

State of Design Report

School of Design
Design Research
Royal College of Art
June 2021



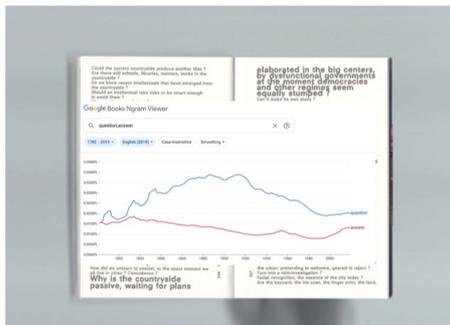
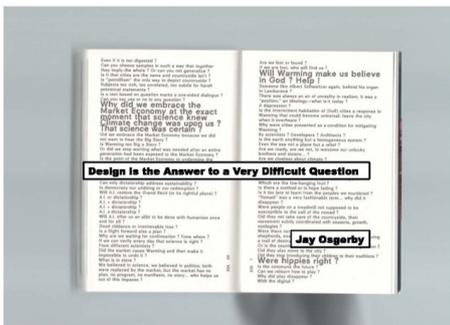
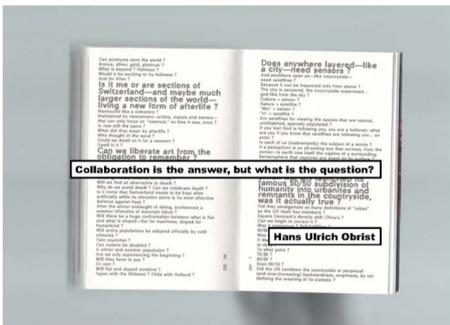
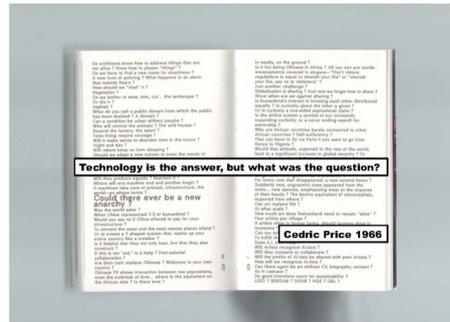
Royal College of Art
Postgraduate Art & Design

In 2019 the UK Design Council declared “Whatever the question, design has an answer.” While not quite so bold the British designer Jay Osgerby maintains that “Design is the Answer to a Very Difficult Question.” Both valiant statements play on Cedric Price’s massively exploited conundrum “Technology is the answer, but what was the question?”

A superficial trawl of the web reveals – “Big Data Is the Answer ... But What Is the Question?” – “Design Thinking Is Not The Answer - Especially If You Don’t Know The Question” – “Universal Design – The Answer to Everything?” – “If Design-Based Research is the Answer, What is the Question?” And the web also exposes curiously aligned beliefs that “Love or war or music or summer or Jesus or art or wool (or countless other subjects) is the answer.”

Perhaps Price was already playing with Shakespeare’s mission for Hamlet “To be, or not to be, that is the question.” It seems that the answers already surround us. It’s the question we don’t know. But its vitally important to place before this catechism the simple fact is that each designer *creates* their precursors. Their work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. Price asked what *WAS* the question and everyone after him writes what *IS* the question as if there is no conception of the past. *WAS* used to be the totally artificial world; a future responsible. Whereas *IS* is now the totally financial world; a future already mortgaged. In which case we can only ask - was the past simple, is the present perfect and will the future be affordable?

In 1990 Donella H. Meadows’ wrote the “State of the Village Report”, which presented a framework for understanding the world as a combination of physical, economic, and social relationships by imagining the world was a village of 1000 people. Scaling down the numbers was a very palpable way to change mindsets and help build awareness about what an individual could do to help manage the complex environmental, social and economic systems of which we are all a part.



Background images: AMO & Rem Koolhaas., "Countryside: A Report", Köln, Taschen, 2020, pp324-351

If, as the Design Council asserts, design always has an answer, is design's apparent omniscience an accurate depiction of the state of design? To answer this question we asked our researchers in the school of design at the RCA to report on the state of design:

If all the answers are already there, designers could focus on designing tools for managing the complexity of the world without adding to it, shaping a balanced relationship between us and our environment.

It is the scientific approach/method/lens that allows design to make that claim - something that design has a love and hate relationship with and its imbalance is sometimes essential (e.g., creativity, experimentation, innovation) and sometimes disastrous.

If design always has an answer it demonstrates an over- (and perhaps hopeless) confidence in our capacity for knowledge. Fundamentally, the 'answer' is underpinned by the correct moral framework for the ideal end (at least, pragmatically ideal end); how can we design that?

Design has the potential to communicate meaning between boundaries and to support and transform the perception of different ways of thinking. There is therefore a responsibility to understand other ways of thinking, professions and fields. This responsibility is to be persistent and ignorant to the uncovered content of the Other. This Other can be the technology, but also the issues that the technology may want to address.

*Design is the awareness of the distinct nature of different villages
Although humans create the problem, only human designers can solve it.*

Design to be approaches for understanding purpose through problems for the development of balancing human and environmental innovation.

Design should take on its imaginative skill sets and bring specialists together to develop and work towards possible, desirable future scenarios to avoid problems that emerge and not merely looking for answers for problems that have emerged already as it is used mainly today. Not really a state of design now, but what its possible potentials can be.

- a. *Design is asking itself questions where the world could have the answer*
- b. *Design could be delivering open answers that can be assumed and recaptured by those who want it.*

The state of design can apply messy methods for re-nurturing.

In this complex, dynamic, and interconnected context, design should not only be about fixing problems, answering questions, but also about iterating and reframing questions.

What progress have we made in bridging the gap between technology and society? Moving technology to society rather than society towards technology. Designing for unknowable technologies. Technology is the answer, but is the question ours to ask? [Revisiting Cedric Price's original 1966 question]

The creeping smartness of technology is unmooring our capacity to own the question about whether technology is the answer.

If whatever the question, design has an answer, then what underpins design or gives us the license to make that claim?

Does the right answer and right question even exist? If so, who approves or confirms that? Is it a designer's patent to research and report the question and answer?

If we designers are a product of the same structures that created the "problems" we aim to address, then how could we have the answers?

What is the relationship between questioner and answer?

*Whether we entrust our decisions to machines of metal, or to those of machines of flesh and blood ..., we shall never receive the right answers to our questions unless we ask the right questions.....The hour is very late, and the choice of good and evil knocks at our door. (Norbert Wiener, *The Human use of Human Beings*, 1954)*

Is knowing the answer but not the question in contrast to, or similar to design experimentation which is always about using a form of technology in an unknowable way?

I wonder what 'non designers' see as the state of design? Do they care?

As long as we are forever limited by problems we will be ambushed by the unthinkable and unknowable. We need a new model for design.

Design for the present is combining knowledge of the past with the technology of the future

The state of design in 2021 revolves around design guiltiness. Nowadays we design for empathy, compassion, trust, care, or humility Long are the days of magazine covers, number ones, personal statements, or the sublime.

Suppose design can propose an answer to the question, who will take responsibility to deliver, implement and look after the answer? Should bringing the answer be the climax of a designer's work? Do future designers still focus on question and answer as designer's top two focal points? If future designers still retain "question" and "answer" as the main interest of the designer, do we (as a designer today) feel it is the right state of design in the future?

If design has "an" answer and the answer is the result of human intention, then how can we ensure the answers we elect through design, speak for those which can not ask the question, yet are touched by the answer?

Technology is the answer, but is it only humans who are asking the question?

Design realises that it is in the middle of a very important phase of its own disciplinary development. Design could not provide all answers to the pandemic, it could not provide all questions to ask to avoid supply chains breaking down, shed light away from the dominant thrive for vaccination towards humanitarian crises, hunger or social, political and economical conflicts. Yet, design did not stop asking questions, did not stop but rather fostered building interdisciplinary networks and entered unknown territories - but is it enough? There is movement, but is it enough movement to really progress design further?

Design strives to approach issues of the future with tools from the past. When a solution starts to fall apart at the seams, design shifts abruptly to the next state of the art. To put it another way, designers are trapped in a never-ending game of tag with the future.

Design is an imminent crisis! What has become the central dogma of late-20th and early 21st-century design, namely, 'to design is to devise courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones', bears all the hallmarks of a 'practice-cum-science' espoused by a rational subjectivity that knows what is preferable and how to bring it into being. Design needs to respond to the problem that it helped bring into being by becoming other than itself - - Design must un-design its own designing, but in so doing, it cannot make this a design project. design must become unrecognisable to itself.

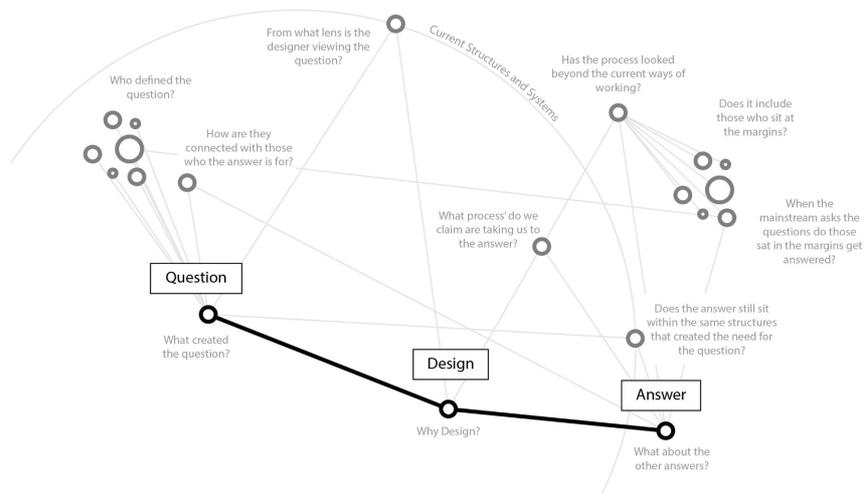
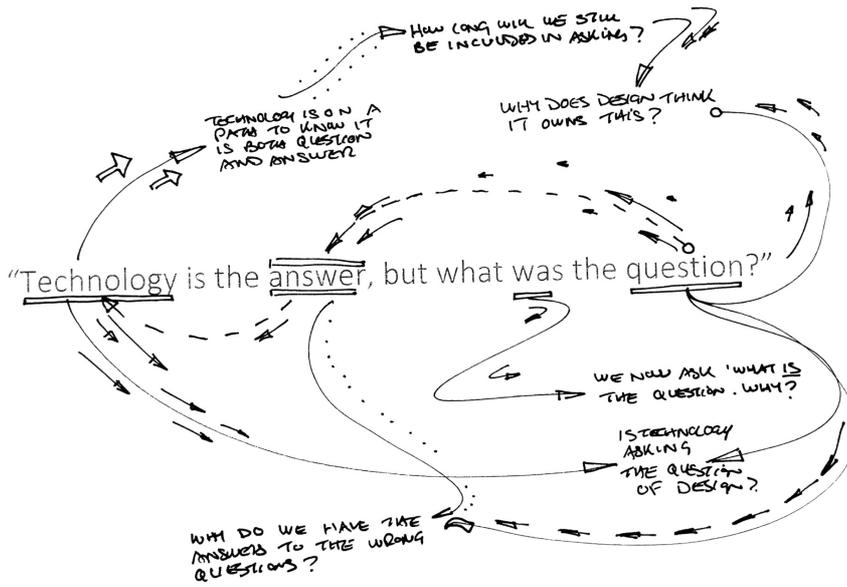
Design today, in the majority of cases, is operating in two conditions, universal solutions and isolated solutions, where both are developed based on pre-packed or revolutionary ideas for predicted and forecasted problems rather than existing needs.

Design is at loss when the role of design or that of the designer is seen as the magician who can brighten up the world and polish strains with some magic tools, but when you scratch the surface many are not aware of the fact that design interventions deeply infiltrate into the social, economic and political systems we are surrounded with.

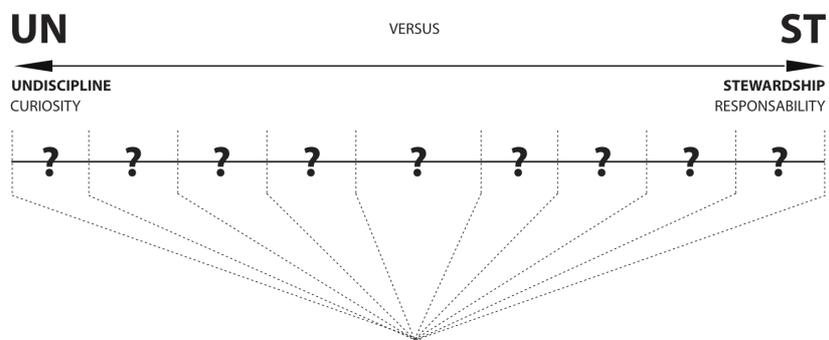
If design 'always has an answer' – a key question is cui bono? Does design perpetuate itself as the oracle and all questions must go through the 'design' lens – a problem or answer as stated is already in a past state and perhaps keeps viewing the problem in a static past state but should look to a dynamic real-life ongoing process (a set of evolving questions) that could be met with evolving dynamic responses (that continue to evolve) that incorporates varieties of designer and non-designer points of view.

It's perhaps less about Design (always) having the answers but more about the capability in design to set a series of questions along the continuum and thereby the right direction of travel, including the right velocity (speed over time) and acceleration (change in speed over time) to get there. The velocity and acceleration in how we design has to be tailored to the need and gear selected accordingly. Without design you end up getting stuck in singular destinations, velocities, accelerations. With design you don't always have to be in one gear.

The state of design is described by those who claim to know the state of design.



THE EDUCATIONAL DEBATE



WHERE SHOULD DESIGN PRACTISE TRESHOLD BE IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS?

Signatories

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RCA

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