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# Rethinking Design Education for the 21st Century: Theoretical, Methodological, and Ethical Discussion

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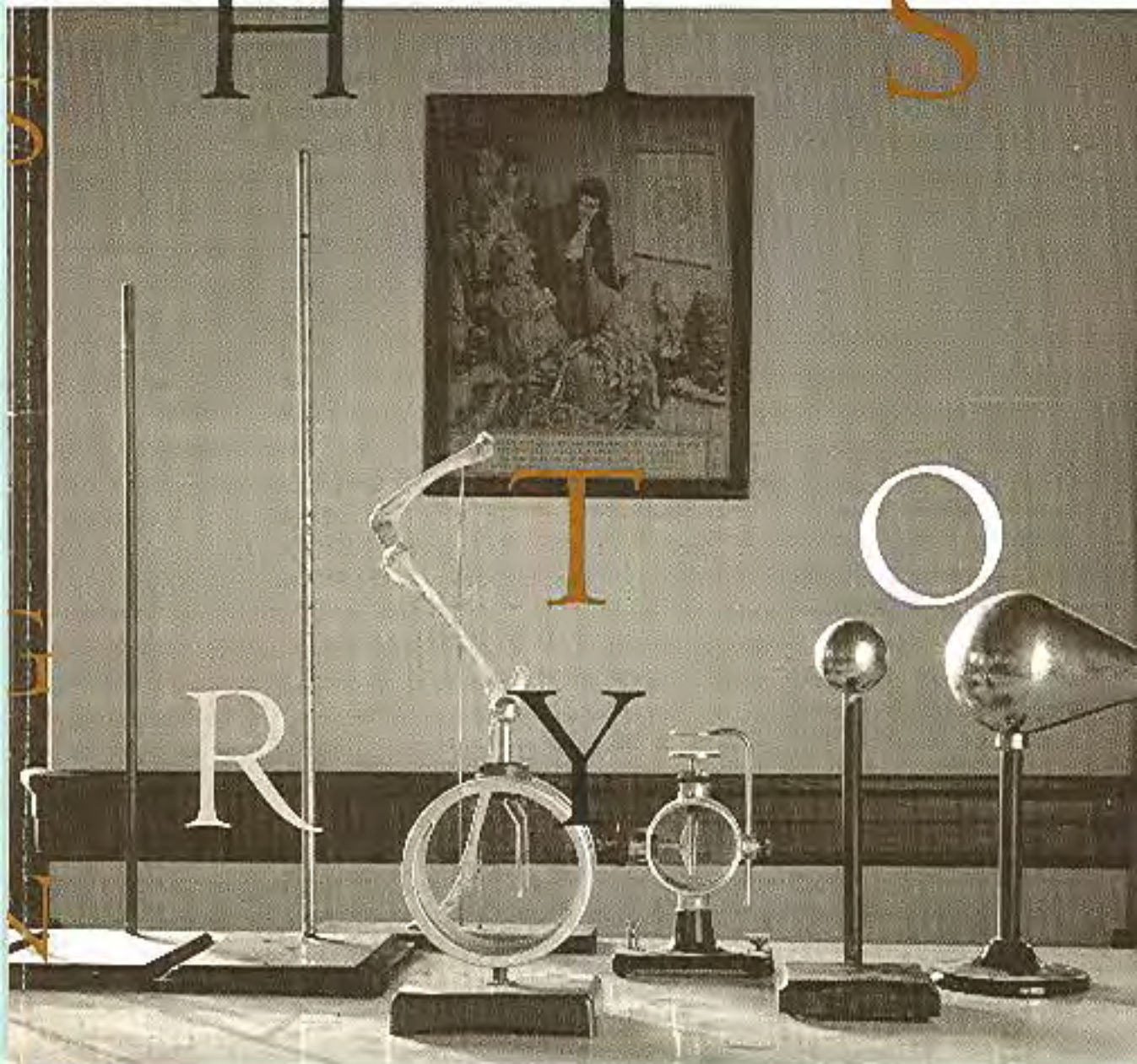


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# Design History and Design Studies: Methodological, Epistemological and Pedagogical Inquiry

Alain Findeli

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All translations from the French  
are the author's.

Indeed, I will take as a reference starting point some customary given units (like psychopathology, or medicine, or political economy); but I will not locate myself inside these doubtful units so as to investigate their internal configuration or their secret contradictions. I will rely on them only the time needed to ask myself what kind of units they are; what right they have to claim a domain that specifies them in space and a continuity that isolates them in time; according to what laws they shape themselves; on the background of which discursive events they stand out; and if, finally, they are not, in their taken-for-granted and almost institutionalized individuality, a surface phenomenon of some more substantial units. I will only accept those units presented by history to immediately put them under close scrutiny and in doubt; to untie them in order to possibly recompose them more legitimately; to know if one should not reconstruct new ones; to replace them in a more general space and, by erasing their apparent familiarity, to include them within a theory. Once these types of immediate continuity are suspended, a whole domain is indeed liberated.

*Michel Foucault*<sup>1</sup>

The above methodological program could easily be applied to the problem that challenges us in this special issue devoted to the history of design, although such question apparently had never been brought to the otherwise rather keen and shrewd attention of Michel Foucault. Indeed, within the context of this special issue, design must be considered as such "a customary given unit" and, throughout this essay, will be put "under close scrutiny and in doubt." However, I will not take up the challenge, in such a limited space, to "include [it] within a theory," a task which is still wanting. As a matter of fact, more questions will be raised than answers given, with the hope of contributing to a somehow touchy discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 38

## Some Fundamental Questions

The following story occurred not so long ago. It is a true story, which could have happened in any design school in the world, most likely in North America or Europe, but also in Latin America, and maybe in Japan. The faculty of the School of Design that was part of the College of Environmental Design, itself a recently founded unit of the local university, decided that a course in the history of design should be introduced into its curriculum. As had been the case for most, if not all, schools of design (and architecture) founded during the sixties, the school had relied for its program and curriculum on the only structured model available then, the still widely respected Bauhaus pedagogical program. One of the characteristics of the Bauhaus program throughout its lifetime (1919–1933) was the absence in the curriculum of any course in the history of art or architecture, and this in the years when the profession of design barely existed. Actually, historical periods, styles and works were only mentioned to the students as things to avoid. Positive references to history were carefully avoided because historical continuity had been a central guideline of Beaux-Arts education, in opposition to which the Bauhaus had been established. The concept of style was inherently dependent on history, whereas Gropius strongly claimed to avoid the creation of a new style. The students should be shown no model, no masterpiece, and no reference points were to be found in the future, nor in the past, i.e. invented rather than reproduced. In such circumstances, history could be of no use for the students; worse, historicism was ideologically suspicious.<sup>2</sup> For all these reasons, it was common if not fashionable in the post-war years to leave history courses out of the curriculum of design, architecture and city planning schools. But times have changed, post-modernism had since invaded both design and the media and, for some reasons that have not quite been clearly exposed and discussed, the faculty of the School decided that a course in design history had now become a necessity. Next door, in the architecture school, things were a bit different, since the course in the history of architecture, by some miracle, had survived in its classical form (i.e., “The Origins,” “The Egyptians,” “The Greeks,” “The Romans,” etc.; all the way to the neoclassical 18th century and to the eclectic XIXth century), through the convulsions of the late sixties, and the attendant radical disparagement of the traditional curriculum and of architectural education in general. But a course in the history of modern architecture also was now found to be necessary.

The question remained, however, who was going to teach this design history course and how. The answer seemed self-evident: an art historian, of course. Surprisingly enough, the local Department of Art History actually had on its list a course entitled “Modern Design,” the content of which seemed to fit perfectly with what the typical design students would be expected to know about the history of their profession. Economically speaking, the deal was

2 When Moholy-Nagy founded the New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1937, this anti-academicism also was central to the spirit of his curriculum. However, history was completely absent. Charles Morris, who was responsible for the planning of the scientific courses, taught a course he named “Intellectual Integration,” a section of which consisted of lectures in cultural and intellectual history (this section most likely anticipated one of the books he was working on, *Paths of Life*, published in 1942). Another section was supposed to cover art history, but it apparently took some years before these lectures actually were given. A set of slides illustrating famous historical buildings and paintings belongs to the archives of the Institute of Design, and it is likely that Moholy-Nagy himself used them for some lectures. Later on, just after the war, John Nef taught a course in industrial and economic history. Some concessions were even made to academicism when Ralph Rapson managed to convince Moholy-Nagy that a drawing class with live models was a necessary training for students! All these and other observations should dim the often very contrasted picture of the anti-historical intolerance of the Bauhaus.

quite interesting, since no new professor had to be hired. The course finally appeared as a “non-obligatory but highly recommended” course.

Two or three years later, however, the course was dropped after the students had judged it to be not relevant to their training. After some reluctance (how in heaven could Semper, Cole, Mackintosh, Behrens, and so many others not be relevant to a future designer?), the faculty decided that a “home-grown” course in the history of design should be put together and taught by a full-time professor, or even by a group of professors already teaching in the program. This course now exists, and has been running for some years. The students seem to be more than satisfied with the teacher’s approach, although she also mentions Semper, Cole, Mackintosh, Behrens, and so many others. Obviously, something seems to be wrong with art historians’ approach to design history!

The same kind of issue was raised not much later, when the introduction of a course in the history of technology appeared on the agenda of the School, with the difference that no such course was available then in any other department (it has since been created at the local engineering school, the Ecole Polytechnique). Consequently, a kind of history of technology course was introduced into the program, under the approximate title of “Genetics of Artifacts,” specially devised for design students along the lines of Yves Deforge’s persuasive model.<sup>3</sup> And yet, when reading the description of the course in the School’s bulletin, nothing particularly exotic appears as far as its content is concerned.

There must be something definitely wrong with the art or technology historians’ approach to their field, at least something that does not correspond to the expectations of a design school in these matters. What are these expectations? What kind of approach would be relevant? These are some of the questions, among others, I intend to address in this essay. But first let us return to the specific reasons that prompted this special issue of *Design Issues*: Victor Margolin’s discussion of design history versus design issues; Adrian Forty’s reply; and Victor Margolin’s reply to Forty, in which he “refined” his argument.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that the questions raised in the discussion between Margolin and Forty and in the short story that opens this essay are similar. My story is only another way of stating the problem. Just imagine the kind of discussions that took place among the School’s faculty members when they decided to cancel the first design history course and to set down the main lines of their “home grown” course, and you arrive at the subject of this special issue.

As an introductory comment, I must say that a closer reading of Margolin’s and Forty’s texts reveals that they don’t argue about the same problem. Instead, each other addresses a problem that has an importance and a relevance of its own, and that, even if not completely unrelated, their questions are distinct. Whereas Forty is

3 Yves Deforge, *Technologie et genétique de l’objet technique* (Paris: Maloine, 1985). I purposely mentioned “a kind” of history of technology course, since Deforge’s original approach has little in common with the standard approach in this field. Deforge, himself, taught his course in a French design school at the *Université Technologique de Compiègne*.

4 These three texts have been reprinted in this special issue as a reference.

discussing the usefulness and purpose of design history, Margolin deplores the “fluidity,” the incompleteness, and the lack of performance of design history. Consequently, the former is accused of taking design-as-a-field for granted, whereas the latter could be accused of taking history-as-a-discipline for granted. More clearly stated, on one hand, Forty addresses the important issue of the use and purpose of historical inquiry, the proper attitude required by historical methodology and approach, and eventually, even if he does not mention it explicitly, the delicate and perilous question of the philosophy of history. On the other hand, Margolin ventures into no less important debates concerning the definition of design, the de-historicizing and re-actualizing of the field, and the development of a more self-conscious and discriminate inquiry into the multiple manifestations of design activity. Nobody could deny that these are extremely important questions, both for their theoretical and practical consequences. The fact that both authors cite the transatlantic nature of the exchange as a reason for the “liveliness” of the debate does not mean that there actually is a disagreement. Forty may have had a right not to excuse Margolin for omitting to mention his own *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1750–1980*, or his British colleague’s *Introduction to Design and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, in his somehow incomplete “anthology” of important milestones in design history. Within their own limits and claims, these two works, for example, happen to exhibit some of the qualities Margolin requires of the field of design history as substantive contributions to the—yet to be established—field of design studies.<sup>5</sup>

I am afraid that debates about design history in general or design studies in general always will yield this type of endless discussion. Therefore, it seems to me more appropriate to abandon the strictly speculative range and pose these two questions in a more pragmatic manner. Indeed, design research is one field in which the discussion could be situated, and this is apparently where especially Margolin, but also Forty, position their arguments. But some provisional conclusions drawn from research into the field of design ethics have convinced me that design education is a particularly critical place where the issues discussed here would be more than welcome and helpful. This will be my central concern all through this essay.

To enter a debate with Margolin and Forty on their respective grounds would require two articles. For lack of space, Forty’s question will be given priority, here since the main theme of this issue is design history. I will only briefly outline a response to Margolin, much to my regret; hopefully, there will be further opportunities to resume the discussion. Before entering the subject matter, I would like to add some further questions to the main questions raised by our two authors, in order to clarify standpoint.

5 Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1740–1980* (London: Phaidon, 1986) and Penny Sparke *Introduction to Design and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986). Other works could be added to these two to discuss Margolin’s somewhat hasty conclusions. I certainly would mention Sigfried Giedion’s *Mechanization Takes Command*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946). Margolin’s argument is dialectically weak, even if on the rhetorical register it may sound convincing. He made his task a little too easy by choosing Pevsner’s work as a paradigm for design history inquiries. How would he struggle with Giedion’s work, for example, an equally “ancient” text, or with Bernd Meurer’s and Vincon Hartmut’s more recent *Industrielle Aesthetik. Zur Geschichte und Theorie de Gestaltung de Gestaltung* (Giessen: Anabas Verlag, 1983).



- Why is it that the existence and the definition of a course in the history of design (or architecture, or urbanism) always raises such controversy, and such conflicts?
- Why is it even plausible to claim such an extensive and problematic range for design history (or design studies), whereas, its counterparts such as the history of engineering, of medicine, of law, and of education never even thought—to my knowledge—of having such claims? (Maybe they should.)
- What are the pedagogical and education problems raised by the teaching of design history, in general, and to design students in particular?
- What type of specialist or generalist should teach a design course? Where and in which department? In what year?
- What should the relationship be between research and education in design history? Or between design history and design practice, and, of course, between design history and design studies?

These more specific questions should help us understand why there is no reason for teaching the same design history course in an art history department and in a design school, and, likewise, give us a possible answer to Margolin's question: "What makes the work produced under the influences [of anthropology and cultural studies] design history rather than cultural studies or anthropology?" Hopefully, they also will demonstrate the relevance of history in design practice and its necessary cohabitation with Margolin's design studies.

### **Some General Problems Regarding History and Design History**

History, writes Forty in his reply to Margolin, "share(s) the pursuit of understanding the processes that together constitute that extraordinary entity, human society." And he adds that "in its ends, design history is no different to any other branch of history." By doing so, Forty includes design history in the larger discipline of general history, and sets a very broad aim to historical inquiry. This, in return, raises three new questions:

1. Could we not fix other ends to history in general, and to design history more specifically?
2. What qualifies historical inquiry for contributing to the "understanding [of] the processes that together constitute [...] human society"? More generally speaking,
3. What characterizes specifically historical knowledge?



I will now address these questions, starting in reverse order, with the last question first.

Like all other so-called "social sciences," history has experienced a radical epistemological crisis in the 20th century. Traditionally considered as part of the "humanities," history now claims scientific rigor and, as such, to be one of the "social sciences." This would imply that there is such a thing as historical knowledge, and that this knowledge reaches some kind of objectivity and universality; in short, some truth. This dispute about the objectivity of history became particularly lively in the French tradition. Together with the argument about the very object of historical inquiry, these questions led to the founding of the "New History" school of French history, also known as the school of "The *Annales*."<sup>6</sup> There seems to be common agreement as to the origin of this movement, which historians recognize as rooted in Karl Marx's treatment of economic history. Although French historians have not been the only ones calling for a new history, it is in their circles that the epistemological and methodological battles have been fought more broadly and thoroughly.

The claims of the "New History" have been precisely and unequivocally stated by Michel Foucault in the introductory chapter of his already quoted *Archeologie du savoir*. The influence of the new approach can be seen, according to Foucault, in two areas he distinguishes within the field of historical studies. History as the narration of dramatic events, the area traditionally ascribed to historians and departments of history, gave way to a history of long duration and to what is better known as a history of enduring structures. Reacting against a kind of Hegelian history; of the sort Pevsner, for instance, developed in his treatment of the slow coming of age of modernity;<sup>7</sup> the structuralist historians rejected the idea of a linear, chronological, and teleological evolution of time and events characteristic of traditional history. They sought to free history; in short, to rid history of the very concept of time. Thanks to a carefully articulated methodology, they managed to disclose the "large motionless and silent platforms that the entanglements of traditional narratives had camouflaged under the thickness of their historical events."<sup>8</sup> And since these "platforms" or structures, these "strata," literally reveal themselves in the research of historians rather than being invented by them; history could now be considered as a science in its own right. In the second area distinguished by Foucault, i.e., the area of historical studies conducted outside the traditional scope of historians and departments of history (history of ideas, of science, of philosophy, of literature; and I would add, of technology and of design), a reverse phenomenon took place. Whereas continuity had long been the central concept of these histories, the idea of a continuous flow of the human spirit their central leading theme; and the belief in an ever existing Science, or Art, or Philosophy unfolding through time their firmest conviction; now

6 Henri Berr, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre generally are considered as the founders of the movement in 1929. The latter republished his most important theoretical texts in *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1953). It is unthinkable to quote here the considerable amount of literature devoted to this topic.

7 I refer to Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Penguin/Harmondsworth, 1960), first published in 1936 as *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, because that is the work Victor Margolin is relying on to set up his argument

8 Foucault, *Archeologie du savoir*, 9.

discontinuity and rupture have become the new keywords. Within the framework of the New Historian's approach (Foucault prefers to call them "archaeologists"), one discovers Foucault argues, unlike Pevsner's conclusions, that the history of design is not "that of its progressive refinement, of its continuously growing rationality, of its gradient of abstraction, but that of its various fields of formation and validity, of its successive rules and ways of practice, and of the multiple theoretical milieu where it has pursued and achieved its elaboration."<sup>9</sup> Briefly stated, the new approach endeavors to clear history from all human intentionality and mankind from all telos in its evolution; to free them from "the anthropological motif," thanks to a methodology that would be "pure of all anthropologism."<sup>10</sup> Some even more radical concepts recently have been proposed by the self-styled "post-structuralist" or "postmodernist" historians that challenge both the "traditional" and the "structuralist" approaches. It is, undoubtedly, these "intellectually elegant system[s]" Forty had in mind in his attack against the "destruction of value" operated by these approaches. Indeed, reading the following description is like a provocation to Forty:

[Postmodernists] generally question (1) the idea that there is a real, knowable past; a record of evolutionary progress of human ideas, institutions, or actions; (2) the view that historians should be objective; (3) that reason enables historians to explain the past; and (4) that the role of history is to interpret and transmit human cultural and intellectual heritage from generation to generation.<sup>11</sup>

From this, it follows that contemporary historical inquiry operates in a totally relativistic range; that it restricts to mere description or presentation (rather than explanation, or worse, interpretation), that it must accept or even encourage contradiction, "because [it] expect[s] that there will be many different "stories" about history;"<sup>12</sup> and, therefore, that its methodology should "look to feelings, personal experience, empathy, emotion, intuition, subjective judgment, imagination, as well as diverse forms of creativity and play."<sup>13</sup>

On the opposite side of the spectrum—but is it really a spectrum; or rather a trench, a rift, or an abyss?—there is room for another theory of history and of historians, centered on the human subject, not afraid of getting involved in its subject matter, but still not blinded by its philosophical and ideological premises. In his *De la connaissance historique*,<sup>14</sup> Henri-Irenee Marrou describes and argues for such an approach, one that can be called phenomenological or existential, and humanistic. According to Marrou, history, since it deals with the knowledge of human experience, cannot become a science like natural science. Along the lines of the German tradition of the *Geisteswissenschaft* on which he relies in his treatise, Marrou claims that the knowledge of human action can never be assimilated

9 Ibid., 11. Foucault, of course, did not mention design as a field of application for his archeology, but his concluding chapter quite explicitly suggests that this field also could be considered fruitfully.

10 Ibid., 26.

11 Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 63. The author clearly indicates that only some of these claims are made by the "New Historian" mentioned earlier.

12 Ibid., 66.

13 Ibid., 117.

14 Henri-Irenee Marrou, *De la connaissance historique* (Paris: Seuil, 1954).

or reduced to the knowledge of natural things, and that there is an insurmountable and radical difference between both modes of knowledge. He thus refers to the so-called *Methodenstreit* (dispute about method), expressed by the German epistemologists in the opposition between *verstehen* (to understand a phenomenon from the inside, intuitively) and *erklären* (to explain a phenomenon from the outside, analytically). History, writes Marrou, “involves neither deduction, nor induction strictly speaking,” but rather is “cognate to the understanding of the Other in the experience of immediacy,” and thus to “the knowledge of humans by humans.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, he states, historical knowledge is always incomplete: “Any historical problem, as limited as it may be, postulates [...] the knowledge of the whole universal history,”<sup>16</sup> a condition which is, of course, beyond human capacity. As far as methodology is concerned, it is clear that any claim to some objectivity must be rejected in favor of the personal involvement of the historian, with all his or her humanity. Marrou also insists that historical inquiry should not be looking for objects (periods, masterpieces, wars, etc.; to which he adds structures), but for problems, “profound problems, really human, the conquest of which requires a perilous heuristics.”<sup>17</sup> The characteristic gesture of the historian’s approach should not be skeptical, but rather sympathetic. The historian must reach out to meet the other, so that the essence rather than the mere existence of the historical fact becomes the target. Under such conditions, history becomes an anthropological project. Foucault exactly opposed this approach when he claimed that historians were not to search for the “visage” or physiognomy of a period, or event, or phenomenon: but for “charts” and relationships between series. In contrast to Foucault’s agnostic history as a “white, indifferent space without interiority or promise,” Marrou’s history is inhabited, meaningful, existential and, as such and according to him, useful insofar as it contributes to the enrichment and emancipation of being.<sup>18</sup>

For our present purpose, it is not necessary to pursue in more details the epistemological critique of historical inquiry. We can already see how Foucault and Marrou, and through them, two radically different views of history, answered the second and third questions—about the specificity of historical knowledge—with which I started this discussion. Whereas Marrou makes a strong analogy between the historical and the intersubjective knowledge, Foucault dismisses any global “historical” knowledge of a teleological or of an hermeneutic type, replacing it by a “de-centered” and disinfected “archaeological” approach (question 3). As to question 2, no doubt Forty would recognize himself in the humanistic and personalist approach characteristic of Marrou’s; whereas Foucault would not even consider such a question, since he does not see why human society should have a particular claim to be considered, in Forty’s wording, as an “extraordinary entity.” Question 1 dealt with the ends or usefulness of history. In this regard, Marrou is quite

15 Ibid., 81.

16 Ibid., 53.

17 Ibid., 78.

18 Marrou’s position can be replaced with a much larger and very vivid epistemological dispute about the foundation of knowledge in the social sciences. Ernst Cassirer has addressed this question in his own manner, comparing the “sciences of nature” and the “sciences of culture,” in numerous writings. See, for example, “Perception des choses et perception de l’expression,” in Ernst Cassirer, *Logique des sciences de la culture* (Paris: Cerg, 1991), 13–139. Raymond Aron’s contribution to this issue since 1938 is indeed, also fundamental. See, for example, his *Leçons sur l’histoire* (Paris: Ed. de Fallois, 1969).

explicit: "Historical knowledge expands, in almost boundless proportions, my knowledge of humankind [...]. much beyond the always restricted limits imposed by my actual experience."<sup>19</sup> In this answer, we already can sense the potential educational value of history. Unlike Marrou, Foucault would not directly consider the issue of the usefulness of his archeological endeavor. However, it is easy to understand how his disclosure of the various "instrumentation," "techniques," "mechanisms," "machineries," "devices," and "procedures" that characterize and give their efficiency to the various powers he analyzes (penitentiary, medical, educational, institutional, and psychiatric) could help humankind become conscious of the determinism, conditioning and subordinating processes and, thus, hopefully free itself from their domination. As such, Foucault's achievement is one of the most embarrassing critics of the misconceptions and drifts of the democratic ideal and of its diversion into an ideology.

As far as the general usefulness of design history is concerned, some words must be added in response to Forty's proposition. Although I certainly agree with the fact that evaluation is of paramount importance in design, I doubt that design history can effectively contribute to it. It is extremely difficult to correctly evaluate the performance of current products in design. Not a single satisfactory method is available today; although, in some cases, the concepts of "function" and "performance" have been considerably extended to include environmental, social and symbolic aspects. However, some critical points still remain to be investigated, such as the nature of the measurement methods, and the proper definition of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of a product. In such conditions, I don't see how the evaluation of past products could be correctly undertaken. It is a very risky enterprise since, in most cases, there is little information available about the product except some photographs, perhaps a working prototype and, in exceptional cases, the original technical drawings. But most of its environment of use and manufacture, beginning with its original users, has disappeared and is extremely difficult to reconstitute historically. Actually and unfortunately, the design field has suffered from an excess of published visual material, mainly photographs, from which so many irrelevant evaluations and unfortunate misunderstandings have resulted.<sup>20</sup> I understand Forty is arguing in favor of a social history of objects, i.e., of a history that takes in account the global environment of the object (economic, industrial, social, legal, political, etc.). But even such a praiseworthy effort still cannot be considered sufficient for a thorough assessment of a product's performance, since an industrial product is more than a mere work of art.

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19 Marrou, *De la connaissance historique*, 261.

20 The Bauhaus and the field of the history of design education, in general, are particularly good examples in this respect. A type of modernist academicism resulted from insufficient understanding and poor interpretations of the abundant photographic material available.

I hope I have given sufficient ground to prove that a standard documentary and archival approach to history is not sufficient, or even advisable. There is ample room in and between Marrou's and Foucault's systems, for example, to accommodate design as a valid and interesting subject matter for history, whether in a restricted or extended sense.<sup>21</sup> Design, being by definition one type of human action, is particularly relevant in Marrou's conception, and there are enough problems in design to be treated historically so that the standard product-oriented approach can be easily surpassed. For this part, Foucault does not exclude the application of his archeological analysis to other subjects besides epistemology and the sciences. He actually sets out a whole program of research centered around subject matters including sexuality (his latest work), painting, politics, etc.; arguing that his method is not exclusively devoted to the type of knowledge specific to the sciences (science), but to any kind of knowledge (*savoir*). Design is definitely such a *savoir*, since it extends far beyond mere know-how. At this point, I would also mention the work and proposals of Michel de Certeau, which embrace both history and design (in Margolin's sense), and to whom a whole study could be dedicated with regard to our current subject matter. De Certeau calls for a "polemological" analysis of culture, that is, an analysis of user's "trajectories, tactics and rhetorics" in their daily relationships with artifacts and designed objects, both in a historical and ethnological perspective.<sup>22</sup> In his master chapter "*Theories de l'art de faire*" (*Theories of the art of "doing"*), he outlines out a genesis of human deeds and points out that there is a "temporal handicap separating the various know-hows from their progressive elucidation by some epistemologically superior sciences."<sup>23</sup> There are echoes in this work of Herbert Simon's and Donald Schon's programmatic research, and Victor Margolin's wishes would certainly find fertile ground here.<sup>24</sup> My very brief mention of this very fecund work should also include de Certeau's statement that historical inquiry could and indeed should contribute to the experimental validation of theoretical models developed in other disciplines such as sociology, economics, psychology, and cultural studies. This demanding epistemological task would be fulfilled by history, according to de Certeau, thanks to its own specific character, in as much as historical discourse is at the same time of the narrative and scientific type.<sup>25</sup>

In short, I would sum up the above chapter as follows: arguing that the current and past historical research in design history has yielded little relevant results and, taking as his point of departure Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* and the standard art historian's approach; Victor Margolin called for an extensive broadening of the field of design, both in geographical terms and conceptually as part of a new discipline he calls design studies. My reply is twofold. First, I remark that the restricted definition of design deserves to be maintained as the subject of historical inquiry under the express

21 By "restricted sense" of design, I mean this specific historical phenomenon that resulted from the industrial revolution in some countries of Europe and North America; and that manifested itself in the appearance in the 20th century of those professionals we call designers. It is the standard meaning within design schools, art history departments, museums, and the public in general. By "extended sense" of design, I refer to Herbert Simon's definition of a specific process ("the conception and planning of the artificial"), that was used as reference during the "Discovering Design" conference in Chicago, and mentioned in Margolin's first article. The title of this journal understandably refers to the extended sense of design.

22 Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien. Arts de faire* (U.G.E., 1980).

23 *Ibid.*, 105.

24 The two authors basic work in this respect are: Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), and Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

25 Roger Chartier, "L'histoire ou le savoir de l'autre" in Michel de Certeau *Cahiers pour un temps* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1987), 155-167. De Certeau's major theoretical piece about history is "L'operation historiographique," published in his *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), and summed up in "L'operation historique" published in Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (eds.), *Faire de l'histoire*. 1. Nouveaux problemes (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

condition that historians extend considerably the method and scope of their work. Maybe this is what Forty meant when he required that “design historians write good history.” In any case, some more extensive explanations about this rather laconic statement would have been more than welcome! Second, I maintain that the above program does not exempt us from seriously considering Margolin’s program, calling for the construction of the field of design studies. Extending the definition of design for design history does not seem feasible to me, because such an endeavor would amount to the setting up of a general history of mankind’s achievements in all domains; something akin to Vico’s history, for example.<sup>26</sup> Such a scientific venture, as philosophically exciting as it may be, appears to me to be too demanding in its present state; both in its scope, and in its theoretical and methodological requirements. This certainly does not mean that the field of design studies should be abandoned to the current and very provincial disciplinary classification of our universities, nor should the study of design history be undertaken without an adequate interdisciplinary approach. Before I venture into some more specific propositions with regard to the teaching of the kind of design history this essay has started to suggest, let me try to respond to Margolin’s proposition about the constitution of the field of design studies.

### Some Remarks About Design Studies

Margolin’s first article obviously was written in response to one specific conception of design history: the traditional art historian’s. Should he be willing to extend his view of historical methodology, I wonder whether he would hold on to his diagnosis. But such a rehabilitating of design history through the refinement of research methodologies dissolves the issue of the status of design studies. The way Margolin presents the debate between design history or design studies is analogous to an old battle that has been—and is still being— fought in some (many?) art history departments. It also originates in the German philosophical tradition when, at the turn of the century, the distinction was established between *Kunstgeschichte* (history of art) and *Kunstwissenschaft* (“science” of art). As a matter of fact, some departments of art history actually have modified their programs, methods of approach and faculty towards a more comprehensive, interpretative, critical, theoretical, and, in short, philosophical approach to art in which history, as such, becomes only one component along with esthetics, semiotics, sociology, hermeneutics, etc. It is likely that this is the paradigm Margolin had in mind when he mentioned design studies as a new, more comprehensive, and more self-conscious field for design. I certainly welcome such a project, except if, in its institutional aspect, a separate department should be created on the undergraduate university level. In fact, the example of art history departments is precisely the worst to follow, since the existence of such depart-

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26 Actually, Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* (successive editions in 1725, 1744, 1774); translated by Thomas Bergin and Max Fisch as *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968) deals more with the philosophy of history and the methodology of human and social science inquiries than with history as such. But it can be read as a history of mankind as Vico understands it in his philosophy. In short, he considers that the world at any period is what it is as a result of mankind’s actions and deeds rather than the will of God, a standpoint that was still quite unorthodox at the beginning of the 18th century. Being a human production, history of any period could therefore be understood by contemporary human mind, concludes Vico. This important methodological consequence explains why history, in Vico’s view, cannot be the product of a rational analysis, but rather the result of an imaginative reconstruction.

ments is a historical anomaly, inherited from the 19th century. Why does art have such a privilege over, say, engineering, agriculture, industry, management, medicine, education, law, trade, communication, etc.? What justifies the existence of a separate department of Art History within a university? Everybody knows that music history is taught in music schools; poetry history in literature departments; and engineering, law and medical history, if available and usually optional, in their respective schools. As for agriculture, industry, management, trade, and communication; one is lucky if the local history department is not too busy with the standard national/international political histories, and has heard about the "new history" and its introduction of new historical objects!<sup>27</sup> Within this rather depressing picture, we are rather well off with our standard design history courses, which usually are available and compulsory in the curriculum of any respectable contemporary design school. For reasons that, hopefully, will be self-explanatory; I maintain that the creation of a separate program in design history or studies is an aberration at the undergraduate level, and that the history of design should remain in design schools or departments, where its relationship with studio practice is essential. Ultimately, even the very idea of a separate so-called "theory" course in history or in philosophy in a design program seems undesirable; the teaching of history and philosophy being even more necessary and alive within the design studio during the very process of designing. Indeed, what holds for design and design history is, or should be, equally valid for the other professions: education, law, management, agronomy, criminology, medicine, pharmacy, engineering, psychology, etc.

I am interested in the creation of a graduate program in design studies, in which history would have an important place, if design studies means *Design-wissenschaft*; i.e., touching on design epistemology, theory, esthetics, and ethics. I would like to have called such a program "design philosophy," if the meaning of "philosophy" had not undergone such a regretful erosion, and the practice of philosophy such a reductive and corporatist entrenchment.

I would distinguish two possible directions or fields for historical research within such a graduate program, where design would be understood in its extended sense, as defined by Margolin. Naturally, this program would be open primarily to students originating from the various, above listed, professional programs available in a university. Such a wide range will obviously require an interdisciplinary approach, and the use of a common formal-logical language as exempt as possible of substantive or disciplinary content.

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27 In this respect, see Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, *Faire de l'histoire*. 3. *Nouveaux objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).



The first direction of research is limited in its time range, reaching back to the industrial revolution. We all know that the birth of our current design professions (in the restricted sense, industrial design; product design; graphic design; most of modern architectural design, i.e., the design of mass housing and commercial buildings, urban design, landscape design, etc.) results from the conditions of production specific to the industrial economy. Most of these professions deal with material artifacts, since industrialization first affected the mass production of material objects (although graphic design is mainly concerned with material supports; its object, communication, is immaterial compared to other industrial products). But, in the 20th century, hardly any human activity and economic sector has escaped industrialization: agriculture, health care, education, culture, leisure, justice, transportation, trade; in short all the activities we call "services." As a consequence, the traditional professional practices have been considerably challenged; whereas in other areas, new professions have sprung up. Indeed, the history of the industrialization of services has received much less attention than that of material production.<sup>28</sup> Although we are, sometimes unfortunately, all aware of the consequences of this historical development on our daily lives, its systematic investigation still remains important partly because no existing university department can claim it as a relevant subject matter, except maybe—and normally—the history departments. If we pursue this line of reasoning, we can quickly perceive what repercussions such research will have on current design practice: a formidable extension of its field of application. A strict analogy with the development of the profession of product design can be drawn, for example. First the problems arise, then they are progressively and simultaneously conceptualized, and anonymously solved even before the profession actually shapes itself and becomes institutionalized (some professions may even disappear afterward).<sup>29</sup> The design of services currently is in the second stage, since the corresponding professions simply do not exist yet. For example, the secondary school education system currently is designed by all kinds of people, most of them honestly dedicated to their task; but who could claim to be able to conceptually, theoretically and self-consciously embrace the genesis and the structure of industrialized education in all its aspects? Consequently, who could claim to have received an adequate education and the professional training needed for this job, i.e., for the job of educational systems designer? The same question can be asked of the health, justice, law-enforcement, leisure, and the cultural industries. In most cases, a few leading paradigms, mostly derived from political strategy and business management, are used as an implicit "theory of practice" and extended to alien fields. Only recently have some programs responded to this need by creating courses in "cultural management," "health management," and "urban management," after realizing that it made no sense to

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28 One interesting and concise example can be found in Daniel Boorstin's *The Americans* (3 vol.) (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); where the birth of mass insurance, mail ordering purchasing, advertisements, etc., are described.

29 I don't mean to impose a kind of historical or genetic law here. The succession and interrelationships of these various stages would need a much more discriminate development, that would precisely find its place within the program exposed here.

- 30 "Auf dem Weg zum" Elektronischen Bauhaus" (Towards the Electronic Bauhaus) is the title of one of the closing chapters of Bernhard Burdek's textbook *Design. Geschichte, Theorie und Praxis de Produktgestaltung* (Köln: DuMont, 1991). Incidentally, such a book is quite welcome, since textbooks in design are a very rare occurrence. It is not advisable to speculate about the future of design on a technological basis. Within one century, the technological base of design has changed three times (from mechanic to electric to electronic). Processes and uses, like mentalities, have a longer time period and, therefore, are much stabler bases; notwithstanding the fact that the human aspect of design must, in any case, receive priority. In this respect, the *Mexico Papers*, published 1993, constitute a fairly enlarged platform for the future of design, where the social, political, economical, cultural, and ecological dimensions of design are given priority. See "The Future of Design. A Global View of its Implications, Opportunities and Challenges," *Design Recherche* 5 (January 1994): 3-8.
- 31 Goethe's phenomenology is described in his own scientific works on botany, anatomy, meteorology, geology, colour, etc.; and discussed by Rudolf Steiner in *Goethe the Scientist* (New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1950)
- 32 Marcel Datienne's and Jean-Pierre Vernant's seminal book *Les ruses de intelligence. La metis des Grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), is referred to here, as well as in the perspective of Jacques Guillerme's steady and scholarly production: Helene Verin's *La gloire des ingenieurs* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993). The work of Jean-Louis Le Moigne, French translator of Herbert Simon and founder of the MCX Program at Aix-en-Provence, also must be mentioned here. See, for example, among others, his *De la science des techniques aux sciences de l'ingenierie. Contribution a l'epistemologie de la technologie*, Research report Number 91-14, URA-CNRS 937, Universite d' Aix-Marseille, May 1991.

plan an educational institutional or a hospital as if it were a manufacturing plant or a political program. After some carefully conducted theoretical work, the concept of "design" could be imported with great benefit from its current standard and restricted field into these new and highly critical areas of human practice. This prospect seems to me much more relevant and rewarding for design than the very fashionable—and market-driven—pursuit of the post-industrial/computer-age, dematerialized but still heavily technological rather than process-oriented, forms of design practice. More specifically, if a contemporary outgrowth of the original Bauhaus should be planned for, I would consider the above enterprise more faithful to its spirit than the recently proposed "electronic Bauhaus," which could only be one aspect of it.<sup>30</sup>

The second direction for research extends throughout the history of mankind. It would deal with what I like to call the epistemology of design and, as such, has close links, even if not necessarily with the same constructive tint, with Herbert Simon's research program. The leading hypothesis is that a common process underlies the practice of all of the above mentioned professions, namely the design process. Various approaches currently are adopted to analyze this process among them the logical (Simon's original procedural approach) and the sociological are the most frequent. Experience has proven that, comparative approaches are more efficient, especially for pedagogical purposes. Two main types of approaches (synchronic and diachronic) are available. Comparative study in space leads to ethnographic methods and studies. For example, one can study the practice of medicine in various cultures and, after careful epistemological analysis, compare these respective systems of knowledge (*savoirs*, in Foucault's sense). A fair amount of writing already is available on such subject-matter. But one also could study the design process underlying the engineer's, music composer's, educator's, and the military strategist's practices; in order to compare their respective logical structure. Comparative study in time leads to some kind of historical method, which I prefer to call "genetic." The kind of genetics I am referring to would be closer to Goethe's phenomenological and morphological than to Foucault's archeological approach.<sup>31</sup> Thus, for instance, the genesis and evolution of the logics of, say, engineering design, could be analyzed along its various historical metamorphoses, all the way back to the Greek *metis*.<sup>32</sup> This "internal" comparative study (internal to a specific practice, here engineering) could then be completed by an "external" one, where the genesis and metamorphosis of various practices would be compared in a given historical period, for instance the end of the 19th century.

As one quickly discovers, the problem is not finding relevant questions to fill out the research agenda of a future graduate inter-professional design studies program, but developing the basic methodological, conceptual; and terminological tools; and to find the students and professors to get the work started, in one way or another, before even waiting until the appropriate institutional structures are made available.

### Teaching Design History to Design Students

After having tried to contribute to the discussion between Margolin and Forty by addressing the range of questions they raised, I think it would be appropriate to draw some conclusions. To do so, I will leave the speculative level in order to be more practical, and to give some indications as to how the principles discussed above could actually be put into practice in the teaching of design history.<sup>33</sup> The following scenario is sketched out as the possible content of a series of courses in design history within a design school, leading to professional practice after a four—or five—year course of study. This detail is of utmost importance, for it reveals why it is quite different to teach a design history course to design students than to art history students, for instance. In semiotic terms, one would say that the design students' frame of mind toward design is, so to speak, reversed from the history of art students. Whereas the latter, as in scientific inquiry in general, proceed from the signifier (the art object) to the signified (the object or product itself); not to mention the fact that his last case, the pragmatic dimension, to use Charles Morris's terminology, is cardinal for the analysis and the design of the object, as compared to the syntactic (signifier) and semantic (signified) dimensions. The extension of this pragmatic attitude toward the artifact, and to history in general is, in itself, a methodological breakthrough (I am using "pragmatic" in its widest philosophical sense, of course, which is much richer and subtle than the common use of the word).

A second remark of essential pedagogic consequence has to be added here. It has to do with the fact that, most of the time, university teachers do not—and indeed have not been taught how to—take into account the fact that first, or second, or third year students are still in an evolutionary process and, more prosaically, that they often are only around twenty years old. As provocative as such an apparent commonplace seems to be, unprejudiced observation reveals that the form of discourse, the terminology, and the theoretic complexity of a course's subject matter is usually of a Ph.D. or of a research paper level. Of course, the use of an abstruse and obscure jargon may contribute to the teacher's prestige, but it is, to be sure, pedagogically quite ineffective and even detrimental. I am convinced that, especially in the field of history, pedagogic practice should be designed according to Ernst Haeckel's law, of which John Dewey, for example, was well aware: ontogenesis and

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33 The seeds of this chapter can be found in a previous article written for the purpose of giving a genetic perspective of contemporary design to scholars from other disciplines (sociologists, economists, theologians, philosophers, etc.) in the context of an international conference on design ethics. See Alain Findeli, "De l'esthétique industrielle à l'éthique: les métamorphoses du design," *Informel*, special issue *Prométhée éclairée* Number 1, III, 2 (Summer 1990): 66–79.

phylogenesis are two analogous processes, i.e. the various evolutionary stages experienced by a person in his or her lifetime (ontogenesis) are a sort of reenactment of the historical evolution of mankind (phylogenesis). This may be especially true in the intellectual and philosophical domains. What does this mean in our context? Let us refer to the historical evolution of methodological systems used in historical inquiry that we discussed above. The traditional method, focused on events and outstanding figures (kings, treaties, etc.) and very close to mythologic narration, was followed by the more comprehensive and hermeneutic, anthropocentric view of history (German 19th century historians; Marrou); then by the structuralist reaction (*Les Annales* and the French new historians), and now by the post-structuralist deconstructivist historians, with Foucault acting as a transition between the two. A very close analogy can be drawn between this methodological evolution and the history of painting with its stages or periods of figurative (Marrou), cubist and abstract (structuralists), and conceptual art (Foucault and the Post-structuralists). The 20th century Occidental mind, influenced by avant-garde ideology, tends to consider that the last system is indeed the best one, and that the others are now outmoded. Whereas this attitude may make some sense in research; mainly on sociological but not on epistemological grounds; it is absolutely not valid for education. Haeckel's principle, used as a guideline, shows us the way: methodological and theoretical sophistication must be introduced progressively, following an evolutionary and comparative—i.e. a **genetic**—pattern. Once the student has been introduced to the global methodological spectrum, she and he will be able to sort out the specific methodology that fits; not only her or his temperament, but also the particular historical phenomenon to be studied. Concretely speaking, there is no harm in starting a first-year design history course in a chronological, evenemential, even anecdotal key; provided this is followed by a progressive sophistication. Much remains to be discussed as to the compatibility of these various methods within a single mind, and to the adequate critical attitude to adopt against them. Only more theoretical work and experience will give enough credit to such propositions, but despite their incompleteness, I have no doubt that it is still better to try this approach than to teach Foucault's archaeology from the start, as I and many students have seen it done much too often.

The above pedagogic preamble brings additional explanations to the short story that introduced this essay. It helps explain why the art historian's design history course was felt somewhat "irrelevant" by the design students. Indeed, this must be kept in mind each time the word "history" appears in the following text description of what I consider to be the basics of a course in design history appropriate to contemporary and future design practice.

The general objective of the design history course is twofold:

1. Since the students are actually future professionals who will act within their time and culture: and, eventually, through these acts, change—even if very little—the course of history, it is necessary that they develop an understanding of this time and culture. The history course should contribute to this understanding, so that students become not only skilled experts, but also responsible professionals. In John Dewey's terms, this course should help students situate themselves within their professional occupation, a meaningful experience both for themselves and for the others.

2. The course should develop a sense of time and history in students. More precisely, they should be able to grasp what could be called the shape of time, or the morphology of history. Historical time has nothing to do with the scientists' abstract, continuous, homogeneous, and anisotropic time. This concept of a morphological approach to history leads us into the very delicate question of the philosophy of history; i.e., of the possibility of deducing some meaning from historical inquiry as to the general course of mankind through its past and its future. It is noteworthy that all the authors we mentioned (Foucault, Marrou, etc.) strongly claimed that any philosophy of history had to be carefully avoided, and, implicitly, that their respective systems actually managed to do so. This fear is very understandable in the 20th century, when mankind has experienced the terrible consequences of political and ideological misuse of a philosophy of history. Nevertheless, I believe the question of the philosophy could be quite negative in its own way. Various philosophies of history have been proposed by historians (Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee are the most often quoted in the 20th century), and usually end up in some prophetic hypotheses about the future. Even the structuralist Fernand Braudel, who would be the last one to be suspected of maintaining such views, wrote that there seems to be natural rhythms in the history of the Orient and Occident, "as if the whole of mankind were absorbed into a primordial cosmic destiny, in regard to which the rest of its history were of secondary import."<sup>34</sup> These philosophies usually maintain that historical time has a specific shape: rhythmic, cyclic, linear, helicoidal, etc. In the field of design, Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* is a good example of a forward oriented linear time. Consciously or unconsciously, every history teacher has his or her own philosophy of history. It would be to the benefit of their students if they become aware of it, and of the way it influences their particular bias toward their teaching of the history of design. The structuralists' long time/short time dialectics; Marrou's anthropocentric and teleologic view of history; Foucault's discontinuous model; Goethe's concept of metamorphosis and dialectics of the same and the different; Deleuze's and Guattari's rhizomic morphology, contemporary models of deconstructed time; Rene Thom's formalized, qualitative catastrophic shapes and patterns; Wollflin's classical/baroque polarity, not to

34 Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation materielle, economie et capitalisme. 1. Les structures du quotidien* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1979), 22 (my emphasis).

mention Hegel's and Marx's dialectics: these and many others are relevant examples of the historians' and philosophers' efforts to give shape to time, and to explain history. Eventually, a self-conscious and adequate development of a morphology of history by the teacher should lead the students to develop their own philosophy of history and, consequently, to be able to adopt a critical attitude to such ideologically loaded concepts as progress, avant-garde, innovation, outdated, historic preservation, revival, etc.

The question of the shape of time is a particularly delicate one in design, if one considers the two main aspects that characterize any artifact. As I have shown in a previous article, all artificial objects or artifacts, whether material or "political," can be arranged in a two-dimensional space bounded by two axes: the instrumental dimension and the symbolic dimension.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, time does not have the same morphology along these two axes: whereas the idea of progress does make sense along the instrumental dimension (products do get lighter, faster, more reliable, easier to manufacture and to use, more secure, etc.); to speak about progress along the symbolic dimension does not make sense. Thus, time can be said to be linear and forward-oriented along one axis; whereas the shape of time is more difficult to ascertain along the other axis (is it cyclic, pulsatory like in Wollflin's theory, linear and backward, accelerated, catastrophic, shapeless, or something else?).

Another way to grasp the morphology of time in design is to consider any artifact in its synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Such an analysis places the artifact in the center of a double cross; its double horizontal bar being the synchronic, and the double vertical bar the diachronic dimension. The synchronic perception consists of the following aspects: each artifact, a lamp for example, is an element of two sets; the first is the set of lamps designed and produced in the same time period; and the second is the set of household objects in general. The first analysis makes students aware of stylistic and technological **differences** (between various contemporary lamps); while the second analysis emphasizes stylistic **resemblances** within a given period. The diachronic or historic perception is also twofold: the artifact is an element of two series; the first is the series of lamps designed throughout time, whereas the second is the series of products conceived by the same designer throughout her or his career. The first analysis is then analog to the above discussion within the space of artifacts (historical evolution of products along their instrumental and symbolic dimensions); and the second analysis is an introduction to the biographic aspect of design. Even in such a simple didactic example one can foresee the pedagogical potential of such assignments; not only do they contribute to the main objectives, but they also can help meet accessory but equally important objectives of a designer's education such as graphic and drawing skills if the results of the analysis are to be communicated visually; A basic knowledge of the historians' craft,

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35 See my article "Ethics, Aesthetics, and Design," *Design Issues*, 10.2 (Summer 1994): 49-68.

i.e., as museographic and chronological data, library and archive research, biographic analysis, etc.; as well as stylistic and technology analysis.

Foucault's concept of discontinuity also can be very helpful in understanding the morphology of history in design. Comparative analysis and interpretation of historical discontinuities can thus be made in connection with design. The idea of modernity and of modernism, for example, is very difficult for students to understand.

It may be helpful to begin the discussion with a review of the history of the idea of rationalism, which spans a longer period of time than rationalistic design. By showing how, in the Occidental tradition, this idea evolved progressively from its prehistory in the 13th century (Thomas Aquinas), through the conscious development in the 16th and 17th centuries (Descartes, Galileo, Bacon), and its consummation in the 19th and 20th centuries; students will find it easier to understand the philosophical foundations of functionalism in design. Why not continue by explaining the epistemological importance of the revolution in relativistic physics in the 20th century, and its consequence for contemporary postmodern relativism? Other such discontinuities could be demonstrated in fields alien to design, employing the comparative method at its fullest. The Romanesque/Gothic discontinuity is, for instance, quite easy to visualize in sculpture (without any preparatory "training" in art history), and helps illustrate what a stylistic difference may refer to in the spiritual world (the "coming down" on earth of human consciousness). Such are also the Classical/Romantic polarity in music (simply listening successively to a Mozart or Beethoven concerto), or in painting (comparing works by Ingres and Delacroix), or the Classical/Baroque opposition in architecture, etc. As a matter of fact, the concept of "polarity" seems to me more adequate than "discontinuity" to help explain the shape of history, since one must indeed recognize that polar opposites are "qualities" that are potentially and simultaneously always present in historical phenomena. History, then, can be considered as the result of the complex interplay of forces of these polarities. Postmodernism in design and its multifarious and complex aspects, for example, can best be explained to design students with such polar models.

A historical, or better yet a genetic approach, can contribute to our understanding of the contemporary design "scene" and its articulation within our current culture in a manner superior to the dominant purely descriptive and anecdotal narrative approach. Here, Marrou's system will prove pedagogically more appropriate than Foucault's overly sophisticated and difficult to relate to, structuralist approach. Experience proves that students have a tendency to better grasp an organic model in which, like for any living organism, the shape of a historical phenomenon is the result of two sets of antagonist forces; inner forces or voluntary drives, and outer forces



or environmental constraints (Foucault and the structuralist tend to ignore the first set of forces in the name of their objectivity, whereas the traditional historians have overemphasized the influences of individual will). A careful analysis of a historical phenomenon in this framework leads to the progressive perception of its “visage” or physiognomy.<sup>36</sup>

As an example, the physiognomy of design today can be presented as the result of the meeting and complex interaction of various lineages. The main ones include:

1. the decorative arts tradition that goes back to the beginnings of human culture;
2. the theoretical or discursive/normative tradition in design; originating in the 19th century; including Henry Cole, Gottfried Semper, the Bauhaus, the HfG in Ulm, and the postmodern discourse;
3. the professional tradition born in the United States in the late twenties and its pioneers (Lowey, Teague, Geddes, etc.); and
4. the technological and managerial furrow, only some fifteen years old and not yet a tradition (computerization of products and management design).

Each of these genetics lines can then be treated with the polar organic model discussed previously. For didactic purposes, these various series can be considered independently, only to show that the idea of a unitary history of design is impossible, if not incorrect. Actually, there are many more distinct and equally relevant ways of telling this story; and students should be exposed, if only briefly, to each of them. Here are some examples of how the history of design could be presented:

- as the history of remarkable and significant products (the most commonly practiced);
- as the history of technology; i.e., as the influence of technological development upon the evolution of design;
- as the history of materials; i.e., as the influence of the discovery and invention of new materials upon the evolution of design;
- as the history of important designers (very commonly practiced);
- as the history of design institutions such as professional corporations, governmental agencies, and international and national design societies;
- as the history of important exhibitions, in design or in general, including national and international fairs and expositions, museum exhibitions, trade fairs, and regular events (Milan Biennale, Kassel Documenta, etc.);
- as the history of the design profession;
- as the history of design education;

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36 The historiography of the Bauhaus provides a very good example of the shortcomings of the too narrow framing of a subject matter, and of the methodological and heuristic fecundity of the organic model. Karl-Heinz Huter's *Das Bauhaus in Weimar* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1976), a thoroughly well-documented work that received Walter Gropius' personal praise, is still one-sided and very deterministic, as if the Bauhaus had been the only result of the economic-political situation in the Weimar Republic. Hans Wingler's treatment of the Bauhaus history, on the contrary, emphasizes internal centrifugal forces; as if the Bauhaus were only result of some individual's will and project. Bauhaus historiography, in general, although quite substantial, still waits to benefit from the recent methodological and epistemological developments in the historical field, and in design studies.

- as the history of ideas in design;
- as the anthropological history of material culture;
- as the economic history of material production;
- as the psychoanalytic approach to mankind's symbolic relationship with artifacts and technology, through time;
- as the history of design discourse;
- as the history of design journals and literature;
- as the history of design industry, its success stories and failures;
- as the social history of design;
  - i.e., the penetration of designed products into daily life;
- as the history of style in design;
- as the history of design museums and Design Centers;
- as the compared history of these histories in various countries;
- as the history of reaction against design in some countries, or institutions, or social groups;
- as the history of women in design;
- as the history of specific products or types of products, such as lamps, cars, or clothes, textiles, etc.;
- as the history of specific daily practices including eating, sleeping, traveling, etc., in connection with design; and
- etc.

None of these series could be considered *a priori* as less important than the other as far as the history of design is concerned. Students must be shown that each artifact is at the crossroads of multiple, more or less interdependent, historical developments. Consequently, what was first simply an icon or a product, progressively takes shape and relief, i.e., meaning. Again, these various approaches should be discussed with regard to their respective qualities, shortcomings and potential fecundity in the context of students' own studio work. Notice also that such a multiserial approach to the history of design could have some beneficial influence upon the museographic aspect of and practice in design. The current approach to design exhibitions is still much too often influenced by the decorative arts tradition, itself inherited from fine arts museums. The *ensemblist* approach, although very traditional, already is an improvement; and the current comparative fashion still better, provided it is carefully designed. In this respect, the last—and quite popular—Paris exhibition "*Design, miroir du siècle*" (*Design, Mirror of the Century*) demonstrated a more contextual approach to our industrial material culture, although it was its "flea market" aspect that most captured the public's attention.<sup>37</sup>

After using a single artifact as the narrative support for historical inquiry, the emphasis should then be put on a more complex, a more human, a more social, a more cultural; and, consequently, on a more problematic historical object; constituted by a whole historical period, with its proper character and problems. The

37 See the catalog of this huge exhibition, symbolically set up in the *Grand Palais*, Jocelyn de Noblet (ed.), *Design, miroir du siècle* (Paris: Flammarion/APCI, 1930).

historian Ernst Gombrich recommended the use of Hegel's model to describe the "spirit" peculiar to a period, in the form of a wheel divided into eight sectors, each corresponding to a human activity: science, art, technology, religion, political system, ethics, legal system, customs, and mentality.<sup>38</sup> This paradigm can be used to adequately contextualize the design situation and problematics specific to a period. Students may be divided into teams, each team being responsible for one period and one country: England (1860–1900), Russia (1915–1925), France (1925–1935), Germany (1918–1933), Austria (1890–1914), United States (1925–1940), Scandinavia (1940–1960), France (1980–1990), Japan, Mexico, Australia, etc. Each period and country then would be examined according to specific points of view influencing the development of design: economic-industrial-technological activity; political situation; social aspects and way-of-life; architecture and urbanism; decorative and applied arts (textile, clothes, ceramics, graphic design, etc.); artistic production (fine arts, photography, cinema, music, etc.); and design. Naturally, the mere juxtaposition of these various sectorial period "pictures" or "snapshots," or the juxtaposition of the former throughout all countries, will not constitute a global history of design. A complementary synthetic effort still must be made so that each picture comes alive and manages to give some meaning to global social, political, cultural, and material environments in which design is practiced and problematized. Such an objective is best attained, I believe, if each student team is given a specific design problem, and asked to simulate the way this problem might have been tackled in their respective period or country. A design contest, the setting up of a design exhibition, the creation of a design school or of a governmental design center; are all relevant scenarios for such a purpose. And since we are in a design school where students normally are quite familiar with workshops, materials and model building; each team may be asked to actually act the situation in a short play with costumes and sets; thus elevating the methodological exercise up to a kind of phenomenological approach to history.

This list of potential didactic experiences naturally has no pretension to comprehensiveness. I only wish to illustrate what an epistemological-methodological critic of the practice of history can yield in terms of concrete pedagogical outcomes and achievements in the specific field of design history. I also want to demonstrate that, even in such an apparently abstract domain as the epistemology of history, the typically pragmatic attitude specific to design thinking; in which the relationship of theory to practice must never be lost from sight; can be of particular help and, in fact, may contribute to a true interdisciplinary approach. In this respect, my last and concluding remark will address the usefulness of a design problem within a given historical, geographical and cultural context; requiring from the students the generation of a complex

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38 Quoted and reproduced in Christian Grohn, *Die Bauhaus-Idee. Entwurf, Weiterführung, Rezeption* (Berlin, Gebr.: Mann Verlag, 1991), 15–16.

process of knowledge—intellectual, emotional, and volitional—oriented toward a synthesis, i.e., the reconstruction of a historical phenomenon. This process of knowledge is exactly of the same kind as the preliminary stage of the design process leading to the first concrete propositions and sketches of the final product. We all know that this stage is of critical importance; since this is where the setting up of the design problem takes place, and where the first concepts are perceived and conceived. There is no epistemological difference in the act of grasping all of the dimensions of a historical object and in the correct setting up of a contemporary design problem that takes into account the technological, sociological, ergonomic, symbolic, ethical, esthetic, etc., constraints within the designer's freedom of action. Furthermore, there is no methodological difference between the collective reconstruction of a complex historical phenomenon and the production of a preliminary concept in design, following the preceding stage. If the problem is properly and comprehensively set up, then the final execution and implementation of the project is greatly facilitated, and the end product likely to be instrumentally (i.e., functionally) sound, and symbolically (i.e., psychologically and socially) significant. Therefore, I would say that the course of design history, if properly considered pedagogically, is not only useful to the students' general education, erudition, scholarship, and all other qualities usually expected from such a course; but also and mainly, at the level of the very theory of knowledge in design, to the improvement of their design ability.

