Introduction

It is now widely accepted that the potential for design and the methods for its practice are changing rapidly. Product design and graphic design as we have known them are still common, but they are complemented by many other options—some made feasible by new client demands and others still simply imaginative possibilities for which no economic base has yet been identified.

For some organizations, the term “innovation” has replaced “design” or has at least become its complement. As Marzia Mortati argues in her article, “A Framework for Design Innovation: Present and Future Discussions,” innovation is now a term that denotes a need for constant change in order to adapt to shifting social and economic conditions, noting that governments as well as companies have taken it up.

Mortati’s delineation of an innovation framework is complemented by “The Open Paradigm in Design Research,” by Tanja Aitamurto, Dónal Holland, and Sofia Hussain. They too espouse innovation but emphasize the innovative process of open design. By this, they mean sharing information and participating in product development. They seek to expand the definition of open design from the conventional understanding of free-user access to a production process that may involve multiple actors. They cite such practices as co-design and participant design, but then they couple these with sharing design information such as computer code. They define open innovation as the use of “purposive inflows and outflows of knowledge” to facilitate and expand the innovation process. Their three layers of open design move from gathering information about the design task by observing user behavior to interacting with users and co-designers and sharing technical details of design projects with the public. The participatory innovation process that the authors describe has the potential to radically change the way that products are made and distributed as well as the methods of determining who owns them.

Tau Ulv Lenskjold, Sissel Olander, and Joachim Halse offer two case studies of how to involve participants in a design process. They are particularly interested in design activism and explore ways to collaborate with community residents in several design projects. The authors employ a concept they call “minor design activism,” which challenges “attempts to stabilize the initial design program
around already unified agendas.” In the two case studies—one to increase user involvement in a Copenhagen public library and the other to improve the handling of waste in municipal housing estates—they show how novel techniques of involving people in the design process can be effective.

Hyunjoo Lee is also interested in the ways non-designers can become involved in design processes, but she approaches the topic from the perspective of how a project manager with considerable authority might also function as a designer. Lee calls this process “silent design,” by which she means engaging in design decisions as part of a larger management brief. For example, she describes Massimiliano Gioni’s managerial process as curator of the 2010 Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, which included his engagement in many aspects of the exhibition and graphic design programs and ranged from organizing the art work in exhibit spaces to considering the entire graphic identity program for the Biennale.

For all designers, no matter what methods or processes they use, values are essential. Nassim JafariNaimi, Lisa Nathan, and Ian Hargraves take on this crucial topic in their article “Values as Hypotheses: Design, Inquiry, and the Service of Values.” They refute the separation of values and action, arguing instead that values are to be discovered and affirmed within action. Following philosopher John Dewey’s ideas, the authors posit that values are hypothetical until they are confirmed through activity. They refute the belief that moral values are either unchangeable truths or “local expressions of individual and group preferences,” favoring instead a philosophy of plurality that lets values emerge from pragmatic encounters with situations. Their approach is an extremely helpful response to the sticky question of whether values that are pre-ordained and fixed can be integrated into design practice.

Evan Barba takes on a topic that is historically rooted—the relation between design theory and practical craftsmanship. Barba notes that the separation of the two has a long trajectory, but he argues that learning that involves the connection of the head and the hands offers “mutual reinforcement that is greater than either alone.” Central to his historical excursus is the debate between two leading African-American educators, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, on how best to achieve equality for the freed slaves. Washington believed that technical and vocational skills training could help any of his students get work, whereas DuBois thought that it was necessary to educate an elite class of black citizens (the “talented tenth”) who would then inspire future generations. However, Barba concludes that a curriculum that combines the head and the hands should help students find common elements in all forms of work and provide them with more flexibility as they follow their own career paths.
Though Craig Eliason’s article “‘Transitional’ Typefaces: The History of a Classification” is about objects rather than processes or practices, he engages in a similar act of criticizing categories as does Evan Barba. Eliason’s concern is with the category of “transitional” typefaces, which he believes wrongly characterizes the lineage of types that moves from Caslon—designated as “Oldstyle”—to Bodoni, which is considered as “Modern.” According to Eliason’s research, there is no validity to the “Transitional” category, despite the fact that it has thrived since the 1920s through the influence of type historian Daniel Berkeley Updike.

A principal way that design changes is through research, particularly by exploring and evaluating new forms of practice and considering new applications for existing ones. Dorthe Thorning Mejlhede describes a model for establishing a national design research program in Denmark and shows how design research developed over a ten-year period. She points out the challenge of defining design broadly yet also separating it from other areas of research. The process also involved coordination among the Danish design schools along with other higher-education institutions that engaged in research. As design research becomes recognized as an important part of design pedagogy, it is important to have national case studies such as the one Dorthe Thorning Mejlhede describes.

The issue concludes with Matt Soar’s review of Alice Rawsthorn’s book Hello World: Where Design Meets Life. Soar acknowledges Rawsthorn’s broad interest in all forms of design but believes the author could have gone deeper to explore design’s meaning in the contemporary world.

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