

DESIGN RESPONSIBILITY IN GLOBAL OPEN SOCIETIES

Charles Bezerra, Megan Brasell-Jones, University of Otago, New Zealand

Abstract

Most of the recent developments in design research are related to the logical and rhetorical aspects of design. The biggest challenge has been to advance in the ethical realm. More than ever, the designers of the artificial are facing moral decisions. Inspired by the political ideas of Karl Popper this research investigates the issues concerning design responsibility. What ought to be our basic moral values in a global open society? Can designers play a role in reducing misery, violence and egoism? What are our responsibilities for increasing freedom and education of the new citizen? These are extremely difficult questions, but they need to be urgently addressed by design research. What follows should be seen as humble conjectures on our responsibilities as creators in this human-perturbed world, to hopefully keep the discussion alive and achieve some progress, even if just a little.

1. Introduction

At a macro-level, design is already recognized by organizations and nations as a crucial factor for economic success. Because of its strategic power, design has emerged as a topic of political importance and many countries have invested and developed policies to make design a priority. As a response to this high level demand, research in the field of design has advanced and new frameworks, methods and tools are constantly being proposed. However, very little progress has been made on issues associated with our responsibilities as creators. Like negligent parents we have a tendency to see only the positive side of our creations and very rarely we assume responsibility for what is negative. Design is not neutral, as one might think. It changes and alters the environment; it changes and alters people's life. Our values towards the future deeply influence our creations.

The present situation in this human-perturbed world requires profound changes. Humankind's celebrated ability to create the new, the artificial, seems to have transcended our individual and collective ability to think about the purpose and consequences of our creations. There is hunger and misery coexisting with excess and waste, environmental damage coexisting with clean technologies, violence, egoism and lack of freedom coexisting with great advances in human knowledge. Despite these terrible things, ours might be the best of all possible worlds, as Leibniz¹ suggests. We cannot do anything about the past but we can certainly better plan the future. And here is where design matters, for planning is the real essence of design. In opposition to design processes are accident, chance and chaos.

Our problems are increasing in number, scale and complexity. Many of those induced by the population explosion that we are currently experiencing. That is not to say that there is not enough space for everyone, there is plenty of space and resources for everyone, but not in the unbalanced way we are living.

People are more connected than ever before and this brings new challenges as well as opportunities. On one hand, the network-effect that is so present in our communication and economy constantly blocks people's ability to think and act critically and freely. On the other

¹ B, Magee, *The Story of Philosophy*, Dorling Kindersley Limited, London, 2001.

hand, the power of networks is enabling people to produce social and cultural changes at a rate never seen before.

Our markets are also becoming extremely competitive. Completely changing the way we work and live. Competitive forces, acting now at a global level, are causing designers of the artificial to create products to satisfy the users' increasing needs of status and ostentation. Creating a society dependent on material possession, which consequently produces more waste.

More changeable than ever, technology is also playing an important role in our lives. It is hard to keep up-to-date with our technology. Even doctors, who have to make life and death decisions are not capable of being totally aware within their own fields. This avalanche of new, powerful technologies produces high degrees of anxiety for it is very hard, at this speed, to distinguish and control the good and bad sides. And still we know that this is just the beginning, we are just discovering our tools.

More than ever before, design has become a fundamental discipline and research in the field is experiencing unprecedented momentum. However, difficult ethical questions cannot be placed outside of the main debate. This paper will attempt to touch on the causes and consequences of our lack of responsibility as creators and the potential for positive action. Inspired by some simple lessons from the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper this paper hopes to bring new insights to an existing debate, to insist on keeping it necessarily fresh, and despite all the terrible things, to keep thinking optimistically about the future. For "Optimism" as Popper² points out, "is a moral duty".

2. Lessons from Popper

Karl Popper is regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century. Few have written with such clarity on a diversity of topics as Popper. He was a strong critic of the idea that our knowledge starts with observations. He believed that what we observe will depend on what we expect to observe, that we learn without induction, and that we build our theories by a process involving guesses or conjectures and refutations or critical tests. For him, all life was a trial and error process of problem solving.

Popper brilliantly demonstrates that although some of our theories might survive a number of tests, our conjectures will remain conjectures; they can never be proved as true. And although we cannot prove our theories, we can disprove them and this means they can be tested in a process, which he named - *falsifiability*. No number of observations of white swans will ever prove the truth of the statement "All swans are white", but a single observation of a black swan is enough to disprove it. Based on these insights Popper develops and applies his theory of growth of knowledge to a range of epistemological, scientific and social problems, including the demarcation between science and metaphysics, the logic of scientific method, the way we use language, how we understand history and the dangers of public opinion.

Popper is also recognized as a defender of critical debate, freedom and democratic ideas and an impartial critic of any form of totalitarianism, arrogance and pessimism in all intellectual fields.

He was born in 1902 and remained an active writer and lecturer until his death in 1994, where he was working on the ideas of open futures, vehemently interested in calling people's attention to

² K, Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving*, Routledge, London, 1999.

recognize their responsibilities and reminding them of the implication of their actions to the future. Popper argues that the future is open and one should approach it with optimism and all intellectual modesty.

It is very hard to synthesize in a few paragraphs the work and ideas of anyone, especially when the person is a thinker with such an impressive range and intellectual depth. However there are many lessons we can learn from Popper, especially his latest work that can be extremely useful for addressing the issues of design responsibility. Briefly, some of those are:

- The lesson that we have to deal with our problems with a multidisciplinary perspective – For Popper, specialization is a mortal sin for the philosopher; according to him, we are students not of disciplines, but of problems³.
- The lesson that we should avoid spending too much time and energy on endless digression about verbal problems. What Popper named “essentialism”, was for him the surest path to intellectual perdition. According to Popper⁴, we shouldn’t let ourselves be goaded into taking seriously problems about words and their meaning -- “What must be taken seriously are questions of fact, and assertions about facts: theories and hypotheses; the problems they solve; and the problems they raise”. For him there are tangible social problems we should act upon, such as, reducing misery, violence and increasing freedom.
- The lesson that we should improve our institutions. That we have to develop mechanisms for avoiding bad leaders doing too much damage. Popper⁵ believed that democracy was not to be ‘the rule by the people’ but the change of government without bloodshed. He points out the advantages of gradual reform over revolution, in which all institutions are destroyed and have to be rebuilt.
- The lesson that freedom depends on responsibility. Popper points out the need for a society in which the freedom of each person is compatible with the freedom of other persons. Even at an advanced age he was alerting people about the destructive power of television in society, especially its role in training children towards violence. As he saw it, television was corrupting humankind, a powerful thing that like anything else that threatens freedom, needed to be restricted.
- The lesson of the value of education and critical discussion. Popper⁶ believed that education has a direct link with freedom; education makes one understand the limits of its own freedom and consequently reduces the need for censorship or laws. He dreamt of schools where young people would learn without boredom; in which one did not study for the sake of passing examinations. He believed that education was the way for self-emancipation, and that the truly enlightened thinker, the true rationalist, would never want to talk or convince anyone of anything, for all the time he or she is aware that they may be wrong. Free opinion formation is precious, not only because this brings us all close to the truth, but also because one should respect free opinion formation as such.

³ K, Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, Routledge Classics, London, 2002.

⁴ K, Popper, *Unended Quest*, Routledge, London, 1992.

⁵ K, Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge Classics, London, 2003.

⁶ K, Popper, *The Lesson of This Century*, Routledge, London, 1997.

3. Design and Responsibility

During the second half of the 20th century, critics started to more vigorously question the role of ethics in design and design practice. From the 1970s Papanek⁷, for example, challenged industrial designers to direct their skills towards real need by encouraging designers to consider their moral, social and environmental responsibility. Whiteley⁸ added to this debate in the 1990s questioning predominant design values and drawing attention to a continued “marginalization of socially useful design”. Towards the end of the 20th century designers acknowledged the accelerating limits placed on the planet by past generations and started to more conscientiously explore the effect of design on society and the environment.

But despite ongoing discourse surrounding the importance of designing for improved human and environmental condition, thinking in the new millennium has remained skeptical about the responsibility debate and its impact on mainstream design. A concern that “egocentric visions” continue to be celebrated over “sustainable solutions”⁹ points to deficiencies in current design models to support expectations for the future. With myriad alarming global issues at the fore, there has been an insistence by many in the design community that a more immediate and drastic mind shift is needed to embrace social and environmental concerns through design.

Fortunately, to address issues of responsibility, new approaches in design are developing. Fuad-Luke for example has advocated for a kind of ‘slow design’ that aims to sustain the well-being of humankind and the environment by working outside the acceleration of economic progress. In a similar vein, McDonough and Braungart’s inspiring ‘Cradle to Cradle’¹⁰ framework, offers designers a model that draws from natural systems and seeks to employ restorative and cyclical processes towards a more sustainable future.

By examining the broader issues of social responsibility and its connection with design, it is possible to appreciate the importance of the ethical undercurrent that is shaping much of today’s design. Torn between a desire to rise to the challenge issued by environmentalists, scientists and economists to make an immediate effort towards a sustainable future, while simultaneously surviving financially in a society still strongly influenced by a dominant capitalist paradigm, designers have to make difficult decisions. There is a growing confidence that designers have the potential to be educators and agents for social reformation. This ability to effect positive change is evident in the increasing examples of socially charged work and the concerns of many design writers. To aid a paradigm shift in the way that designers approach their designing so that people and the planet are top of mind, some instruction is still required. Accordingly, the potential for design to be altruistic and better integrate responsibility needs to be explored.

⁷ V, Papanek, *Design for the Real World*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1972.

⁸ N, Whiteley, *Design for Society*, Reaktion Books, London, 1993.

⁹ A, Fuad-Luke, *Slow Design*, Think Cycle, Cornwall, 2002.

¹⁰ M, Braungart, W, McDonough, *Cradle to Cradle*, North Point Press, New York, 2002.

4. Patterns of Responsibility

In a recent study on social responsibility¹¹, a selection of Australian and New Zealand design companies was examined. The research followed the modus operandi of designers identifying themselves as considering social and/or environmental responsibility as a prominent characteristic of their design practice. What emerged was a strong sense of personal ethics among those interviewed. The designers indicated a range of influences, from their parents to their teachers, from Chomsky to Papanek, that helped shape their personal ethics and the spirit of their design practices.

While much of the impetus came from the company founders themselves, external models such as *The Natural Step* and *The Triple Bottom Line* frameworks were also referred to as useful tools, adding structure to business operation and guiding decision-making. These models revolve around an effort to have as a central focus of their business practice, the concerns of the community and the environment. The ensuing effort goes beyond standard business and governmental requirements suggesting a more altruistic rationale.

Rachlin¹², points out that altruistic behavior may be learned and maintained over an individual's lifetime, without any special inherited mechanism. He explains that individual acts of altruism, each of which may be of no benefit (or of possible harm) to the actor, may nevertheless be beneficial when repeated over time. To illustrate this action he uses the example of a woman who runs into a burning building to save someone else's child. For him, patterns of altruistic behavior transcend case-by-case decisions. "Once we abandon case-by-case decisions, there will come times in choosing between selfishness and altruism when we will be altruistic even at the risk of death".

Although varied, the different business and ethical models referred to by the participants, spoke a similar language of altruism and a consideration for people and the planet. This approach then acts as a catalyst for action throughout the supply chain. It was expressed by interviewees for example, that in promoting themselves as prioritizing ethical values, they attracted like-minded clients. It is this simple appreciation for another's ideals in terms of business exchange that extends client/designer relationships beyond simply providing a service.

Despite experiencing an era of increased interest in social and environmental issues there are relatively few design companies working within obvious ethical boundaries. This suggests a stronger need for individuals to behave in a way that does not encroach on the opportunities for future generations. Rather than having a position on the periphery, as participants in the research found themselves, designers addressing socially responsibility need to enjoy a position that is more mainstream.

Having ethical motivations in place is perhaps the cornerstone to developing a designer's responsibility. The challenge is then exercising these principles through practice. It may be through improved patterns of responsibility like those expressed by Popper, that future designers seek reasons to tailor their designing to include social and environmental concerns.

¹¹ M, Brasell-Jones, *Design for People and Planet*, University of Otago, Dunedin, 2005.

¹² H, Rachlin, "Altruism and Selfishness", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences Journal*, (2002) 25, 239–296

5. Towards A Humankind-Centered Design

In a recent article¹³, Charles Owen, professor of the Institute of Design in Chicago, points out that the current policy-making process is not efficient in confronting today's problems. He argues that uniformed decision-making is no longer tolerable and that partly by its own fault, design is far from the advisory committees of the big decisions, which now have global consequences. He suggests that design thinking offers a better way to find information, gain insight from it, organize it, evaluate it and project inventive concepts and that is what is missing in the advice used for policy-making. Professor Owen highlights the role of design education in preparing designers for assuming leadership positions and introduces the need for what he calls International Design Institutes, an institution oriented to be a working example of design thinking, broadcasting the values, benefits and culture of good design; demonstrating the best principles of sustainability and adaptivity.

The human-centered design approach is maybe the most advanced logical and rhetorical concept design research has produced. It changes the focus from technology and from the designer to the user, to their needs and desires. However, the reasons this approach has become a trend has more to do with the economical benefits it brings to the companies who adopt it, than due to any ethical values. Human-centered design is still a limited concept; the designers of the artificial have to think urgently of the broader picture, something like a humankind-centered design. And, this means an ability to influence the big decisions and to think in long-term goals. Misery, violence, egoism and environmental damage will not be solved quickly, maybe it will be necessary few generations, but it needs to be initiated. Maybe, companies can value this humankind-centered design as well. It might become a strong differentiator with positive economic consequences.

Similarly, Popper's conclusion that education is a solution for increasing freedom, education is also the solution for increasing design responsibility. Bertrand Russell¹⁴ suggests that the education of character should start at very young age, before the age of six. As any future ethical development will be consequence of the virtues learned at childhood. Therefore, the learning about design responsibility may need to start before tertiary education. Design is also responsible for educating the new citizen. Design education needs a curriculum that encompasses logical, rhetorical and ethical dimensions of design targeted at helping students to become literate leaders, with power and capability to positively influence any human creation. Design research should keep insisting on the debate of design responsibility, sharing any new knowledge, examples or approaches that can contribute to a more responsible use of human creativity.

A number of designers interviewed in the previously mentioned study had been involved in information sharing at different levels. One avenue for distributing knowledge is through publications such as newsletters. *Digital Eskimo* produces an electronic newsletter called D.mail, which covers topics such as "sustainable design, ethical business, progressive social and ecological projects" and news from the studio itself. Some of the participants have also given seminars to the design community and design students about "what we do and why we do it". This sharing of wisdom through websites, publications and seminars contributes to a richer body of knowledge to draw from and arouse others. Some designers are also members of networks and online resources, which are instrumental in supporting positive practices. *Design by Nature*, for example, is a shared resource aiming to "inspire, educate and empower" designers as well as offer

¹³ C. Owen, "Societal Responsibilities: Growing the Role of Design", *Institute of Design*, IIT, 2005.

¹⁴ B. Russell, *On Education*, Routledge, London, 1994.

a forum for discussion. We are just beginning to explore the power (or potential for) of spreading knowledge through networks.

6. Conclusion

Our environment and our open global societies are currently at risk because of the irresponsible use of human-creativity. Our powerful designing capabilities differentiate us from other species; however, design is advantage only when used responsibly. So far we have just developed our designing processes, now we have to learn how to use it according to a collective, long-term plan. Design is linked to what we are and what we will eventually become. Design research is also responsible for what is to come. As Popper urges, “we all have a duty, instead of predicting something bad, to support the things that may lead to a better future”.