

## Mario Gagliardi on design

### Whom is design to serve? Design with/out industry

Plato: *Jim, do you think the end of the world will come at nighttime?*

Jim: *Mm, no. At dawn.*

James Dean and Sal Mineo in "Rebels Without A Cause", 1955

Berlin, May 19, 2006

It is a cold late morning for the season. Fitting to the temperature, a skier runs sqashy skis in a circular groove on a metal plate, around and around. Running in circles. The show, called "Your personal career" is somewhat iconical for design as it was on display at the Designmai show.



*Your personal career*

Most exhibits are made in cardboard or plywood, taped or tacked, early process mock-ups rather than fully developed models. That reflects on the city, fragmented and patched as Berlin has been through history, it reflects on the budget of the exhibitors, and it reflects on a particular situation of contemporary design, in Germany and in Europe.

There is a lot of stuff designed to be and look shoestring, which is interesting. Cheap chic started out being cheap while at the same time trying hard not to look cheap, offering a discount entry ticket to contemporary design and fashion for the budget-conscious, epitomized by the likes of IKEA and H&M. Then high street designers turned the recipe around, took on street fashion and offered ripped jeans for Prada price tags. This look subtly balances the look of the Ghetto with the appearance of high street – a high wire act to conform and at the same time to mark out. In products, Droog design typifies the highbrow stylistic treatment of the banal and cheap through limited series designer ware with exorbitant price tags.



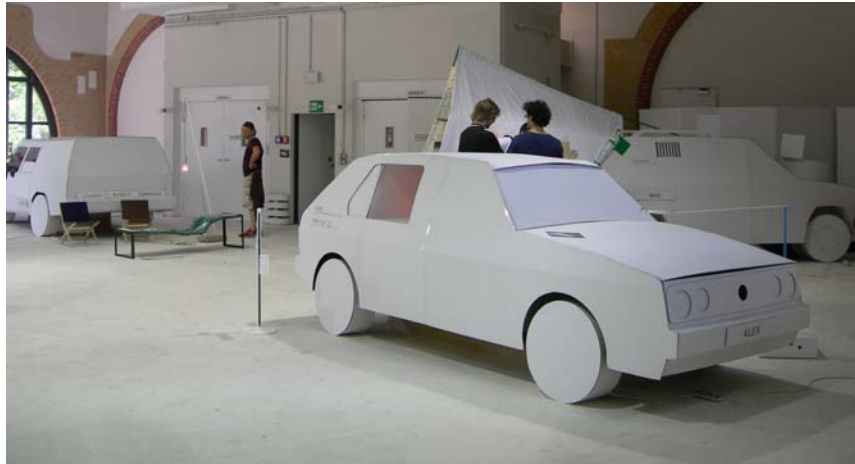
*Build or Die*

There is no high wire act required with tacked and taped cardboard mock-ups, but there is an indulgence in a strange alleged inevitability: that cheap must look cheap. There is nearly a Freudian reproach in this, the designers and design students on show seem to grudgingly ask: what has happened that we are forced to look that bad? That attitude is quite new. It certainly needs a consciousness for a certain design historicity: that before design was all about making things look good, and now times are difficult and we show it through our artefacts. The “100 Euro Haus” by Students from Kassel aims “to enable those faced with limited funds and possibilities to create their own spatial situation in a meaningful and liveable way”.

An honorable goal, but the point was missed. Spatial situations created in the reality of Bazilian favelas, for instance (an architecture on often nearly impossible steep building grounds) show a handling of space and material perhaps not too liveable, but at the whole more adapted to a stunningly difficult situation than the propositions shown here. Here, real life came up with more appropriate solutions. Similarly, the “Nohotel”, a design for temporary installations in vacant buildings, aimed to “transform temporarily any space into an accommodation with comfortable atmosphere”. Also an interesting starting point, however the result was, contrary to its aim, distinctively uncomfortable.

Young designers in Europe again deal with issues beyond glitzy showrooms, or what Viktor Papanek called “genuine needs” versus “evanescent wants and desires” back in 1971. This has to do with an overall sense that companies are further removed from and doing less for society than they used to. The gloomy economic outlook in Germany might do its part, and with designers realizing that they themselves might be excluded from discourses on economy, power and politics, they realize that a new concern for the excluded in general is needed. That designers deal with questions of livelihood for the poor is to be emphatically supported. Just how to deal with a question makes all the difference. Design is about a (sometimes difficult) reality, but it is also about attempting to make reality better. It is about using whatever is at disposal to ingeniously create something. This is in most cases more than just the obvious.

Something more must be in it, something smart, something different. First it needs an idea and second it needs to put that idea into a greater framework – a form, a structure, a system.



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“Whom is design to serve?” The question reappears in contemporary discussions about design in Denmark and the rest of the world, mostly coming with a gist that it mainly has to be more about the benefit of business and industry. Designers shall not make “art pour l’art”. Partly I do agree with this, and partly I also don’t agree. Let’s have a look at the Designmai show, again. It was partly sponsored by a German car manufacturer, headquartered in the US, which besides showing two standard production cars in front of the exhibition hall did not appear again, which, admittedly, for a sponsor usually is the way to go. But in the particular context of this show it highlighted two seemingly dichotomical sides: design with and for- and design *without* and *not for* industry.

Design, just as a reminder at this point, came into being by industry. It was called crafts before. So design without industry is crafts? Perhaps. However, to be called crafts at all it needs a certain degree of craftsmanship. So what is design without industry and without craftsmanship? A *causa designanda*. Perhaps it is art, perhaps we need to invent a new word for it.

Back to the question of design and its need to benefit industry. First, design and industry are inevitably connected by virtue of both their origins. This lends design a couple of features: That (just as business) it is about something in the future, that (just as business) it is about something which deals with a certain goal, and (just as business) it is hopefully better compared to when this something would not be in existence, although, as we know, that does not necessarily hold true all the time.

Historically that meant buildings and tangible products. Only lately we came to realize that this necessarily also implies better services, better structures, better experiences, and better systems, which do not necessarily need to be tangible, but always perceivable. And at that very point of reflection, when it becomes clear that design is about more than just about tangible products, it also is inevitably about the whole fabric of society. This is not new and a social tradition which is in esteem in Denmark, and it is what contemporary business practice at times is not about. In a curious mimicry of art, business today indeed often seems as much centered on itself as art “pour l’art”, which, as Walter Benjamin called it, with the onset of

mechanical reproduction was becoming a “negative theology” denying any social function and categorization. Design, by contrast, is not business, although it is part of it, and not art, although it is an art, and it is not “design pour le design”. It is, quite simply, about more than serving its own goals. It should point out undesirable futures, but it also needs to envision possible other, more desirable futures, and so it naturally lends itself to be not an underpart, but that other, missing part of business.

That means *Ueberzeugungsarbeit*, as it is called in German, conviction work. To qualify for that role as the other part of business it needs to persuade with visions for the future. That time lag between present reality and imagined future is both the problem for and the promise of design, and for that end it has got a couple of cards up its sleeve: To simulate complex environments, to test materials and concepts in real-life situations, and most effectively, to make something imagined and envisioned for the future appear as if it would be already present reality with convincing models and renderings.

These are tools and methods which should be assumed relatively universal for all design objectives. Alas, design objectives and design tools have been separated: the material of choice for young designers dealing with social aims was taped cardboard. Design *without* and *not* for industry at the same time was shown as design *without* its very own tools, as if consciously avoiding intrusion into the protected realm of design *with* and *for* industry.

Presenting early cardboard mock-ups is good for the internal use of design teams, but to have it on show for the greater public means missing the point, as for people who are not designers themselves they achieve an odd effect: That what the designer wants looks as if it is consciously designed *not* to become a possible reality. The message is this: We want to deal with social issues, but we don't want our ideas to become reality. Reality is deplored, but not even attempted to be changed. Oscar Wilde said in his “Intentions”: “*It is always with the best intentions that the worst work is done*”.