Reflection

Human Dignity and Human Rights: Thoughts on the Principles of Human-Centered Design

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As I walked on the shore of Cape Town to the opening ceremonies of a conference on design in South Africa, I saw through the rain and mist a small sliver of land in the bay.[1] Naively, I asked my host if it was part of the peninsula that extends south of the city or an island. With what, in retrospect, must have been great patience, she quietly explained that it was not "an" island, it was "the" island. I was embarrassed, but I knew immediately what she meant. I spent the rest of the evening thinking about the political prisoners who were held on Robben Island, human rights, and the irony of a conference within sight of Table Bay that seeks to explore the reshaping of South Africa by design.

I was helped in these thoughts by the address of the Minister of Education, Dr. Kadir Asmal, who opened the conference by exploring the meaning of design, the need and opportunities for design in South Africa, and, most importantly, the grounding of design in the cultural values and political principles expressed in the new South African Constitution. I have never heard a high government official anywhere in the world speak so insightfully about the new design that is emerging around us as we near the beginning of a new century. Perhaps everyone in the audience was surprised by how quickly and accurately he captured the core of our discipline and turned it back to us for action. Many of his ideas were at the forward edge of our field, and some were further ahead than we are prepared to admit. For example, I believe we all recognized his significant transformation of the old design theme of "form and function" into the new design theme of "form and content." This is one of the distinguishing marks of new design thinking: not a rejection of function, but a recognition that unless designers grasp the significant content of the products they create, their work will come to little consequence or may even lead to harm in our complex world.

I was particularly surprised, however, by Dr. Asmal's account of the creation—and here he deliberately and significantly used the word "design"—of the South African Constitution. He explained that after deliberation the drafters decided not to model the document on the familiar example of the United States Constitution, with an appended Bill of Rights, but rather to give central importance from the beginning to the concept of human

1 This essay is based on a paper delivered at a national conference organized by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa, "Reshaping South Africa by Design," held in Cape Town from June 22 to June 24, 2000.

dignity and human rights. Though he did not elaborate the broader philosophical and historical basis for this decision, it is not difficult to find. Richard McKeon, co-chair of the international committee of distinguished philosophers that conducted a preparatory study for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, explains that the historical development and expression of our collective understanding of human rights has moved through three periods.[2] *Civil and political rights* were the focus of attention in the eighteenth century; *economic and social rights* were the focus in the nineteenth century; and *cultural rights*—formally discovered in the preparatory work for the Universal Declaration—became the focus in the twentieth century. The U.S. Constitution begins with a statement of *political rights,* and the appended Bill of Rights is a statement of *civil rights* protected from government interference. The document was properly suited to the historical development of human rights in the late eighteenth century, and in subsequent evolution the United States has gradually elaborated its understanding of economic and social rights as well as cultural rights. The South African Constitution begins with a statement of *cultural rights,* suited to the current historical period in the development of human rights. It seeks to integrate civil and political rights, as well as economic and social rights, in a new framework of cultural values and cultural rights, placing central emphasis on human dignity. The result for South Africa is a strong document, suited to a new beginning in new circumstances. The opening article of the Constitution, quoted by Dr. Asmal, reminded me of the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which announces "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family."

Dr. Asmal's account was both historically important and a conscientious reminder of the cultural context of the conference. However, the next step of his argument brought the room to complete silence. He made the connection between practice and ultimate purpose that is so often missing in our discussions of design, whether in South Africa, the United States, or elsewhere in the world. Design, he argued, finds its purpose and true beginnings in the values and constitutional life of a country and its peoples. Stated as a principle that embraces all countries in the emerging world culture of our planet, design is fundamentally grounded in human dignity and human rights.

I sensed in the audience an intuitive understanding of the correctness of this view, though the idea itself probably came as a surprise because we often think about the principles of design in a different way. We tend to discuss the principles of form and composition, the principles of aesthetics, the principles of usability, the principles of market economics and business operations, or the mechanical and technological principles that underpin products. In short, we are better able to discuss the principles of the various methods that are employed in design thinking than the *first* princi-

2 Richard McKeon, "Philosophy and History in the Development of Human Rights," in *Freedom and History and Other Essays: An Introduction to the Thought of Richard McKeon*, ed. by Zahava K. McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

ples of design, the principles on which our work is ultimately grounded and justified. The evidence of this is the great difficulty we have in discussing the ethical and political implications of design and the consequent difficulty we have in conducting good discussions with students who raise serious questions about the ultimate purpose and value of our various professions.

The implications of the idea that design is grounded in human dignity and human rights are enormous, and they deserve careful exploration. I believe they will help us to better understand aspects of design that are otherwise obscured in the flood of poor or mediocre products that we find everywhere in the world. We should consider what we mean by human dignity and how all of the products that we make either succeed or fail to support and advance human dignity. And we should think carefully about the nature of human rights—the spectrum of civil and political, economic and social, and cultural rights—and how these rights are directly affected by our work. The issues surrounding human dignity and human rights provide a new perspective for exploring the many moral and ethical problems that lie at the core of the design professions.

What is important at the moment, however, is that we may recognize in Dr. Asmal's argument the major tenet of new design thinking: the central place of human beings in our work. In the language of our field, we call this "human-centered design." Unfortunately, we often forget the full force and meaning of the phrase—and the first principle which it expresses. This happens, for example, when we reduce our considerations of human-centered design to matters of sheer usability and when we speak merely of "user-centered design." It is true that usability plays an important role in human-centered design, but the principles that guide our work are not exhausted when we have finished our ergonomic, psychological, sociological and anthropological studies of what fits the human body and mind. Human-centered design is fundamentally an affirmation of human dignity. It is an ongoing search for what can be done to support and strengthen the dignity of human beings as they act out their lives in varied social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances.

This is why Robben Island remained in my thoughts on the first evening of the conference. It reminded me that the quality of design is distinguished not merely by technical skill of execution or by aesthetic vision but by the moral and intellectual purpose toward which technical and artistic skill is directed. Robben Island, site of the prison in which Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were isolated so long from direct participation in the national life of South Africa, is another symbol of twentieth-century design gone mad when it is not grounded on an adequate first principle. It is a symbol of the wrongful use of design to shape a country in a system that denied the essential dignity of all human beings. Robben Island

belongs with other disturbing symbols of design in the twentieth century, such as the one that my colleague, Dennis Doordan, chillingly cites. He reminds us that the Holocaust was one of the most thoroughly designed experiences of the twentieth century, with careful attention to every obscene detail.

Dr. Asmal's argument carried an urgent message for the work of the conference and for everyone in the design community. Not only is design grounded in human dignity and human rights, it is also an essential instrument for implementing and embodying the principles of the Constitution in the everyday lives of all men, women, and children. Design is not merely an adornment of cultural life but one of the practical disciplines of responsible action for bringing the high values of a country or a culture into concrete reality, allowing us to transform abstract ideas into specific manageable form. This is evident if we consider the scope of design as it affects our lives. As an instrument of cultural life, design is the way we create all of the artifacts and communications that serve human beings, striving to meet their needs and desires and facilitating the exchange of information and ideas that is essential for civil and political life. Furthermore, design is the way we plan and create actions, services, and all of the other humanly shaped processes of public and private life. These are the interactions and transactions that constitute the social and economic fabric of a country. Finally, design is the way we plan and create the complex wholes that provide a framework for human culture—the human systems and sub-systems that work either in congress or in conflict with nature to support human fulfillment. These range from information and communication systems, electrical power grids, and transportation systems to managerial organizations, public and private institutions, and even national constitutions. This is what leads us to say that the quality of communications, artifacts, interactions, and the environments within which all of these occur is the vivid expression of national and cultural values.

We are under no illusion that design is everything in human life, nor do we foolishly believe that individuals who specialize in one or another area of design are necessarily capable of carrying out successful work in other areas. What we do believe is that design offers a way of thinking about the world that is significant for addressing many of the problems that human beings face in contemporary culture. We believe that conscious attention to the way designers work in specialized areas of application such as communication or industrial design is relevant for work in other areas. And we believe that general access to the ways of design thinking can provide people with new tools for engaging their cultural and natural environment.

As we work toward improving design thinking in each of our special areas of application, we also contribute to a more general understanding of design that others may use in the future in

ways that we cannot now anticipate. The urgent message of Dr. Asmal is that we must get on with our work as designers in all of these areas if we are to help in sustaining the revolution that has been initiated in South Africa and the wider revolution in human culture that is taking place around us throughout the world.