



Only design will save Europe's future

Description

This was the agreed title of my 10 minute polemic at a debating session at the Design Research Society Conference ([DRS2016](#)) on Tuesday 28 June. Here's the transcript.

You may think it odd to burden design with the responsibility to redeem anything, let alone to save Europe. But that's by no means a new role. The kind of design that most of us at this conference are involved with is driven by a desire to improve things. Furthermore, the history of design as a discipline runs in parallel with the history of Europe. We have only to think of how the Bauhaus infiltrated the rest of the world as its members escaped twentieth century fascism.

If there's to be any redemption through design I don't only think of it in terms of the creative industries, growing businesses, so-called soft power and a means to economic success.

I think design's salutary function will come by spreading ideas that are embedded in design, design theory and design processes. I've often thought that if something is so good and worthwhile then proselytize, share it with others, rather than cut yourself off: e.g. if Britain is so brilliant, designerly, organised, pragmatic, sceptical and slightly amusing then give others the benefit. Don't leave.

But back to design: if designers have such great insights then let those infiltrate the rest. I've always thought this in relation to the position of our school of architecture within the University and a wider professional context. Let's not only teach architects, but others who will benefit from studio practice, ideas about synthesis, making futures, working with others, and valuing cross disciplinary teams.

I want to focus on three attributes of design pertinent to the current situation in the UK and Europe, and that are worth disseminating outside the walls of the studio, workshop and conference hall.



Complexity

The first is about complexity. Unlike politicians (and reporters who become politicians), designers and design theorists don't depend on one-liners, such as *let's take back control*. Of course, designers practically invented slogans and manifestoes, and created stunning fonts and graphics to bring them to life. But like a lot of hands-on innovators designers know how these signs and symbols work, the limits of such creations, and their subservience to ambiguity and irony.

Campaigning politicians apparently feel the need to keep their messages simple and uncomplicated. But designers can and do deliver complicated messages. In any case they communicate through artefacts, which are complex objects in complex situations of use.

As well as being explicit in their messages, designers can deliberately or unwittingly conceal messages, like dormant DNA, that gets released when the situation is appropriate, as when the Eifel Tower presents as a symbol of liberty, or British telephone boxes present public services in happy union with civic responsibility.

So the rest of the world can learn from the designer, not just as the servant who decorates the sides of campaign buses, but as the creator and purveyor of mixed and complicated messages that transform as they get passed through semiotic networks in complex environments.

Designers of course are skilled at packaging all that complexity in simple, elegant Bauhaus-inspired forms when required. Think of the complexity contained in the minimalist Apple or Samsung smartphone. At other times we can subvert and unleash that hidden complexity, as we've learnt from experimental musicians, sound designers, glitch artists and hackers. So my first point is that design deals without embarrassment in complexities, an ethos worth sharing.

Infection

The second beatitude from design is *infection*. Designs are, or can be, carriers of memes that get transmitted, replicated, mutated and combined. As a trainee architect I used to flip through magazines inspecting or just glancing at plans, sketches and photographs, and of course I went on the grand tour and visited actual buildings. Designs cluster as populations within complex style-ecologies. Now we have only to search online for reviews both professional and amateur of design outputs, and are bombarded with images that multiply and contaminate. To continue the medical metaphor, they also revive, comfort and inoculate.

Designs communicate, inform and spread in ways more powerful than slogans and debates filled with words. Politics uses graphic design clumsily to that end. You've perhaps seen the artless UKIP poster showing a photograph of refugees as if waiting to enter the UK. Designers can communicate with greater intelligence and better informed motives.

Gathering

The third blessing of designs is their ability to distract and engage in ways peripheral to the problem at hand. This is easiest to illustrate with puppies. I recently went upstairs from my flat to challenge a neighbour about the disconcerting noises transmitted through my ceiling. I was greeted at the door by a band of infants and an enthusiastic puppy who leapt at me with disarming charm and became the immediate focus of conversation. That not only explained the sounds but patting and hand wrestling with an enthusiastic canine made it easier to broach the subject of peaceful co-existence, the purpose of my visit.

Not everyone can engage with other people's pets, but designs serve a similar function as entities about which people [gather](#). Some designed objects such as dining tables, meeting rooms and television screens function in that way, but designed things also gather in any case as talking points, and objects about which to agree or disagree. The thingy character of everyday things is one of Martin Heidegger's themes that I enjoy.

Already, while discussions are getting tough inside or outside of Europe, some of us can talk about flags, Venn diagrams of complex European configurations, border stations and bananas. Things imagined and real become focal points of reflection, discussion and eventual transformation. It's interesting how images on social media produced by individuals with basic design skills get circulated. The EU flag with the lone star sailing out of the circle is one example, and I'll never forget the mockumentary at the time of the Scottish independence debate in which a presenter explained via a Lego model how cars crossing the England-Scotland border would change seamlessly from driving on the left to driving on the right. Designs provide powerful mental images, and illuminate political logics and absurdities.

At least in Britain there is a lot of talk about healing divisions in the country, not least the roughly 50:50 split between those who expressed a wish to leave and those who still want to stay in the European Union. I prefer "gathering" to "uniting." I lost interest some time ago in solutions and slogans that seek unity, when diversity, difference and contest are so much more real. But "gathering" **is** interesting, and designed objects provide moments about which to focus attention, gather, share, resolve and dispute.

My story about the puppy is true, but even more engaging is the moving account of how the war surgeon David Nott was honored at a private dinner with the Queen just days after he returned from poorly resourced hospitals in war ravaged Syria. His own trauma meant he couldn't respond to her attempts at conversation until she called in her corgis which he petted as they talked.

I would say that designs can also harbour therapeutic benefits, which is the same as saying they aid us in our thinking. Try a conversation over a map, a meal, a building, or a hat when tackling a thorny problem.

Conclusion

So can design save Europe? I didn't want to start with the Internet, but it is one of those multifaceted, hydra-like design monsters in our midst that deals in the trinity of complexity, infection and gathering. Everyone knows how the Internet features as a medium for information, misinformation and dissent, but what about its therapeutic role?

It's well known that we select media channels that help boost our own view of the world, and there are traps in that. But at last I know what Facebook and Twitter are for. Through the noise of friends' random holiday pictures, of food, pets and babies there's a sudden concentration of communication over something like a national crisis, and expressions of solidarity as Europhiles pass through the various stages of grief. In the circles I move in many display their dismay, anxiety and/or optimism through images. It's not world-leading design, but often spontaneous and heartfelt. In these and other respects design is part of an ongoing project to repair, restore and save our sanity, if not the world.

Thank you.

Notes

- On *gathering* also see [Gathered round the hearth](#).
- Of interest: In a famous interview for [Der Spiegel](#) in 1966 Martin Heidegger said: "Only a god can still save us."

Category

1. Design

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1. Europe
2. things

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