

# Design in Age of Crisis

## Therapeutic Design Strategies

**Design Architecture Experience Wellbeing...Intelligence**

### **The Crisis**

The C19 virus has been extraordinarily effective in revealing the fault-lines in the systems and structures of modern society. The environmental degradations associated with the relentless exploitation of natural resources provided for the origins of the virus; whilst the networked proximity and interactions of everyday life in the globalised economy helped spread the virus at amazing speed. Accordingly, the inequalities and exclusions that distinguish our society have provided the chinks in the armour of our preparedness against the virus and have, again, revealed the gap between the rhetoric of equality and the everyday reality of life for the majority.

Of course, there will be many schemes proposed to address these systemic failures through the development of more robust systems and structures. But what about people? Why not help people design themselves a better head-space from which to consider everyday life?

The present crisis provides an opportunity to reconsider the systemic interactions between people and resources and so as to help people thrive within the systems and structures of present-day society. I want to present design as a form of therapeutic practice...

### **The Realities We're In**

Design has usually been understood as a set of practices that shape the material reality of our lives. The practice of design has been elaborated, over the last three hundred years or so, as a system of critique of how things are, and how they work; and how they could be made better...

Over the last century or so, we have begun to distinguish between the material reality of things, and the social reality of human relations with the people around us, and the attendant emotional reality of how we experience those relations through feelings.

In this context, design can become a powerful bridge between the material world and its experience through feeling of these various realities.

We learnt, from the counter-culture that it is possible to create one's own reality...and that this is quite often a nicer place than the various realities forced upon us.

## **Design**

The practice of design articulates and shapes an improved material reality of economy, performance and style. Often, it does this by reference to the values that attach to the improvement. We hope that this is progress...although progress has often seemed to be about systems of conformity.

The connection between design and psychology allows a space in which the object of design becomes about our own psychological formation. In this context it is surprising how little the established systems of education and design touch upon the potential of design to shape the psychological reality of our lives.

## **Psychology**

### **Gestalt - Observation + Memory**

My interest in psychology begins with von Helmholtz's conception of the intelligent eye (eye and brain together) and the consideration of how the experience of modern life, through technology, shapes the development of a different and new ocular intelligence. See, for example, the impact of railways or of cinema upon our ways of seeing...

<https://bagdcontext.myblog.arts.ac.uk/2014/03/30/railway-observation-and-ocular-formation/>

I'm interested in how what we see is organised into a gestalt of connections and how we can give shape and meanings to those connections through the constructions and development of an individuated mind-palace.

Almost any account of developing a greater intelligence speaks of improving memory. In general the strategies for developing a better memory involve the elaboration of mnemonic narratives to amplify the connections between image, memory and meaning...Weirdly, the books that describe these techniques have little to say about architectural forms or design in relation to this psychological space.

The practice of design places the individual at the fore in relation to both ocular technologies and in the personal development of mnemonic association.

## **Design + Therapy**

*Eventually, everything connects...people, ideas, objects*

*The quality of the connections is the key to quality per se*

Charles Eames

The scientific methodology of observation, classification and interpretation informs the methodology of progress through design. The elaboration and understanding of the world through the connections between objects, ideas and their meanings is a key therapeutic in terms of helping people understand the system and structure that we are in...and to experience a better life.

## **Therapeutic Strategies**

### **01/ Building a Mind-Palace**

The idea of the mind palace is pretty straightforward and goes back at least as far as the ancient Romans. It provides for a way of organising memory visually and spatially.

If you read any book about how to improve your memory and about how to become cleverer; the book always suggests that you visualise memory through a process of mnemonic association. That usually means turning a sequence of data into a picture story. That's how people train themselves to recall long lists of telephone numbers and so on. For many people that would be a bit like looking at a series of film stills in sequence. You can also develop a memory in which images and objects are positioned in relation to each other. That's the mind-palace, and that's a bit more like being in the film...

When the mind-palace idea was first developed the architectural structures available were quite limited. Naturally, the Romans imagined the palace as a kind of villa, with rooms arranged around an interior court. Later we were able to imagine something bigger. Something like Versailles, for example, or the other palaces of the 18C aristocracy.

In 1851 and because of Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, we could begin to imagine an architecture of infinite extension, constructed from a kit of bolt-ons, made from iron and glass. That was a really useful development because it meant that you could quickly add an extra room to the mind-palace. In the 1960's and the 1970's, modern engineering combined with ideas of a different kind of cultural experience and produced the fun-palace concept. This was a multi-function space that could be configured in different ways. The fun-palace remained unrealised in its original form in Britain; but it was made as the Beaubourg in Paris.

In Britain, the architect and theorist, Cedric Price, used the potential of the mega-space-frame to conceptualise a multi-function structure which he called the Fun Palace. The legacy of this idea may be seen in the present-day scale and design of airport terminals, shopping malls and so on.

Part of what Cedric Price had imagined was an architecture that was structural and systemic; but also social and cultural. This gave the expression to the engineering modernity of the second (post-industrial) machine age. The most successful expression of this idea was realised by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano in Paris.

The Beaubourg, or Pompidou Centre, in Paris is the most important building of the 20C. The Beaubourg is a multi-function cultural space. The design of the structure externalises all building services that support the functionality of the structure. So, power and water, and even stairs and elevators are all on the outside. The visible ducting is colour-coded to add drama and visual excitement to the exterior. In addition the building faces a large open piazza that effectively connects inside and outside as a way of facilitating cultural and social exchange.

In structural terms, the internal spaces of the building are entirely open and can be given any form that is required...the floor spans within the building extends to almost the full foot-print of the structure.

Piano and Rogers were helped in the realisation of the building by the structural engineers Peter Rice and Ted Happold from Arup's. No wonder the Pompidou has been a success...it was blessed with a team of geniuses.

The new spaces, encouraged curators to develop new ways of showing things and created an environment in which the connections between things became more clearly evident. In curatorial terms the spaces undermined the usual ownership of culture by effectively by-passing the gate-keepers of compartmentalised objects and culture. Thus high and low were brought together, and everything became more visibly connected through proximate association.

This was the beginning of the inter-textual hyper-reality.

In the UK, this model was most clearly realised in the retail environment of the Biba store. Looking back, I can now understand that I internalised these structures and, as far as I was able, these systems of thinking. I did that thanks to my father, who was an architect, and thanks to family and friends who took me around palaces, and shops, and showed me how life could be lived and how things could be arranged.

When I began to build my own mind-palace it was quite architecturally specific. It was a high-tech structure derived from the Eames House (kit of parts) and at the scale of Piano and Rogers. There are no corridors, and the rooms are configured by the artful arrangement of objects, people and moving images...The whole thing is a cross between how I imagine Biba (I never went there) and what I got from Beaubourg and Versailles.

From the 1980s and onwards, I worked in the art world. This helped me develop my visual memory so that I have really good recall of the spatial arrangements of objects in room-settings - furniture, pictures, objects, people and books etc.

As I've got older, the whole thing has become a bit more 18C looking. That's a bit weird; but I've definitely developed a taste for parquet floors. I do like the patina you get on old-fashioned linoleum after about twenty years.

## **02/ Enjoying the Exquisite Everyday**

*I believe, everyday, you should have at least one exquisite moment..*

Audrey Hepburn

I very much like the French idea of being able to buy small, beautiful things relatively inexpensively...cakes, cheeses and lipstick are good examples. Hermes do this with their silk scarves. They are expensive for silk scarves, but you can wear them everyday and they last a lifetime. The scarves are much less costly than anything else by Hermes.

I call this expression of modestly-priced sophistication: ***the exquisite everyday***...

## **Flynn Effect**

James Flynn has identified a most unlikely phenomenon...it is that across the 20C, populations appear to be becoming more intelligent, at least in terms of IQ scores. It turns out that only some people are getting more intelligent and only in specific ways...those are the populations of large metropolitan environments who environments and technologies appear to support a greater development of visual and spatial intelligence.

## **Design and Liberation**

The therapeutic strategies outlined above give specific expression, through design, to ideas expressed elsewhere by thinkers as diverse as de Certeau and Debord. By this process design can become an expression of personal liberation.

## **Proposal**

To present design thinking as powerful tools in the articulation of an individually liberating reality. To present the spatial logics of different mind-palace structures.

**Paul Rennie**

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