

Design, art and the notion of empathy

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When the notion of empathy (Greek: *em-pathos*), which in its broadest sense may be defined as the ability to have compassion for and an understanding of the thoughts, feelings, and situation of another being and humanity in general, is linked to the practice of design which is based on discursive consciousness, the question to be answered is: What role does this specific emotion play in the creation of useful objects and for whom are they intended? Empathic role-taking can be said to elicit altruistic behaviour and provides a vicarious experience, through putting the individual in the place of another who may be suffering, or in need of physical aid that may be relieved or assisted by a tool or object. This specially designed tool or object may be uniquely individual or capable of mass-production and a broader application in society. Goal-directed rational action defines us as humans, but the designer should have a passionate commitment to the continuous improvement of social well-being and also prioritise ecological issues in the interest of the future of the human race. Design has point and value because it is an activity that is based on a desire to obtain knowledge of reality, humanity and the principles of reason, goodness, nature and beauty in very general terms. Hopefully the future will lead to an attempt to avoid turning value into mere profit by marketing expendable products.

Key words: design, empathy

Ontwerp, kuns en die begrip empatie

Wanneer die begrip empatie (Grieks: *em-pathos*), wat in die omvattendste sin omskryf kan word as die vermoë om medelye vir en insig in die gedagtes, gevoelens en situasie van iemand anders en die mensheid as sodanig te hê, gekoppel word aan die praktyk van ontwerp wat op diskursiewe bewussyn gebaseer is, moet die volgende vraag beantwoord word: Watter rol speel hierdie spesifieke emosie in die skepping van gebruiksvoorwerpe en vir wie is hulle bestem? Empatiese emosies gee aanleiding tot altruïstiese handeling wat spruit uit die vermoë van 'n individu om hom of haar te verseenselwig met iemand anders wat moontlik in lyding verkeer, of behoefte het aan liggaamlike hulp wat deur middel van 'n werktuig of 'n objek verlig kan word. So 'n spesifiek ontwerpte werktuig of objek kan moontlik uniek wees, bestem net vir een individu, of dit kan massageproduseer word en 'n wyer toepassing in die samelewing verkry. Mense word gekenmerk deur doelgerigte rasonale handeling, maar die ontwerper behoort 'n passievolle toewyding te hê ten opsigte van die voortdurende verbetering van sosiale welsyn en ook voorrang verleen aan ekologiese kwessies ten bate van die toekoms van die menslike ras. Ontwerp het 'n doel en is van waarde, want dit is 'n aktiwiteit wat gesetel is in die wens om kennis te verwef van die werklikheid, menslikheid en die beginsels van die rede, die natuur en skoonheid in die wydste sin. Hopelik sal daar in die toekoms 'n poging aangewend word om te voorkom dat waarde in wins omgeskep word deur die bemaking van weggooi-produkte.

Sleutelwoorde: ontwerp, empatie

The word “design” derives from the Italian *disegno*, which in Renaissance usage referred to the drawing which an artist conceived as the basis of a work of art. Anthony Hughes (1986: 4) explains the Renaissance conceptualisation of draftmanship: “In theory, it may designate the very cognitive faculty which makes the practice of painting, sculpture and architecture possible at all. Artists could, then, associate beneath a conceptual umbrella rather than be gathered together because they worked in particular materials.” However, naturalistic representation was not all that art was about; it was also associated with the concept of Idea in a Neoplatonic sense. At the end of the sixteenth century the painter Federico Zuccaro, a member of the Florentine Accademia del Disegno and founder of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, explained the etymology of *disegno* as derived from the phrase *segno di dio in noi*, or “the sign of God in us”, indicating that those skilled in the art of drawing were divinely inspired (Heikamp 1961: 300-5). Thus *disegno* was twofold: *disegno interno* and *disegno esterno*, respectively the concept or idea that inspires the artist and the work produced.

In sixteenth-century English usage “design” acquired a somewhat different meaning in that it indicated the plan in the form of a working drawing for an object or artefact with an utilitarian or a functional purpose, disregarding the lofty ideal of the Idea. In the English language this

usage remains entrenched. It has even become an accepted term in German, even though the debate about its exact domain still gives rise to passionate debate (Hauffe 1995: 11). However, it is clear that since the Industrial Revolution in the West design came to mean “industrial design”, defined by Edward Lucie-Smith (1983: 7) as “the business of determining the form of objects which are to be made by machines, rather than produced by hand. [...] Industrial design can concern itself with everything from a teacup to a jet aeroplane.” Industrial design has become a recognised profession and should be clearly distinguished from craft which is based on the design of objects produced by hand. Nevertheless, both are design disciplines that produce functional objects, while graphic design may be in a different category.

There is still some debate about the understanding of drawing’s role and purpose in industrial and craft design, since evidence confirms the central importance of drawing to art and design education (see Cloutts and Dougall 2005). Notwithstanding the focus on drawing in both art and design, the difference between the creation of works of art and designed products for practical use needs to be explained.

Design, art, architecture and the environment

Hillier and Hanson (1984: 1) states that a designed object or artefact has two dimensions:

For the most part, the design of an artefact – whether it is a bridge, a cup or a surgical instrument – has a certain logic to it. First, functional objectives must be achieved: materials or elements must be assembled into a form which works for a well-defined purpose, or range of purposes. When this is done, a second dimension may be added: that of style. By this we mean that decoration embellishments, or even modifications of the shape can give the artefact a significance over and above its practical uses, one belonging to its cultural identity or ‘meaning’.

However, architecture is set apart from other artefacts since its peculiar property is the ordering of space. In this sense buildings are not objects in themselves: “Insofar as they are purposeful, buildings are not just objects, but transformations of space through objects” (Hillier and Hanson 1984: 1). Even so, buildings are products of a design process and may be judged in terms of socially meaningfulness in an empathetic sense. In this regard one may refer to Louis Kahn and other architects who defined the relationship between a building and its users as empathetic.¹

The difference between art and design as well as their complementarity has given rise to an ongoing debate.² According to Tsion Avital (1972) a distinction should be made between hand tools and mind tools. Hand tools are extensions of the body. Mind tools are images and all kinds of symbols whether verbal, pictorial or other. *Homo habilis* made the first hand tools more than two and a half million years ago, but figurative art which originated *circa* 30 000 years ago is much more recent in human development. Thus it is fair to conclude that the design of tools influenced human evolution. Avital (1992: 74) states: “The product of the designer is closed-ended compared to that of the artist, which is open-ended, but the motive for innovation and creation in both instances is identical.” Extensions of the hand and extensions of the brain are complementary in human creativity. In many cases functional objects such as furniture, doors, windows, etc., can simultaneously be functional objects and works of art. Thus a door is a functional, designed object, but if it carries figurative engravings it is also a work of art, hence some objects can belong to both categories; art and design at the same time. This dual purpose was very common in history and is so even today.

At present, Avital (1992: 78) contends, “The synthesis and complementarity of the instrumental and the cognitive reach new perfection in the computer”. Designers now aim to

give shape to material objects by means of computer assisted systems (CAD). This procedure creates an opposition between handicraft and machine craft, and has led in Western affluent societies to new lifestyles through the integration of design in everyday life, especially in domestic interiors, but also with reference to motor vehicles, trains and ships (see Cheney & Cheney 1992). It is inevitable that designers will discover and develop forms in keeping with technological progress and industrial production. However, notwithstanding the extent of material dominance in Western culture and the urge to turn value into profit, the designer may assert his or her full humanity by engaging in a creative process in which not only inspiration and innovation are important, but also empathy in the sense of caring and respect for people and their environments that will be influenced by his or her designed products. Environments have become human creations, with the result that natural resources are increasingly modified by human intervention and planning for sustainable and non-sustainable purposes, with the latter seemingly predominant and destructive.

However, before venturing into a discussion of design as empathy, the aspects of novelty, originality, intuition and inspiration need to be discussed.

Novelty, originality, intuition and inspiration

A work of design is a product of intentional human activity – and always expresses a human point of view. Therefore novelty and originality in design are dependent on actual experience, influenced by specific social and cultural contexts in a broad sense. No pure aesthetic value can be attributed to artifacts since they are apprehended within the context of human experience and not created for the luxury of disinterested contemplation. Mirjam Gelfer-Jorgensen (2001) addresses the subject of the doubts experienced by museums of applied art and design as to their *raison d'être* on account of their emulation of museums of art, more specifically because of the narrowing focus on the artistic merit of artefacts, and currently on individual icons of design. Instead, the emphasis needs to be put on evolving qualitative, not quantitative design criteria, based on a humanistic technology. Almost four decades ago Henryk Skolimowski (1970: 31) wrote: “To develop this humanistic technology will require an intellectual effort in rethinking all our relationships to nature and to the concept of the human being on the scale comparable to that which occurred at the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. We are only at the beginning of this process of rethinking.” Clearly, this statement was prophetic and the Western world has not made the required progress in evolving humanistic technologies.

Design as intuition and inspiration

It is commonly accepted that facts are known rationally, while values may be said to be known intuitively. However, ethical decisions should be made rationally in all known contexts of reality. Designers should operate within an ethical and an empiricist paradigm of thought; thus design should be a holistic process, involving an array of social, scientific, economic, cultural, attitudinal and political manifestations in complex interaction.

In modernism, rationalism dominated our appreciation of design products. It made us aware of the beauty of machines since Filippo Martinetti, inspired by Fascist politics, celebrated them as “concentrated power, inexorably precision, constancy and sincerity” ([own translation] in Luigi Scrivo 1968: 186). The Futurists’ celebration of the beauty of mechanisation and speed led for many to the replacement of traditional aesthetic objects with mechanised objects. Martinetti advocated an identification of “man with machine” which, in turn, inspired the Fascists, most notably Mussolini who flaunted his red sports car and flew his own jet. Have

we moved beyond this braggadocio to a humanist approach? Have we actually achieved a “humanistic technology”? The answer remains elusive and calls to mind Lewis Mumford’s (1964: 1) statement that “from late neolithic times in the Near East, right down to our own day, two technologies have recurrently existed side by side: one authoritarian, the other democratic, the first system-centred, immensely powerful, but inherently unstable, the other man-centred, relatively weak, but resourceful and durable.”

Currently a dominance of scientific paradigms has emerged in design. Alain Findeli (2000) outlines dominant theories of visual intelligence which privilege the visual appearance of the material object and concludes with an examination of the need to reform the existing professional code of design ethics in response to the shifts in the relationship between art, technology, science, and culture that contemporary Western societies are experiencing. To that one may add the need for a shift to emotional intelligence that privilege human-centred material objects and environments which may nevertheless also be responsive to visual intelligence.

Design as empathy

Leaving art out of consideration, the purpose of the present research is to relate empathy to design. Since empathy² (Greek: *em-pathos*) is an emotion, this aspect of human experience and motivation deserves a separate discussion. However, to discuss emotions is extremely difficult. Jack Barbalet (2002: 1) states:

The word ‘emotion’ carries a lot of weight: indeed, it is overburdened with meaning. Its widest application is probably as a term of pejorative evaluation. ... [E]motion simply indicates what might be called an experience of involvement. A person may be positively or negatively involved with something. ... It is this experience that is emotion, not the subject’s thoughts about their experience ... but that immediate contact with the world the self has through experience.

Emotions in human beings can lead to actions or deeds of extreme consequence, destructive or constructive and all gradations in between. The idea that emotion is embedded in human nature, which originated with Auguste Comte, is now generally accepted, as Chris Shilling (2002: 17) explains:

Comte referred to human nature as the *tableau cerebral* and suggested that it might be regarded as twofold (consisting of the heart and mind), or threefold (consisting of two dimensions of the heart – sentiment/affection and action/will – together with the mind). Comte also argued that the impulse to act comes from the heart rather than intelligence, which only guides or seeks to control this emotional impulse to act. Human action of any sort possesses a relationship to emotional impulses, but these impulses could be channelled or shaped in different ways in different epochs, and could be used to motivate that moral action (action prompted by feelings and ideas of empathy, altruism and self-sacrifice) essential to social order (Comte 1853, volume I: 150).

Strong human emotions such as love, hate, fear and envy are understood to be vital to all of us since they are driving forces in social life (Wulff 2007: 1). Characterising the wide range of human feelings and emotions is beyond the scope of this research. It will suffice to define “empathy” as different from “compassion”. The latter is an emotion that can be sincere and deeply felt, but does not lead to role-taking behaviour. We have compassion with the victims of accidents, crime, natural disasters and other calamities that are beyond our control, except that we can aid by donating money, or offer our physical assistance to help the victims.

Here a distinction should be made between sympathy and empathy. According to Martha Nussbaum (2001: 301) “compassion is a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune”. Compassion as an emotion can be most disturbing and “is frequently linked to beneficent action” (Nussbaum 2001: 335), as explained above.

On the other hand, “empathy ... involves an imaginative reconstruction of the experience of the sufferer”, and “a participatory enactment of the situation of the sufferer, but is always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer” (Nussbaum 2001: 327). Succinctly put, in the words of Eva Brann (1999: 18), “sympathy, that is, fellow feeling, ... empathy, that is, identification”.

While compassion or sympathy does not lead to role-taking behaviour, only empathy leads to acts of an altruistic nature. An empathic motivation to act altruistically may become an enduring state of consciousness in people who cultivate this trait consciously. In order to experience “empathic” role-taking emotions (as identified by Shott 1979) one must place oneself mentally in the place of another to obtain his or her view of oneself. According to S. Shott (quoted from Kemper 1993: 50): “The empathic role-taking emotions are even better at eliciting altruistic behaviour. Empathic role-taking provides vicarious emotional experience, through putting the individual in the place of another who may be suffering and who can be relieved or assisted.”

How does empathy manifest in the design of an object?

If the impulse to act that is prompted by empathy is singled out for consideration as essential to the social order, it may be predicted that a specific category of objects may reflect the designers’ altruistic motivation. Goal-directed rational action defines us as human and the designer should have a passionate commitment to the continuous improvement of social well-being. Already in the writings of Max Weber (1968) on politics, science and personality, a concern is expressed about individuals who make decisions in the absence of a commitment to rational action (Barbalet 2000).

In more modern terms Ian Burkitt (2002: 154) states: “Clearly, when acting on feeling we are aware of what we are doing, so we cannot say that feeling and thought are two separate elements, hence the reference to thought as feeling and feeling as thought.” Following up on his argument Burkitt (2002: 154) concludes that emotion belongs to discursive consciousness. While this may be a wide generalisation, it is certainly true of empathy.

The evaluation of designed objects

In a 1963 publication Kurt Rowland (1963: 126) states that “A building or a tool must be judged by its efficiency and its appearance”.³ This evaluation excludes the effect the building or tool has on their users who may not find it affordable or in keeping with their cultural expectations. In Mumford’s terms one should evaluate technologies and designed objects in terms of their “man-centred” qualities. At schools of industrial design, such as Eindhoven and Enschede in The Netherlands there is an awareness of industrial design as a statement about the quality of life (Vlemmings 2001). Concerning the environment Antti Nurmesniemi (1996) explains how production techniques have developed since the 1960s and examines the extent to which ecological issues have altered the priorities of the designer. He states that a designer has a duty towards society and suggests that a good product has an educational value. The designer Bruce Mau (Kaufman 2004: 88) is quoted as saying: “It is our view that design – the human capacity to plan and produce desired outcomes – has placed us at a new, unprecedented period of human possibility, where all systems and economics are becoming global, relational, and interconnected.” And he continues: “Our aim is to produce a new breed of designer, one who is, in the words of Buckminster Fuller, a ‘synthesis of the artist, inventor, mechanic, objective economist, and evolutionary strategist’” (Kaufman 2004: 88).

Thus, clearly, one may deduce from the reasoning of the selected authors quoted above that design has entered into a new phase of the human quest for a qualitative environment. Design products as “hand tools” acquire value and meaning by informing their users that design has a purpose and value because it is an activity that is based on a desire to obtain knowledge of reality, humanity, the principles of reason, goodness, nature and beauty in very general terms. The new reasoning is hopefully also an attempt to avoid turning value into mere profit by marketing expendable products.

Conclusion

Design is a many-faceted enterprise. Undeniably, it is also influenced by the intuition of the designer as well as his or her inspiration. However, the influence of empathy implies more than compassion as a motivation for altruistic and humanistic design. It requires wisdom to actually make life better for all people and I have adjusted the following quote from Karel Čapek’s *Apocryphal Stories* to illustrate my insight: “cleverness is a gift or talent; reason is a quality or strength, but wisdom is a virtue”. If “design as empathy” is substituted for the word “wisdom”, the quotation could be adjusted to read: “intuition is a gift or talent; inspiration is a quality or strength, but “design as empathy is a virtue”.⁴

Notes

1. See “The functional architecture of human empathy”: Empathy accounts for the naturally occurring subjective experience of similarity between the feelings expressed by self and others without losing sight of whose feelings belong to whom. <http://bcn.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/3/2/71>
See also “The architecture of empathy”: <http://eideneurolearningblog.blogspot.com/2005/02/architecture-of-empathy.html>
And: “The functional architecture of human empathy”: Empathy accounts for the naturally occurring subjective experience of similarity between the feelings expressed by self and others without losing sight of whose feelings belong to whom. <http://www.medscape.com/medline/abstract/15537986> *Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience Reviews* 3 (2): 71. <http://www.citeulike.org/article/63911>
2. For an overview of interpretations of the concept “empathy”, see Gauss (1973).
Miller (2008: 50) explains the neurological basis of empathy: “The challenge to cognitive neuroscience becomes greater as we go up the ladder to more complicated emotional states. And the stakes become higher, too, because research into such highly valued and personal mental processes can be easily misunderstood. Empathy is more than being nice. It is the ability to feel what another person feels, and in its most refined form it is the capacity to deeply understand another person’s point of view. The brain’s emphatic powers actually begin with fear detection.”
3. McDonald (2004) discusses the normative critical assessment of the 1955 exhibition, “50 Years of American Art”, organised by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, also exhibited at the National Museum of Modern Art, Paris, and explains the show’s aim of displaying consumer and household items to demonstrate the benefits of American life, and maintains that, despite the critical response from some French critics to the inclusion of such items in an art exhibition, it was intellectually justified to do so.
Oscar Salinas Fores *et al.* (1999) discuss the difference between objects created by artists and industrial designers and the respective values which society places on them. The paradox of supposedly useful objects is discussed, for example Philippe Starck’s lemon-squeezers which were purchased as ornaments, rather than for their original purpose, blurring the distinction between art and design.
4. This research has been accepted for presentation at the Third International Conference on Design Principles and Practices, Berlin, Germany, 15–17 February 2009.

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