

REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF DESIGN.

TALK

DEYAN SUDJIC
TALKS TO
KONSTANTIN GRČIĆ
AND SAM HECHT.



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thing. When did you become aware of what design is? Do you
think it's a profession? Or is it a practice and the functional
designer is someone who makes things that are useful and a little
functional – just a little bit better. It's not about luxury.
In the way in which a designer works? How do you
mean for design/design about luxury? How does
be a designer? What does the threatened position
people pay for which a designer works? How do you
Do you mean that if design adds something that

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EYAN SUDJIC: I'm interested in the way that designers use the word "problem" so much. There is something quite puritanical about the idea. It suggests that design is basically a question of looking for a problem and then coming up with a way to solve it. It suggests a particular idea of functionalism, but there are other, equally important things to think about for a designer.

SAM HECHT: Either you are confronted with something that the client thinks is a problem or you think about the design in a way that reveals the potential of a situation.

Problem is not the right word, opportunity is better if you are looking for a creative outcome. A lot of problems are self-inflicted. I designed a photographic printer once, and there were lots of ways to improve the way it worked and how it was made. But in the end, Kodak ended up selling a camera with a printer. So the printer suddenly had no value whatsoever.

These were huge problems, very complex and really on a large economic scale. Their solution to it was to say well okay, if the industry can't make money from printers, they'll have to make it from selling ink cartridges. So no one cares about the printer.

Designers all want to design chairs, for instance. But there are no problems left with chairs anymore. There is no reason why any chair should not be comfortable, stack easily, be very light and pretty cheap. But all of us as designers are continually doing chairs, so basically we make our own problems now. We think about designing the world's lightest chair or the strongest chair or the most

recyclable chair. We have to create our own constraints.

SUDJIC: What we call design may not be so much about designing an object so that it works well, but is more to do with persuading people to use it more often or selling them a service contract which they can't fully understand. If one takes a pessimistic view, and usually I don't, this might be seen as being a sorcerer's apprentice moment for designers. We've created an industrial system that can't be stopped. More and more things happen faster and faster and the process is now out of our control.

HECHT: It does sometimes feel like that, particularly in China. China has changed design in so many ways. I've never been to China, even if 80 per cent of my work is now produced there. I've never seen the factories, I'm almost scared of seeing them.

SUDJIC: From choice?

HECHT: No, I am more than happy to investigate it. What has changed is that the methods of production are quite different now. You work with agents and all sorts of strange mechanisms and then out pops the product with a superfast turnaround. It looks



IF 4000, TAYLOR'S EYE WITNESS

pretty good and if it doesn't work, then you can re-engineer it or adjust. The distance between production and the designer is wider than it has ever been.

SUDJIC: Given that the link between design in Europe and manufacturing in Asia is becoming more and more attenuated, can design survive as a strength in the West?

HECHT: Maybe one way of answering it is to look the other way. I've been to countries that don't have a particularly rich heritage of design but are building a strong basis for manufacturing. I don't know if we'll soon become the novelty acts rather than fundamental instigators of design. We are approached quite often now by clients from Eastern European countries. For one reason or another it hasn't worked out, but they're clearly looking for designers and adding them to their economies. I suppose, essentially, you need to put something back into the pot to make sure that it doesn't deplete to the point where there's nothing left. And perhaps one of the pots that is quite interesting and is still full for Europe is education. There are so many foreign students using Europe to learn about design as opposed to being educated at home. I think that has become an industry in itself.

SUDJIC: Are you optimistic about design?

HECHT: Well, I am always a little bit pessimistic, but that is why I have a partner who is the optimist. I see so many companies struggling at the moment and trying to deal with huge problems, from waste to social responsibility.

SUDJIC: You are talking about your clients rather than designers.

HECHT: Yes, but there is something that design can contribute to here. It requires a different viewpoint on what a designer is. A designer is often thought of as someone who is a trendy fashionista, who is either obsessed with material and how or what you can do with, or hung up on colour or form. But you will never be able to really contribute at that level. I worked with Rem Koolhaas on a project for Prada, and I think that designers have

a lot to learn from his level of ambition. He brought the idea of the urban scale back into the frame of architecture.

SUDJIC: Can design be critical in the way that someone like Ettore Sottsass has proposed? Can you use the ultimate product of industrial design to ask, well just a minute, is this the right thing to spend our resources on?

HECHT: I think that is the kind of model that I strive for. I have always said that if all you are doing is designing things that are to hand, you are never really going to make very much impact.

SUDJIC: If you are Victor Papanek, you would claim that design is in business to seduce innocent consumers into spending money they don't have on stuff they can't afford and that this is actually part of the trick and the way the consumer society works on its victims.

HECHT: It's a reality that design is intertwined with capitalism. Design has become a minefield for a lot of people trying to navigate through marketing tricks. I think the least we can expect now is that things work effectively. There is really no excuse for them not to.

SUDJIC: And then what? What more does an object need to do?

HECHT: Well, then the design kicks in. It offers what is relevant to me as a person. That's what we do with Muji for whom I am a consultant. The company is up to something like 6,000 products now, so every meeting has to look at what else we can do. It's become a process of gap finding.

SUDJIC: And each of those products needs to demonstrate the Muji DNA?

HECHT: Exactly.

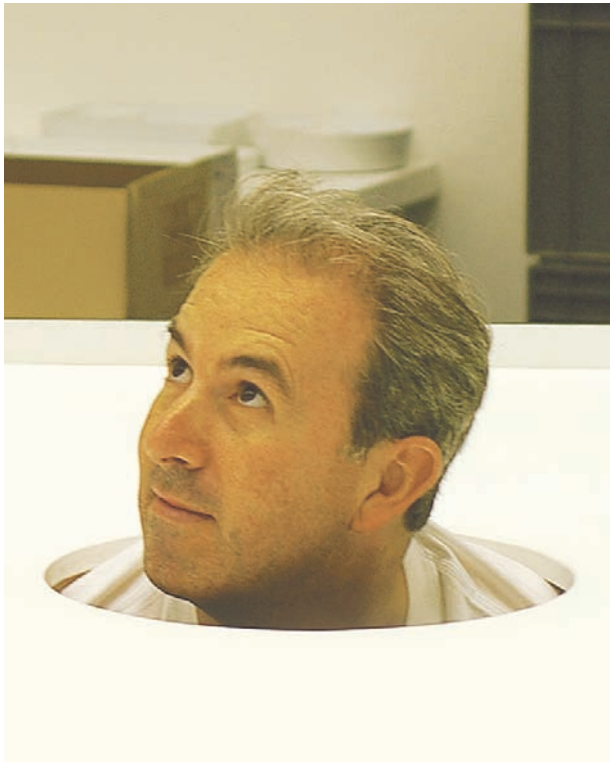
SUDJIC: So you're the guardian-in-chief for Muji's DNA?

HECHT: Well for Europe, yes I have played a part in this. I do believe they are doing the right thing. Partly because I really have the same sensibility.

SUDJIC: How should designers respond to the virtual world?

HECHT: I can always spot a design that has been created by a computer. About a year ago,

we had an interesting experience designing a chair for Magis that made us decide deliberately to deskill the studio. They asked us to design it on the computer. They told us it makes the process so much easier. So we did. We had a person operating the machine, we talked it over. We designed it and it looked absolutely spectacular. We were very confident about it and they said okay, send over the files and we'll prepare a prototype. So they did and I went over to see it in Italy and no matter how good it looked on the screen, it was just appalling in the flesh. I had been taken in to such an extent by how it looked on the computer, it held all of the qualities that I thought it would hold, but in reality it didn't. So now we make everything by hand. With a computer you are looking at a luminous layer on the screen, it is backlit, so it already looks magical. At the same time, a computer doesn't allow you to stop. You can go on forever, adding more and more. So, trying to design something that has a certain elegance and simplicity to it is very difficult on a computer because there is a natural urge to discover and use all the tools on the computer on the product.



SAM HECHT

Now we deliberately work with models rather than simply a screen. That gives you an immediate connection. And when you present to a client, a working model can be a powerfully persuasive tool for something very simple and elegant. When I was working on a coffee maker, all I showed them was a model made from cardboard tube. The big idea was just a cylinder. But if we had done it just as a rendering of a cylinder, it would have been impossible to present. They would just have asked me: where's the design?

SUDJIC: Is the object losing its appeal?

HECHT: I think that as humans, we have a natural instinct to touch things that are in our environment. I don't think that will go away. It's just the form of expression that changes. People customise and they want more engagement, they are less keen on the perfect thing. People want more possibilities with the things they own – to make them theirs as well.

SUDJIC: When you meet a new client, what do you talk about in terms of what you can do?

HECHT: I've found that if you get along and you enjoy each other's company, that generally makes for a good project. It gets a lot more complicated when you are dealing with bigger companies, especially when dealing with more people. I don't think we have ever had a client who has come to us and said: can you give us a simple design? It is more about us simplifying a process or the particular brief. But it is hard to pinpoint exactly why they come to us. We talk about what we see in the world that is captivating – that might influence the project beyond what the client might imagine.

SUDJIC: What can a designer offer that a marketing consultant can't?

HECHT: It depends on the degree of passion and commitment. You can have a very good marketing person, who is super clever, super intelligent and really wants to develop the brand of the product to the best of his ability or you can have a weak person.

SUDJIC: If industrial design is about making mass-produced objects, you would assume



SECOND TELEPHONE, MUJI



FAN, MUJI

that the most successful pieces of industrial designs are the ones that perform best commercially?

HECHT: Successful design is much more than making something that is purely functional. The things that I would regard as successful have a message or a meaning. There needs to be something in an object that I can see but others can't and that doesn't get in the way of how it is used. It doesn't happen often, it happens sometimes. Then it is very pleasant.

SUDJIC: It's an elusive quality?

HECHT: Yes. I designed a notebook for Muji once. It was the same size and shape as a passport. It came in black, red, green and blue, so the colours were not simply colours. They amounted to a nationality. People didn't realise what they were carrying around. I really enjoyed that sense of giving an object meaning without making it obvious. It's not like a post-modernist form of meaning, which is really about visual literacy. It was much more subversive.

I do make a point of challenging the processes that a lot of companies use to develop their products. A lot of the time, you've got marketing departments desperately trying to make their products as visible as possible in the market place. We designed a printer last year and we wanted to make it off-white with a brown lid. In Japan they accepted it when I explained the concept to them. I spoke to the marketing people and I said, you know, if you want to make an impact, do the exact opposite of what the others are doing. Everybody else's printer is shouting for attention and using lots of fancy metallic sprays and finishes and bright lights and those sorts of things. I said, if you make a printer that is just a box, that is very simple in a domestic colour rather than a shop colour, then it will have a bigger impact. It worked in Japan, but in the UK and America the client refused to accept it.

I spent hours arguing but they wouldn't accept it, and sure enough their version doesn't stand out at all in the shops, but it does stand out in the domestic world. They

were vehement, the company said that it had to have a silver finish, just like all the other electronics. Why are most TV sets silver? I don't need to look at the TV when it's off. They are silver because they are making me feel that's how you can generate glitzy specialness.

SUDJIC: That's the magpie appeal.

HECHT: Exactly. We go around picking up these shiny objects but the reality is that when you bring it home it has absolutely no connection with the domestic setting, and that is very frustrating for me.

SUDJIC: Design is not an automatic passport to commercial success?

HECHT: True, it's not, but I think that design is now very important to a lot of companies. They feel that the customer is far more savvy about what design is and so they feel that design should be part of the equation.

I like difficulties that need to be overcome. That is often what sets up what the project will be. I know a Japanese designer who I think is very good. He once told me that when he meets a client, if he can't think of what the final design will be in the first ten minutes of the conversation, he won't take on the commission. I think there's something in what he says. Probably, I wouldn't say that I wouldn't do the project, but certainly if my mind starts racing very quickly as the project is presented, then I know it is going to be good. But if I don't feel that speed and momentum right away, then it invariably becomes a struggle.

SUDJIC: Which parts of the process do you enjoy most?

HECHT: There is a very strange Freudian space between the idea and the reality, between what is in a designer's mind and what it will be when it's been tested and becomes real. I find that playing in this area is really very, very interesting. I can feel an object, I can see it before it actually exists. And I love that gap. It's a dreamlike experience; sometimes I go to bed looking for those periods. It's very hard to explain but when an object is made real it has lost that quality. It has become something else.

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SAM HECHT

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