

# Designing Things

A Critical Introduction to the  
Culture of Objects

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# INTRODUCTION

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities,” its unit being a single commodity.

Karl Marx, *Capital*

What is a thing? The question is quite old. What remains ever new about it is merely that it must be asked again and again.

Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*

There is an extraordinary lack of academic discussion pertaining to artefacts as objects, despite their pervasive presence as the context for modern life.

Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*

The study of things is also the study of culture. All things—big and small, mundane and extraordinary, simple and complex, expensive and cheap—are essential components of the culture of everyday life. The cities we live in, the buildings we occupy, the spaces we move through, the things we use and the images we gaze upon mediate our experience of the world. It is in the constant company of these things that we go about our daily rituals of work and play. These things shape our world. And a good number of them are products of our own making; they are of human design. Design’s core mission is to fashion things so that we may have meaningful interactions with the world. Meanings are neither inherent properties of the things themselves, nor are they total fabrications of the human mind; they are suspended in the spaces between us and all that is around us. Meanings emerge and change continuously as people and things travel through their lives, constantly bumping into each other.

People and things together create networks or “webs of significance,” as Clifford Geertz calls them. It is in these networks that the cultural meanings of things arise. Scholars in several disciplines including design, anthropology, philosophy, material culture studies, science and technology studies and cultural studies have developed critical theoretical positions in seeking to explain the significance of things in society. *Designing Things: A Critical Introduction to the Culture of Objects* offers insights into the ideological positions and methodologies adopted by these disciplines, and in this process, it attempts to make theoretical interpretations of objects more accessible to readers of design.

The relationship between people and things has endured through 2.5 million years, since the appearance of the first stone arrowheads made by members of the genus *Homo habilis*. This long-lasting bond has been symbiotic, and in order to recognize its significance, let

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us, for a moment, visualize two entirely different, improbable but potentially enlightening scenarios: a world without people and a world without things. In the first scenario, imagine that people have suddenly disappeared, leaving all things behind absolutely intact. Assume, for the second scenario, that all human-made artifacts have vanished leaving us in a world that can only be described as “natural.” Such an exercise is, of course, riddled with the fundamental problem that making clear distinctions among these three entities—humans, natural things and artificial things—is not easy or even possible. However, for a moment, turn a blind eye to such boundary-defying hybrid entities as “frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensor-equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks, psychotropic drugs, whales outfitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesizers, audience analyzers, and so on” (Latour 1993: 49–50). In fact, doing so might actually serve to highlight how closely connected these concepts are.

Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us* (2007) is an example of the first scenario, a book in which he explains how nature, when left to its own devices, starts taking over all things artificial. Bit by bit, and with a determined force, unchecked natural forces start to demolish our products, buildings and entire cities, dismantling them with a slow and bewildering force. “On the day after humans disappear, nature takes over and immediately begins cleaning house—or houses, that is. Cleans them right off the face of the Earth. They all go... After we’re gone, nature’s revenge for our smug, mechanized superiority arrives waterborne” (Weisman 2007: 16). Water rusts metal, rots wood, dissolves chemicals, widens cracks and becomes the conduit for the destruction that unleashes itself on all human creation. Without people to clean, maintain and upgrade our air-conditioners, homes, roads, skyscrapers, bridges, subway systems and nuclear power plants, weeds would start sprouting from every available gap and fissure, and “gradually, the asphalt jungle will give way to a real one” (Weisman 2007: 28).

People and their things serve as a collective barricade, constantly pushing back the forces contained in plant growth, animal communities, weather systems and the ever-present gravitational tug. As shrubs, trees and eventually forests start to repossess all urban, suburban and exurban land, they bring with them wild animals. In the absence of humans, unprotected domesticated animals would quickly disappear, potentially leading to a surge in the populations of a variety of large mammals like elephants. All wilderness areas awkwardly trapped in between urban tracts would creep outwards into land left behind by humans.

However, not everything human-made falls apart. Noble metals like gold and silver used in our jewelry do not corrode and our electronics do not easily crumble; they will endure. So will bronze, an alloy of seemingly interminable durability. Ceramics and glass too possess the resilience to thwart nature’s insistent proclivity for dismantling all it encounters. It is difficult to tell how long all our plastic products—bottles, packaging, bags, etc.—will survive, with or without our presence. We know how long it takes processes of biodegradation and photodegradation to decompose vegetable matter; what is not known is how long it will take to completely demolish plastics. Weisman discovers in his conversations with scientists

that polymers have not been in existence long enough for microbes to develop enzymes with which to break them down. They could last for several thousand years before starting to degrade, but eventually they probably will. Weisman's detailed account of how nature eventually swallows up all human inventions makes it evident that things cannot survive without the continuous guardianship that people provide them. This first scenario proves that the durability of our products is very limited while nature's tenacity is boundless.

Imagine for a moment, the other extreme and our second scenario: a world entirely devoid of human-made things. People would be immediately stripped of their clothes, robbed of their means of transport and left homeless. Life as we know it would cease to exist; all habits of work and leisure that depend on our devices of communication, forms of shelter and systems of transportation would come to a grinding halt. We have designed cocoons (our homes and cars), personal devices (clothing and cell phones) and barriers (walls and fences) to help us manage the physical, social and cultural distance between us and other humans, and between us and nature. When the objects disappear, when the machine is taken out of the garden, will it signal an opportunity for us to fully experience an unrestrained natural world? Will it allow us enjoy what E. O. Wilson calls our biophilia: "the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (Wilson 1984: 1)? Wilson suggests that "people react more quickly and fully to organisms than to machines. They will walk into nature, to explore, hunt, and garden, if given the chance" (Wilson 1984: 116). Does a world without things inspire a pastoral, idyllic image where humans (without any tools) would be seamlessly integrated into the natural ecosystem? Or will we be thrust into a harsh environment where survival would involve fierce struggle and staying on the top of the food chain would be neither guaranteed nor effortless. A reduction in the social, physical and cultural distance between us and the world around us would sharply redefine notions of privacy, ownership and status.

This imagined state of a world without things would not last for too long. Like our ancestors the *Homo habilis* who handcrafted their stone artifacts, tool-less modern humans would quickly begin populating the planet with new things. But in the meanwhile, an objectless world would be eerily quiet without the constant buzzing, whirring and creaking sounds of material friction. Nature's noisy machines rain and thunder, wind and tides will of course persist, but the incessant and often ignored clatter and hum of the engines of modern living would no longer be around. Our senses would have to adjust to sounds, sights, smells and textures that are not of our own making and have existed prior to us. In *Things That Talk*, Lorraine Daston too wonders what a world without things would be like. "It would be not so much an empty world as a blurry, frictionless one: no sharp outlines would separate one part of the uniform plenum from one another; there would be no resistance against which to stub a toe or test the theory or struggle stalwartly. Nor would there be anything to describe, or to explain, remark on, interpret, or complain about—just a kind of porridgy oneness. Without things, we would stop talking. We would become as mute as things are alleged to be" (Daston 2004: 9).

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Both scenarios are improbable. And the goal of imagining them is not to suggest a contrast between the natural and the artificial, or reignite the conversation about the clash between nature and culture, or even suggest that these entities are distinctly different from one another. The purpose of these visualizations is to foreground the interdependence and dialog between people and things. Not only have we been creating, using, modifying and discarding things, but we have also been thinking and writing about them for a long time. Things, in turn, form the very material infrastructure on which our societies are built; they are inseparable from the activities of everyday life. In fact, “a key argument in science and technology studies has been that the nonhuman and the human are co-constitutive—together, constitute the world and each other” (Clarke 2005: 63). Human beings and things together possess *agency*, and they act in conjunction with each other in making the world. This idea is fundamental to the actor-network theory (ANT) developed by Michael Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law in the late 1980s as a social study of technology. According to Law (2003), one of the basic tenets of ANT is that “society, organisations, agents and machines are all effects generated in patterned networks of diverse (not simply human) materials.” All actors in the network (people, things, institutions) possess agency and they are what they are because of the network within which they exist. For Latour, agency refers to the capacity of “making some difference to a state of affairs” (Latour 2005: 53). That *nonhumans possess agency* is possibly one of the more intriguing and unique propositions of ANT. Latour very simply explains how obvious this is. It is human agency that leads us to drive nails into walls, boil water or fetch provisions: actions generally performed with hammers, kettles and baskets. Accomplishing these tasks without these things is just not the same, and therefore he describes things as “*participants* in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration” (Latour 2005: 71). Figuration refers to the form or shape with which actors are endowed. As participants, things do not *cause* or *impose* the action; instead, they engage in a range of actions, some merely supportive or passive and others more vigorously active. In other words, the agency of things could take several forms; they might “authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on” (Latour 2005: 72).

The title of this book, *Designing Things*, has two interpretations. In its more evident sense, *designing things* refers to the primary activity of making, i.e. the process of the design of products, buildings, graphics, interiors, services, systems, etc. Designers (and people in general for that matter) are constantly *designing things*. However, *designing things* can be read one other way. As things themselves have agency, they afford specific kinds of action, they encourage certain types of behavior and they can elicit particular forms of emotions. Therefore, in addition to being designed by us, things in turn design us. We are surrounded, not by an assemblage of passive things, but by a network of *designing things*. Winston Churchill famously said once, “we shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” This astute observation can easily be extended beyond buildings to all things. *Designing Things*, therefore, refers to a *reciprocity of agency* and an ambiguity of design’s locus of action. *People*

*and things configure each other.* The word “configure,” derived from Latin *con* (“together”) and *figurare* (“to shape”), succinctly encapsulates the reciprocal form of the engagement between people and things. Indeed, this relationship directly influences how we produce our social structures and cultural forms. And it is this relationship that design seeks to “civilize” in all that it does.

*Designing Things* inhabits that space of inquiry where multiple academic disciplines overlap. And it does so as much out of joyous choice as out of sheer necessity. The scholarly conversation about things is as vast as it is deep, as diverse in theoretical inspiration as it is singular in purpose and as widely distributed across disciplines as focused in function. This book, in its attempt to nudge design discourse yet closer to the world of theoretical thinking about things, needs to inhabit this common ground of interdisciplinarity. In ecological studies, an “ecotone is the boundary between two natural communities where elements of both as well as transitional species intermingle in heightened richness” (Krall 1994: 4). Ecotones are rich habitats that demonstrate three key properties—a unique interaction between species, stunning biodiversity and organisms adapted to survive in these edge conditions. “To an ecologist, the ‘edge effect’ carries the connotation of complex play of life forces where plant communities, and the creatures they support, intermingle in mosaics or change abruptly” (Krall 1994: 4). This book is situated in a disciplinary ecotone, and hopes to enrich our understanding of things by taking advantage of the “edge effect.” It seeks to build new insights upon the knowledge being developed in a broad range of disciplines, question and expand established points of views and present the seemingly mundane object as a complex network. Indeed, this is a position that material culture studies has adopted as well.

The interstitial positions occupied by material culture studies provide a platform for a critical engagement with materiality for understanding issues facing us such as the fluidity of gender and body/object interfaces, recyclia, biotech, genetic engineering and the Internet—in short, those key materializing and transformative processes that shape new inclusions and exclusions as the critical focus of material culture studies such as new kinds of bodies, forms of ‘nature’ and political subjects. (Buchli 2002: 15)

Material culture studies serves as a vehicle by which to study a variety of systems of cultural production and consumption. This book also occupies the interstitial spaces among disciplines, drawing from several of them to create a mosaic understanding of things and develop new avenues for scholarly inquiry. It assumes that the boundaries circumscribing these disciplines are porous rather than impervious and elastic rather than rigid—conditions essential for a more informed understanding of things.

Behind interdisciplinarity, however, lurks danger. “The term *discipline* signifies the tools, methods, procedures, exempla, concepts, and theories that account coherently for a set of objects or subjects” (Klein 1990: 104). These elements, which define each discipline, become mixed, reappropriated and hybridized in interdisciplinary work. As Klein (1990) notes, in interdisciplinary research, the author carries the “burden of comprehension”,<sup>1</sup> and needs

to demonstrate an understanding of the primary context of the borrowed material. This burden multiplies as more disciplines are engaged, and creates a risk of a discourse scattered in content and style. This book will attempt to describe the primary context where possible, while recognizing that providing concentrated topical detail is neither the objective nor a possibility. Instead, through nine chapters, the book offers analytical perspectives on some of the most ordinary things inspired by the extraordinary vision some of the greatest critical thinkers of our time. Often, the scholarship produced by anthropologists, philosophers and theorists is inaccessible to readers of design. At times, the complexity of their thinking translates into specialized vocabularies and impenetrable writing. For a reader genuinely interested in theoretical examinations of material culture and design but unfamiliar with languages of the multiple disciplines engaged in this conversation, this poses a tremendous hurdle. *Designing Things* attempts to circumvent this obstacle in an effort to bring the worlds of object creation and object critique closer.

The surge in scholarship in material culture also raises the questions of whether things can and should be theorized. Such questions are certainly relevant, and one of the primary tasks of material culture studies (or any discipline, for that matter) is to establish its *raison d'être*, scope of study, objectives, methodologies and theoretical underpinnings. In his essay, *Thing Theory*, Bill Brown asks: “Do we really need anything like thing theory the way we need narrative theory or cultural theory, queer theory or discourse theory? Why not let things alone?” (Brown 2001: 1) The phrase “thing theory” does incite some skepticism. Is this cute alliteration an attempt to convert the corporeal into the ephemeral, the commonplace into the cerebral, the silly into the sublime? Is this a wasted/wasteful effort to try and theorize the trivial? There is a certain peculiarity to the juxtaposition of the word *thing* and the word *theory*; placed together, they exude an uneasy incongruity. They are like strangers who do not seem to have much to say to each other at a swanky party. Brown himself says that thing theory could sound like an oxymoron. But it is clear that critical, theoretical examination of things is a worthwhile study. The ubiquity of things in everyday life, their role in shaping identity, their critical presence in economic systems, their existence in art, their function as markers of history, all are qualities that make them socially and culturally significant. Theorizing things can help us determine the nature of how these processes unfold, and what things mean to people. However, it is also important to recognize that “there is not, and can never be, one ‘correct’ or ‘right’ theoretical position which we may choose to study material forms or to exhaust their potential for informing us about the constitution of culture and society” (Tilley *et al.* 2006: 10). It is therefore critical to draw upon multiple theoretical positions in order to develop a holistic understanding of things and their relationship to people.

Of late, the swelling interest in writing about material culture has led to a series of books that have taken on the analysis of paper clips, chairs, iPods, cars and a host of other everyday products. “Commodities have made a striking resurgence within the academy over the last decade after being relegated for a generation or more to a lower drawer in the

dusty backrooms of economic geography” (Bridge and Smith 2003: 257). This scholarship is distributed across a variety of journals and books in a multitude of disciplines, pushing it beyond easy reach. With some exceptions, this increased academic interest has not necessarily resulted in a better understanding of the cultural meanings of things or the process of their manufacture and disposal. *Designing Things* strives to be an approachable text that provides access to some of this literature not only to design aficionados, but also to curious minds that possess an anthropological interest in all things material.

## DESIGN AND THE CULTURE OF OBJECTS

As the title suggests, this book deals with design and the culture of objects. Subsequent chapters will explore the relationship among the three—design, culture and objects—through a series of thematic concepts. These ideas, when unpacked, reveal that they signify extraordinarily knotty concepts, and their meanings are rooted in networks of relationships. In addition to being under the scrutiny of a range of disciplines, each of these ideas also has entire areas of study devoted to their examination—design has design studies, culture has cultural studies, and objects have material culture studies. These three areas of study are themselves highly interdisciplinary; not only do they tap each other’s scholarship but their purviews exhibit significant overlap as well. In order to develop a better understanding of design and the culture of objects, it is important to locate questions about the topic in the space shared by these three areas of study.

Of the three terms—design, culture and objects—it is culture that has been labeled by multiple accounts as one of the most complex words in the English language (Williams 1976; Eagleton 2000). In *The Idea of Culture*, Eagleton traces the history and evolution of the meaning of culture, and concludes that it is a concept that is at once too broad and too narrow, too imprecise and too specific. “Its anthropological meaning covers everything from hairstyles and drinking habits to how to address your husband’s second cousin, while the aesthetic sense of the word includes Igor Stravinsky but not science fiction” (Eagleton 2000: 32). He explains that science fiction belongs to the arena of popular culture, which “floats ambiguously” somewhere between the aesthetic and the anthropological. All that design produces too flourishes in this space, at times hovering close to the aesthetic (with such artistic examples as original sketches drawn by Charles Eames or Frank Lloyd Wright) and at times close to the anthropological (with such everyday objects as the Oxo GoodGrips potato peeler). Clifford Geertz’s (1973: 5) definition of culture as “webs of significance” within which human beings are suspended aligns itself closely to the anthropological sense, albeit with a semiotic twist to it. He explains these webs as “interworked systems of construable signs” and emphasizes that culture is a context rather than a power (Geertz 1973: 14). And it is within this context that “behaviors, institutions, or processes” can be described. Eagleton (2000: 34) defines culture “loosely” as “the complex of values, customs, beliefs and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group.” He adds, “culture is just everything which is not genetically transmissible” (Eagleton 2000: 34), i.e. all that is socially produced