

# Design History: From Service Subject to Discrete Discipline

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Design history is undergoing an identifiable shift from a relatively marginal and insecure position as a service provider operating within design education, to a recognizable and independent research discipline. This paper examines both the relationship between the practice and purpose of design history within design education as it is taught and researched in various countries, as well as the subject's emerging status as an independent discipline.

## 1. What is Design History?

Design history has a compound name, design + history. While historians interpret evidence primarily from textual sources to understand social, cultural, economic or political life (Munslow, 2005), design discourse has augmented a focus on designed artifacts and processes, consideration of their production, mediation and consumption and 'networks of stakeholders' (Krippendorf 2006: 64). Design history is the study of designed artifacts, practices and behaviors, and their surrounding discourses, in order to understand the past, contextualize the present, and forecast the future.

We can refine our definition using two distinctions. John A. Walker differentiated the academic field of *design history* from its subject, the *history of design*. The latter is often deemed to begin when industrialization separated design and manufacture (Walker, 1989). Design history has therefore prioritized the output of Western, industrialized nations at the expense of non-Western regions and the pre-industrial. A second distinction concerns design history as taught to design students – contextualizing students' design practice through studying the work of other designers, and the social, political and economic and cultural forces that shape design, production and consumption – and design history as a field of research.

Design history's development in the 1970s and 80s was informed by its role in design education, typically within art and design schools. The subject's roots as a distinct field of inquiry lie in the UK, including the establishment of the Design History Society in 1977 (Woodham, 2001), academic conferences, the launch of postgraduate degree programs such as those at Middlesex University (1980; Putnam, 2012) and the Victoria and Albert Museum/Royal College of Art (1984) and the *Journal of Design History* (1988). In the US, the Design Forum was founded in 1983 (renamed the Design Studies Forum in 2004) and the journal *Design Issues* launched in 1984, treating design history within a broader remit. Major museums have also contributed significantly to the development of design history..

Clive Dilnot's two-part 1984 account of the 'varieties of design history' noted the limitations of its basis in decorative arts and Pevsnerian modernist architectural histories (1984). Early monographs such as Forty's *Objects of Desire* and Sparke's *Introduction to Design and Culture* (both 1986) rejected an art historical model based on innovative practitioners, iconic objects, and period styles, instead situating designed objects within social, political and economic contexts. Walker proposed extending design history's research field through a 'Production-Consumption' model (Walker 1989). While Walker and Dilnot rejected 'grand narratives' in favor of multiple narratives, Margolin (1992) contended that design history needed to define its remit and methods. Woodham (1995: 37) responded that a lack of clearly defined disciplinary boundaries was a *positive* trait and 'interdisciplinary interchange' was a key characteristic of design history.

Design history has borrowed from a diverse range of related studies, particularly continental philosophy, art history, literary studies, cultural anthropology, and history. Multiple frameworks have emerged for situating design in its historical context, including national histories that chart design's role in a chronological narrative (Betts, 2004) and close analyses of specific materials (Meikle, 1995), industries (Blaszczyk, 2002), or political perspectives (Lavin, 2002). Cultural studies has exerted a strong influence on design history, as did feminist scholarship (Attfield and Kirkham, and Buckley,

both 1989). In the US, popular culture studies, folklore studies, material culture studies, and the history of technology have accommodated work on designed objects. The latter's influence has extended beyond the US (e.g. Atkinson, 2010). Fallan argued recently that design history's 'core concern' remains 'the materiality of objects' (2010: 33). He positioned design history within material culture studies and advocated the use of methods from anthropology and ethnography, museology, archaeology, and the history of science and technology.

Design historians have drawn from (typically qualitative rather than quantitative) social science research (Attfield 2000, 2007), with little reciprocal interest. Molotch (2011) argues that sociologists have largely ignored material culture, but Shove, Watson, Hand and Ingram (2007) form an exception. Like design history, material culture studies is 'interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary' (Woodward 2007:27), using methods ranging from semiotic interpretation to empirical observation to understand how artifacts and humans interact (see, for example, Miller 1987 and the *Journal of Material Culture* founded in 1996). From cultural anthropology, design historians have learned that everyday objects have 'social lives' (Appadurai, 1986). Yet social scientific approaches have focused on consumption practices, at the expense of design practice, manufacture and materials, or historical perspectives.

Despite design historians borrowing from various fields, Margolin (2009) described design history's marginal position within (social and cultural) history and the wider humanities. With the publication of three key texts in the last two years, design history seems to have reached a state of reflexive maturity. Lees-Maffei and Houze's anthology, *The Design History Reader* (2010) surveyed the breadth of the field, its methods and key themes, Fallan's *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method* (2010) analyzed method in further depth and Adamson, Riello and Teasley's *Global Design History* challenged the subject's Western bias, by asking 'that all design be understood as implicated in a network of mutually relevant, geographically expansive connections' (2011: 6). Design history has emerged as a discipline capable of producing sophisticated analyses of the interplay of social, cultural, political and economic forces on designed artifacts, design practitioners, production, consumption and mediation.

## 2. Design History: Teaching and Research

While design history arose primarily to serve a specific need within design education, its role is changing even within this context. Brawley, Kelly and Timmins (2009) have demonstrated the importance of comparative appraisals of pedagogic trends to identify the marked international differences in pedagogical theory and practice. What follows is an initial attempt to broadly map design history's current position in teaching and research based on primary email interviews and published research, for an international sample of regions.

In the UK, design history has grown out of the studio and back into it again for economic as well as pedagogical reasons. Design history's role within design higher education is practically enshrined in law, but in recent years many dedicated departments of contextual studies (including art and design history) have been disbanded and design historians now report directly to the heads of practice-based courses. This allows for a closer relationship between practice and theory but its implications for the research infrastructure for design history are less reassuring.

The situation in wider Europe is strikingly different to that in the UK. Rather than being increasingly managed within the studio, design historians working in continental European countries including Spain (Campi, 2011; Julier, 2011), Italy (Dalla Mura, 2011; Prina, 2011), Greece (Traganou, 2012), Turkey (Balcioglu, 2012) and Scandinavia (Fallan, 2011), express their desire for a more defined, discrete identity for design history. While they complain of the lack of an institutional structural base for design history, many are also optimistic about the imminent establishment of dedicated MA and PhD programs.

United States design history, too, was developed almost exclusively within design schools (Margolin, 2002: 129). While the historical survey course remains a mainstay of American design education, Lichtman notes a recent shift from teleological narratives towards blended history and studio practice models (Lichtman, 2009). At the graduate level, the prominent courses are the MA in Design History and Decorative Arts run by Parsons the New School of Design in conjunction with the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, and the MA and a PhD program at Bard Graduate Center, New York. However, the majority of design history academics continue to emerge from Art or Architectural History programs or from abroad (Margolin, 2011). The recent revival of the Design Studies Forum

within the College Art Association and the founding of its journal, *Design and Culture*, in 2009, as well as the relaunch of Bard Graduate School's journal *Studies in the Decorative Arts as West 86th St: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* in 2011 exemplify a new wave of interest in design history. In related fields, the University of Delaware with the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, offers MA and PhD programs in early American decorative arts from a material culture perspective (Margolin, 2002: 152), and important contributions are made by scholars working within the American Studies Association, the Popular Culture Association and the Society for the History of Technology, and their respective journals.

While Fry provided an early call to arms for the development of Australian design history (Fry 1988), that country lacks dedicated graduate programs in design history, and only recently has a critical mass of active scholars working within academic institutions emerged. Australian design education has tended to follow UK models, with design history as a contextual subject within design practice degrees. Despite this, McNeil (2011) notes revived PhD research in design history, particularly at University of Technology and the University of NSW, both in Sydney, Griffith University in Brisbane, and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. There has been some interest in design history within The Art Association of Australia and New Zealand, as well as the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand annual conferences. A symposium held at Robin Boyd's Walsh St House in Melbourne in 2011, brought together several key scholars from around the country to create the Design History Australia Research Network (DHARN), with the aim of further developing the discipline in Australia.

Finally, Kikuchi has recently written that 'Design Histories and Design Studies in East Asia have been developing steadily, but unfortunately this has not been widely recognized in the UK or in other Euroamerican centres of this field' (2011: 273). She notes that Japan has led the development of design history in East Asia, for example through the 'Nihon Dezain Gakkai (Japan Society for the Science of Design)', established in 1954. Japanese university level design history teaching occurs within art history, aesthetics, history, area studies, English studies, languages, international studies, engineering, architecture and crafts programs. Some isolated design historians teach 'modern design history', for example at Musashino Art University and design history has greater visibility in the art universities (Kikuchi, 2012). In Korea, design history is delivered only on a limited basis within design programs and art history and cultural studies courses (Lee, 2012a and 2012b). While the design history of Hong Kong is more prominent than that of neighbors such as Taiwan due to the availability of empirical materials in English, 'writings on the design history and design studies of the Greater China region (the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong)' have yet to emerge (Wong, 2011: 386). Possible reasons include a lack of foundation texts, the methodological challenge of reconciling China's long arts and crafts history with the modern, imported, notion of design, and the undervaluing of design history. Taiwanese design history is more developed than that in the PRC due to the influence of the Japanese design education system, while in Greater China the economic return offered by studio-based design education is favored over design history programs which seem to lack such potential. Uniquely, in China, design history textbooks are available to prepare school students for entrance exams for higher education design programs in which design history is taught through survey courses divided into 'World history' (Western) and 'Design history in China', (spanning 5,000 years). Some elite Chinese institutions, such as the Academy of Art & Design, Tsinghua University (formerly Central Academy of Arts & Design), host design history research and the enormous recent growth of China's design industry has prompted optimism about the development of design history there (Wong, 2011: 390), including a dedicated MA program (Wong, 2012).

### 3. III. Conclusion: From Service Industry to Discrete Discipline

Globally, the very conditions which catalyzed design history have also been a limiting factor, in that it has often been regarded as a 'service' subject attendant upon design education, and as a subject that is taught rather than researched. However, design history is being consolidated both within design curricula and as a discrete discipline. Fostering the study of design history at undergraduate and postgraduate levels is important not only in terms of the contribution the subject makes to design curricula, but also in providing an institutional base for the research of design historians. Design history needs to develop further as a discipline in order to extend its recognition both as a pedagogical entity and as a research field. We have surveyed design history's development from a focus on a canon of styles and key designers to simultaneously broader and more in-depth contextualised analyses which, for example, add more recent theoretical developments around mediation to the existing foci of production and consumption. Working alongside practitioners, design historians are uniquely placed

to contribute to this effort. The European, American, Australian and East Asian samples provided above give cause for optimism about the growth of design history from a service subject to a discrete discipline. However, a case remains to be made for the wider relevance of design history beyond design education. The vitality of design history would be well served through the building of bridges between the subject as it exists within higher education and the apparently boundless popular enthusiasm for related phenomena such as heritage, family history and domesticity. The relationship between designed goods and consumers could hardly be more extensive in capitalist society; design history can expand at least in part by harnessing popular interest.

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