

# Introduction

We live in a complex world. There is nothing polemical in this statement. Nor is the claim that design is deeply implicated in the conceptualization, fabrication, dissemination and evaluation of this complexity controversial. The challenge for the design community is to marshal the intellectual, professional and material resources required to develop an intelligible portrait of complexity as a precondition for acting responsibly. The contributors to this issue respond admirably to this challenge and explore various facets of design's complexity. Reviewing the career of Henry Steiner in Hong Kong, D.J. Huppertz, for example, notes how cultural clichés like East meets West are used to aestheticize power structures and thus camouflage the impact of colonization in Asia. Using Istanbul as his focus, Gérard Mermoz suggests the limitations of a design lexicon based on concepts of style, self-expression, taste and the seductive appeal of the picturesque impede our ability to think critical about environments we inhabit yet all too often do not fully comprehend. While language figures prominently in Mermoz's essay, Sebnem Timur turns our attention to the cultural role of an artifact: the Turkish *nargile* (water pipe). Timur is interested in the way in which the nargile functions as an object of resistance to the Western model of economic and social modernization. More than politically correct rants against the encroachments of modernity upon tradition, both Mermoz and Timur are concerned with the ways in which design shapes experience and the subtle ways in which experience often resists being molded by designers. The complexity of experience is a central theme in Genevieve Bell's article on the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in parts of southern Asia. An anthropologist, Bell approaches ICTs as a set of social practices rather than merely an array of communication technologies. Bell employs an intriguing writing strategy to foreground the experiential nature of the design phenomenon under investigation. In conformity to disciplinary models of rigor, she poses a series of questions to be addressed and lays out a methodology for pursuing answers. But she leavens this academic approach with a series of brief, intimate sketches that evoke the social milieu within which the users of ICTs are embedded. Ultimately, responding to the challenge of designing in and for a complex world will require the designers to consider their own values, practices and identity according to John Carroll and Nathan Stegall. Carroll discussed the concept of participatory design (i.e. empowerment through inclusion in the design process)

through a discussion of Herbert Simon's seminal work *The Sciences of the Artificial*. Stegall argues that designers must envision and promote new behaviors not just new products as a way to activate an ecologically sound philosophy. Both Carroll and Stegall call into question existing paradigms of design practice. In his essay (drawn from his remarks on receiving a honorary doctorate recently from Metropolitan University of Technology in Santiago de Chile) Gui Bonsiepe acknowledges the flaws, the contradictions and failures of design in the age of globalization. But he also notes the potential of design to promote an authentic democracy in the contemporary world. He rejects both the Neoliberal definition of democracy in narrowly economic terms and the sterile irony of postmodernist commentary. Instead, Bonsiepe notes a potential to promote what he calls design humanism, which he describes as the exercise of design activities in order to interpret the needs of social groups, and to develop viable emancipative proposals in the form of material and semiotic artifacts.<sup>f</sup> The realization of complex, inclusive, environmentally viable, culturally appropriate forms of design called for by the various contributors to this issue constitutes a daunting design agenda. As Bonsiepe reminds us, it is also one that affirms our common humanity and ennobles us.

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