Introduction
Rethinking Design

Back in 1996, the Department of Art and Design at the University of Alberta was one of three successful recipients of funds from a (then) new government program designed to support new educational initiatives that promised increased enrollments and job prospects for the graduates. The success of the Department was based on its new Bachelor of Design degree with Pathways. We had moved recently to the new degree denomination, leaving the Bachelor of Fine Arts for the students who concentrated on fine arts subjects. We thought there was confusion in the province about the expertise in design that the BFA stood for, given that students majoring in Painting, Printmaking or Sculpture, came out with the same degree—and often sought similar jobs—as students concentrating in industrial or visual communication design.

Once the new denomination was accepted (it took twelve years to convince the administration) we looked at the changes that had occurred in our understanding of the profession and decided that two fundamental educational moves were necessary: first, we needed to recognize the interdisciplinary nature of design and act on this recognition through becoming associated with other departments and faculties in the university. Second, we wanted to provide possibilities for a number of different students, with different talents, to study different aspects of design. As a consequence of this, pathways were created so that students in the Bachelor of Design program could take between thirty and forty-five percent of their credits in other departments. These "pathways" are offered by Computer Science, Engineering, Business & Marketing, Social Sciences (Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology), and Printmaking. This new administrative structure was the consequence of recognizing the importance of methodological, contextual and technical aspects that required more attention than what had been the case in traditional design education.

The need to develop and articulate our conception of design education in this new ground, made us earmark part of the funds received for the creation of a series of lectures by recognized local and foreign design theorists, educators, and practitioners. In this way we promoted reflection and dialogue, and contributed to the development of our position as design educators. This volume of *Design Issues* is dedicated to reproduce a selection of the lectures delivered during the last three years. They represent part of the ongoing reflection in which we are embarked.

The issue is opened by Alain Findeli, who concentrates on a conception of how the design profession should be in order to make sense. He writes about the historical development of design, in both its reactive relation to industrial and commercial development, and the conceptual innovations that expanded the role of design from time to time, as it happened in industry itself, or in educational institutions like the Bauhaus and the HfG Ulm. He does not characterize this as a magical, progress-related line, but as a series of shifts defined by changes in focus, priorities, interests, allegiances, and methods. In this context, he discusses the relations between design and art, and design and science, and the notion of the "applied." He proposes to go back to Moholy Nagy in search for a study of the fundamentals of the act of designing, and sees in design "not a profession, but an attitude" (borrowing words from Moholy). He argues this so as to prevent design from becoming an exclusively reactive—and submissive—extension of the business world. Instead, he proposes to foster design's potential for a proactive role in the construction of culture.

John Heskett, as his title shows, includes the past, the present, and the future in his paper. He begins by analyzing the different meanings of the word "design," seeing this as a challenge to our possible understanding of the phenomenon. He, as Buchanan, argues that the knowledge of the past can help the understanding of the present. He discusses cultural and physical contexts, and the way they have fostered the development of certain ranges of design concerns. His analysis borders on cultural anthropology, with a view to awakening our attention to the objects that surround us, whose characteristics we take for granted. Through discussions of history, he identifies critical points in which the design of products has been affected by institutions that facilitated the spread of information, therefore affecting the material culture and the life of people. But he not only ascribes design development to abstract forces of social history: he also identifies the impacting role of the exceptional individual. The processes of massification created by the macroeconomics of today's markets, and the new possibilities of customization created by new production technologies characterize for Heskett the new dimensions that design faces today. He suggests that adapting to new situations is the very task of design, and the challenge, our time faces.

Charles Owen discusses the advantages of structured planning for design. With fine attention to details, he breaks down the design process into its component parts, discussing strategy, context, project definition, action analysis, synthesis, and communication, developing diagrammatic models that assist the reader in the mapping of his conceptual terrain. He looks at the many challenges that business face in a very competitive market, and at the need to carefully position products and maximize efficiency in order to succeed. To close, he proposes three basic dimensions that define
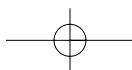
good design, and makes a forceful point for a well contextualized, thorough, and structured design planning.

Dietmar Winkler proposes that it is time for Modernism to fade away, that its naive social concerns, and its misunderstandings of social complexity, should make room for more sensitive approaches to solve the problems of our time. He suggests that today we are not looking at a replacement of a theory with another theory: but at the coexistence of different theories, all containing their partial currency, the resulting complexity being compounded by contemporary notions of relativity, chaos, probability, and utopia. He discusses the value of utopia, as the idealistic concept for intellectual reform, and proposes a central challenge for designers: either to continue building objects and images, or to build cultures. Building cultures puts emphasis on values, on distinctions, on tolerance, on multiplicities, and places responsiveness and responsibility at the center of the designers task, while leaving, at the end of the day, a number of unanswered questions.

Bernd Meurer suggests that the developed world has become opaque: the systems we use and the scales within which we operate (travel, commerce, communications) are so beyond our perceptual systems that we live through representations. These representations, however, challenge our capacity for information processing, and demand the creation of representations of representations, a somewhat labyrinthian world of information that reminds one of Jorge Luis Borges. He discusses the tensions created by overpopulation, development, and technology and the limits (however blurred) posed by the environment. Technological developments in communication and transportation, he claims, have fundamentally altered our perceptions of space, time, motion and speed, and all this has affected our social structures. Sustainability as an inescapable requirement and interdisciplinarity as a working method characterize design at the end of this century. He proposes that we perceive the world through action, that this action is oriented to the creation of objects, and that the task of design is not the solution to the design of those objects, but the invention of new tasks.

Richard Buchanan closes the issue. I could not agree more with him when—implicitly—he criticizes the name of the lecture series: "Rethinking Design for the XXI Century," arguing that it is the present that we can discuss and try to understand. Indeed, when I proposed the series, I just called it "Rethinking Design," since that was the task as I saw it. The rest was added by others with other concerns in mind. As a practitioner, what has been moving me to learn since I remember, is the drive to act, and the need to act as well as I can. Buchanan discusses the principles, the frames, and the options, in an effort to take positions or formulate patterns of meaning. He proposes an "ecology of design culture" as the necessary broad perspective to take, above partisan visions of the essential dimensions of design. He explores the value of the
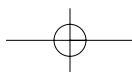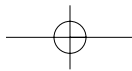
past, and of history—both as what has happened and as the accounts of what has happened—or the understanding of the present, but insists that it is in the present where our attention as students of design should focus. He also explores the broadest definitions of design, and outlines what he considers the four basic causes that different groups subscribe to as central to design.

The ideas are multiple. None of the writers pretends to address the whole truth. Each one, however, contributes insights, enriches our understanding, and challenges our thinking. I hope that the sample provides a glimpse of the wealth of discourses we enjoyed during the lectures series, and contributes to fostering reflection amongst the readers of *Design Issues.*

It has been invaluable to have hosted the series of lectures in Alberta. It would be wonderful to be able to increase the possibilities for this kind of interaction amongst people who work in distant institutions but who can share a space for reflection. I thank Desmond Rochfort, former Chair of Art and Design, for his creative management that made this series possible. I also thank *Design Issues*, for the possibility of sharing with their readership a selection of the series. I hope the dialogue will continue, so that constantly, and intensely, we continue rethinking design.

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