

Product Design Beyond Urban Consumerism

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Urban Planning and Product Design used to be the two poles of a spectrum of the Culture of Design. Simply caused by a matter of scale Urban Planning deals with creating the urban tissue whereas Product Design manifests in the small-scale daily life equipment.

Since Planning was more directed from a governmental base and utensils are bought by every member of society, different modes of negotiating and transmitting design were suitable for these disciplines. The ability however of the convincing **marketing techniques**, initially specific for Product Design, slowly entered all fields of design. And so not only products but also buildings and urban tissues changed towards iconic shapes of identity.

In the Modern Style, the catchphrase: 'less is more' could apply to both urban and product design. Urban layouts appeared strict and rationally, products were abstract and geometrical. All aimed to follow a true system.

Postmodernism on the contrary appeared in pretty different ways in Architecture and Design. **Complexity** as means to overcome the boredom of simplified modernism, took a variety of shapes. Completely in accord with the postmodern idea of multiplicity also the interpretations of 'more' differ. All of them however cherish differentiation, multiplicity and temporality.

Nowadays more than fifty percent of the world population lives in the city. Cities that started as a **centre of commerce** and power and sprawled all over the countryside, and on the other hand attracted people to their economy resulting in areas of self-regulating informal dwellings. In the modern perspective these **slums** were regarded as underdeveloped parts of the city, where order and regulation had no chance. Complex problems however that were difficult to solve in an over regulated city, seemed to be easily coped with in the informal townships. Reconstructions after an earthquake for example were more cooperative and quicker done there. The questions and needs of the digital era changed the opinion on the slums. Where regulated urban structures lacked flexibility, slums appeared to self generate multiple forms of coexistence although as well ethical as illegal. Insights like these eventually formed a renewed idea on Urban Redevelopment, where the social and **human resource** was valued more.

In Product Design a parallel discovery was made. To escape from the too rational forms first computer aided design helped to generate more organic shapes. But when mass production was overtaken by differentiation in the market unusual strategies of production came up to humanise the appearance using both high-tech and low-tech in one and the same product. Here Product Design showed its guidance, the process of design that included production, information, marketing and commerce so well gained terrain and overgrew its limits. **Product Design dominates** Interior Design and Architecture and even enters museums as if it is the substitute for fine art in the age of democracy.

Even in the Urban tissue Product Design fulfils the need to re-humanise the rational planning with **Public Space Design**, a new discipline that combines the organisation of planning with the consumer approach of Product Design.

Architects have always used product like **models** to illustrate their principles. What else could serve as an attractive, clear and convincing container of multiple information in a simple form?

The commercial orientation that made Product Design so successful also had its downside for the city. All over the globe urbanity has the same guise, the global market occupies city centers and original culture is marginalised. Counter movements however appear frequently these days. First pioneers are of course the more **artistic interventions** that make us aware of the silly circumstances we created.

More serious attempts to reveal possible futures are made by designers and architects showing their **scenarios**. One of these scenarios called Flow Food shows what would happen if the water circumstance develop like they do now, and the countryside near sea is getting more

wet and salty. To illustrate the consequences a simple section of the landscape is highlighted with the food that could be cultivated in the different biotopes. The real impact however comes when the scene is transformed into the menu and dish it affects. This Product Design is the summit of the landscape investigation. It might even work better than the architectural elaboration the office Van Bergen Kopla made.

The same office took the idea one step further in an attempt to reinforce the urgent urban need for diversity in food. By projecting the logistics of a supermarket on the Dutch polder landscape a Park Supermarket was created. The landscape will change in this design in a kind of drive through supermarket, where the consumer reengages in the cultivation of food. Product Design here plays an important role by improving the landscape facilities.

What are the new principles that we can find behind this shift in Design?

There is a beautiful example to illustrate a lot of aspects of the new design. Every year at the furniture fair in Cologne another designer was invited to create an 'Ideal House'. Designers like Zaha Hadid took the liberty to make an outstanding breathtaking ideal shape, with no more basis than fantasy, just starting from scratch. In 2004 Hella Jongerius was invited. Her design questions the concept of 'the ideal'. Is it really possible to create an ideal for everyone? Or is the ideal for everyone different? And if so, isn't it the most ideal to have a situation in which you have an option to choose? Following this argumentation the most logic result is a collection of choices. This 'Ideal House' is an arrangement of frames each covered with an option of different items. The cupboards, curtains and chairs displayed were just regular examples. The design is no longer a new original yet disconnected idea, it reacts on the existing circumstances. It does not offer a fixed and imposed ideal; it offers a variety of options at choice. It does not require an empty clear page to start from but engages with reality and is constructed from reality.

In modern Product Design there was an ideal, the ideal of functionalism. And so there is one product that is the climax of it's time. The well known Arne Jacobsen chair fairly can be considered as the ideal of modernity. It differentiates its functions clearly and most expressively.

In postmodernism you cannot choose one ultimate design. The design at best, like Tejo Remy's pile of drawers or Jurgen Bey's fluently covered old chairs, doesn't even have a consistent shape. It is more a particular formula or strategy that adapts to the situation and offers a multiplicity of forms.

This postmodern strategy differs very much from the modern system. The modern system was looking for a representation of the ultimate truth. Whereas the postmodern strategy is an arrangement of reality; it opens up the diversity of possible options.

In this postmodern design process the **role of research** has tremendously changed. In the modern approach research was preliminary to design, aiming to find a general valid understanding. The design then was the application of this principle.

In the postmodern approach design and research are interrelated. The design process is one of action and reflection. The steps that are taken are positions to be tested. This process continues till somewhere an evocative option is frozen and the challenge of acting and reflecting is left to the audience.

Works of design are then very often an arrangement of facts, ordered in such a way that an insight is revealed or an interaction is urged.

The role of the audience or user however can be taken much further in the research-integrated design. In the Van Abbe Museum, spectators were given the possibility to choose the paintings at a temporal exposition.

In an interactive design process at MAHKU students brought in material for their classroom, accompanied by a leaflet that informs about the intention.

In the Urban context we see design making interesting moves in participation as well. Originally planning was managed by power and expertise. In the democratic emancipation stakeholders and inhabitants participated in the process. Often in a final stage to check the outcomes of a design. This effected significant extension on the decision making time, with a lot of influence for fanatic opinions, resulting in designs of compromises. A new tendency is to engage participants earlier in the process and address institutions that represent a particular value.

Crimson architectural historians for example investigated an area in Rotterdam. The project Sociologica worked from inside to outside and tried to start from the human qualities present in the neighbourhood. This proposal resulted in decreasing the many bureaucratically planned projects, just starting with a few that stimulated the engagement of inhabitants.

In the forefront of Urban Development we find Urban Think Tank (UTT). The office started working in the slums of Caracas, working bottom up, resulting in completely new designs. The result of these urban interventions are relatively small in scale but with great impact, like an **urban acupuncture**. MAHKU cooperated with UUT in a project in Hoograven, Utrecht, where different scenarios of small-scale interventions were tested. In the process of working from the wishes and needs of the inhabitants it is important to continuously identify the status of the project to secure the proper interaction. Proposals mostly effected in a combination of interventions where Product Design partake in social or economical cases. Products have the advantage of being small, interactive and flexible; brilliant to be used in a test case or initial interactive phase of the project.

In The Hague, projects like this resulted in Hotel Transvaal, with temporary room in houses that were to be demolished. Again Product Design eventually shaped the ideas.

A competition named Immediate City at the biannual in Hong Kong shows more interactive design ideas. It builds on the strength of scenarios and interaction. Old abandoned urban mega structures are used to redevelop as if they were products.

What consequences could these tendencies have for research and education in the design discipline? Product Design cannot be separated anymore from its context. Assignments should offer a challenge on many levels; in which it is crucial for the designer to interpret and choose ones identical circumstances to work with.

When we recollect the text 'Junkspace' by Rem Koolhaas and see the impact on Architecture and Design we only can think of design processes starting with rethinking the global conditions. As a reaction on the text students in a HKU workshop identified different groups of urban organisation. In the workshop the pictures gathered already visualised the categories but the translation into simple objects like fruit bowls offered the impact needed to proceed further towards an urban scenario for leisure. The work of these students illustrate how many levels come together and show how Product Design can transform its commercial roots and go way beyond urban consumerism.