

# Introduction

In the middle decades of the twentieth century discussion in the design community sometimes turned to questions of national identity. Through the variety of practices and products available in the world, writers wondered if there was a national identity that distinguished, for example, work in the United Kingdom from Italy; or in the United States from Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden; or in Japan from Europe and the United States. The idea of national or regional identity was perhaps at odds with the idea of design as a universal art and discipline, but there were grounds enough to make the investigation worthwhile. Of course, the issues were somewhat obscured by the interplay of the practices of designing and the realities of business, the marketplace, and economic forces. Were all of those books on national design—still in our homes and office libraries—really about design or were they about the products of successful companies?

In this issue of the journal, our Guest Editors, Rosan Chow, Wolfgang Jonas and Felicidad Romero-Tejedor, explore a different version of the theme of national identity. They explore *design research*, placed in the national context of Germany. Their thesis is that following the closure of the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm in 1968, design research in Germany became a pluralistic enterprise, guided by individuals from many disciplines, representing not a single perspective but many perspectives, and, hence, without a single school of design research. Whether this is unique or special in the context of Germany rather than common among many other countries as well, due to the growing influence of design and the recognition of its importance among intellectuals in a wider and wider variety of disciplines, the approach in this special issue of *Design Issues* offers an important opportunity to consider the variety of design research in German today.

One of the distinctive features of the HfG Ulm School was an effort to redefine the terms of the new industrial culture that slowly began to emerge following the Second World War. As Tomás Maldonado wrote, “The HfG we are building in Ulm intends to redefine the terms of the new culture. Unlike Moholy-Nagy in Chicago, it does not merely want to form men who would be about to create and express themselves. The school at Ulm . . . wants to indicate what the social goal of this creativity should be; in other words, which forms deserve to be created and which do not.”

(Quoted in Kenneth Frampton, "Apropos Ulm: Curriculum and Critical Theory," *Opposition*, No. 3, 1973.) To this end, Maldonado and other leaders at HfG Ulm invited individuals from a wide variety of disciplines and political persuasions, setting the ground for a questioning or skeptical dialectic that persists to this day, as revealed in the essays of this special issue.

Over the years, *Design Issues* has published many articles that focus on or deliberately reflect a particular nation or region. However, one of the most interesting and influential efforts to represent different countries and regions was a Special Issue on "Design in Asia and Australia" (*Design Issues* Vol. VI, No. 1, Fall 1989). At the time, the region was virtually ignored in the design literature—as were many other countries and regions, as the Editors of *Design Issues* noted in their Introduction to the special issue. Since that time, the journal has received and published important work from many of the previously neglected areas, demonstrating that design and design research is now alive and well throughout the world. So, it is with pleasure that we return in this special issue to "Design Research in Germany?"

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