

# Introduction

We begin this issue of the journal with three different perspectives on the broad theme of design and consumption. In “Altruism as Design Methodology,” David Stairs investigates an alternative to traditional for-profit design practice, the tradition that is deeply implicated in the culture of consumption with which we are well familiar. He offers an impassioned and intelligent discussion of the idea of altruism and its role in a new form of non-competitive design practice, illustrated in organizations such as Design for the World, Design for Social Impact, and Designers Without Borders—the latter conceived and operated by Stairs and his partners. He argues that this form of practice represents a sea change in design thinking and a new trend in the design community, oriented particularly toward people in developing countries such as Uganda.

In contrast, “Semiotic Neighborhoods” offers a sociological discussion by Ilpo Koskinen, who focuses on the culture of consumption in highly developed countries. What is innovative in this article is the identification of whole neighborhoods within cities and towns that are largely devoted to satisfying the desires of the upper-middle classes and tourists with luxury goods created by designers. These urban areas are distinguished from shopping malls as well as entertainment districts. They are “historical creations in which the streets belong to people, property ownership is decentralized, and passersby are exposed to a full scale of life rather than to a managed version of it.” Semiotic, in this article, refers to “semiotic goods,” where “most of their economic value is based on the meanings people give to them rather than their functionality.” The argument is illustrated with a specific discussion of Helsinki.

Following this unusual juxtaposition of perspectives, there is an article by Andrew Shanken on the history of Sweet’s Catalogue, from 1906 to 1947. Sweet’s Catalogue is a famous compilation of building resources for architects. Shanken’s careful historical research reveals “the ways in which architects responded to, and were shaped by, the emergence of a consumer culture.” The reader is rewarded with a clear discussion of the communication strategy operating behind the catalogue as well as an insightful discussion of the strategies of visualization and information organization that made the catalogue an important tool in the practice of architectural design.

The next two articles—separated by a visual essay, “The Bicycle, Cross, and Desert,” by Andrew Weed—discuss different aspects of digital media and computers. In “What the Film Archive

Can Tell Us About Technology in the Post-digital Era,” Michael Punt explores the relationship between analogue and digital cinema, pointing toward cinematic imagination in its two manifestations: a concern for the image and a concern for the technology and materials that support image creation. This is a wide-ranging discussion that touches on a variety of topics that are of interest to designers, including the place of animation in cinema, the disappointment of the CD-ROM, and the design concept behind Broderbund’s *Living Books*. Of special interest is the parallel that Punt draws between the early technology of moving images and the early digital media.

In “Visualizing the Vague,” Sara Ilstedt Hjelm presents an important critical discussion of the idea of the “invisible computer.” Championed by some industrial designers and cognitive engineers, the invisible computer or ubiquitous computing (aka “UbiComp”) is a strategy of design thinking that seeks to embed computers into the surrounding environment in such a way that one pays no attention to the power of computing and its pervasive influence on our lives—a kind of ultimate usability ideal. With UbiComp, Hjelm observes, “everything appears normal” and the power of the computer appears more a natural fact than a cultural phenomenon that is open to explorative and critical aesthetics. Therein lies the rub. UbiComp may serve the interests of commercial development and lead to increased sales, but is it wise to allow information technology to be hidden from view when it is so powerful and problematic for our lives? Drawing from psychology, design theory, sociology, and feminist theory, Hjelm presents an argument that deserves careful attention and further discussion.

The final article in this issue of the journal turns to culture, death, burial and design in Hong Kong. Michael Siu presents a research and design project carried out in Hong Kong in 2001. The problem is the conflict between traditional Chinese cultural beliefs about burial and the limited amount of available land in one of the most densely populated cities on the planet. Once again, usability and cultural satisfactions appear to be at odds with each other. Siu and his team offer a new burial concept that seeks to balance vastly different interests in a culture that prizes tradition and respect for ancestors.

We conclude this issue of the journal with a conference review by Gitte Waldman, Trysh Wahlig, and Robert Zolna, on the ICOGRADA 2003 Congress “Visualogue,” involving a visual dialogue between designers, and a book review by Danielle Schwartz of John Heskett’s *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life*. The combination of perspectives reveals, again, how complex and rewarding the field of design can be.

Richard Buchanan  
Dennis Doordan  
Victor Margolin