly personalised. Its design method may therefore involve deep user research in order to understand the variety of requirements and experiences that they engage. In addition, notice may be taken of small scale innovations that users and producers of services create themselves, seeing that their “unofficial customisation”

may be of significance and applicability that can be upscaled.

Service design has been of particular interest to public sector thinking in the UK government. Strategy documents such as *Building on Progress: Public Services* (2007) lay important emphasis on the role of design in the creation of personalised public services in which users play a more participative role both in their configuration and their delivery. The pedigree of this thinking itself leads back to the influence Charles Leadbeater (himself an associate of RED; Leadbeater 2000; Leadbeater 2008). Leadbeater's position that much can be made of the intrinsic creativity of citizens, "empowered" through the free-flow of information, in turn, means that solutions to complex challenges can also provide cost-effective innovations.

The downloading of action and responsibility to citizens in public services that is implicit in this thinking leads from and to the question of public sector budgets. The government commissioned *Cox Review of Creativity in Business* (Cox 2005) noted the rise of spending on health and education from £128 billion in 2002 to a projected £200 billion in 2008. Nonetheless, given pressures such as an ageing population, it was also noted that there was a need to take a more innovative, strategic, and holistic view on expenditure in order to deliver value for money. In 2008, the magazine of the Design Council ran a discussion entitled "Can we deliver better public services for less money?" (Bichard 2008). In the context of postcredit crunch rising national debt and foreseeing the squeezing of public sector spending, this debate was apposite. Tellingly, Ben Reason, director of Live|Work, remarks, "we need to change our relationship with public services, from one where we just expect things to be there for us, to one where we're more engaged in ensuring we don't need them, or managing our way through them." Avoiding "unnecessary" use of and making judicious choices within them is therefore also a way of saving public money. This attitude puts the onus on individual responsibility rather than the system itself (Perks 2008).

Public Sector Reform

This turn towards "cocreation" or "citizen empowerment", in relation to the public sector, may be read as

part and parcel of a longer trajectory of change with respect to the state and its public that relates to postindustrial, neoliberal economies. In his wide-reaching analysis of the relationship of economic change and political reform, Claus Offe (1985) concludes his book *Disorganized Capitalism* with a discussion of the relationship of politics to administrative action. In the first instance, he identifies the incongruity of administrations that require norms of action within fluctuating systems of demand. He cites Weber in identifying the need for a correspondence of a socioeconomic environment in order for that form of administration to be fully functional. This is a system that is conditional on the absence of any nonstandardised demands, then. Rigid state bureaucracies only make sense if they serve an equally rigid economy and society, in other words. On the other hand, in the case of liberal democracy within disorganized capitalism, while certain norms are still necessary, administrative action is nonetheless much more "goal oriented": fluctuations in demand, employment, exchange, and so on make specific and irregular demands on administration. In short, government is more obviously centred on the successful management of systems rather than on the strident enforcement of ideological priorities. Here, the relationship between politics and administration partially reverses as governments are made increasingly reactive to the latter's demands where bargaining and cooperation are necessary. In this respect, Offe further argues that, in the course of the production of state-organised services, the distinction between "consumption" and "production" is blurred (1985). Users enter into partnerships with agents in "productive interactions".

In this climate, one must note the reform of UK public services, be it health, education, the Civil Service, the police force, or social services, has become based increasingly upon the application of market principles. Thus, performance measurement and ratings, responsiveness to public demand, and contracting out to competitive tendering gradually became features that brought the culture of public services closer to the private sector. This was where the public sector moved from its "public administration" approach to the so-called New Public Management from the 1980s (Osborne and McLaughlin 2002; Du Gay 2004).

Within this, there has been the requirement to achieve "best-value" (Martin 2002) and for pursuing

continuous improvement in the way functions are exercised. This provides opportunities for design consultancies to create money-saving systems. An example of this is the UK graphics company Corporate Document Services that provides print management services that helps local authorities reduce their costs and the efficiency of their publication processes (CDS 2008). The marketisation of public services also creates a denser landscape of management and indeed, design opportunities. Delivery of services may be developed and managed through the alliance of local authority social services, semipublic agencies, and the voluntary sector. This forms part of what Whitfield (2006) calls “agentification”. For example, Whitfield shows how the management of a school that involved simply interacting with a local authority that previously provided all ancillary services to subcontracting to a plethora of agencies including privatised school meal providers, buildings and facilities maintenance companies, after-school care voluntary groups, outsourced school transport, special educational needs resources, and teacher supply agencies. This marketisation of services calls for a much greater number of relationships with external bodies and more frequent decision making on the part of school managers. It also creates evermore numbers of subcontractee organisations that might represent themselves within this system: more logos, more corporate documents, more public sector-orientated products, more relations. It is a small wonder, therefore, that the public sector was of increasing significance to designers in this period. By the midnoughties, the public sector provided work for around half of design agencies, making it the fourth or fifth most important client to them (British Design Innovation 2006 and 2007).

The discussions that emanated from the Design Council around service design represent a move towards a third phase of public sector practices—networked governance. Here, “the role of the state is to steer action within complex social systems rather than control solely through hierarchy or market mechanisms” (Hartley 2005). Problem solving and governance are expected to be shared across a range of actors.

The overlapping of New Public Management and networked governance itself demands new standards of creative thinking in the public sector as the pressure to develop new, localised solutions and

processes becomes evermore prominent. The UK Government's White Paper, “Innovation Nation” (Department for Innovation, Skills and Universities 2008) lists climate change, the ageing population, globalisation, and higher expectations of public sector users as drivers of the need for innovatory approaches to service delivery (Hill and Julier 2009). We have seen how creativity has become a buzzword of priorities in regeneration. Here, though, it represents a concern to optimise service delivery at local levels by instilling a sense of innovation and autonomy on the part of the public sector workers who configure and provide it as well as in including end users in their cocreation and operationalisation.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show the links between the broad ideological schema of the New Labour government 1997–2010 and governmental priorities in the promotion and instrumentalisation of design. Firstly, I sketched out a broad shift in the Design Council's core interests. This governmental organisation moved gradually away from its former priority concern with promoting design as a “value added” practice, as a way to differentiate products and make them more competitive in the market place. In the 1980s, this move was motivated by a straightforward, more generalistic notion of “design for profit”, meaning that notions of integrity of the object, or “good design”, became subservient to their exchange value. From the mid-1990s, the Design Council began to take up increasing prominence in promoting issues of creative capital and design skills.

This keyed in firstly with government-led discussions around the repositioning the UK as a creative country in a global marketplace. But it subsequently coincided with the emergence of “creative industries” discourses, the latter of which are now well-known. At one level, design was a way by which national claims to creative capital could be materialised and evidenced. But design—and more widely the notion of creative labour—could also take on a symbolic role. It could signal the transformation or regeneration of localities, but also of the self. In either case, it was a “fast” policy, achieved relatively quickly, and with relatively low capital investment. It symbolised not just a “tidying up” but a wholesale adherence to specific attitudinal dispositions

towards labour formats that underwrote the New Economy. Thus, design also became about value in potentia. Just as financialisation is concerned with the search for sources of value (see Lash in Julier 2009), so design could signal future wealth. It became the rainbow that pointed to the crock of gold.

Returning to the Design Council, we saw how, from 2000 onwards, it also promoted service design. In relation to the growing interest in design for the public sector, this coincided with certain ideological priorities that centred around notions of citizenship and network governance. By focusing on the end user more, service design could find ways of downloading responsibility for the stewardship of welfare state objectives while also engaging public sector employees more fully in their configuration. This foregrounded a more “relational” notion of design wherein greater attention is to be paid to the flows, vectors, and values that exist between entities. Again, this echoes changes in the way that public sector services were to be delivered, moving away from the centralisation of these to multiagency approaches.

The title of this article promises discussion of political economy. A close analysis of government-spending priorities during the period under discussion and changes in the UK's economic structure would no doubt map onto shifting discourses and commercial practices of design. However, I have attempted to be elliptical and speculative in a different way in this article. The three books discussed at the beginning of this article (Atkinson and Elliot 2007; Peston 2009; Minton 2009) all draw attention to the enormous ambition of New Labour in terms of the economy, the welfare state, and the built environment coupled with what, in European terms, was a relatively low taxation regime. In these circumstances, they all argue, the alternative was to build up massive public and private debt. The triumph of financialisation is dependent on high levels of trust. These may be achieved through integrity but also helped by promotion. Design was just one way by which this was achieved.

Writing in the 1980s, cultural critic Peter York (1988) observed that the success of British design is born of deprivation. With very little street life, culture, or education, what is there to fall back on? “Style” is his answer. Fortunately, Design UK has come a long way from there. It is more sophisticated and knowing than that. But something of this suggestion, that design is a kind of panacea, a way by which the nation's disparate

and underinvested economy, culture, and society can, somehow, be stitched together remains.

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