

DESIGN,
HISTORIES,
FUTURES

DESIGN AND THE QUESTION OF HISTORY

TONY FRY
CLIVE DILNOT
SUSAN C. STEWART

B L O O M S B U R Y

DESIGN AND THE QUESTION OF HISTORY

DESIGN, HISTORIES, FUTURES: SERIES INTRODUCTION

This series aims to advance knowledge on the wider historical significance of design, and, in doing so, go beyond the current scope of 'design history'. It will also strive to demonstrate that a historical engagement with design necessitates engagement with the wider crisis of the discipline of history itself.

The contributing authors to the series will no doubt bring very different perspectives to the realization of the series aim and the intellectual challenges it presents. However, they will all share an understanding of the significance of design thought and design action for sustaining the future well-being of humanity and the environments of our dependence. They will also recognize that for this potentiality to be realized, the scope of historical inquiry has to be significantly widened, become more critical, and surpass the limitations of existing concerns with disciplinary boundaries.

The actual directional consequences of designing and of the designed worlds of human occupation, historically and futurally, are still not adequately understood either in or beyond design education, practice, history and theory. Without understanding design as both historically situated and futurally directional, the ethical character of design – as a negotiation between creation and destruction, care and uncaring – cannot be adequately grasped. This series aims to expand the scope of discourse and comprehension of the directional agency of design, extending understanding and prompting speculation toward this end.

Tony Fry, Lisa Norton and Anne-Marie Willis
Series Editors

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Design and the Question of History, Tony Fry, Clive Dilnot and
Susan C. Stewart

Steel, Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis

The Future by Design, Damian White

DESIGN AND THE QUESTION OF HISTORY

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Susan C. Stewart**

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PREFACE, PRE-FACE ESSENTIAL READING

What is this book?

Let's start with what it is not. It is not a work of design history, although it has a great deal to say about design and history.

It is not a resolved continuous dialogue of three authors speaking with one voice. Rather the three of us cut across each other and present the reader with the task of disclosing to themselves the commonalities, repetitions and differences within the deployed explicatory approaches, linguistic styles, arguments and issues addressed from which the text is constituted.

It is not an object of closure, an attempted last word.

So now what is it?

It is an opening—the opening of a series of books that all in some way are to look at the relation between design and history otherwise and without the constraint of just writing for the “design community” (however perceived), for design is more important than any form of disciplinary constraint. So said, it is a facing, *a facing of design now*, this in a world that is still being partly created and still being partly destroyed by design.

It is a mixture of meditation, advocacy, and polemic. It is also a work of friendship, of solidarity in difference, an act of design cultural politics—which means its ambition is to make “a something happen” at the very least for some of those people who have occasion to think about design, history and futures. This is to say, contra to a certain strain of intellectual fashion of recent decades, it invites a reader to “take a position.” It thus seeks engagement over agreement.

Now why is this book?

Above all it exists because of the necessity of “care.” We can all say we “care,” but in ontological reality care is not what we say but the consequence of what we do, not least by forms of design(ing), making, educating that

negate the wasteland, the arrival of which Friedrich Nietzsche warned, and of which design, in its ambiguity, has been deeply implicated in creating, extending, aesthetizing and concealing.

The point of this project can be simply stated: to establish that design history dominantly fails to recognize the historical significance of design, and thus by implication its futuring agency, while equally ignoring the contemporary “crisis in the discipline of history.”

This situation places an enormous intellectual challenge before design thinkers that instantly arrives—a challenge that demands to be urgently met. Stated in its most overt and simplified form: the fate of humanity to a very significant degree rests upon what is now designed, and how. So contextualized, the project before us is to move design out of what in the critical scheme of things is a trivial modality of history, into a position wherein its actual historical importance, and thus its futural significance, is understood and engaged.

The approach to be taken by all three contributors will substantiate these opening claims while questioning those narratives in which design and history travel in wedlock, as with design history. Rather what will follow will be more of a weaving together of the problems and possibilities of design and history as they circle around each other. However, the overall objective is straightforward: to expand how design is understood, to expose history as a problem begging far more serious consideration, and to pose ways to establish a far more dynamic and critical relation between the two.

ESSAY ONE

WHITHER DESIGN/ WHETHER HISTORY

Tony Fry

INTRODUCTION

History, as a serious practice and rigorous discipline, is having a hard time.

Certainly in contemporary Western culture, history has been diminished by its reduction to image in popular media. This means that increasingly it carries imaginaries. As such, rather than telling us who we are, it authors who we imagine ourselves to be. This is especially seen in film and television, where an enormous amount of effort is expended on the construction of authentic and detailed historical description and visual appearance. With some notable exceptions, “narrative history” has, at best, only a thin critical historical grounding. In the company of “the political,” and elemental to it, history is being reduced to entertainment. What results when the political is so negated, as Carl Schmitt prophetically pointed out in the 1930s, is “the world” rendered merely “a world of entertainment,” a world without “seriousness.”¹ Thus for Schmitt it is “the political”—that domain of decision that goes well beyond just institutionalized politics—that stands between humanity and a reduction of “all and everything” to entertainment.

Academic history has suffered, in the company of other disciplines, from the diminished status of the Humanities within higher education. Along with these general trends has been a growing epistemological and increasingly Eurocentric critique of the foundations of the discipline itself. In sum, as will be shown; the authority of history is in decline, with the discipline itself becoming ever more fragmented. Notwithstanding this situation, there is a strong argument for the standing of “the historical” to be revived and for associated practices to be remade. At the core of this argument is the recognition that in the deepening complexities of the late modern world there is an increasing need for an understanding of the presence of the past. To recognize this then requires asking: what form should this understanding take, and how can it accommodate actual and substantial differences of power and perspective? Equally one asks: does not the imperative of revitalizing “history” beyond existing regimes of disciplinary ownership and practice actually mean the creation of something else, something new? Exploring these two questions will be central to our inquiry and its relation to design.

On design and history

Design history is dominantly disarticulated from those “questions of history” that have preoccupied historical studies.

It can be characterized as a subdiscipline of history that arrived in the space, and adopted the methods and values, of art and architectural history. But by the late 1970s design history had attempted to break away from these links and establish itself as a project in its own right. While some “in the field” might claim that it has done this, frankly it still carries many traces of the perspectives of its origins. Most significantly, what did not arrive during this period of transition, or subsequently, was what historical studies was fully aware of; that history itself, as discipline, practice and method, was in deep trouble.

Against this backdrop, rather than moving design and its agency into a wider and more critically engaged relation to debate of the “question of history,” design history took it mostly in the opposite direction. Thereafter, design’s history became historically dislocated. At best, it was supplemented by social context (again an art-historical trope). So while design history dominantly “established itself” as a “history” of canonized objects, images, organizations, movements, people, and events (often gathered under the rubrics of graphic design, industrial design, interior design, fashion design, jewelry design and so on) the practice frequently veered into antiquarianism and connoisseurship.² It was in this modality that a dominantly Western canon was constructed. When the non-Western was inducted (often as the exotic) it was done so within values, norms and topologies of the then “established field.”

What has not been engaged by design history is the huge complexity of the “world-within-the-world” of human fabrication, wherein everything within this world has been created by design: as such, it is often invisible, mostly anonymous (as Siegfried Giedon told us well over half a century ago³), of little stylistic interest, a manifestation of the force of will (and now capital) and is always, to a greater or lesser extent, an elemental force of futuring or defuturing consequence. Design, so grasped, is historically directive of both “worlding” and “deworlding.” By implication, understanding design historically is far harder and enormously more important than design history recognizes and communicates. But as remarks already made imply, a naive appeal to history as self-evident is no more viable than is such an appeal to design. Like it or not, neither design, history or design history are resolved objects of inquiry.

As should be now clear, what follows is a continuation of engagement with design as problematic, linked to an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of design history (already argued in prior publications by Dilnot and by Fry), meeting what gets characterized as “the crisis of history.” Fundamentally, this “crisis” has had two moments: the first at the end of the nineteenth century when there was a recoil against the claim of history as a science; and the second in recent decades coming from critiques arising in postmodern theory, centered on the epistemological claims of historical narrative. What debate around the crisis of history has exposed is:

- That the notion of there being an evolutionary *telos* of “human society” is totally flawed, and that the historical narratives associated with this *telos* are now dysfunctional areas of knowledge. Such a view was given profile through the discrediting of those master narratives that underpinned modernity, this in significant part triggered by the critique proffered by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979.⁴
- The loss of authority of the discipline of history that has increased with its fragmentation, coming not just as a result of critiques of its practice but also from its diminishment of status within the academy, as the position of the Humanities has been made weaker in the course of the instrumentalization of higher education around the world post-1968.
- The contestation of the authority of Eurocentric paradigm of history coming from decolonial theory that showed how, and from where, the dominant practices of the historian were formed, and how these practices were generalized and thus constituted the history other cultures.⁵

The result of this crisis is not that history no longer has a presence in the world, but rather that the nature, value and ability of history to critically inform (which was always less than adequate) is fading fast. At the same time, the need for historical understanding (which is not the same thing as history) constantly increases—not least in relation to design. History so qualified not only acts to conceal, but retains a certain appropriative ability in that we are historical beings. Historical understanding arrives with the potential to disclose this condition and the anthropocentric essence of history (we are history and it does not exist without us). More

than this, the overwhelming force of human centeredness is indivisible from the lack of focus on, or concern with, the issue of being itself.⁶

Responding to this situation is the substantial task at hand. It is undertaken not because of some deep-seated desire to rescue history for design, but as a necessary task, if we are to comprehend and deal with so many of the problems elemental to the contemporary world. These are problems that need to be better understood historically and, in many cases, as a consequence of design's limitations, flaws and errors. In other words, what is needed is a general recognition of design, within orders of power, as an historical actor in and upon the world. Such an understanding requires the creation of radically transformed notions of both design and history. Placed in this context, design history—the practice and its product—has unwittingly acted to conceal the historical significance and agency of the designed world of human habitation.

At its simplest what design historians (among others in “the world of design”) have failed to recognize is *that everyone, or at the very least all thinking people, need to grasp that it is not possible to comprehend the worlds of human existence without design, its agency, function and presence, being adequately understood in both historical and contemporary terms.* At its most basic, what this requires is gaining ascent for an understanding of the historical assent and prefigurative agency of design as generative of, and exercised by, things, processes, systems, social structures, built forms, and environments as they converge to constitute the ontologically designing forces of (and within) the uneven and inequitable distribution of power of the “world-within-the-world” of human creation.⁷

While in our animality “we” are of the biophysical world, as the human we are the producers and the product of another world, by design and artifice, named here as “the world-within-the-world.” In this world all that is brought into being by design takes on a life of its own and, in some form, returns to us to actively influence and, in part, materially direct, what we are, what and how we see, and how we act (and upon what). Thus, while the formative act of design employs the inscriptive intention of an act of will, the designed object itself is directly independent in its designing—as such it constitutes ontologies—but in, and from, conditions of global(izing) inequity.

Currently, so many of the people who lead and direct the affairs of “the world” only have a very partial (if any) understanding of the significance and agency of design. It follows that as a result of their limited (or nonexistent) understanding they only have a limited comprehension of

the world of human existence itself. This remark in fact equally applies in large part to almost all designers and design academics. Bluntly: design practice, history, theory and journalism have failed to grasp and communicate, especially to leaders and decision-makers, just how powerful is design's distributive and compound directive agency.

With these comments in mind, the intent is to turn design (obviously reconsidered beyond its characterization by design history) toward history, but with a corresponding intent of turning history (reconsidered) toward design.

Of course the ambition is not to resolve all the challenges the discipline of history faces, but rather to problematize them within a remit that recognizes the historico-worldly importance of design and then strives to communicate it to, and beyond, the design community.

Design history and history

As indicated, the formation of design history partly, but only partly, displaced the methods, values and agenda of art history. This meant it constituted a history outside the epistemological issues, arguments, politics and debates over, in and about history. Of course it would be misleading to suggest that the rise of design history was a coherent, consensual and consciously managed project. It was not—the practice was contested when it first arrived and ever remains so.⁸

Bringing the perspectives so far adopted leads us to ask the question: *how* does one start to think about and engage design in history as a contested domain of knowledge?

To do this, four key meta-design observations need to be made.

- 1 Observation one is that as a species the ability to prefigure what we intend to make before doing so is elemental to our being; this is designing at its most fundamental. Not only have *Homo sapiens* always been able to do this (as were some of the hominoid predecessors) but also this ability at a deep level contributed to our becoming what we now are.⁹ Prefiguration is thus one of the defining characteristics of our becoming human.
- 2 Observation two is that from the ability to prefigure (as it directed both the creation and use of tools and, subsequently, the development of practices of making), human beings incrementally

created *by design* what has been named here as a world-within-the-world—a world that in its complexity is now beyond our ability to comprehend.

- 3 Observation three is that the situation in which human beings now find themselves—demographically, geopolitically, biophysically, psychosocially and environmentally—is one wherein the future with a future for “us” can only be reached by design.
- 4 Observation four is that design is currently implicated in the world of uneven human development, dominantly in the service of inequality.

As just a few moments of reflection reveals: to comprehend and explore these four observations demands historical inquiry, and for this inquiry to be possible a new kind of dialogue between design and history has to be created. Design has to be ripped away from that clean, sanitized and risk-free engagement with “the world” as delivered by design history. The directional imposition integral to the essence of design (what “it,” as a situated willing, designs) folds into the dialectic of sustainment. What this means is that design, as an act, draws the line between creation and destruction, and determines what falls on which side, but at present mostly unknowingly.

Critical issues, centering on the world that design(ing) has brought into being and has negated, are extraordinarily complex. Consider that almost everything in the environment around us is designed—stand at a window in a city, any city: is there anything to be seen, beyond a given relation to the biophysical substrate, which is not designed (including the very way we see what we are looking at)? Such designing arrives by both intent and ontologically (the designing of things/things designing, which is why one can say that we are in part a product of design).

Clearly the significance of the corpus of design history scholarship and its textual output is trivial if measured against the overwhelming active and relational complexity of the designed. There is simply no correlation between the totality of the transformative agency of the designed and the assembled discourse of design. Design discourse in fact strives to secure its “coherence” by exclusion. But in harmony with Jacques Derrida’s famous line “the world is a text” (by which he meant “world” as an object of interpretation) it can be pointed out that “the text is designed” (which is to acknowledge that what we see, and/or how we see, are a

product of design as disclosed via a play of object, image, idea and interpretation).

As is becoming more evident to a growing number of people: the negative dimension and consequences of design have had a profound worldly impact. A great deal of what has been brought into being by design, from coal-fired power stations to asbestos, from herbicides to jet-skis, from cigarettes to cluster bombs, all combine to take the future away. They “defuture.” In particular, industrial society has brought these, and a myriad other defuturing things and forces, into being. As members of such a society, we find ourselves at the currently comfortable epicenter of the condition of unsustainability that defuturing animates. To know this is to realize that design has had much more significant historical agency than has been realized. To know this can, and should, be seen to have huge implications in how its history is constructed, understood and viewed. Even more important—to gain such an historical understanding is to acquire a crucial source of knowledge directive of how “designing the future” is thought and undertaken, and by whom. What is implied here is far more than just “learning from history” (because this history does not yet exist).

History, the past, is always a construction of the present by those powers that control it. This means *how and why* the past is made present (as a transformation of “what was”) is as critical to understand as *what* is actually (re)presented, and who and how it can be contested. What is at stake in the creation of history—as George Orwell famously pointed out in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—is the future.

History, the historical and historicity cannot be gathered into a single discourse. Its fragments can never again be reassembled. The very notion of a possible unified discourse has gone. It follows that nobody any longer has the authority to speak for history (those who did so in the past now look to be delusional, and those who do so in the present are critically unaware). Yet even so one can find and create historical assemblages for particular ends, including gaining an understanding of relations between design and narratives of change over time (which may or may not be claimed as “history”).

But for the moment our aim is merely to start orientating the reader to the nature and the scale of what has to be resolved in order to think and talk about “design” as it is present *in* historical process. Much more on this will be said in the essays, so what follows is a first pass.

History totalized

We are, and will be, writing against history totalized, naturalized and narrativized. That is, learning from Nietzsche, we are writing against the history of historians (especially those who claim “historical truth” from (their) account of the historical). But likewise we are writing against the “genetic theory of the modern world,” expressed in Hegel’s philosophy of history, whereby European nations surpassed the Asiatic world in an evolutionary schema emanating from the Greeks, and characterized by linear and unstinting drive called “progress.” Essentially, Western metaphysics underscored the Hegelian view, negated the history of other civilizations and was oblivious to the “darker side of modernity.”¹⁰ Likewise, the beginning of the West so characterized marked, as Heidegger recognized, the start of a history of forgetting—not only was this moment of first thinking forgotten for centuries but its significance still dominantly remains unremembered, silent, unthought (thus the casting of “our” destiny is overlooked).¹¹ Here history becomes positioned in the project started by Nietzsche, and continued by Heidegger, as an object through which to think the meaning of Western thought, how the West thinks and its fate.¹²

By implication, history is refused as an ordered gathering of typologies of events configured in a universalized chronology. There is no “world history.” There is no mode of representation that can “speak for the world”; there are no direct or supportable links between the author, referent and the represented. One might ask, for example, when were “The Crusades” and who speaks for them? In the West they are cast into the past and long forgotten but for cinematic fictive traces. But in the Middle East they still cast a shadow and occupy a significant place as a historical marker of a European ideology of war underwritten by the Christian church.¹³ As such they remain of the present and retain future determinant agency, and as such still have a continuing effect upon everyday life. “The historical” thus is never simply “the past.” To cast it as this, as many historians do, is to negate an ability to comprehend the nature of the present and future, as well as of time itself.

That narrative ordering from “the zero” point that discounts all Other(s), is so familiar within, but so ignored in practice by, the *habitus* of the historian. The past is not “there,” and the viewpoint is not simply “here.” Moreover, future events rewrite the past. For instance, at one time the Soviet Union looked like an eternally present force, yet it evaporated. The fall of the Berlin Wall acted symbolically to mark its demise while

also opening up a moment of major historical revision. Likewise, postcolonial studies started rewriting the narrative of modernity; now the discourse of decoloniality has divested all remaining claims of modernity's global authority. The apocryphal arguments for the progressive dimension of modernity, delivered by, for example, Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas, stand condemned by many thinkers from the underside of modernity inspired by the enduring significance of Frantz Fanon and the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel.¹⁴ There is an emergent recognition that structural unsustainability, as inscribed in the very essence of human being, will have an even larger impact as population numbers increase, and "consumerist" demands for planetary resources grow.

As indicated, the ethnocentric notion of "world history" is anathema (including a world history of design) because there is no valid locus of observation (or defence against the perceptual coercion that arrives when it is adopted). This is not only because this mode of history is exclusive, and written from the "zero point," but also because it assumed there is an essential being ("man") available to be employed as the common denominator, the common figure, linking all events over time and space. "Man" is not a singularity as humanism would have it, and therefore cannot provide the basis and figure for a unified history. As Michel Harr put it: "There is no autonomous history of humanity." "Man," as the subject of "world history," is the product of a particular and imposed historical construct (from Enlightenment metaphysics) that dismisses all other ways, ancient and modern, by which our *dasein* has been enacted.¹⁵ We can emotionally align ourselves with Emmanuel Levinas when he says "Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human," yet we equally need to intellectually contest this view because it excludes our plurality, animality and technicity.¹⁶

On forgetting history

History is forgotten (individually and culturally) but this does not mean that the forgetting of the historical can be sanctioned.

The notion that history had a *telos* with an end point is now a discredited idea carrying the mark of Hegel. There has never been a totality, history has never had a totality (only a particular discourse with varied narratives): there was never a destination to reach, an end point, an

end state. Events continue. Some will end, some will not, others will commence. That which continues implies memory and “the not completely forgotten.” However, memory is at risk. It is being industrialized, externalized and ruptured from mind.¹⁷ Memory is never just a servant of the past, a given. Remembering is directly linked to becoming futural. It is a key to liberation from forms of oppression lodged in, and continued from, the past. Likewise, forgetting is not overcoming what has passed: the future, directional choice, demands remembrance.

History, as Michel Foucault made clear in his seminal essay “Nietzsche, genealogy, history,” does not function as truth but as “counter-memory.”¹⁸ History from the underside of modernity is this writ large. “We” can survive without history, but not without memory.

Keith Jenkins claims that a whole raft of contemporary thinkers, including Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Ernesto Laclau, Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, Julia Kristeva and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, functioned, and managed perfectly well, without making reference to history—they (at least those who are still alive) “can forget history.”¹⁹ This sweeping claim is not true. It rests on the reduction of history to the “output” of historians. Just to take one of the Jenkins examples: Derrida. Not only did his oeuvre trade on historical reference, but equally it is evident that his own history (especially in relation to his Algerian background and the Jewish tradition) underscored many of his concerns (one clear example was his writing on racism²⁰). Then there were texts like his *Spectres of Marx* that registered a certain kind of presence of history that exposed a past existing in the present as futural. So while “history” is undoubtedly extremely problematic, and begs to be treated with a great deal of critical caution—it is not (able) to be wished away or simply erased by critique. Certainly there is much that must not be forgotten. Here witnesses are at large in the world, and their memories of modernization and colonization, continually question the positions and perspectives of the historians.

History and humanism

The Enlightenment welded history to its fabricator/fabrication (“man”)—the individuated rational humanist subject. Metaphysics, in this context, validated the history/man nexus. In recoil, Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin grounded the being of both in another of the Enlightenment’s

project's "discoveries": "nature." Seemingly they were going somewhere, but as we shall see, in the end they went nowhere. "Man" is ripped from "nature" by humanism negating "our" animality. Moreover, there is no binary: man/nature (the animal that "we" are, no matter who we tell ourselves we are, rips the nature/nurture debate to pieces). "We" remain the "wonderful and terrible" (understood as *deinon*: that overpowering power of our being unsurpassed in its strangeness²¹).

The challenge before us goes beyond Eurocentric errors of constructed history (as it marginalized and erased the historical significance of Others). It exceeds all such errors in its global and continuing consequences. This challenge cannot be met by searching for authentic history (notwithstanding that for some it will be felt and claimed as authentic). Science does not provide a way forward—it certainly does not provide truth or fact supported by observation. Rather science creates a worldview that clarifies "idealizations" endemic to itself.²² Historically it thus created a position of observation that arrived, and appeared to observe nature from a position outside it ("man").

The combination of the Enlightenment's fabrication of "man," globalized by Eurocentric colonialism, imposed a universal construct of "the human"—a "civilized and civilizing being" that was deployed in ways that dehumanized all being deemed Other.²³ This protracted action not only repressed our own understanding, and our dealing with "the animal that we are," it was equally a refusal to recognize those Others whose sense of being was not predicated on the binary division human/animal but on a continuum of the being that we are. The human was, is and remains an epistemological imposition.

Ontology and history

The challenge before us thinkers of, or about, design is to hold the ground of the advancement of "history" counter to consciousness. What this means is holding the space of possibility opened by Heidegger's recognition of the interpretation of history centering on the historical being an ontologically foundational structure. The nature of this structure is not recoverable in itself, rather it arrives in the form of interpretations emanating from a new ontology, which itself is an effect of a practice of transformation. "History" (the historical) here is placed before design as agency—as historical events that in significant part ontologically design

subjects that interpret them (the past). Historical agency is therefore lodged in foundational events that, in part, bring them, as subjects, into being. It follows that there is simply not “us” and historical events *for we are historical*—even though “we” (in all our differences) have little or no awareness of our being as such. As historical beings we are a trace of more than the past experiences of our “self.”

There can be no appeal to our coming out of nature. Humanity has no natural history (as Adorno and Benjamin would have it²⁴). We *Homo sapiens* are not historically or ontologically “natural” beings, albeit that we humans created the world-within-the-world out of, and in, that which is deemed “nature.” Our very coming into being was a rupture from the “general economy” of exchange (“life”) that insured the formation of a history that fused the “natural” and the artificial. As argued at length elsewhere, “we” arrived as an animal onto-technologically predestined to become a biological/technological (world-designing) hybrid.²⁵ The animal that we were was ontologically designed by the use of basic (stone) tools to become the human-animal that we now are. In this sense, “we” did not invent technology; rather, technology invented us (and continues to do so). The persistent idea that technology is merely a tool we use *de facto* feeds a dangerous illusion.

The decentering of historical consciousness brings the notion of historical experience into question. The assumption has been that it is possible to gain a genuine experience of one’s own historicity (this as we are bound to objects of experience).²⁶ However, ontological design (across the full range of the conditions of being that “we” as a species occupy) reveals the gap between the agency of the object of experience and knowledge of experience and, as such, exposes a structural lack of awareness of design, not least by designers. Thus, a hermeneutical engagement with experience does not necessarily get to the ontological production of what is being examined here. A simple example makes the point: the passage from instruction to intuition is not retained as a remembered experience (one does not remember learning to talk, what it was like to learn how to walk nor, perhaps, the first time a pencil was held and used; other memories blur, like learning to ride a bike, to tie one’s shoe laces etc.). Formative experience is not available for interpretation, or free from re-presentation (the constructed memory in childhood by “an other” is a part of what “I” take to be “my” memory). Moreover, one must not assume that experience implies and equates with authenticity. As Edmund Husserl, in his examination of scientific thought made very

clear, idealization travels ahead of us as “we” experience “the world” and as such prefigures a great deal of what is experienced.²⁷

Yet there can be no argument that experience begs interrogation, is of great complexity, and folds into the condition of the mode of presence of the “Being-of-beings.”²⁸ Certainly it can deliver knowledge (but once it becomes this it ceases to be experience). Thereafter experience provides subjects with objectified insights of/into their positive and the negative worldly encounters: their pain and their pleasures.²⁹ However, it is the case that all claims to experiential truth, and their sufficiency as causal agents, remain problematic.

Now

All things meet in the transience of “now.” The past and the future are only ever viewed, understood and represented from a “now,” a constant moment of time—or as Benjamin engaged it, *jetztzeit* (an everlasting now). The form of this particular figure of the displacement of history will receive much more attention later. But for the moment all we wish to do is: (i) to note that a primary characteristic of our present moment is the negation of time (a negation we have called defuturing—those actions that reduce the time of our finitude as finite beings), and (ii) acknowledge that all “nows” are not the same.

Defuturing qualifies the process whereby we are all living in a continuous structural condition of unsustainability. To better understand this moment requires gaining a clear understanding of how defuturing is reconfiguring both the past and the future, and thereafter how this knowledge is key to act counter-wise (the practice and process of futural action toward Sustainment).

Futuring education: Design and history

Design education is in flux. The technological inroad into the craft practices of design continues apace. The distinction between its subdisciplines—product/interior/visual communication design etc., continue to blur. Newer areas, like service design, are becoming more established. The demand for

designers to be ever-better informed beyond the bounds of design practice and design theory (including design thinking) constantly increases. And the viability and appropriateness of simply educating designers to be “service providers” is now becoming questioned. But above all, the key issue that design and design education has to face is whether it is going to remain within its currently limited sphere of aesthetic-economic function, or enlarge its scope to more significantly engage the geoenvironmental and sociopsychological challenges arriving in this emergent age of unsettlement.

For design education to rise to the challenges posed it would have to rupture its relation to the instrumentalism that brought it into the academy and act against the more pervasive degeneration of education, not least university education, into instrumentalism (the servicing of the needs of “the economy” and the associated demands of scientific pragmatism). Such a move, of course, requires education constituting a new vision and project informed by a critique of its current modality, and clear understanding of the existing and coming imperatives of unsettlement.

Against this backdrop one is required to acknowledge that the ambitions of the Enlightenment, and the kindred project of modernity, died and were not replaced with a new and better vision. The result is that learning itself has become diminished and devalued. So much education has lost sight of what really needs to be learnt, with a great deal of what is actually delivered directed by concerns of the status quo and government (there are numerous publications and many international conferences supporting this view³⁰). So positioned, the critique of education turns on two fundamental observations.

First, institutionalized education mostly educates for “the world that was” rather than “the world that is.” What this means is that, from kindergarten to the postgraduate level, people are *now* “educated in error.” Thus, as earlier implied, children and adults are being inducted into values, practices and knowledge that in the end serve to extend the unsustainable everyday *everywhere*. This educational debacle, and its accompanying void, did not happen by accident; rather, it was created, and can be characterized, as such, in various ways, for example, as:

- An induction into capital logic as “the appropriate” foundation of exchange (whereas, such “logic” rests upon unsustainable modes of production and consumption bonded to the notion of continual economic growth, within a finite system—our planetary system, and thus is illogical);

- An induction into the unrestrained acquisition of a world of manufactured things deployed as (conspicuous consumption) to mark worldly “success”;
- An induction into consumption as an expression of freedom. At best one can say that while institutional education may provide knowledge, plus many skills and competencies able to assist career advancement, at best it only partially educates. Certainly institutions, as they stand, fail to educate for the future—they fail to be futural, they are unable to present and deal with the complexity of the worlds of “human” habitation. What this might mean is what we are about to explore.

To become futural in this context is not an option, if humanity is to be able to learn how to sustain itself and all that it depends upon. What this means is: first, thinking and creating in the medium of time, and in the understanding that the future is already populated by many problems (including the related problems of climate change) that have been thrown into it. Then second, learning how to better track the consequences of our material actions on all the environments of our existence over far longer expanses of time.

Besides a failure of education content, there is also a failure of method. As Iain Thomson explores at length, universities have lost the essence of *paideia*. But what does this mean, and what exactly has been lost? As Thomson points out, Heidegger describes *paideia* very clearly in saying it is a means that enables us to “become what we are.” As such, it teaches us “to dwell.” It lays hold “of our very soul,” transforms it and then returns us to the essential place of our being.³¹

What we are as a human being is not what we can be reduced to (our animality, bare life, a Eurocentrically totalized subject and so on) but rather our potentiality in difference. Heidegger’s declaration that to “become what you are” is to be situated in a context of becoming, which is a condition of emergence informed by what this being desires to be, or realize (ambitions, dreams and goals).³² But becoming is always a becoming situated somewhere in cultural space. To realize this is to transform one’s potentiality. For instance, to discover one is Eurocentrically placed in the world to “become what you are” means undergoing a process of epistemological decolonialization enabling reflection upon “what you were made.” The ambitions, abysmal dreams and forged goals in the wake of this reflection can but disrupt, disturb and crack the colonized identity,

and in so doing open a space into which something other than that self can insinuate itself.

Education is inherently futural: it is a form of ontological designing. As such it can deliver positive or negative futures. What is lost in the negative (currently seen in the economic functionalism of instrumentalized education) is the potentiality of individuals to realize what they could become in their difference. It follows, and universally, that in the early twenty-first century universities have to be “led” away from their subordination to the instrumental and specifically:

- The continued damage they do to the already damaged Humanities (both in terms of their status, level of presence and critical content—this not on the basis that the Humanities need to be saved but rather that they be available to be transformed), and
- Vocational programs servicing the structurally unsustainable status quo (in pragmatic areas like business, tourism, marketing, public relations, nursing, project management, accountancy and of course computing) have to be eliminated or redirected. Such programs in almost all disciplines are now presented and marketed in terms of their claim to having a “use value” and delivering career prospect/jobs.³³

Institutional managerialism accompanied the rise of such instrumentalism. Both trends have contributed to the modern university becoming a diminished institution, lacking vision and meaning within public culture. This situation is, of course, not a sudden occurrence but one that gained momentum over the last century.³⁴

Against this backdrop, if we define *paideia* as “real” and “essential” education, then the view of existing instrumentalized and conformist education can be seen as not just an abandonment of our self-realization but also a fundamental failure to really identify what knowledge should be and direct—this within global contemporary sociocultural, geopolitical, economic and environmental circumstances as they harbour the defuturing forces of structural unsustainability. To acknowledge and expose the specific characteristics of this situation makes possible much of what actuality needs to be newly learnt to advance the condition upon which life, not just human life, as we know it depends—Sustainment.

Here we acknowledge that metaphysics, from its inception, directed the very form of knowledge within which all Western education became

situated. Following Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, Thomson elaborated how it delivered what he called "ontological holism"—a mode of being with knowledge of which there was no exterior.³⁵ He suggested that "by giving shape to our most historical understanding of 'what is' metaphysics determines the most basic presuppositions of what *anything is*, including *education*."³⁶ Of this understanding Thomson also observes that it makes "education" possible, both as knowing what entities are and how our knowledge of them is transformed.³⁷ However, in a post-Enlightenment defuturing world, such education, as indicated, is now insufficient. The absence of design education (understood here not as it is, but with its true potential of disclosing world making and unmaking) is just one example of such insufficiency.

Foundationally what is established by metaphysics is the extension of a particular condition of being: a globalizing Western condition of being within an ontotheological understanding of what knowledge is and does. Effectively what this being-in-a-condition-of-belief means is that there is "what is" and a history of being with an absolute belief *that arrives with the ability bring the "what is" within the realm of knowledge*. Thus the caesura between "what is" and "how it is known" goes unseen. This condition of limitation (a condition intrinsic to the metaphysics of presence) has been universalized under the direction of a process of epistemological colonialization (as it equally colonizes the colonizer and thereafter the colonized). Such a "mode of being with knowledge has no exterior"—all other modes of knowledge are either unseen or deemed operationally inferior (esoteric). It follows that the belief in such knowledge is taken to be the total sphere of authentic knowing and, as such, completely colonizes—but it does so not as under the mantle of imposition but in the name and guise of a gift (education).

A critique of the Eurocentrically grounded metaphysics from the viewpoint of epistemological colonialism, as it layers onto the structural traces of colonialism in global inequity and conflicts, arrives as just another face of defuturing.³⁸ This is to say it is elemental to the ontologically designing essence of unsustainability (as it forms the basis of so much of the "knowledge" upon which defuturing actions are based). Knowledge of "what is" and "the world" cannot be divided from "knowing" how to act in and upon "the world." In a deeply structurally unsustainable world, by implication, this means people are educated into defuturing actions. Thus, countering such education and knowledge changes our knowing of *everything*. Effectively, the arrival of such counter knowledge

demands engagement in a process of unlearning, and it is this unlearning that enable “true” learning to become a possibility. All this means that in confronting the unsustainable, the very ground of education shifts.

What this shift reveals acts to confirm Heidegger’s realization that education is grounded in the history of being (but with the caveat that this history is neither totalized nor of the singular). To comprehend this is again to realize that the ontotheological foundation of “our” education, as the ground of all we know, is a reaffirmation of ontological designing at its most fundamental. Education, so grasped, is absolutely directional: underlying all that is learnt is the mode of being into which the learner is placed.

Our concern with design remains central to this exposition as, by implication, we are all designed into the way we know by informal and formal education, and thereafter act in the belief in the validity of the foundational knowledge of our knowing (the taken-for-granted knowledge “we” inhabit – or *habitus*). What is to be done in this situation? For it appears to contain a double bind—namely: we only know there is a problem via the way we know, which we gain as a result of the way we have been educated into a way of knowing.

These comments take us back to the now dominant instrumental paradigm of education, and again to the recognition that the colonizing forces of education are always a displacement and imposition. At its most basic, this is characterized by the notion that “we are born an animal and are made a human by education.” What education displaces is not the fact of our animality; rather, it represses its social appearance. The way we know is one thing, what we know is another. For knowing to become otherwise, as we have acknowledged, existing ways of knowing have to be disrupted by a process of unlearning.

Thomson suggests: “we need an alternative to our contemporary understanding of education, one capable of favorably resolving our education crisis by averting the technological dissolution of the historical essence of education.”³⁹ But as indicated, “our education crisis” needs more than this.

In Thomson’s terms, this means departing from instrumental “information based knowledge accumulation,” and “how-to learning,” to a privileging of the question of “why” and practices of “situated learning.” Calling up Plato and Heidegger, he hopes to restore “meaning to the increasingly formal and empty ideas guiding contemporary education.”⁴⁰ Both these proposals invite a critical response, which must include an acknowledgement of the long and dark shadow cast over education by

Eurocentrism, as well as the clearing of a space into which difference can arrive.

Let's start by looking at the issue of "averting the technological dissolution of the historical essence of education." Two problems arise immediately when considering this.

The first problem is that Thomson's statement assumes technology to be an external agent, yet he is familiar with Heidegger's notion of "the essence of modern technology" being identical with "the essence of modern metaphysics"—whereby technology is metaphysics "completed."⁴¹ But as already established, metaphysics determines what *anything is* and as such establishes our condition of being, *ergo*: we are technological Beings-in-being. Yet what an ontological design informed critique of Heidegger's view of "man" as "world forming" reveals is that ontologically "we" have always been technological and that now, with metaphysics becoming technology, we are completed as technological beings. This of course is not to say "we" are machines," but it is to recognize that the ontological designing of technology has gone way beyond changing the way we make a world-within-the-world.

Huge numbers of us think and act within a technospheric existence. The interface has dissolved, now there is no boundary between the inside and the outside, interiority and the exterior.⁴² "We" are now fully technologically "naturalized" (it is as much of our nature as "nature"). What becomes at issue, what is at stake, is contesting the *nature* of technology as: environment, as ontological form-giving, and as directionality (wherein the distinction between user and used is rendered meaningless). The key to doing this, it is suggested, is a form of "creative alienation" whereby technological being becomes an object of projective and reflective "observed observation" that is focused upon how what is observed is actually observed. Methodologically this method is indivisible from one brought to the observation of ecological systems by Niklas Luhmann.⁴³ This means that rather than being seen/seeing our self as singular, as monad, as an objectification (as the Enlightenment would have it, as the primary object of enquiry), we recognize that we are relational—thus co-joined by our animality to the biophysical sphere and overdetermined as a self by our social ecology. Effectively, our "modern" sense of self ruptures us from what there is to know about what we relationally actually are. This is not to suggest we are not a self but rather that we are more than it names—and that this "more" is a "cleared space" into which a difference to be learnt can arrive.

The second problem Thompson gives us is that *paideia* (as “the historical essence of education”) has not actually survived “the dissolution of” metaphysics and the marginalization of ontological inquiry. However, in reframing “what is” beyond a Western metaphysical characterization, as well as “what there is to learn,” a possibility arrives for a remaking. *Paideia* is learning and law embedded in the forms of designation of education. It is (ontological) design. As *habitus*, it is a historical presence that is futural (it takes us to our future).⁴⁴

Certainly there are currently no organizational models, politically coherent projects or agreed agenda for such a fundamental reframing of education. Yet there are counter-institutional projects arriving that do strive to build a way of knowing and acting that can seriously challenge the now dominant instrumental paradigm.⁴⁵ In all cases what is shared is a substantial critique of the status quo, recoil against the structurally unsustainable, a recognition of the imperative of intercultural understanding, and of making futures that have the sustaining-ability all we depend upon, that go to what we humans should be rather than just what we are.

Notwithstanding dealing with questions of metaphysics/technology, it follows that the resolution of the “education crisis” that Thomson speaks of is as much a political challenge (geopolitically and personally) as it is an intellectual one. His hope to reinstate “meaning to the increasingly formal and empty ideas guiding contemporary education” is clearly not enough. The task is far larger than this. What is actually needed is not just “meaning” but rather a reconfiguration of what is to be learnt (this to recover, understand and redirect old critical content, and to invent new content that is apposite to the times). When moving to discuss Heidegger’s belief in and commitment to “ontological education” Thomson understands this as education disclosing the “essential in all things.” What he overlooks are those divisions of knowledge that disable science from delivering relational thought and action in a world where the colonizer gives due recognition to the colonized.⁴⁶

Thomson asks: how can Heidegger’s ontological education combat the metaphysical education “we” have always received? The answer given by Heidegger, which resonates with what was said on creative alienation earlier, is totally counter to the contemporary instrumental and technocentric mode. What Heidegger advocated, as indicated by Thomson, looks like a counter action.⁴⁷ This can be summarized as:

- Students breaking their “bondage to the technological mode of revealing, freeing themselves to understand the being of ‘what-is’ in a different way”⁴⁸—this being linked to his understanding of *paideia* as an exposure of the essence of things (that is their “thinging”).
- Students liberating themselves from the grip of metaphysics in relation to the knowledge they have acquired (here is the move from a claim to know to a motivation to understand).
- Students learning the relation to dwelling, as an attunement to the essence of things beyond their ontologically directive technological enframing (impositional form) thereby seeing the “world” of beings, and things as beings, as animated with no-thing as passive and reified.

The convergence between *paideia*, as understood so far, decolonization, and education (centering on ontological design) begs noting. While Heidegger posed education against metaphysically overdetermined education as mere “teaching,” ontological design education (as education against instrumentalized design) names its pedagogic practice as “futuring.” Decoloniality, while having a totally different agent and agenda, shares the same goal.⁴⁹

Appropriation and the new university

The idea of a new form of the university does not assume a “green field project” that claims pedagogic and market difference from the “modern university.” Rather, and informed by the emergent projects, it needs to be far more strategic to succeed and really have the kind of transformative impact needed.

There are strong clues on how to do this to be found in non-Western progressive institutions⁵⁰ and in the transition of the first European Universities (the first of which, the University of Bologna, was founded around 1155) to the modern university. The primary objective of these early universities was theological and legal, with their power centered on the Church. This disposition continued with the rise of the medieval university. Then at the start of the fifteenth century, prefigured by the rise of the Renaissance and an interest in the classical world (via Greek

learning arriving by mediation from the Middle East), the power of reason started to ascend as a conceptually refined and directive mode of thought in the face of resistance from the Christian church.

As the Western university started to explore the agency of reason, the institution started to transform, knowledge started to divide and the influence and agency of science grew. The path to its secularization was set and over the next few hundred years the modern university developed. Increasingly as modernity became a global project the expansion of knowledge was marked by a deepening ignorance of other kinds of knowing from elsewhere.

In the present moment, prompted by the necessity of creating the kind of knowledge that Sustainment demands (which for reasons stated cannot be met by the educational status quo), what is now being called the “Urmadic University” is one example of redirective change. Its form is as a university without a place, and without cultural ownership by one culture (while rejecting pluralism), but with a dispersed community and a clear program of learning for change—as such, it is more than just another network organization. The strategic intent, learning from the formation of the modern university as it resulted from acts of appropriation enacted by the medieval university, is to mirror this process so that eventually the new knowledge displaces the old. Within such a model, the *historical understanding of design* occupies a position of major importance, in contrast to the inability of “design history” to add to a relational understanding of the consequences of the historical agency of the designed.

Obviously there are a large number of issues and questions thrown up by comments made here, and these will be engaged at length in the essays to follow. The hope is that the engagement with history, design and education to be presented will generate debate, gather interest, inform action and produce change.