Since the mid-1950s, Tomás Maldonado has been a pioneer in the development of a new way of understanding the purpose, the contexts, the methods, the interdisciplinary supports, and the means of design. With his passing on Monday, November 26, 2018, the design community lost not only a friend and an articulate and erudite advocate, but also a symbol of a way of life, dedicated to satisfying an endless thirst for knowledge. He was a protagonist of an important moment in the history of design and design education in the twentieth century—a moment of reflection that lasted all his life, and that was as necessary in the 1950s as it is today.

The Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung/HfG) curriculum, to which Maldonado had contributed, quickly spread internationally, affecting programs in countries as distant as Argentina, India, Japan, and Mexico. Initially hired as an instructor by Max Bill in 1954 to teach the basic course, Maldonado became a member of the governing board of the Ulm School in 1956, with Otl Aicher and Hans Gugelot, after strong disagreements led to Bill’s departure.¹ The three new leaders were motivated by their realization of the need to extend the design curriculum to integrate human and social sciences, ergonomics, operational research, planning methodology, and industrial technology,² as well as philosophy, and they promoted the development of design from objects to systems.

Maldonado was an exceptional man, able to see and articulate the connections between the most disparate things. This ability is exemplified in his article, published in Design Issues, on Daniel Defoe. In it, Maldonado analyzes the opposite notions of designing for the individual and designing for society in the writings of Defoe and examines the connections between Defoe’s thinking and the emerging utilitarianism.³ The common thread in both approaches, as Maldonado says, is the “[h]uman’s capacity to project.”⁴

At almost 90 years of age, he delivered a three-hour lecture at the IUAV (Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia) without notes, in a seamless delivery of dense content, without a moment of distraction or diversion. After the lecture, he was asked

1 Hatje Cantz, Ulmer Modelle/Modele Nach Ulm (Ulm, Germany: Ulmer Museum/hfg Archiv, 2003), 39.
4 Ibid., 78.

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what he considered to be his major character trait, and after a second of reflection, he replied, “to be always vigilant.” He was a tireless observer and analyzer, evaluating all that he saw and taking notes and writing down reflections about everything. His colleagues recall seeing that, even in his twenties—during his time as an abstract painter in Buenos Aires—he always walked around with a small black notebook, in which he did his note-taking.

In addition to being a constantly alert observer and thinker, an innovating educator, and a tireless worker, he also had a witty sense of humor, was great at conversation, and was always able to add salt and pepper to any gathering. He was a generous friend and a committed gourmand, and he was able to read entire libraries throughout a life in which he slept only four hours per night.

His extensive personal library was proof of his wide range of interests; it included books in German, Italian, English, Spanish, and French languages, in which he was fluent. He was the pusher of multidisciplinary and philosophical approaches at the Ulm School of Design, establishing working connections with the Frankfurt School and with many international avant-garde thinkers of the time, including Max Bense, Horst Rittel (who is credited with coining the term, “wicked problems”), and Abraham Moles, who eventually became a professor at the HfG Ulm.

Not only was Maldonado a strong advocate for the need to explain the reasons why technical, economic, and cultural decisions were made in design; he was also a pioneer in environmental conservation and the role of design in it. La Speranza Progettuale [The Planning Hope], published in English as Design, Nature and Revolution, came out in 1970, one year before Victor Papanek’s Design for the Real World and two years before “The Limits to Growth, commisioned by the Club of Rome. In his book Maldonado faces both the potential of design as a way to work toward environmental conservation and the lack of support of the centers of political and economic power. We see the same resistance happening now, with the famous Paris Agreement, by which not even Canada is willing to abide. Maldonado writes that “[i]n fact, the more I advanced in the knowledge of the current methodological techniques, the more evident was the contradiction between the relative maturity of these sophisticated techniques and the absolute immaturity of the centers of decision-making power of our society to make a reasonable use of them.”

Maldonado touched the life of many people, first in Buenos Aires as a painter and later in the Ulm Design School as a visionary design educator, then even later at the University of Bologna, as a philosopher, and finally in the Milan Polytechnic, again as a design educator.
educator. He also reached people far and wide with his many publications covering design, technology, culture, cognition, education, and environmental conservation, among other topics.

Those of us who advocate for design as a motor for social and cultural development will miss him. The thrust for a responsible design practice—an interdisciplinary one, conscious of contexts and embracing a wide spectrum of knowledge—for which he long fought has lost a champion. We are fortunate to have had him to guide this effort for so many years. His perspective is as necessary to the discourse of today as it was in the 1950s.

Maldonado wrote in 1958: “The designer will be the coordinator. His responsibility will be to coordinate, in close collaboration with a large number of specialists, the most varied requirements of product fabrication and usage; his will be the final responsibility for maximum productivity in fabrication, and for maximum material and cultural consumer satisfaction.”

Referring to the Ulm School, he wrote in 1987: What must be remembered is not only the limitless curiosity that we had in those years about anything that was—or seemed—new. That was a feverish, insatiable curiosity directed above all at the new disciplines that were coming up: cybernetics, information theory, systems theory, semiotics, ergonomics. But our curiosity went further than this: it also extended, in no small measure, to established disciplines, such as the philosophy of science and mathematical logic.

The mainspring of all that curiosity, our reading and our theoretical work, was our determination to find a solid methodological basis for the work of design.

Against the intellectually lazy, amateur designers—who would like to have methods that can be mechanically applied—he articulates the need for more expansive understandings of the task at hand: In the near future we will have to revise our position, not only our position, however, but our methods too: that is, we must develop our specific working methods adjusting them to the specific types of problems that we shall have to solve. Thus we can successfully face the task entrusted to us by society: the reconstruction of human environment in the new era of scientific humanism. This will mean overcoming the contradiction between theory and practice, between knowledge and action, between consciousness and reality, between freedom and necessity.
Closing his famous paper, delivered at the Brussels 1958 EXPO, Maldonado insisted that Bauhaus could not be blamed for not being up-to-date with the educational avant-garde, he wrote:

We cannot criticize the Bauhaus on this score. These movements were the most advanced manifestations of educational thought at the time. It was a matter of opposition to philological and verbalist “neo-humanism,” to philosophical idealism, to the academic crystallization of education. It was a question of argumentative exaltation of expression, intuition, and action, above all of “learning by doing.” But this educational philosophy is in crisis. It is incapable of assimilating the new types of relations between theory and practice, engendered by the most recent scientific developments. We know now that theory must be impregnated with practice, practice with theory. It is impossible today to act without knowledge, or to know without doing.10

In the current discussion about PhDs in art and design, and the merit of practice-based PhDs, Maldonado quite clearly is taking a position. If he articulates anything as indispensable in a responsible practice of design, it is the need to understand that “it is impossible today to act without knowledge, or to know without doing.”

In his opening speech for the 1957–58 academic year, he refers again to the Bauhaus—in support of a particular educational attitude, but not using the specific tactics of the famous school:

To set out to continue the work of the Bauhaus, in any literal sense, would be trying to restore the past. The best of the former Bauhäusler will certainly agree that to continue the Bauhaus’s work means going, in a sense, against the Bauhaus. We adopt only its progressive, anticonventional attitude, the effort to contribute to society in the specific historical situation in which we find ourselves. In this sense, and in this sense only, we are continuing the work of the Bauhaus.11

Maldonado, as he described himself, was “always vigilant,” always aware of the contexts, never taking the easy road to apply any previously successful concept to a new situation. His texts about design are as current today as they were 60 years ago, pushing for an accountable design practice—one grounded in reality and based on extensive interdisciplinary collaboration. If his fundamental writings were mandatory reading in all design schools, the design community would have a more significant and positive role in contemporary life today.


11 Lindinger, Ulm Design, 22.