



It's About Time — Time, motion, acceleration in design and architecture

How do we mean 'it's about time'? Everything is about time; 'time' is an eternal issue. So what is the reason to talk about time today? What's the urgency of the theme? For design? For architecture? For culture? When combined with the notions of 'motion' and 'acceleration', the notion of time already becomes more precise: things are moving, and moving ever faster.

Next question: what 'things'?

1. Things, as in objects: we are moving stuff all over the world at an ever increasing mass and speed. Things designed in Ohio, US, are being made in Guangdong, China, transported to Amsterdam, Europe by a Philippine shipping company to be traded by a whole-seller from Italy and sold in stores across the Russian republic, aided by a call centre in Mumbai, India. Or vice versa.

What does this mean for design? The logistics of remote communication and production and economical transportation will weigh heavily on the design brief. The fact that a design concept will have to be produced and work in cultures far removed from the designers' will also have its effect. Then there's the political, or moral issue: cheaper production in low-wage countries can lead to loss of jobs in the company's country of origin, and bad working conditions in the production countries. World-wide transportation has a tremendous global environmental impact. Are we distributing products or problems?

2. Things, as in ideas. Any product, any design stands for a set of cultural values, whether consciously or unconsciously. These values are distributed with the products that result from them. Now that we move products over ever growing distances at an ever increasing speed, we need to face the question of which values we ship with them? This is a design matter as well; how are designers responding to the accelerating traffic between local communities and global markets? Are they trying to balance local values with global economics, or are they, even unwittingly, adding to the tensions between them?

Time is a crucial element here, and should be taken into consideration more, in terms of design, production, distribution, consumption and economics.

1. Time for design: the development of a design needs research. The more quality time is devoted to researching the conditions and needs of the design's producers and users, the better it is prepared to function in a culturally viable and valuable manner.

2. Time for production: it remains of course a matter of balancing resources and aims, but 'time' in terms of production does not only need to be a function of efficiency (as in: the less time the better). A hand-crafted product incorporates other values than an industrially produced one. Can design take this insight to the next level, that of producing well designed products using 'manufaktur' in a cost effective and culturally interesting way?

3. Time for distribution: Can things distribute themselves? Or is the only scale thinkable for distributing goods the massive container shipments that roam the oceans these days? Is there a (potential) value in the fact that things travel greater distances than most of us do? Can one design things in such a way that they accumulate value in the time they travel?

4. Time for consumption: acceleration seems to be the most (or sometimes even only) decisive factor in consumer markets; no growth is considered lethal. How can we design products that do not have to cannibalize on their previous generations to survive? The design for 'upgradeability' in stead of replacement seems a way to go. Design time for adaptation, evolution, amelioration, instead of adding to the growing heap of old, obsolete and unusable equipment and objects that litters our homes today.

5. The economics of time: in today's design and production cycles, time is the enemy: it has to be beaten. The market is a race against the clock. Time is money in a very limited sense: a cost factor. We 'spend' time. Can we 'earn' time as well? Traditionally, this question is answered in terms of 'time-saving' – the onion cutter saves us time because it accelerates the process of cutting onions. Lucius Burckhardt has explained that this is often a false argumentation (because it leaves out quite a few other variables), which leads to what he calls 'böse objekte' (malign objects – ref: 'Design Ist Unsichtbar', Linz 1982).

From the point of view of design, I would suggest it might be interesting to look at how we can design time to become a positive value, looking at all aspects of the product cycle. A new notion of 'time based design'.

Centrifugal —

1. acting, moving, or pulling away from a centre or axis.
2. using or operated by centrifugal force
3. see efferent
- > conducting outward or directing away from an organ, especially the brain or spinal cord.
4. used to describe a plant part or tissue that develops from the centre outward
5. tending to disperse political or administrative power away from a central authority

There is a growing notion that ‘time is running out’ for Western hegemony in the cultural, political and economic fields. New centres of power and influence are rising, with China and India in the East, Iran and Egypt in the Middle East, and Brazil in South America. Although still unsurpassed in military power, and still formidable economies, the old cultural centres which were for centuries distributed between Europe and the United States are rapidly losing their clout. In design, we still only see the very beginnings of this ‘centrifugal force’. It’s about time we take them into account.

Although the bulk of global design still follows Western models and technologies, there are signs that there is a growing interest in defining more locally based design methodologies and practices. Here, the most interesting countries are (from my admittedly limited perspective) China, India, Iran, South Africa and Brazil. Although quite influential in the arts, China’s design production at the time seems preoccupied with copying proven models and methods from the West. In graphic design, I know of very few examples that go beyond a nostalgic reference to ancient Chinese culture. Again, my perspective here is limited, but I think it is worthwhile to research this aspect deeper: are the ‘new economies’ developing design strategies and models, which more reflect their own cultural heritage, and if so, how? Are the centrifugal forces which can be seen in economy and politics also at work in design culture? And if they are, what do they result in?

For design in the West, there is (or should be) also a need to reassess the notion of cultural dominance vis-à-vis the accelerating centrifugal forces. Western companies struggle to gain access to new markets in China and elsewhere. What are they designing, producing and distributing there? The same stuff as here? Can we find examples of Western companies and designers who not only go to the East for inspiration (classic ‘orientalism’), but also to research and develop new ways of designing and producing for culturally different markets?

The notions developed above could in my view be guiding thoughts for Experimentadesign Lisboa 2009 and/or an exhibition tracing the design response to what I here tentatively term ‘centrifugal culture’. Designed objects are distributed around the world, and it’s about time we looked at the consequences of that gigantic carousel, not just from political, economic or environmental perspectives, but from a cultural and design angle.



With respect to the 'time theme', I suggest we think of short phrases which can complete the slogan 'it's about time...' in the vein of the urgencies we want to point to:

It's about time

we look around us
they are heard
we start talking to 'the other'
you realized where you came from
to design for diversity
we think about what our planet's needs, instead of what we need
we think outside the box
to address sustainability
etc.

There are a few more associations that came to my mind thinking about "Time, Motion, Acceleration":

1. Siegfried Giedion's classic 1941 book 'Space, Time and Architecture', in which he develops the modernist answer to the changing values which rule both production and interpretation of architecture 'in the machine age' (his other famous book is 'Mechanization Takes Command', 1946).

What could 'Space Time and Design' mean today? I think it would deal with links and connections, spaces that become intertwined over time – by design...

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