

When Conviction Gets in the Way

By Alfredo Gutiérrez Borrero

Not all pathways lead us to the same design, nor we all have to design through the same pathway.

“Let’s get emancipated from the impossible, from all we seek and sometimes believe doesn’t exist, and even worse, can’t exist.”

Macedonio Fernández, letter to Jorge Luis Borges¹

Writing as much as designing: neither short nor lengthy, just writing and designing... Three years ago on FOROALFA (in his article “A map for the critique of design”), Javier González Solas traced two realities in design: one dominant, spectacular, money-oriented, obvious, where mister Mark Et is king; and the other alternate, critical, desired by those of us who wish we had inclusive societies, guaranteed general profit and solved basic human conditions. Which is more real? And what do designers “really” do when designing?, González Solas wondered and asked us, answering to himself: they probably “do” much more than what they “do.”²

I agree that we actually do more than what we do. “Reality” in design is dissociative, it has multiple personalities; in it coexist, not becoming generally influential, women, men, communities, professions, institutions, specialties, products, traditions, movements, schools, guilds, speeches, publications, practices and trends, all with a variety of doctrines, history and geography of their own, with their respective disputes and agreements, domestic as well as urban. The alternation between competition and cooperation links policies, ideas, philosophies, ethics, skills, techniques, economies and personal interests which continually restructure frontiers, positions and dispositions. Often, some “personalities,” either individual or collective, each with their own perception and incidence, attempt to gain control of the destinies of design, declaring themselves legitimate bearers of the “real-reality” amid litigations which imply oblivion, denial or ignorance of the existence, views and contributions of other participants. The exaltation of oneself (as well as the aggrandizement of one’s own idol) and the amnesia toward what belongs to others ends up with manipulated stories and cloistered individualisms with universal arrogance.³

In order to dodge such a situation, cartography (mapping) is therapeutic. We who populate the worlds of design are able to, every now and then, visualize our locations, empathies, affections and animosities on maps where certainties (which may turn out to be conjectural) and conjectures (which may turn out to be certain) are the parallels and meridians. By making situations, actions and relationships public, we would spare ourselves that costly solipsism, that ridiculous conceit of pretending to know what designing really “IS”: here, for all purposes and places, forever and ever.

We are in need of maps so that we can shape modifications, innovations, pathways, methods, achievements, limits, influences, migrations and neighborhood changes; so that we can discuss upon what we consider backlashes and advances as they occur, without affirming ourselves through the denial of others, united in our effort of defining professional “domiciles” and jurisdictions for colleagues to be able to visit us... or avoid us.

Given the growing interest and the applications of participatory thinking, I assume that professionals who are understanding of people, whether designers or not, will be the guides of tomorrow’s design.⁴ The understanding of others requires understanding among ourselves. Mapping design may be helpful for that purpose and, thanks to its number and quality of members and exchanges, FOROALFA is a stage for keeping dialogue on the matter.

It changes, everything changes⁵

“Ideologies do not map the world’s living processes in their entirety.”

William Irwin Thompson⁶

Convictions are ideas we are embedded in. They possess us. And sometimes they are not even our own. Thinking engines that we transform into habits, respectable yet modifiable and, hopefully, permanently debatable. Learning from them: of course!, yet maintaining them impervious: never. Relinquishing our own doubts and then interiorizing alien certainties makes us automatons. “Today is not yesterday, nor will tomorrow be today; it is inadmissible that formulas which were justifiable for a certain moment in the past can be deemed unalterable for the whole infinite future.”⁷ Why should we give up our own faculty for inquisitiveness and accept instead a particular reality as “THE ONE” reality?

As far as my acquaintance with Colombian industrial design goes, it amazes me to see so many young people wave the flags of “the-good-old-days” (to me, those days were neither better nor worse than these: they just were, as this time now is. I am surprised at the number of defensive reactions against the opening towards new perspectives because, excluding those who partly were protagonists of some facts —and embellish their record—, nearly none of those who so much praise the glories of the past ever actually lived through the times which call for their nostalgia. Besides, little willingness is displayed on their part so as to put references to the test, or to inquire more deeply into what schools unknown to them propose on design, or to leave linguistic barriers behind and experiment with material that reaches their hands pre-edited or material which authoritarian guides discourage them to look into (mark of the orthodox mind-set: “there were astronomers who refused to look into the sky through the telescope, fearing the sight of their steadiest errors obliterated”...⁸).

Mapping design requires sharing convictions and appreciating how other persons organize their field maps, for instance, graphic and textual ones, like those made in different times by: Clive Dilnot⁹, John A. Walker and Judy Attfield¹⁰, or by Isabel Campi¹¹ and Javier González Solas¹² (in Spanish), on historical approaches and ways of history-ing design; or the maps by Liz Sanders¹³ and Birger Sevaldson¹⁴ on research panoramas in design; or the diagram with

which Dan Saffer illustrated the contributions of all the disciplines of design (industrial, architectural, graphic, etc.) to the user's experience.¹⁵ How lively would the field be if more practitioners went over and through the heterogeneity of options such cartographies offer! It is most urgent to devise project pathways upon polyvalent maps, instead of projecting from the soliloquy, without pondering the alternatives, about the simplicity of learning and teaching to do research by doing research, to history by history-ing, or to design by designing.

As a professor, I validate every designer's power to state their position toward design and to channel processes according to their bona fide knowledge, action and understanding, yet I find inexcusable to close one's mouth, ears and eyes to what others do. There is too much distance between colleagues. Too many attempts to converse about old and new sources end up with ceremonial nods of the head and expressions of the "oh, yes, yes, that" kind, as if in affirmation of knowing it all in advance (even how somebody one has never spoken to thinks); there is a profusion of pundits who specialize in terminating discussions without having really started them.

Terms such as "discipline" or "expert" add up to the mathematics of convictions —when they make it easy to contrast lines of action or method in design—, yet they become lessening when used as formulas aimed at dissuading students from revising forgotten parts of old maps or trying to trace new ones; it is then when dogmas, opinions or systems of opinions, are disguised under a presumption of objectivity and are imposed on the apprentices by an authority prior to their own experience.¹⁶ Within dogmatic approaches, answers of design are predetermined to a great extent by infallible lecturers and incontestable norms; when designing under such circumstances, reflection and production become subordinated to the inexorable acceptance of commands that "dominate" all of the outcomes, which in turn must fit and abide by them.¹⁷

Paraphrasing Latin singer and songwriter Ricardo Arjona, dogmatism reduces design to a merely labeled method: "Forbidden to think that everything's been written already"¹⁸ (by professors or bosses who don't write, for students or beginners who don't read but who accept in a leap of faith). Occasionally, we persons in positions of authority, who have purified our teaching models for years, impose our smart-aleck-ness on students prone to let us think for them and used to letting us do their work for them; evangelized in dogma, they soon appropriate it and make it their own, replicate it and thus become professional zealots: detached, suspicious, frightened, controlled. Apprentices of the major rigor (alien to them) and the minor effort (of their own), they show outstanding results when their professor is no "pushover," that is to say, a lecturer who allows students to think the least but who crushes and squashes them the most; they are like those apprentices of astrology, who prefer to give up trying to understand the zodiacal structure (which anyhow has a "design" of its own) and pay the guru in charge for him to dictate today's horoscope to them instead.

There are also so many of those who, guided by an appetite for technical rigor, and faithful to an image of solid professional competences, —or even afraid of entering a world where they don't know entirely what to do without their instruction handbook— choose to seclude themselves inside a narrow professional practice and end up designing on the basis of cartoon-esque and reduced versions of reality, controlling what is already controlled, and

doing what has already been done.¹⁹ Selecting a design method without having compared first turns out to be an extraordinary paradox and, as Tony Fry wrote, “when design is linked to sustainability, it does not operate with certainties but with learning to change.”²⁰ *Ubi dubium ibi libertas* (“where there is doubt, there is freedom”).²¹

Contrarily, when feudalism dominates, who says what and in what tone matters more than what is actually said, which proves the magnitude of subjectivity, so often denied by those who pose as objective and claim to know the real-reality of design: the professor said it, believe it!; the only book they made you read says it, believe it!, just plain buy it: period. An epidemic Adamism²² —particular to those who, with no previous verification, declare to first have thought, said or done something they attribute to themselves in absolute terms, as their achievements and ideas— decimates the possibilities of collaboration of designers who, similarly to the illustrious don Rodrigo Díaz de Carreras (a character created by Argentinean comedians and musicians Les Luthiers), “they as much founded Caracas as to found it in the center of Caracas, as it had already been founded, and they were unable to see it.”²³

It is healthy to start controversy over the traditions of design, contemplate them just like Hans Christian Andersen’s emperor’s new clothes, deluxe invisible new clothes tailored for fools, were stared at²⁴ (let us keep in mind that it is often fools who get to see the emperor’s clothes since he is actually going around naked); it fits well here to say that, centuries before, the infante don Juan Manuel presented something akin to Andersen’s tale,²⁵ by stating that all design is re-design,²⁶ literary design included.

When designing, knowing where we and our interlocutors are would facilitate building up conversations, instead of surrendering ourselves to sect-oriented antagonism,²⁷ with every person in their own terms: “this is my map and this is where I am; which is yours and where are you?.” Announcing where I am, where I can be, and where I am definitely not at, is far better than looking away or putting my hands in my ears in order to “disappear” to the eyes and ears of other people.

Frequently, as pointed out by José Luis Ramírez González,²⁸ insisting on the fundamental only conceals a mental case or sheath (*funda* in Spanish): beyond immobile personal convictions, design is a social fact where you design “with” as opposed to “for.”

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