

# Chapter 1

## What is design?

One of the most curious features of the modern world is the manner in which design has been widely transformed into something banal and inconsequential. In contrast, I want to argue that, if considered seriously and used responsibly, design should be the crucial anvil on which the human environment, in all its detail, is shaped and constructed for the betterment and delight of all.

To suggest that design is a serious matter in that sense, however, is problematic. It runs counter to widespread media coverage assigning it to a lightweight, decorative role of little consequence: fun and entertaining – possibly; useful in a marginal manner – maybe; profitable in economic sectors dominated by rapid cycles of modishness and redundancy; but of no real substance in basic questions of existence.

Not surprisingly, in the absence of widespread agreement about its significance and value, much confusion surrounds design practice. In some subject areas, authors can assume common ground with readers; in an introduction to architecture or history, for example, although the precise degree of readers' knowledge might vary substantially, a reasonably accurate concept of what constitutes the subject can be relied on. Other subjects, such as nuclear physics, can be so esoteric that no such mutual understanding exists and approaches from first principles become necessary.

Design sits uncomfortably between these two extremes. As a word it is common enough, but it is full of incongruities, has innumerable manifestations, and lacks boundaries that give clarity and definition. As a practice, design generates vast quantities of material, much of it ephemeral, only a small proportion of which has enduring quality.

Clearly, a substantial body of people exist who know something about design, or are interested in it, but little agreement will probably exist about exactly what is understood by the term. The most obvious reference point is fields such as fashion, interiors, packaging, or cars, in which concepts of form and style are transient and highly variable, dependent upon levels of individual taste in the absence of any fixed canons. These do indeed constitute a significant part of contemporary design practice, and are the subject of much commentary and a substantial proportion of advertising expenditure. Other points of emphasis might be on technical practice, or on the crafts. Although substantial, however, these are all facets of an underlying totality, and the parts should not be mistaken for the whole.

So how can design be understood in a meaningful, holistic sense? Beyond all the confusion created by the froth and bubble of advertising and publicity, beyond the visual pyrotechnics of virtuoso designers seeking stardom, beyond the pronouncements of design gurus and the snake-oil salesmen of lifestyles, lies a simple truth. Design is one of the basic characteristics of what it is to be human, and an essential determinant of the quality of human life. It affects everyone in every detail of every aspect of what they do throughout each day. As such, it matters profoundly. Very few aspects of the material environment are incapable of improvement in some significant way by greater attention being paid to their design. Inadequate lighting, machines that are not user-friendly, badly formatted information, are just a few examples of bad design that create cumulative problems and tensions. It is therefore worth asking: if these things are a necessary part of our existence, why are

they often done so badly? There is no simple answer. Cost factors are sometimes advanced in justification, but the margin between doing something well or badly can be exceedingly small, and cost factors can in fact be reduced by appropriate design inputs. The use of the term 'appropriate', however, is an important qualification. The spectrum of capabilities covered by the term 'design' requires that means be carefully adapted to ends. A solution to a practical problem which ignores all aspects of its use can be disastrous, as would, say, medical equipment if it were treated as a vehicle for individual expression of fashionable imagery.

This book is based on a belief that design matters profoundly to us all in innumerable ways and represents an area of huge, underutilized potential in life. It sets out to explore some reasons why this is so and to suggest some possibilities of change. The intention is not to negate any aspect of the spectrum of activity covered by the term 'design', but to extend the spectrum of what is understood by the term; examine the breadth of design practice as it affects everyday life in a diversity of cultures. To do so, however, some ground clearing is necessary to cut through the confusion surrounding the subject.

Discussion of design is complicated by an initial problem presented by the word itself. 'Design' has so many levels of meaning that it is itself a source of confusion. It is rather like the word 'love', the meaning of which radically shifts dependent upon who is using it, to whom it is applied, and in what context. Consider, for example, the shifts of meaning when using the word 'design' in English, illustrated by a seemingly nonsensical sentence:

'Design is to design a design to produce a design.'

Yet every use of the word is grammatically correct. The first is a noun indicating a general concept of a field as a whole, as in: 'Design is important to the national economy'. The second is a verb, indicating action or process: 'She is commissioned to design a new

kitchen blender'. The third is also a noun, meaning a concept or proposal: 'The design was presented to the client for approval'. The final use is again a noun, indicating a finished product of some kind, the concept made actual: 'The new VW Beetle revives a classic design.'

Further confusion is caused by the wide spectrum of design practice and terminology. Consider, for example, the range of practice included under the rubric of design – to name just a few: craft design, industrial art, commercial art, engineering design, product design, graphic design, fashion design, and interactive design. In a weekly series called 'Designer Ireland' in its Irish Culture section, the Sunday Times of London publishes a brief, well-written analysis of a specific aspect of design. In a six-week period, during August and September 2000, the succession of subjects was: the insignia of the Garda Síochána, the Irish national police; Louise Kennedy, a fashion designer; the Party Grill stove for outdoor cooking; the packaging for Carrolls Number One, a brand of cigarettes; Costelloe cutlery; and the corporate identity of Ryan Air, a low-cost airline. The range of subjects addressed in the whole series is even more bewildering in its diversity.

To that list can be added activities that appropriate the word 'design' to create an aura of competence, as in: hair design, nail design, floral design, and even funeral design. Why not hair engineering, or funeral architecture? Part of the reason why design can be used in this arbitrary manner is that it has never cohered into a unified profession, such as law, medicine, or architecture, where a licence or similar qualification is required to practise, with standards established and protected by self-regulating institutions, and use of the professional descriptor limited to those who have gained admittance through regulated procedures. Instead, design has splintered into ever-greater subdivisions of practice without any overarching concept or organization, and so can be appropriated by anyone.

Discussion of design on a level that seeks a pattern in such confusion leads in two directions: first, defining generic patterns of activity underlying the proliferation, in order to establish some sense of structure and meaning; secondly, tracing these patterns through history to understand how and why the present confusion exists.

To address the first point: design, stripped to its essence, can be defined as the human capacity to shape and make our environment in ways without precedent in nature, to serve our needs and give meaning to our lives.

Understanding the scale and extent of this capacity can be tested by observing the environment in which anyone may be reading these lines – it might be while browsing in a bookstore, at home, in a library, in an office, on a train, and so on. The odds are that almost nothing in that environment will be completely natural – even plants will have been shaped and positioned by human intervention and, indeed, their genus may even be a considerable modification of natural forms. The capacity to shape our world has now reached such a pitch that few aspects of the planet are left in pristine condition, and, on a detailed level, life is entirely conditioned by designed outcomes of one kind or another.

It is perhaps a statement of the obvious, but worth emphasizing, that the forms or structures of the immediate world we inhabit are overwhelmingly the outcome of human design. They are not inevitable or immutable and are open to examination and discussion. Whether executed well or badly (on whatever basis this is judged,) designs are not determined by technological processes, social structures, or economic systems, or any other objective source. They result from the decisions and choices of human beings. While the influence of context and circumstance may be considerable, the human factor is present in decisions taken at all levels in design practice.

With choice comes responsibility. Choice implies alternatives in how ends can be achieved, for what purposes, and for whose advantage. It means that design is not only about initial decisions or concepts by designers, but also about how these are implemented and by what means we can evaluate their effect or benefit.

The capacity to design, in short, is in innumerable ways at the very core of our existence as a species. No other creatures on the planet have this same capacity. It enables us to construct our habitat in unique ways, without which we would be unable to distinguish civilization from nature. Design matters because, together with language, it is a defining characteristic of what it is to be human, which puts it on a level far beyond the trivial.

**Design** This basic capacity can, of course, be manifested in a huge diversity of ways, some of which have become specialized activities in their own right, such as architecture, civil engineering, landscape architecture, and fashion design. To give some focus in a short volume, the emphasis here will be on the two- and three-dimensional aspects of everyday life – in other words, the objects, communications, environments, and systems that surround people at home and at work, at leisure and at prayer, on the streets, in public spaces, and when travelling. Even within this focus, the range is still huge and we need only examine a limited range of examples, rather than attempting a compressed coverage of the whole.

If this human capacity for design is manifested in so many ways, how can we understand this diversity? This brings us back to the second point mentioned above: design's historical development. Design is sometimes explained as a subdivision of art historical narratives emphasizing a neat chronological succession of movements and styles, with new manifestations replacing what went before. The history of design, however, can be described more appropriately as a process of layering, in which new developments are added over time to what already exists. This layering, moreover,

is not just a process of accumulation or aggregation, but a dynamic interaction in which each new innovative stage changes the role, significance, and function of what survives. For example, innumerable crafts around the world have been widely displaced by industrial manufactures from their central role in cultures and economies, but have also found new roles, such as providing goods for the tourist trade or supplying the particular global market segment known as Arts and Crafts. Rapid developments in computers and information technology are not only creating exciting new possibilities in interactive design, but are also transforming the ways in which products and services are conceived and produced, in ways that supplement, rather than replace, the old.

Neither is it possible to describe a process with an essential pattern followed everywhere. There are significant variations in how the process of change occurs in different societies and also in the specific consequences change entails. Whatever the exact details, however, there is a widespread pattern for what existed before to continue in some form. It is this that helps explain much of the dense and complex texture of design, and the varied modes of practice under the rubric that confront us today. To ancient crafts and forms that survive and adapt are continually added new competencies and applications. A great deal of confusion in understanding design, therefore, stems from this pattern of historical evolution. What is confusing, however, can also be regarded as a rich and adaptable resource, provided that a framework exists enabling the diversity to be comprehended. A brief outline of the historical development of designing – that is, the practice and activity of creating forms – is therefore necessary.

What is design?