**If Design is Not the Answer, What Might it Be?**


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***Let's be clear. Design is not the answer. No field or discipline or practice is the answer. And this is hard to believe when the question is finally so clear.***

Despite the regular reprisal and reinterpretation of the title of Cedric Price's 1966 lecture – *Technology is the Answer, but what was the Question* – only in the final slide did he hint at what might be an answer when he said "*The usefulness of this architecture is to remind its users that the major resource that should be conserved is the human spirit.*" (Price, 1979) It's possible that if technology is the answer, then the question might have been how to conserve the human spirit? If that is so and if design is the answer what might be its question – certainly not to conserve but to improve the human condition through the project for the better world. In this sense design thinks and acts as if it were a medicine – by making things better. Medicine can be a science or a drug or a spell or charm. The word medicine is from the Latin for physician – the person we would know as a doctor. Design is premised on the promise of making things better therefore it produces people who resemble physicians who are not scientists and generally not in the drug business so to continue to believe in the project of the better world they must be in the business of 'designing' spells or charms that, as Vilém Flusser reminded us, trick us into believing it is design (Flusser, 1995).

There appears to be a sanguine and comforting relationship between the question and the answer – or the question and its answer – and we are not sure when this marriage occurred and why it has such value and power. So, we thought the invitation to contribute to this exercise was the ideal platform to think about what troubles us about the question-and-answer relationship.

Both question and answer are performative in they don't describe anything – they do something – but what needs to be done? Given what we claim in the first brief paragraph - that the question is finally so clear - perhaps we are at a point where it is no longer possible to distinguish between the question and the answer. What provoked the question? What experiment was necessary to arrive at the answer? Is it time to stop asking questions and stop expecting answers and in their place start to guess, have a go, make do? The abundance of questions and paucity of answers has destabilised the act of knowing so that not-knowing is the real context of all possible decisions.

Since Price couched his riddle, it has been applied to a vast array of fields. Even cosmologists are seeking the question to which the universe is the answer. It now appears that the answers already surround us. It's the question we don't know. Only

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an organisation as zealously optimistic as the Design Council (UK), could recently resolve this universal riddle by confidently claiming "*Whatever the question, design has an answer*"[1].

Maybe, then, we should look at design as the universal answer to all questions, just like love is. How to end all wars? Design! How to make a better world? Design! How to be happy together? Design! But when a single term is used to satisfy so many needs and answer so many – and broad – questions, it simply implodes. Imploding means that it disappears, without even leaving a void behind. The space that was once occupied by design as a matter, is now claimed by marketers, CEOs, strategists, and even academics, who present their design saviourist slides at conferences, board meetings and pitch talks, just like a well-trained Karaoke aficionado would sing in a pub filled with tipsy customers.

Long ago, design learned to loathe its commercial, utilitarian, wasteful and dehumanizing nature. Key figures like Victor Papanek, Ken Garland, and more recently Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (and there are many others) have criticized the sheer amount of time and energy spent by designers polishing the cogs of the capitalist machine. Labels like "social design", "critical design", and "speculative design" have emerged that focus on the "big issues" of our time (Lorusso, 2019). Here, design super-heroes tackle societal problems in events like the Dutch *What Design Can Do* (WDCD) – a regular affair created to "*…demonstrate the power of design; to show that it can do more than make things pretty. To call on designers to stand up, take responsibility and consider the beneficial contribution that designers can make to society.*"[2] Each year WDCD promises to explain what design can deliver, but exploring its website, a clear answer doesn't seem to appear. Instead, we find a list of urgent and difficult challenges - "Clean Energy Challenge", "Climate Action Challenge", "Refugee Challenge…" Design seems to be challenging everything, but does it ever win? What Design Can Do sounds more like an implicit question, with a self-referential answer: Design Can Design. That's what it delivers. As the designer and writer Ruben Pater boldly stated, design positions itself as the "*ultimate problem-solving discipline*", superior to governments or NGOs[3].

Dunne and Raby in their essay "What If…"[4] claim that because of the complexity of our world, "*there are no solutions… or even answers… just lots of questions, thoughts, ideas and possibilities, all expressed through the language of design.*" They see design as a thing that can probe our beliefs and values, challenge our assumptions and encourage us to imagine how what we call "reality" could be

[1] https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/news-opinion/councils-across-uk-learn-whatever-challenge-design-has-answer
[2] "About What Design Can Do." What Design Can Do. Accessed 28 March, 2022. https://www.whatdesigncando.com/mission/
[3] Ruben Pater, "Treating the Refugee Crisis as a Design Problem Is Problematic." *Dezeen*, Accessed 28 March, 2022. https://www.dezeen.com/2016/04/21/ruben-pater-opinion-what-design-can-do-refugee-crisis-problematic-design/
[4] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, "What If…" Accessed 28 March 2022. http://dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/496/0

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different. Design helps us see that the way things are done is just one possibility, and not necessarily the best one.

So, on one hand non-designers (including marketers, CEOs, strategists, the business world, and even academics) offer up design as the answer to all questions. But, on the other hand, designers offer design as a question. Consequently, we might say that designers have passed from being the trouble-shooters, to being the trouble-makers.

Maybe it is not so important to identify the moment in which this switch happened. It might be more useful to understand to whom designers are posing their questions. And also, who was asking the designers' questions before?

Let's start from the latter. If design is historically concerned with the industry and its profit-making agenda, it is probable that those asking questions were the CEOs, the manufacturers, the clients, and more broadly the agents of the capital machine that simultaneously feed and starve the industry. Their questions were likely articulated as - "how can we sell more?", "how can we produce it cheaper?", "how can we make it more appealing?" It was around this time that Raymond Loewy famously quipped - "*The most beautiful curve is a rising sales graph.*"[5] Designers never really provided answers to those questions – and understandably so. Therefore, the same CEOs, owners and agents of capital asking those questions, decided to hold onto the mic and provide *design* as an answer. Does this mean that designers were not involved in building this self-referential and somewhat supremacist narrative? Well, those who were involved were likely tricked into it. After all, if you are a designer and you hear your possible bosses stating that the world needs more design, it is very likely that you'll end up repeating that, too.[6]

Design simultaneously becomes the question and the answer, thus placing itself at both ends of the chain of labour, with designers finally becoming both the customers and the providers, the senders and the receivers. This is a short-circuit that – just like any short-circuit – doesn't generate a difference at the two ends of the labour-chain,

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[5] http://raymondloewy.com/about/quotes/
[6] Our criticism of design relationships was also parodied by Giovanni Cutolo in Domus Magazine;
"The furniture sector for example reminds me of a painting by Brueghel in the Capodimonte Museum of Naples, titled 'The Parable of the Blind'. In it we see a group of six blind men walking in single file, each with his right arm outstretched and his right hand resting on the shoulder of the blind man in front of him. The first is falling into a deep ravine and has an expression of terror on his face; the second can no longer feel the support of the shoulder in front of him and wears an expression of amazement; the third is calm; the last smiling. If we suppose that the blind men are a manufacturer, a retailer, a sales representative, an advertising man, a journalist and a consumer, it only remains to establish in what order they proceed and which of them is first. For those working in the trade the metaphor is not too hard to follow. Let me propose a possible sequence: The first is the consumer, by now plunging into an empty space; the second, who advises and reassures him, is a trade journalist; in his turn motivated and sustained by an advertising man followed by a representative hard on the heels of a hopeful retailer, while bringing up the rear is a manufacturer who does not know what he is smiling about and is unaware of what awaits him".
Giovanni Cutolo. The Virtuous Hedonist and Consumer Design, Domus 706, 1989 p21

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but it causes tension, stress to the whole system. However, the stress generated in the system might not be completely or always bad. Between the two design ends of this system, one can find scientists, policy makers, engineers… The result, in some cases is that the short-circuit generated by design, stimulates whoever is in the middle of the chain to object to design, offer alternatives, improve the status quo.

Let's not forget that the question/ answer affinity has been codified in the form of the catechism, the elementary question-and-answer book of religious instruction. If you trace its etymology 'catechism' is divorced from religious instruction. It comes from the Greek 'katekhein' meaning 'to resound' which we now interpret as 'to echo' and 'to sing the praises of'. Ironically, as we have argued, singing the praises of design is booming but we have also exposed the hollowness of these sounds in a previous text (Rodgers *et al.*, 2017). But if design were an echo or reverberation what is the origin of the sound? It is vitally important to place before this question/ answer affinity the simple fact is that each designer *creates* their precursors. Their work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. Cedric Price asked what WAS the question and everyone after him asks what IS the question as if there is no conception of the past. WAS used to be the design of the totally artificial world; a future for which we were to be infinitely responsible. Whereas IS is now the design of the totally financial world; a future already mortgaged for which successive generations will pay forever. We ask - was the past simple and is the present perfect? If so, what is to become of design?

One vector shaping the becoming-of-design comes from current design research agendas where the majority of publicly-funded design research in the UK is researching the education of the designer. The same research (Rodgers *et al.*, 2020) also illustrates that even though the thrust of current research is not focussed on the numerous planetary crises design research is playing a role in generating social, cultural, economic and environmental change. The planetary crises are not going away any time soon so the focus on design education might eventually re-shape the profile of the future graduate and the resulting future designer might be better placed to confront both the strange ecology and unwelcome change that is shaping an increasingly unthinkable-world.

This research sheds light on an evolving landscape of design research (in the UK) over the last 12 years that tells how design researchers working with others are dealing with significant socio-economic and other issues including those articulated in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This landscape of 67 projects shows that design researchers deliver value to a nation's economy, support industrial competitiveness, innovation, skills, and social policy and generate knowledge which is applied in healthcare, urban planning, engineering, computing, and business domains. It is often challenging to measure the intangible outcomes (value) of design research in quantitative terms because impact often takes a long time to become manifest and may be generated by a multitude of actors.

However, this research (Rodgers *et al.*, 2020) reveals that over one-third of the projects contribute to social change (*e.g.*, empowering disadvantaged groups to gain agency, enhancing the quality of their lives, improving social wellbeing through better

social interactions). Over one-quarter of the projects contribute to cultural value (*e.g.*, preserving and revitalizing cultural heritage through archival studies). Over 20% of the projects analysed here generates economic value, including driving employment in the creative economy and embedding technological innovations within enterprises and manufacturing businesses. Surprisingly, only one of the 67 projects in this study creates environmental value, which here refers to making sustainable use of resources, protecting biodiversity and ecosystems, and adopting production processes that reduce the negative impacts of human activity on the wellbeing of society and the environment. It should be noted, however, that most of the projects in this study synergistically create more than one type of value – generating an interesting mix of social, cultural, economic, and environmental value.

Returning to the question we posed in the title of this piece – if design is not the answer what might it be? For far too long design has asked knowingly "What *is* design?" And for far too long design has responded confidently that "Design *is* this or that…". This surety is encapsulated in the exaggerated recent claim by the UK Design Council that whatever the question design has the answer. It is surprising to us to see design still projecting surety for the out-of-date project of designing a world-for-us. We look around and wonder where is the evidence that design is all or any of what it claims to be, whether it has done all or any of what it claims to do. What is even more surprising is this apparent surety has not paid heed to the warning inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi – "Surety Brings Ruin."

What Price doesn't reveal is his search for the question is that for too long we have been reliant on technology to be the answer to a promise proposed initially in 1942 by the economist Maynard Keynes - 'that anything we can actually do, we can afford.' This promise should have reduced Price's question to read "Money is the answer." Money has never needed questions because the only question that concerns money is how to accumulate more.

From the outset design has been premised on the promise that anything it can imagine it can do. But about our imaginings Isabelle Stengers warns;

> Its time then, for minor knowledge, which questions the order words of Promethean modernisation. The guardians keep the floodgates–as they see them–closed to questioning. We have to learn to pose our own questions. And refuse the answers when the questions to which they answer are answers for nobody, for whoever, rather than answers for us. And all that without investing too much faith in one or other belief that we know what we are doing: "its not a matter of converting us but of repopulating the devastated desert of our imaginations" (Stengers, 2015, 132)

This questioning takes us back to Cedric Price's lecture. Perhaps we need to ask again, and we say 'again' because there isn't much evidence that the first time it was asked it stuck in the design lexicon. Perhaps the question is how might design conserve the human spirit? If most design research is focussed on educating the designer perhaps it needs to develop a new catechism, a new question-and-answer set of instructions, not to sing the praises of design (there has been enough of that

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already), not to convert design into imagining it is something it is not, but to pick up the reverberations of our relationship to everyone and everything on the one planet we share – our common home – and to question what-might-not become in a world-without-us – an unthinkable-world.

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