

# THE CULTURE OF DESIGN

## GUY JULIER

3RD EDITION

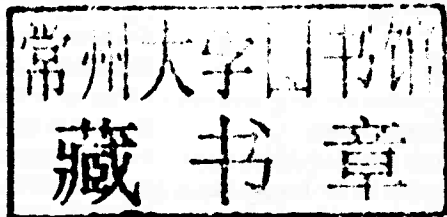
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# INTRODUCTION

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In developing the first edition of this book, I was excited by the links to be made between the astonishing ascendancy of design to current developments in Cultural Studies, Sociology, Political Economy and Geography. These disciplines seemed to be providing interesting perspectives on the deep shifts in cultural production and consumption taking place in this era of 'disorganized capitalism'. But the patina, nuances and detail of the artefacts that made up that cultural part needed filling in. Something had to be done.

Design history has always concerned itself, as one would expect, with the object and its relationship to processes of change. So it should also take a design historian to undertake this task with respect to the contemporary world. But the discipline seemed to have reached two methodological predicaments.

What I would call 'popular design history', the kind that fills the pages of more colourful and probably more sellable commodities of bookshops, continued to present design as the output of individuals, emphasizing design style over process or social impact. Having worked in this format myself, I was acutely aware of both the predictability and randomness by which particular designers, and their designs, would be foregrounded over others. This genre repetitiously favoured particular forms of design. New furniture design and highly authorial graphics that fitted with wider art and architectural historical patterns dominated, while the more ordinary, everyday stuff of design – leisure spaces, educational computer software or urban public spaces – went largely overlooked and underestimated. I knew that designers were partly reliant on this bias towards the spectacular if they wanted to be anything other than anonymous. Meanwhile, the question of why some designers may be included in this history over others is a vexing one. Clearly gender, age and socioeconomic background (often male, youngish and Western) narrowed its scope. Beyond this, inclusion would rest on such random features as the availability of photographic images, a journalist's chance meeting with a designer or the work of a designer's promotional agent.

By contrast, many academic design historians had aligned themselves with Material Culture studies during the 1990s to develop detailed and, often, charming accounts of the significance of objects in the everyday lives of people. In Material Culture studies, the work of designers or other cultural producers receives less attention in favour of researching how consumers read and

understand products, through the analysis of their mediation in advertising and magazines or in their quotidian use. This is important in foregrounding this ‘other side’ of the life of objects. It proposes an approach that considers the adjustments that consumers make to design and the creative ways that they appropriate objects once they have left their point-of-sale. However, the focus of such studies has tended to fall mostly on private, domestic forms of design and consumption. The individuated consumer at home appears to have been privileged over other scenarios. The orchestration of leisure centres, specific urban agglomerations or online computer games, the configuration of corporate training programmes and networking events or the design of retail experiences represent significant sectors of design production and take up equally significant portions of the world of consumption. They often remain strangely absent from the scope of Material Culture studies, however.

Nonetheless, *The Culture of Design* owes a considerable debt to these strands of design history. From the ‘popular’ end of the discipline, the notion that design inculcates various degrees of value into objects – aesthetic, exchange, symbolic or otherwise – is significant. This resonates with Judy Attfield’s idea of design as being something beyond the ordinary to being ‘things with attitude’ (Attfield 2000). From the ‘Material Culture studies’ approach to design history, the influence was perhaps more attitudinal – keeping the approach grounded in the realities of the ordinary and in viewing design promotional hyperbole for what it is. *The Culture of Design* then became a project in tracing the interactions and tensions between these two worlds. How do design objects, their producers and designers, conspire to script experience? What tensions and discontinuities exist between this aspiration and how these ‘experiences’ are actually encountered? How do cultural producers develop and use an understanding of consumer behaviour as data for further action? And if we are to talk about design in its fullest sense, beyond domestic objects, what analytical tools might we use in order to interrogate such relationships?

These questions strike at the heart of what is termed ‘design culture’. A concept of design culture embraces the networks and interactions that configure the production and consumption of the artificial world, both material and immaterial. It lies at the interface between object and individual user, but also extends into more complex systems of exchange. It describes the normative actions, values, resources and languages available to designers, design managers and policy-makers as well as the wider publics that engage with design.

Similar sensibilities to this concept of design culture have emerged *implicitly* in some important publications since the first edition of *The Culture of Design* came out. It is discernible in Scott Lash’s study *Critique of Information* (2002) through his ‘architectonic’ conception of information. Celia Lury’s *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (2004) considers that the objectivity of brands emerges from the relations of its parts. Harvey Molotch, in *Where Stuff Comes From* (2003), traces the networks of producers, intermediaries and users that exist around objects or, more interestingly, the social, cultural and economic projects that they engage. Lash and Lury came together in *Global Culture Industry* (2007), a text that exemplifies a prose that, in its occasional poetic intensity, opens the imagination to the dynamics and textures that the movement of cultural goods takes along with it.

This notion of a ‘culture of design’ has also been used explicitly. For example, in developing an analysis of design-led urban regeneration, Bell and Jayne (2003) refer to a ‘culture of design’, suggesting that a nurtured, dense coexistence of producers, consumers and designers in a coherent circuit of culture can in turn generate economic, social and cultural value for a location. Chatterton and Holland

(2003) make use of the idea in the context of night-time leisure practices of city-centre bars and clubs, where a pervasive designer ambience courses through these environments. In more promotional settings, it has been increasingly common for curators and journalists to talk of the design culture of a nation or city rather than its design. This, at least, recognizes that it is perhaps more enriching to think about the way design is done, discussed, created, circulated, seen, used and thought about than in terms of the deadhand of describing the mere appearance of its objects.

The first edition of *The Culture of Design* was written in the late 1990s, and the earlier chapters of this version perhaps betrayed a somewhat giddy adherence to championing the rise of British design within a discourse of the creative industries. This was, after all, the early years of the New Labour government in the UK where policymakers were busy carving out a righteous space for creative and cultural industries, both as a way of re-branding Britain and in order to herald certain priorities of a knowledge economy. Academia followed in the early 2000s as texts, stemming mostly from business studies and the social sciences, such as Caves's *Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce* (2000) and Hesmondalgh's *The Cultural Industries* (2002) began to appear. These have proven useful in beginning to understand the broader structures and motivations of creative work.

Nonetheless, the idea of creative industries has often been a rather blunt instrument; it is a wide concept that can lack empirical specificity and focus. Even the design sector, as this book argues, shows enormous variation in its practices, business arrangements and locations to make it inadvisable to make overarching observations of it. Indeed, one of the few such views I take is that design is consistent in its fragmentation and deliberate differentiation amongst its actors. Another difficulty in many of the broader texts that analyse creative industries is the absence of the actual objects of its production. Much is often made of the clustering of creative workers and the benefits that they derive from close, flexible collaborations between them. Little is said of their focus on cultural goods. Of course creative practitioners work together; but their work is looped through objects that appear in various forms – drawings, models, digital prototypes – and through the material culture of their workplace. This book doesn't centre itself exclusively on the design process and business environment (but see Julier and Moor 2009). Nevertheless, my interest is in bringing more precision to the discussion of design as a creative industry and also placing a bigger role for materiality therein.

In developing this third edition, it rapidly became apparent that while the basic categories and approach that I had outlined for the study of design culture were still viable, a number of fundamental developments had taken place in the 21st century. The first of these has been in the straightforward growth of design industries throughout much of the world. While design remains a potent creative industry sector in the UK where it continues to innovate approaches, its global importance to economies has risen exponentially. What's more, design has become embedded into governmental policies and regarded for its symbolic and its instrumental characteristics with mounting enthusiasm. It would be over-ambitious to attempt a worldwide, comparative survey of design cultures in this text. It has been incumbent on me in this edition to provide a more international set of examples and statistical data that demonstrate this, particularly in Chapter 2.

If the culture of design has become increasingly more widespread, then it has also continued to seep at its edges in terms of its professional reach. Hence, in Chapter 3, I give a new account of the way that design has moved beyond the brand ethos into the perhaps more structured approaches to be found in service design. Equally, in the same chapter, I demonstrate how



the rise of so-called ‘design thinking’ demonstrates a sharper attention being paid to the material components of product and service strategy. The process of iteratively prototyping and testing of solutions, itself derived from design practice itself, finds its way into broader approaches to management. In Chapter 5 on high design, I extend the argument beyond mass-production artefacts that, nonetheless, engage a certain connoisseurship to design that pushes commentary and critique back onto consumer culture in my discussion of ‘critical design’. I continue this into a consideration of ‘design art’. In both these cases, the emphasis continues the idea of design’s ability to destabilize categories.

Readers may be surprised, even aghast, to see that I have kept Chapter 9, which focuses on ‘on-screen interactivity’, largely as intact as in earlier editions of this book. My description of a 1998 CD-ROM product may seem outdated or quaint, even. However, looking at my desktop today and the screen-grabs I made over ten years ago suggests that at least on the glowing screen of my personal computer, the fundamentals haven’t changed. While download speeds have multiplied and the content available has expanded enormously, the basic issues of multi-level readership, cybernetic loss, the continual hyperbole and uptalking that exists amongst its mediators, the weaving of cultural products in and out of digital space and many others, remain.

Revisions for the second edition of this book were made in 2007, a year before the US and European debt crisis sent much of the global economy into a downward spiral. Even then the grey clouds of recession were visible on the horizon and this made the case for models of design practice that were not dominated by an economic growth model more pressing. The case for a more equitable economic order, greater social inclusion in processes of change and, not least, a sharper response to possible environmental catastrophe has gathered even more momentum. Out of this ‘design activism’ has emerged more coherently (Fuad-Luke 2009; DiSalvo 2012; Thorpe 2012) as a practice and field of enquiry. The final section of Chapter 10 is therefore revised to place the issues of participation in design more firmly against discussions of design activism.

Broadband, wi-fi and smartphones were unavailable in 1998 when I began the first edition of this book. When revising it for the second edition, iPhones were only available in the USA. Mobile or distributed computing existed but was unresolved in terms of where it would find commonplace usage. Smartphones and tablets are now the standard accompaniment of the railway commuter. A new Chapter 11, entitled ‘Networks and Mobile Technologies’, provides a discussion of the networks that make up the corporate control of their content design as well as the implications of mobile technologies on everyday life. Here I take the opportunity to develop on actor-network theory (ANT). The work of Latour (1987, 2005) and colleagues has been lurking in the background of this book since its instigation. After all, the idea of design culture that comes into being through the mutually interdependent action of people and things appears in ANT thinking, albeit often with a different focus of qualities. The jargon and detail of ANT are challenging and I have taken the course of introducing these backwards – lightly reversing in, if you will, through a discussion of key terms of *agencement*, assemblage and articulation, rather than by starting with a full-blown exposition of ANT. This is done in relation to design very satisfactorily by Fallan (2010), in any case.

The primary aim of giving a critical and theorized discussion of contemporary design in society still dominates this third edition. In the second edition, I opened up a new aim which was to explore in more detail what this design culture concept meant and implied, both in its general usage and more specifically as a field of study. In so doing, my intention was to give a more

reflexive account that positioned Design Culture as academic enquiry distinct from Material Culture, Visual Culture and Design History. While that initial salvo still stands, in this third edition I have developed a recapitulating final Chapter 12 that is entitled 'Studying Design Culture'. This is not presented as a route-map to 'how to do' design culture. As I had already intimated in Chapter 1, I fear methodological orthodoxy not least because the variations by which design cultures are constituted and performed demand flexibility and inventiveness in their study. Instead, I present in this chapter a series of notes that expand on 'things to look out for'.

The gestation of *The Culture of Design*, and its reincarnation in the second and third revised editions, have involved the pre-exposure of some of its parts in the form of conference papers, articles and essays, too numerous to list here. These have provided useful grounds for testing material out. The initial publication of this book led to further contact with numerous academics who are listed in the foreword to the second edition. Since then, I have had the instructive pleasure of working and interchanging thoughts with colleagues at the University of Brighton, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the University of Southern Denmark. Individual scholars such as Hilde Bouchez, Lucy Kimbell, Liz Moor and Cameron Tonkinwise have provided further inspiration. Staff and students on visiting forays to the University of Otago in New Zealand, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Universidad de Caldas in Colombia, the Universidad de Buenos Aires and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México have helped me understand a little bit better the globalizing challenges and questions of design culture.

My children, Joe Julier and Becca Julier, have both grown up alongside this book and its iterations. They have figured in early 'design encounter' expeditions or in late-night discussions about what it all means and a lot more besides. For her wonderful support at all levels, ultra-girlfriend and fellow wordsmith Diane Setterfield merits special mention and heartfelt thanks.

Consonant with the notion that the objects of design culture these days are played through various media and platforms, I have authored a support website for this book where further teaching material, spin-off blogs, bibliographies and related writings can be accessed. The web address is: [www.designculture.info](http://www.designculture.info).



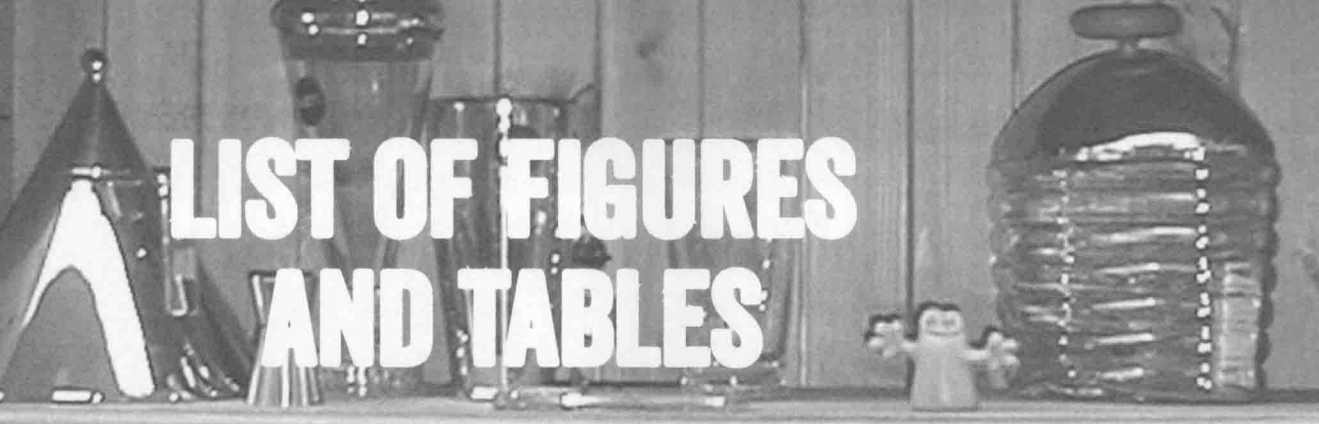
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