
Design. Where did it all go so terribly wrong?

Intro

We often observe that designers at design conferences desperately attempt to change opinions of their harmful influence on society and the environment. We know about the circular economy, new biomaterials, and concerns about inclusion. When the speaker is really good, we even almost believe that design is actually solving problems. But there are important questions: what kind and whose problems? And when the oceans are full of plastic bags and pens with well-designed logotypes we should ask: what is going wrong? And how to see it? Should we still only discuss the construction of proper logotypes?

Looking for the proper assessment

Ruben Pater in his book *Caps Lock. How Capitalism took Hold of Graphic Design and how to Escape from It* ruthlessly show us links between designers' jobs and problems such as social unfairness and climate disasters. His quick look at the history of economy, education, work, and others shows us how graphic design has influenced and stimulated the Entropocene. Indeed, there is not enough hope for a successful escape. However, his work is very important and not typical because he focuses on the mass of ordinary graphic designers: 'as designers we find ourselves creating endless promotional images for products we don't need, working all-nighters for low wages **while dreaming of becoming star designers**. But we are not famous, and we are not only individuals' (Pater, 2021, p. 512). And this last question is the background for his proposals for the escape: let's start working together, for people and with them (Pater, 2021, pp. 447–516).

But what about those who dream of being a graphic design star (with large incomes)? How to change those dreams? The dreams that began not so long ago – the position of design stars developed during the 20th century and led to the creation of designer celebrities in the 1990s. (Drucker, 2001, p. 194). Suppose during the whole life, throughout the whole education process, a designer only hears about design stars and learns about aesthetic ways of judgement design. In that case, a lack of admiration – or even worse, often a lack of a client’s trust and the necessity of building confidence over and over again with the next client is a nightmare, not a dream. A designer’s ego in this job is irrelevant, and finding compromises between a designer’s and the client’s sense of taste could be challenging. Therefore, for fans of design stars, a member of a cooperative who is working in the province for local society could look like a loser. Ordinary and sometimes dull work for small clients, without any chance of red carpets and glossy trophies, looks like a failure. Your ego in this kind of job is not relevant and finding compromises between you and your client’s sense of taste could be really difficult. Therefore, for fans of design stars, a member of a cooperative, who is working on the province for local society could look like a loser. Ordinary and sometimes boring work for small clients, without any chance of red carpets and glossy trophies, looks like a failure.

As long as we measure the quality of design without considering true social and environmental influences, the icon of success in the designer activity will remain the rich white man, who is designing things we don’t need.

Jorge Frascara asks: ‘What criteria can be used to assess quality in visual communication design? As a design community, have we learned to use the right parameters?’ (Frascara, 2022, p. 272). I faced a similar question while analysing publications about design intended for children (Treska-Siwoń, 2022, pp. 176–201). How do we assess their impact? Which of them are good and which are bad? Audrey Bennett¹ has some proposals: ‘good design can no longer solely be based upon formal metrics’ (Bennett, 2012, p. 74). The same is René Spitz’s² conclusion after huge research on world design education in 2021: ‘For the design of the 21st century, answers to aesthetic questions no longer come first. More important are competencies for international, interdisciplinary, intercultural, and cross-hierarchical collaboration in mixed teams based on human values, in order to make a sustainable contribution to public value’ (Polch-Jahn, 2021). The next question follows these statements: how to measure such values in design?

1 Co-author of the IcoGrada Education Manifesto 2011.

2 Member of the iF design Foundation, which I will also mention later.

Audrey Bennett formulates five features of good design, and some of her proposals are quite easy to check. For example: ‘The design outcome has a user-friendly interface that facilitates and stimulates use’ (Bennett, 2012, pp. 75–76). We can test such properties, we have a methodology to do this and even many helpful tools to investigate details, such as colorsafe.co. No doubt we are ready to evaluate design in this way. Universal, inclusive design demands deeper knowledge of people – users. However, there is still a possibility that one can use this knowledge against people instead of helping them. Design could also be ‘the most destructive tools of deception’ (Bennett, 2012, p. 74). Therefore, just to be safe from skilled graphic designers with wrong intentions, we have to find also other tools for design evaluation, which allow us to see true goals and the real social impact of judged objects.

The visualisation of information can help us see what we might otherwise miss. Therefore, in this article, I will focus on using charts and diagrams to visualise the social impact of design objects.

Review of existing visualisations

The need for a tool that helps with attempts to objectify the evaluation of design objects was taken up by Paul Mijksenaar.³ He based his diagram on historical foundations – starting with Vitruvius’ criteria. He explains it as follows: *Firmitas* – durability, firmness; *Utilitas* – usefulness, commodity, and *Venustas* – beauty, delight (Mijksenaar, 1997, p. 18). His diagram consists of three factors, so-called thermometers: *Reliability*, *Utility*, and *Satisfaction*. In Mijksenaar’s view, these factors not only make it possible to identify the main objectives guiding the designer but also to catch situations where he has been seduced by dogma (Mijksenaar, 1997, pp. 20–22). As an example of such dogma, he cites the Bauhaus decision in 1925 to dispense with capital letters – a decision that is still cultivated today. Mijksenaar considers the application of this principle by the Amsterdam studio Total Design to the wayfinding of Schiphol Airport in 1967 to be particularly damaging, since a British typography study (in the 1960s) on directional signs proved that their legibility ‘increases significantly when each name or sentence begins with a capital letter’ (Mijksenaar, 1997, p. 22). Indeed, it was very important research⁴ on fast-growing roads, but in these British tests, designers only checked how legibility

3 Dutch wayfinding specialist; known especially for airport information systems, such as at Schiphol, La Guardia, JFK, and others.

4 Reports from this research are known as the Anderson report (1960) and the Worboys report (1962). I use findings from the second one. More information on sabra-roads.org.uk and trl.co.uk/publications.

changes when road signs use capital or mixed letters (lower-case with an initial capital), and how it affects the size of boards (*Traffic Signs*, 1962, p. 4). English directional signs traditionally have only used capital letters, and the introduction of mixed-case letters met strong conservative objection (www.roads.org.uk, 2017). In the face of loud opposition, it is likely that nobody thought about legibility tests using only lower-case alphabet (Baines P. et al, 1999). However, conclusions of Jock Kinneir's and Margaret Calvert's analysis accented how changing the shape of words in mix-case type was found useful for fast-reading drivers (*Traffic Signs*, 1962, p.4). This finding could be in some way applicable to using only lower-case letters. Did it lead us to the curious question: what is the impact of Bauhaus's decision that German all nouns begin with a capital letter? I have no answer, but we can see the difference in letter rhythm and word recognisability when looking at the example below.

On the motorway to London there are road signs.

Auf der Autobahn nach London sind Verkehrszeichen.

Figure 1. Comparison of two sentences: in English and German, author's study

Nevertheless, the British test from the 1960s did not show any significant advantage of either system. Signs using only capitals were a little more visible for users, although Jock Kinneir already had an official agreement with the Road Research Laboratory, and the design process with his version was advanced in production (Lund, 2003, pp. 108–113). The Road Research Laboratory decided to stand by that decision, and from the financial point of view it made sense. This story teaches us how many details influence the success of a graphic design project. It is hard to say what exactly prejudiced opinion that Kinneir's and Calvert's signs have better social influence than Kindersley's⁵ proposal.

Keeping in mind that social influence can't be precisely measured, let's look at Mijksenaar's charts, which always uses pairs of projects to show the use of his diagrams. For example, Falk and Michelin maps, Dutch and British road signs, and a Swatch watch and a coffee measure (Mijksenaar, 1997, pp. 18–20). This points to a common feature of the diagnostic tools in question: it is much easier

5 David Kindersley was Kinneir's opponent in the fight of the shape of the signs for new-build motorways. His proposal (in short) consisted of new, but more traditional typography – only capital letters with serifs (a little irregular) and a smaller surface of the directional signs.

and more efficient to use them for comparison than for evaluating individual projects. Therefore, they are also the perfect tool for evaluating students' work.

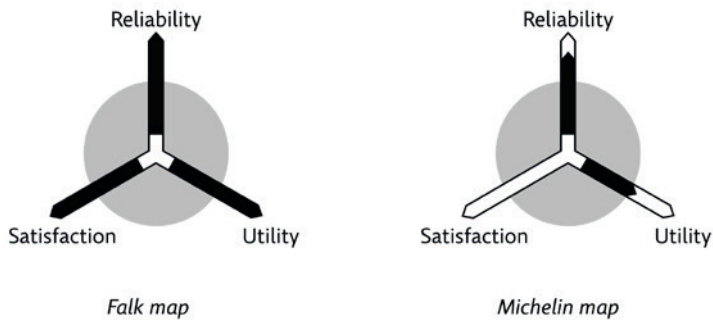


Figure 2. Comparison of Michelin and Falk production maps, own study based on diagrams by Paul Mijksenaar, *Visual Function*, p. 18

The AGRAFA International Student Design Competition (Katowice, 2022) used a visually similar diagram. Its directions were *Social*, *Commercial*, and *Beyond*. The chart was created during the reformulation of a competition rules. Organisers broadened its scope beyond graphic design. As the curators explained, the purpose of the diagram was to map out ‘what needs and challenges the design responds to’ (agrafa.asp.katowice.pl). Interestingly, when submitting their projects, the participants themselves defined their place on the diagram. The organisers reserved the right to change it, but did not exercise it.⁶ The viewer also had a say, as the diagrams were placed next to the exhibited works and it was possible to modify their settings. More information on how organisers interpret those axes can be found in the competition rules: ‘**Social**: projects that support social innovation, socially engaged projects, projects that support solving complex social problems, projects developed in harmony with the natural environment, projects that emphasise the role and responsibility of a designer in society; **Commercial**: custom-made projects (based on a project brief, competition, public contract), projects limited due to market/implementation reality, projects using new technologies, implemented projects (not conceptual); **Beyond**: experimental projects, precursor projects, innovative projects, projects beyond convention, speculative projects, interdisciplinary projects.’ (formularz.agrafa.asp.katowice.pl).

⁶ Information from a telephone interview with Dr. Agata Korzenska, member of AGRAFA Competition committee, 03.08.2022.

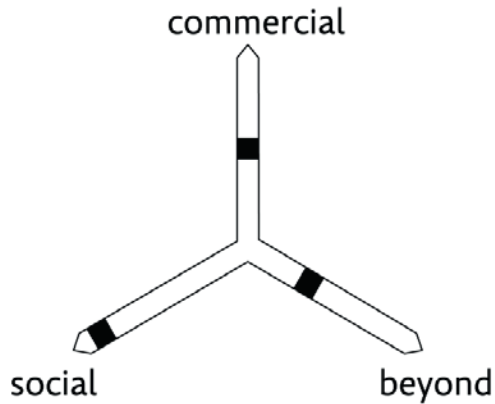


Figure 3. Agrafa charts, author's study based on charts from the exhibition

Another example of an attempt to depict project goals and priorities was used at the Design Museum in London for the Beazley Design of The Year 2019 exhibition. The charts created for the occasion are simpler, as they only have two directions. Although four types of such sliders were on display at the exhibition, only one type appeared next to each object on show. The organisers did not annotate these charts with comments, so we can only analyse the possible overtones of the offered references (figures 4 and 5).

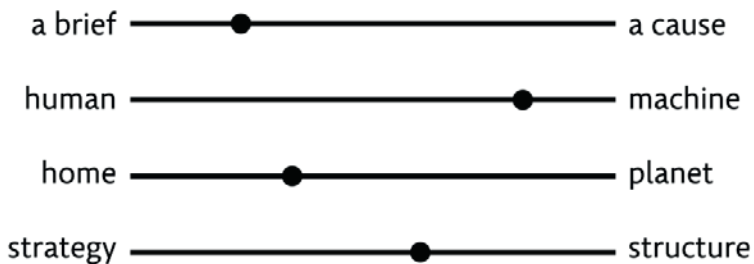


Figure 4. Beazley charts, author's study based on charts from the exhibition

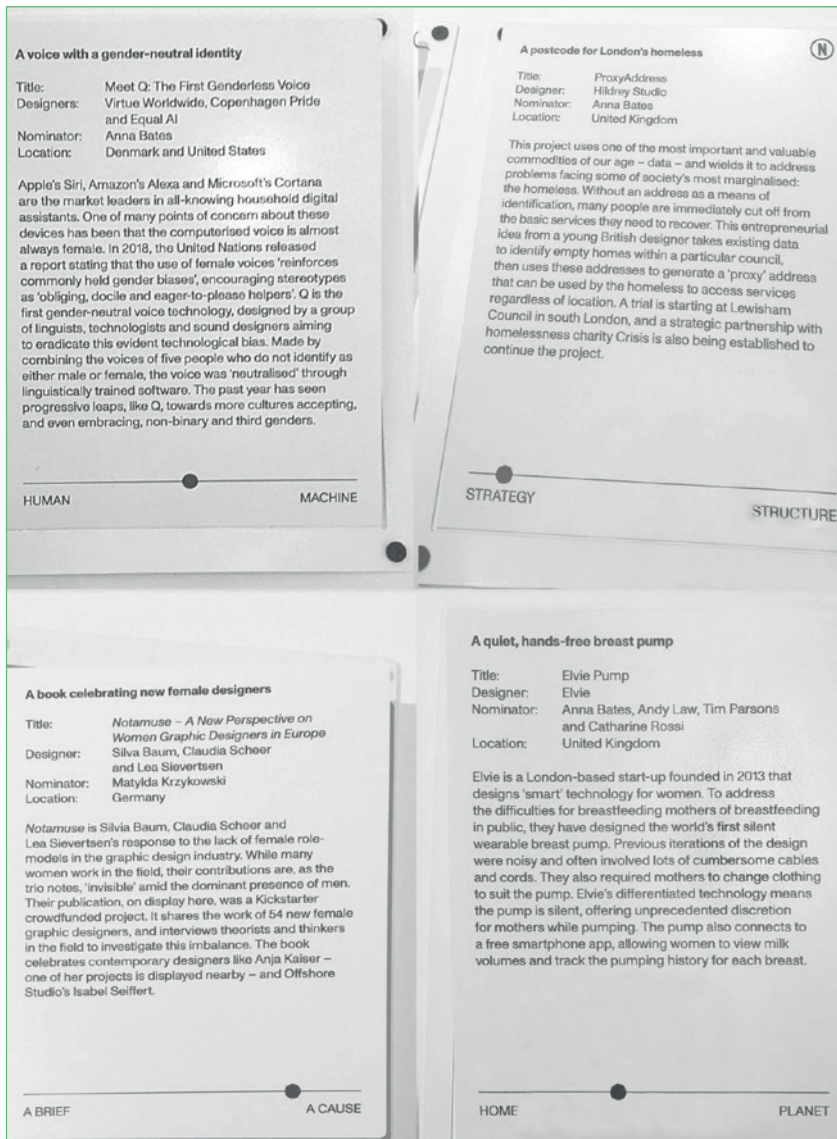


Figure 5. Charts included in the descriptions of the works on display at the Beazley Design of The Year 2019 exhibition, author's photo

Just like the AGRAFA International Student Design Competition in Katowice, the Beazley Design of The Year 2019 changed its formula, abandoning its previous divisions and declaring a search for new factors that defined the areas of design (Galilee, 2019, pp. 11–12).

Agrafa's and Beazley's graphs are intended to make us reflect upon our vigorously evolving field – designers and spectators alike. It seems that the opportunity

for interaction, as applied in Katowice, is more developmental. If some form of recording of the choices was introduced, we would obtain extremely valuable material – a contribution to further reflections on our field. The imprecision inherent in these visualisation tools is an ally to us. At this stage of design research, we need openness, different perspectives, and an escape from accepted dogmas. However, it is worth taking a close look at the keywords that constitute the factors of the charts.

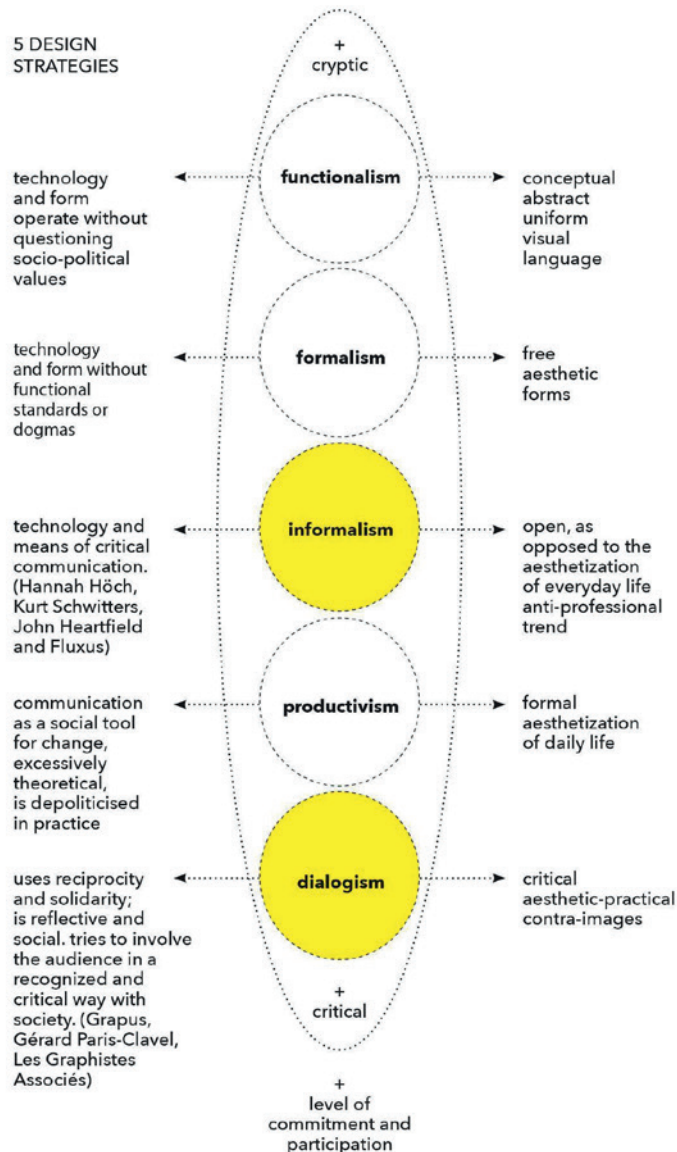


Figure 6. Un Mundo Feliz. Five design strategies (according to Els Kuijpers), G. Martínez, S. Díaz, *'Love is a Human Right'...*, op. cit.

Els Kuijpers,⁷ with reference to the work of Jan Van Toorn, has defined five strategies for visual communication: *functionalism*, *formalism*, *informalism*, *productivism*, and *dialogism* (Kuijpers, 2014), and the Madrid-based collective Un Mundo Feliz has developed a chart based on these strategies indicating their potential for social influence (Martínez & Díaz, 2020, p. 51).

Taste

Paul Mijksenaar's considerations are exceptionally important because they accent the most visible and loud question when judging design: taste. The factorial of 'satisfaction' is associated with the feeling of beauty and contentment. The notion of beauty, in turn, inevitably leads us to the theories of Pierre Bourdieu. He linked aesthetic preferences and beliefs to the classism of societies – particularly to the maintenance of upper-class status (e.g., through symbolic violence). The research he conducted on a large scale in the 1960s indicates, among other things, that when evaluating the effects of design, the evaluator's perspective, their belief in the natural order of things, which they acquired in the immediate environment (primary habitus) or in the process of education (secondary habitus), is crucial (Bourdieu, 1996). Graphic designers are well acquainted with this problem, as working with a client is often a constant clash of different habitus.

Comments on the government's edition of *My Child's First Book* (*Pierwsza książka*, 2013) were also good examples of such clashes. See some of them below:

- 'trivial, slapdash work, simply ugly (...) the whole thing is not much different from the dubious quality children's books sold for 5 PLN in a supermarket'⁸
- 'psychologists (...) emphasise how important the contours of illustrations and vivid colours are for a young child. We did not make this book for illustrators'⁹ (Rachid Chehab, 2013)
- 'My Child's First Book is a symbolic rape' (sic)¹⁰ (Cackowska, 2014).

In the design magazine *2+3D*, Professor Tomasz Bierkowski expressed his longing for the possibility of a more rational system of evaluation, accusing critics representing the art community of 'most often referring to "good taste" in their narration, which does not contribute anything constructive to the discussion – on

7 Dutch independent publicist and curator on communication design.

8 Opinion of Maria Kulik, children's book promoter and teacher.

9 Opinion of Irena Koźmińska, graduate of the Warsaw School of Economics, head of the ABCXXI Foundation – publisher of *My Child First Book*.

10 Opinion of Dr Malgorzata Cackowska, an educational expert in visual and media literacy.

the contrary – it dangerously lowers its level’ (Bierkowski, 2014). I share this sentiment as well – in particular – because the taste of the representatives of the environment is often part of a secondary habitus, developed in design studies.

Describing a study of aesthetic choices in architecture, Charles Montgomery argues that the longer the period of study of architecture, the more often the subjects’ taste diverged from the tested group average. Non-designer participants were comfortable with imitations of the Victorian style, and architects were delighted with the black skyscraper Seagram Building (Montgomery, 2021, pp. 128–130).

Maria Kulik accented a significant element of her values when judging *My Child’s First Book* – the price of the object. It could be connected with the very Polish word *dizajnerskie* (also *designerskie*). This word is sometimes translated into English as *designerly*, but when looking at Google pictures we can easily see the differences in meanings – please compare figures 7 and 8.

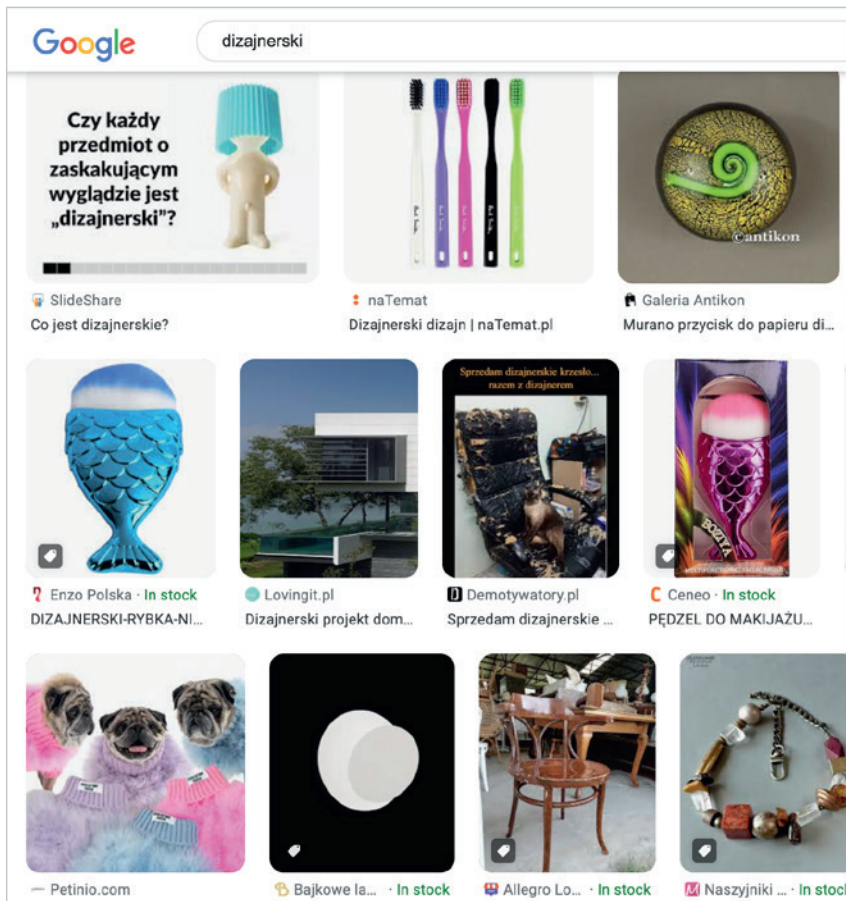


Figure 7. Screenshot of Google search for the word *dizajnerski*, accessed: 05.03.2023

The financial dimension shaped the perspective of Maria Kulik, quoted above, who emphasises the relationship between low price (but thus also more accessible) and poor quality of the books. In addition, Ewa Solarz refers to prices in the introduction of her book for children – D.E.S.I.G.N.: ‘Almost all the items described in this book are manufactured and can be bought. But unfortunately... most of them are very expensive’ (Solarz, 2013, p. 006).



Figure 9. E. Solarz, *D.E.S.I.G.N. Domowy Elementarz Sprzętów i Gratów Niecodziennych*, Dwie Siostry, Warszawa, 2013, photo K. Sowiński

In the French publication *La vie en design* (Delavaux, 2015), children can find egalitarian, accessible objects. This book presents a different point of view, and the narrative is also varied. Even when talking about a fancy model of Hoover, the authors refer to the history of cleaning tools – and they start with a simple broom.



Figure 10. C. Delavaux, S. Kiehl, *La vie en design*, Actes Sud, Paris, 2015, photo K. Sowiński

The new tool

I was looking for a tool to help visualise the differences in the tones of communication publications relating to art and design for children. It led me to the conclusion that it was necessary to define their place in the space between elitist and egalitarian or exclusive and inclusive (Treska-Siwon, 2022, pp. 167–168 and 195–199). The second factor I chose to explore was to prioritise: form or function, that is, aesthetics versus usability.

Let's take a look at how it works. First, we judge the egalitarian nature of the two earlier-mentioned publications by their selection of objects. In the French publication, we have a lot of objects that are widely available – such as a Bic pen, a Stabilo highlighter, or Heinz ketchup bottles. Examples of design are discussed in a broader historical, cultural, and social context. The authors compiled the objects by their functions, not their stylistic features. Here, we have a history of tools for writing, cleaning, lighting, etc., which increases the usefulness of the book for young readers. Thus, it can be diagnosed that this publication will be in the bottom right corner of the chart.

I have placed the Polish book on the opposite side of the chart. The aesthetics adopted in it do not reflect the actual appearance of the objects depicted. Therefore, I supposed that for the authors, their sense of taste was more important to share than the information. The contrast of backgrounds and letters is sometimes insufficient, also probably because of aesthetic reasons. It also lacks proper context, which makes it less useful. For example, next to the Savoy Vase description, we have a suggestion to keep a fish in it, which would certainly shorten the fish's life expectancy considerably. The main function of this publication remains to play with design icons created by design stars from ordinary designers' dreams. Additionally, as I mentioned earlier, most of the selected objects are elitist in nature. Comparing the aims of both publications in one chart helps in understanding how much they differ.

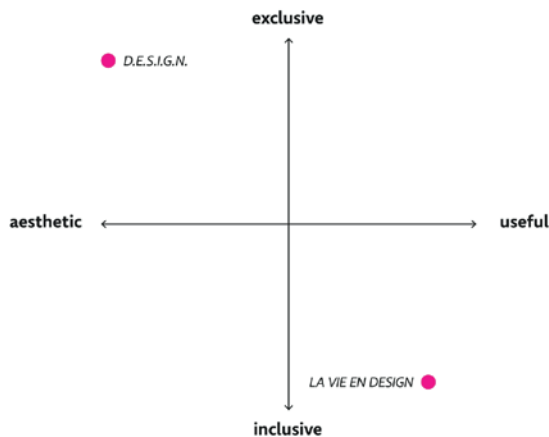


Figure 11. Evaluation of two design publications, compiled by the author

Choices similar to mine was made by the iF Design Foundation in the *Designing Design Education* report (2021). In Figure 12 we can compare the charts.

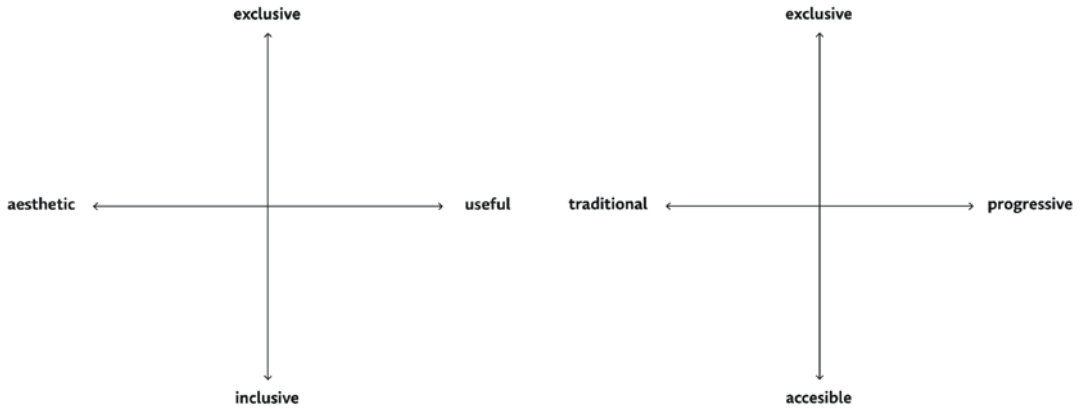


Figure 12. Chart comparison: left mine, right iF Design Foundation, author's study based on a chart from *Designing Design Education*, p. 75

The vertical axis of their graph spans between *exclusive* and *accessible*, which in principle is the same as on my chart. The difference between our visions is in the horizontal axis: iF Design Foundation spans it between 'traditional' and 'progressive' (*Designing Design Education*, 2021, pp. 74–75).

Basically, our intentions were similar. The main idea of the horizontal axis is to avoid taste judgement. Hence, iF Design analyses attachment to styles, which we can easily recognise; and in my chart, we have to evaluate which feature determined author choices: form or function. iF Design used this chart to map the areas that characterise different types of design schools (*Designing Design Education*, 2021, pp. 45–46). They surveyed a selection of design schools. Based on the descriptions next to the chart, we can conclude that the accessibility assessment is mainly related to tuition fees, as state universities were rated as the most accessible (traditional; main teaching model: Bauhaus), private universities as more exclusive (described as progressive, but on the chart, they are exactly in the middle of the axis; main teaching model: HFG Ulm), and a separate category, the 30 leading universities, as the most exclusive (there is a 'vague mix of traditional and progressive working methods' in the description, but a clear shift towards interdisciplinarity in the graph). For a good understanding of the concepts of traditional and progressive education that appear in the iF Design Foundation chart, it is still worth quoting from the description of traditional universities. Most of them define design as 'an expert practice to boost aesthetic appeal' and innovation as 'the generation of new variants of formal and aesthetic elements of a product' (*Designing Design Education*, 2021,

pp. 74–75). In key conclusions about the future of design, the authors of the report emphasise that formal and aesthetic measures alone will no longer guarantee the success of a project or even the professional success of the designer himself. There is necessary a broader understanding of the design context is required: technical, business, cultural, political, and social. They also point to the growing importance of user experience design (*Designing Design Education*, 2021, p. 67).

Conclusion

Beazley 2019 curator Beatrice Galilee writes in the catalogue's introduction: 'By separating themes from objects, we invite visitors to examine it and consider each thing on its own terms, wondering where it sits on the spectrum of contemporary thought within its own discipline' (Galilee, 2019, pp. 11–12). This quote seems to sum up our reflections well. Visualising the differences in design priorities helps us to think more broadly and deeply about the project, and to see it from a new perspective. Can we therefore accurately and objectively assess the quality of a project? Of course not. The charts we discuss only help us to take a step back and look at the bigger picture, although, what we see depends both on our habitus and on how insightful we are able to look, how broad our perspective is, and which objects have been chosen for comparison.

The time we have to spend thinking about values and ethics will be probably the most important for the process of changes in factors of design evaluation. The presented charts are particularly helpful in giving a structure to our analyses.

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Useful links

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Abstract

Graphic design has been an ambassador of modernity for the past 1000 years, leading us to a new, brighter future. In the time of the Entropocene, we are convinced the future will not be bright. Indeed, we are not sure if there is a future for humankind. As creativity and designing things are one of the oldest human activities, we have to ask ourselves the question: what is the role of design in the creation of such chaos we observe now? Many designers and thinkers now explain that the role of design in creating the human environment is crucial. Hence, we are afraid that many problems of planet Earth from postcolonial injustices to a destroyed environment are strictly connected with design activities. A lot has happened since humans designed the first tools and the first infographic on cave walls, and nowadays we have tons of trash in the oceans, climate emergency, and drastic social injustices. Why does this happen when we have many proofs of the usefulness of design objects? Driving without road signs would be very dangerous. But why are some symbols just the first letters of English words when the meaning of those words is not recognisable in other countries, even those who use the Latin alphabet? Or let's look at how useful smartphones are! But why are they not for all? Why can't I put an iPhone in my pocket when it hardly fits into my hand – also, is this smallest model? Something has gone wrong and there is a possibility that the mistake is deeply ingrained in our way of design evaluation. In this article I investigate the tools for the evaluation of graphic design. First, I look at different proposals for new assessment criteria. Next, I explore the usefulness of visualisation in judging design projects, and then I look at the connection between taste and symbolic violence. Finally, I propose my tool, which could be helpful in such considerations.

Keywords: judgement, evaluation, social impact, responsibility, graphic design, education, visualisation, typography, charts, taste, symbolic violence