

**Sofia Pia Belenky: At your recent joint lecture at the Het Nieuwe Instituut you said maybe we should demolish the word *design*. This could be the last time we would hear the word. This is the end. We will remember this day.**

Beatriz Colomina: We didn't quite say it that way, but it sounds much better the way you are saying it, more dramatic.

Mark Wigley: Yes, sounds like The Doors were invited to the funeral with Jim Morrison breathing '*This is the end*' as the word "design" is buried. Actually we said there two ways to go: either let's get rid of the word design since it's really getting in the way – or let's reboot it, let's rethink it. And our new little yellow book (*Are We Human? Notes on an Archeology of Design*) is really based on the 'let's reboot it' approach. But if you can't rethink it then dump it. It's really weird that the entire world is now organized around the concept of design that we think is so particular to us as humans, yet designers have neglected the word and exactly during the years that we've neglected it, it went global. Ubiquitous.

BC: We started by thinking about what design is, teaching parallel classes on *What is Design?* at Princeton and Columbia and our intent was to reconsider the way we think about design. But the question quickly turned into *Are We Human?* and then it was just impossible to keep the old notion of design. What makes us human is design and design is everything. It's bigger than the world. At that point you have to put that word carefully away and start with something else. The reality is that design was invented, both as a word and as a concept, in a very particular moment in history in response to the Industrial Revolution. It's an Anglo-Saxon word. For example, in most countries in Europe they don't even have a clear translation; in Italian 'disegno' means drawing. In Spanish, 'diseño' means industrial design. I was surprised when I came to the United States and heard someone in the school of architecture at Columbia say that they were teaching a design studio. I thought it was product design but then realized that architecture schools in the USA were calling themselves *schools of design*. It's an Anglo-Saxon thing to conflate architecture and design.

MW: Design schools are great at designing everything, re-designing everything – but not the word design. What is always fascinating for both Beatriz and I, in any conversation, is what is not being questioned or what is being taken for granted, in this case the word *design*.

BC: It is actually appalling that most of the world of architecture is working in this very narrow concept of what design is. Unaware or uninterested in exploring all the dimensions of design. So they are constantly working on this surface layer, which is actually a very clear limitation.

**SPB: Also the implications of this word on the way we think about the self, the design of our bodies and brain. Thinking about design in this way we can get beyond the specific designed object or architecture and talk about relationships. Our understanding of the**

**word design seems to give way to how we think about relationships between multiple people not just a person and an object.**

MW: And just because these wider relationships are complex and multidimensional doesn't mean that they are great – in every sense we seem to be in a very bad moment globally. Meanwhile, the concept of design is a rip roaring success, it's on everybody's lips; from business people to politicians to ISIS being praised for its design abilities, its website, its communication, its control. I think those of us who are designers, teaching in design or writing about design, really need to seriously rethink our approach and the little yellow book is really driven by this sort of feeling; that this is urgent. Let's cut the crap and get serious about design. The great thing about designers is that they are really smart, innovative, and very inventive, but they are also nervous. So there is sort of this feeling that if we tinker with this design thing, we might be out of work. Well, get used to it, most designers are out of work in terms of the big issues.

**SPB: But then why are we teaching architecture as a singular thing if it has always been a discipline of multiple fields. Historically haven't architects always been Renaissance men / women?**

MW: You are so right. Architects are kind of a magnificent species because they can be so promiscuous. There is nothing we will not talk about. There is this sort of refusal of etiquette. No protocols. No shame. Architects simply dive deep into any question and really think about it. But they are a little reluctant to think about themselves and their relationship to the world they are in. As a result we end up with 99.99 percent of architecture schools, of architecture magazines or architectural exhibitions and so on, that are really devoted to mediocrity. Mediocrity is hard, it's really, really hard, because most of us have good days and bad days. To be consistently mediocre requires incredible discipline. There are a million or so architecture students in the world. To train that amazing group of people to be mediocre seems like some kind of horror film. A nightmare. Of course we love the AA because it represents a non-boring alternative. This kind of promiscuity of the architect is like a slippage in and out of categories, cross-breeding ideas. For us the AA represents a promiscuous desire to rethink things. We very much treasure these kinds of places and certain kinds of magazines, museums, sites, people.

BC: Ever since Alvin Boyarsky, some of the most innovative thinking in architecture has come out of the AA and also some of the innovative approaches to pedagogy, mostly bottom up. That's what I love about the AA; it always begins with the students. You look at the moment that Alvin Boyarsky takes over the school, I think of these people that were teaching there like Peter Cook, the Smithsons, and so on, and I think to myself the students must have been in awe of all these professors. But it's not that way at all. Even with these unbelievable people teaching, you had the students immediately coming out with radical ideas that were really challenging

the very young faculty; students were lampooning Peter Cook and Archigram and taking them all apart. The only one they left untouched, for some reason, is Cedric Price. Everyone else was up for grabs. They could take down anybody.

MW: If design is interesting, it is like any other form of experimental work; because the people doing it don't know what they are doing. So they are asking questions, and we are very much interested in the idea of design as a way of asking questions. Our thesis is that what makes the human *human* is simply that the human is never sure what the human is. A sort of Woody Allen species... And it looks for itself in artifacts but when it does so it's unsure of what it sees and rethinks itself. A species rethought by its artifacts. So we are the species that is suspended somewhere between ourselves and "our" artifacts and we are not sure who is running the show: the artifacts or us? In this light, the human is an extraordinary set of questions. If you say that design is about helping or taking care of people, then it should be a form of hospitality to this radical self-questioning. So architecture, design, philosophy and all these disciplines would no longer be "good" by protecting, conserving, stabilizing, but instead creating a sort of hospitality for unsettling transformative questions. Over hundreds of thousands of years, our species produced itself by being uncertain of "its" objects and itself. 'Good design' is such a horrible idea. It's not good.

**SPB: When did the notion of good design come to be?**

BC: Exactly from the moment of the massive acceleration of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century and the proliferation of machine-made objects and the associated trauma that people were starting to be treated as machine parts. They had no idea how to design these objects differently though, so at the beginning there was a lot of objects with decoration and ornament being produced by machines. The machine reproduced the artefacts of the world it was leaving behind, which made no sense. An argument developed that our objects have to become clean and smooth. They have to be consistent with the machine. Therefore there is no wasted effort, no wasted time. This means the elimination of everything that was superfluous, all ornamentation. The notion of good design is also a moral idea: good design implies that you are a good person, that if you don't waste effort then you are efficient and productive. It's tied up with a lot of other complex ideas of the time.

**SPB: The AA sits in a bit of a precarious position here, being a very non-British school, in Britain, we see a proliferation of different ways of designing here; everyone applies their own value criteria rather than an accepted 'good'.**

MW: Good design is a British idea, perfected by the Germans, sent over the Atlantic to America where it was rebranded and redistributed globally.

BC: This was reinforced by institutions like

MOMA with their good design programs and their good design exhibitions. Another example is Ulm, a school in Germany founded after the war, constructed from the idea that you can educate the German population to be good, to be democratic through design.

MW: Very dictatorial.

BC: It's more than dictatorial.

MW: Authoritarian.

BC: It's even more than that. It's megalomaniac that through design, you can change an entire way of thinking of a population, that's unbelievable. Through design you can make good people and regenerate society.

MW: One of the little theories of the little yellow book is that even if architects and designers feel like they are sort of stuck in a very thin layer of contemporary society, that layer has a function. It's an anesthetic function to desensitize people to the world they live in. So our kind of professional job is to desensitize people to the fact that they and countless fellow citizens are living a horrible life. That just doesn't seem like a very admirable task. Fortunately there are a few schools around the world that are interested in a form of design that confronts the horror of the current situation and see it as an opportunity for new kinds of organisms and new kinds of ideas to grow.

The amount of bullshit about design is spectacular. We are swimming in it all the time. It's not fair on students to get all the disastrous set of clichés about design. The little yellow book tries to just discuss design more transparently.

BC: One of the chapters of the book asks: what if design is all about perversion? What if modern design is kind of kinky? Why not. Why believe some professor that says design is about solving problems. Maybe it is a very kinky thing. All these sort of shiny surfaces and slippery things. Maybe it's sort of a sexy thing.

MW: Maybe, if one reads Charles Darwin, design is actually all about sex. How do you get someone to like you? If you make a great object so someone will have sex with you, then design has a purpose.

**SPB: If it will keep you reproducing, you can survive.**

MW: Then why don't we talk about this? ♥