NEW FRONTIERS OF DESIGN

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Earlier this spring, manufacturers and designers from all over the world were shipping their wares to Milan to prepare for the Salone del Mobile. Anybody involved in design knows this is the most important rendezvous of the year — or at least it used to be, when design meant mostly furniture and objects. Designers anticipate meeting new talent and inspiration; they seek out curators, writers, teachers, students, and, of course, each other — this is a chance to meet with their peers and trade war stories. It's hard to tell in advance whether Milan will be blooming with wisteria or gray, rainy, and dreary at this time of year, but the event is inevitably alive with the sound of design. The Salone is to design what Cannes is to film: the most useful and most productive yearly trade meeting. But is the future of design here?

Milan still represents a big red dot in the geography of design, but design is changing rapidly, and so are its maps. There are myriad forms of design, many of which don't require movement of materials and artifacts; only curiosity, an Internet connection, and the ability to seek, learn, and synthesise from other fields and cultures.[1] These mutants are the future of design and the place to find them is not at big design trade fairs, but rather in interdisciplinary gatherings, pluralistic exchanges and, especially, in certain schools. Programs like the Design Interactions at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London or the Department of Design at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) are trying to merge poetry and beauty with advanced technology.[2] A crucial contemporary effort was pioneered,

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[1] Quote from Antonelli's M+ Matters public talk (Asian Design: Histories, Collecting, Curating) at Asia Society Hong Kong Center on 3 Dec, 2012: 'The change in design is that design has become open, dynamic, and really much more tuned to society, to the real world... One of the chages is the shift from problem solving — the old stereotype of the definition of design — to problem finding. It is something you might also have heard before from philosophers or scientists. But it is very much an issue today - not taking anything for granted, not just embarking on finding solutions, but rather making sure that the question that's being asked is the right one. And that's what designers do often today. They don't necessarily provide answers anymore but they ask questions.'

[2] Ibid. 'Design today sometimes has to be deeply ironic. It's about the irony that helps you reveal new directions for the future.'

of course, by such groundbreaking centers as the Media Lab at MIT, the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) at New York University, and the Knowledge Interaction Design Laboratory (KID) at Tokyo University. However, the newer initiatives at RCA and KAIST are attempting an even more daring synthesis of digital media, this time not with art, but rather with design, which was not a priority before (despite what KID's name might imply).

Since the industrial revolution ushered in the modern idea of design, different poles have anchored design, attracted designers and intermediaries, and concentrated cultural and technological production. The manufacturing plants themselves, which vertically integrated all aspects of production and marketing from design to distribution, were the first. The great Josiah Wedgwood, whose groundbreaking 18th-century company was recently sold and is in danger of being obliterated, is the archetype of such a manufacturer. This model persisted until after World War II, when the poles began to shift. Companies then began to subcontract most of the actual construction, while they continued to handle the pre- and post-production phases themselves. This is still the model used by either very big companies such as Herman Miller or Steelcase, or smaller companies producing objects in different materials, each of which requires dedicated plants and technologies. Even in that context, however, the geography of design shifted. Whereas subcontractors once tended to be located in specific areas such as Michigan, California, or north of Milan, today they are spread all over the world.[3]

Just as the landscape of manufacturing has changed, so has the conference scene. Milan's Salone has been joined on the map by a number of fairs and salons that make up smaller red dots, including London (in September), Tokyo and Kortrijk, Belgium (in October), Paris and Cologne (January), and Berlin and New York (May). Several opportunities now exist for people to meet and do business, and new forms of design that have, for instance, multimedia and interfaces as their focus, have entered the mix. Other gatherings not traditionally considered

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[3] Ibid. '…it's important that the characteristic of design today, the criteria of which we judge the soundness a design are not really connected to geography - whether done by an Italian or Hong Kong designer. It's about how any kind of design fits in the world. It's about whether any object, interface, interaction or system adds something to the world without wasting its energy and resources and without wasting our time. And if we have to burn a few more chairs like what Mendini did in the 1970s to get there, we shall.'

"design," such as Ars Electronica in Linz or TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) in Monterey, have begun competing for designers' attention and money.

Moreover, the tough financial situation and dwindling travel funds; the increasing number of resources and opportunities available online; the ease of movement from digital design to digital production that renders prototyping almost unnecessary until the moment of distribution; the shrinking of the luxury industry, where much of this type of design resides; the increased sensitivity to the footprint caused by air travel; and especially the massive shift of the design profession from making things to proposing models, visualising complexity, and building scenarios, are all working together to further endanger this latest design world map. What is important now is the production of ideas: The poles have become lighter and more immaterial, having rid themselves of much of the baggage of material production. The geography of design has transformed; systems are now built around schools rather than industry.

Design education's path since the second half of the 19th century is a fascinating and rather unexplored subject. That may be a result of the protean definition of design — that vague noun always in need of a modifier to make complete cultural sense, whether it is "graphic," "furniture," "automotive," or "fashion." Moreover, examples of schools entirely devoted to design are rare, as design often figures as a division within schools devoted to the arts or, as with polytechnic schools, to architecture and engineering. The best contemporary design schools are the most important centers for the production of ideas, having earned preeminence over the R&D departments of corporations and other think tanks by progressively shedding the focus on the immediate production of finite artifacts to privilege experimentation. As a result, they usually flourish where students and teachers can find interdisciplinarity and pluralism, in areas with a strong cultural identity — be it the arts, engineering, architecture, technology, craft, or in any other discipline from which designers draw on a daily basis — that have connections and access to other cultural poles, such as departments of universities, museums, galleries, and so on. Along with KAIST and the RCA and several other institutes in London — always a great design incubator — many vibrant schools have created new

centers of design gravity around the world, from Eindhoven's Design Academy in Holland, to Bezalel in Jerusalem.

The dismantling of a static geography of design is not over yet, however. The system of schools and other educational institutions is becoming wider and more open.[4] It will hopefully foster the development of identity and personality, the ultimate pointillist and open-source destination of the design trajectory.

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[4] Ibid. 'Openness means extroversion, altruism. It means generosity, and also transparency.'