

THE DESIGN OBSERVER GROUP**POSTED 11.03.08****Andrew Blauvelt**

Towards Relational Design



Bionic Hamster, using the iRobot Create kit, c. 2006

Is there an overarching philosophy that can connect projects from such diverse fields as architecture, graphic and product design? Or are we beyond such pronouncements? Should we even expect such grand narratives anymore?

I've spent more time in the field of graphic design, and within that one discipline it is extremely difficult to pinpoint coherent sets of ideas or beliefs guiding recent work — certainly nothing as definitive as in previous decades, whether the mannerisms of so-called grunge typography, the gloss of a term such as postmodernism, or even the reactionary label of neo-modernism. After looking at a variety of projects across the design fields [and lecturing on the topic](#), new patterns do emerge. Some of the most interesting work today is not reducible to the same polemic of form and counter-form, action and reaction,

which has become the predictable basis for most on-going debates for decades. Instead, we are in the midst of a much larger paradigm shift across all design disciplines, one that is uneven in its development, but is potentially more transformative than previous *isms*, or micro-historic trends, would indicate. More specifically, I believe we are in the third major phase of modern design history: an era of relationally-based, contextually-specific design.

The first phase of modern design, born in the early twentieth century, was a search for a language of form that was plastic or mutable, a visual syntax that could be learned and thus disseminated rationally and potentially universally. This phase witnessed a succession of “isms” — Suprematism, Futurism, Constructivism, *de Stijl*, *ad infinitum* — that inevitably fused the notion of an avant-garde as synonymous with formal innovation itself. Indeed, it is this inheritance of modernism that allows us to speak of a “visual language” of design at all. The values of simplification, reduction, and essentialism determine the direction of most abstract, formal design languages. One can trace this evolution from the early Russian Constructivists’ belief in a universal language of form that could transcend class and social differences (literate versus oral culture) to the abstracted logotypes of the 1960s and 1970s that could help bridge the cultural divides of transnational corporations: from El Lissitzky’s [“Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge”](#) poster to the perfect union of syntactic and semantic form in Target’s bullseye logo.

The second wave of design, born in the 1960s, focused on design’s meaning-making potential, its symbolic value, its semantic dimension and narrative potential, and thus was preoccupied with its essential content. This wave continued in different ways for several decades, reaching its apogee in graphic design in the 1980s and early 1990s, with the ultimate claim of “authorship” by designers (i.e., controlling content and thus form), and in theories about product semantics, which sought to embody in their forms the functional and cultural symbolism of objects and their forms. Architects such as [Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour](#)’s famous content analysis of the vernacular commercial strip of [Las Vegas](#) or the meaning-making exercises of the design work coming out of Cranbrook Academy of Art in the 1980s are emblematic. Importantly, in this phase of design, the making of meaning was still located with the designer, although much discussion took place about a reader’s multiple interpretations. In the end though, meaning was still a “gift” presented by designers-as-authors to their audiences. If in the first phase form begets form, then in this second phase, injecting content into the

equation produced new forms. Or, as philosopher Henri Lefebvre once said, “Surely there comes a moment when formalism is exhausted, when only a new injection of content into form can destroy it and so open up the way to innovation.” To paraphrase Lefebvre, only a new injection of context into the form-content equation can destroy it, thus opening new paths to innovation.

The third wave of design began in the mid-1990s and explores design’s performative dimension: its effects on users, its pragmatic and programmatic constraints, its rhetorical impact, and its ability to facilitate social interactions. Like many things that emerged in the 1990s, it was tightly linked to digital technologies, even inspired by its metaphors (e.g., social networking, open source collaboration, interactivity), but not limited only to the world of zeroes and ones. This phase both follows and departs from twentieth-century experiments in form and content, which have traditionally defined the spheres of avant-garde practice. However, the new practices of relational design include performative, pragmatic, programmatic, process-oriented, open-ended, experiential and participatory elements. This new phase is preoccupied with design’s effects — extending beyond the design object and even its connotations and cultural symbolism.

We might chart the movement of these three phases of design, in linguistic terms, as moving from form to content to context; or, in the parlance of semiotics, from syntax to semantics to pragmatics. This outward expansion of ideas moves, like ripples on a pond, from the formal logic of the designed object, to the symbolic or cultural logic of the meanings such forms evoke, and finally to the programmatic logic of both design’s production and the sites of its consumption — the messy reality of its ultimate context.

Design, because of its functional intentions, has always had a relational dimension. In other words, all forms of design produce effects, some small, some large. But what is different about this phase of design is the primary role that has been given to areas that once seemed beyond the purview of design’s form and content equation. For example, the imagined and often idealized audience becomes an actual user(s) — the so-called “market of one” promised by mass customization and print-on-demand; or perhaps the “end-user” becomes the designer themselves, through do-it-yourself projects, the creative hacking of existing designs, or by “crowdsourcing,” producing with like-minded peers to solve problems previously too complex or expensive to solve in conventional ways. This is the promise that *Time* magazine made when it named you (a nosism, like the royal we) person of the year in 2006, even as it

evoked the emerging dominance of sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Wikipedia, Ebay, Amazon, Flickr and YouTube, or anticipated the business model of Threadless. The participation of the user in the creation of the design can be seen in the numerous do-it-yourself projects in magazines such as *Craft*, *Make* and *Readymade*, but they can also be seen in the generic formats for advertisements and greeting cards by [Daniel Eatock](#).

Even in most instrumental forms of design, the audience has changed from the clichéd focus group sequestered in a room answering questions for people hiding behind two-way mirrors to the subjects of dogged ethnographic research, observed in their natural surroundings — moving away from the idealized concept of use toward the complex reality of behavior. Today, the audience is thought of as a social being, one who is exhaustively data-mined and geo-demographically profiled — taking us from the idea of an average or composite consumer to an individual purchaser among others living a similar social lifestyle community. But unlike previous experiments in 1970s-style community-based design or behavioral modification, today's relationship to the user is more nuanced and complicated. The range of practices varies greatly, from the product development methods employed by practices such as [IDEO](#), creators of the famed *Nightline shopping cart*, to the "social probes[,]” of [Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby](#) who create designed objects, not to fulfill prescribed functions but instead use them to gauge behavioral reactions to the perceived effects of electromagnetic energy or the ethical dilemmas of gene testing and restorative therapies.

Once shunned or reluctantly tolerated, constraints — financial, aesthetic, social, or otherwise — are frequently embraced not as limits to personal expression or professional freedom, but rather as opportunities to guide the development of designs; arbitrary variables in the equation that can alter the course of a design's development. Seen as a good thing, such restrictions inject outside influence into an otherwise idealized process and, for some, a certain element of unpredictability and even randomness alters the course of events. Embracing constraints — whether strictly applying existing zoning codes as a way to literally shape a building or an *ethos* of material efficiency embodied in print-on-demand — as creative forces, not obstacles on the path of design, further opens the design process demanding ever-more nimble, agile and responsive systems. This is not to suggest that design is not always already constrained by numerous factors beyond its control, but rather that such encumbrances can be viewed productively as affordances. In architecture, the discourse has shifted from the purity and organizational

control of space to the inhabitation of real places — the messy realities of actual lives, living patterns over time, programmatic contradictions, zoning restrictions, and social, not simply physical, sites. For instance, architect [Teddy Cruz](#) in his [Manufactured Sites project](#), offers a simple, prefabricated steel framework for use in the shantytowns on the outskirts of Tijuana — a structure that participates in the vernacular building practices that imports and recycles the detritus of Southern California's dismantled suburbia. This provisional gesture integrates itself into the existing conditions of an architecture born out of crisis. The objective is not the utopian *tabula rasa* of architectural modernism — a replacement of the *favela* — but rather the interjection of a micro-utopian element into the mix.

Not surprisingly, the very nature of design and the traditional roles of the designer and consumer have shifted dramatically. In the 1980s, the desktop publishing revolution threatened to make every computer user a designer, but in reality it served to expand the role of the designer as author and publisher. The real "threat" arrived with the advent of Web 2.0 and the social networking and mass collaborative sites that it has engendered. Just as the role of the user has expanded and even encompasses the role of the traditional designer at times (in the guise of futurist [Alvin Toffler](#)'s prophetic "prosumer"), the nature of design itself has broadened from giving form to discrete objects to the creation of systems and more open-ended frameworks for engagement: designs for making designs. Yesterday's designer was closely linked with the command-control vision of the engineer, but today's designer is closer to the if-then approach of the programmer. It is this programmatic or social logic that holds sway in relational design, eclipsing the cultural and symbolic logic of content-based design and the aesthetic and formal logic of modernism's initial phase. Relational design is obsessed with processes and systems to generate designs, which do not follow the same linear, cybernetic logic of yesteryear. For instance, the typographic logic of the Univers family of fonts, established a predictive system and closed set of varying typeface weights. By contrast, a Web-based application for Twin, a typeface by [Lettererror](#), can alter its appearance incrementally based on such seemingly arbitrary factors as air temperature or wind speed. In a recent design for a new graphic design museum in the Netherlands, [Lust](#) created a digital, automated "posterwall," feed by information streams from various Internet sources and governed by algorithms designed to produce 600 posters a day.

Perhaps the best illustration of this movement toward relational design can be gleaned through the prosaic vacuum cleaner. In the realm of the syntactical

and formal, we have the [Dirt Devil Kone](#), designed by [Karim Rashid](#), a sleek conical object that looks so good it “can be left on display.” While the vacuum designs of [James Dyson](#) are rooted in a classic functionalist approach, the designs themselves embody the meaning of function, using color-coded segmentation of parts and even the expressive symbolism of a pivoting ball to connote a high-tech approach to domestic cleaning. On the other hand, the [Roomba](#), a robotic vacuum cleaner, uses various sensors and programming to establish its physical relationship to the room it cleans, forsaking any continuous contact with its human users, with only the occasional encounter with a house pet. In a display of advanced [product development](#), however, the company that makes the Roomba now offers a basic kit that can be modified by robot enthusiasts in numerous, unscripted ways, placing design and innovation in the hands of its customers.

If the first phase of design offered us infinite forms and the second phase variable interpretations — the injection of content to create new forms — then the third phase presents a multitude of contingent or conditional solutions: open-ended rather than closed systems; real world constraints and contexts over idealized utopias; relational connections instead of reflexive imbrication; in lieu of the forelorn designer, the possibility of many designers; the loss of designs that are highly controlled and prescribed and the ascendancy of enabling or generative systems; the end of discrete objects, hermetic meanings, and the beginning of connected ecologies.

After 100 years of experiments in form and content, design now explores the realm of context in all its manifestations — social, cultural, political, geographic, technological, philosophical, informatic, etc. Because the results of such work do not coalesce into a unified formal argument and because they defy conventional working models and processes, it may not be apparent that the diversity of forms and practices unleashed may determine the trajectory of design for the next century.

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Towards Relational Design

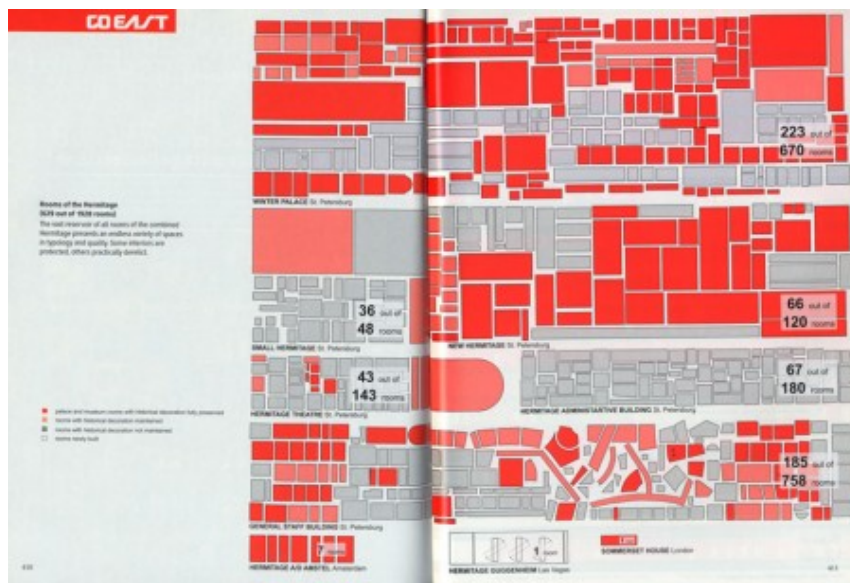
by **Andrew Blauvelt** at 12:27 pm 2008-11-10

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The following is extracted from a series of lectures about relational design practices. A related article can be found at [Design Observer](#).

A seemingly random selection of projects from various design fields with an underlying thread:



Rem Koolhaas/OMA, Hermitage Museum expansion plan, St. Petersburg, Russia, c. 2003.

An expansion strategy for the Hermitage Museum in Russia simply annexes the surrounding government-owned buildings in St. Petersburg, increasing the available space for objects from 629 to 1928 rooms.

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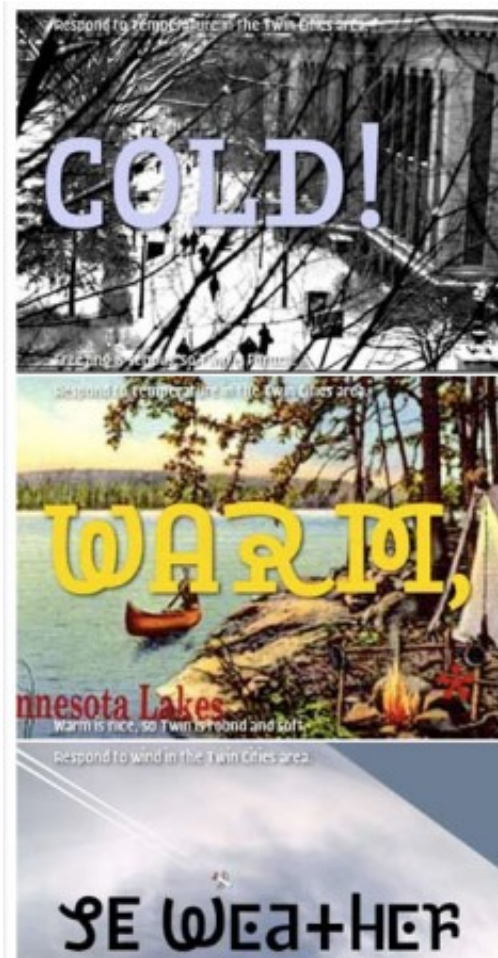
Nucleo, Terra: The Grass Arm-Chair, 2000

A chair made of grass must be grown and then trimmed and watered by its owner in order to remain functional.



Worldbike.org, Big Boda cargo bicycle, Kenya, 2002-2005.

A worldwide group of bicycle enthusiasts borrow the open source model for redesigning and modifying inexpensive passenger bikes for transporting cargo in developing countries.



LettError, Twin, typeface for the Twin Cities
commissioned by the Design Institute at the University
of Minnesota, 2003.

A typeface designed for a city alters its weight and appearance based on changes in the reported air temperature.



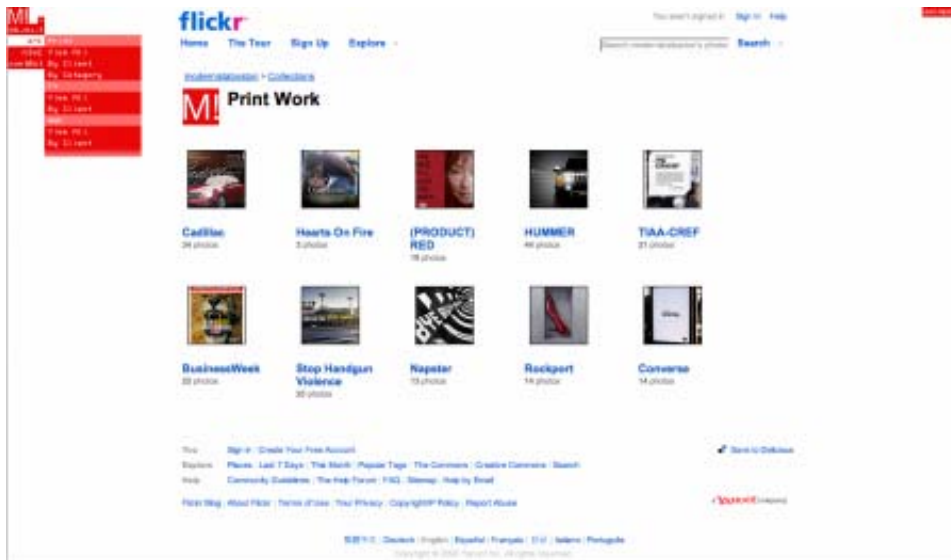
Shared Space concept in England, c. 2005, most likely by Ben Hamilton Baillie after Hans Monderman's schemes.

A Dutch city removes all of its traffic markings and signage in order to reduce collisions between motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians by increasing awareness among those sharing the roadway.



Diller, Scofidio + Renfro, Blur Building, Swiss Expo 2002

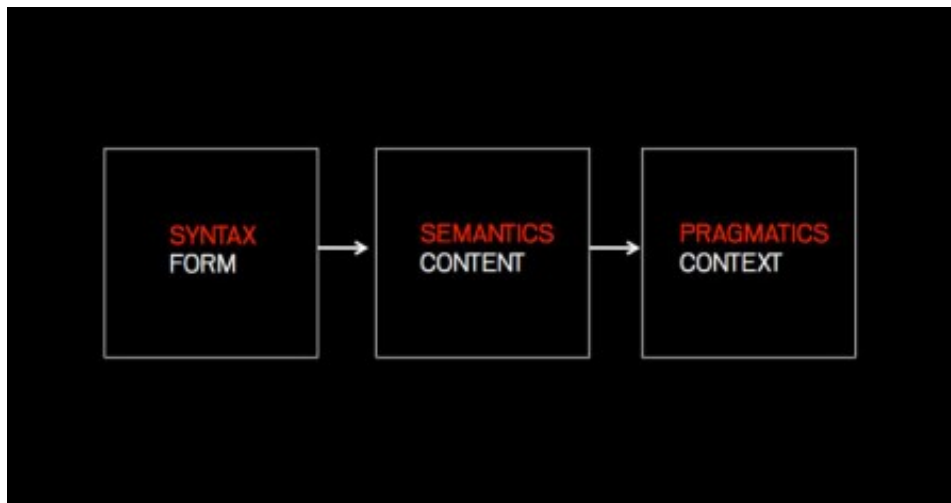
A pavilion on a lake containing thousands of jet nozzles adjusts to atmospheric conditions and dispenses a continuous mist around itself, the resulting fog both conceals and reveals the structure: a scaffolding with no "real" building.



Modernista! website, 2008

An advertising company launches its new “website,” which exists as a small navigation bar overlaid on any referencing page, directing users outward to preexisting forums such as Flickr and MySpace for much of its content.

THREE PHASES OF DESIGN



The history of modern design can be viewed in three successive phases, moving from form to content to context; or, in the parlance of semiotics, from syntax to semantics to pragmatics.

This third phase of design—which could go by several names including relational, contextual, and conditional design—follows and departs from twentieth-century experiments in both form and content, which have traditionally defined the spheres of avant-garde practice. Relational design is preoccupied with design’s effects, extending beyond the form of the design object and its attendant meanings and cultural symbolism. It is concerned with performance or use, not as the natural result of some intended functionality but rather in the realm of behavior and uncontrollable consequences. It embraces constraints and seeks systematic methodologies, as a way of countering the excessive subjectivity of most design decision-making. It explores more open-ended

processes that value the experiential and the participatory and often blur the distinctions between production and consumption.

Some examples of design as they move from form to content to context:

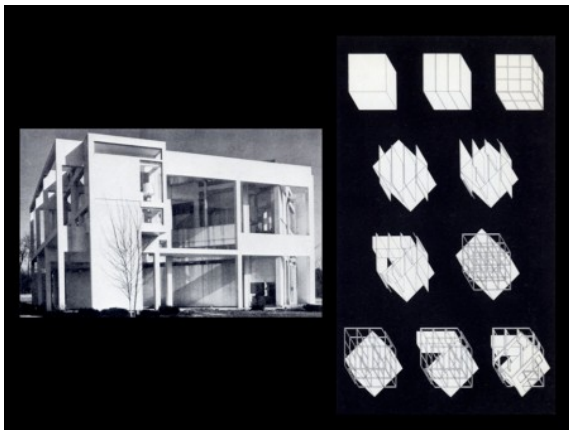


fig. 1

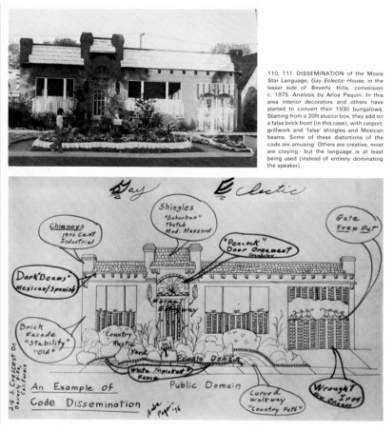


fig. 2



fig. 3

fig. 1: Peter Eisenman, House series, c. 1970, a formal language in which architectural elements such as columns and walls were separate from a “functional context,” used instead as part of a “marking or notational system;” fig. 2: Content analysis of vernacular architectural languages, in this case the meaning and symbolism of “movie star mansion” iconography applied to bungalows around Los Angeles, 1975 (analysis by Arloa Paquin); fig. 3: Estudio Teddy Cruz, as part of Manufactured Sites, 2008, a prefabricated metal framework, a designed element, is introduced into the ad-hoc, indigenous building practices of Tijuana’s suburban shantytown sprawl.



fig. 4



fig. 5



fig. 6

fig. 4: Dieter Rams, Braun Aeromaster 10 Cup Coffeemaker; a classically modern approach to simplifying the visual form of the product and process of coffeemaking; fig. 5: Michael Graves, Tea Kettle for Alessi, 1985, the bird connoting the sound of the whistle; fig. 6: Naoto Fukasawa, Rice Cooker for Muji, 2002, which has a rice paddle rest on its flat top, solving the problem of where to place this utensil after use. The rice cooker's form is a result of its relationship both to the paddle and to the behavior of the user.



fig. 7



fig. 8



fig. 9

fig. 7: Karim Rashid, Dirt Devil Kone vacuum, 2006, in a form so refined “you can leave it on display”; fig. 8: Dyson DC15 vacuum cleaner, 2005, the articulation of the “ball,” the pivoting wheel of the vacuum, as well as its color-coded parts, imparts and expresses its functionality; fig. 9: unlike its predecessors iRobot’s Roomba vacuum cleaner, 2002-, maintains a relationship to the room rather to the hand of its owner and uses various algorithms to complete its cleaning tasks.



fig. 10



fig. 11

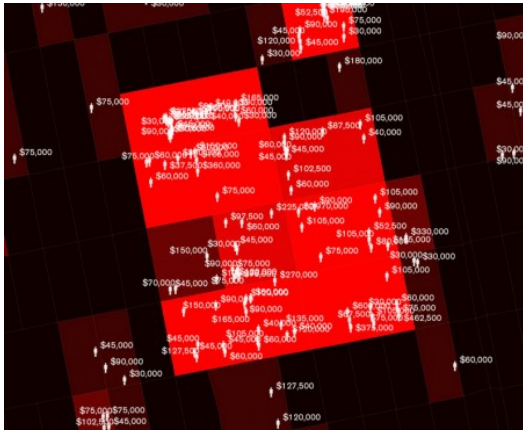


fig. 12

fig. 10: Vignelli Associates, New York City Subway Map, c. 1972, a classic of modern information design and the belief in the clarity of abstract form in communication; fig. 11: Durst Organization, The National Debt Clock, New York, NY: “a symbol and metaphor, particularly highlighting the fact that the clock ran out of digits when the U.S. public debt rose above \$10 trillion on September 30, 2008”; fig. 12: Laura Kurgan, Spatial Information Design Lab, from Million Dollar Blocks project, c. 2006: informatic mapping of individual incarceration costs to inmates’ former neighborhoods in the hopes of shaping public policy.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RELATIONAL DESIGN

	SYNTAX FORM	SEMANTICS CONTENT	PRAGMATICS CONTEXT
ROLE	DESIGNER	AUTHOR	EDITOR
	PRODUCER	CONSUMER	PROSUMER
PHILOSOPHY	STRUCTURALISM	POST-STRUCTURALISM	PRAGMATISM
CULTURE	POPULAR	VERNACULAR	QUOTIDIAN
	ICONIC	IDIOMATIC	PROSAIC
LOGIC	AESTHETIC	CULTURAL	SOCIAL
	FORMAL	SYMBOLIC	PROGRAMMATIC
PROCESS	LINEAR	CYBERNETIC	NETWORK
	ITERATIVE	VARIABLE	GENERATIVE
	INFINITE FORMS	VARIABLE INTERPRETATIONS	CONTINGENT SOLUTIONS

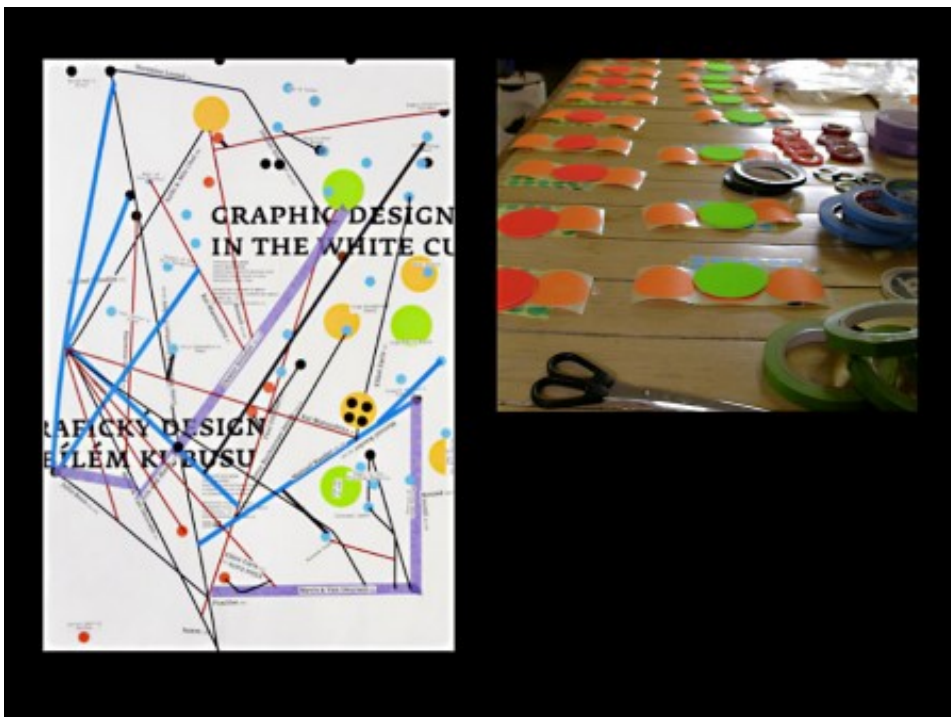
In relational design, the role of the designer is closer to that of an editor or a programmer, not an author but an enabler, while the consumer is recast as a more creative agent (in the guise of the designer, DIY-er, hacker, or “prosumer”). It prefers pragmatism over post-structuralism, or Dewey over Derrida, and the prosaic and banal over exotic vernaculars. It is governed by social logic and the network culture of the many to the authorial culture of one. It embraces generative systems over formal iterations and contingent solutions to variable interpretations.

Some examples from one strand of the diagram: open-ended processes and generative systems.

OPEN-ENDED PROCESSES AND GENERATIVE SYSTEMS

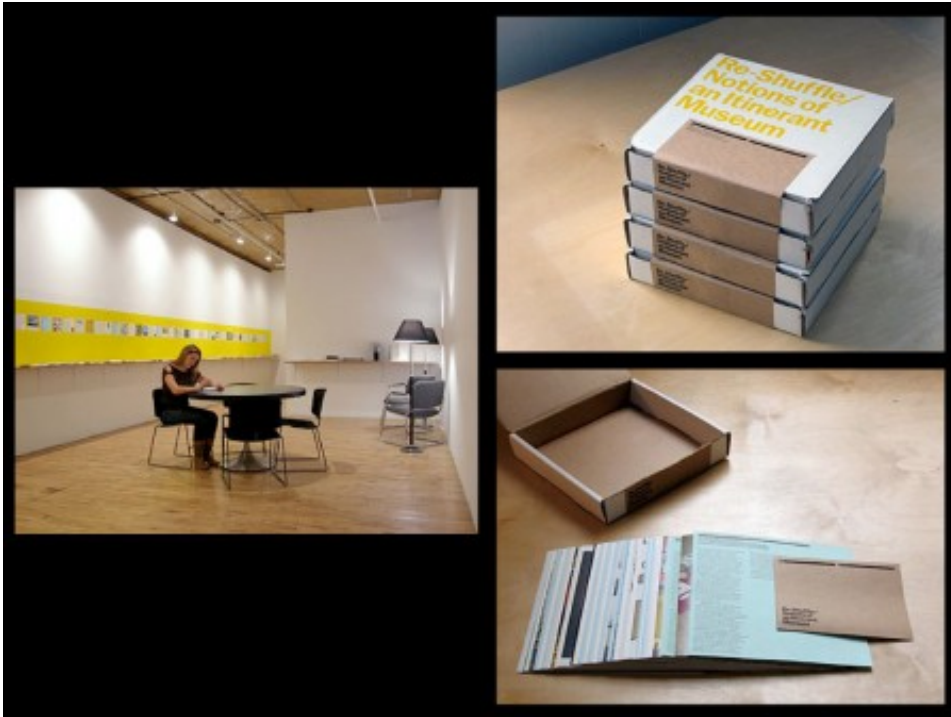


Experimental Jetset, John&Paul&Ringo&George T-shirt, 2001, and variations from others: the archetype as meme.

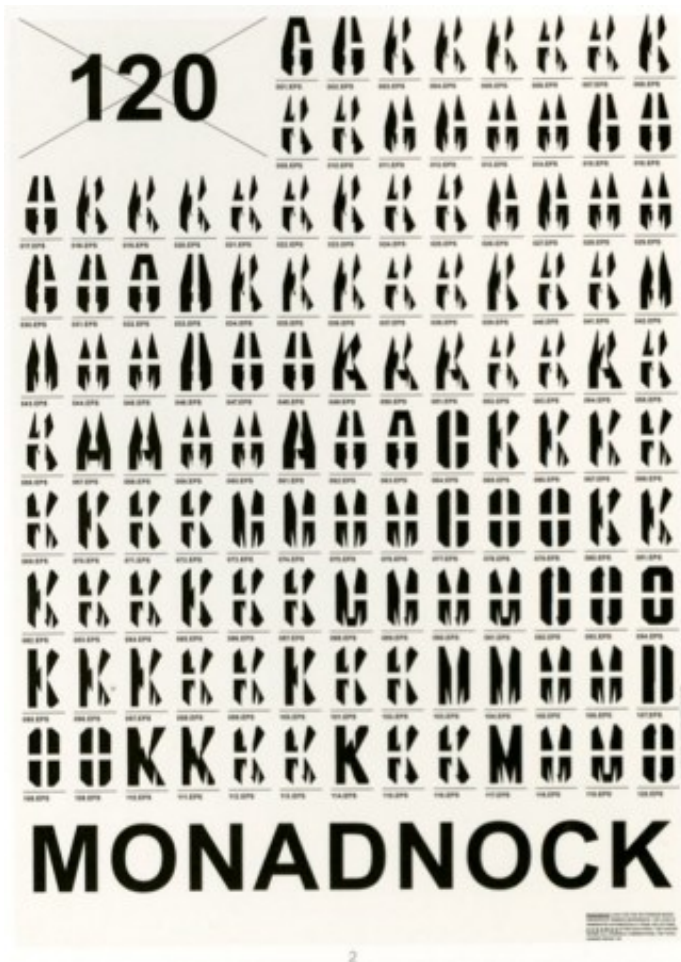


Luna Maurer and Jonathan Puckey, workshop with kits for poster-making using game-like, rules-

based instructions for participants. Graphic Design in the White Cube exhibition, 22nd International Biennale of Graphic Design Brno, 2006.



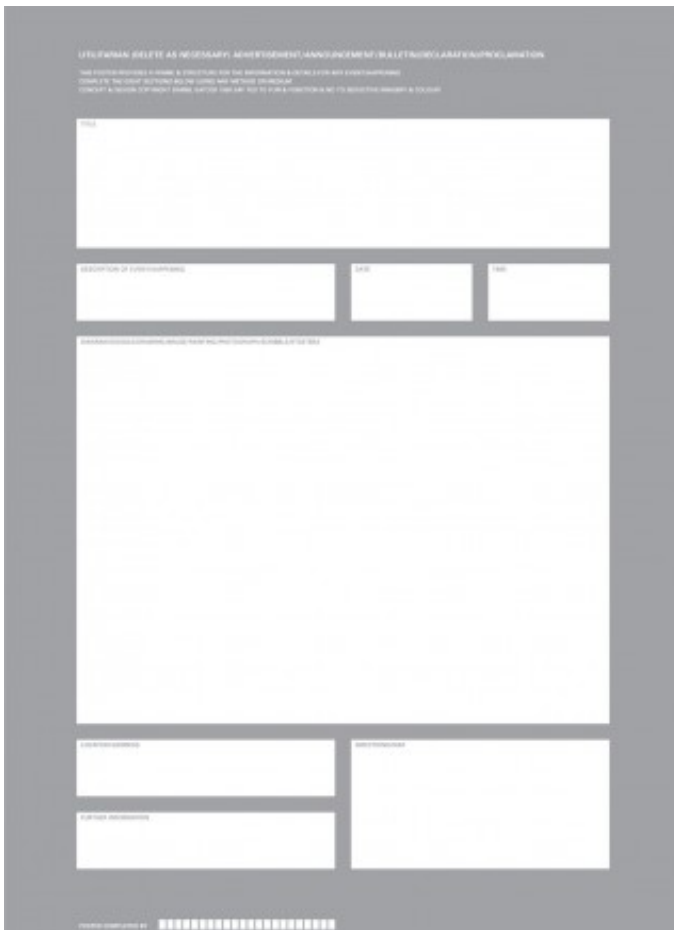
Project Projects, Re-Shuffle/Notions of an Itinerant Museum, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2006. Visitors assembled their own portable exhibition using the provided screen-printed boxes, cards, and mailing labels.



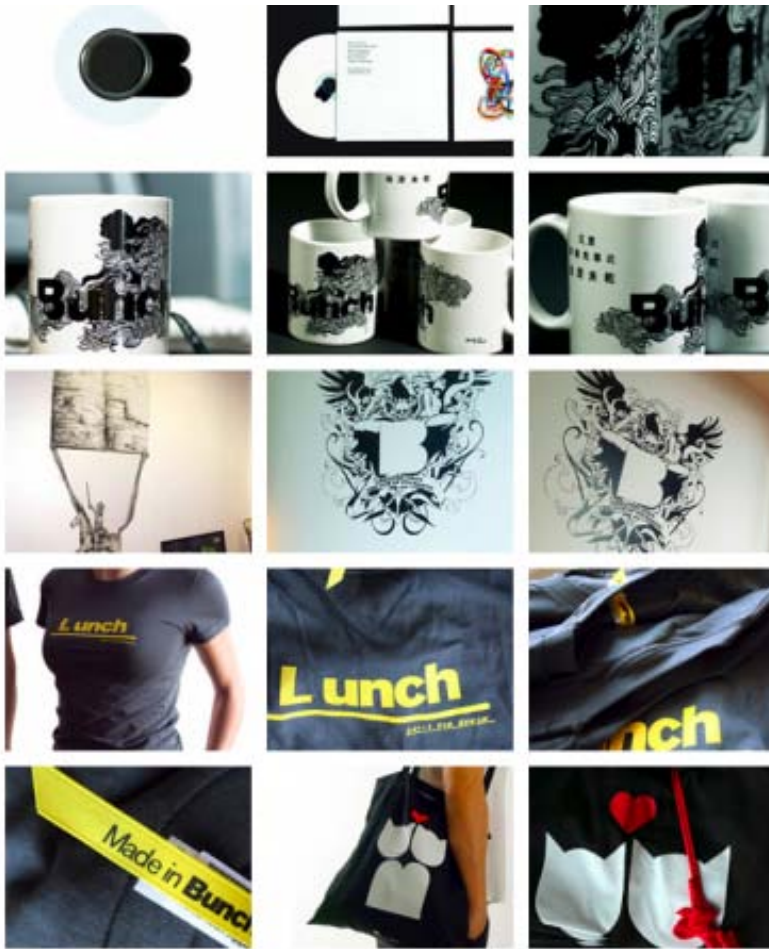
Catalogtree (in collaboration with Lutz Issler, programming), poster for logotype series for Monadnock, Rotterdam-based architects, 2007/2008. With each save, export or print command, the logo is automatically generated from a postscript file.



Lust, Poster Wall, Graphic Design Museum, Breda, the Netherlands, 2008. 600 unique posters are automatically generated daily using content gathered from various Internet sources.



Daniel Eatock, Utilitarian Poster, 1998, foresakes the specificity of content and context, at least until the user completes it.



Identity for Bunch, a design firm, outsourced for re-interpretation to other designers, c. 2008

RELATIONAL DESIGN...

- is not a movement or a style, per se, but rather a way of understanding, exploring, and reexamining the role of design and designers in the lifecycle of the artifacts that it produces.
- can be seen as a method or approach for the generation of form (i.e., design).
- represents a diverse range of practices across a variety of design fields and that diversity coupled with a more process-oriented approach means that common stylistic traits will not reveal such tendencies.
- although relational design is emergent with the advent of interactivity and connectivity in the digital realm, it is not limited to zeros and ones. However, it often uses such metaphors as an operational procedure.

- embraces constraints and conditions as opportunities not obstacles. It tends toward the reduction of subjectivity in the design process or transfers the subjective to others in the network of relationships.
- is only really complete within the confines of its immediate environment or context.

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