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All about that place

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The critical nature of context forms a strong link between the papers in this issue of The Design Journal. Be they physical places or spaces, or sensory attributes, aesthetic, visual or tactile aspects, or local or global cultures, the impact of the different contexts within which design operates is clearly shown to be a crucial issue that affects the ways in which design is received.

In 'The Role of Product Meeting Form in Product Experience', Haug tackles this issue directly. He argues, and shows, that the situational factors that form the context within which the user first encounters a particular product have a significant impact on how the user experiences that product. A series of detailed interviews with designers revealed the extent to which many tacitly take this aspect into account during the design process, but also highlighted many contexts of which designers had no experience or over which they had no control. The research evidences the extent to which an explicit classification of 'product meetings' would be of value to designers: such a framework of product meetings could contribute to a more holistic design process for professional designers as well as inform a more holistic curriculum for design education.

The following paper by Zuo et al, 'Sensory Perception of Material Texture within Consumer Products', describes a case study of research into subjective responses to material textures being applied to products. Building on prior research that assessed individual responses to surface textures in isolation from any form, this research aimed to assess if those results would remain consistent when applied in the context of a real product – in this case to the handles of a range of hairdryers. The authors found that the material textures and the combinations in which they are placed have a significant influence on users' reactions and how they perceived the product.

Aesthetic appearance rather than tactile feel is the concern of Lam, Liu and Lam's paper, 'The Aesthetic Experience of Product Design: A Case Study of the consumption of Earphones in Hong Kong', which describes a particular cultural consumption of everyday technological artefacts. Starting from the position that the 'aestheticization of everyday life is a notable feature of our postmodern age', the authors aimed to research the sensory experiences and bodily concepts guiding the aesthetic judgements of consumers. They found that, far from passively and thoughtlessly consuming music, the participants felt that listening to music through earphones during everyday activities provided 'background music for the world', and actively used that music, and their choice of designs, to construct personal meaning. The authors conclude that designers should 'pay attention to these subjective narratives of consumer experiences concerning perceptions of design attributes, and the social and personal meanings that consumers infer when using products in everyday life'.

In a different geographical context, 'Tactics of Cultural Adaptation: Design and Production Characteristics of Toys in Istanbul', Gurpinar et al, use a study of toy design to investigate 'how objects act as physical manifestations and intermediaries of cultural relations'. The authors accept the view that

globalization is not as homogenous as might be thought – that imported ideas, innovations and artefacts are not accepted wholesale, but made to fit into local purposes or embedded with local content. 'Foreign' solutions are taken in but modified and adapted to suit the local context, and what might be considered 'universal' is, in fact, made particular. Using historical and sociological accounts, Gurpinar et al, follow the transformation of toys from handmade local artefacts to machine-made global products, and overlay this change onto the industrial development and urbanization phases of Istanbul.

A completely different context – that of Critical Design – is the subject of the contribution by Malpass. 'Critical Design Practice: Theoretical Perspectives and Methods of Engagement' provides a review of many of the methods and theoretical considerations in Critical Design, which is perceived as a form of design research. Critical Design, he states, is design to generate debate, where the purposive function is discursive. Objects are positioned as forms of discourse – not as strictly functional, but as 'bearers of expression with inter-subjective qualities'. While Critical Design is not a new phenomenon, many of the facets it covers are ripe for the accessible and digestible explanations provided here: 'Para-functionality', 'Post-optimal design' and the 'Aesthetics of use' are just some of the terms explored.

The final two articles both address design in healthcare environments. Firstly, Mackrill, Cain and Jennings describe designing positive soundscape experiences within a hospital context in 'Proposing a Conceptual Framework to Develop the Hospital Soundscape through Visual Communication'. As they note that particularly in hospitals noise can create stress, and providing information about the source of that noise might ease that patient stress, they posit that communication about the sounds heard may act as an 'emotion-focused controlling mechanism'. The aim, then, is to find out how to design the visual communication of sound within healthcare for a more positive experience.

Lastly, Van der Linden, Annemans and Heylighen consider 'Architects' Approaches to Healing Environment in Designing a Maggie's Cancer Caring Centre'. Their paper investigates the meaning of the healing environment in design practice, and how architects deal with the concept in the absence of any scientific knowledge. Healing environments are places with complex and conflicting requirements. They have to meet the expectations of both patients and visitors; individuals and collective groups. They have to combine open spaces with areas for private contemplation. A series of interviews with the architects involved in creating such emotionally laden environments revealed the success was often down to a use of the 'architect's intuitive knowledge and personal experience' and a collaborative relationship with the client, whose main role was to communicate a care vision based on user needs. As the authors conclude, 'Whereas designers mainly focus on the physical environment, the influence of the social context should be recognized too'. Drawing this issue to a close is a review of Barry Katz's new book, 'Make it New: The History of Silicon Valley Design', by Steven McCarthy. The book describes the various economic, social, political and cultural factors that came together in a single place to

provide the perfect breeding ground for what has become a major driving force in the world of design.