Realities and Conventions

By Alfredo Gutiérrez Borrero

Even though we refuse to accept it, there is indeed life in other brains: the culture of scorn harms us designers.

Regarding the construction of knowledge on design, my thoughts are similar to those of Chantal Mouffe (Belgian political scientist) in relation to how she views the collective imagination on politics: it is not founded upon rational consensus but upon an "agonistic pluralism" from which it is feasible to acknowledge that antagonism will always occur, since every "we" entails a "they".[1]

I find it healthy to practice design by getting rid of the notion of one single truth which we can possess; the thought that one owns certainties whereas everyone else is mistaken is incompatible with the creative viabilities provided by comparing and contrasting positions through reasoning. I agree that there are "truths" being debated,[2] I do not intend to impose any, and I reject as ignoble every negation of the legitimacy of my potential interlocutors (even in the very remote case they could see me as their "opponent"). That is why I propose the addition of a permanent errata list to our statements: when and where we sustain "design is", we may wish to mean "design (in my opinion) is"; and when and where we affirm "reality is", perhaps we would rather mean "(to me) reality is". It is superfluous to decide that another designer lacks understanding of reality because their view of it is different from mine; my assertions do not cause other designers to cease to exist, nor do they cause their versions of reality to cease to be valid for them. We all have the right to discuss design, even if we do not have anything to do with companies or academies, just as we all can give our opinion on our own health without being doctors, or reflect on law without being lawyers.

Following that vein I am writing here, with broad views, before a forum of Spanish-American reach, for potential readers belonging in an infinity of specialties, universities and countries; and when I refer to design here, I do it within an all-embracing scope, avoiding even giving it a surname, for the reason that I aspire to include everyone and, if possible, to start a dialogue with the majority of people possible. As far as my intuition goes, every time a designer scorns another, attributing them unfavorable characteristics, or pushing them aside (even if not too noticeably), the whole community suffers.[3] All species and individuals play a role of importance within the ecology of opinions and practices; from those who produce oxygenizing knowledge, just like herbs, down to those who merely feed themselves on what is alien to them. Each person reads "reality" in their own particular ways: there are those who choose to read, as well as those who decide not to do so; and "reading", etymologically, remits to the intellectual act of choosing and combining: the Latin verb legere, from which it comes, is equivalent to "choose".[4] We read even when we don't! Likewise, we design better when we

try to "comprehend the comprehension" of other people; when we try appreciating how others "read" what we read differently; or when we respect, and learn from the way others respond in ways we would never ever choose to respond.[5]

The maps again

> "The foremost structural feature of maps relies on the fact that in order for them to perform their functions adequately, they inevitably have to distort reality."
> Boaventura de Sousa Santos[6]

Where, on the personal level of "design cartography", obstinate convictions lead one to individualism, on their social level the problem lies in the sphere of conventions: seeming agreements usually accepted, often not reflected upon, under which each person assumes that it is the others who have to study and do design similarly to them and to serve only their particular interests. Let us remember that conventions are, hypothetically, assemblies[7] where united participants (I will not say representatives, as I believe each person represents themselves on their own) of societies add up understandings for making decisions: something barely incipient in our design collectivities where, far from contrasting perspectives in the dialogue, ad hominem arguments still emerge occasionally (attempts to annul ideas by drawing attention to characteristics and beliefs allegedly negative of the persons who present them)[8]; even here, on FOROALFA, safe zone for the continuously discussed revision of realities and conventions, where designers in diverse areas of expertise share our respective "cartographies", every now and then comments and remarks arise that are tainted by the signals of the culture of scorn. Please, let us honor the communicative exercise: we debate around ideas, not against individuals.

From that angle, mentioning conventions turns out to be ironic, when the conventional thing to do in design would be to stay away from them. I am under the impression that the tacit and low-contrast agreement favors sectarianism and common places: we opine extensively about what is most visible on the mass media and about mercantile success-ism; what about critical reflection then? So sad that form follows sales, when it could follow possibilities, as observed by Alexander Manú[9]; and it is even sadder that unorthodoxy and eccentricity are discriminated against. We must examine the mutual conventions in the cartography of designs (since their meanings, permanently renovated, tolerate every person's right to think and do); we need to identify our symbolic guidelines, and utilize them to approach specific currents and tendencies, so as to set off interpretative shared exercises which reduce disputes brought about by misunderstandings, stubbornness or vagueness. While doctors of medicine and law got to make a considerable portion of humankind well acquainted with their "cartographies" (to the extent that nearly every human being understands their respective health and law-based maps), many of us, friends of design, cannot even explain how or on what foundations we build ours.

Therefore we must encode our cartographic conventions, enhance them permanently and, in the panorama of practices and specializations, encourage members of an academy to

compare and contrast their location with that of others; we must encourage professionals of design communities in a country to share and compare with those of another country, so that common people are capable of locating us all: each person is situated in a crossroads of multiple representations (when I design I recognize how I view myself, how others view me, how they view themselves, and how I view them). In front of our "I-am-here", as proposed by Javier González,[10] there are a number of "you-are-there", from different perspectives and places, from whom we can indeed learn.

We are both naive and ambitious when we take it that our perception of the map of design is the map itself, or when we even assume that there is no map at all and our opinion, arbitrarily anchored to the road of the history of design at some point, is the whole world instead: the reason is that all cartographies are fractional and under incessant construction; only the socialized contributions among many (not "cripple-lized", due to arrogance and intolerance) make way for progress: it is necessary to illustrate symbolically the subjective specificities of experiencing the profession on particular territories. For instance, if on geographic maps "a plane" means "airport", "blue" indicates a body of water, or "green" signifies tree or plant, how can we represent architectural, interior, industrial design etc.?; by doing so, we could someday divulge a worldwide-spread list of now distinctive conventions and publish it in boxes or pop-ups by the margin of printed materials, blogs, websites, professional cards, etc.[11] Let us imagine an informational characterization of the field, including its boundaries with other professions and domains of human activity; projections, scales and symbolizations, in a similar fidelity to that of Google Maps, or Google Earth;[12] even detailing the languages spoken by us members of design communities; or the comparative visibility of companies, publications and organizations; or our relations with country rulers; or the magnitude of our projects; or our personal coordinates for us to look each other up on the basis of figurative, abstract, referential, or cognitive versions of our maps; in full texts or on diagrams and charts either to be read or seen.[13]

The idea of mapping individuals, and combining ways of knowledge with forms of representation is ancient; however, recently, some have gone more deeply into the matter. Such is the case of Valencia-born philosopher Francesc Llorens who in late 2011 came up with the concept of epistemo-cartography ("epistemology" + "cartography") for the study of the representational interpretation of the territory, made by those who integrate cultures (of design in our case) as a means to obtain understanding of their knowledge, or vice versa.[14] "You get to know in accordance with your maps (or in accordance with their absence)…", is the motto of epistemo-cartography. Something of imperative nature would be to include or invite to take part in the construction of the map even those who deny it. I share the hypothesis of Donald Schön, for whom emphasis on simplicity, efficiency and rigor (denying the map?) leads to the implementation of irrelevant projects, inasmuch as complexity, instability and uncertainty are neither removed nor solved by applying specialized knowledge onto well structured tasks. If there is any usefulness in using specialized knowledge effectively, this utility depends on its previous philosophical restructure in inexorably complex and uncertain situations.[15]

Revising conventions and tracing new and better maps would make it possible for convictions

to be redesigned, with no one directing or ruling over design processes, nor imposing convictions covered up as conventions so that others share and naturalize them as "the truth". Multiple ways of reasoning are always conceivable, each with a variety of tones. For instance, German sociologist Max Weber proposed three rationalities: the moral-practical (that of ethics and law); the aesthetical-expressive (belonging to arts and literature), and the cognitive-instrumental (proper of science and technology).[16] I infer that in order to design there is an overlooked potential in the moral-practical rationality (which, in my everyday life, I consider the most evident one in the field); nevertheless, from my contextual experience in design in Bogota, it is the aesthetical-expressive and the cognitive-instrumental rationalities which battle for domination, both of them under commercial approaches, with the latter favoring those who validate it, since it is that with the most credibility among youths (naturally, my experience of design in Bogota IS NOT the design of Bogota yet only my individual experience of it); at any rate, Weber's rationalities are perhaps preceded and blended by the rationality of design, whose uses we have but little developed, on account of some people's fear of getting infected if they theorize too much.Anyhow, it is preferable to think before doing than to do without thinking.

A method: No. Methods!

> "Some misunderstandings occurring in exchanges and analyses on design arise when the place from where one speaks or listens is not taken into account."
> Javier González Solas[17]

Our design cartography should be built up from several rationalities instead of solely from the version a reduced bunch of people have created out of one rationality alone (people who are often close-minded towards other conceptions), as occurs with the scientific-technical reality and the logic which grants it its fundaments, of course, a useful tool for doing design, which are frequently mystified and mythologized, as trenchantly put by Norberto Chaves:

> "This scientistic conception is that which upholds the infatuation toward 'methodologies of design', constructions of a hypothetical-deductive inspiration, high ideological potential and practically null technical efficacy."[18]

In contrast, there are designers who do point out the value of, not the method, but the methods (plural form) for designing, inasmuch as the comparative scrutiny and the combination of approaches make it possible to fathom the logics lying at the basis of every design process, to think by ourselves so as to secure original practical rationalities, and to build personal methodological approaches: I will include here the works of Hugh Dubberly[19] (on ways of designing); Lance Carlson[20] (about models for innovation); and Gabriel Simon Sol,[21] a member and participant on FOROALFA (on the unified methodological structure of industrial design).

I will now confess to my bias: there are maps of design, neither written nor solidified, which

we take for granted. Many of these, traced out from the scientific-technical logic, turn out to be reductionist to me, since the tenet their defenders advocate seems to imply that everything that is measurable, under their units of measurement (and what is defined and definitive in keeping with their dictionary interpretation) is controllable (which is very arguable) as well as to imply that everything which is "un-measurable" is useless, unfit or non-existent for designing (which is even more debatable). I am not alone in that train of thought: some fifty years ago, Pitirim Sorokin lampooned the manic insistence on quantifying and controlling it all, naming it as "quantum-phrenia".[22] Just like him, I object to the submission to limiting maps provided by authoritarian traditionalisms and monological big shots who deny other rationalities, with an additional aggravating element: those who design beneath and within such a narrow framework demurely interiorize a reality given by and from alien assessments and external knowledge to which their ideas have to adjust when, pretty much on the contrary, as noted by José Luis Ramírez González "the theory of design is a theory of how reality is produced and how ideas and experience can shape an external reality..."[23] Thus we who engage ourselves in designing (from poems up to constitutions, and from packages up to whole cities) should avoid deeming other people as unreal, or denying and underestimating their capability of making contributions of worth to the social construction of realities, at least because by doing so we are denying and despising design itself, with its infinite nuances.

When autocratic convictions become norms, there is an abundance of –among conventions and customs– expert technicians (efficient, effective, efficacious, blah, blah, blah,...) yet there are very few reflective designers who from their experience are capable of transforming conventions and enriching traditions with original ways of representation and innovative items, developed in cooperation or (at least) in society. Blessed be the community which has individuals permanently encouraging reassessments of the maps...

I am pleased by approaches that promote connections, such as that of George Siemens, for whom the particularity of human systems is the fact that we their members express our opinion and contribute to the general framework (even improving the theorizations that experts –who forged the systems themselves– have on them), consequently:

> "We humans are capable of connecting with each other, sharing and creating. We are co-creators, not knowledge consumers. The generation of contents lies in the hands of many. Co-creation is an expression of being, a sense of identity and property. We possess what we are by virtue of the contributions we make."[24]

If there is anything for a designer to "control" is whatever predisposition to proscribe other persons as partners in his/her job (colleagues, students, users, critics, and even "the illiterate", "the uneducated", objectors, etc.); it is more gratifying to communicate to them their location within the cartography of the map of design and encourage those others to act likewise; all the better if we get those who are not professional designers to take part (considering that we all humans are everyday designers). Thus I here find the path to surmount the ignorance that has been born from intolerance (let us keep in mind that the term "ignorant", in its ancient etymology, rather than referring to that who does not know something, actually refers to that who under-appreciates or scorns the way through which

others express their reality, their "being-in-the-world")[25] whether in design or in any walk of life.

It is when we all cherish everybody's footprints and grant ourselves the right to action in different coordinates on the same map, or even on different maps, that we are able to find integrating approaches to design so as to design each other, continuously, as different individuals, always mutually providing one another with more options to choose new and different habits.[26] If we take that grand cartographic construction of design under our wing, and start to design beyond convictions and conventions,[27] we then will enter an unseen domain where what convenient (when despotic) turns out to be inconvenient: the point is not a method, a technique or an "essential" competence but the opportunity to bring the inexistent to the plane of existence; now we venture into the field I refer to as "convections of design": a field where, in similar fashion to what happens to physical magnitudes (mass, electricity or heat) by virtue of the displacement of molecules,[28] the dogmatic particles are shaken and come to flow due to the general acceptance that we all design under a variety of densities and intensities. In such a "village", what stated by Jan Michl[29] becomes axiomatic:

> "It is a fact that all designers, as much the outstanding ones as the average ones, always build, alter and resume the work of other designers, and that is something nobody can keep themselves from doing."

Hence all of us people, beyond being designers, are and live as re-designers; let us give each other the right to design differently. Let us do away with the culture of scorn and welcome that of mutual understanding instead!

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2. Compare with text cited in [1].

3. Compare with Krippendorff, Klaus. (1995). "Redesigning Design; An Invitation to a Responsible Future" in Design: Pleasure or Responsibility, edited by Paivi Tahkokallio & Susann Vihma (Helsinki: University of Art and Design). p. 138-162. On-line version, p. 4.

4. See etymology of leer (read).

5. Compare with Krippendorff, Klaus. (2005). "Writing: Monologue, Dialogue, and Ecological Narrative" in Michael B. Hinner (Editor) (2005). Introduction to Business Communication, Freiberger Beiträge zur Interkulturellen und Wirtschaftskommunikation, Band 1, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), pages 119-159. Post-printing on-line version, p. 17

6. Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. (2003). Criticism of the insensitive reason: against the waste of experience; for a new common sense: science, law and politics within the paradigmatic transition, p. 227, Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer.

7. See definition of "Convención" (convention) , in Real Academia Española (Spanish Royal Academy) (2001)

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8. Ad hominem. (2012, February 25). On Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

9. Barreto V. María José (2004). "La forma sigue a la posibilidad" (Form follows possibility) p. 42-44 interview with Alexander Manú in proyectodiseño magazine, n. 32.

10. See González Solas, Javier (2006) "You are here. Two paradigms for the critique of design: the public and the private" in Trípodos, extra issue. González.

11. See "Cartographic Conventions" (not dated) in Encydia Encyclopedia beta.

12. See Google Maps or Google Earth.

13. See Santos, Boaventura de Sousa, work cited in [6], p. 232.

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15. Compare with Schön, Donald A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action. New York: Basic Books, p. 19.

16. See Santos, Boaventura de Sousa, work cited in [13], p. 52.

17. González Solas, Javier (2006) "Un mapa para la crítica del diseño" (A map for the critique of design) on FOROALFA.

18. See in Chávez, Norberto (not dated) "Cuatro mitos en la cultura del diseño", el apartado "Mito 1: la jerarquía científica". (Four myths in the culture of design. Myth 1: the scientific hierarchy.)

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22. See Sorokin, Pitirim Aleksandrovich. (1957). Achaques y manías de la sociología moderna y ciencias afines. (Old-age problems and manias of modern sociology and akin sciences) p. 158-259. Chapters VII (Quantum-phrenia) y VIII (Quantum-frency, conclusion) Madrid: Aguilar.

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25. See Harper, Douglas R. (2001-2010). "Ignorant" in Online etymology dictionary. [Lancaster, Pa.].

26. Compare with Siemens, George, work cited in [24] p. 22

27. See my article, "When conviction gets in the way" (2012) on FOROALFA.

28. Compare with definition of "Convención" (convention), in Real Academia Española (Spanish Royal Academy) (2001) 22nd edition, Diccionario de la Lengua Española Real Academia Española (DRAE).

29. See Michl, Jan, "Seeing design as redesign: an exploration of a problem forgotten in the teaching of design", Argentinean magazine of visual arts Ramona 79, March 2008, translation to Spanish of an article's excerpt "Seeing design as redesign", originally in the Scandinavian Journal of Design History 12, 2002, p. 7-23.