

Design, History and Time: New Temporalities in a Digital Age
Zoë Hendon and Anne Massey (eds.)
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Review by Stephen Boyd Davis

The book's title promises a lot, as does the subtitle: new temporalities in a digital age. Derived from papers at the Design History Society conference held at Middlesex University, UK, in 2016, this edited volume brings a wealth of insights to its three themes, each of which could be said to be currently in flux. Design's place in deep time and the long now is increasingly apparent. Design history has often been concerned with tracing the relatively ephemeral and impermanent, but there have been those with a longer view, highlighting the consequences of consumerism and disposability, and invoking a historical conscience for design – a need increasingly evident in the light of current social and environmental disaster. At the same time there has been a shift towards designing the immaterial, with its emphasis on systems, processes, services, ecologies and experiences, each with more obvious temporal aspects than the objects that have dominated design and its history to date. And a few historians have addressed the subject of historic time itself, rather than taking it for granted as an ignorable background. Each of these themes appears in some way in the book, though not with equal prominence. It is structured around a zoomed approach to time, from millennia to seconds. The book's three sections also differ in emphasis, the first dominated by perceptions of time, the second the interpretation of historical material evidence, and the third by designs that seem to explicitly engage with time.

Barry Curtis' foreword reminds us that, among the various histories, design history is a latecomer. One of its strengths is to see *objects* as laden with meanings and implications, and as having an agency that other histories have tended to ascribe only to human and social actors. Many of the chapters that follow persuasively use a single object as a source of semiotic, social and political analysis. Several are also calls for action – including to reimagine our ways of researching, archiving and writing history.

Hendon and Massey's introduction to Section One emphasises the importance of forms of time other than the mechanical. This view is itself perhaps in danger of becoming a new orthodoxy, but the concept of *thick time* is certainly useful: designed objects do not merely exist in time, but themselves embody pasts, presents and futures. This approach is much in evidence in the rest of the book.

Seher Erdogan Ford approaches the materiality of building-stone, and particularly its changes over time as represented in images. She contrasts the modernist desire to eliminate decay – and its image – with those like Piranesi who have revelled in evidence of change, and she identifies an important correspondence of motive between forms of depiction and what they portray. Rather than seeing that modern form of drawing, the virtual environment, as an unmediated imaging of pristine buildings, she identifies an important opportunity: to use our interactive engagement with the mutable image to render it tentative and multivalent. VEs are conceptualised as knowledge systems, not final images. This is a useful corrective to the naive view of virtual archaeology as unproblematic reconstruction, making the chapter both an analysis and a proposal for action.

Sally Anne Huxtable brackets her chapter on the Scots designer and artist Phoebe Anna Traquair by problematising time in the cultural context of the second half of the nineteenth

century. She argues that the period's controversies, exemplified in the tension between diurnal rhythms and railway time, between Biblical timescales and those of geology, permeated Traquair's mission to reconcile science and religion, which she aimed to resolve by casting them as aspects of a single quest, one informed by love both mortal and divine.

The heritage industries have come under increased critical scrutiny in recent years, not least in their internal contradictions, which ostensibly make us grateful that we do not live in the past while somehow hinting at the opposite. Anne Burke brings a powerful lens to these contradictions in postcolonial Australian identity by showing us a single luxury train journey across the country, through her own eyes as a passenger. Is this chapter about design? Yes. It is about service design and experience design, above all about the ways these may exploit time and its distortions as marketable commodities.

Chapters in Section Two consider the archive – loosely defined – as the physical embodiment of (official) memory, and look at the ways in which it is changing in the digital age: structures of time and structures of power. In passing, it is odd that Benedict Anderson is credited alone with the important notion of *homogeneous empty time*, rather than Benjamin whose original *homogene und leere Zeit* originates in 1940.

Jessica Jenkins traces changing attitudes to one particular past, that of the GDR as seen, and constructed, by post-unification Germany. She identifies three sequential phases – trashing, crisis and adjustment – exemplified each by its own attitudes to the art of the defunct regime. A dominant trope traced by Jenkins is the asserted “naturalness” of the unified nation-state, and the perception that the art of any othered regime is not only worthless but simply ineligible as art. Particularly interesting is the retrospective reinterpretation of GDR murals and other works as emblems of “community” which become acceptable only once they are shorn of their specific political origins.

Carlos Bártolo traces a single paradigmatic object – the Barcelos cockerel – from hand-made folk toy, through symbol of “traditional” values under Portugal's dictatorship, to complacent emblem of a nation and a fast food company. The ability of apparently innocuous objects to be freighted with populist political exhortation emerges strongly. In relation to time, and an emergent theme of other chapters in the book, is the persuasive duplicity of regimes that combine apparent freshness – here Portugal's Estado Novo (New State) – with curated nostalgia for a fictional golden age.

By contrast, Michael Findlay traces a reactionary nostalgia that misfired. The aim of the Rome Prize for architecture was to reinforce classical tradition, but the 1926 winner Amyas Connell instead became one of the founders of British modernism. As in other chapters, the tracing of big ideas through a single artefact – the High and Over house – is effective. Ironically, as Findlay demonstrates, Connell's experience of classical architecture, including its re-interpretation by Piranesi, was actually fundamental to his design. A strength of the chapter is the tracing through time of the subsequent critical views of this landmark building.

Emily Candela highlights a key contribution of her chapter: it is about questions concerning eBay's role in the development of popular memory, particularly where design histories are concerned. There are two fascinating stories here: the history of “atomic” ball-and-rod designs of domestic objects in the 1950s and 60s, and the meta-history of their curation through the consumerist website. As Candela puts it, at stake is “the practice of design history at a time when issues of who, and what, writes history become more pressing.” Her “what” is

important. Whereas the book noticeably lacks any discussion of digital humanities as such, Candela's highlighting that *what*, not just *who*, has agency in shaping (design) history is timely.

Most chapters embrace not just historical and methodological, but social, ethical and political aspects of history, design and time. A welcome contribution is John Potvin's highlighting two lacunae in the conventional (heteronormative) legacy. There are material absences, not least because many queer figures requested the destruction of their own documents at their deaths; and there are human absences too, in the lack of physical progeny. These absences are compounded, he argues, by historians' refusal to address the special character of particular design professions in which queerness predominated. Potvin traces the history of perceptions of women and queer men as interior designers, in particular in relation to assumptions about sensitivity and feeling. Far from objecting to the latter, he sees it as valuable against the claims of a false "rigour" in historiography.

The third and final section of the book focuses on modern time through familiar concepts: the widely remarked sense since the nineteenth century that time is "speeding up", with its alleged compression of space, and the always-on instantaneous culture of the digital age.

David Lawrence's analysis of the London Underground has more in common with Anne Burke's depiction of the Ghan than being about trains. Both portray systems that are amalgams of physical engineering, product design and experience design within a vision of a service: the Ghan one of luxury, the Underground of public good. And whereas the Ghan is about leisure where time does not matter very much, Lawrence likens the Underground to a multitude of interconnecting clocks; it is useful here to see engineering treated as integral to the analysis of design.

While Erdogan Ford's opening chapter focused on images of slowly ageing architectures, Claire McAndrew foregrounds faster architectural mutability as conceptualised by Archigram and by Price's Fun Palace. Pask's involvement in the latter ensured that the essentially temporal cybernetic notion of conversation would imbue the project. Buildings would be not just responsive but anticipatory, and time would become the friend of architecture rather than its enemy. McAndrew emphasises too the social element at the heart of these projects: responsive architecture to enable human-human interaction.

The shift from product to process is fundamental to the "Minutes" range of ceramics highlighted by Niels Peter Skou. This launches a productive discussion of the tension between the time-famine so widely felt in technologised societies and the desire for goods that seem to oppose rapid production, consumption and disposal. It is interesting that slow products such as "grown chairs" offer primarily linear narratives: the circular economy and its implications for time are absent from this book. But the move to products-with-narratives reinforces the design of the immaterial as one of its key themes.

Stephen Hayward also uses a single distinctive Dutch artefact as the start-point for his analysis: the animated clock at Schiphol airport where an overalled worker seems to hand-paint every minute. Hayward's theme is the engagement of speculative design and other exploratory design disciplines with time. Understandably, he is anxious about the value of such approaches. In the end, it is not clear how persuaded he is of any answer to his own questions, but the examples are a useful stimulus to thought.

The final chapter by Toke Riis Ebbesen encapsulates a principle that Hendon and Massey highlighted in their introduction, that designs are situated in time but also themselves embody evocations of past, present and future: intertextuality as intertemporality. Ebbesen's example is the Kindle reading device. He highlights its many conservative features – not least the doggedly isolated nature of the books it houses, which resist the freedoms of hypertext and preserve the siloed nature of traditional leather or paper covers. Ebbesen's bemused disappointment at the conservatism of an apparently futuristic device is a perhaps suitably sombre note on which to end the book.

One of the things that emerges as most clearly “designed” in this volume is History. When Simon proposed in 1969 that “everybody designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones,” he was thinking about designing the future. This volume emphasises how we design certain pasts to suit and shape our chosen narratives. It is a commonplace of historiography that histories are selective and formative, but what this fascinating collection adds is a perception that the design of history is as important as the history of design and that it takes a multitude of forms both tangible and intangible. Those who succeed in designing the past may control the future.