

## THE VALUE OF DESIGN AND THE DESIGN OF VALUE

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### Introduction

For sociologists of consumption and researchers working in science and technology studies, design is something of a mystery. Social theorists have yet to consider where design belongs in debates about the relation between human and non-human actors, in discussions about the social construction of need and want, or in analyses of consumer culture. Product designers clearly have a place in the social and institutional organisation of consumption and production and in the construction of value but what is this ‘place’ and how might it be conceptualised? In this article we address this question by identifying existing interpretations of the part designers play in adding value and by showing how these interpretations reflect theoretical understandings of the relation between people and material artefacts.

As Tharp (2002) points out, value is a slippery and contested topic and one that has different meaning for consumers and producers as well as for economists, sociologists and anthropologists. We use Marx's distinction between exchange and use value as a convenient starting point from which to reflect on the value of design and the design of value, and around which to structure our discussion. We consider accounts of how designers add value, starting with those which, implicitly or overtly assume that value is an enduring quality of an object and one that can be literally increased through design. As we observe, these approaches tend to interpret value with reference to moments of exchange. Moving on, we consider the views of those who argue that attributions of value emerge in and through situationally specific contexts of use.

Contemporary debates about design and in particular about what it is that designers do touch upon issues of materiality and social practice that are of central concern to theorists writing about the relation between human and non-human actors (Latour 1992). Rather than seeing goods as neutral carriers of meaning, vehicles of value or embodiments of labour and social relations, authors like Reckwitz (2002) and Schatzki (1996; 2002) underline the active, constitutive part things play in configuring everyday practices and hence in shaping cultural values of use and exchange. It is not yet clear what these arguments mean for the design professions. It is, however, obvious that theoretical debate about the status of objects has immediate consequences for what designers do and for our understanding of the types of value that designers add.

Having said that, there are other ways of approaching the question of what and how design contributes to the production and appropriation of consumer goods. What product design involves and how it is viewed and understood is also a matter of historical and empirical enquiry.<sup>2</sup> In differentiating and commenting on representations of the value of design, and on the tacit theories of things on which these accounts depend, we identify an important but perhaps not

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws upon current research “Designing and Consuming: products, practices and processes” funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council as part of the Cultures of Consumption Programme. This project has a number of aims one of which is to explore the potential for theoretical development at the interface between science and technology studies, design research and the sociology of consumption.

<sup>2</sup> According to Abbott, processes of professionalisation have to do with horizontal divisions of labour and jurisdictional claims-making; differentiation within professional groups, and larger social forces (1988).

surprising convergence between a) theoretical accounts of the material world and b) corporate and professional interpretations of designers' competence and contribution.

### **Endowing (exchange) value**

Sparke (1983) and Miekle (1979) review the historical emergence and differentiation of tasks undertaken by industrial product designers. In following this history, Miekle alludes to two types of added value: one associated with styling and appearance, the other with function and performance (Miekle 1979: 97; Molotch 2002: 65). Drawing upon his analysis of industrial design in America in the 1930s, Miekle concludes that certain manufacturers used 'design' as a means of rejuvenating outmoded products. In this context, the value of product design was strongly associated with improving sales of specific commodities (for example, radios, refrigerators and ovens) by means of stylistic reform. Writing of the 1980s and 1990s, Julier (2000) suggests that industrial designers contributed to a system of production in which distinction and corporate identity were particularly important. In this environment, designers added value by developing brand images and aesthetic features that promised to unite otherwise disparate products. Moving on, Molotch (2002) reflects on the spatial dislocation of design, production and consumption and the challenges this presents for a new breed of global product designers. Miekle, Julier and Molotch are alike in suggesting that the role and value of product design are bound up with the wider political economy of production.<sup>3</sup>

Aspects of social and institutional organisation - for instance, the relative significance of mass and batch production; the role of local and multi-national companies; the reach and range of different market - structure opportunities for adding value through design. That said, it is possible to discern a common logic in which design figures as one amongst other means of increasing the gap between production cost and price. As an industrial designer interviewed by Tom Fisher explains, the issue is how to put:

“...perceived value into it [a designed object], so that the customer, the consumer will pay one pound for an ice-cream scoop or twenty pounds for an ice-cream scoop, when fundamentally they're pretty much the same ice-cream scoop” (Fisher 2004: 135)

Governments and regions invest in design support and education for similar reasons. For example, in the UK, Advantage West Midlands and the European Regional Development Fund are supporting The Centre for High Value Added Products (CHVAP) based at Birmingham Institute of Art and Design. The CHVAP provides information, advice and assistance to improve the competitiveness of SMEs through improvements in design, management and marketing processes and increased awareness of innovation. The centre was developed in response to an identified need for SME businesses to use design and innovation as way of increasing competitiveness.

By implication, designers increase competitiveness by endowing objects with extra doses of style, functionality, brand identity or global salience. For designers, the notion that things which are deliberately designed to “serve needs and give meaning to our lives” (Heskett 2002: 7) fare better in the market place has the dual function of generating income and anxiety. Are designers inadvertently but inevitably contributing to patterns of capitalist advance and unsustainable

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<sup>3</sup> There is more that could be said about the dynamic relation between design and business. What designers do is, of course, also related to what advertisers and marketing departments also do and to the types of product in question. As product types develop so the expected value of design is likely to evolve.

consumption or are they providing a necessary service in humanising technology and increasing welfare, for instance by designing for all? In a normative sense, whose values are being added? For the purposes of the present argument the point is not to resolve this question but to recognise that either way designers are located as agents with the power to add value or at least act as the medium through which the social is materialised.

As we have already noticed, designers rarely figure in sociological or anthropological analyses of material culture and value. One reason is that in much of this literature concepts of value are conceptually dissociated from the things to which they are attached. For Appadurai (1986), goods exist in a world of changing meaning and symbolic significance, the dynamics of which are of immediate relevance for how artefacts are used and consumed. Recognition that the 'same' things can and often do have quite different exchange and use value in different contexts lends weight to the view that objects have no meaning other than that with which users and consumers endow them. Kopytoff takes this idea forward with the Durkheimian proposition that "society orders the world of things on the pattern of the structure that prevails in the social world of its people. ...societies constrain both these worlds, simultaneously and in the same way constructing objects as they construct people" (Kopytoff 1986: 90). It is on this basis that Douglas and Isherwood claim objects "make visible and stable the categories of culture" (1996: 38).

Design undoubtedly goes on within this semiotic fray but one implication of the anthropological approaches sketched above is that designers have no *special* part in making meaning or utility. Having also noted that "cultural identity is not fixed like a fly in amber but is constantly evolving and mutating" Heskett seeks to recover a distinctive function for design by suggesting that it "is a primary element in stimulating the awareness of possibilities" (2002: 133). This is an interesting argument, and one that points to a very different role (increasing awareness of possibilities) as compared to those described above (e.g. increasing the gap between cost and price and/or humanising technology). Social, cultural and relational theories of symbolic value force us to think again about the contribution of design but before taking up that task, it is important to recognise the limitations of these theoretical positions. Critically, things are not only tokens of communication, differentiation and connection. They are also used.

### **Co-producing (use) value**

In describing IDEO's approach to design, Kelley and Littman explain that "we think of products in terms of verbs, not nouns: not cell-phones but cell-phoning"; (2001: 46).

Design professionals are increasingly aware of - or perhaps increasingly keen to articulate - their role in scripting, configuring and shaping what people do and how activities are experienced. Tharp (2002) highlights a number of observations made by Cagan and Vogel, two of which are especially relevant for the present discussion. Cagan and Vogel suggest that "Since products enable an experience for the user, the better the experience, the greater the value of the product to the consumer (2002: 62). In addition, they claim that "the interaction of the product with the user and the quality of the resulting activity summarize the overall user experience... The goal is to understand how to create a product that facilitates a positive user experience" (2002: 180). Overbeeke et. al. (2002) make a similar suggestion, arguing that "the designer needs to create a context for experience, rather than just a product. He offers the user a context in which they may enjoy a film, dinner, cleaning, playing, working.. with all their senses." By concentrating on things in use rather than things at the moment of purchase, or things as signifiers, these comments point to a new and somewhat different understanding of the relation between design and value.

The idea that designers are (or should be) especially capable of producing things that meet people's needs, that are fit for purpose, ergonomically suitable and functionally effective is not at all new. This claim has been critical for the professionalisation and scientific development of design and it remains important today. For example, when asked about the type of value he adds, one of our design respondents explains that his job is one of:

“making products worth it, ...if you look at products and think they are not achieving their potential, they're not achieving what they should do as the product they are. So you ask how can that product do what someone is buying it for, how can it be what it can be.”

Taken literally, the statements by Cagan, Vogel and Overbeeke et. al. depart from this somewhat essentialist tradition in three important respects.

First, they suppose that interpretations of use and uselessness are contextually specific - they are not qualities of the object alone but instead arise through interaction between people, situations and material artefacts. Although often inspired by the goal of product optimisation, one theoretical by-product of 'user centred design' is a growing recognition of consumer creativity. The point that consumers routinely use things in multiple ways and in ways they were not at all designed for is of further consequence for design theory. As well as challenging the very idea of optimising form and function, situated and interactive accounts of the relation between things and people suggest that it is simply impossible to get the 'human factor' right. On the other hand, and as scholars of science and technology studies have also argued, interpretive flexibility is not infinite: there are periods of closure and collective agreement about what things are for and how they should be used (Bijker 1997). The critical issue, though, is that such stability is an outcome of social process, not an expression of human need.

Second, the notion of designing an experience - for example, dining or phone calling - brings into view the fact that things (mobile phones, dinner plates, cutlery etc.) are rarely used in isolation. This changes the unit of analysis. In so far as they do add value, the implication is that designers do so not to an individual product but to the complex of material artefacts of which an individual product is a part.

Third, but perhaps most significant, thinking about products in terms of verbs opens the way for a much more radical interpretation of the designer's role. In a recent article on consumption and theories of practice, Alan Warde makes the deceptively simple observation that “items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular practices” (2005: 131). Things and doings interdepend to the extent that entities (i.e. objects) are “tied to action” (Schatzki 2002: 106). The notion that objects have a “causal impact on activities and practices” (Schatzki 2002: 197) suggests that designers have an indirect but potentially distinctive hand in the constitution of what people do. If material artefacts configure (rather than simply meet) what consumers and users experience as needs and desires (Latour 1992, Akrich 1992, Woolgar 1991), those who give them shape and form are perhaps uniquely implicated in the transformation and persistence of social practice. In this context, verb-based interpretations of what we might term “practice oriented product design” make perfect sense and are perfectly compatible with Graeber's interpretation of value as the emergent outcome of the many actions in which goods are embedded and of which they are formed (Graeber 1996; Tharp 2002).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Drawing upon Latour's work, Preda suggests that human and non-human actors are symmetrically involved in processes of "reciprocal inscription and modification" (Preda 1999: 357). The question of

## Conceptualising design and value

In this article we have considered parallels and points of connection between the ways in which designers' roles are represented and justified and more abstract theories of the relation between things and people. The result is a necessarily generalised plotting of positions and perspectives.

In the real world, product designers are commissioned and employed for different, sometimes contradictory reasons and the nature and extent of their responsibilities varies widely. Designers and those who write about design frequently subscribe to theoretically incompatible views, often switching erratically between absolute and relative concepts of value (Cagan and Vogel 2002; Kelley and Littman 2001). Although this kind of analytic confusion does not appear to obstruct or prevent normal design work, we have sought to clarify and tease some of the underlying arguments apart.

We began by exploring the widely held idea that value has something to do with the extent to which objects fulfil pre-existing (but not necessarily articulated) symbolic and functional requirements. Framed in this way, designers add value by closing the gap between object and need and by doing so in such a way that perceived value and price outstrip production costs.

We then considered the possibility that interpretations of value are mobile, contextual and certainly not inscribed in objects themselves. The implication here is that designers, consumers and producers are *all* actively involved in the social and cultural construction and attribution of utility and meaning.

The third more radical suggestion was that material artefacts themselves configure the needs and practices of those who use them. While designers may have a privileged role in shaping objects and thereby influencing the definition and reproduction of composite activities like phoning, dining, fishing, etc., the dynamics of practice are surely not determined by designers alone.

While these and other interpretations co-exist, there are discernible and relevant trends in the types of expertise to which designers lay claim and in the kinds of methods they adopt. Traditional forms of ergonomics are, for example, imbued with quite specific and quite fixed ideas about the nature of the “man-machine” interface. By contrast, the fashion for so-called ethnographic enquiry within and as part of the design process indicates the existence, if not the prevalence, of a more fluid and a more culturally sensitive understanding of material culture. Swings of methodology may indicate a more fundamental re-positioning of design not only in theory, but also in the political economy of production.

For most of this article we have been grappling with rather elusive theoretical questions about concepts of design and value. In conclusion, it is important to recognise that these discussions are of direct practical and political significance for professional identity and status, for the fees designers earn and for the type of work they undertake. Like other professions, designers are bound to a set of tasks by what Abbott (1988) describes as ties of jurisdiction. These tasks and ties are not particularly stable for they are established and reproduced through the process of actual professional work (Abbott 1988: 33). In other words, theory and practice run together with the result that what designers *do*, and how they go about their business is intimately related to the sort of expertise they lay claim to and the kinds of values they purport to add.

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whether designers and users inscribe and modify and of whether they are inscribed and modified in the same way deserves further exploration.

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