

The Disobedience of Design: Gui Bonsiepe, edited by Lara Penin

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Reviewed by Dora Souza Dias

As other books in the series *Radical Thinkers in Design*, *The Disobedience of Design* aims to “bring back into circulation, as provocations and aids to thinking, some key ‘lost’ [...] texts in contemporary thinking on design(ing)” (ii). Edited by Associate Professor of Transdisciplinary Design at Parsons School of Design Lara de Souza Penin, it makes accessible essays by designer and educator Gui Bonsiepe, several of which have informed the thinking of many design-ers operating outside of Europe and the United States, particularly those in Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Chile, and Argentina.

As a German-born emigre who chose to relocate to South America in the late 1960s, Bonsiepe became known in Latin America for his agenda, advocating repeatedly against the imbalances in trade relations between the “center” and the “periphery,” and promoting the role of designers in policy making. He also became known for his pedagogical background, having studied and taught at the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in Ulm, which influenced many Latin American higher education courses on design (Fernandez 2006).

Bonsiepe’s essays promoting design and industrialization as tools for development and, later, for autonomy, along with his writing advocating design research, the role of theory in design practice, and the importance of interface design, are all gathered in *The Disobedience of Design*, and will now be easily reachable to a much wider audience.

The book is organized in four main parts, each containing 10 essays and emphasizing a particular aspect of Bonsiepe’s work. Part

one focuses on design education, politics, ethics, as well as theory and practice in design; part two gathers essays on “Design in the ‘Periphery’”; part three focuses on “Interface Design”; and part four includes some examples of his “Design and Development/Projects.” Each part is introduced and contextualized by a renowned specialist to provide further insights into Bonsiepe’s work. The main introduction of the book, written by Penin, focuses on the reasons why Bonsiepe was chosen to become part of the Radical Thinkers in Design series. She argues that “Bonsiepe writes about design through a Latin American lens, recognizing its systems and forces” (xi). Having some shared background with Penin myself – we are both graduates of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo – it is easy for me to understand Penin’s celebratory perspective of the contributions made by Bonsiepe.

However, there are some issues with the book that need highlighting. Most of the texts introducing his work fail to critically contextualize it, by largely focusing on Bonsiepe’s achievements or, even, by overstating them. For instance, the book’s introduction states that, “One of his most fundamental contributions is defining the dichotomy center-periphery” (xii). Similarly, one of the interviews reads that “periphery” was a “term that Bonsiepe developed in the early 1970s” (119), using wording that differs slightly from the original text published in *Design Issues* (Fathers 2003). In fact, throughout the whole of *The Disobedience of Design*, there is only a single footnote (169) mentioning Bonsiepe’s source – Immanuel Wallerstein, who is known for his work on dependency theory (Wallerstein 1974, 2004) – and no evidence of how Bonsiepe encountered the dichotomy “center-periphery.”

It is concerning that neither Bonsiepe’s essays nor the critical essays mention the work of Argentinian economist Prebisch (1950), who defined the dichotomy center-periphery in the late 1940s and defined the basis of what would be later developed into dependency theory. Prebisch’s ideas circulated across Latin American circles in the following decades, informing many thinkers and writers, but not always necessarily accompanied by his name.

The suggestion of Bonsiepe’s “fundamental role in proposing in 1980 the formation of the Latin American Industrial Design Association (ALADI)” (108) is another example of recurring overstatements in the book. Even though it is true that he was one of ALADI’s founding members (Buitrago-Trujillo 2017), to say that he was the one who proposed its creation fails to acknowledge the role played by other designers, most of whom were Latin American (Buitrago-Trujillo 2017, 2020).

Moreover, in several essays, Bonsiepe dismisses the role of identity in design as well as attempts by Latin American designers to embrace contributions by native peoples and pre-Columbian artifacts as key parts of Latin American material culture, labelling their efforts as either “nostalgia,” “essentialism,” or “exoticism” (83, 143, 164–5, 176, 190, 194, 197–9, 206). He seems, in this case, to show symptoms of his position as, in his own words, “a parachutist from

Ulm" (129), maybe not entirely aware of his perspective or of how these pre-colonial and popular cultural references play a central role in decolonial movements. This seems clearest when he argues that identity and historical roots are not relevant to design (194, 235), or when he argues against historical or popular references, stating: "Do you think Japanese designers care about 'Japanese' design [...]?" (83). By comparing the Latin American search for identity with that of a country – Japan – which has not had its identity and history stripped off by centuries of colonization, he seems to miss the point. He argues that, "instead of looking for design identity in a romantic-ally idealized past, it would be more appropriate to change the direction and look toward the future" (199) and proposes that industrialization in the peripheral countries is the way "to create a material culture with its own identity" (190). But he offers no specific discussion of how that would work in practice.

Bonsiepe's perspective on design, at least until the mid-1990s, was paradoxical: underpinned by a Eurocentric understanding of design that is attached to industrial development and that rejects historical and popular references, while at the same time defending design for autonomy. His emphasis on discarding any reference to preindustrial history in Latin America and on highlighting the importance of a particular type of development – shaped after universalist approaches to design practice, arguing, for instance, that the "design rationalism of the HfG proved operable in the periphery" (143) – goes against his advocacy of design shaped by particular social and cultural perspectives, and of the necessity of changing the status quo (77).

Many of Bonsiepe's writings read more as opinion pieces rather than academic essays and, although surely informed by his expertise and experience, can sometimes come across as speculation. This is particularly clear in the case made against identity, which does not include references to relevant scholarly literature about the topic (197–8). There are also issues of terminology, for example in the use of the word "otherness" (100) with a positive connotation, as if it is interchangeable with "diversity" or "inclusion," but this could, however, be due to translation issues. Moreover, there is also some repetitiveness across the book; arguments are reiterated without furthering the discussion or adding much depth to the topics examined.

Yet, comparing the essays and interviews written in earlier years to more recent ones, it is evident that Bonsiepe never stopped questioning the world of design, even reconsidering ideas that he himself had advocated, such as "development" and "progress" (350).

The *Disobedience of Design* fulfills its aim as a provocation and aid to thinking, offering opportunities for interesting discussions about social, ethical, and political considerations about design. These, if accompanied by an appropriate critical contextualization, could become valuable resources in design theory and in thinking about design education. The book also offers the reader a historical perspective on the ideas circulating in Latin American design

networks during the second half of the twentieth century, many of which have helped shape the thinking of many design practitioners and academics who are active today.

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