Discursive Design

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Article about types of design

You do what? "So, you design factory machines? Is that what you mean?" Many of us have switched from calling ourselves "industrial designers" to saying that we are "product designers." But the difficulty grows if your design work does not fall squarely inside the commercial realm—the experimental stuff, the artsy stuff, or not-for-profit stuff.

The confusions are understandable. Not only has the profession never had its own television series with a catchy abbreviated title to predicate popular understanding (E.R., CSI: NY, L.A. Law, Dr. 90201), but the discipline is relatively young, immensely broad, and ever expanding. What is hard to reckon with, however, is the confusion that exists even *within* the profession of industrial design: What activities do product designers recognize, champion, or even legitimize? What are the frameworks around our practice, and how are those communicated to the outside world?

Design is a mess The problem is that design is pretty much a mess. Just try and make sense of the range of the terms floating around out there: user-centered design, eco-design, design for the other 90%, universal design, sustainable design, interrogative design, task-centered design, reflective design, design for well-being, critical design, speculative design, speculative re-design, emotional design, socially-responsible design, green design, conceptual design, concept design, slow design, dissident design, inclusive design, radical design, design for need, environmental design, contextual design, and transformative design.

Without a compelling, indeed, taxonomic, way of organizing design activity, we are selling ourselves short; we not only have difficulty understanding the

profession ourselves, but also in communicating to the world our potency, range, and potential impact. In the end, we seem scattered and "designy"—in a less-than-flattering sense of the word.

As academics responsible for making sense of this jumble for our students then, we feel like those professional bic-a-brac organizers you see on daytime talk shows, confronting the tumult of someone's bloated car garage. So after some long days and a dumpster-load of capabilities lists, here we present everything neatly ordered onto 4 shelving units. Behold the Design Garage—a categorizing of designed-object activity into four primary fields: **Commercial Design**, **Responsible Design**, **Experimental Design**, and **Discursive Design**. Let's take a closer look at each, focusing on the drivers, criteria for success, and primary intents:

Commercial Design Commercial Design is what is commonly understood as industrial/product design and comprises the overwhelming majority of our professional activity. This is design work oriented toward, and driven by, the market. Success is largely defined in economic terms—sufficient return on investment. The primary intent of the designer is to create useful, useable, and desirable products that customers can afford and that generate adequate profit.

With the iPhone, we have what is rudimentarily a gadget, be it seductive in form and sophisticated in function. It has proven quite profitable for Apple, as even between the announcement of its sale in January 2007 and the first days in the store, their stock value increased 65%, and then up to a 135% total increase by the end of the year.

And beyond the realm of gadgetry, Phillipe Starck's Louis Ghost chair for Kartell sold over 200,000 units in 2006. Now selling for $410 at the MoMA store, this could represent over $80,000,000 in retail sales. While just a (highly profitable) chair, Starck includes an element of "concept" in its design, capturing the spirit of classic Louis XV chair, but in 21st Century polycarbonate plastic. Aside from this perhaps "artistic" quality and intellectual content, it is still an object that was designed using cutting edge industrial processes for a mass market, with the chief intent of producing profit for Kartell.

The primary (though not only) driver of Commercial Design is to *make money*.

Responsible Design Responsible Design encompasses what is largely understood as socially responsible design, driven by a more humanitarian notion of service. Here the designer works to provide a

useful, useable, and desirable product to those who are largely ignored by the market. Issues such as ethics, compassion, altruism, and philanthropy surround the work, be it for users in developing or developed countries. While Responsible Design can and often does have a relation to the market—being "commercially available"—its primary intent is not a maximization of profit, but instead to serve the underserved.

The XO laptop of the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) program is a prime example that has garnered a great deal of press in recent years. It is typical in that the device is commercially available (to governments and aid organizations), though it is not conventional in its means of distribution nor with its philanthropic intent.

Another example that helps make the distinction from Commercial Design is the Ableware one-handed cutlery set, which with the aid of a spring mechanism cuts a bite-sized piece of food and allows it to be skewered on fork tines with a simple downward motion. With this product, amputees and people with limited dexterity are better able to feed themselves and live more independently. While this is a product that exists on the market, the impetus was compassion— this object is not highly profitable as the target audience is fairly limited. The designer's primary intention was one of service.

(It may be helpful to compare Ableware to OXO Goodgrips, where Sam Farber wanted to create a commercially viable mass product line around more comfortable and grip-able handles. While initially inspired by his wife, he saw a market opportunity of "20 million Americans like Betsy who suffered from arthritis" and subsequently "interviewed retailers and buyers to identify the best-selling and most important items" for the first OXO products. Responsible

products certainly can be profitable, but we doubt that if Farber had not seen such a viable business opportunity he would have proceeded with his project. As such, Ableware is a more pure example of Responsible Design, and we would classify OXO as Commercial Design—primary intent—but one that also has a strong secondary concern for service to a somewhat ignored market.)

The primary (though not only) driver of Responsible Design is to *help those in need*.

Experimental Design Experimental Design represents a fairly narrow swath within the broad field of design, and its primary intention is exploration, experimentation, and discovery. Experimental Design is defined perhaps more by its process than its outcome. In its purest form it is not driven by an overly specific end-goal of application, but instead is motivated by a curiosity—an inquiry into, for example: a technology, a manufacturing technique, a material, a concept, or an aesthetic issue. Much of the work at MIT's Media Lab is fairly typical of this kind of design: technological investigations that are often only obtusely practicable and relevant to the immediate and everyday. Just as with Responsible Design, a marketable object may eventually result from an experimental project, especially after refinement and after it is directed at a specific market. But the primary intent of Experimental Design is to explore possibilities with less regard for serving the market.

Front Design's Animals Project

Popular Swedish design group, Front Design, created their Animals Project as a way of exploring the possibilities of a non-humanly-mediated production process: "We asked animals to help us [design products]. 'Sure we'll help you out,' they answered. 'Make something nice,' we told them. And so they did." What resulted were everyday objects: wallpaper that was "decorated" by a gnawing rat, a lamp cast from a rabbit's burrow, wall hooks that were formed by

constricting snakes, a lampshade created after recording a fly's path around a light bulb, a vase created by casting the impression of a dog's leg in deep snow, and a table who's top is patterned by the paths of wood consuming beetles. None of these everyday products were commercialized; they were not intended to be viable products, but instead the product-form was the means through which they investigated ideas of randomness and mediation within the context of mass-production and everyday objects.

The primary (though not only) driver of the Experimental Design is *to explore*.

Discursive Design Discursive Design refers to the creation of utilitarian objects whose primary purpose is to communicate ideas—they encourage discourse. These are tools for thinking; they raise awareness and perhaps understanding of substantive and often debatable issues of psychological, sociological, and ideological consequence. Discursive Design is the type of work that is generally less visible in the marketplace (though it can certainly exist there), but rather is most often seen in exhibition, print, and film. This is where design rubs up most closely against art. Importantly, however, these are objects of utility that carry ideas; in order to be considered design rather than art, they function (or could function) in the everyday world, but their discursive voice is what is most important and ultimately their reason for being.

Dunne and Raby's Compass Table (Photo: Jason Evans)

The Placebo Project by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby is a strong example of Discursive Design, where they wanted to raise awareness and debate regarding the role and costs of technology in contemporary life through the topic of Hertzian space—the engulfing fields of invisible electromagnetic waves generated by electrical devices. One object from the series is the Compass Table, which is an ordinary, unadorned wooden table whose top surface has been embedded with twenty-five simple, navigational compasses. The table functions as any other table would. However, when, for example, a cell phone sitting on the table rings, the compass needles begin to dance and make visible the electromagnetic waves that enter into the home and surround its occupants.
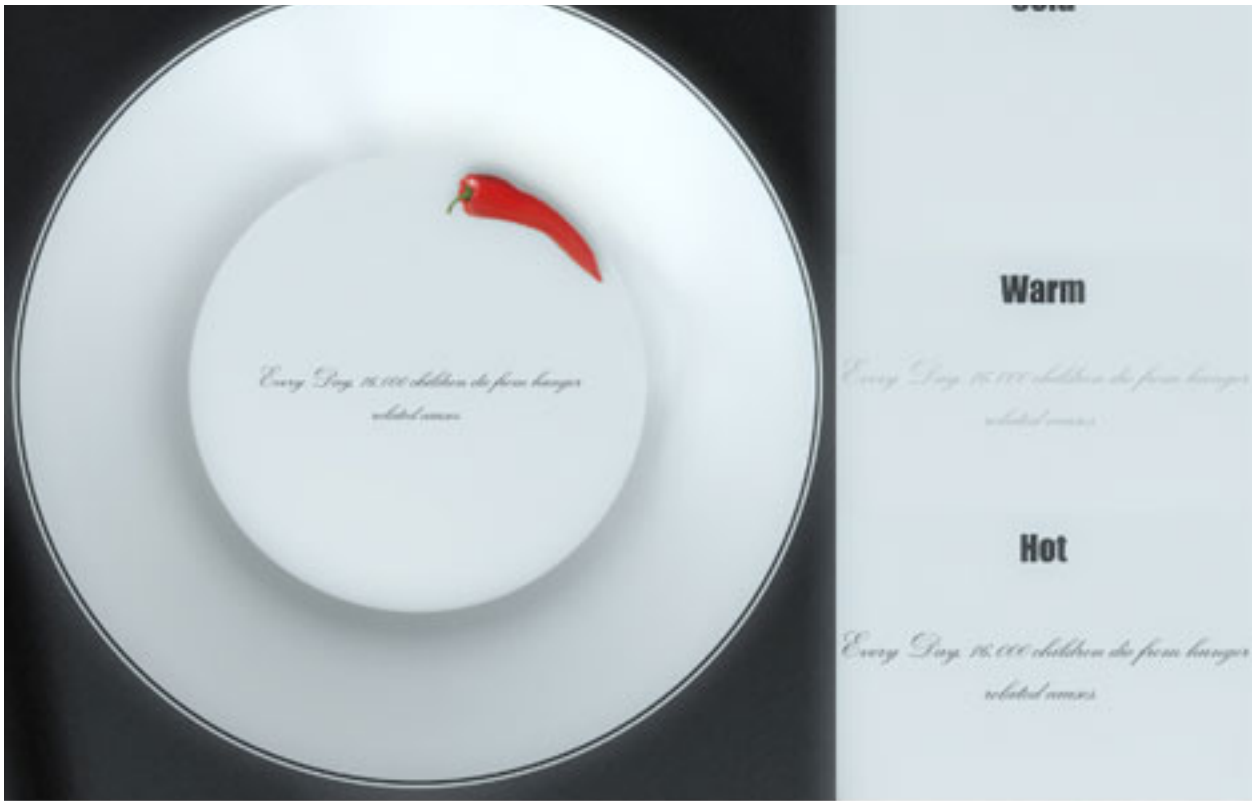
Rafael Morgan's Indigestive Plates

Another more literal example is with Brazilian designer, Rafael Morgan's Indigestive Plates. These are classic ceramic dinner plates that have a message about poverty and hunger printed in thermochromatic ink. At room temperature the plate seems conventional, but when a dinner guest begins to finish their hot meal, they are confronted with a message such as: "Every day 16,000 children die of hunger-related causes." Morgan imagines "what would happen if we disguise some of [these] plates in an expensive snob restaurant...or maybe in some important political meeting?" Here a product offers typical utility, but is foremost designed to instigate and quite literally carry a provocative message.

The primary (though not only) driver of Discursive Design is *to express ideas*.

The Overlap In presenting the aforementioned product examples from the four fields, we chose more "pure" versions of each. As mentioned, this framework is based upon the primary intention of the designer, yet we fully recognize the reality of multiple motivations. It important to emphasize that the categories are not entirely distinct from one another— there is overlap.

In fact, it is rare for any product to be "pure," in the sense that it is a result of a single intention (e.g., profitability, service, experimentation, or voice). Most products are the result of multiple intentions, like OXO's interest in commercially successful mass-products that also serve the dexterously challenged.

A strong example of "impurity," or more appropriately, "hybridity" would be the Hug salt and pepper shakers designed by Alberto Mantilla. They are very successful commercially, and yet have a strong and intentional discursive voice. These are two shakers abstractly anthropomorphized, which differ only in color—one white and one black. The shakers, with their stubby arms, nest together appearing to hug each other. As described by the designer, "[Their] very nature...connotes brotherhood. The bold use of black and white suggests that we are all brothers and sisters on this planet and we need to treat each other with kindness, compassion and respect." To truly understand these as either a commercial object or a discursive object, it would be necessary to understand the *primary* intention of the designer, which cannot always be read from the objects—especially in hybrids. Along with this overlap, it should also be emphasized that all four fields represent relative- rather than ultimate-states; objects range in their commercial-, exploratory-, responsible-, and discursive-capacity.

Scott Wilson's iBelieve iPod lanyard

So what? It might be easy to respond to this conceptualization of four fields as an interesting contribution to design theory, but is it actionable in the "real" complex work of design practice? As authors/academics/designers who confront daily the theory/practice divide ourselves, we feel confident that there are important implications of such a framework for designers, the profession, and the consumers of design.

1. First, we know from experience with our students and many seasoned practitioners that there is a sense of comfort and even relief that comes from the legitimization of the range of their design work/ideas. There are many professionals who do "side work"—considering it "conceptual" and sometimes hiding it or sheepishly refering to as "design-art" on their websites. (This was the case at one point for Scott Wilson and Mike and Maaike, for example.) This four-field approach offers formal acknowledgement, and challenges the dominant legacy of 20th-century industrial design with its inextricable link to markets and its focus on "problem solving."

2. Similarly, once the range of design work is recognized and "sanctioned," forces can rally around it and move it toward full potential. In many ways this

has happened in the last decade with Responsible Design. We now understand what it is, how it relates to the profession, and corporate pro-bono initiatives and groups like Project H are understood, championed, and are becoming more mainstream. We imagine that once the IDSA adds to their professional interest sections Discursive Design and Experimental Design groups, we will see the same kind of advances that have occurred since their establishment of responsible design sections such as Universal Design and Design for the Majority.

3. Since this framework is based upon design intention, its structure can help designers better understand and focus their projects. The fields help the designer get straight on their overall intention and how overlap or hybridity might help or hurt, as well as how the context of use/consumption comes into play.

4. Professionally, this scheme also helps Industrial/Product Design communicate with the world that it engages. Once we understand the various intentions and roles that we can take on, the better we can clarify and be taken as seriously as we often wish we would be. Those who work in staunchly commercial realms can easily distinguish their activity from the other forms, and vice-versa. Experimental Design or Discursive Design, which can resemble art or mere frivolity, have a means of expressing distinction and value in their activities.

5. The formal inclusion of other modes of design beyond the commercial moves us beyond the role of handmaiden to industry; our profession is seen as being able to serve along broader intellectual and social lines. It helps establish designers as important

local and global citizens as well as influential cultural agents.

6. With this framework, consumers of design have a more established basis for understanding intentionality and therefore a basis for evaluation. Experimental and discursive work are often erroneously subjected to the same measures of success as commercial work (blog commentary is notorious for this). When consumers are aware of designers' intentions, then more effective communication results: the designer is better satisfied because an object's goals are understood, and the consumer can focus more precisely on what value they may extract from the work.

7. And finally, the consumer can see their role shift from a position of passivity (when striking an all-too-common commercial posture) to a more active engagement in work that intends on engaging the intellect or prompting debate.

Names and frameworks are powerful. Our hope is that understanding the design landscape through these four, simple categories—Commercial Design, Responsible Design, Experimental Design, and Discursive Design—will help the profession, our "consumers," and ourselves better understand design activity and ultimately its potential in an increasingly complex world of ideas and objects.

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Associate Professor of Industrial Design at the University of Illinois-Chicago, are currently working on a book project, entitled Discursive Design. In addition to their academic work, they have a studio, materious, through which they create across all four fields of designed objects.