
Weltentwerfen

Eine politische Designtheorie

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To Project the World

Towards a Political Theory of Design

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PROJECTING

1 Design as projection is the opposite of design as subjection.

Design as projection. Design as subjection. Everything that is designed subjects us to its conditions. At the same time, that which is designed projects, because it frees us from a state of subjection, of subordination, of subservience. Design¹ creates freedom, the possibility of actions that were either impossible or inconceivable previously. But in doing so, it also delimits a space of possibilities, creating new restrictive conditions. Everything that is designed simultaneously projects and at the same time subjects. Design is conditioned in fundamental ways by this determinative and excluding antagonism. This dichotomy,² which

¹ There have been numerous and to some extent promising attempts to define the term »design«; it has been used variously throughout history, and the various historical and present-day synonyms and precursors – for example »styling«, »form-giving,« or »applied art« (and in German, the term »Gestaltung«) – have been subject to changes and shifts, all of have resided within the broad field of connotations, demarcated by the term »design« as it is understood today. Since the present volume is not however a history of the concept of design, the following definition of the term will be adopted as the basis for the ensuing discussion: *Design is the methodical – which is to say intentional, deliberate, goal-oriented – shaping of physical and virtual objects, of interior and exterior spaces, of information and of social relationships*. This expanded definition therefore encompasses everything that is referred to in contexts defined more narrowly by the discipline, including production, industrial, graphic, and communication, etc. design, and beyond that architecture, urban planning, as well as landscape architecture, but also the realms of the fine arts and of social as well as artistic activism. Design, then, is understood as a praxis that encompasses the material as well as the immaterial, objects as well as symbolic forms, so that, in a formulation proposed by the architectural theoretician Philip Ursprung, »Art and architecture [...] merge in design« (Ursprung 2012, p. 119).

² The dichotomy referred to here arises from the need for clarity, in full awareness of the fact that in reality, the dividing line is fluid, and that the specific effectivity of design functions along a blurry boundary line between subjection and projection. The dichotomization proposed here serves as a heuristic instrument.

is inherent to design, affects not just design itself, but also the realm of politics. It conditions freedom and unfreedom, power and powerlessness, oppression and resistance. It is the political essence of design.³

1.1 Design is the emergence of the human being from subjection.

Projective design, understood as the counterpart to design as subjection, is the point of departure for a political perspective on design, one that conceives of design as a fundamentally emancipatory act.⁴ A corresponding design theory must be built on models of thought derived from philosophy and the social

³ It could be objected here that many objects are the result of design without being in any way »political.« Take for example a salt shaker, i.e. an everyday object, which embodies »design« in the conventional sense. At first glance, it is devoid of any political dimension. It subjects no one. But when a salt shaker is examined more precisely, it no longer appears as a harmless object, but instead as one that shapes our everyday existence, albeit in small ways. It offers us the freedom of salt our food to our own preference; the user becomes independent of the stipulations of the cook (unless the latter has already salted the food, in which case this freedom is void). At the same time, the salt shaker predetermines how quickly we salt our food; the number and size of the perforations determines how much salt pours onto the plate per shake. Moreover, the salt shaker delimits us from other cultures that salt food. We do not use a little open bowl that shared by those who share our meal, taking a pinch between thumb and index finger, but instead use a covered, hygienic shaker, which not only separates from us from the salt, but also from the other members of the assembled company. The salt shaker, then, is by no means merely a functional object; through design, it generates – or dissolves – relationships between people and between people and things. The salt shaker too is a thoroughly political design object.

⁴ The opposition between »design as projection« and »design as subjection« represents an explicit decision concerning definitions, and one that excludes others. In cultural studies in particular, there have been attempts to define design methodically. Here, the artistic and design practice of shaping objects is not only explored scientifically, but also legitimated scientifically: now, design is characterized – in a way that complements a scientific epistemology – as an autonomous and artistic form of knowledge production.

sciences. Essential in this context are the reflections of the philosophers Martin Heidegger and Vilém Flusser.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)⁵ characterizes the human individual as arriving into the world unasked, as being »thrown« (geworfen) into the world. For Heidegger, this »thrownness« is a fundamental structure of all being. But the human individual is not determined exclusively through by thrownness, but also through the »project« (Entwurf). (In German, Heidegger's terminological constellation of »Wurf« (throw), »Entwurf« (design, projects, conception, outline, plan), and »Entworfensein« (thrownness) renders all of this more intuitively graspable.) In his magnum opus *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)* of 1927, Heidegger writes: »Project is the existential constitution of being in the realm of factual potentiality of being. And, as thrown, *Dasein* is thrown into the mode of being of projecting.« (Heidegger 1986 [1927], p. 141) The human individual is not only brought into the world unasked, but is also involuntarily a projective/creating being. Heidegger continues: »Projecting has nothing to do with being related to a plan thought out, according

⁵ At first glance, the philosophy of Heidegger seems essentially unrelated to design. That his writings are relatively accessible is surely one reason they have not had a significant reception within design discourse. Alongside the concept of the project as formulated in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, other reflections to our relevant for design theory; examples include his distinction between »equipment« and »thing« in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (Heidegger 2012 [1936]), and his discussion of the relatedness of being and dwelling in »Building Dwelling Thinking« (Heidegger 2013 [1951]). A number of design theorists have been strongly influenced by Heidegger. I cannot claim to have fully understood Heidegger and his ontology; I am behaving here instead like a grave robber of theory, helping myself to various theoretical set pieces in the work of Heidegger and other thinkers in order to develop a model of that which I term »the world as design project.«

to which *Dasein* arranges its being, but, as *Dasein*, it has always already projected itself and is, as long as it is, projecting.« (ibid.) Sixty years after the publication of *Being and Time*, Vilém Flusser (1920-1991)⁶ took these fundamental-ontological ideas further. He added an element of political resistance to Heidegger's concept of projection. The human individual, according to Flusser, »...no longer represents the world primarily as something that is given to him, but instead as something that is projected by him, and himself is no longer as subjected to that which is given, but is instead self-creating.« (Flusser 1995, p. 307)

The central element of the process of becoming human, Flusser continues, is projection, the path from subject to project. While the subject (from the Latin *subiectum*, that which is thrown down – a literal equivalent of the German 'unterworfen') is hence subdued or subjected, the project throws/projects or thinks itself forward. Design/projection is hence an act of liberation. And this is moreover the essential core of our humanity. In this spirit, the designer Otl Aicher (1922-1991)⁷ postulated: »and the world can

⁶ In the 1990s, when the computer was first applied to the design disciplines, Flusser was discovered by cultural studies as a media philosopher and futurologist. This circumstance is of interest, since Flusser never pursued an academic career. Born in Prague in 1920, he broke off his university studies in philosophy in 1939 after two semesters, obliged to flee the German occupiers. He spent most of his life in Brazil, where he earned a living in a turbine factory. The focus of his work was media and language, and he was strongly influenced by Heidegger and Hannah Arendt.

⁷ Otl Aicher was a graphic designer who saw himself as a political actor. During the National Socialist era, he evaded military service (initially, he inflicted an injury on himself to avoid participation in the war; later, he deserted), and was a friend of the Scholl siblings during his youth. In the early 1950s, he married Inge Scholl, the sister of the murdered Sophie and Hans Scholl, and founded the Hochschule für Gestaltung

be seen as a design. as a design, that is to say as a product of civilization, as a world made and organized by then. [...] the world in which we live is the world we made. [...] designs make one autonomous, designers are dangerous, dangerous for every sovereign authority. [...] in designing, people come into their own. [...] design is the creation of a world. [...] in design, man takes his own development in hand. for human beings, development is no longer nature, but self-development. [...] in design, man becomes what he is. animals have language and perception as well, but they do not design.« (Aicher 1991b, p. 178 f.)

Design-as-projection, understood as the contrary of design-as-subjection, is the practical realization of enlightenment.⁸ Design in this sense is subversive, dangerous, incendiary. Design in this

in Ulm, among other things. In his hometown of Rotis in the Allgäu, he built a number of houses and founded the »autonomous republic of rotis.« In addition to his activity as a designer, he produced theoretical work, and contributed to the rediscovery of Wittgenstein's architectural oeuvre. He was one of the first designers to appreciate the Austrian philosopher's meanwhile celebrated door handle. Since the text *the world as design* (1991b) makes Aicher a godfather to the reflections presented here, the titles of *The World as Design Project* are set in the *rotis* font he designed.

⁸ »Enlightenment,« according to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), »is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity« (Kant 1784, London 2009, p. 1). Today, this sentence is regarded as a commonplace, and of course, Kant was not referring to design when he wrote it. But are we enlightened today in the Kantian sense? Are we mature, that is to say, do we determine all of the aspects of our lives? Or do we instead submit in many respects, out of complacency, to the economic and cultural conditions of global capitalism and its associated forms of unfreedom? Materialized in that which we commonly refer to as design is our immaturity: in the ways we dress, in the forms of our dwellings, the objects with which we surround ourselves, etc., we allow ourselves to be conditioned by the aesthetics of the capitalist culture industry, succumbing to empty promises. A form of projective design that regards itself as political necessarily opposes this form of voluntary subjection.

sense is liberation. It is the emergence of the human individual from a state of subservience.

1.2 Design has an object

The practice of design in this sense always has an object toward which it refers. Here, the word object has two meanings. The first level of meaning pertains to the objecthood of that which is designed. And even where design remains invisible (Burckhardt 2004 [1980]), since it also includes the shaping of processes, relationships, and situations, we generally associate the concept of design with something material, with an object. But the way in which design has an object refers to something more fundamental: that something confronts us, something we tackle, toward which we adopt a definite stance in order to make the world a better place. Concerning the nature of the object, Flusser writes: »An ›object‹ is what gets in our way, a problem thrown in our path. [...] The world is objective, substantial, problematic, as long as it obstructs.« (Flusser 1993, p. 58) This second level of meaning of the word »object« is also present in etymological terms (from the Latin *obiectum*, that which is thrown).

1.2.1 The object of design consists of conditions.

The object of design, which is to be overcome through design, consists of the conditions of life itself, which every designer seeks to alter through the purposeful shaping of the world. In *The Human Condition*, the philosopher and political theoretician Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) addresses the conditions of human

existence, the *conditio humana*. »In this thing-world,« writes Arendt, »human life is at home, although by its very nature, is homeless in nature.« (Arendt 1958 [1958], p. 9?) The human being lives under conditions created by humanity itself.

»Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life,« Arendt continues, »immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. This is why men, no matter what they do, are always conditioned beings.« (ibid., p. 9)

That which we design is not produced without preconditions. Our lives are governed by circumstances. We do not decide freely, but instead move within a field of standards, values, fixed conditions. The things we create (and in the sense of an expanded conception of design, spaces, relationships, systems as well) are subject to these conditions. They are present in the world into which we are thrown, are given – and are in turn transformed through the designs we oppose to the world projectively.

1.2.2 Design reifies conditions.

Reification means that under the capitalistic relations of production, the human being herself becomes an object: through the purchase of her labor power, her knowledge, her creativity, the products of her labor. She submits to this for the privilege of consuming things, commodities. »A commodity,« writes Karl Marx (1818-1883), »seems at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing« (Marx 1976 [1867], p. 163). But as soon as the product of human labor appears as a commodity, it is transformed »into a thing which transcends sensuousness.«

(ibid.) The supersensible, mystical character of the commodity emerges from the commodity form itself. For the value of a commodity is not determined by its use value or by the labor time necessary to produce it, but is instead an expression of social relations. Now, »social relations between men« assume »for them the fantastic form of a relationship between things« (ibid., p. 170). The result is a reification of social relations. Reification is accompanied by alienation, as the individual becomes estranged from herself, from other people, from her entire lifeworld – and in particular from the products of her labor, which are now commodities. According to the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), people begin to treat themselves and others »like things« (Adorno 1980 [1951], p.46).

The society within which this form of alienation is possible is based on a deception. It appears as though not people themselves, but instead commodities, enter now into social relations. Marx sought to grasp this with the concept of »fetishism.« The commodity is a fetish. And for the human beings who are deceived by the products of their own labor, so that »their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things under their control, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them« (Marx 1968 [1867], pp. 167-68). In a society based on mass consumption, the form of reversal analyzed by Marx, the fetish character of commodities and the associated superelevation of things

produced by human labor, has been perfected by the culture industry.

It is however possible to deploy the term »reification« in such a way that it refers to a reification of conditions that is effected by design. Now, the life conditions within which people find themselves can be understood as products, as design products. They manifest themselves either materially or structurally. Design is in the sense of the term *de-signum* (cf. Flusser 1993, p. 9) leaves open the question: What social, economic, political, cultural conditions underlie the design of things? In these terms, design can be understood as an expression of norms, but also of anxieties and hopes: it reifies conditions. Now, these become vivid, tangible, and begin to exercise a retroactivity on human beings. As a result, at the same time, these conditions themselves become the object of design.

1.2.3 Reification generates conditionality.

That which we produce exercises an influence on the conditions under which we live. The relationship between social conditions and the materiality of design takes the form of these conditionalities. The term conditionality characterizes the connection between things and the world within which they exist. Or to cite Arendt: »...everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence.« (Arendt 2015 [1960], p. 9)

1.2.4 Conditions, reification, and conditionality are interdependent

The things – the »equipment« – we create⁹ and the spaces and places that accommodate them represent the conditionality of our lives (or are at least representatives of these conditions, in and under which we live). An analysis of the underlying interdependency between conditions, reification, and conditionality forms the basis of a political theory of design, for an analysis of designed things (objects, spaces, relationships, etc.), reveals the respective political, cultural, and economic framing conditions.

1.3 Design as projection is opposed to design as subjection. But the boundaries between the two are fluid.

Not every design is projective. On the contrary, Design – as demonstrated by the designer and design theoretician Viktor Papanek (1923-1998) in the book *Design for the Real World*, which appeared in 1971 – is capable of the most pernicious effects, and may oppress rather than liberating. »There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them.

⁹ In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger investigates the character of objects created by human hands. Here, he differentiates between »thing« and »equipment.« While the category »thing« encompasses all »beings,« »equipment« (Zeug) is consciously »created« (erzeugt) by human beings. The objects to which he refers as »equipment« also display »serviceability« and »reliability« as central attributes. The term »equipment« refers to objects of use that wear out, deteriorating into »mere equipment.« They are closer to human beings than other types of objects, for example natural objects, since they were produced by people for specific purposes. Like works of art, they are »created,« yet remain invisible and concealed in their »serviceability«: »The handier a piece of equipment is, the more inconspicuous, [...] the more completely it preserves itself is equipmentality.« (Heidegger, 2002 [1936], pp. 39-40.)

And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today. Industrial design, by concocting the tawdry idiocies hawked by advertisers, comes a close second. [...] Before, [...] if a person liked killing people, he had to become a general, purchase a coal-mine, or else study nuclear physics. Today, industrial design has put murder on a mass production basis.« (Papanek 2009 [1971], p. ix)

Not every design is emancipatory. Design can be other projective or can subjugate. That the boundary between the two is fluid burdens designers with the obligation to strive to come to terms, again and again, with contexts of utilization and with the instrumentalization of their work.

1.3.1 Subjugating design disempowers.

Subjugating design generates objects, spaces, and contexts that do not expand the radius of possible actions of their users – or do so only within a predetermined frame. Subjugating design confirms existing relations of authority and power, manifesting these functionally and aesthetically. In this regard, a modern high-rise building is no different from a Baroque palace complex, nor is a monstrosity distinguishable in its effects from a smartphone. Design serves to glorify a proffered identification in relation to which the human individual is expected to subject herself. Nor can a putatively neutral, functionalist design that pretends to prescribe an apolitical solution to a given problem

evade the immanent linkage between design and the political sphere. For in many instances, a design that is oriented toward problem-solving in fact concerns the existing order – and thereby assumes on a political function, albeit involuntarily.

1.3.1.1 The present-day social system is based on suggestion. In a suggestion society, disempowerment and subjugation occur voluntarily.

In the contemporary Western system, subjugation does not occur primarily through compulsion, but instead voluntarily. As a consequence, it is possible today to diagnose a new type of society: the "suggestion society."¹⁰ Based not on disciplinary

¹⁰ In *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1994 [1975]), the philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) characterizes the manner of functioning of a disciplinary society, which, as the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) demonstrates in his *Postscript on the Societies of Control* (Deleuze 1993), was supplanted later by the control society. In a society of control, the mechanisms of authority are internalized unconsciously by the subject of control, so that external controls are no longer required. But present-day reality is more complex than the one characterized by Deleuze: we know that we are being controlled and manipulated, we have therefore not internalized these control mechanisms, but instead submit to them consciously because we believe that the various forms of control offer us certain advantages and useful service provisions. Just one example: the tracking service of a cell phone, we persuade ourselves, does more than to serve surveillance functions, improving mechanisms of control, but also improves certain services, i.e. that of Google Maps. We persuade ourselves that the smartwatch whose purchase is covered by our health insurance is simply a measure designed to promote our health. We like to believe that the sensors of smart cities merely reduce environmental burdens, making our lives more secure – and that the necessary surveillance functions serve these objectives alone... In the suggestion society, subjects are conscious of control mechanisms. They subjugate themselves to such mechanisms because the latter are regarded as advantageous. Contemporary society is not transparent, as asserted by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han (*1959) in *The Transparency Society* (Han 2015), nor is controlled entirely internalized. Instead, the putative necessity for such controls is internalized in such a way that they are regarded as the foundation for our own opportunities for self-development. The suggestion society can therefore be regarded as a refinement of the society of control, one that does not however renounce the instruments of a disciplinary society.

measures or direct control, it is characterized instead by voluntary action; we need not be compelled toward subjugation, but instead submit willingly to contexts within which we can be kept under surveillance, controlled, and manipulated. This subjection also means a relief from responsibility, it frees us from the burden of decision-making, from the challenges of freedom. This voluntary subjugation is only possible through a form of deception, one that masks collective agreement and existing structures of compulsion while simulating freedom. Supplanting critique, opposition, and resistance is self-deception: the autosuggestion of independence, self-realization and autonomous development.

1.3.1.2 Disempowerment is manifested in the simulation of opportunities for self-development.

The voluntary character of subjugation is based on deception. In consumer culture, disempowerment is not experienced as such, but instead as the availability of experiential opportunities and options for self-development. Surveillance is conceived as a service, subjection as self-realization. Today, autosuggestion consists in inducing us to believe that we are developing ourselves, while the putative opportunities for experience and self-development are in reality predefined from the very beginning, delimited, controlled. We navigate through the suggestion society not unlike the player of a computer game who believes she is making her own decisions, but is in fact only choosing between preprogrammed options. The proffered

»freedom« and »self-development« are ersatz in character; every opportunity for action is *scripted*, inherent in the program's structure. Today, the *condition humaine* is deception and self-delusion.

The dogma of self-development and associated promises such as »everything is allowed,« along with invitations such as »just do it« imply the presence of options that do not exist. The permitted options never transgress the boundaries of the predetermined frame prescribed by the system, which are designed to protect and preserve it; they pretend that everything is possible, that failure is attributable solely to our own individual lack of ability. The suggestion of freedom, of limitless options, then, leads toward profound frustration, to despair that threatens to destroy us unless we are able to see through their its function. In *The Agony of Eros*, Byung-Chul Han writes: »*You can* generates massive compulsion in relation to which the performing subject can essentially break down. This self-generated compulsion appears to him as freedom, so that it cannot be recognized as such. *You can* exerts even more compulsion than *you must*. This autocompulsion is more fatal than external compulsion, since no resistance is possible against oneself. The neoliberal regime conceals its structure of compulsion behind the apparent freedom of the individual, who no longer perceives himself as a subjugated subject, but instead as a self-creating project. Precisely this is its cunning. Whoever fails, furthermore, is guilty, and henceforth must carry this guilt around with him.« (Han 2012a, S.16 f.)

1.3.2 Design as projection is empowering.

These attitudes, which confirm and stabilize the system, are opposed by subversive and emancipatory approaches. The authors and protagonists of a projective design attempt to identify alternatives to the societal status quo and to conceive a better society, one that reorganizes relationships between people and between people and their environment.¹¹ Projective design therefore strives to restore genuine to scope for action but allows users and recipients to shape their own lives. It equips them with technologies, tools, instruments, and symbols for a self-determined life.

1.3.2.1 Projective design criticizes design through design.

Nor however can projective design escape the dilemma that involves design inadvertently preserving the capitalist system (and strengthening the neoliberal regime). That is why every designer must incorporate self-critique into her praxis, which is to say: to critique design using its own resources. Belonging to the praxis of such a »critical design«¹² in the truest sense is not just the design of objects, but of their contexts as well. At a minimum, this means drawing upon the resources of design to

¹¹ Although, according to Aicher, designed constitutes the basic difference between humans and other animals, projective design is not necessarily anthropocentric; it need not serve the interests of human beings exclusively, but may also benefit other animals and the environment as a whole.

¹² The term »critical design« was coined during the 1990s by the London designer duo Anthony Dunne (*1964) and Fiona Raby (*1963). It refers to a conceptual design that seeks to interrogate design and its societal framing conditions through fictionalization and speculative experimentation.

analyze one's own role, one's own involvement in existing relations of power and their political, cultural, and economic systems – and integrating the results of this analysis productively into one's own design praxis.

1.3.2.2 Because design as subjection camouflages itself, design as projection must continually reinvent itself.

Within a capitalism that renews itself perpetually, design as subjection must imitate design as projection, disguising itself as projective and concealing its subjugating character. Projective and subjecting design stand in an indissoluble relation of interdependence, conditioning one another reciprocally.¹³ To the degree that projective design criticizes design as subjection, it contributes to the latter's optimization. For the antagonist of projective design never sleeps, is always alert, the state of constant development. Projective design must therefore reinvent itself ceaselessly. It is subordinate to design a subjection, because the latter compels subjective design to continually transform, improve, develop itself – in the jargon of the market: to engage in

¹³ This interdependency is also expressed in biographical terms. One example is that of the architectural group Coop Himmelblau (later: Coop Himmelb(l)au). At first, the group's members saw themselves as part of the counterculture, and developed a provocative architectural idiom in Vienna during the 1960s and 70s under the motto: »architecture must burn.« To be sure, they have retained this architectural idiom, but it is no longer an expression of the counterculture, but has instead become mainstream. Among the most important buildings realized by Coop Himmelb(l)au alongside the BMW Welt in Munich is the European Central Bank in Frankfurt am Main. What was once a provocative, countercultural gesture has become an emblem of power. This shift of meaning is not an isolated case, but is instead manifest in nearly all countercultural movements of the past 60 years – from the student revolt to the punk movement, and all the way to graffiti art.

perpetual innovation. Projective design to must evolve, think ahead, be inventive.

1.3.3 The field of tension between projection and subjection is present in all areas of design.

The field of tension between design as projection and design as subjection is found in all of the fields where designers are active. A chair can be projective, but also subjugating.¹⁴ The same is true for buildings, landscapes, as well as for the invisible realms of design, which includes the design of social relationships, of economic orders, or of communication technologies. Whether the given result of a design process is projective or subordinating does not however depend upon scale, nor upon the methods utilized, nor upon materiality, but instead on the context within which it is implemented, used, and produced.¹⁵

¹⁴ A throne is subjugating, it demands that those who stand around it acknowledge the preeminence of its possessor, and this motif conditions the design of much furniture designed for sitting: we are familiar with the executive chair, with its tall backrest, and the dining chair with armrests found at the head of the table. A chair can serve to represent power, and is hence subjugating. But a chair can also be projective, an example being the cantilever chair, an icon of modern design. This design dissolves the static seated posture into a dynamic oscillation, into a moment of freedom that calls stable relations into question: a materialized paradigm change that visualizes the way in which design is capable of overturning societal conventions and relations of power. But the relationship between the chair and society is not only conditioned by the design, but also by its utilization; the revolutionary cantilever chair of industrial modernism became the gleaming, chrome and leather status symbol of a postwar bourgeois culture that basked in its own progressiveness.

¹⁵ An exemplary instance of design's dependence upon context is the »Sedia 1« chair, designed by Enzo Mari (*1932) in 1974, and a member of the »autoprogettazione?« furniture series. Prospective users were expected to procure the necessary materials from retailers and construct the chair themselves based on the Mari's instructions. According to Mari's concept, the designer's fee would take the form of a symbolic

1.4 Design is political because it intervenes in the world. This fact requires designers to adopt a political stance.

Many designers do not regard their work as political. But given the field of tension between projection and subjection, design – in contradistinction to the fine arts – is always necessarily political.¹⁶ Design structures the form in which a society

payment of one dollar. Mari's design represents a call for self-empowerment, and is at the same time a well-designed and highly economical item of furniture. Just how many people have actually produced this item of furniture themselves is not known. In the first decade of the 21st century, the finish furniture firm Artek purchased the license for the entire series from Mari, with elaborate presentation events staged at the Milan Furniture Fair in 2010. Now, however, the do-it-yourself kit no longer cost one dollar, but instead 261 Euros. A social project had been transformed into an item of »normal« designer furniture whose price could no longer be justified in relation to the materials employed, but instead through symbolic supercharging pushed via marketing mechanisms. The design experienced another renaissance in 2014, when two Berlin residents launched a design project intended to assist refugees. According to the concept of the Cucula Initiative, refugees were would build furniture, earning a living while at the same time restoring their sense of pride and dignity – and of course generating visibility for their life situations. Among the chairs constructed by the refugees and marketed by Cucula is Enzo Mari's »Sedia 1.« A special edition was produced using driftwood collected in Lampedusa. On the design scene, which regards itself as progressive, this design classic, constructed from the sunken boats of refugees, became a politically correct must-have item of furniture. But is Cucula submitting to contemporary marketing logic – or instead undermining it? The project is particularly interesting at the point where financial and political concerns intersect. Take the licensing issue, for example. Mari granted a license to Cucula for the construction of the »Sedia 1« chairs by refugees. In doing so, he provided the initiative with the means to document, when applying for residency permits, that the refugees would not be taking jobs from workers already living in Germany.

¹⁶ With the term »politics,« I am not referring to the conduct of everyday political affairs, but instead to the fundamental question of the constitution of society and the concrete organization of collective life. This approach could be reproached with being a regression to an idealistic conception of politics. For during a time when politics is – for good reasons – no longer responsible for providing a sense of meaning, but instead only for the administration of everyday life, the search for meaning has been differentiated into other spheres of life. One could go so far as to say that the increasing importance of design is inversely proportional to the loss of significance suffered by political life. Today, design, understood as the shaping of our life world, is a meaning-generating element. And it is precisely at the moment

organizes its collective life. Design is by its very nature interventionist, for it impinges concretely upon object constellations, spaces, relationships. Through her design production, then, every designer positions herself – whether consciously or unconsciously – in relation to the existing social order. It is either confirmed, reinforced, criticized, or undermined – and this can be shown through recourse to the history of the design, as well as to contemporary production.¹⁷ But the political moment is not grounded exclusively in this specific tension, but also in the modes of action of design. Design is political, because it intervenes into the constitution of the world. Whoever design something strives to change the world in which she lives. That is

when a putatively apolitical design is situated in the context of fundamental sociopolitical questions, when the shaping of our lifeworld is not understood in individualistic-hedonistic terms, but instead in terms of collective responsibility, a »reconquest« of the political and expected to occur.

¹⁷ Prominent examples of the political blindness – or flexibility – of many designers are the celebrated architects Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), Walter Gropius (1883-1969), and Le Corbusier (1887-1965). All three made their design skills available to a variety of political ideologies with scandalous degrees of adaptability. After having designed the memorial for Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht at the Zentralfriedhof in Berlin-Friedrichsfelde in 1926, Mies van der Rohe explored options after 1933 that would have allowed him to collaborate with the National Socialists. After his emigration to the United States, he became a cofounder of American postwar modernism, which sought to represent the essence of Western democracy in aesthetic terms. A similar path was taken by Walter Gropius, who remained in Germany until 1938, and initially attempted, like Mies, to cooperate with the National Socialist regime. But it was probably Le Corbusier who demonstrated the highest level of political »flexibility.« In 1927, he participated in a competition for the League of Nations Building in Geneva, while also soliciting commissions from Mussolini. In 1932, he took part in a competition for the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow. And beginning in 1947, he realized the United Nations Headquarters in New York. It is one of the melancholy truths about modernism that many avant-garde artists and designers readily threw themselves into the arms of political systems that propagated the most diverse phantasms of modernization.

why design objects reflect the conditions and the conditionality of collective human life. Design is determined by the political realm, and in turn defines it. This fundamental connection between design and politics is the basis of the political effectivity of design.

1.4.1 Politics is an object of design.

Not only is design fundamentally political, politics itself can become the object of design in quite concrete terms:

- Politicians are design objects because their images, their visual appearances, are shaped according to the guidelines of market research.
- Political programs are design objects, since their contents are scenarized as proposals for identification, just like consumer products. In a »market-compliant democracy,«¹⁸ the political program takes the form of a commodity.
- The design tasks that emerge from political decisions should also regarded as design objects.
- Conversely, political processes are reactions to failed design processes or those whose results generate problems.

¹⁸ The concept of »marktkonforme Demokratie« (market-compliant democracy) was coined by Angela Merkel at a press conference held on November 1, 2011; cf. among others a transcript of her remarks at { <https://www.bundesregierung.de/ContentArchiv/DE/Archiv17/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2011/09/2011-09-01-merkel-coelho.html> } (retrieved in July 2016).

Design and politics are not independent of one another, but instead condition one another. This reciprocal conditionality of design and politics requires designers to adopt a political stance.

1.4.2 A political design theory is defined in relation to sociopolitical questions.

As soon as design is understood as political, then alongside the political attitude, that is to say the individual positioning of the designer in relation to her objects, we also require a political theory of design in order to analyze design activity from a political perspective, making it possible to integrate it into various political contexts. The structure of a political design theory is therefore not defined on the basis of design-immanent themes, but instead in relation to sociopolitical questions that point up the opposition between projection and subjection. In the following, therefore, four categories will be used to structure the praxis of design: survival design, security design, societal design, and self-design.¹⁹ These stand alongside one another on equal

¹⁹ This at first glance reductionist classification of the division of labor was inspired by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The American social psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) is regarded as one of the founders of humanistic psychology. He developed the model of the Hierarchy of Needs during the 1940s and 50s. He began from the assumption that in and of herself, the human individual is »good.« Negativity – that is to say destructiveness, cynicism, violence, etc. – are not fundamental human characteristics, but instead reactions to the non-satisfaction of needs. He represents these needs as a hierarchical pyramid. Its base is formed by »basic physiological needs« (i.e. water, oxygen, nutrition, but also rest, sleep, the avoidance of pain, and sex); the next levels consists of the »need for protection and security,« the »need for love and affection,« the need for »recognition,« and finally, at the apex, the need for »self-realization,« or – depending upon the specific version of the model, which he continually refined – the »need for transcendence.« Today, Maslow's model is regarded as obsolete. Human needs are seen as more complex

terms, enter into relationships with one another, and build upon one another, in order, ultimately, to dissolve into one another.

1.5 There is good and bad design.

The aim of a political design theory is provide orientation in relation to the essential question every designer poses for herself, namely whether the results of the design process are good or bad. Throughout the history of design, there have been numerous attempts to identify criteria for judgments of quality concerning design. The objective was to identify »good form« – and in doing so, to delimit one's own position vis à vis other tendencies within the respective debate on the significance and tasks of design. Design was evaluated either aesthetically or functionally (for example as sustainable or cost-effective), or simply in relation to economic success. For a long time, political and ethical criteria were rejected. An example of such an apolitical perspective of design is exemplified by the »Ten Theses on Design« compiled beginning in the 1980s by the designer Dieter Rams (*1932).²⁰

than Maslow was able to model in his pyramid. As a heuristic instrument that aids my attempt to characterize the contemporary field of activity of design, however, the use of his Hierarchy of Needs appears to me quite useful – particularly since it is still used today in marketing. For a political design theory that opposes a conception of design that is oriented toward economic valorization, it is moreover in intriguingly ambiguous reference.

²⁰ The »Ten Theses on Design« are: »Good design is innovative. I...] Good design makes a product usable. I...] Good design is aesthetic. [...] Good design makes a products comprehensible. [...] Good design is unobtrusive. [...] Good design is honest. [...] Good design is durable. [...] Good design is logical down to the last detail. [...] Good design is environmentally friendly. [...] Good design is as little design as possible.« (2009 [ca. 1987], p. 584 ff.) The phrase »Good design is...,« which recurs in the Ten Theses, is my model for the formulation of the final sentence of the following chapter.

They touch upon sociopolitical questions without going into depth or providing a political context for design objects.

The sociologist Bruno Latour (*1947) defies an attitude that masks the political aspects of design or negates them altogether. In his essay »A Cautious Prometheus?« he argues that the term design »necessarily involves an ethical dimension which is tied into the obvious question of good versus bad design. [...] ...it is as if materiality and morality were finally coalescing. This is of great importance because if you begin to redesign cities, landscapes, natural parks, societies, as well as genes, brains and chips, no designer will be allowed to hide behind the old

Independently of the »Theses,« which he compiled toward the end of his career, Dieter Rams was one of the most important German designers of the latter half of the 20th century. His reputation was based on his activities as chief designer for the Braun firm, a position he held from 1961 to 1995, when he made a substantial contribution to the minimalist appearance of their products. Many of his appliances are regarded as design classics today. There also formed the point of departure for my preoccupation with design – and even contributed to my decision to study at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts (HFBK), the institution where I teach today. Despite my earlier enthusiasm, Rams's designs have meanwhile come to see alien – the reason for this will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this book. The strangeness I experience today in relation to Rams's work is related to its coldness, a quality that may be responsible for the Renaissance of his formal idiom. Rams's designs received renewed attention a few years ago when Jonathan Ive (*1967), the chief designer of Apple, declared that Rams was his model, and when design blogs began to feature comparisons between Rams's historic designs and contemporary products by Apple, in relation to which they betrayed striking formal similarities. But the products of Apple by no means correspond to the Rams's »Ten Theses on Design«. Far from being »truthful,« the design obscures the complexity of their contexts of production and use – thereby shedding new light on the Braun products of the postwar era. It may even be the case that the neutral calm, the reductiveness, the emptying out of meaning so characteristic of the minimalist appliances of Braun may have represented an unconscious instrument that served a strategy of concealment, an aesthetic expression of the myth of the »zero hour.« Once again, the apolitical character of the »Ten Theses on Design« is revealed as representing a political stance.

protection of matters of fact. No designer will be able to claim: ›I am just stating what exists,‹ or ›I am simply drawing the consequences of the laws of nature,‹ or ›am simply reading the bottom line.‹ By expanding design so that it is relevant everywhere, designers take up the mantle of morality as well.« (Latour 2008, pp.5-6)

A political design theory therefore offers criteria for a different evaluated grid. It establishes standards for positive or negative judgments on the basis of ethical and political categories, not aesthetic, functionalist, or economic ones. Projective design is seen as good, subjugating design as bad.

1.6 Good design not does not subjugate, it is projective.

[...]

SURVIVAL DESIGN

2 Survival design is the design of survival.

In order to survive, the human individual shapes – designs – her environment. She does so to resist threats to life, the constant danger of death. She is exposed to this danger for as long as she lives – as a projective/designing being per se, while engaged in projection/design, and when attempting to subjugate others. The forms of survival with which survival design is concerned are both individual and collective, permanent and conditioned situatively. At first glance, survival design is projective in principle – ultimately, it secures survival. But like all design, survival design can be either projective or subjugating, depending upon the context within which it is deployed and the purposes for which it is instrumentalized.

2.1 Survival design addresses the bases of human existence.

Survival is not unconditional. It is conditioned by the availability of the bases of human existence: of air, water, and sustenance. The design of our access to these bases forms the object of survival design. The design of such access is a mirror image of every society, because it indicates which survival chances are granted to which segments of the population.

Air

Nothing seems more self-evidently there and at the same time less material than air. It is ubiquitous, it is ever-present, it exists without boundaries, and is hence a symbol of freedom. Today,

however, clean air is no longer associated with freedom for all. It has become a privilege.²¹ Both clean and polluted air are treated as commodities; clean air can be purchased, exactly like the right to pollute it. The polluting of the air is not simply an unintentional obvious accepted consequence of industrial production and mass consumption, one that can be remedied with air purification technology, but instead a deliberate instrument of subjugation: according to the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (*1947), the deliberate contamination of air was an intrinsic aspect of air design from the very beginning.²² The enhancement of air – which facilitates survival – finds its counterpart in the deliberate – life-threatening or even fatal – degradation of air. The design of air insures survival while simultaneously making it impossible.

Water

Water is the foundation of all life. In all high cultures, the provision of clean water was a central design task – just think of the Roman aqueducts or Arabian irrigation systems. Today as well, water shortages represent a significant challenge, and one that is met using enormous technical and logistical (as well as

²¹ The freedom of air came to an end with modernism, and at the latest in 1960, when the designer, architect, and engineer Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) and the architect Shoji Sadao (*1927) designed a »Dome over Manhattan,« a glazed copula with a diameter of 2 km that was to have covered a section of Manhattan. Within the dome, Fuller explained, the air would have been cleaner than the air outside of it.

²² In »Airquake,« the introduction to the third volume of *Spheres: Plural Spherology*, Sloterdijk explains that not just air conditioning was developed at the start of the 20th century, but also the technical bases for gas warfare – he refers to both as the »conditioning« of air (cf. Sloterdijk 2004, p. 89 ff.).

military) resources. Not only the provision of drinking water is vital to survival: in addition, water always means the possibility of hygiene, or conversely: water shortages or the absence of water often need to hygiene problems, and hence to health risks, including those that threaten survival. In shaping the infrastructure that is necessary for the provision of water and the disposal of wastewater, a central role is accorded to design.

Sustenance

According to the World Food Program of the United Nations, one in eight human beings suffers from hunger today, while at the same time, the wealthy countries produce a surplus of food. In light of a constantly growing world population, questions of the design of sustenance present a radically new challenge – genetic and biotechnologies harbor potential that has been addressed to date by few designers, and for whose evaluation we still for the most part lack meaningful criteria. The preparation and consumption of meals are cultural practices that not only serve to provide the body with energy, but also generate (collective) identity. The shaping of meals is a form of design that points in the direction of social design.

2.2 Survival design is a response to hazards that threaten the bases of life.

Survival design responds to the various forms taken by threats to life, and hence extends all the way to a confrontation with the very bases of life. It is structurally reactive: when a life-

threatening situation emerges, survival design makes instruments available that enable us to respond to it.

Existential threats to life

The human individual strives to survive in an environment that is experienced as hostile. She develops tools and techniques in order to open up new living spaces within these hostile surroundings, **even, in extreme instances, in deserts, high mountains, and frozen landscapes. Through design, she attempts to render the uninhabitable habitable. Clothing and shelter protects her from environments in which she would otherwise be unable to survive. In shaping this environment, she attempts to elude existential dangers, but being expansive by nature, at the same time exposes herself to new dangers. Life itself is life-threatening. On this fundamental and existential level, the human individual is perpetually engaged in survival design. All design is survival design.**

Situative-individual threats to life

Independently of the fundamental and existential dimension of survival, the human individual engenders situations – whether deliberately or through negligence – that threaten the survival of the individual or the group. War and environmental catastrophe are extreme examples. These call for instruments of survival such as bunkers, protective gear, or gas masks. But in everyday life as well, life-threatening situations emerge from which we seek protection by means of devices such as airbags or lifejackets.

These design products are survival tools intended for extreme or emergency situations that are engendered by human action.

Permanent and collective threats to life

When a situative and individual emergency situation expands in space and time, it is transformed into a permanent and collective threat. Alongside the fundamental-existential and the situative-individual levels of survival design, the expansive character of the human drive to shape the environment instigates enduring situations that are life-threatening. Survival design that no longer addresses exceptional situations, but instead a long-lasting process or permanent condition.

In order to cope with such self-created situations as well, human beings develop tools and techniques that make possible survival within them. The hazards and threats emanating from them not only affect the individual, but the collective as well. All of the design projects that are situated in the context of ecological sustainability or the mitigation of climate change, all architecture, all urban planning that deals with resource efficiency, energy conservation, and so forth, can be regarded as forms of such a collective survival design, since they strive to contribute directly to the survival of humanity. Such forms of survival design go beyond the situative, because they transcend individual survival in the here and now in order to address the future survival of the species.

2.3 Survival design is oriented toward deficiency.

The characteristic feature of survival design is that it is always oriented toward deficiencies. Its perspective is not life, but the end of life: death. Such survival design, which opposes deficiency, is imbued with fear. It emerges from the experience of failure, because it is a human trait to exhaust the potentialities of the feasible, all the way to the boundaries of collapse – and even beyond. Deficiencies must be perpetually remedied. This attentiveness to deficiencies corresponds to the notion of the human being as intrinsically deficient, a position advocated by the philosopher, sociologist, and anthropologist Arnold Gehlen (1904-1976). In the human being, Gehlen perceived a deficient being who was »liberated from its instincts,« and which required institutions in order to find its place in the world. From this perspective, social design emerges as the logical consequence of survival design, because societies prescribe orders within which the »deficient human being« is capable of acting.

A different perspective of the finitude of the human species is found in the work of the philosopher and author Günther Anders (1902-1992), who however undertook a shift of emphasis. In the light of the experiences of National Socialism and World War II, he characterized the human being as »obsolete.« Humans have not evolved to cope with the world they have created, with new machinery, rapid production, breakneck technological development, with weapons of mass destruction and their management. The projects and schemes realized by human

beings overwhelm their capacities; they are no longer competent to act in the world they have created. The human individual begins to feel ashamed of his humanity, to feel »obsolete.«

The 2010, Sloterdijk took up the question of the human competence to act within the world we have created. He characterizes design as the »Equipment of Power« (*Das Zeug zur Macht*; Sloterdijk 2010), which is employed by the helpless, overburdened, deficient human being in order to avoid acknowledging her own impotence, and in order to survive. In this context, power means in particular the capacity to survive collectively and individually in a world that is by no means a »comfortable place.« (ibid. p.10). According to Sloterdijk, design is society's attempt to avoid acknowledging its own failure. For this reason, it would be possible to »define design as the simulation of sovereignty: design means that despite everything, one can go on.« (ibid., p.12)

2.4 Survival design can be both protective and subjugating.

Survival design is multilayered; it is directed against the various forms taken by threats to life. It can assume a variety of manifestations, and can be either projective or subjugating.

2.4.1 Survival design is projective when it facilitates or enables individual survival in life-threatening situations.

A design that protects life is projective, because it expands the range of possible action. Survival design also means sustaining a sense of hopefulness, not giving up, but instead offering

opposition to death, to civilizational and natural catastrophes, to social grievances and political crises. It means the will to shape the world into a better place.

2.4.2 Situational survival design is latently subjugating because it normalizes extreme situations.

Survival design helps the human individual to survive in a situation in which she cannot normally survive. But this expansion of the possibilities for survival has a rebound effect when it leads to an unacceptable situation becoming tolerable, so that an undesirable condition becomes stabilized. In the worst-case scenario, survival design entrenches fundamental social and political problems, solidifying existing structures that promote injustice and inequity.²³

2.4.3 Survival design is subjugating when it instrumentalizes crisis situations in order to legitimate the restriction of freedom.

It is subjugating when it exploits life-threatening situations in order to curtail political freedoms in the long-term. In *The Shock Doctrine* (Klein 2007), the Canadian activist and journalist Naomi Klein (*1970) demonstrates with reference to numerous

²³ Analgesics relieve pain – but at the same time make it possible for the individual to continue working despite an existing injury. And when a designer develops a refugee camp, the refugee nonetheless remains displaced. The design of the refugee camp does not rectify the cause of the refugee's flight, it only mitigates her current situation. The more effective the design, the more stable the situation against which it is actually directed. Any design that is conceived as a repair operation will always be confronted with this dilemma.

examples how crises and crisis scenarios are instrumentalized in order to impose political restrictions that would not be implementable in the absence of the danger that is held to be present. It is also conceivable – and this is the origin of numerous conspiracy theories – that crisis situations are precipitated intentionally for this very purpose. A temporary survival measure now becomes a permanent security measure.

The French authors' collective Comité invisible (The Invisible Committee) takes the view that²⁴ »what is new in our epoch is that the apocalyptic has been totally absorbed by capital, and placed in its service.« (The Invisible Committee 2015, p. 36).

According to the collective, the claim that a threat exists and the forecasting of catastrophes have a subjugating function. But »The purpose of prophecy is never to be right about the future, but to act upon the present: to impose a waiting mode, capacity, submission, here and now.« (ibid. p. 36).

2.5 Today, fear is the primary instrument of power.

A survival design that is oriented toward deficiency produces fear. It generates a permanent state of emergency.²⁵ In

²⁴ The Invisible Committee is an anonymous collective from France which became known through the text *The Coming Insurrection*. The Committee's point of departure is the assumption that change in a capitalism is possible only through violence. The group's head is the philosopher Julien Coupat (*1974). He was charged by a French court with committing sabotage against a high-speed train, and spent a number of months in pretrial detention. The French police assume an identity between his life and his work (at the time of his arrest, Coupat lived in a commune not far from the place where the sabotage was carried out).

²⁵ In his multivolume work *Homo sacer*, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben (*1942) addresses the elimination of the individual from society. The segregation of

contemporary society, the catastrophe (financial crisis, climate change, Islamism, etc.), which is to say the life-threatening situation, often serves as a point of departure and engine for society-wide change. Catastrophes and catastrophe scenarios are analyzed, produced, or asserted in order to legitimate social transformation. In the process, a fear-based survival design becomes an instrument for justifying arguments that far from orienting social change toward a desirable future, instead – via references to real or imaginary threats – maintain the status quo. Profit now are not possibilities, but instead inevitabilities. Survival design – that is to say, alternatives to catastrophe – now become instrumentalized by forms of social design that are not discussed collectively as such, but instead proclaimed as necessities. The absence of alternatives is proclaimed and accepted as fact. The crisis, the emergency situation that must be addressed, becomes a justification for measures that interfere with the genuine improvement of life situations. Fear is produced in order to monitor and guide our thoughts and feelings. As a consequence, survival design and its counterpart, permanent collective threat, can be exploited as instruments of authority. At the latest at this point, survival design is transformed into a subjugating security design that reinforces traditional societal structures.

individuals (i.e. for »security reasons,« one instance being the excluded, tortured detainees at Guantanamo, who are deprived of all rights) is held to aid the restoration of security. An »emergency situation« serves as a justification for iniquitous practices (cf. inter alia Agamben 1998).

2.6 The task of design is to oppose a subjugating survival design of permanent crisis with a collective, projective survival design.

A survival design based on fear necessarily subjugates. It limits action and thought rather than opening up new spaces of possibility. The task of projective design is to oppose the constraints putatively imposed by permanent crisis.

A survival design that projects collective values, then, is necessarily transformed into a different form of design – one that addresses questions of social design in order to imagine new forms of collective life. This type of design projects resilient social and spatial structures that prevent dangerous situations from becoming critical, from morphing into emergencies. It designs economic arrangements that resist the growth paradigm. As a transformative design, it develops products and contexts through which these new economic arrangements can be tested and put into practice. In the practical mode, survival design is transformed into self-design, whose object is not the environment, but instead one's own behavioral patterns.

2.6.1 A projective survival design imagines better futures.

If fear is to be overcome, we need positive visions of the future. A projective survival design opposes putative necessity, opposes the pressure of the factual by means of a positively intended »moral fantasy« (Anders 2002 [1956], p. 273) that is oriented not toward deficiency, but is instead fashioned with an eye toward the possible. In this way, survival design not only aids the

situative survival of individuals, but the collective survival of humanity as well.

2.7 Good design aids survival.