Design futures

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The articles in this issue are all concerned, in one way or another, with the capacity of design to create a better future for us all. They range from a polemic about future ways of thinking about design itself, through future ways of consuming products and services more sustainably, future ways of designing products to influence user behaviour, future ways to test prototypes in context to improve problem identification, to future ways of sharing knowledge within organizations more effectively.

Victor Margolin's positioning paper is a short but insightful call to arms for design studies to take control of its own destiny and develop into an academic field that would ensure design was in the best position to help build a better future. As Margolin points out, the outputs of design are judged on their success in producing an intended result. This is in stark contrast to the world of art, where no such requirement exists. It is therefore much easier for a work of art to be anything, and the art world itself determines what can and what cannot be considered as art. However, there is no equivalent 'design world' that performs the same role. He argues, quite convincingly, that many of the problems design faces can be attributed to a lack of understanding of various institutions of what design can be, because their preconceptions of design are informed by what design has been in the past. Margolin offers design studies as the forum where the 'chaos in the domain of design' could be addressed, and where 'a transformation in its practice, research, discourse and education can occur'. As he says, with proper training, scholars of design studies could argue for the future of design better than designers can.

As we all know, sustainability will remain a key agenda item for the future. Two papers here address sustainability from different perspectives. First, Emma Dewberry et al propose 'alternative resource consumption pathways' – arguing for more sustainable ways of living through adopting the use of centralized specialist products and services rather than the wasteful duplication involved in individual ownership of products such as lawnmowers and washing machines. The authors suggest that the efficiencies afforded by such new practices could benefit us all, if they are properly planned through processes such as well-designed Product Service Systems that would 'reorganize relationships between people, resources and the environment'. To be most effective, these service systems need to be taken into account at a fundamental level, directly impacting on the design of the spaces in which we live. As it is easier to do this from the beginning rather than try to retrofit such processes into existing spaces, it is argued that such systems need to form part of the design brief of new housing developments.

In a similar vein, Dan Lockton et al argue that products themselves should be explicitly designed to influence the user to use them in a more sustainable manner. The researchers set design briefs based around four scenarios: putting too much water in a kettle, leaving a tap running whilst brushing teeth, not closing curtains at night or unnecessarily printing documents. Designers then engaged in workshops and were given a toolkit of techniques designed to help

them address these particular briefs. The results showed that using the toolkit enabled them to generate more concepts than brainstorming alone. The importance of sustainable user behaviour, they state, will become more mainstream over time, and designers will increasingly play an important role in influencing this behaviour.

Continuing the discussion about usability, Alex Woolley et al ran comparative studies of 'rough and ready' prototypes being tested in laboratory situations against being tested in more realistic contexts, and found that in-context testing uncovered a different set of usability problems. Prototypes tested in-context were subject to rougher handling, and physical problems not encountered in laboratory settings, such as screen glare and accidental pressing of buttons, emerged that had remained hidden in laboratory tests. Conversely, during in-context testing, users did not reflect upon the prototypes to the same extent as they did in laboratories, providing less in the way of critical feedback. Both settings provided valuable, yet different information to aid the design process.

The management of information forms a central focus of the article by Craig Standing et al. The use of wikis as knowledge management systems within organizations has proved problematic for many organizations, as although they potentially afford democratic and collaborative ways of working, the introduction of new technological paradigms can also lead to feelings of isolation and stress for those affected by them. Communications technologies such as wikis can also be appropriated by users in a number of ways not anticipated (or sanctioned) by the organization. This has the potential to disrupt the shared beliefs, values and structures (the lifeworld) of a workforce. Standing et al examine how wikis can be used as catalysts for achieving desired changes in existing norms and behaviours within an organization while maintaining this harmonious lifeworld.

The issue draws to a close with Clive Edwards' review of Interior Design Theory and Process by Anthony Sully, which brings us safely back to the present. Until next time …