

## **Brown is Not the New Black: Designing Outside the Non-Place**

Alison J. Clarke

What might happen if something in the Viennese tap-water generated a collective state of hyper-consciousness that threw the sheer scale of the design that surrounds us, from the patterns on our socks to interiors of our hospital waiting-rooms, into sudden relief? What if the complex networks of materiality and culture that come to make our object worlds became suddenly transparent? Someone, somewhere decided the typeface of our tram ticket. Someone, somewhere suggested that cobalt blue was no longer this Season's 'must-have' colour. Everything from our toothbrush to our grave is the result of design processes. Everything from our objects, to our services and our interfaces is designed. Design is the ultimate mediator.

Design is ubiquitous; but we are almost entirely unconscious of the immensity of its presence unless it fails or offends us. But most significantly a heightened awareness of the vastness of design's impact on everyday lives would quickly reveal the most uncomfortable truths about power in contemporary society. For, despite the transformative visions of 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernists, design still tends to exist in an inverse relation to need.

Most European cities are presently defined by a self-conscious design culture of branded flagship stores, iconic 'It' buildings and over-managed public space. The design of 'quick-fix' economic solutions all too often takes precedence over long-term understandings of socially sustainable environments and cultures. Design, at its best, is the subtle means of mediation that brings together the old and the new, the familiar and the innovative, into a mutually harmonious state. It is a force for accessibility: for social inclusion. Yet all too often it is the vulgarised claims of designers professing the transformation of the world with 'avant-garde' designs or new-improved products (poetic sports shoes; emotionally enriched Corian® work-surfaces; experiential toothbrushes?) that dominate mainstream international design discourse. The proliferation of endless consumer product designs, as our present economic crisis reveals, is an unsustainable delusion. But genuinely creative design, the sort of design that silently, truly transforms everyday life for the masses, remains on the whole anonymous. But this is what Vienna, as city with a unique civic culture and radical design history, has excelled in.

Half a century ago, leading American economist J. K. Galbraith ventured, in his best-selling polemic *The Affluent Society* (1958), a prophetic description of a future world. In his vision of a dystopian, affluent society the wealthy would inhabit a protected private sector of designed luxury; the poor, the aesthetically impoverished landscape of a public-funded sector. To quote Galbraith,

The family which takes its mauve and cerise, air-conditioned, power-steered and power-braked automobile out for a tour passes through cities that are badly paved, made hideous by litter... They pass on into a countryside that has been rendered largely invisible by commercial art... They picnic on exquisitely packaged food from a portable icebox by a polluted stream. (Galbraith, 1958: 223).

In a contemporary version of Galbraith's vivid depiction of an economically driven public/private material world, this middle-class family would surely drive a black Hummer with tinted windows, and unpack their picnic from a Karim Rasid pastel plastic picnic box before making their way home to their new-build suburban home (car windows firmly shut) through a run-down 'migrant-populated' area on the periphery of the city.

In many contemporary cities that are celebrated as hubs of creative design, this lurid vision of material inequity is all too plain; design has no place in the real, lived-lives of everyday people but rather is confined to an endless round of champagne-sipping private

views. It is symptomatic of the shift in design's status, and that of designers themselves, that design (as one-off or limited pieces) is increasingly taking on the garb of 'art'; exhibited in art galleries and auctioned at extraordinarily high prices. But if design culture continues to gravitate unerringly towards the art market it's truly radical nature, to transform and critique the very mechanisms of everyday life, will surely be lost. Why should design, the ultimate material social force, need to imitate art in order to achieve its full recognition? Have the cultural hierarchies our late 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors fought so hard to dismantle, thus giving the applied arts as radical a role as art in the politics of everyday life, been re-born? Or is art just a term that generates easy 'added-value' in a population made lazy by an increasingly alienated relation to the ownership of the stuff that surrounds them?

Vienna is renowned universally for its exceptional status in the history of design – precisely because it placed design above art as a means of social transformation (from the Wiener Werkstatte to the legacy of the Red Vienna housing designs). The weight of this history poses a burden some designers might feel happier to avoid: for Vienna is surely a city full of aesthetic ghosts and coffee house rumour. But it is Vienna's astonishing legacy as the harbinger of cutting-edge aesthetic debate, and its relation to design as a transformative cultural practice that sets the city apart. In the details of the Vienna's everyday environments and objects, one sees an approach to design that embraces the everyday as a profound source of inspiration. Vienna is a uniquely thriving city of makers and thinkers; it is a city in which extreme scales of production and temporality co-exist and are integrated into the fabric of the capital's public life. It is simultaneously home to industrial product designers using rapid-prototyping technologies for a global market, and those making the highest quality hand-made designs.

Galbraith's gloomy description of a neo-classical capitalist model – in which the designer's sole purpose is to perpetuate conspicuous consumption and an insatiable capitalist appetite for expansion– is, of course, tied to a distinctively North American history of material culture. Design in this equation is merely responsible for a never-ending proliferation of superfluous goods. Vienna's unique approach to design is founded on an intellectual discourse, as opposed to a purely commercial imperative. Design in this city has always been an intervention, a statement, rather than a bland expression of industrial out-put. However with an historical shift towards privatisation, in which State and national industries have a diminishing power over individual's lives, how is the European role of design as culture (rather than merely commerce) to survive?

In some European cities, from Barcelona to Amsterdam, there has been a very self-conscious marketing of design and designers: a kind of crude 'branding' of national aesthetic disposition. But Vienna's capacity for creativity, the sheer diversity of its creative community and output, evades this easy slide into national self-parody. Vienna, unlike its counterparts, is able to simultaneously sustain local cultures of 'slow' craft-based production and the 'fast' turn-over of international design consultants. But what both ends of this design spectrum share (from the designer using locally sourced materials, to the international design office dealing with globalised virtually-generated projects) is that they are located *somewhere*. Despite all the hyperbole around non-place, the globalisation of visual culture and non-fixity of ever-circulating, internationally inter-changeable creatives - in reality we might have to admit something extraordinarily unfashionable; that place matters. Certainly, we can creatively network across the stretch of the globe; but far beyond the artificial branding exercises of creative industries think-tanks that give us design 'movements' (like the Dutch design we are so familiar with) Vienna is proof that place really does matter to creativity.

And there is a quiet revolution afoot. In a culture of brand homogeneity, in which each global city comes to resemble another, design practice is evolving as the key means of mediating difference, generating consensus and delivering innovation to an ever wider group of people. As a city of diversity, as yet refreshingly un-branded as the producer of a particular type or style of design, Vienna remains uniquely and radically organic in its

approach to design. In an ecologically and economically precarious global state, design's relation to the common-sense notion of innovation (as a determinant of constant change in new products, new forms, new patterns, new typologies) must be brought into question. Is accelerated change necessarily the logical outcome of creative practice? Are there ways of designing that develop a more nuanced, anthropological relation to socially and materially sustainable worlds? The sheer extremes of Vienna's design out-put in terms of its scales of production, from the local to the global, make it once again the ideal setting for a radical re-thinking of design's role as mediator.

While Vienna plays an ever-greater role within the global creative industries, its design culture is integrally tied to a locally thriving civic culture. It is this public culture, that other European cities have struggled to maintain, that has always been at the centre of broader political and sociological debates over the role of aesthetics and 'things' in the social transformation of everyday lives. The diversity of Vienna's contemporary designers continues this radical tradition: promising an approach to design that will always exceed the ambition of merely offering nicer coloured cars, or more blandly fashionable retail spaces.