



Design Ethics

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Unless the economic and social impact of design in South Africa is made evident and clearly articulated, debating design ethics will continue to be regarded as a trivial exercise by the general public.

Why do we have moral and ethical codes governing the activities of a profession? Ethical structures enable constructive activity and provide individuals with a sense of certainty about what is expected from them. However, when reviewing perceptions of acceptable behaviour currently held by South Africa's design community, it soon becomes clear that professional ethics are not an isolated set of rules from which no one dare digress. Instead the ethical considerations of designers are a facet of a process which is in constant dialogue with the reality of its execution. Ethical questions are continuously being re-evaluated and discussed by designers and the design community seems to accommodate a wide array of, often opposing, moral viewpoints.

Some of the many issues presently informing the debate in South African design are the following:

- • Stylistic indulgence versus the integrity of product/message
- • Personal morality and the commitment to client requirements
- • The purpose and desirability of design competitions
- • Creative originality and technology
- • Ecological issues
- • Pro bono work

South African relevance

These issues are very much the same as those that are being debated internationally. Does this debate have any relevance for South Africa today? Many of the issues seem indicative of an elitist mentality concerned with the ought's and ought-not's of a first world situation. One is left wondering about the importance of topics like aesthetics and stylistic indulgence in a country such as South Africa with its high level of illiteracy and widespread lack of the most basic necessities in many communities.

Are South African designers fiddling while Rome is burning? I should like to suggest not. In my view, the above mentioned issues are relevant for South Africa, irrespective of prevailing third world circumstances and imposing challenges. I offer two reasons. The first concerns the economic role of design, while the second concerns its aesthetic and social function.

Design's economic role is well documented. Through its contribution to aspects like product differentiation, visual identity and visual communication, design has a pivotal role in a capitalist environment. According to Debra Wine-Smith, senior fellow for the United States Government's Council for Competitiveness: '... design is the definitive factor for consumer selection' (Cullen 1993:21). This view is corroborated by Robert Blaich, former managing director of design for Philips Electronics. He claims that a fierce battle is waged for the competitive edge in today's markets and design represents a 'formidable advantage' which has to be seized (Cullen 1993).

Alan Topalian (1994) confirms that design is recognised as a powerful vehicle for conveying added value and differentiating between products. He stresses that these are both imperatives to profitable survival in an increasingly competitive world.

Design can be of great assistance in the development of successful international and national markets for South Africa, thereby making a substantial contribution to the economy. The ethics debate has a functional role in honing the profession as it attempts to adapt itself to the business and economic requirements of an ever changing world.

However, design should be viewed in a wider context. Katherine McCoy, former co-chair of the Design Department at Cranbrook Academy in the United States, emphasises that design is not just a commodity, but a process with far more than economic implications: 'Design is also a social, cultural and aesthetic force' (Cullen 1993:24).

I was intrigued to find in my research into the ethical implications of aesthetics, that a certain word kept cropping up. The word was 'quality'. American designer and critic Tucker Viemeister (1994) says that although 'design' was predicted to be the buzzword of the 1990s, 'quality' has indeed become that buzzword.

Nirmal Sethia (1994) notes that the designer has been described as the 'human and aesthetic conscience of industry.' He postulates that design therefore offers quality conscious companies several appropriate and important means of addressing enduring as well as emerging social concerns. According to Sethia (1994: 306), design can make quality:

...better attuned to the diversity of cultural sensibilities in our increasingly pluralistic and multi-ethnic society, devise new approaches for meeting the challenges of environmental responsibility, and impart universality to products and services so that they meet the individual needs of the highest possible number, including the handicapped and the aged.

He maintains design can provide more than significant support for many basic quality objectives. It can also add new value dimensions to quality.

In the preface to his book *The Ecology of Commerce*, Paul Huten promotes an interrelational model where qualitative acts on an everyday level impact on each other and lead to the furthering of culture as a whole. He feels that the urge to create beauty is a powerful yet greatly untapped force and that through good design humanity could rid itself of its '... neurotic relationship to absurd acts of destruction' (Viemeister 1994:20).

According to Cullen (1993) design has the ability to communicate ideals and turn principles into substance. By bringing social meaning into the quality process and making improvement to the quality of life its main objective, design can bridge the gap between commerce and culture.

For if we look at the design/quality model as a new way to think about, organise and improve who we are, what we make and what we do, the continuous improvement of a product readily translates into lifelong learning for an individual leading to the ongoing advancement of a civilisation (Cullen 1993:26).

If we view aesthetics as an important and influential entity (which as designers we are bound to do), and accept the quality models, then it follows that design has a potentially powerful social role. The refinement and improvement of design through critical self-evaluation and an ongoing debate about design ethics, are bound to make a meaningful social contribution, irrespective of geographic location.



South African problems

Professional ethics is an attempt to develop a professional conscience. By investigating the moral implications of its actions a profession tries to place itself in a position where there is mutual acceptance between the profession, the culture and the community in which it operates. A high ethical awareness in a profession is deemed to benefit both the profession and society. For example, doctors are trusted because through the Hippocratic Oath they subscribe to a moral code which is condoned by society. An interaction is facilitated between doctor and society in which the doctor can fulfil his aspirations and society has its health protected.

So, if ethical issues are debated in a specific profession, no matter how esoteric these may seem to an outsider, the debate should be seen as an attempt to improve the profession. This can only be to the advantage of society since a profession serves the people. Right? Unfortunately not always.

The problem is this: the actions of the profession in itself must be perceived to be in the interest of the general public, otherwise all attempts at self-reflection are likely to be seen as self-indulgent. When doctors debate euthanasia it is deemed highly relevant because it involves life and man's say over it. However, when designers debate the role of aesthetics or the impact of technology on aesthetics most people do not really see how this affects them. The problem is that although designers see design playing strong economic and social roles, not everybody else does. To many it is still window-dressing or even an activity which they are simply not aware of.

The irony is that design is not actually 'seen'. As Viemeister (1994) claims '... design is an invisible profession'. Good design is not something that is seen to possess an external enhancing effect. Instead, good design becomes an intrinsic part of what it enhances.

For instance, graphic design is central to effective communication and through this is able to contribute to wealth creation and social upliftment. Through its 'invisibility' to many people, however, this centrality is often overlooked. This 'invisibility' is particularly problematic in South Africa with its low standards of visual literacy at all levels of society. In addition to this, there is little understanding by the general public of the role of design and even a lack of knowledge that a profession like graphic design even exists.

A message emerges from all of this. Unless the South African design industry can ensure a greater awareness of design, an acknowledgement of its impact and the advantages it offers, the design ethics debate could well be seen as esoteric, trivial and irrelevant by the rest of society.



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