Express purpose

Shine on Kitchenware

Only human? Design’s ethical dilemmas

Fast and furious Rapid prototyping
Nico Macdonald is a London-based writer, event programmer and consultant focusing on the overlap of design, business and technology. Along with new design contributor Kevin McCullagh he co-founded the thinktank Design Agenda in 1994, foreshadowing the ascendancy of the political designer which he writes about on page 28. He also founded the AIGA Experience Design forum in London, which has become a significant forum for discussion of design and the Internet.

Having qualified as a 3D product designer, Nick Verebelyi spent 10 years working as a designer before founding Design Bridge Structure in 1992, with his partner Tim Jebb. The man behind the Ariel Ultra Granulette detergent dosing ball and someone who is passionate about the importance of pack shape as a visual equity, Verebelyi turns his attention in this issue (Naked lunch, page 87), to the way Internet shopping might change packaging – for the better.

David Chaloner is creative director at Conran Design Group. On page 34 he moves from designing to thinking about why we design.

“As I continue to look for the ideal solution for the next brief I find this question in the ongoing process,” he says. “All our days involve the application of new knowledge applied to experiences from the past, a balancing exercise requiring nerve, verve and commercial sense.”
Can designers save the world? (and should they try?)

As this year’s SuperHumanism conference showed, designers are increasingly self-conscious about their social role. Nico Macdonald warns that the new design ethics shouldn’t be taken at face value.

Late in May this year over 400 of the great and the good from in and around the design world came together in Westminster at Church House, traditional meeting place of Church of England bishops, to discuss the role of design in society and listen to the High Priestess of anti-branding herself, Naomi Klein. This was the most high profile discussion of this theme in over a decade. With Richard Seymour (of Seymour Powell fame), and Mark Leonard (one time Demos-ite, author of Britain TM and New Labour favourite), at the helm, and the FT’s Creative Business section behind it, expectations could hardly have been greater.

Designers are clearly more self-conscious about their social role today than they have been at any time in the last 20 years, yet the lack of substance of the critics who have come to the fore, and the issues on which it is chosen to take a stand, reflect a political agenda that is set elsewhere. There are many areas of life in which designers can make a real difference, but we need to look first at why they are taking themselves so seriously in the noughties.

This self-consciousness among designers mirrors the increasing de-politicisation of society, although it is driven by many of the same forces; primarily the end of ideology and the rise of individual politics. Most people are understandably frustrated by the disjunction between presentation and reality in politics, and more broadly in commerce, and many – including designers – have taken to questioning authority more, as those who represent it have appeared less confident about their position. The current defensiveness of corporations was captured in an advertising campaign earlier this year by the Lattice Group, one of the successor companies to energy behemoth British Gas and a sponsor of the Royal College of Art degree show. “We do need to benefit all our stakeholders,” it stated sheepishly, “So while we operate safely and economically... we also make a profit.”

There are many areas of life in which designers can make a real difference, but we need to look first at why they are taking themselves so seriously.

newdesign | septemberoctober 2001
There is also a sense of impotence, a result of the lack of apparent forces for change in society. This is a point that graphic designer Alex Cameron expresses well in the anthology *Becoming Designers*.

“Ethical design in some sense is a response to a sense of political powerlessness: designers are urged to get off the fence and act.”

A greater awareness of the world around design – politics, business, economics, science and technology – can only be a good thing, but the reality of the new design ethics shouldn’t be taken at face value.

There are a number of themes that have become the focus for the discussion of design in society, all of which draw from wider discussions.

The idea that “consumerism is running uncontested,” was a key assertion in the re-issued *First Things First 2000* manifesto (originally penned by UK design luminary Ken Garland in 1964) and chimes with concerns about the role of designers in helping companies that simply want to push more products on us by “manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best.” The flip side of these concerns is that design is not being put to useful social ends, a point made by *First Things First* as it chided the application of designers’ time to selling sport utility vehicles, butt toners, and dog food.

A broader challenge is levelled at advertising and branding, which, it is claimed, are co-opting and remaking our culture and blurring the distinction between public and private. This is of course one of the critiques found in *No Logo*, and was reinforced at SuperHumanism where pensioner terrible Neville Brody claimed that the effect of brands on consumers “takes away their self respect.”

Then at the macro level considerable concern has been exercised about the environment and sustainability, and the role design can play in creating products that are environmentally-friendly and in discouraging waste.

While the design debate draws on concerns in wider society, it has essentially become one big umbrella for a smorgasbord of dissatisfactions.

Though his remark that “we have done this since the beginning of time” missed the point that in the past complaining usually expressed a desire for social improvement, not social restraint, and was allied with a force that could do something about it. Activity aimed at social improvement was also focused more on governments or the state, and the argument that in the era of Gates’s Microsoft these are subservient to corporations is not new nor any truer than it was in the days of Rockefeller’s Standard Oil. If anything government is more powerful and intrusive, and the focus on corporations ignores the UK government’s reactionary policies on immigration, surveillance (the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act), justice (the reform of the criminal trial system), and many other issues. Dan Wieden, co-founder of Nike agency-of-record Wieden & Kennedy, noted this lack of focus at SuperHumanism, asking whether “we are trying to save the world for capitalism, socialism, technology, or ourselves?”

The lack of focus for discussion is very telling. The end of any substantial social conflict has made it very easy to be a critic and to be against any and everything. Being anti-capitalist or anti-globalisation these days sounds radical but in an age when George Soros is one of the more articulate critics of capitalism, and the police treat anti-capitalist protesters with kid gloves, it seems to have rather lost its edge. (Censor may have been an exception here but anti-capitalists anywhere in Europe in the 1930s, or even the 1980s, received a good deal more beatings and shootings than their economy class namesakes will ever experience.)

The end of any substantial social conflict has made it very easy to be a critic and to be against any and everything.
The disconnection between holding a view and acting on it means that most politics in designland is simply posturing, as ideas never have to be tested and justified in the real world. Neville Brody berated the audience at SuperHumanism about the evils of the world for 45 minutes but his opinions had no consequences by which he might be held to account. One delegate commented that she had “heard it all before”, and exclaimed, “Why doesn’t he just go and do something about it?” while another described the talk as a “PC string of stock images and stock phrases.”

So much of what passes for politics in the design world is really a discussion of tactics, and so much the more boring for it. The key issues - global warming, consumerism, sustainability, equality, restriction of choice – remain unshaken by debate as our self-appointed, and self-righteous, spokespeople don’t consider that anyone might disagree with the received wisdom, treating doubters much as the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages treated anyone questioning the existence of God.

In reality the debate about global warming is far from settled, but the only discussion we are treated to is “what should we do about it?” The obligatory use of ‘dramatic’ statistics about the environment out of context and without reference is just the most insulting aspect of views that have no coherent foundation and only a shaky understanding of science.

In reality the debate about global warming is far from settled, but the only discussion we are treated to is “what should we do about it?” while the interesting debate about our relationship to the environment is considered superfluous. The obligatory use of ‘dramatic’ statistics about the environment, out of context and without reference, is just the most insulting aspect of views that have no coherent foundation and only a shaky understanding of science.

This self-righteous attitude to debate extends to designers’ ultimate clients, the real people who drive 4x4s and keep pet dogs (during those moments they aren’t working, engaging with the world, and being creative). Brody proudly claimed of his company that “we won’t work for petrol companies, cigarette companies, or drinks companies”, leaving open the question of where he got the right to judge how other people should live their lives or how he manages to remain inured to the terrible influences that he believes the rest of us
ethics

Being a designer doesn’t pre-dispose you to having the same outlook on society in the way that historic social movements did. Brody’s attitude is akin to the middle-class terrorists who came to prominence in Germany and the US in the 1970s to liberate the oppressed and exploited while retaining from actually engaging in a debate about the beliefs they held with such certainty. As Pentagram partner Michael Bierut commented in a critique of *First Things First* in *I.D.* magazine last spring, “Its vision of consumer capitalism is a stark one: Human beings have little or no critical faculties. They embrace the products of Disney, GM, Calvin Klein and Philip Morris not because they like them or because the products have any intrinsic merit, but because designer puppetmasters have hypnotised them with things like colours and typefaces.”

For designers to make a difference in broader political activity they would have to have a core of common interests that in fact doesn’t exist. Being a designer doesn’t pre-dispose you to having the same outlook on society in the way that historic social movements did. Designers are a diverse population and are individually oriented towards their clients, all they have in common is their skills and their professionalism. Expressing political views in design work that are beyond, or even contradictory to, the client brief simply makes for bad design work, however well intended the action.

In an odd way the ethical design movement over- and under-estimates the power of design. It over-estimates the power of design and advertising to influence people (most of whom can deconstruct an ad more effectively than their grandparents could take apart a Ford engine), but in concentrating on its message, rather than the best way to get it across, it doesn’t treat the craft of design seriously enough.

Alex Cameron notes that in this low view of humanity, “On the one hand people are [considered to be] sheep who will believe what they are shown and, on the other, not intelligent enough to warrant someone who concentrates his skills and effort in the process of effectively getting ideas across.”

This isn’t to say that designers shouldn’t be political as people. However, we should be aware that effective political discussion is a battle of ideas, not tactics. Aware that it is underpinned by theory and rhetoric which is informed by, and contextualises, facts. Aware that while we may feel strongly about issues, emotion can’t substitute for a well-considered argument. We should also be aware that as designers we can indeed make a great difference to the world by building on what we know how to do already.

Key skills in the design process include being able to conceptualise and weigh up a multi-dimensional problem, consider scenarios of use, think laterally and creatively, evaluate ideas, and communicate effectively. As society’s needs become more sophisticated, people want to do and achieve more, and a larger population has access to more of society’s resources, designerly thinking will become even more important as a skill for anticipating and working through problems and opportunities.

Secondly, design has at its core the concept of human agency: the idea that nothing in the external world is a given, and the problems we experience (sometimes unknowingly) and the opportunities we see are often design challenges waiting to be addressed. This is a key concept missing from social life.

newdesign | septemberoctober2001

This isn’t to say that designers shouldn’t be political as people. However, we should be aware that effective political discussion is a battle of ideas, not tactics. While we may feel strongly about issues, emotion can’t substitute for a well-considered argument.
and one that designers effectively propagate in their work.

Thirdly, for designers to be more effective at ensuring that their skills are applied to products that actually make a difference to people’s lives, they would do well do understand better the world around us, from a political, business, social trends, economic, and technological perspective. Design, being a discipline that orients itself around the experience of the user, is uniquely positioned to mediate between all the parties in product development, and bringing a wider understanding of the world would help designers understand the interests of each group in this process more acutely.

To achieve this, we need to take users seriously and not impose our perceptions, values or prejudices on them, and treat them as robust individuals needing effective and satisfying design solutions, while critically assessing what they tell us. As Malcolm Garrett – speaking at SuperHumanism – put it, we should “use our intelligence as designers so that people can use theirs.”

SuperHumanism was notable for its lack of discussion of design, design process, or clients, which was remarkable considering Richard Seymour’s admirable track record in effective communication on all these subjects. Irene McAra-McWilliam, the new head of computer-related design at the Royal College of Art, was the notable exception, while Garrett addressed some of these themes but described a model of design development one rung above technology-push.

To be more effective we should also consider improving the relationship we have with our clients (and our collabo-

For designers to be more effective at ensuring that their skills are applied to products that actually make a difference to people’s lives they would do well do understand better the world around us, from a political, business, social trends, economic, and technological perspective.

As products, services and businesses become indistinguishable, one of the great challenges for design is to apply its processes and methods to the design of organisations. This is an area of application that could provide immeasurable value to the rest of us who interact on an hourly basis with increasingly dysfunctional companies and institutions. This idea was hinted at in the promotional material for SuperHumanism, but the only speaker who addressed it at the event was Irene McAra-McWilliam, who noted that creatives “design the future of certain technologies, and to an extent the businesses of the future.” Neither should we forget that we still live in a very physical world and that the physical design of spaces where objects are produced and services delivered (offices, factories and the like), rather than consumed, will be of continuing if not greater importance.

In September this year more than 2,000 designers and design critics will descend on the humid avenues of Washington DC for the American Institute of Graphic Arts’ Voice conference, to “explore the ways in which designers can use their voices to make a difference to society now and in the future,” to ask “what kinds of meaningful things they have to say”. The AIGA was in at the start of the current discussion of design ethics with its Dangerous Ideas event in the late 1980s. The secular capital is a spiritual world away from Church House but the discussion may be only a confessional apart.

Enough hand-wringing. Let’s put down the rosary beads and pick up our tools.

Becoming Designers, edited by Esther Dudley and Stuart Mealing, Intellect Books, 2000

Details of the AIGA Voice conference can be found at www.voice.aiga.org

newdesign | septemberoctober 2001
newdesign looks at the whole business of design

- case studies
- strategic uses of design
- design education
- marketing
- new products
- branding
- manufacturing
- research
- environmental & cultural trends
- packaging
- best practice

To subscribe, call the subscriptions hotline on:
+44 (0)1564 771772

Or go to the website at:
www.newdesignmagazine.com

For more information, contact the team at:

newdesign
Gillard Welch Ltd
3rd floor 32-34 Great Titchfield Street
London W1W 8BG

t: +44 (0)20 7436 3800
f: +44 90)20 7436 3838
e: debbie@newdesignmagazine.com