# Design in History

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“What is the use of history?” one might ask, when attempting to make sense of contemporary life. What answers might we find in the past to questions about the present when the current configuration of actions and events seems so volatile and unstable? Simply trying to keep our balance demands so much energy and attention that looking beyond the moment for helpful explanations might seem like a useless distraction. However, history has always played a role in shaping contemporary thought, whether it was Herodotus’s attempt to find patterns of human action to explain Athenian military might, the rediscovery of ancient philosophical and literary texts by Petrarch and other Renaissance scholars; or Karl Marx’s teleological vision of a classless society that would dissolve the conflict between the wealthy and the working class.[1]

“In recent years, most historians have tended to carve the past into small pieces and focus on specialized topics. They have done this rather than pursue the larger spatial and temporal visions that have animated a few of the profession’s most prominent figures including Eric Hobsbawm, the British historian who has written, among many books, an epochal four-volume history of Western politics and society that ranges from the French Revolution in 1789 to the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991.

In a collection of his essays, published in 1997 as *On History*, Hobsbawm presented three papers which dealt, respectively, with the past, present, and future. In “The Sense of the Past,” he affirmed the place of the past in the present. “To be a member of any human community,” he wrote, “is to situate oneself with regard to one’s (its) past, if only by rejecting it. The past, therefore, is a permanent dimension of the human consciousness, an inevitable component of the institutions, values, and other patterns of human society.”[2] Hobsbawm combined a belief in “la longue durée” or “the long term” from the French *Annales* school, which he called the “formalized social past,” with the recognition that this stable component of the social order is complemented by more flexible sectors of social change and innovation.[3] Recognizing the various components of society and their differing rates of change can be extremely helpful in contributing to a balanced process of social transformation that does not lead to social destabilization or collapse. Thus, for Hobsbawm, history in its best sense becomes “a process of directional change, of development or evolution.”[4]

Nonetheless, there are forces that militate against learning from history. One that Hobsbawm identifies is the “a-historical,

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[1] For an excellent account of Western historiography, see *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, Lloyd Kramer and Sara Mazda, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

[2] Eric Hobsbawm, “The Sense of the Past” in Hobsbawm, *On History* (London; Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997), 10.

[3] On the “longue durée,” see Fernand Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences: The Long Term,” *Social Science Information* 9 (February 1970): 145–175. The original French version of Braudel’s essay, “La Longue Durée” was published in the *Annales* journal in 1958, and then republished numerous times. It appears in a collection of Braudel’s writings, *Les Ambitions de l’Histoire* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1997), 149–178.

[4] Hobsbawm, “The Sense of the Past,” 18.

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engineering, problem-solving approach by means of mechanical models and devices."[5] The other is its opposite, the distortion of history for ideological ends of which we see so much today. Hobsbawm's complaint about the former is that it lacks perspective, and cannot account for anything that is not fed into a theoretical model.[6] What he rejects is a technocratic way of addressing social problems that lacks the human experience for which history is the repository. As seers of the future, Hobsbawm states, "[historians] are by definition concerned with complex and changing ensembles, and even their most specific and narrowly defined questions make sense only within this context."[7] What the historian can contribute to imagining the future, he claims, is a vision of how different strands of social activity relate to each other. Historical forecasting, he states, provides "the general structure and texture which, at least potentially, includes the means of answering all the specific forecasting questions which people with special interests may wish to make—of course insofar as they are answerable at all."[8]

Hobsbawm's characterization of the historian as someone who can provide holistic frames for imagining future social actions and projects would not have been possible without the growing interest in the vast terrain of social history that embraces the full spectrum of human activities. This tendency was initially evident among historians of the French *Annales* school in the years between the two world wars, but it received an added impetus from the myriad social movements of the 1960s that brought politics to the grass roots, and identified a broad social agenda of human rights and environmental concerns.

As Hobsbawm notes, "Social history can never be another specialization like economic or other hyphenated histories, because its subject-matter cannot be isolated."[9] He insists that the social aspects of human life are not separate from other aspects, which include the material environment. Thus, available models of historical processes are not sufficient for the development of a history of society. New ones need to be invented. To achieve this, he believes, historians with different areas of expertise will have to establish a greater unity of now separate practices and theories.

I support Hobsbawm's call for greater collaboration among historians, but note that in his account of the most interesting work in social history he makes no mention of material culture, design, architecture, or any of the arts. Granted that the essay, "From Social History to the History of Society," where he outlines promising tendencies in social history research since the mid-1950s, was published in 1972, a few years before the Design History Society was founded in Britain and design history received its first strong impetus, his omission of material and cultural life as integral components of any social model is worth noting.[10]

Hobsbawm singles out classes and social groups, modernization and industrialization processes, social movements and other forms of social protest, demography, and "mentalities"—the French term for modes of thought—as key areas where social historians have been working.[11] His list consists of processes, practices, and ideas and omits material objects and images. And yet there is no human activity that is not embedded in material culture. To support this assertion, I introduced the term "product milieu" in 1990 to represent "the human-made material and immaterial objects, activities, and services; and complex systems or environments that constitute the domain of the artificial."[12] My argument was that human action takes place within this milieu, thus opening up the question of how important it is in contributing to action and, consequently, social processes, activities, and events. Until now, this question has remained within the design research community, and even there researchers find greater interest in analyzing design methods than in trying to understand design's part in the unfolding of social life. So where should we look for answers?

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[5] Eric Hobsbawm, "What Can History Tell Us about Contemporary Society?" in Hobsbawm, *On History*, 35.

[6] Hobsbawm cites one example of such a practice: the Delphi technique invented by the Rand Corporation. He describes it as a process of "asking selected groups of experts to consult their chicken's entrails, and then drawing conclusions from such consensus as may or may not emerge." Hobsbawm, "Looking Forward: History and the Future" in Hobsbawm, *On History*, 39.

[7] Hobsbawm, "Looking Forward: History and the Future," 42.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Eric Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society" in Hobsbawm, *On History*, 75.

[10] Since Hobsbawm wrote these words, a number of historians have paid considerable attention to artifacts; whether as ephemeral as fashion designs, or as enduring as civic architecture. I discuss some of this work later in my essay.

In his seminal, two-part survey of "The State of Design History," first published in *Design Issues* in 1984, Clive Dilnot discussed design's place in the social world, stating in part I of his essay his belief that design cannot be fully understood without considering its social dimension. "The conditions surrounding the emergence of a designed object or a particular kind of designing involve complex social relations," he wrote. "The fact that these relations are described *only* in design terms obscures their social or socioeconomic aspects."[13] He then went on to state in part II that "[t]he essential field of design's meaning and import, therefore, is *not* the internal world of the design profession, but the wider social world that produces the determining circumstances within which designers work, as well as the conditions that lead to the emergence of designers."[14] I agree with Dilnot's call to understand design in the widest possible framework, but I would expand it and urge design historians to bring what they have learned about design into a closer relation with the research that historians in other fields are doing.

As a community of design historians, we have accomplished a great deal since Dilnot's two-part article was published in 1984. There is now a cadre of researchers, representing multiple generations, who have brought the study of design's history to a respectable scholarly level. We have journals in which their research appears, and a growing collection of academic publications. Design historians now work in multiple languages around the globe, thus bringing a complexity of voices and viewpoints to the field. Yet despite these accomplishments, the community continues to operate within an intellectual framework that frequently isolates design from much of what other historians do. With the exception of occasional journal special issues or sessions at conferences, design history does not engage actively with related fields such as business history, labor history, and the history of technology, invention, and engineering, or the histories of economics or even material culture.[15]

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[11] Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," 83.

[12] Victor Margolin, "The Product Milieu and Social Action" in *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies*, Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 122. The definition cited here is a condensed version of the one Richard Buchanan and I used in 1990 for the program statement of the "Discovering Design" conference we organized at the University of Illinois, Chicago, where the product milieu paper was presented.

[13] Clive Dilnot, "The State of Design History. Part I: Mapping the Field" in *Design Discourse*, Victor Margolin, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 227.

[14] Dilnot, "The State of Design History. Part II: Problems and Possibilities" in *Design Discourse,* 244.

[15] A notable exception is the *Journal of Design History*'s special issue on design, commercial expansion, and business history; with an introduction by Jeffrey Meikle. See *Journal of Design History* 12:1 (1999).

This is partly the result of design history's stage of development. With a large number of teachers who come from practice and direct their teaching of design history to future practitioners, there is a strong emphasis on narratives that limit the field rather than broaden it. This focus has positive and negative consequences: it makes the history of a particular practice more engaging for future designers, but it simultaneously obscures the relation of that practice to other fields of design and to the wider history of society that Eric Hobsbawm envisioned. Such an approach also fails to engage historians in other fields because it speaks little or not at all to concerns of theirs that lie outside of the field of design.

## The Relevance of Histories of Technology

"Technology historians have done considerably better than historians of design in relating the subjects of their inquiries to a wider social field. In *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870–1970*, Thomas Hughes moved well beyond a study of individual objects to link technology and invention to an explication of the American character. He located the most important technological developments at the level of systems rather than individual objects. "In popular accounts of technology," he wrote, "inventions of the late-nineteenth century, such as the incandescent light, the radio, the airplane, and the gasoline-driven automobile, occupy center stage, but these inventions were embedded within technological systems. Such systems involve far more than the so-called hardware, devices, machines and processes, and the transportation, communication and information networks that interconnect them. Such systems consist also of people and organization." As an example, he cited an electric light-and-power system that might incorporate "generators, motors, transmission lines, utility companies, manufacturing enterprises, and banks. Even a regulatory body may be co-opted into the system."[16]

"A central theme of Hughes's book is how the culture of invention shifted from the workshops of individual inventors and their staffs to large corporate laboratories, which were far more conservative even as they industrialized the process of inventing. At stake in Hughes's account of technology is how the United States organized itself as a nation to produce technological devices for peace and war. His attention to systems shows how social actors from many different backgrounds came together to accomplish common goals, and he also examines the complex relation between those goals and the technological systems he describes. Although he deals with large themes of government policy and corporate strategy, there is nothing in Hughes's narrative that lies outside of the history of design. Comparing Thomas Edison and Henry Ford as designers he writes:

> Designing a machine or a power-and-light system that functioned in an orderly, controllable, and predictable way

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[16] Thomas Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870–1970* (New York: Viking, 1989), 3.

> delighted Edison the inventor: designing a technological system made up of machines, chemical and metallurgical processes, mines, manufacturing plants, railway lines, and sales organizations to function rationally and efficiently exhilarated Ford the system builder. The achievements of the system builders help us understand why their contemporaries believed not only that they could create a new world, but that they also knew how to order and control it.[17]

"Hughes refers here to Henry Ford's design for the extraordinary River Rouge plant, where the entire process of creating an automobile from the production of steel to the manufacture of parts, to the design of the auto bodies and the final assembly of the vehicle occurred. By characterizing Ford's conception and plan of River Rouge as design, Hughes enlarges the sphere of activity that can and should be addressed within design history, while also connecting design to a range of ambitious business practices whose study is currently missing from the field.

"Like Hughes, another historian of technology, David Noble, extends the idea of design in his book *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* to the invention of complex systems where business executives expropriated the workers' technical knowledge and reduced them to parts of a production process over which they had no control. What, one might ask, does this have to do with design? Why should it not be labor history? The answer is that the subject of Noble's investigation is not labor per se, but its place within the corporate organizations that managed technological innovation. And these were designed.[18] "For technology is not simply a driving force in human history," Noble writes. "It is something in itself human; it is not merely man-made, but made of men."[19]

Both Hughes and Noble as historians of technology owe a tremendous debt to Lewis Mumford, whose broad interests embraced technology, architecture, town planning, literature, and much more. Though Mumford had academic appointments at various universities during his career, he was primarily an activist and crusader for whom historical research was a strategy to examine large moral and ethical issues that related to the design of everything. His 1934 book *Technics and Civilization*, as rife with polemics as it is with facts, is hardly a model for the systematic historian. Nonetheless, it is the best account we have of how deeply technology is embedded in the conduct of social life. What drives Mumford's narrative is the way it has shaped human character. While he inserts himself and his values into the history of technology in a way that would cause dismay among professional historians, as a result he makes the bold claim that technology contributes to the mechanization of life and undermines the organic lifestyle he values.[20] Mumford also addresses the future as Hobsbawm urged historians to do, although he does it in a prescriptive rather than a predictive way.[21] "Hence we do not have to renounce the machine completely," he states, "and go back to handicraft in order to abolish a good deal of useless machinery and burdensome routine: we merely have to use imagination and intelligence and social discipline in our traffic with the machine itself."[22]

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[17] Hughes, *American Genesis* 8. See also Thomas Hughes, *Human-Built World: How to Think about Technology and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[18] See the special number of *Design Issues* devoted to organizational design entitled "Design + Organizational Change," *Design Issues* 24:1 (Winter 2008).

[19] David Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), xxi–xxii.

[20] Mumford continued to write about technology and its social consequences in his two-volume work *The Myth of the Machine*, published between 1967 and 1970.

Why is it then that *Technics and Civilization* is hardly read or referred to by design historians, while it remains one of the founding texts for historians of technology? It is a natural complement to Siegfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command*, which many design historians reference, but it devotes less attention to furniture and other domestic objects that continue to hold a central place in design history research. Feminist design historians such as Cheryl Buckley also ignored Mumford and the history of technology in general when they sought to identify the role women have played in the history of design. In a seminal essay, "Made in Patriarchy: Towards a Feminist Analysis of Women in Design," published in 1986, Buckley argued for a greater recognition of craft arts that had been overlooked by design historians, rather than considering the field of mechanical and technical invention where many examples of women's achievements are evident.[23] Even Isabelle Anscombe's survey *A Woman's Touch: Women in Design from 1860 to the Present Day* and Pat Kirkham's comprehensive, edited volume *Women Designers in the USA, 1900–2000*, both of which discuss women as industrial designers, make no mention of invention and the design of technology as activities that engaged women.[24]

## Historians Writing Design History

"Among historians, the French *Annales* school has taken material culture most seriously as a consequence of its members' interest in geography, sociology, economics, and related disciplines. Henri Berr, founder of the *Revue de synthèse historique* at the end of the nineteenth century, provided an impetus for future *Annales* historians, but it was Marc Bloch's and Lucien Febvre's journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, which was founded in 1929, that became the principal focus for the group.[25] Of the *Annales* historians, Fernand Braudel paid the most attention to the material of daily life and included it as a vital component of his three-volume history *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century*, the French edition of which was published in 1979.[26] Braudel's aim was to expand the study of the European market economy by exposing a more complex structure than he believed other historians had recognized. Besides the mechanisms of production and exchange, he identified "another, shadowy zone, often hard to see for lack of adequate historical documents, lying beneath the market economy: this is that elementary basic activity which went on everywhere and the volume of which is truly fantastic."[27] Braudel called this zone "material life" or "material civilization."[28] Though he recognized the ambiguity of both terms, he believed the sphere of activity for which they stood was essential to his account of how capitalism developed.

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[21] I introduced the distinction between predictive and prescriptive future scenarios in my essay, "Design: The Future and the Human Spirit," *Design Issues* 23:3 (Summer, 2007): 5.

[22] Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1963, c.1934), 426–427.

[23] See Cheryl Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design" in *Design Discourse*, Victor Margolin, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 251–264; *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*, Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham, eds.; and *A View from the Interior: Women & Design* (London: The Women's Press, 1989).

[24] Ruth Schwartz Cowan, a prominent historian of technology has focused on women as consumers of technology rather than producers of it in her book, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a history of women inventors, see Autumn Stanley, *Mothers and Daughters of Invention: Notes for a Revised History of Technology* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993).

[25] I have taken my account of the Annales school from Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 103–115.

[26] Braudel's three-volume study was preceded by a shorter, single volume, *Civilization Matérielle et Capitalisme*, which was published by Librairie Armand Colin in 1967. An English translation, *Capitalism and Material Life 1400–1800* appeared in 1973.

[27] Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century, V. 1:The Structures of Everyday Life*, 23

[28] Ibid.

Braudel emphasized houses, furniture, and fashions as indicators of differences between the rich and the poor. "The poor in the towns and countryside of the West lived in a state of almost complete deprivation," he wrote. "Their furniture consisted of next to nothing, at least before the eighteenth century, when a rudimentary luxury began to spread…."[29] He briefly discussed furniture makers, but devoted considerably less attention to their craft than to a more anthropological account of where furniture was placed in homes and why. The design of interiors was, for Braudel, also an indicator of a society's stability. He noted that unchanging interiors were characteristic of traditional civilizations. "A Chinese interior of the fifteenth century," he stated, "could equally well date from the eighteenth, if one ignores certain variations—porcelains, paintings and bronzes."[30] By contrast, Braudel argued that "the characteristic of the West in matters of furniture and interior decoration was undoubtedly its taste for change, a relative rapidity of development which China never knew. In the West, everything was constantly changing… nothing escaped a complex evolution."[31] He treated fashion similarly, linking it to a broad array of customs that include gestures, greetings, and body care.

Braudel considered houses, interiors, and clothing components of material life, which he related to food, technology, money, and urbanism. Concluding the chapter in his first volume, where he discusses these, he affirmed the importance of considering material goods in an economic context and a social one as well. For Braudel, material goods are constituents of "a complex order, to which the assumptions, tendencies and unconscious pressures of economies, societies and civilizations all contribute."[32]

A principal and justified criticism of the *Annales* school is its emphasis on structures and processes rather than events. Nonetheless, Braudel's study of capitalism, which adopts methods from anthropology and sociology, can be useful to design historians both as a demonstration of scholarly ambition and a model of how the components of daily life relate to larger economic and social forces. Braudel did not write about design per se, but his inclusion of buildings, furniture, interiors, and clothing within his study of capitalism was exceptional among historians at the time, and continues to serve as an example of how material culture can be incorporated within a large, historical narrative.

Around the time Braudel published his study in France, historians elsewhere also had begun to consider design's relation to social and economic themes and issues; although more recent ones. One of the now classic texts adopted by design historians, although written by an historian outside of the field, is Jeffrey Meikle's *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925–1939*. It was published in a Temple University Press series called *American*

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[29] Ibid., 283

[30] Ibid., 285

[31] Ibid., 293

[32] Ibid., 333

*Civilization,* where it joined other volumes on revivalist religion, Social Darwinism, and radical feminism. Although Meikle, an American studies scholar, provides excellent formal analyses of various industrial products, he discusses them within a narrative that describes how America became a consumer society. Replete with documentation from many sources, the 1979 book successfully reveals the complex social relations that Dilnot later claimed were central to understanding design.

Since Meikle wrote from within American studies rather than design history, he had to make design relevant to the research of other scholars in his field; hence his framework is the economic and social transformation of the period between the two world wars to which a transformation in design practice contributed. Although *Twentieth Century Limited* has a more central place today in the canon of design history literature than in American studies, its importance for the latter field lies in the way Meikle demonstrated that design is crucial in gaining a full picture of the American economy during the late 1920s and the 1930s.[33] Some years later, another historian trained in American Studies, Regina Lee Blaszczyk, published a book that related design to the wider field of consumption. In *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning*, Blaszczyk explored the ways that several American manufacturers of china, glass, and ceramic goods correlated their design and production strategies with an assessment of the markets they sought to reach.[34] A related book whose subject is British society in an earlier period, and which had some bearing on Blaszczyk's work, is *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England* by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb in which the three historians show how designed objects contributed to a consumer revolution that paralleled manufacturing in making mass production a staple of the capitalist marketplace.

Looking at advertising and public relations rather than industrial design, Roland Marchand used advertisements and magazine covers instead of products to examine American business practices in the first half of the twentieth century, and their effect on the public. However, his book *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernism, 1920–1940* contributes as much to understanding the consumer as it does to explaining the workings of corporations and their advertising agencies. In a subsequent volume, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business,* Marchand made an important contribution to business history by examining the role of advertising agencies, designers, and public relations consultants in creating corporate images. Among the industrial designers who participated in this process were Walter Dorwin Teague and Norman Bel Geddes, about both of whom Marchand wrote extensively.[35] Advertising histories such as Jackson Lears's *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* and Michele Bogart's *Artists, Advertising,*

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[33] Meikle has played a prominent role in the Anglo-American design history community, contributing articles to various journals and exhibition catalogues; and writing an important book on plastics. One of his doctoral students, Christina Cogdell, published a book on streamlining that related it to the American belief in eugenics. See Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

[34] Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). For a book that looks at consumption in a different industry, see Sally Clarke, *Trust and Power: Consumers, the Modern Corporation, and the Making of the United States Automobile Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Before her book appeared, Clarke published an article based on her research in the *Journal of Design History*. See Sally Clarke, "Managing Design: the Art and Colour Section at General Motors, 1927, 1941," *Journal of Design History* 13:1 (1999) [Special Issue: Design, Commercial Expansion, and Business History]. A more polemical approach to the consumption of automobiles is David Gartman, *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design* (New York: Routledge, 1994). On the consumption of refrigerators, see Shelley Nickles, "Preserving Women: Refrigerator Design as Social Process in the 1930s," *Technology and Culture* 43:4 (October 2002).

[35] Marchand published articles on both Teague and Bel Geddes in *Design I*.

*and the Borders of Art* have also made important contributions to our understanding of how designers as well as art directors and illustrators worked within the larger advertising system, while Neil Harris included an essay on design and the modern corporation in his book *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America*.

Other cultural historians besides Neil Harris have written about design; among them Deborah Silverman, a student of Carl Schorske. In his book *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture,* Schorske included a chapter on the Ringstrasse and its construction, which he related to discussions of intellectual and cultural figures including Gustav Klimt and Sigmund Freud. Silverman adopted Schorske's method of integrating material culture and intellectual history in her study *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, where she looked at art nouveau from several new perspectives: its place in an evolving government policy discussion within the Central Union of the Decorative Arts, the Third Republic's embrace of eighteenth-century architecture and decorative arts as an act of self-glorification, and the movement's relation to the *psychologie nouvelle*.[36]

Of all the canonical figures in design history, William Morris has attracted the most interest from historians outside of the field. This interest has not ignored his design achievements, but has more emphatically emphasized his political views and his critique of industrial culture. An early book on Morris, and still the most substantial in regard to his political views, is E. P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary.* In *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts Movement*, Peter Stansky does attend to the artifacts that Morris and others produced, but he devotes considerable attention to the social relations that underlay the guilds and exhibiting societies of the movement, and addresses the question of their efficacy. Eileen Boris's *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* appeared in the same American Civilization series as Jeffrey Meikle's *Twentieth Century Limited*. An American Studies scholar like Meikle, Boris examined how the craft values of Ruskin and Morris underlay a resistance to the dominant American processes of mechanized production. "By analyzing the ideas of the crafts movement in their social, economic, and cultural context," writes Boris, "this book attempts to examine the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century response to the developing corporate order."[37]

In citing a number of historians who have found in the study of design the means to deal with issues related to economics, labor, politics, and social movements, I don't wish to imply that scholars whose primary emphasis is design history have not engaged similarly with social concerns. One could mention various studies, for example, of how design and design policy have contributed to the development of national identity. David Crowley's *National Style and Nation-state: Design in Poland from the Vernacular Revival to*

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[36] See also Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[37] Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), xv.

*the International Style* is an excellent example, as are many of the essays in *Designing Modernity*, the catalogue edited by Wendy Kaplan that accompanied the first exhibition at the Wolfsonian in Miami, Florida. Jonathan Woodham has addressed this issue in a contemporary context through a number of articles on the British Council of Industrial Design[38]; and Adrian Forty in *Objects of Desire: Design & Society from Wedgwood to IBM* has a number of chapters that would be extremely useful to historians interested in aspects of social history such as labor, hygiene, technology, and business.[39]

### What Is to Be Done?

The point to which I want to return in the concluding section of my essay is the paradox of design's pervasive presence in the social world and its marginality within the community of historians. Where then should we begin to seek an explanation for this curious situation? As I have shown, design has yielded valuable results for those historians outside of design history who have incorporated it into their research projects. Therefore, the fault does not lie with design's limitations as a subject.

Should we next look to the community of design historians to question whether they have done all they can to make the subject relevant to a broad audience? I want to acknowledge that an understanding of design and its history is what design historians bring to any discussions of broader topics, but I would argue that many design historians conceive design too narrowly. Although we have surpassed the narrative of Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* many times over, we still have not sufficiently changed his paradigm of what design is. We now write about stoves and automobiles, corporate identity and digital fonts, but we have little to say about design outside of the realm of consumption. How many design historians have written about the history of military hardware; street lamps, mailboxes, and other urban artifacts; surveillance technology, or interface design?[40] As technologies become more pervasive, design historians should be incorporating them into their narratives and through historical research, contributing to public debates about their value. How many design historians are familiar with the history of the Internet and the role played by DARPA, the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the United States Defense Department, in its founding? Could any design historian provide an analysis of how the ratio of spending in any given country on infrastructure, military hardware, and consumer goods has changed over the years? Or can anyone trace the history of proposals for automobiles that would consume less gasoline, and how automobile companies have resisted them?

Can anyone trace the history of industrial waste and chart the early trajectory of sustainable design practices?[41]

But even if design historians could do all these things, we nonetheless would have to acknowledge that many in the wider community of historians still might not be convinced of design's important role within the field of history. As a comparable example, the eminent historian of science Thomas Kuhn has described the difficulties of getting his colleagues to recognize the value of his own field. He writes:

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[38] See Jonathan Woodham, "An Episode in Post-Utility Design Management: The Council of Industrial Design and the Co-operative Wholesale Society" and "Design and the State: Post-war Horizons and Pre-Millennial Aspirations" in *Utility Re-Assessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*, Judy Attfield, ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); along with Woodham, "Managing British Design Reform I: Fresh Perspectives on the Early Years of the Council of Industrial Design," *Journal of Design History* 9:1 (1996), and "Managing British Design Reform II: The Film—An Ill-fated Episode in the Politics of 'Good Taste,'" *Journal of Design History* 9:2 (1996).

[39] Forty is an architectural historian who has also written about design.

[40] Paul Atkinson is almost alone among design historians in writing about recent technology. See his articles "Computer Memories: The History of Computer Form," *History and Technology* 15:1-2 (1998): 89–120; "The (In)Difference Engine: Explaining the Disappearance of Diversity in the Design of the Personal Computer," *Journal of Design History* 13:1 (2000): 59–72; "Man in a Briefcase: The Social Construction of the Laptop Computer and the Emergence of a Type Form," *Journal of Design History* 18:2 (2005), 191–205; and "The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men: The Role of the Computer Mouse in the History of Computing," *Design Issues* 23:3 (Summer 2007): 46–61. See also Loretta Staples, "Typography and the Screen: A Technical Chronology of Digital Typography 1984–1997," *Design Issues* 163 (Autumn 2000), 19–34.

[41] A pioneering work in this broad area is Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History Trash* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999).

> But men who consider socioeconomic development or who discuss changes in values, attitudes, and ideas have regularly adverted to the sciences and must presumably continue to do so. Even they, however, regularly observe science from afar, balking at the border, which would give access to the terrain and the natives they discuss. That resistance is damaging, both to their own work and to the development of history of science.[42]

A consequence of this separatism, Kuhn claims, is that historians have abdicated the responsibility to evaluate and portray the role of science in Western culture [much less world culture] since the end of the Middle Ages. He continues by observing that the historian of science, because of the primary commitment to his or her specialty, is no more capable of fulfilling this task. "What is needed," he concludes, "is a critical interpretation of the concerns and achievements of historians of science with those men [and women] tilling certain other historical fields, and such interpretation, if it has occurred at all, is not evident in the work of most current historians."[43]

Kuhn's words from the early 1970s could just as well represent design history's and the design historian's minimal connection to the wider field of history today. By contrast, however, Eric Hobsbawm provides some cause to be more optimistic about the possibilities for collaboration. For him, the motivation for cooperative work centers on a choice of topics that hold mutual interest for scholars from different disciplines. He cites, as an example, "the study of millennial phenomena" which has attracted "people coming from anthropology, sociology, political science, history, not to mention students of literature and religions…."[44] Design historians might consider the Cold War, for example, as a comparable topic to whose study they could make a valuable contribution. A good place to start the discussion would be the Victoria & Albert's exhibition "Cold War Modern: Design 1945–70," which opened in September 2008.[45]

If design historians are to present themselves as valuable contributors to such collective historical research, they have to make a persuasive case for the relevance of their knowledge to fora outside of their field. This is the challenge I put to the design history community. Can design historians contribute more significantly to understanding the past, present, and future as Eric Hobsbawm thought the historian ought to do? I believe so, but to make this possibility more probable will require a cultural shift within the design history community that includes all aspects of how the subject is taught and researched. Design historians have to broaden the understanding of design they communicate to their students, and they also need to pay closer attention to the ways that design researchers other than historians are thinking about the subject.[46] Is the design history community up to the task? I hope so.

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[42] Thomas S. Kuhn, "The Relations between History and History of Science" in *Historical Studies Today*, Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1972), 160.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Eric Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," 76.

[45] See the catalogue *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970,* David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds. (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2008). An early contribution to Cold War cultural studies was Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Translated from French by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). See also Robert H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997); and *Cold War Hothouses: Inventing Postwar Culture, from Cockpit to Playboy*, Beatriz Colomina, Annmarie Brennan, and Jeannie Kim, eds. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).

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[46] In 1991, I raised the issue of design history's relation to a wider field of design research in a paper "Design History or Design Studies: Subject Matter and Methods," which was presented at a conference on design history in Milan. Afterwards, the paper was published in *Design Studies*, and then in *Design Issues*, where it was central to a debate on the subject. It was subsequently included in my book, *The Politics of the Artificial: Essays on Design and Design Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).