

Critical Form(at)ions: Forms of critical practice in design¹

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Design is a powerful force in shaping material reality, cultural values and human behavior. Promising to ease our workload, provide the 'good life', signify taste and social rank, design produces 'persuasive arguments' that operate in ways not unlike political rhetoric to convey ideas about how things might, or should, be in the future (c.f. Buchanan, 1989). Design, literally, manufactures desire (Forty, 1986). And design does not stop at rhetorical argumentation – ideas are inscribed into the enduring forms of images, objects, buildings, infrastructures and systems that constitute visual and material culture. Indeed, architecture has long been understood as a 'disciplinary practice', ordering public and private life through form (c.f. Dovey, 1999). From the visual hierarchies and physical circulation set in urban plans to the range of motion and sequence of actions built into consumer appliances, designed forms embody a sort of 'political ergonomics' (Winner, 1995) that become naturalized into bodily habit, daily routines, social norms and cultural memory. Conveying ideas and regulating ideals, design is complicit in (re)producing ideologies.

As a 'service profession', design has typically served the ideals of clients and their markets. Unlike disciplines such as architecture and art, which have more established traditions of critique, design is closely bound to its origins in the Industrial Revolution. As John Thackara argues, "Because product design is thoroughly integrated in capitalist production, it is bereft of an independent critical tradition on which to base an alternative" (1988: 21). Given radical changes to modes of industrial production and consumption as well as current socio-economic and environmental challenges, today, however, we must critically reflect on and reformulate the discipline (Mazé et al., 2013). Alternative tendencies might be traced, for example, such as counter-movements in the 1960s and '70s. The ideological status quo was contested by the Italian group Superstudio, who articulated an 'anti-design' movement against design ideals that merely furnished consumer culture, mass-produced modernist uniformity and expanded neo-capitalist values. Such tendencies in design raises questions for us today. How may criticality take form in relation to design practices? How may critical practices articulate alternatives or futures for the design profession?

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Indeed, the 1960s prefigured different approaches to criticality, evident in architecture. Motivated by perceived social and environmental failings of modernism, more rigorous history and theory were one approach to improving the understanding and accountability of architecture. History and theory were institutionalized, for example, as separate departments in the university, charged with criticism of architecture from outside. Another approach was articulated as ‘criticism from within’ (Silvetti, 1977), in which architectural practice gives form to critical issues that might otherwise be obscured by the languages of other disciplines. Today, while architecture is undergoing a so-called ‘post-critical’ turn (Rendell, Hill and Fraser, 2007), design is just establishing a critical tradition. As design is expanding in higher education, history and theory are important. However, following on ‘criticism from within’, there is also a basis for criticality premised on and generated through the processes, materials, and products of design. This is what I refer to as ‘critical practices of design’.

In this article, I discuss some aspects of critical practices of design. I briefly trace how ideals and alternatives are explored within genres of ‘concept’, ‘conceptual’ or ‘critical’ design. Engaging with the ideas expressed through design practice, such practices illustrate how intellectual and ideological issues might be constructed from within, rather than prescribed from outside. This represents an important shift in relations between theory and practice in design – criticism is not something merely to be done apart from and outside of design but is incorporated within design practices and forms (Mazé and Redström, 2009). This shift is also reflected in academia, in which practice-based approaches to design research are expanding (Koskinen et al, 2011). To illustrate some approaches, I present examples from Switch!, a practice-based design research program at the Interactive Institute in Sweden. This anchors a discussion of how critical practices may take form today, and how, or why, they have an important role for a discipline in transition.

Forms of criticism from within design

Historical and contemporary precedents to ‘criticism from within’ might include genres such as ‘concept’, ‘conceptual’ or ‘critical’ design (for further discussions and references see Mazé, 2007). One such genre is found in trade shows and world expositions, in which the ‘concept car’, ‘ideal home’, or ‘future city’ speculate on ideal ways of living. These may reinforce existing ideals of family and gender, class and consumerism, perhaps materialized in ways that cause us to reflect upon such ideals, or alternative ideals may be materialized. Another borrows on conceptual art and radical crafts to expose ideals and norms embodied in everyday things. Ordinary housewares and household tools, for example, may be reinterpreted or placed in alternative contexts that expose how ideals of beauty, taste, ‘good design’ and function embody are gendered, racialized, culture- and class-specific. The ethics of new technological functions are debated in ‘critical design’ approaches, in which potential emotional, psychological and social side-effects are imagined. Playing out such potentials is a basis for debate within arenas dominated by overly-rationalized, positivistic views of technology as societal progress.

These are three approaches to creating ‘critical distance’ between design and the ideals that it might embody, persuade us to desire, and embed in our daily lives. Speculation in the form of concept design posits a future at a safe distance, through which we might reflect on ideals as if from the outside. Conceptual design strategies of decontextualization place familiar things where we can view them in an unfamiliar light that exposes hidden norms. Exploring side-effects, as in critical design, operates like film noir or science fiction to open the imagination to alternative interpretations and ideals. Such approaches craft a critical distance that disrupts unconscious norms, cognitive expectations, and unthinking assimilation.

The critique posed is not of design, as such, but of design blindly serving historical or hegemonic ideologies. Practitioners make use of the aesthetics, contexts and methods of design as holding unique possibilities for inducing reflection on the ideals embodied and shaped by design. But it also borrows from other disciplines – concept designs may include polished representations and statistics more at home in marketing to suspend disbelief about possible futures, for example, and conceptual design occupies galleries in order to leverage the kinds of critical discourse associated with art. Located at the fringes, and crossing into other disciplines, practitioners (de)construct ideas that occupy the center or mainstream of design. While “it is easy to overlook the arguments presented by design, because they constitute the mainstream and represent the dominant mode of production,” Helen Rees argues, “only at the edges (of fashion, price or taste) does a design ‘statement’ become impossible to ignore” (1997: 130). Crafting critical distance entails that practitioners shape not only the design itself but the frames of reference through which design is typically viewed and evaluated.

Research through (critical) practice

Tendencies toward critical practice represent a sort of criticism from within design – an ideological and intellectual engagement that takes place in design practice and in designed forms. In an academic context, this might be understood as research through practice (Frayling, 1993/4), in which research questions are explored, assessed and generated through design activities, materials and methods. This is precisely what differentiates practice-based design research (as a material practice) from the hermeneutic practices of design history, theory and criticism (Allen, 2000). Central to discussions of both critical practice and practice-based research is consideration of design as a mode of knowledge production – and the objects produced as a ‘material thesis’ that explore certain intellectual and ideological arguments. As material theses, design can be understood to give form to objects as a form of discourse in which critical objects engage ‘critical subjects’ in debate.

To explore the approaches to critical practice discussed above, we might consider some examples. In a number of practice-based research projects over the last decade, I have been exploring how criticality might be approached from within the material practices of design. More specifically, in projects such as Static! (Mazé, 2010) and Switch! (Mazé and Redström, 2008), we have engaged in criticism of design ideals complicit with the logics of mass-production and the expansion of material and energy consumption at the expense of the en-

vironment. In Switch!, for example, we attempted to get at more fundamental questions about the role of design in sustainability. We asked: How does design mediate ideals of nature and control over resources? What kinds of future ideals – or whose – do we assume, desire and determine by design? Within such projects, we generate design examples in the form of visualizations, scenarios and prototypes. These are the basis for critical reflection within our research team as well as with stakeholders, in public forums and contexts of consumption. Two of the design examples created within Switch! – Symbiots and Energy Futures – are discussed further here in relation to the notions of ‘objects as discourse’ and ‘design for debate’.

Object as Discourse

The products of research through (critical) practice may be understood as material forms of discourse, articulating existing or alternative ideals. As a sort of ‘material thesis’, the products of critical practice might be seen as a physical critique materialized through carefully crafted forms and aesthetics (Seago and Dunne, 1999). An example is Switch! Symbiots, in which familiar places and social interactions were depicted in a new light within images that queried ideals of energy consumption.

Example: Switch! Symbiots

Symbiots explored ideals of ‘good’ consumption as reduced energy consumption within an urban (eco)system. Inspired by concepts of symbiosis in biology and botany, we explored interactions ranging among the mutualistic, parasitic and commensal, which are pathologies describing ‘the living together of unlike organisms’. These were lenses for speculating on urban life as competition among individuals, families, neighbors and non-human entities over finite energy resources. To explore the material and social implications of such competition, we selected sites around Stockholm, such as a crosswalk, building facade and shared lawn. These were developed into scenarios including: a street cinema that arises to provide a traffic-stopping experience for locals collaborating to save energy, public streetlights that spotlight the private balconies of energy conservationists, and a common mini-golf course that is built up through competition among house-proud neighbors. These reflect the more complex nature of ‘good’ consumption, ‘ideal’ society, and ‘domesticated’ nature by depicting competition among diverse types of people in socio-economically specific parts of town.

The scenarios were materialized in the form of a photo series in the genre of hyperreal art photography. The photos were also used to illustrate the project on posters distributed in town and in interviews with neighborhood residents. The images were accompanied with questions such as “Do you know how much energy your neighbors consume?”, “What about energy in common?” and “Whose responsibility is it?”. Politically-correct answers were elicited – “We have only one Earth.” – but also internal conflicts, social tensions among different types of households, and perceptions of injustice in public systems providing services. Issues of class, generation gaps and public/private interests were brought up by interviewees. In this, the project explored a more complicated set of ideas than those typical in sustainable design.

Crafting material theses

Complex (and competing) ideals, actors and interests, costs and benefits, are engaged through the craft and the content of the images. Rather than prototypes, which might be perceived as realistic propositions, we carefully crafted the images. The hyperreal photographic style rendered surreal and even epic portrayal of minute and mundane details of everyday life. Subtle alterations to the texture and color of light, for example, resulted in dramatic differences in how attention was directed in the picture and the mood conveyed – the color green in the mini-golf scenario, for instance, could be dark and forbidding or bright and suburban. Such nuances in materiality allowed us to relate to the everyday but from a distance – a humorous or sinister, but definitely strangely familiar. Painting a vivid picture of competing ideals, the carefully crafted materiality of the images induces a critical distance between the everyday and another, perhaps darker reality.

Each picture embodies different sets of socio-political issues, as we realized in selecting sites for the scenarios and photoshoots. For example, the street cinema pictured in a suburb suggested a potential clash between old-timers and outsiders but, in a progressive part of town, suggested impromptu social gatherings and shared child-minding among young families. The content of scenarios and sites were thus carefully staged within each photo and across the three scenarios, order to evoke different issues and tensions. To some extent, the scenarios raise issues that design historians, theoreticians or critics might, through the lens of critical theory. As images, however, these issues take different forms than the languages of such disciplines. The images do not prescribe a particular ‘reading’ – indeed, the interviewees’ interpretations reveal as much about their own situation as that depicted in the images. As a ‘thesis’, the images might be understood as two-way ‘argument’. Design critique embodied in a critical object but, also, critical reflection and active interpretation by the viewer.

Design for Debate

The artifacts produced in research through (critical) practice are not ends in themselves, they are intended to be viewed and, perhaps, debated. The alternate-reality and hyperreal materiality of the photos embodied our criticism of prevalent ideals of sustainable design from within, but they also evoked a range of interpretations and reflections among those interviewed. This suggests further potential for critical objects – as a means rather than as ends. As Charles Rice articulates the issue in architecture, “‘Critical’ problems occur when projects founded in an opening up of critical experiential possibilities as part of a design process are then, as concrete buildings, confronted by the inherently critical experiences of actual subjects” (quoted in Hatton, 2004: 107). As concept design may borrow from and rely upon the genre of trade shows and world expositions, and conceptual design on modes of consumption and criticism in the art gallery, critical practices must consider not only the design of objects, as material forms of discourse, but also the frames of reference through which such objects are viewed, interpreted and consumed.

Example: Switch! Energy Futures

Switch! Energy Futures was a response to the ideals of many design ‘visions of the future’. These often envision only incremental changes to otherwise unaltered middle-class Western lifestyles or, alternatively, eco-topias of silver-bullet technologies. Energy Futures incorporated methods from futures studies to build multiple future scenarios. We crafted a series of design artifacts that speculated on changes in belief systems and political ideologies, relations to nature and the body, work and leisure. These artifacts are staged within (super) fictional scenarios – for example, weather reports that feature sun and wind in kilowatt-hours for life ‘off the grid’, common electrical hardware rewired by eco-terrorists for socket bombing, national holidays around energy saving and city zoning incentivizing voluntary electricity abstinence. Accompanied by (re) designed artifacts and supporting ‘evidence’ such as faked websites and media coverage, these scenarios set the stage for a debate among stakeholders.

An event was staged with the artifacts and scenarios in a gallery setting. Invited architects, engineers and educators were gradually immersed in Energy Futures over the course of an hour. The event started with a room only furnished with beverages typical of a gallery opening and a table with a large suitcase – suddenly everyone receives a phone call to their mobile simultaneously. They are greeted by an absent guide who tells an oral history of each of the scenarios, and participants are instructed to each unpack an object from the suitcase. Among themselves, participants had to collaborate to make sense of these Energy Futures – along the way emerged a variety of intimate stories and personal opinions, as well as political issues and professional points of view. Learning from participatory and critical design, the design included not only the critical objects but a narrative and a program for the event, for staging a critical discussion among stakeholders.

Critical subjects

Energy Futures includes a collection of what might be understood as critical objects. These included newly-designed objects and carefully crafted fakes intended to be read as found objects from futures very different than today. These are ‘persuasive arguments’ but also, rather than ends, these are a means for staging discussion among participants. Like the images in Symbiots, the artifacts in Energy Futures could be understood as design means – or research methods – for debate. Rather than realistic prototypes, which might induce desire (“I want this!”) or practical feedback (“I would use it like this.”), artifacts here were crafted to create a critical distance from typical design ideals centered on increasing consumption. While Symbiots achieved that distance through depicting a strangely familiar alternate reality, Energy Futures materialized multiple possible and more or less (un)desirable future realities. The materiality of design is central, but as a means for alternative forms of consumption.

The carefully crafted critical objects were left open for stakeholders, as ‘critical subjects’, to debate. Beyond those ideals typical in design ‘visions of the future’, Energy Futures imagines outside the current organization of society and problematizes a wider range of those who may be affected. Potential conflicts are implied, lifestyle disruptions as well as adaptations, winners as well as losers. While futures studies includes critical and participatory methods, the outcome typically takes the form of white papers and statistics. Energy Futures takes the

form of objects that operate within a staged platform for debate. Futures were made tangible in ways that invited physical and emotional responses, affective engagement rather than only rational deliberation.

Discussion

While it may not be up to design to resolve the large-scale problematics of the prevailing order (c.f. Jameson, 1982), critical practices of design and research through (critical) practice can query tacit ideals and norms. Switch! illustrates aspects of concept, conceptual and critical design approaches. Symbiots vividly depicts an alternate reality in which resource scarcity heightens competition among those living together in urban ecologies. Ideals of sustainability as reduced energy consumption were complicated by ideas about environmental and social justice, subtly implied within the content and craft of the images as well as in interviews with residents. While Symbiots achieves a suspension of disbelief through strangely familiar imagery, Energy Futures distances us from present-day ideals by exaggerating these as possible and problematic futures. Ordinary housewares, daytime TV and daily routines are the raw materials for futuristic belief systems, eco-activism and survivalist lifestyles. The content of each example evokes the everyday – the (sub)urban vernaculars of sites chosen in Symbiots and domestic artifacts in Energy Futures – to which a ‘critical distance’ is established through speculation, decontextualization and dark side-effects.

In these examples, design makes ‘persuasive arguments’, but these do not affirm existing ideals or even ‘discipline’ us into more sustainable lifestyle ideals. As material forms of discourse, artifacts problematize such ideals, multiplying the ways in which might think about and discuss ideas of sustainability. The material practice of design remains central: as a means of embodying and communicating arguments about how things might be otherwise if reality were shaped according to different ideals. Made concrete in forms that might be viewed and experienced, these are material critiques that evoke visceral responses. The high resolution of the photos and near-reality of the concepts in Symbiots, for example, elicited detailed responses and strong opinions, and Energy Futures required participants to make sense of the futures for themselves and their professions. Artifacts in such critical practices are created not to induce desire but also to create a space for reflection on oneself, among stakeholders and about society at large. Countering the traditional industrial modes of mass-production and mass-markets (and its logics of capital and popular culture), critical practices also design alternative modes of (critical) consumption, for framing and staging encounters between ‘critical objects’ and ‘critical subjects’.

Critical practices have an important role to play in making design as well as societal ideals accessible to understanding, debate and change. Within design itself, critical practices model alternative ways of thinking about and doing design. For one thing, in rethinking design ideals, critical practitioners must question their own assumptions, values and judgments. This enhances self-critique, or ‘reflection-in-action’ within design choices of method, material, and form. In Symbiots, for example, we needed to be reflexive about the social norms associated with prototyping choices, photoshoot locations and visual aesthetics. Secondly, critical practices engage a criticism of the design discipline itself.

For example, Switch! questioned the complicity of design with increasing consumption and instead explored alternative lifestyles and social behaviors. To establish critical distance from the discipline itself, critical practices develop alternatives to traditional design production and consumption. For example, galleries (as in Energy Futures), the media, civic or public settings provide other frames of reference for design aimed at debate rather than consumer desire.

Thirdly, critical practices have a role to play in society, for instance, engaging with the problematics of climate and social change. Embodying critical inquiry in material form, design has a unique agency within discursive situations. The languages of history and theory, environmental or futures studies have certain advantages and speak in particular ways to particular audiences. The languages of design have other advantages, such as rendering abstract and difficult ideas available to more people by taking on forms that are familiar and close to ordinary experience. This may also entail that they can create a common ground for people with diverse backgrounds, interests and worldviews, which we explored on a small scale in Switch!. Beyond its traditional role in service to industry, design also has a role to play in society, alongside and with other disciplines. As ‘public things’ (Latour and Weibel, 2005), design has a power to provoke occasions for disruption, debate and alternatives. In this way, design objects – as material forms of discourse – create a ‘public space’ embedded in familiar things and everyday life.

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