

# Design Rewritten

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## Abstract

This is a keynote given by Alice Rawsthorn at the Object Subject conference in Canberra on 10 November 2017. In *Design Rewritten*, she explored the role of design writing in her own introduction to design, and how its influence on perceptions of design, and its cultural potency, has evolved over the years.

## Keywords

Design; Design History; Design Writing

I discovered design thanks to someone who wrote about it unusually eloquently and compellingly. It was when I was an art history student at Cambridge University in the late 1970s. The course itself was a disappointment, being rather stuffy with no opportunity to study my principal areas of interest: modern and contemporary art. But the faculty library, which we shared with the architecture department, was fantastic, with an incredible selection of books and subscriptions to cultural journals from all over the world. None of which I'd known of before.

Among them was the Italian architecture magazine *Domus*, which was then edited by the architect and designer, Alessandro Mendini, who I later discovered had co-founded the Radical Design and Global Tools movements in the early 1970s.

His friend and fellow designer, Ettore Sottsass, was *Domus'* art director. Mendini described design as an eclectic, dynamic, richly contextualised discipline, which was at the intersection of art, politics, film, literature, music, fashion, architecture, psychology and style culture. All the things I was obsessed by then, and still am. Thanks to Mendini's writing, and that of the friends he roped in to write for *Domus*, I was introduced to design as a bold, gutsy, ambitious, provocative and intellectually dynamic discipline, which was embedded in every aspect of our lives.

Who wouldn't be seduced by that? Having read up on design and design history as much as I could as a student, I continued to do so in the first half of my career as a journalist for the *Financial Times*, where I wrote about corporate affairs, politics, economics, and worked as a foreign correspondent in Paris. I often spent days off – and occasionally whole weeks of holiday – reading up on design history in the National Art

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Library at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and the Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. When, in 2000, I decided to focus my career by writing about a subject that really fascinated me, I chose design, convinced that I should approach it in Mendini's eclectic spirit.

I was unbelievably lucky to have discovered design through Mendini. Not only was his vision of design exceptional in its ambition and sophistication, design was seldom mentioned – let alone discussed – in 1970s cultural discourse. The unofficial barometer of cultural significance in the United Kingdom at the time was the 1975 book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* written by the Welsh political scientist Raymond Williams. Design did not appear in the original 1975 edition, showing how poorly it was regarded by intellectuals like Williams. Nor was it in the revised edition, published in 1983. Williams added words such as “anarchism”, “anthropology”, “ecology”, “ethnic”, “liberation” and “technology”, but not “design”.

Mendini wasn't entirely alone in writing about design with the same rigour and subtlety as Williams and his circle analysed literature and politics, but he was a rare exception, because few people considered design to merit serious consideration. The dearth of analysis left design prey to muddles and clichés. None of which is surprising, because design is a complex and elusive phenomenon that has meant many different things to different people at different times and in different contexts.

The more meanings design has acquired, the slipperier and more elusive it has become, not least because so many of its newer interpretations sit so oddly with the older ones. The late design historian John Heskett summed up the confusion in the phrase: “design is to design a design to produce a design”. Nonsensical though this sounds, it is grammatically correct. Heskett also compared the difficulty of defining design to doing the same for “love”. It was a brilliant allusion because both words have acquired so many layers of meaning that they can be read very differently in different contexts. Just as “love” can describe anything from tender affection and lifelong devotion, to unbridled lust and destructive obsession, it is possible for “design” to convey a minute technical detail to one person; a million-dollar chair to another; and a life-changing innovation to a third.

But, for me, design has always had one elemental role as an agent of change that can help us to make sense of what is happening, and to turn it to our advantage. Every design exercise sets out to change something, whether it is to transform the lives of millions of people, or to make a marginal difference to one, and it does so systematically. At its best, design can ensure that changes of any type – scientific, technological, cultural, political, economic, environmental or whatever – are interpreted in ways that are positive and empowering, rather than scary, inhibiting or destructive.

There is no doubt that we need design more than ever, as we face changes that are unprecedented in their speed and scale on so many fronts: the deepening environmental and refugee crises; the growing imbalance of power between rich and poor, old and young; the need to identify useful applications for ever more complex and

powerful technologies; and to enable us to express different aspects of our increasingly fluid and nuanced personal identities, in terms of our politics, ethnicity and genders.

Design is not a panacea for any of those “major problems” as *The Economist* calls them, but it can help us to address them intelligently, responsibly and constructively. Yet most people don’t see design like that. They regard it as a superficial medium whose primary functions are as a styling tool, a marketing ploy, and an indulgence for spoilt consumers in wealthy economies. They may even see design as a catalyst for toxic hellholes like this, the notorious [Agbogbloshie e-waste dump](#) in Ghana, where unwanted computers and other digital junk from Western Europe and North America go to die.

Sadly, some design projects were – and still are – guilty as charged, though that’s only part of the picture. But the stereotypes aren’t just irritating for those of us who believe that design has much more to offer, they are also deeply damaging. If the power brokers in politics, business, finance, education and economic development persist in thinking of design as only being useful for, say, producing expensive, unstable chairs or blingy cell phones, it risks being restricted to those roles – and to being overlooked as a solution to major problems like climate change. And there will be no public pressure to challenge the Agbogbloshie Dump. If most people still dismiss design as something that creates fetid hellholes like this, why would they think that it might also help to clear them, to clean them up and to devise less dangerous and destructive ways of disposing of junk by recycling it responsibly? They wouldn’t.

Unfortunately, design writing has contributed to these stereotypes over the years, almost always unintentionally. And I am not just referring to flashy-trashy articles in style magazines and coffee table books, but to some of the most thoughtful examples of design critiques by intelligent, laudably serious writers. If we look back historically, much of the most incisive writing on design has come from either a negative, or distorted, perspective.

One of my favourite early design writers is an exception, the pioneering 19th century industrial designer, Christopher Dresser, whose books and lectures introduced conservative British consumers to his enlightened approach to industrialisation. As intellectually agile as he was technically ingenious, Dresser was passionately committed to modernity and experimentation, and combined extensive knowledge of industrial materials and production processes with a deep respect for – and understanding of – the skills of the people who fabricated his work. He set a great precedent for future writing on design.

Yet even as deft and dedicated a design champion as Dresser was no match for its opponents led by the artist, designer, poet and maker William Morris, the art critic John Ruskin, and their followers in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Morris and Ruskin championed a return to the gentler, supposedly pure values of rural craftsmanship, and demonised design, as they did “dark satanic mills”, child labour exploitation and everything else associated with manufacturing industry.

The cultural tide turned in the early 20th century when Alexander Rodchenko, Liubov Popova and the other pioneers of Constructivism in post-revolutionary Russia championed industrialisation as a means of improving the lives of millions of people. Their message was spread across Europe by the original Constructivists and their converts. In the forefront was another of my design heroes, the Hungarian-born artist, designer and visual theorist, László Moholy-Nagy, who taught at the Bauhaus school of art and design in Germany during the mid-1920s.

It was Moholy-Nagy who infused the Bauhaus with Constructivist fervour and reinvented it as a progressive, technocratic institution with the slogan “Art and Technology: A New Unity”. He even wore factory overalls as his teacher’s uniform at the Bauhaus to symbolise his faith in industry and technology. Moholy-Nagy continued to write intelligently and sensitively about design, after leaving Nazi Germany in the 1930s, first for Britain and then the United States, as did his collaborators, including fellow Hungarian visual theorist Gyorgy Kepes and the British art critic and curator, and convert to modernist design, Herbert Read.

But most of the cultural discourse on design at the time was written by architects, led by Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Hermann Muthesius. Understandably architecture was their primary concern, and given that their principal personal engagement with design was through furniture – mostly chairs – this was the area of design they focused on. (Even though many of those architects delegated most or all of the design of their furniture to colleagues, often to women, as Le Corbusier did to Charlotte Perriand, and Mies to Lilly Reich.)

The same applied to the pioneers of design curation in museums, like the US architect Philip Johnson, who founded the architecture and design department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 1930s, and started its famous design collection. Unwittingly, they too viewed design through the prism of architecture, and skewed cultural discourse on it towards aesthetics and styling.

So did the most incisive post-war cultural critiques of design, written by the French philosophers Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard, and the British architectural historian Reyner Banham. Barthes wrote brilliantly about the beauty of mass-manufactured objects like the 1955 Citroën DS19 saloon, which he dubbed the “*déesse*” in a play on the similarity of its initials “d” and “s” to the French word for goddess. His writing was nuanced, perceptive and sophisticated, yet it also reinforced the idea that design is about appearances.

Reyner Banham was equally witty and incisive in inveighing against the tyranny of furniture design in general and the chair in particular in the phenomenon he called “furniturization” in a 1967 essay for the British political journal *New Society*.

“The area worst blighted by furniturization lies right under the human arse”, he wrote. “Check the area under yours at this moment. The chances are that it is occupied by an object too pompous for the function performed, over-elaborate for the performance actually delivered and uncomfortable anyhow.” Thoughtful and enlightened though his, Barthes’s and Baudrillard’s writing on design was, it was rooted in consumerism, visual

seduction and in deconstructing design's power as a commercial tool, which did nothing to quell the notion, fostered by Morris and fellow Arts and Crafts champions, that design was at best shallow, and at worst damaging.

Nor did the polemics written by design and environmental activists like the Austrian designer Victor Papanek in his 1971 book *Design for the Real World*. Papanek delivered a brutal, but justified assault on the ecological and moral damage caused by sloppy and irresponsible designers, summed up by the opening sentence of the preface to the first edition: "There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a few of them". He went on to accuse the "dangerous breed" of causing mass pollution, mass murder, wanton nonsense and other evils. Despite, or perhaps because of, its ominous tone, *Design for the Real World* is still in print, and is one of the best-selling design books in history. And many of Papanek's doleful warnings have, of course, proved to be correct.

Not all design writers were as cynical and disillusioned as Banham and Papanek. There have always been inspired and inspiring individual writers and design journals, who have focused on design's strengths as well as its weaknesses. Among my favourites are Deborah Allen's analyses of car design for *Industrial Design*, the US magazine in the 1950s. Reyner Banham was a great admirer of her design criticism, as was his friend, the British artist Richard Hamilton, who named his painting "Hers is a lush situation" after a line in Allen's review of a 1955 Buick.

I also love *Typographica*, the 1960s British graphic design journal, edited by Herbert Spencer. He published some wonderful writing though *Typographica's* real forte was fusing words with imagery, as it did in an exposé of the UK's muddle of illegible road signs that triggered a government review of road signage design.

The 1970s was, of course, the decade that Alessandro Mendini came to the fore as the editor of a succession of dazzling radical Italian design magazines: *Casabella*, *Global Tools* and *Domus*. By the time he left *Domus* in the early 1980s, Mendini's mix of design, culture and politics was adopted by the art critic Rosetta Brooks in *ZG*, a post-punk zine that I loved at the time because of its originality, ingenuity and cultural inclusivity.

The US graphic designer and design activist [Sheila Levrant de Bretteville](#) also wrote brilliantly about the cultural politics of design, specifically about its gender politics as a co-founder of The Women's Building in Los Angeles, where she set up the Women's Graphics Centre. While in the 1990s, the British magazine, [Eye](#), emerged as an excellent source of good writing on graphic design.

And the Dutch product designer [Hella Jongerius](#) forged a fascinating collaboration with the design critic and historian [Louise Schouwenberg](#). Hella has always been laudably intellectually ambitious for her work, but is less confident about articulating and contextualising the underlying ideas. Louise has done this for her brilliantly since Hella's career began in the 1990s, and continues to do so.

Important though all of these writers, editors and journals were, they were preaching to the converted, by being read and debated within the design community, as was the cottage industry of academic design journals. The vast majority of people only read about design in the context of interior design magazines or newspaper Home sections – stuffed with property and furniture ads. The few design stories that received mainstream coverage tended to be calamities – like embarrassing corporate logos and wobbly bridges – or the record-breaking prices set by the over-priced, barely functional chairs sold at design-art auctions. Very few newspapers employed specialist design critics, who could have been counted on to lobby for wider, deeper and more nuanced coverage of design. And the economics of publishing meant that most design writers depended on existing media to disseminate their work, thereby restricting themselves to interiors coverage or specialist journals whose readerships were too small to stimulate a broader debate.

All of that changed with Web 3.0 technology, which has transformed design discourse. Like so many other subjects considered too esoteric to justify regular coverage in the mass media, design has benefited immensely from the latter's decline and from the emergence of countless websites, blogs and social media feeds, which are now devoted to interrogating different elements of it. New writers have been able to express their visions of design and to develop distinctive critical voices by writing for their own blogs and those hosted by established media, such as *The Guardian* and *The New Yorker*, both of which publish considerably more design content online than in their printed editions. Many of the old specialist design journals have closed, but some have survived online. Like the most dynamic of the new design blogs, they can command far larger readerships with a broader international reach than their printed predecessors. Also, many of their readers are more engaged with the ideas they encounter online, because they are able to participate in the debate.

Not only has Web 3.0 design media empowered many more people to air their views on design, the most ambitious and sophisticated blogs, like [Disegno](#) and [Design Observer](#), have provided platforms for thoughtful and spirited discussion. Some of the most influential design critics of the print era, including the British graphic design historian and *Eye*'s founding editor, Rick Poyner, now write regularly online, free from the space constraints and visual limitations of printed media. Rick, for example, was initially dubious about blogging, as many established writers were. Then he discovered that it enriched his writing in *Design Observer* and other blogs because of the possibility of animating his writing by placing relevant images alongside the text.

Interestingly, the British art critic, John Berger, did the same – albeit more clumsily – when working on his 1972 book, *Ways of Seeing*. Berger sat beside the graphic designer Richard Hollis, with whom he had worked for many years on *New Society* magazine, while he was laying out the pages. Whenever necessary, Berger revised his text to ensure that the images could be perfectly positioned.

Specialist blogs devoted to specific aspects of design and design culture are thriving. Some have print components, like one of my favourites – the Dutch project [Works That Work](#). It featured reflective and investigative writing on politically charged aspects of vernacular design, though, sadly, *Works That Work* closed in early 2018. One issue was

devoted to design in Bhutan – from the design of national dress and stamps to define the tiny country’s national identity, to the incredible ingenuity of two self-trained vets, who have designed and constructed medical equipment, splints and animal wheelchairs from whatever scrap materials they could find.

Other blogs are geek fodder, such as *Art of the Title*, which deconstructs the design of inspiring film and television title sequences in extreme detail. Or they focus on important strands of design politics, like [Depatriarchise Design](#), a blog founded by the Zürich-based designer, researcher and activist Maya Ober to provide a space to explore feminist and patriarchal issues in design. Neither *Art of the Title*, nor *Depatriarchise Design* could have survived on the old print business model, but like countless other incisive, knowledgeable, funny and provocative blogs, they are very welcome additions to design’s cultural discourse.

Another fertile source of design writers stems from the growing interest in conceptual design and design research in which designers interrogate elements of historic or contemporary design culture, using writing as an important component. Some of my favourite new design writing has come from the graduates of the Contextual Design course run by Louise Schouwenberg at Design Academy Eindhoven – like the Chinese designer [Jing He’s](#) brilliant analysis of the construction of China’s new design identity, and the role of copying in it.

Web 3.0 technology has also transformed design curation by fostering a new genre of curatorial projects, whose principal impact stems from the debates they provoke, rather than their physicality, thereby creating new platforms for design writing. This shift also reflects design’s evolution into an increasingly eclectic and elastic medium, which is as likely to be applied to complex social and political challenges, such as reinventing dysfunctional social services or alleviating the refugee crisis, as to developing new physical phenomena. Design curation required radical changes to address this. A pioneer was [Design for the Other 90%](#), an exhibition on the growing interest in design’s social and political responsibilities that opened at the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York in 2007, a year after the term “Web 3.0” was coined. Curated by Cynthia E. Smith, the exhibition was modest in size, but its theme was so timely and intriguing that it generated a spirited online discussion of the issues raised that continued long after the show had closed.

The online debate was largely conducted independently of the Cooper-Hewitt. Six years later, the Museum of Modern Art in New York launched a strategic response in an experimental project, *Design and Violence*, that used Web 3.0 technology to fuse design curation and writing. Curated by Paola Antonelli, MoMA’s senior curator of architecture and design, and Jamer Hunt, who teaches at Parsons, the New School of Design in New York, [Design and Violence](#) was the museum’s first major exhibition to be presented solely online. Its objective was to explore the changing concept of violence in society by inviting specialists from diverse disciplines to analyse 43 design projects relating to violence, including the AK-47 assault rifle, plastic handcuffs, stiletto heels, a land mine detector and the design template for a 3D-printed gun.

Every week for 18 months, an essay on a new project was posted on the *Design and Violence* website, where it was commented on and critiqued. The essayists included established design critics like Rob Walker of *The New Yorker* and me, but also Gillian Tett of the *Financial Times*, the feminist theorist Camille Paglia, and a US army officer who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. The responses were significantly more profound, polemical and surprising than those elicited by conventional museum exhibitions, especially as the curators were able to make strategic interventions in ongoing discussions. *Design and Violence* proved so successful in its online guise that Antonelli and Hunt organised a series of public debates in spring 2014, and published a printed book of the original posts in 2015. The concept was reinvented in 2016 by the Science Gallery in Dublin with a physical exhibition.

Eclectic, incisive, gutsy, accessible and seemingly endlessly adaptable, *Design and Violence* is already hailed as a landmark for early 21st century design curation. It may also be remembered as a milestone in design discourse as the template for a new wave of curatorial projects that, together with all of the other changes fueled by Web 3.0 technology, will create yet more new opportunities for people to write on design in ever more singular, nuanced and diverse ways. I would love to think that this process will continue, and fervently believe that it will, because the more voices we hear and read on design, the better.

## About the author

[Alice Rawsthorn](#) is an award-winning design critic and the author of critically acclaimed books, including *Design as an Attitude* and *Hello World: Where Design Meets Life*. Her weekly design column for *The New York Times* was syndicated worldwide for over a decade. Alice speaks on design at important global events including TED and the World Economic Forum in Davos. Born in Manchester and based in London, she chairs the boards of trustees at Chisenhale Gallery in London, the contemporary dance group Michael Clark Company and The Hepworth Wakefield in Yorkshire. A founding member of the Writers for Liberty campaign to champion human rights and freedoms, Alice was awarded an OBE for services to design and the arts.