

From Visual Culture to Design Culture

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The past ten years of academia have seen the establishment of Visual Culture, Material Culture and, most recently, Design Culture as scholarly disciplines. Visual Culture partly has emerged from art history through its incorporation of cultural studies. Material Culture's provenance is in a mixture of anthropology, museum studies, and design history. The term "design culture" has been used more sporadically, and not just in academia. It also has been employed in journalism and the design industry itself. But if design culture is to be consolidated as an academic discipline, what relationship would it have to these other categories and, indeed, to design practice itself? Given the foci of Visual Culture in images, and that of Material Culture in things, they should, theoretically, provide a scholastic springboard for Design Culture.

Visual Culture is now firmly established as an academic discipline in universities across Europe and the Americas. It sports two refereed journals,¹ at least five student introductory texts,² and three substantial readers.³ Undergraduate and postgraduate courses have been established. While differing in their approaches, Visual Culture authors generally include design alongside fine art, photography, film, TV, and advertising within their scope.⁴ Visual Culture, therefore, challenges and widens the field of investigation previously occupied by Art History. This project was instigated in the 1970s within the then-called "New Art History." Proponents turned away from traditional interests in formal analysis, provenance, and patronage to embrace a more anthropological attitude to the visual in society. Henceforth, all visual forms are admissible into the academic canon—a notion spurred on by the rise of Cultural Studies, Popular Culture Studies, Media Studies and, indeed, Design History. As the academic discipline of Visual Culture emerged through the 1990s, its central concern was the investigation of the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Nonetheless, despite this apparent openness, this article contends that the methods of Visual Culture have limited use for developing an understanding of the cultural role of contemporary design in society. Victor Margolin previously has suggested the need for doctoral-level studies of design and culture.⁵ In essence,

- 1 The *Journal of Visual Culture* (Sage, founded 2002) and *Visual Culture in Britain* (Ashgate, founded 2000).
- 2 For example, see Malcolm Barnard, *Approaches to Understanding Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Richard Howells, *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and *Visual Culture: An Introduction*, John Walker and Sarah Chaplin, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).
- 3 For example, see *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); and *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Amelia Jones, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- 4 Malcolm Barnard, *Art, Design, and Visual Culture: An Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1998) includes some short references to design.
- 5 See Victor Margolin, "Design History and Design Studies" in *The Politics of the Artificial: Essays on Design and Design Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

my ambition is to move beyond Visual Culture and consider the conditions of, and the procedures for, Design Culture that take Margolin's proposition a step or two further.

The principle focus of this article is on the way these disciplines situate themselves in relation to their objects of study and their scope. First, it develops a critique of Visual Culture as a "way of looking," exposing its limitations in relation to design. I contend that the hermeneutic position occupied by some Visual Culture authors, so far, explains their discomfort and inability to deal meaningfully with the functions of contemporary design. Secondly, I review the conditions that may give rise to the superceding of Visual Culture by a concept of Design Culture, and the meanings it occupies. Finally, this article proposes a conceptual model that helps to structure how the study of Design Culture might be pursued.

Given the limitations of space, issues, and debates that have emerged in Material Culture studies are given less attention in relation to this problematic. This is not to underestimate its role in the emergence of a Design Culture conception. Rather, I acknowledge that the openness with which Material Culture studies are pursued, alongside Design History and Design Studies, provides an intellectual flexibility that is largely absent within Visual Culture. As we shall see, the use of the term "design culture" is pluralistic in academic institutions, and this resonates with similar debates that have run through design history and design studies. Earlier attempts to define these fields with specific boundaries, discursive features, and pedagogic aims have led to a more mature agreement among its supporters that expresses a reverse situation. Nowadays, these disciplines and their sub-areas interact in a secure and complex way.⁶ In seeking to define and propose a conceptual framework for the study of Design Culture, its debt to these other disciplines, as well as Visual Culture, is acknowledged.

The Periodization and Scope of Visual Culture

The periodization of visual culture⁷ is understood in two ways. One is that the visual has come to be the dominant cognitive and representational form of modernity. This certainly is the position that was taken by W. J. T. Mitchell⁸ and Mirzoeff.⁹ In this account, the emergence of a "visual turn" in Western society is the effect of the creation of mass consumer markets and urbanization during the industrial revolution. Indeed, the proliferation of images became a key characteristic of modern social organization.¹⁰ From a design point of view, commodities and services needed to be made more self-consciously visual in order to advertise and market them to a wide, anonymous audience. The Victorians saw the growth of the department store, catalogue shopping, mass tourism, and entertainment as spectacle—all of which hinge on the mediation of visual experience. And, of course, this also was the period of new visual technologies such as film, animation, and photography.

6 Ibid.

7 Henceforth, I refer to "visual culture" in lowercase to mean the field that "Visual Culture" (uppercase) as an academic discipline studies, and likewise for "design culture" and "Design Culture."

8 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

9 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998).

10 Jessica Evans, "Introduction" in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds. (London: Sage, 1999).

Alternatively, we might view the issue of visual culture as a hermeneutic one. It is not a question of one era superseding another or of binary opposites. There isn't a clear historical break between, say, a literary era and the visual era. Vision is neither hegemonic nor non-hegemonic.¹¹ In the first instance, all media are hybrid or, as Bal claims, "impure."¹² They do not merely engage one expression—visual, textual, aural, material—but are dissolved within their mediatory contexts. (One cannot talk of the Internet in terms of either visual or textual culture but, perhaps, as screen culture.) Therefore, it does not follow that the advent of a new visual technology—from oil painting to Internet—means the strict dominance of one cognitive form over another in any era. Forms of visual presentation emerge and indeed occupy some discursive prominence at various historical junctures. An era of visual culture, Mitchell argues, is where the perception of the visual becomes commonplace; something that is mentioned casually.¹³ In doing so, assumptions are automatically made about the ubiquity and role of the visual in society.

In considering this more nuanced notion of visual culture, we slip from an essentialist view (the visual is the medium of our times) to a complex view (we regard the visual as an intrinsic and important social and cultural expression of our times).

While proponents of the latter position may acknowledge the visual as part and parcel of a complex, interlocking web of cultural production, the visual plays a lead role in cultural formation and representation. They are concerned with images, pictures, visual things, and what they are doing. The chief focus of interest is on them as representations and in the relation of viewers and practices of vision. The dominant transaction of interest is between singularized object and individual viewer, between produced object and consuming subject. Issues of "scopic regimes," vision, ways of looking, the gaze, and semiotics dominate the literature. The "reading" of the image is a central faculty of the discipline.

This ocularcentricism in Visual Culture studies therefore renders the viewer almost inanimate in relation to the viewed. A sensibility is embedded in its practices whereby things external to the subject are seen, analyzed, and contemplated. This rigid process of looking is underpinned and promoted by the habit of disembodiment of images from their primary contexts of encounter.¹⁴ Adverts or photos are quite literally cut out of newspapers and magazines for analysis, a process that is not dissimilar to practices undertaken within traditional art history that Visual Culture studies critiques.¹⁵ Furthermore, to date, the traditional objects of interest to scholars of Visual Culture have predominantly been static forms. A survey of the key introductory texts for the discipline reveals the preponderance of static visual forms such as photography and advertising.

11 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture" in *Journal of Visual Culture* 1:2 (2002): 165–181.

12 Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture" in *Journal of Visual Culture* 2:1 (2002): 5–32.

13 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture" in *Journal of Visual Culture* 1:2 (2002): 165–181.

14 Carol Armstrong, "Questionnaire" in *October* 77 (1996): 26–28.

15 Mirzoeff, however, refutes this notion of the "disembodiment" of images. See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

How one looks and how looking is represented may be a multifaceted performance. Indeed, Martin Jay identified three common historical forms. The first is embedded in the perspectivalist Cartesian relationship between viewer and viewed that relates to Renaissance painting. Here a single, static position for the viewer is expected. Second, observational empiricism that was embedded in Dutch seventeenth century art does not make the assumption of three-dimensional space external to the viewer, but revels in the particularity of surface detail. Third, the multiple and open picturing of visual phenomena prevalent in baroque art demands the viewer to piece together visual objects into a coherent narrative.¹⁶ These are useful starting points for exploring visual encounter, and may be transferred into the exploration of designed objects and environments. However, Jay's argument, it seems, still positions the practice of viewing in the foreground as the prior function that such objects fulfill. Furthermore, his interest is in whatever is, quite literally, within the frame rather than around or behind it. The notion that such artifacts also function as things in space or circulation, or in individual or collective reproduction, memory, or aspiration, is absent.

Contemporary Design and the Limitations of Visual Culture

As visual information has become ephemeral and immediate, so the ground on which culture is played out has shifted up a gear. The growing ubiquity of design as a self-consciously distinguishing feature in everyday life expands the grounds on which visual values lie. As Scott Lash notes, "Culture is now three-dimensional, as much tactile as visual or textual, all around us and inhabited, lived in rather than encountered in a separate realm as a representation."¹⁷ He describes an architectonic, spatially-based society, and information is reworked in these planes. Culture is no longer one of pure representation or narrative, where visual culture conveys messages. Instead, culture formulates, formats, channels, circulates, contains, and retrieves information. Design, therefore, is more than just the creation of visual artifacts to be used or "read." It is also about the structuring of systems of encounter within the visual and material world.

Academics at the core of Visual Culture studies are not oblivious to this development. Hal Foster's recent writings, in particular, resonate with Lash's "architectonic" conception of culture. Foster places himself at the end of discursive tradition that recognizes the remaking of space in the image of the commodity—itself a prime story of capitalist modernity. This tradition, he claims, runs from the work of Georg Simmel, through Sigfried Karcauer and Walter Benjamin, the situationists, to David Harvey and Saskia Sassen.¹⁸ In the same way that the commodity and sign appear as one (through, for example, branding), so, he contends, does the commodity and space. This is nowhere more evident than in the use of design to

16 Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" in *Vision and Visuality*, Hal Foster, ed. (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1988).

17 Scott Lash *Critique of Information* (London: Sage, 2002), 149.

18 Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2002), 23.

define the cultural value of locations—place branding in other words. Thus, for Foster, Frank O. Gehry's design for the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao creates a spectacle that is "an image accumulated to the point where it becomes capital."¹⁹ This observation closes the loop instigated by Guy Debord, arguing that the spectacle was "capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image."²⁰ Here design is used to establish symbolic value over a location; or, as Foster would have it, image and space are "deterritorialized."²¹

Equally, Camiel Van Winkel speaks of a "regime of visibility ... that permeates all levels of culture and society ... [so that] ... increasingly works of art and other cultural artefacts are no longer simply made but designed ... a productive model dominates that is all about styling, coding, and effective communication with an audience."²² In agreement with Van Winkel, Bryson argues that, as they proliferate, "A primary experience in everyday life is that of being engulfed or overwhelmed by images."²³ Together with Foster, these Visual Culture writers resonate a profound and enervated anxiety as to what to do about design in contemporary culture.

At the heart of these narratives concerning the instrumentalization of design in the commodification, corporatization, and formatting of culture is a telling diffidence and anxiety as to how to deal with this. The imperative of modern capitalism to make things visual in order to commodify them implies a flip side—that more and more things are passed from a non- or pre-visual state into this aestheticized state. There is an implied "before" and "after" here and, equally, there is an implied "them" and "us." "They" are the forces and objects of modern capitalism and design therein, and "we" are viewers and subjects of them. Visual Culture then becomes a project in how to deal with this asymmetry.

The commentaries of Van Winkel and Foster therefore seem to assume an alienated position on the part of the subject. In this account, modernity has entailed a shift from a bodily, practical relationship with the world to a more abstract and intellectual one, and the "disembedding of aspects of life from the social relationships and activities with which they have previously been implicated."²⁴ This process began, according to Marx, with the passivization and routinization of labor and the process of objectification, whereby human values are invested into alien processes of capital, exchange, and the commodity.²⁵ This discourse emerges in Weber's account of the spread of legal-rational thought and the resultant processes of disenchantment that forms the basis of Ritzer's "McDonaldization thesis."²⁶ Systems are orchestrated and routinized for maximum perceived efficiency, leaving the consumer as a passive participant. Equally, it has influenced studies of alienation from the urban milieu promoted by Richard Sennett²⁷ that subsequently has influenced John Urry²⁸ in his conception of "the tourist gaze." Here, the conceptual

19 Ibid., 41.

20 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 1967), 24.

21 Hal Foster, "The ABCs of Contemporary Design" in *October* 100 (Spring, 2002): 198.

22 Camiel Van Winkel cited in Norman Bryson, "Visual Culture and the Dearth of Images" *Journal of Visual Culture* 2:2 (2003): 229–32, 230.

23 Norman Bryson, "Visual Culture and the Dearth of Images" *Journal of Visual Culture* 2:2 (2003): 229–32, especially 230.

24 James G. Carrier, "Mind, Gaze, and Engagement: Understanding the Environment" *Journal of Material Culture* 8:1 (2003): 5–23.

25 Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, T. B. Bottomore, trans. and ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

26 George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (London: Sage, 1996).

27 Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

28 John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990).

emphasis is on tourism as a form of spectacular consumption in which sites are arranged for visual pleasure. Tourist spaces are produced and viewed as an alien “other.”

Meanwhile, the emergence of a range of visual technologies during the 1990s perhaps has broken this relationship between viewer and viewed. Among these, the idea of virtual reality in its raw state (before it was sublimated into applications such as computer games) indicated a direction for an alternative conception of how we might handle visual culture. The discourse of “immersion”—where the subject “steps into” the object—signifies a paradigmatic shift of the ground on which visual culture might be played out. Thinking about virtual reality shifts us away from an ocularcentrism into an account that takes on board the embodied nature of engagement.²⁹ Furthermore, virtual reality becomes an, albeit extreme, metaphor for change in the rules of engagement between subject and object. In the new conditions of design culture, cognition becomes as much spatial and temporal as visual. Information is presented within architectonic planes rather than in the bounded, two-dimensional space of representation. The processes of encounter go further and are more complex than the analytical tools of Visual Culture can fully aid. The last decade has seen the ascendance of a range of overlapping and interdependent visual technologies. These promise not so much convergent media, but rather, simultaneous and concurrent experiential moments. The same visual information may be generated and encountered via a range of platforms: picture phones, DVD cameras, Webcams, and LED and plasma screens.

Meanwhile, the insistence on the singularization of the objects of analysis within Visual Culture accounts for the discipline’s inability to make substantial contributions to the study and understanding of design. The presumption is that visual objects are intrinsically alienating. To follow a parallel Material Culture studies argument, their singularization through consumption is what interrupts and reverses this process of alienation. Its quest for meaning is in the investigation of the transactional relationship between seeing and the thing seen. But this leaves out the possibility, even more probable in design culture, that it can be encountered through a range of media or even that its multiple reproduction itself produces meaning. By extension, it does not necessarily follow that the primary experience of design is that of being overwhelmed or engulfed by it. Indeed, the multiplication of its artifacts may even be what makes it meaningful. So how are the ways that the term “design culture” is articulated signal an alternative approach to Visual Culture? How might we construct a model of analysis that respects the specificities as well as the more general effects of design culture?

29 My thanks to Melanie Chan, Ph.D. candidate at Leeds Metropolitan University, “Discourses of Virtual Reality,” with whom discussion has led me to this position.

Towards Design Culture

Daniel Koh is a Singapore-based art director. He maintains a personal Website (www.amateurprovokateur.com) that profiles his own design work and that of others. He divides his own into two categories: “commercial” and “noncommercial” work. A page is devoted to “design culture.” Here, Koh has listed more than one-hundred and twenty links to the work of designers to “showcase their sensibilities ... and to stimulate the creativity within the design community.”³⁰ Profiles of practitioners in Caracas, Montreal, New York, London, Amsterdam, Rome, Krakow, Tokyo, and Singapore are included in this gallery.

I asked him what he meant by the words, “design culture.” He replied, “[It is] a term I define as designers think and work through different mediums. Different thought processes/ approach but one common objective: to communicate. Design is a way of life; it’s all around us. We should all make things better.”³¹ According to Koh, “design culture” is located in communication. It is both something designers do, but also is something that is “all around.” “Design culture,” then, is part of the flows of global culture. It is located within network society, and is also an instrument of it. It expresses an attitude, a value, and a desire to improve things.

Koh’s brief exposition of “design culture” provides a neat synthesis of many of the positions that have been taken up in relation to this term. Here are its main occurrences to date.

Design Culture as process. This is, perhaps, the most established usage, and stems from architectural and design criticism. In particular, it describes the immediate contextual influences and contextually informed actions within the development of a design. A close term that throws light on this is the Italian usage of “*cultura di progetto*.” The word “*progetto*” implies something broader than simply the form-giving within design, but extends to the totality of carrying out design; for example, from conceiving and negotiating artifacts with clients, to studio organization, to the output of the design and to its realization. Within all these there is an implied interest in the systems of negotiation—often verbal—that conspire to define and frame design artifacts. Anna Calvera broadens this understanding by placing the idea of studio activity into a framework of immediate influences.³² Thus, the project process is understood to be produced within and by a network of everyday knowledge and practices that surround the designer.

Design Culture as context-informed practice. This usage is concerned with a wider notion of “design culture as process,” to imply collectively-held norms of practice shared within or across contexts. More specifically, this usually refers to the way that geographical context may influence the practice and results of design. This can fall in two ways. One is how the everyday specific features of a location—availability of materials and technologies, cultural factors that affect business activities, climate, local modes of

30 Daniel Koh,
www.amateurprovokateur.com
(accessed 1/21/04).

31 Daniel Koh, personal e-mail communication with author, 1/21/04.

32 Anna Calvera, “Historia e historias del diseño: la emergencia de las historias regionales.” (Keynote paper given at “La Emergencia de las Historias Regionales” conference in Havana, Cuba, June 7–9, 2001).

exchange, and so on—produce particularized actions. This might be contrasted with perceived globalized, dominant, mainstream forms of practice. The second may equally engage a consciousness of difference or peripherization, but views design culture as a platform for communication. Design culture thus becomes a forum (supported chiefly by the Web, but also by other channels such as magazines and conferences) by which globally diasporic actors connect, communicate, and legitimate their activities.

Design Culture as organizational or attitudinal. Here, the focus remains tightly within the scope of the producer-agents of design, though not exclusive to designers per se. It stems from management studies and sociological texts that have sought to analyze and provide models for the human resources within innovative industries.³³ Thus flexible, horizontally-networked, transaction-rich activities that, in particular, deal in symbol products become dominant in this discourse. Within this, creative industries have begun to serve as paradigms for wider shifts in business organization, both internal and external. Team-working, creative empowerment and innovation become keywords in this situation. Furthermore, in seeking coherence between the internal ethos of a company and its interactions with its public, the role of brand stewardship becomes increasingly important. Within this mode, then, the idea of a “design culture” as an attitudinal and organizational spine within a company that concerns itself with both innovation and formal coherence has been used.³⁴ Leading on from this, it may also be used to signify the “cultural capital” of a company—its facility to qualify, critique, and thus deliver distinction and differentiation.

Design Culture as agency. If the term can be used as an attitudinal marker of an organization to maximize its market position, this may also be appropriated into attempts to reform the aims, practices, and effects of design toward greater and more direct social and environmental benefit. Here, the emphasis also is in design culture as a “way of doing things,” but attempts to be active in changing the practices of those outside its stewards. Therefore, it takes context as circumstance but not as a given: the world can be changed through a new kind of design culture.³⁵ Certainly the term is not used, however, to signify a cultural capital for commercial advantage. But it does imply the notion of a design practice that is “encultured” in the sense that it strives for a higher moral ground.

Design Culture as pervasive but differentiated value. Leading on from this last observation, one might detect a spirit of openness, or almost random connection, in the same way that magazine-thumb-ing, Web-surfing, and conference-networking produce chance “pick-ups.” Within this is the quality of immersion in a specific (designerly) ambience.³⁶ So, again, there is the notion of design providing a label of distinction. But simultaneously the locations, artifacts, or practices

33 For example, see Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Spaces* (London: Sage, 1994) and R. Scase and H. Davis, *Managing Creativity: The Dynamics of Work and Organization* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 2000).

34 See N. Oudshoorn, E. Rommes, and M. Stienstra, “Configuring the User as Everybody: Gender and Design Cultures in Information and Communication Technologies,” *Science, Technology & Human Values* 29:1 (2004): 30–63; Gavin Cawood, “Design Innovation and Culture in SMEs,” *Design Management Journal* 8:4 (1997); and Paul A. Rodgers and Megan Strickfaden, “The Culture of Design: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Designers’ Identities” (2003). Paper given at “Design Wisdom” Fifth European Academy of Design Conference, Barcelona; available at www.ub.es/5ead.

35 For example, Bruce Mau’s “Massive Change” project at the School of Design at Toronto City College was subtitled “The Future of Design Culture” (www.massivechange.com; accessed 1/21/04), although the “culture” word was later dropped (www.massivechange.com; accessed 11/4/04). See also www.vtt.fi/virtual/ndc/ for its “New Design Culture” project at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

36 For example, Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands, in *Urban Nightscapes, Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces, and Corporate Power* (London: Routledge, 2003), write of the corporatization of urban night life that produces an agglomeration of designer bars and clubs that are, nonetheless, highly differentiated.

that harbor design as carrying cultural value become ever wider and more various. Design culture represents a conceptual breadth that goes beyond traditionally used notions of “excellence” or “innovation.”³⁷

What these definitions share with Visual Culture is their openness in terms of scope. Design culture, while incorporating agency, is not tied to paternalistic notions of “good design” in the same way that Visual Culture breaks from High Art/Popular Culture distinctions.

Equally, the same duality in terms of periodization result. On the one hand, the emergence of design culture goes hand-in-hand with the massification of design production and consumption in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By 1994, the Netherlands Design Institute was optimistically predicting a growth of the European design market from \$9.5b. to \$14b. by 2000.³⁸ In the UK, the number of first-year design students increased by thirty-five percent, from 14,948 to 20,225, between 1994 and 2001.³⁹ It is in this decade that we see the emergence of the terms “creative industries” and “cultural industries”—of which design forms a significant proportion—and measurements and forecasts of them taking place. According to a 1998 European Commission report, “cultural employment”—that is work in advertising, design, broadcast, film, internet, music, publishing, and computer games—grew by twenty-four percent in Spain (1987–94), while employment in Germany of “producers and artists” grew by twenty-three percent (1980–94).⁴⁰

On the other hand, what is described here is a qualitative change in terms of how design is practiced, circulated, and perceived. As with Visual Culture, we are not talking about the replacement of one cognitive process by another. Rather, a shift takes place wherein design takes up a central role, as commonplace, in creating and articulating value, structuring the circulation of information and forming everyday practices. In either case, it seems apt to regard design culture as a key result and expression of our times.

A Model for Studying Design Culture

The recent uses of the term “design culture” suggest a dual role for it. One is in its appreciation of multiple contexts in structuring form and expression. Another reflects a new sensibility and attitudinal position in terms of how design is practiced. Having critiqued the inadequacies of a “Visual Culture” approach in the context of design, how can the relationships between design artifacts, values, and users be effectively studied? And how can this understanding be used as a form of agency in order to feed into design action? How can, in other words, the study of Design Culture be both analytical and generative? (See Diagram 1.)

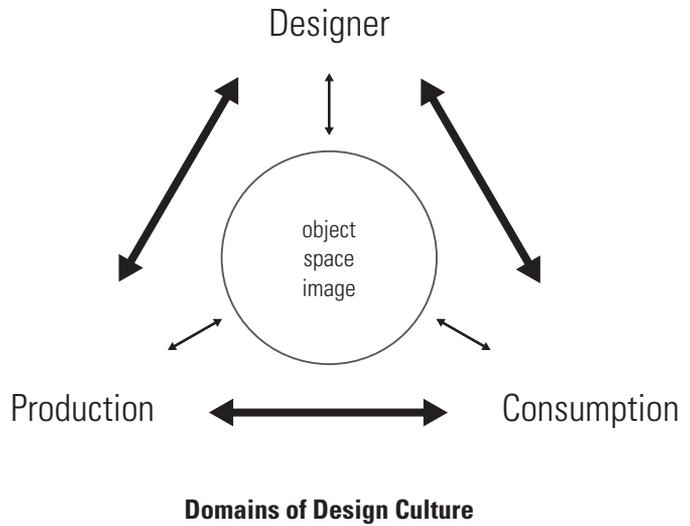
I have previously presented Design Culture as engaging the interrelationships of the domains of designers, production, and consumption with the design object, image, or space.⁴¹ The quest

37 This is how Ellen Lupton conceived “design culture” for the National Design Museum, Cooper-Hewitt exhibition of 2002, “Design Culture Now” (Ellen Lupton personal e-mail to the author, 1/8/04).

38 Netherlands Design Institute’s *Design Across Europe: Patterns of Supply and Demand in the European Design Market* (Amsterdam: Vormgevingsinstitut, 1994), 9.

39 Design Council’s *Design in Britain 2003–2004* (London: Design Council, 2003).

40 David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* (London: Sage, 2002), 90.



of the scholar of Design Culture was to explore how each of these nodes affected the other—how these relationships were materialized through practices in the design profession and of production and consumption. Rather than draw a line between what have been regarded as more traditional approaches to Design History and Design Studies (where the principle focus was on the processes and norms of action within design practice are studied) and more recent concerns of Material Culture (where the role of the consumption of artifacts as part of everyday is emphasized), my aim was to explore the dynamics and interrelationships of these concerns. In essence, I was, as an erstwhile design historian and in agreement with Margolin,⁴² attempting to break the stand-off between design history and a larger culture of design research that had yet to be addressed.

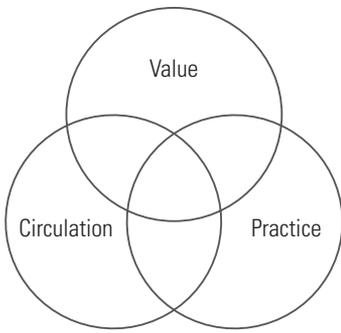
This nodal framework favors a straightforward conception wherein singularized artifacts are placed at the center of analysis. Perhaps some resonance with a “Visual Culture” paradigm of enquiry is detectable here. Meanwhile, in her exploration of the relationships of design research, theory, and design culture, Sylvia Pizzocaro is more demanding. She encourages the design researcher to embrace an open-ended sensibility in the face of the increasing complexity of design environments.⁴³ This attitude owes something to Margolin’s notion of a product milieu that he defined as “the aggregate of objects, activities, services, and environments that fills the lifeworld.”⁴⁴ In stark opposition to the exponents of Visual Culture that I have reviewed in this article, these scholars of design research and design studies have moved toward the structuring of a systematic approach to understanding the dynamics and effects of material and immaterial relationships that are articulated by and through the multiple artifacts of design culture. In doing so,

41 Guy Julier, *The Culture of Design* (London: Sage, 2000).

42 Victor Margolin, “Building a Design Research Community” in *Design Plus Research, Proceedings of the Politecnico di Milano Conference*, S. Pizzocaro, A. Arruda, and D. De Moraes, eds. (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, May 18–20, 2000); available at <http://pcsiwa12.rett.polimi.it/~phddi/uk/01/dpr00/intro.htm>.

43 Silvia Pizzocaro, “Research, Theory, and Design Culture: A Knowledge Growing within Complexity” in *Design Plus Research, Proceedings of the Politecnico di Milano Conference*, S. Pizzocaro, A. Arruda, and D. De Moraes, eds. (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, May 18–20, 2000); available at <http://pcsiwa12.rett.polimi.it/~phddi/uk/01/dpr00/intro.htm>.

44 Victor Margolin, “The Product Milieu and Social Action” in *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies*, Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 122.



Domains of Design Culture

Diagram 2

they suggest a movement toward a “knowing practice” of design—whether in terms of design action or reception. While acknowledging a debt to their thinking, and by way of development from my previous diagram, I present diagrammatically, with each element subsequently discussed, a revised conceptual framework for Design Culture. (See Diagram 2.)

Value. The designer’s role is in the creation of value. This most obviously is commercial value, but also may include social, cultural, environmental, political, and symbolic values. Clearly, it is not restricted to notions of “good design” as value.⁴⁵ It involves the origination of new products and product forms, but also their value augmentation. It is an expanded field of activity that orchestrates and coordinates material and nonmaterial processes results. A key feature of this value creation is the reproduction of “product nodes,” whereby cultural information is filtered through a range of platforms and moments. The establishment of multiple coordinates for the networked reproduction of this cultural information might be termed a “designscape.” Creative action may indeed originate, position, and differentiate, product forms and “product nodes” to increase value. But systems of measurement and accountability are also embedded in this domain.

Circulation. A range of straightforward elements underpin and shape the productive processes of design culture, including available technologies, environmental, and human factors. But nonmaterial elements such as existing knowledge networks, legislation, political pressures, economic fluctuations, and fiscal policies are also contextual factors that these draw on. Beyond design manufacture or production issues—whether we are talking about material or information products—“downstream” flows of product information and distribution are channeled, formatted, interrupted, or facilitated to influence their movement and /or reception through the system of provision. Within this, the specificities that create a “fit” or disjuncture of global/local nexus invariably play crucial roles.

Practice. The engagement of design products, processes, and systems in everyday life is not merely a function of consumer culture in its traditional sense. Beyond individual, privately-orientated activities of use, ownership, and maintenance focused on the domestic sphere are layers of socially-constituted activities in which individuals are carriers of collectively held practices, and may comprise sets of conventions and procedures.⁴⁶ Alternatively, practice may be conceived as specific types and ranges of activities that Bourdieu termed as “fields.”⁴⁷ Here, different practices are governed by their specific, respective rules. Practice involves routinized behavior that is both individually enacted but also socially observable. Consumption, therefore, is a part of practice. Things are bought and put to use, environments are visited, Websites are perused in fulfilling practice.

45 By “products” I mean not only manufactured goods, but also services that are marketed or provided as products (e.g., airlines, healthcare, leisure provisions, insurance, etc.).

46 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1994).

47 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992). I wish to thank Dale Southerton, University of Manchester, for getting me to think about practice rather than consumption.

Qualitative change in what drives the design profession and the meaning of design in society adds weight to the “contemporaneity” of a design culture concept that takes us beyond Visual Culture studies. The rise of branding as the key focus and driver of much design practice signals two clear challenges. One is that design culture requires its observers to move beyond visual and material attributes to consider the multivarious and multilocational networks of its creation and manifestation. Brand management rhetoric tells us that producer agents—be they corporations, institutions, or individuals—are responsible for controlling a coherent brand message throughout its circuit of culture, from production through mediation to consumption to consumer feedback. If a brand is typified into a clear, simple message—which is often crystallized as a slogan—then this should be reflected in all of its manifestations. This might include the way corporate workers dress, talk, and act with customers and clients. Branding obviously extends into more traditional, designed elements such as promotional literature graphics or the design of retail spaces, reception areas, Websites, or other points of corporation and consumer interface. In this way, the systems of branding inhabit much of the space of design culture, turning information into an “all-around-us” architectonic form.

The rise of branding may partially account for the growing interdisciplinarity of design within the profession as designers seek, and clients demand, greater integration of product, graphic, and interior design in order to create coherent and complete design solutions. It also explains the design profession’s increased integration with marketing, management, and public relations mentioned earlier. Branding is, by no means, the only driver and expression of contemporary design culture, but it is indicative of design culture’s multidimensional qualities.

I use branding for illustrative purposes, but do not necessarily foresee its domination as permanent. Ultimately, value production in design hinges on articulating “the cultural reconstruction of the meaning of what is consumed”⁴⁸ by various means. Value is continually adjusted in response to changing everyday and global practices, as well as systems of product and information circulation.

Traditional surveys of consumption focus on the social role of goods in private, everyday life. Even where the relationships of consumed goods are synthesized into an exploration of concepts of lifestyle, discussion invariably falls into matters of personal choice. However, design is mobilized and encountered at both material and nonmaterial expressions distributed across a range of platforms. Service-orientations in private and public sectors, for example in corporate consumption, health provision, or leisure practices, provide structures of engagement that are acted on at different bodily and mental levels. In effect, design culture contributes to the structuring of practice and the formation of the rules of engagement of its related field⁴⁹ through the provision of interrelated elements

48 Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1992), 4.

49 The distinction between “practice” and “field” is debatable. See Alan Warde, “Practice and Field: Revising Bourdieusian Concepts” (Centre for Research on Innovation and Competition Discussion Paper 65, Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, 2004).

that give meaning to these. The competition between brands, for example, reflects and contributes to their distinctions through providing differentiated rules of engagement. Brands currently articulate fields of their respective practices.

The academic study of Design Culture allows for the deep analysis of such systems. In embracing their complexity in creative and imaginative ways, it provides cues for further design intervention into them. It breaks from the singularized “way of looking” endemic within Visual Culture studies, while maintaining a zest for understanding the social meanings of artifacts. Meanwhile, in synthesizing the methods and sensibilities of Design History, Design Studies, and Design Research, it provides a conceptual framework that addresses contemporary problematics of design and its social meanings in the contexts of complexity.⁵⁰

To embrace Design Culture as an academic discipline requires, therefore, a different sensibility than that of Visual Culture. In the first instance, it forces one to move beyond the enervated position of the detached or alienated observer overwhelmed by images. Instead, a Design Culture enquiry traces a cartography that exposes and analyses the linkages of artifacts that constitute information flows and the spaces between them. Second, while one might dwell on individual artifacts, this process requires these to be seen relationally to other artifacts, processes, and systems. Third, it may be mobilized not merely as analysis, but as a generative mode that produces new sensibilities, attitudes, approaches, and intellectual processes in design practice.⁵¹ In this way, it promises a critical and knowing pathway toward the amelioration of this runaway world.

50 See Mark C. Taylor *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

51 For an excellent discussion of the relationship of design and critique, see Gunther Kress, “Design and Transformation: New Theories of Learning” in *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, eds. (London: Routledge, 2000).