

‘DESIGN CLINIC’ CAN DESIGN HEAL THE WORLD? SCRUTINISING VICTOR PAPANЕК’S IMPACT ON TODAY’S DESIGN AGENDA

MARTINA FINEDER

ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS VIENNA / UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED ARTS VIENNA

M.FINEDER@AKBILD.AC.AT, MARTINA.FINEDER@UNI-AK.AC.AT

THOMAS GEISLER

MUSEUM OF APPLIED ARTS/CONTEMPORARY ARTS VIENNA

THOMAS.GEISLER@MAK.AT

ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on the role of Victor Papanek’s work informing today’s call for social change by analysing contemporary exhibitions and accompanying media. In so doing we have put our focus on termini used in titles and curatorial explanations such as ‘social change’, ‘design for purpose’, ‘real world’ and ‘real needs’ versus ‘false needs’, ‘social and ecological responsibility’, as expressions of the current paradigm shift in design and design discourse. These buzzwords had already been coined by Victor Papanek and critical contemporaries and are again dominating today’s debate. By focusing on three recent exhibition projects we are looking for direct references to a ‘design for the real world’, as well as investigating

how Papanek’s work, or let’s say, ‘spirit’, is used within the current search for this. In so doing we also ask how and why a former design dissident like Papanek has become a key figure for today’s critical design discourse? How have changing perspectives (social, cultural, economic and political) in design provoked a shift from counter culture to design establishment? Has this development led to a new category of design – ‘a real world design’?

MAIN TEXT

Can design save the world? No, but it can help.

This claim accompanies the recent exhibition *Challenge Society. Designing the Simple Solutions to a Complex Future* at the Dansk Design Centre

[1]. It points to the current phenomenon of (re-)considering design as a powerful tool in tackling the world's most challenging problems. Already in the late 1940s, forward looking designer, author and teacher Victor Papanek (1923–1998) called his first design studio 'Design Clinic' – back then, this was a labelling he utilised in the spirit of an American Modern human engineer rather than of a sceptical dissident of industrial design culture. In those days, industrial development and progress through design was considered THE strategy to enhance people's quality of life and well-being. Almost two decades later, against the background of the increasing global social and ecological crisis of the 1960s and 1970s, Papanek radicalised himself and the role of design in shaping the world. In his seminal book *Design for the Real World. Human Ecology and Social Change* (1971) he promoted design as an extremely valuable instrument in "healing" and even saving the world. But in pioneering the power of "Design for Survival and Survival Through Design" – as suggested in the book's last chapter – he had to use a more radical, even polemic, tone than that of the Dansk Design Centre and other initiatives now acting on safe ground.

This paper sheds light on the role of Papanek's work informing today's design agenda by analysing contemporary exhibitions and accompanying media. In so doing we have put our focus on termini used in titles and curatorial explanations such as 'social change', 'design for purpose', 'real world' and 'real needs' versus 'false

needs', 'social and ecological responsibility', as expressions of the current paradigm shift in design and design discourse. These buzzwords had already been coined by Victor Papanek and critical contemporaries and are again dominating today's debate. By focusing on three recent exhibition projects we are looking for direct references to a 'design for the real world', as well as investigating how Papanek's work, or let's say, 'spirit', is used within the current search for this. In so doing we also ask how and why a former design dissident like Papanek has become a key figure for today's critical design discourse? How have changing perspectives (social, cultural, economic and political) in design provoked a shift from counter culture to design establishment? Has this development led to a new category of design – 'a real world design'?

Design, diseases and disasters – The real world then and now

Initially it should be said that the role of design has always been challenged by society ever since the Industrial Revolution. The period in which Papanek wrote and published his most prominent book and bestseller saw the Vietnam War, the increasing environmental pollution, the oil crises and an increasing solidarity with people from developing countries; this led to massive criticism of industrial development, consumer societies and their political regimes. This time of crisis is also marked by the

emergence of an "alarmist literature" [2] such as the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (1972), Alvin

Toeffler's *Future Shock* (1973) as well as an international call for an economic system "Where People Matter" as promoted so influentially in Ernst Friedrich Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973). By taking the same line, Papanek was at the forefront as a design practitioner advocating solutions as presented in *DftRW*, where he frankly stated that

"Maybe we learn best from disasters"
(Papanek 1985).

His call for change reads as urgently as today:

"As socially and morally involved designers, we must address ourselves to the needs of a world with its back to wall, while the hands on the clock point perpetually to one minute before twelve" (Papanek 1985).

For the past decade, the world has had to face particularly strong waves of unease and uncertainty about future development. Threatening terrorist attacks like 9/11, natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina or, lately, nuclear menaces such as Fukushima – just to name a few – again seem to trigger the call for CHANGE – social, cultural, political and economical. Additionally, the turn of the millennium and its flashback seemed to ignite an intensive momentum for catalysing future perspectives. In this regard it is significant that numerous curatorial prefaces and institutional statements

refer directly to the disastrous effects of 9/11 as a turning point. Cynthia E. Smith, curator for Socially Responsible Design at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum New York, recalls how dramatically this event has changed her life:

"My world changed focus from the moment I watched the planes bring down the Twin Towers. I, like so many others, realized that our lives had changed. (...) In what ways could I, as a designer, make a difference?" (Smith 2007).

In general, disasters and accidents are referenced as catalysts and triggers for design projects concerned with real life and real needs. As an example here we might quote the prefix of the *Massive Change-book*, a project that caused an early international furore:

"Every accident provides a brief moment of awareness of real life (...) and our dependence on the underlying systems of design" (Mau 2004).

Massive Change like other initiatives and projects founded in the early 2000s set out to "explore the legacy and potential, the promise and power of design in improving the welfare of humanity", to use their own words. This project is one of the markers in shifting the paradigm in design from focusing "on the world of design to designing the

world” as the Canadian designer and initiator of *Massive Change* Bruce Mau states (Mau 2004). At least since then, it can be argued, there is an increasing involvement of the international design scene in the search for solutions for social and ecological sustainability, both on a local and global scale. When looking at the number of exhibitions and projects which joined the call for change throughout the past ten years, it does seem appropriate to speak of a “movement”, as Cynthia E. Smith suggests in her preface of the exhibition catalogue *Design for the Other 90%*. Significant for this development is seen not only in the increasing number of projects but also their related choice of words in naming their projects: *Designs for the Real World (Designs für die wirkliche Welt)* (Generali Foundation, Vienna, 2002); *INDEX: Design to Improve Life* (Copenhagen based initiative of design competitions and exhibitions, since 2005); *Design for the Other 90%* (Cooper Hewitt National Museum, 2007); *Design for a Living World* (Cooper Hewitt, New York, 2009); *Climate Change: The Threat to Life and New Energy Crisis* (The American Museum of Natural History, 2009); *Design to Change the World Exhibition: Imagine another life through the products* (Tokyo, 2010); *Ergonomics – Real Design* (Design Museum London, 2010), *Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement* (MoMa, New York, 2011) ... and so forth.

We look at design exhibitions and initiatives as markers for cultural phenomenon and developments, and mediators of societal values.

More and more programmes of museums and cultural institutions have to draw on current needs and desires to interest a broad range of visitors. They furthermore reflect the cultural-political interests of their private or public sponsors. At the same time they serve to shape educational objectives. Social awareness seems to be experiencing an increased demand within museums’ policy, as it is best exemplified by a recent gathering of international design experts at the *Reasons Not to be Pretty: Symposium on Design, Social Change and the “Museum”*, who discussed the potentials of museums in relation to design for social change [3]. For our investigation we are using prefaces and statements of stakeholders in museums and cultural institutions. We look at the appropriation, reuse or even reinvention of Papanek’s ‘real world design’ philosophy and terminology.

The three projects we have chosen for our exploration include:

1. the exhibition *Unresolved Matters. Social Utopias Revisited* at the Centraal Museum Utrecht, one of numerous events within the 2009 *Utrecht Manifest Biennale for Social Design* to enhance a multidisciplinary socio-political debate;
2. the exhibition *Designs for the Real World (Designs für die wirkliche Welt)* at the Generali Foundation Vienna in 2002, where four contemporary artists shed a socially critical light on housing, urban planning and design;

3. the exhibition *Design for the Other 90%* at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum in 2007, promoting design as a „dynamic force in saving and transforming lives“ as claimed by the museum homepage [4];

We are aware of the fact that our selection has a strong European and North American focus. However, it represents our research background and within the restricted length of this paper we accepted this limitation. For a more global discussion the report of William Drenttel and Julie Lasky about the afore mentioned *Reasons Not to be Pretty: Symposium on Design, Social Change and the “Museum”* provides an extremely helpful source (Drenttel, Lasky 2010).

Exhibition I: Unresolved Matters

“What contribution can design make to the future of our society?” was one of the central questions raised with the exhibition *Unresolved Matters* in Utrecht in 2009 [5]. The exhibition was meant to revisit the debate on the social in design throughout the twentieth century. As stated at the Manifesta’s homepage, “the retrospective perspective on which the exhibition (...) is based is not, however, intended as a simplistic ‘learning from history’.” “Instead”, it is continued, “it follows on from the question of to what extent a society can discover its potential, evolve, and reflect on it” [6]. In so doing curator Claudia Banz has chosen three key books, each representing a

“certain state of ideas in relation to social utopia”: Ebenezer Howard’s *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (1902), Siegfried Giedion’s *Befreites Wohnen* (Liberated Living; 1929) and Victor Papanek’s *Design for the Real World. Human Ecology and Social Change* (1971). Papanek’s work was presented in one of three so-called “Denkräumen” (*think tanks*) entitled ‘Social Sculpture’. Here, amongst others, the Tin-Can-Radio, developed by Papanek with his student, George Seeger, as a project within the UNESCO’s Technical Experts Programme for South East Asia in the mid 1960s, is put in relation to one of Joseph Beuys’ multiples, the Telefon SE of 1974. Both objects made of tin-cans are used to touch upon one of the world’s crucial issues: the democratic access to communication and information. Both are rebels, the artist as well as the designer, and have been most challenging for their disciplines. Within his search for a broadened conception of his profession, Papanek was as radical to the design-term as Beuys to art-term, as Claudia Banz has put it in a recent issue of *Kunstforum International* on “Social Design” (Banz 2011). Here, Papanek’s work has been used for the reconsideration of the social, cultural and political role of design. This discursive context not only highlights the current shift from a mere object-based debate to broader questions of social and cultural processes, but also points to the ongoing search for a more universalistic conception of design and interdisciplinary thinking to enhance social change. In this respect Papanek’s declaration “All men are designers” (Papanek 1971/1985) and

Beuys' "Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler" (*Everyone is an artist*) merge into the conception of design as a 'social sculpture', which still retains the status of 'unresolved matter'.

Exhibition II: Design with Purpose – Designs for the Real World

It is this search for a more 'universal' conception of design, which, informed by conceptual art, also lay behind the exhibition *Designs for a Real World* (*Designs für die wirkliche Welt*) at the Generali Foundation in Vienna in 2002. Four artists working with an interdisciplinary approach addressed issues such as "utopian and ecological design", "design for the Third World", "social engineering", "and urban development", as the institutions homepage puts it [7]. Curator Sabine Breitwieser writes in her catalogue text entitled "Design with Purpose – Designs for the Real World" that Papanek's book title served as a kind of "leitmotif" (Breitwieser 2002). She continues to explain:

„The reason why we and the participating artists and architects relate to the book is not only because of the aspects of ecology and ethics or social responsibility it covers, but also because of its espousal of a universalistic concept of design. (...)”
(Breitwieser 2002).

Though Papanek took an extremely critical stance

against contemporary art – highly polemic as well as coloured by the counter-cultural spirit of his time – it offered a helpful starting point for the curator and the invited artists in questioning the artistic as well as the individual responsibility within the *gestaltung* of a social environment. Accordingly Florian Pumhösl, one of the artists, states in his contribution to the catalogue:

„His [Papanek's] work is inseparable from current slogans such as 'social' or 'poor' design and is, at the same time, an example of a very coherent set of social topics which stands in distinct opposition to a discourse about, say, 'the ideal form' and related ideas as to how it is embedded in the social environment”
(Pumhösl 2002).

What's so striking about this statement is the way it links Papanek's work to the current debate of addressing the 'social' or the 'poor' through design, but at the same time puts 'social' and 'poor' design in opposition to approved design credos of the 20th century – such as the "ideal form" and – without having to say it – in contrast to accompanying debates on taste and aesthetics with regard to style. The predominant perception of design is still related to beauty, life style and technological innovation. While design exhibits that reference the 'social' and the 'poor' are introduced by putting them in opposition to the genuine attractive, the beautiful, or the

functional, they are apparently in a category of the 'other' design [8].

Exhibition III: Design for the Other 90%

The foreword of the book published in conjunction with the exhibition *Design for the Other 90%* on view at the Smithsonian's Cooper Hewitt National Museum in New York in 2007 opens with introducing a new category of design:

"The works displayed and described have little relation to what we generally think of as design, (...), or displayed in museum exhibitions. But we hope that exhibitions and books such as this one will gradually change this reality and help generate wider awareness and participation in this 'other' kind of design"(Smith 2007).

The so-called "other" kind of design is represented by projects made for the use in developing countries. The majority of the exhibited projects were built on small-scale technology and economy and were made possible by social entrepreneurs, small non-for profit organisations, and simplistic, but smart, technical or process-related innovations. In the catalogue the curator Cynthia Smith's article "World Designs to End Poverty" refers to two books that have influenced this kind of thinking for decades: Ernst Friedrich Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973), which provided the basis for the Appropriate Technology Movement by

calling for local production and the use of local resources to satisfy local needs; and, Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (1971). Papanek is introduced as "a product designer for UNESCO" and as "one of the first advocates for socially responsible design (...) indicting not only the Western consumerist society but also designers, stating that, 'the genuine needs of man have often been neglected by the designer'" (Smith 2007). The curator's interest in Papanek's work goes to the numerous low-cost products he presented in his book, "including a radio made from discarded metal cans and powered by a candle for local production" (Smith 2007). The radio she refers to in her article is the Tin-Can Radio, which also caught the attention of the curator of *Unresolved Matters*. Listing Papanek's work in the context of *Design for the other 90%* once again points to some of the 'unresolved matters' – the increasing division between those who can easily access knowledge and information and those who cannot. The same Tin-Can Radio, which was used as a reference to Beuys' multiple in Utrecht, also decorated the exhibition catalogue of the Generali Foundation's 2002 show as introduced afore. Papanek's radio is a helpful vehicle since it touches upon one of the key issues within the call for social change – the democratisation in accessing communication and information media. Along with the career of the *DftRW*-book – which we have traced in an earlier article – the Tin-Can radio became a useful reference, even an icon within the search for a 'real world design': along

with the gathering of time, Papanek's book has changed value and status from a controversial counter cultural text to a historic landmark and timeless classic (Fineder, Geisler 2010). In the same way the radio apparently lost its 'ugliness' and Papanek his nickname as "garbage-can" designer. Additionally to the book title, which meanwhile has developed into a label for a specific approach to design, and the Tin-Can Radio, now a symbol for design and social change, there is an increasing appropriation of statements taken from *DftRW*. One of these quotes is currently promoting a design competition at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York:

„Design, if it is to be ecologically responsible and socially responsive must be revolutionary and radical in the truest sense. It must dedicate itself to...maximum diversity with minimum inventory ... or doing the most with the least“ (Papanek 1985a).

This statement is used to announce the international design competition *Design for the Real World Redux* by the MAD in partnership with the Austrian Cultural Forum New York and the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, which is the soon to be inaugurated as home of the Victor J. Papanek Foundation. The call focuses on "innovative and radical examples of ecologically responsible and/or socially responsive designs (...) in the spirit of Victor Papanek's philosophy" [9].

The homepage further provides us with one possible answer to our question of how and why a former design dissident like Papanek has become a key figure for today's critical design discourse:

His ideas on, and critique of, design practice and culture resonate as soundly today as they did when he published them in his seminal and polemical book, Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change (1971). Papanek argued for research over impulse in the production of creative, sustainable, safe, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural design. In a Papanek-designed society, objects and structures are responsive to the needs of both man and earth [10].

They continue

“Yet as we face unparalleled social, economic, and environmental challenges, Papanek's words are more timely and urgent than ever.” [11].

CONCLUSION:

This paper has traced how today's discourse on design casts the spotlight on the reawakening of social and ecological responsibility, which reminds us of the counter-cultural design discourse of the

1960s and '70s. In so doing we have shed light on the role of Papanek's work informing the actual design agenda by analysing recent exhibitions and accompanying media. We have focused on termini and phrases used in titles and curatorial explanations as markers of the current paradigm shift away from the mere fetishism of the 'ideal form' to 'design with purpose', 'design for the other 90%' or 'design for the real world'. We have looked at examples of what the projects have in common: their concern with 'unresolved matters' of modern societies. Thereby it became significant that the various authors draw from a repertoire that directly or indirectly goes back to Papanek, then partially outlawed and today well-nigh glorified. Here it also becomes evident that the current 'redux' challenges the same questions as raised decades before by dissidents like Papanek. As our research work has identified, this debate utilises some of Papanek's most polemic statements taken from *DftRW* in order to respond to the urgent need for a critical reflection of our consumerist society. This goes hand in hand with a new desire for a 'design for the real world' (also termed social design), which seems to force the development of a new movement in design. Within this emerging movement – concentrated on the social and the democratic – Papanek's renaissance should not be understood as simplistic "learning from history" but rather as a chance to "evolve and reflect on it", as expressed by the curator of the *Unresolved Matters* exhibition. Design exhibitions play a significant role as markers and mediators of societal values in

disseminating and popularising the current call for social change. This examination has also shown how museums contribute in promoting design as a valuable instrument in 'healing' and even saving the world by drawing on Papanek's 'universal' design philosophy. Looking at this development in the light of the design history of the twentieth century, our findings put to question whether this marks a new state of social utopia, fuelled by unsatisfiable expectations of the power of design.

Notes:

- [1]. Dansk Design Center, Exhibition 04.13.11 – 02.19.12, *CHALLENGE SOCIETY – designing simple solutions to a complex future*, also see <http://en.ddc.dk/exhibition/challenge-society-designing-simple-solutions-complex-future> (last accessed 20/09/2011).
- [2]. We borrow this term from design historian Penny Sparke: Spake, Penny (1985) 'Anti-Design', *Tools*, 8: 14–15.
- [3]. The symposium was organised by the Winterhouse Institute in April 2010 at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Como, Italy. Where 22 representatives from 11 countries came together, among them: Paola Antonelli (senior curator of design and architecture, MoMA, New York), Ashoke Chatterjee (former executive director of NID, Ahmedabad; India), Galit Gaon (creative director Design Museum Holon, Israel), Jeremy Myerson (director Helen Hamlyn Centre; London, UK) and John Thackara (curator and master mind of Doors of Perception, Amsterdam; NL).
- [4]. See <http://other90.cooperhewitt.org/> (last accessed 20/09/2011).
- [5]. The exhibition itself took place at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, 04.10.2009–14.02.2010.
- All information, including this question, was put on the homepage of the Utrecht Manifest 2009: Biennale for Social Design, see <http://www.utrechtmanifest.nl/node/277> (last accessed 20/09/2011).

- [6]. Ibid.
- [7]. See <http://foundation.generali.at/index.php?id=76&L=1> (last accessed 20/09/2011).
- [8]. See for instance Bloemink, Barbara (2007) *Design for the Other 90%*, New York: Copper-Hewitt National Design Museum: 5.
- [9]. See <http://vjpsocialdesign.madmuseum.org/> (last accessed 20/09/2011).
- [10]. Ibid.
- [11]. Ibid.

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Vienna: Generali Foundation: 165.

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Poverty', *Design for the Other 90%*, New York:
Copper-Hewitt National Design Museum: 10–18.