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Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios en Diseño y Comunicación [Ensayos]

Interpretando el pensamiento de diseño del siglo XXI

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PARSONS THE NEW SCHOOL FOR DESIGN

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Interpreting XXI century design thinking. Introduction

Steven Faerm *

Summary: It seems that everything around us is becoming more and more extreme. The once dominant and prevalent “middle-ground” is being absorbed by two opposite axes, thus creating vastly contrarian situations and experiences in our communities. Societies and cultures are increasingly gravitating towards all aspects that are bigger/smaller, faster/slower, simple/complex, austere/luxurious, technological/natural, private/public.

Due to the growing extreme environment, a breaking point is being faced by many around the world –particularly in the U.S.– in several areas. The fragile environment, economic inequality, increasingly intrusive technology, and the tenuous future of design education are experiencing divergent crossroads that require immediate address; society must either adopt radical change or be faced with dire consequences. If we are to reign-in the growing extremities, a middle-ground that is *more* desired by the populace must be proposed for widespread adoption.

It is with this need to raise awareness, demonstrate through provided example, and expand the necessary dialog that the seven American authors of this Journal present their papers examining the future of design and our broader communities.

Key words: design - extreme - environment - growth - awareness - consumer - design teaching.

[Summaries in spanish and portuguese at pages 151-152]

(*) Associate Professor, The School of Fashion, Parsons The New School for Design.

Extreme New Worlds

It seems that everything around us is becoming more and more extreme. The once dominant and prevalent “middle-ground” is being absorbed by two opposite axes, thus creating vastly contrarian situations and experiences in our communities. Societies and cultures are increasingly gravitating towards all aspects that are bigger/smaller, faster/slower, simple/complex, austere/luxurious, technological/natural, private/public. This predilection to all that is extreme and at opposite spectrums was recently shown at a Trend Union forecast presentation: “Glamping” –or, glamorous camping– is predicted

to be a future trend for those seeking rustic vacations that provide deeper and more contemplative connections to nature, albeit with a martini in hand.

These opposite axes are particularly salient when considering the current American population. Today's martini lifestyle and the nation's 1% contrasts greatly with the widening demographic that is challenged to make ends meet. In New York City, the city's workforce appears to be working longer and harder, making *time* the most in-demand and fleeting commodity. The middle-class population that works two jobs to make ends meet is increasing, while America's top earners are making the acquisition of second (or third) homes a normative lifestyle. However, regardless of one's socio-economic strata, such traditional concepts of time as the 40-hour workweek are fading in virtually all professions; corporations want to do more (with less human resources) and struggle to sustain business practices (in ever-expanding, competitive global economies) in our post-recession economy.

In the contemporary design industries –and particularly in the realm of fast-fashion– global competition is leading to ceaseless consumer demands, accelerated production, decreased quality, lowered prices, and unprecedented consumption. The realities of globalization and bottom-barrel pricing enable shoppers to consume like never before. Author Annie Leonard underscores our excessive lifestyles in her book *The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing Our Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health –and A Vision for the Change* (2010); globally, personal consumption topped \$24 trillion in 2005, up from 4.8 trillion in 1960. This results in the earth now taking one year and five months (or very nearly five) to regenerate what we use in a year. The rift between the haves and have-nots is further exemplified by the \$19 billion that could eliminate hunger versus the \$17 billion spent on pet food in the U.S. and Europe combined. In January 2014, Oxfam released a report citing the world's 85 richest individuals own the wealth of half the world's population. With such inequities, the fabric of social stability and equality is at risk. These “elephant balancing on a toothpick” scenarios serve to highlight our increasingly extreme world, even if it isn't tangible for most of us –yet.

Due to the growing extreme environment, a breaking point is being faced by many around the world –particularly in the U.S.– in several areas. The fragile environment, economic inequality, increasingly intrusive technology, and the tenuous future of design education are experiencing divergent crossroads that require immediate address; society must either adopt radical change or be faced with dire consequences. If we are to reign-in the growing extremities, a middle-ground that is *more* desired by the populace must be proposed for widespread adoption.

It is with this need to raise awareness, demonstrate through provided example, and expand the necessary dialog that the authors present their papers. Prior to submission, the coordinators at Parsons and The University of Palermo posed questions to the authors regarding the future of design and our broader communities. Each authors was asked to consider adopting the following “lenses” when preparing their paper's theme and Abstract:

- What is the *experience* –current & future– consumers seek from design? Why?
- How will people experience design differently? Are there new, emerging demands? Will these be increasingly tangible or non-tangible?

- What do people want to *feel* through the design they engage with? How? Why?
- How are these impacting design through physical, visual, and emotional attributes? How will future design define the world sociologically, anthropologically, and economically?
- How is this evolving the designer's role, who they are, and how they create?
- How can this evolution be contextualized?
- What new systems and aesthetics are emerging as a result of these two axes?

The Articles

Aaron Fry in The School of Design Strategies (SDS) and **Steven Faerm** in The School of Fashion (SoF) present a co-authored paper that examines the increasing disparities in both income and net wealth that have been rapidly escalating in the U.S. since the 1970s. Over this period of time, the wages of lower and middle income Americans have grown at a slower rate than the GDP growth of the country as a whole, and at a much slower rate than incomes of the top 1% of earners. This latter disparity has widened dramatically in the years following the recession of 2008. It is in this extreme economic environment that the authors position their article. Despite this widening gap of income inequality, American consumers, in all income groups, own more possessions than ever before. Consumption is at an all-time high. The authors discuss the psychological effects of consumer access to well-designed, affordable mass-market luxury products. The article examines four dimensions of luxury perception in the context of the two different luxury brands of Michael Kors and Everlane. The article proposes that the increased purchasing power that the American consumer currently enjoys is a factor that may offset or cushion adverse social and political effects of income stagnation and economic stress.

David Carroll in The School of Arts, Media, and Technology (AMT) investigates a new, radical form of technology that may have tremendous impact on our future societies. Google Glass, not yet widely available at the time of the paper's writing, is a truly novel product. Currently, only select "curated" purchasers are engaged by Google to own and test-pilot the glasses. The headset, as Carroll writes, is "a clear attempt to start normalizing the idea of wearing a computer on your face". Having been chosen by Google as one of the purchasers, Carroll writes about his use of the product and the subsequent reactions of those observing him in public environments. What follows is a study in surveillance, a redefinition of what is public and private, and contemporary society's comfort/discomfort with the increasingly blurred boundaries of daily life and technology. The Google Glass uniquely contextualizes the journal's theme of extremities through a new lifestyle that is emerging, in this case a "tech-life" that blurs the boundaries between the public/private, and personal/professional. What was once intrusive may now being adopted as normative aspects of life and living.

Karina Nobbs at The London College of Fashion and **Gretchen Harnick** in The Parsons School of Fashion (SoF) present a paper that furthers the discussion around our use of technology, and how technological platforms are radically altering the fashion marketing landscape. The rise of social media has allowed consumers to engage with brands on a far greater personal level. In their article, Nobbs and Harnick examine why fashion brands

are using this platform, and how they are doing so with diverse outcomes. Through the case studies of Burberry, ModCloth, and Next, the authors detail subsequent benefits and challenges these diverse brands experience as they expand their social customer service (SCS) presence for an increasingly targeted online consumer. Fashion companies deliver such personalized attention through social media that, for the majority of brands, it has become a highly sought after service by their customers. With the increasingly democratized fashion and online communities, brands are recognizing that “the customers [cannot be seen as] a generic clump of the masses, but as individuals with a desire to feel special”. From macro-to-micro fashion brands, and their consumers, are navigating the two extreme contexts of connecting to the masses online while simultaneously striving to offer highly personalized experiences.

Steven Faerm in The School of Fashion (SoF) builds upon his previous paper for *Cuaderno*, “From Classroom to Design Room: The Transitional Experience of the Fashion Design Graduate”. Using this initial exploration into the future of fashion design education for context, this second article discusses the importance of providing faculty in fashion design higher education with advanced pedagogical training. Historically, universities have adopted a “sink or swim” approach with their hiring of art and design faculty. Yet, as American fashion design education undergoes seismic shifts –moving from a primarily vocational model into one that emphasizes sophisticated theories and design processes– faculty will be required to replace their long held teaching methods with new, advanced pedagogies. To negate this need, thereby devaluing the importance of pedagogical preparation, will have serious consequences on faculty, students’ learning, the broader academy, graduate preparedness, and the future American fashion industry. The author examines the three nations of Finland, South Korea, and Singapore, each with highly advanced and successful teacher training programs and student success rankings, in hopes that American fashion design education may devote far greater attention to this pressing matter.

Jeffrey Lieber in The School of Art, Design, History, and Theory (ADHT) presents an essay that addresses questions of society’s experience in design. Using Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (1958) as a theoretical framework, the author raises questions about the hegemony of science and technology in design discourses today. As examined in the other papers, a new extreme lifestyle is being created. The author states: “We no longer talk with each other in the sense Arendt describes, rather we text, tweet, and leave comments; we have an entirely new technological lexicon developed by and for these devices [and] for every human feeling and experience”. Our language –and the very strands of communication that connect individuals to one another– are being redefined and subsequently adopted across communities. Some believe Arendt’s prediction of “a world where speech has lost its power” and people evolve into “thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible” has become our 21st century reality. Lieber brings Arendt’s study of these dilemmas to bear on the history of modern architecture; her analysis of the social realm –and the effect technology has on atomizing people and communities– is applied to the field of architecture and the work of Louis Kahn and Paul Rudolph.

In “Veils and Velocities”, his previous article for *Cuaderno 48*, **Robert Kirkbride** in The School of Constructed Environments (SCE) explored the relationship between decorum

and identity, and the capacity for ornamentation to convey stories over time. The author also discussed that while sustainable solutions often focus on the *downstream* byproducts of production, effective solutions can be created through analyses of the *upstream* origins. For this current issue, the author expands this subplot of “upstreaming” by illustrating several contemporary examples. These include a land planning project that experienced tremendous flooding when a river overflowed during torrential rainstorms; in order to advance the project forward, the author went backward and walked upstream to assess the causes and develop solutions. Other examples of upstreaming are provided, such as a design for temporary housing in Sweden, the rebuilding of a community pavilion in Margaretville, New York, and a Parsons catered event whereby attendees were made aware of the origins of the accoutrements not normally considered in such a detailed way; the event included a 24-hour workshop that examined how infrastructures equip or hinder our minds and sustainable behaviors. This paper furthers the conversation around opposite extremes (in this case up –and down– stream analyses) and how immersion in *both* are critical for future successes.

Parsons The New School for Design

As a leader in art and design education, Parsons the New School for Design in New York City is questioning the future role of the designer and associated industries through ongoing conversations and evolving academic philosophies. Parsons contains five Schools: The School of Fashion (SoF); The School of Constructed Environments (SCE); The School of Art, Design, History, and Theory (ADHT); The School of Arts, Media, and Technology (AMT); and The School of Design Strategies (SDS). Within each School, graduate and undergraduate programs house disciplines that relate to one another. For example, in AMT, the programs of Fine Arts and Illustration are contained, SCE offers graduate and undergraduate degrees in Architecture and Interior Design, and SoF offers programs in Fashion Design and Fashion Marketing. While these Schools offer students their own areas of study, broader philosophies in art and design education are influencing their programs’ academic framework and curricula in order to contextualize each student’s area of study; the importance for this breadth (and depth) has even led to the creation of a graduate-level interdisciplinary program and undergraduate course pathways that allow students to experience multiple Schools, thus supporting the belief that “design thinking” and cross-disciplinary partnerships may reshape design education and practice.

Resumen: Pareciera que todo lo que nos rodea es cada vez más extremo. El otrora dominante y prevaleciente “punto de convergencia”, está siendo absorbido por dos ejes opuestos, creando así experiencias y situaciones muy contrarias en nuestras comunidades. Las sociedades y las culturas están gravitando, cada vez más, y en todos los aspectos, en términos de más grande/más pequeño, más rápido/más lento, simple/complejo, austero/ostentoso, tecnológico/natural, privado/público.

En este creciente entorno extremista, muchas personas en todo el mundo –en diferentes ámbitos– están enfrentando un punto de ruptura, especialmente en los Estados Unidos. El frágil entorno, la desigualdad económica, la tecnología cada vez más intrusiva, y el aún tenue futuro de la educación en diseño están experimentando encrucijadas divergentes que requieren ser direccionadas en forma inmediata; la sociedad debe adoptar un cambio radical o enfrentará graves consecuencias. Si nos proponemos prevalecer entre estos extremos en crecimiento, debe proponerse un punto medio que resulte deseable para la sociedad y sea adoptado en forma generalizada. Es con esta necesidad de crear conciencia, comprobar a través de ejemplos, y ampliar el necesario diálogo, que los siete autores norteamericanos que participan de este Cuaderno presentan sus trabajos abordando el futuro del diseño y de nuestras comunidades.

Palabras clave: diseño - extremo - entorno - crecimiento - consumidor - concientización - enseñanza del diseño.

Resumo: Parece que tudo o que nos rodeia é cada vez mais extremo. O outrora dominante e prevalecente “ponto de convergência” está sendo absorvido por dois eixos opostos, criando assim experiências e situações muito contrárias nossas comunidades. As sociedades e as culturas estão gravitando, cada vez mais, e em todos os aspectos, em termos de maior/menor, mais rápido/mais lento, simples/complexo, austero/ostentoso, tecnológico/natural, privado/público.

Neste crescente entorno extremista, muitas pessoas em todo o mundo, em diferentes âmbitos, estão enfrentando um ponto de ruptura, especialmente nos Estados Unidos, O entorno frágil, a desigualdade econômica, a tecnologia cada vez mais intrusiva, e o ainda tênue futuro da educação em design estão experimentando encruzilhadas divergentes que requerem ser direccionadas imediatamente; a sociedade deve adotar uma mudança radical ou enfrentará graves conseqüências. Se a proposta é prevalecer entre estes extremos em crescimento, deve se propor um ponto médio que seja desejável para a sociedade e seja adotado em forma generalizada. É com esta necessidade de criar consciência, comprovar através de exemplos, e ampliar o necessário diálogo, que os sete autores norte-americanos que participam deste Caderno apresentam seus trabalhos abordando o futuro do design e de nossas comunidades.

Palavras chave: design - extremo - entorno - crescimento - consumidor - conscientização - ensino do design.
