Rethinking Design Policy in the Third World
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Introduction

The unfortunate social and economic conditions of Third World[1] societies have instigated designers and design scholars to pay attention to the needs of this two-thirds of the world population. The "ideology" of design as problem solving drives designers and design scholars to think about how design can contribute to helping Third World societies. The 1970s witnessed the emergence of this awareness. Victor Papanek, in his classic *Design for the Real World,* called for designers' attention to the predicament of these societies. As an industrial designer, Papanek believed that "design has become the most powerful tool with which man [and woman] shapes his [and her] tools and environments (and, by extension, society and himself)." Furthermore, Papanek asserted that "design must become an innovative, highly creative, cross-disciplinary tool responsive to the true needs of men [and women]."[2] Papanek's notion of design for the Third World was quite novel at a time when most designers in industrial, developed countries were concentrating on serving profit-oriented industrial corporations, celebrating high mass consumption society.

Following Papanek's challenge, the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) organized the *"Design for Need"* conference in April 1976. Held at the Royal College of Art, the conference represented the international design community's general awareness of design's responsibility in contemporary society, examining the social contribution of design at both the philosophical and practical levels. Gui Bonsiepe, a Brazilian design thinker, provocatively brought up the issue of design in Third World countries in a broader sense. Bonsiepe's point of view, however, was quite different from that of Papanek. While Papanek proposed the idea of design for the Third World from the materiality of design, Bonsiepe construed the issue of Third World design from the political and economic relations between the First and the Third World, or in Bonsiepe's terms using a Marxist-oriented dependency framework, central and peripheral countries. Bonsiepe scrutinized the inequalities in the distribution of wealth caused by a system of unequal exchange or "value transfer" from peripheral to central economies. He proposed a model of design transfer that would rely on an industrialization policy "that promotes a self-centered or autonomous economy, as

against an outer-directed, dependent economy." Bonsiepe argued that this policy would enable design to "contribute to the satisfaction of local needs perfectly with local material and locally developed technology."[3]

Over two decades after Papanek and Bonsiepe first conveyed their ideas of design for Third World societies, the social and economic conditions of these societies have not changed much if one compares them today with thirty years ago. It seems that the paradigm of design as problem solving for Third World societies remains utopian, for these societies still are submerged in many social and economic dilemmas such as poverty, lack of adequate shelter, poor health facilities, lack of education, malnutrition, and so forth. The idea of design for the Third World advocated by either Papanek or Bonsiepe did not really work because they lacked political dimensions in their implementation. Therefore, this article seeks to offer a new perspective to implement the idea of design as a solution for Third World societies by looking at the interweaving of design and politics.

Political Economy of Design

As Jacques Giard[4] points out, design does not, and cannot, exist in a contextual vacuum. Design always is connected to a broader context that includes political systems, economic models, and cultural milieus. In a similar vein, Edward Woodhouse and Jason Patton[5] assert that political, cultural, economic, and environmental factors always are embedded in design, thus producing far-reaching implications. Hence, a more comprehensive formulation of the concept of design for the Third World should begin from an understanding of the complex interrelationship between design and social, cultural, and political factors. From this standpoint, I want to extend the conception of design from "proximate designers" to "design by society." According to Woodhouse and Patton, proximate designers are professional designers "who work at the drawing board, exercising the finest level of control over the details of design," while design by society is an awareness that "myriad persons participate in the design process with varying degrees of immediacy." The design by society framework enables us to view design in a broader perspective, and to construct a new direction for coping with the problem of Third World societies.

To comprehend how design evolves from an individual activity of proximate designers into an "object" of politics, we should understand the political economy of design. This begins from the notion of design as a process of creating artifacts that have economic value. In the aggregate, the economic value of design produces a considerable impact on economic systems. Although design usually is taken for granted in economic theories, several studies have shown the significance of design for economic growth.[6] This economic significance brings design into the political arena in which design is

3   Gui Bonsiepe, "Precariousness and Ambiguity: Industrial Design in Dependent Countries" in Julian Bicknell and Liz McQuiston, eds., *Design for Need: The Social Contribution of Design* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977), 13–19.

4   Jacques Giard, "Canadian Design and the National Agenda: Toward the Year 2005," *Design Management Journal* 7:3 (1996): 28.

5   E.J. Woodhouse and J. Patton, "Design by Society: Science and Technology Studies in the Social Shaping of Design," *Design Issues* 20:3 (Summer 2004): 1–12.

6   Studies of the relationship between design and economic competitiveness are to be found in: O. Davidson Ughanwa and Michael J. Baker, *The Role of Design in International Competitiveness* (London: Routledge, 1989); Robin Roy and Steven Potter, *Design and the Economy* (UK: Design Council, 1990); and Vivin Walsh, et al., *Winning by Design: Technology, Product Design, and International Competitiveness* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992).

situated as a public policy object. In a broad sense, public policy is construed as the pursuit of particular purposes, where the government as the holder of public authority decides the policy objectives and the way to achieve them. Hence, design policy is a form of the government's political and economic intervention into public sectors to influence the development of design in society.

There are two good reasons for discussing design policy in Third World countries. First, Third World governments recently have shown an increasing awareness of design. The establishment of design centers and institutes, and the growing number of design schools with the government's support in Third World countries, indicates this trend. Second, the endeavors to bolster design activities in Third World countries are motivated by the idea that design is a strategic tool for business and commerce,[7] and thus important for economic growth. How this design policy orientation becomes a "mainstream" model in Third World countries, and whether this design policy model is adequate to encounter the problems of Third World societies, are two questions addressed here. Throughout this paper, I will examine whether the "mainstream" model of design policy has a felicitous rationale, given the current dilemmas of Third World societies. Furthermore, I shall propose a model of design policy that situates people as the main concern of the policy by incorporating democratic, participatory approaches in the determination of design policy outcomes.

Design Policy in the Third World
The discourse of design policy in the Third World arises from today's global economic situation, which imposes a double bind on Third World countries. On one side is the substantial size of the Third World's foreign debt to First World financial institutions. This is a very serious problem that Third World countries face, because it not only severely burdens their economies but also shapes the Third World's economic dependency on the First World. Looking at how foreign debt has trapped Third World countries in a vicious circle, Arturo Escobar[8] analyzes the emergence and consolidation of the discourse and strategy of development in the early post-World War II period as a result of the problematization of poverty. Using Foucauldian frameworks, Escobar scrutinizes the utilization of allegedly "neutral" and "universal" knowledge, particularly development economics, in "rescuing" the Third World. Through this knowledge, a type of development was promoted which conformed to the ideas and expectation of what First World countries judged to be a normal course of evolution and progress. Furthermore, Escobar points to the basic set of elements and relations that hold together the discourse of development, and define its hegemonic worldview. This increasingly permeates and transforms the economic, social, and cultural fabric of the Third World, and creates its perpetual dependency on the First World.

7   Christopher Lorenz, *The Design Dimension: The New Competitive Weapon for Product Strategy and Global Marketing* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

8   For the discussion of the discourse of development and the emergence of development economics, see Chapter 2 and 3 of Arturo Escobar, *"Encountering Development: The Making and the Unmaking of the Third World"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

To reduce foreign debt and its burdensome implications, Third World countries have been trying to increase the export value of industrial products for international markets. This is an economic solution that can be pursued by them, yet is not easily attainable. Third World countries have to face the reality of an economic globalization in which international trade is becoming more and more rigorous. This is the other side of the double bind. Although promising a free market system, as David Korten[9] asserts, the global economy in fact primarily serves the benefit of powerful corporations and financial institutions of the First World.

Nevertheless, globalization with all its economic, political, social, and cultural implications already is here and, as Thomas Friedman[10] suggests, embracing it is the only rational attitude to take. Thus, to dissolve the double bind, Third World countries are compelled to increase their industrial product competitiveness. This is the entry point of design policy in the Third World. The unequivocal advantages of design for the economy, as shown in the case of Japan[11] and South Korea,[12] have inspired Third World governments to give considerable attention to design policy. Today, industrial-oriented design policy in the form of design promotion centers, design institutes, and the like is growing in a number of countries.[13] For example, the Malaysian government established the Malaysia Design Council in 1993 to determine the best use of design by Malaysian industry. The Indonesian government created the Indonesian Design Center in 1995 with assistance from the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Japan Design Foundation.[14] In the Philippines, the Product Development and Design Center of the Philippines was created by the government to promote industrial design as a tool for improving the quality and competitiveness of Philippine products. The Thai government has created the Office of Product Development & Design for Export. In India, design policy is implemented through the establishment of the National Institute of Design, which puts an emphasis on educating designers and serving industry. In Colombia, there exists *Artesanías de Colombia,* while in Cuba there is an *Oficina Nacional de Diseño Industrial* (National Office of Industrial Design). In Mexico, the government created the Mexico Design Promotion Center, whose tasks are similar to those of design institutions elsewhere. In Brazil, the Brazilian Design Center has done an excellent job of fulfilling industry's needs in the industrial area of Sao Paulo. In South Africa, there is a similar institution, the SABS Design Institute, which fosters the economic and technological development of that country.

Due to the diversity of economic and political systems, there are distinctions among these countries in terms of how design policy is implemented. Yet one can still squeeze out similarities among these measures that encompass the factors of policy orientation, policy subject, and policy agency. First, as already discussed, economic interests characterize the orientation of design policy in

9   David Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 1995).

10 Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Anchor Books. 2000).

11 See John Heskett, *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 184–186.

12 See Kyun-Wong Chung "Strategies for Promoting Korean Design Excellence," *Design Issues* 14:2 (1998): 3–15.

13 Design institutions presented here are based on the data obtained from the Website of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) <www.icsid.org>.

14 More information on design policy in Indonesia can be found in my article "Industrial Design in Indonesia: Education, Industry, and Policy," *Design Issues* 18:1 (2002): 36–48.

Third World countries, which treats design as a strategic tool for industrial competitiveness. Second, since design policy is aimed at improving industrial competitiveness, it is very obvious that the subjects of the policy are industrial corporations. The important feature of design policy is to encourage those corporations to utilize design more intensively in product development and innovation processes. Third, even though some models of design policy emerge from the initiatives of non-governmental groups,[15] the role of government in design policy undoubtedly is central and vital because the government conceives and approves design policy decisions, and provides financial support.

Human-Centered Design Policy
Undoubtedly, design policy in Third World countries is an advantageous trend for design communities. It indicates the government's awareness of design's potential, giving design an important position equal to other fields such as science, technology, and economics. Yet it should be noted that a discrepancy emerges between this industrial-oriented design policy and the social and economic realities of a large number of people in the Third World. While design policy appears to be serving industry's needs to increase its competitiveness in the international market, it overlooks local people in terms of alleviating poverty and fulfilling their basic needs. Design policy focuses heavily on questions of how to utilize design more intensively in industrial production, yet it neglects questions such as: What is the strategy to empower laypersons through design so they can build their economic life more independently? How does design play its social and cultural role in a situation in which Third World societies are marginalized? How can designers be made more socially and culturally conscious of local people's needs?

Questioning industrial-oriented design policy is ethically important if we take seriously Richard Buchanan's reminder of the ontological meaning of design for human dignity and human rights:

> 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...[D]esign 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 frame-

15 Some models of design policy initiated by non-governmental groups are discussed in two special issues on design policy in *Design Management Journal*: (1) "Design and National Policy: Assessing Government's Options in Design Management" 4:3 (Summer 1993) and (2) "Design and the National Agenda" 7:3 (Summer 1996).

work for human culture—the human systems and subsystems that work either in congress or in conflict with nature to support human fulfillment.[16]

Buchanan insinuates our pragmatic attitudes of exploiting design, and invites us to ponder the dimension in which design should be treated in its relation to society. This means reminding ourselves that design is for people. It is from this perspective that we need to rethink design policy in Third World countries, which has been heavily focused on competitive economic purposes.

If industrial-oriented design policy is not adequate to answer the problems of Third World societies, then what kind of policy is to be conceived? This article, however, is not intended to answer the question by giving prescriptive concepts. Rather, it calls for awareness that design policy should be aimed at society not solely at of industrial corporations. Therefore, following Buchanan's notion of the foundation of human-centered design,[17] I propose a human-centered design policy that takes into account the transformation of the orientation, the users, and the initiator of design policy.

In its intrinsic meaning, policy is a sort of design that involves analytical as well as creative processes in solving social problems. In this instance, constructing a human-centered design policy might start from Langdon Winner's illuminating concept of political ergonomics. This is developed as a discourse in which politics and design are interwoven by understanding the selective forces that influence the shape of artifacts, as well as their role in shaping human affairs. Winner applies the concept of ergonomics to the science of politics that shapes the policymaking process.

> The study of political ergonomics ... is a logical outcome of the critical study of technology and politics that has been brewing in much of twentieth-century thought. Many criticisms about the relation of technology and social life are actually a commentary about an unhappy fit between the two. If different forms or design of technology are suited to the qualitatively different forms of social and political existence, then the science of politics must include an ergonomics able to specify a suitable fit between the body of politics and its instruments.[18]

Political ergonomics offers us the notion of the structures that embody a political system. Like a designed artifact formed by purposeful structures, Winner explains that a political system is constituted by structures that establish coherent patterns of enablement and constraints within a given medium or set of related media. While the enablers strongly encourage certain outcomes, the constraints build a wall obstructing others. Thus, political ergonomics seeks to arrange a composition of these structures so as to fit the social and cultural realities of a society.

16   Richard Buchanan, "Human Dignity and Human Rights: Thoughts on the Principles of Human-centered Design," *Design Issues* 17:3 (2001): 35–39.

17   Ibid., 37. Criticizing the reduction of human-centered design to matters of sheer usability, Buchanan redefines human-centered design as a fundamental affirmation of human dignity.

18   Langdon Winner, "Political Ergonomics" in Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, eds., *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995): 163.

The notion of structures can be used in transforming an industrially oriented design policy into a human-centered one. Thoroughly analyzing the former, we are able to find that this sort of policy is surrounded by structures enabling industrial interests to influence the nature of design policy, while building constraints that hinder local people from putting their needs, desires, and interests into the policy. Therefore, the implication of political ergonomics in implementing a human-centered design policy is the creation of a fairer political setting of design policy that allows lay people to influence orientation. Certainly, this requires the willingness of the government as well as the design community (designers and design scholars) involved in design policy to include local people's needs, desires, and interests in national design agendas.

The institutionalization of human-centered design policy can be characterized by three principles, which replace those of the "mainstream" mode of design policy. First, a human-centered design policy is directly oriented toward people's needs and interests. Within this orientation, design is treated as a social and cultural tool for creating a better life for Third World societies in accordance with their social and cultural infrastructures. Second, the targeted-users of human-centered design policy, as expressed in its name, are people. Here, the function of design is not limited to producing physical artifacts, but is extended to enhancing sociality and improving equity in Third World societies. And third, although the role of government in human-centered design policy remains important, the participation of many stakeholders such as design practitioners and academicians, and local communities, plays a pivotal role in influencing design policy outcomes. This participatory model of design policy politically empowers design to be utilized more effectively in dissolving the predicaments of Third World societies.

Conclusion

I want to emphasize that the social and economic problems of Third World societies cannot be solved solely through the materiality of design, such as creating low-cost products using local material, charity design, and the like. What underlies the problem is a structural condition that needs to be solved through a structural solution. This is the reason why the discussion of design policy is relevant because it involves political factors in its implementation.

We have seen that design policies in Third World countries are mostly aimed at increasing the competitiveness of industrial products. This sort of design policy, however, overlooks the unfortunate social and economic conditions of Third World societies. Thus, the concept of human-centered design policy is proposed to revive the ontological meaning of design for the betterment of society. This model of design policy centers on people's social and cultural realms by incorporating participatory approaches in determining design policy outcomes.

Two immediate questions arise in response to this proposal. First, the whole argument conveyed throughout this article that criticizes the industrial-oriented design policy seems to undermine the precariousness of foreign debt that most Third World countries face. Indeed, foreign debt is a very crucial problem, but the effort to cope with it has commanded too much attention, while the actual needs of Third World societies have been neglected. Focusing design policy on people's needs and interests is much more crucial, because people have the right to live in better conditions than they do now. Second, the idea of incorporating democratic principles into design policy through participatory approaches is not easy, given the fact that democracy in many Third World countries is rarely practiced.[19] Yet this does not mean that the concept proposed here is impossible. What is needed is the openness of designers, design scholars, and policymakers in Third World countries to democratic ideas and practices. This could be hard work for them, but making design more socially, economically, and culturally useful for Third World societies through human-centered design policy is worth the effort.

19 For more discussion on this topic, see Howard Handelman, *Democracy and Its Limits: Lessons from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).