

[De]signing the Referent: An Act in Three Stories

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean : "*to design*"? In this simple question lies both philological and ontological questions, but perhaps most importantly, it is a question that goes to the heart of the identity of architects and all those disciplines that identify themselves as designers. This also includes the countless number of commercial and media driven producers of information, media propaganda, advertisers, fashion related products and frenetic cyber space moguls. The word design has become a magnet for the multi-ferrous producers of logo-centric currency, where style, signage, logo, and design have become synonymous. The promise of technological advancement, that will produce a better future through this designed merchandise, is a "sign" of our times. Inherent in this promise is an excelleration process that blurs the distinctions between thinking, acting and building. This paper will attempt to re-designate these distinctions, re-situate them in the process of design, and relocate them in the map and territory of language.

The technology of artificial intelligent machines and mass communication presumes to make a promise and as a promise is significant. The word significant in this case is used as a mnemonic device that hopefully will allow the calling up of a prior meaning of the word sign. The Latin root of sign and design is signum (signa), a pointing to a divine presence. When situated in a divinely created universe, a sign appears as a guiding star, a planetary pattern (constellation), or a reoccurring presence that issues a divine promise (rainbow). In fabricated things, signa refers to idols or icons that signify or indicate nothing in an of themselves, but instead call to mind by making visible, a divine order. In the machine turned information age, the *machina* ex deus has recently re-appeared in electronic form as a reoccurring presence, a sign. As designers in a world of currency, this sign seems to offer a promise to facilitate the design process, but it also poses questions regarding the distance between thinking, acting, and making, and at the same time, the distance between direct experience and indirect experience, between desire and making, between word and image,

between map and territory.

In a faltering first attempt to defined the word design, upon opening the canonic lexicon, I found this: design - A plan or scheme conceived in the mind and intended for subsequent execution. (Oxford English Dictionary). This definition, which is synonymous to engineering, only points to an index and not a meaning,so, in an attempt to think rationality, abstraction and divisiveness came to mind as the next act. If we cleave the word into its components: de + sign, an epistemological disjunction appears. However this only points out the sign or the referent in it's commonly interpreted definition and locates the act of referring in a cognitive act using a coupling organic metaphor, that of conception. However, if we re-designate the prefix, de a referent to the removal of, then we obtain an entirely different signification of the word design. Through an intentional act of re-designation consider the following definition: [de]sign - to de-sign, to remove the signifier from the signified, and to reposit its meaning in an act of mediation through the device of means, material and methods. Couched with this re-definition, making re-appears as a significant process. It relocates the emphasis on making as meaningful, de-emphasizes the object and recharges the field of design. With this process in mind, an enigma appeared. The more one questions the definition, the farther removed one becomes from making. The more designing becomes removed from making, the greater the distance, between theory and practice. In other words, the analytical process deposits signs upon signs in the process, of deconstruction, obscuring the original point of departure in a layered labyrinthian matrix.

This enigma prompted a radical turn: a re-turn to Jorge Luis Borges. Or perhaps we have always been captives in the ingenious mirrors and devices of the late Argentine poet. In his gardens, his fictions, the world becomes transparent, but never resistive, never resolved, always full of multiple possibilities and reinterpretation. Here relationships between things and thoughts become meaningful. The whole is glimpsed in the smallest detail. The universe, at once abbreviated and full, complete, seems as if I was writing it, or at least uncovering a universe that was of common origin, for

the first time. Here, I sought solace and attempted to unravel the Aradnial thread of [de]signing the referent. Woven within this paper are three definitions which lead from the finitude of separation (the precision of a line drawn around, signifying the boundaries), to the indefinite distinction between world and maker: an infinity which signifies an undefinable territory.

It is the attempt of this paper to convey an awareness that the act of design is a bridge that both separates and conjoins the maker and the world. The structure of this paper is founded in **Story One** on the work of Borges' *Dreamtigers*. **Story Two** layers Borges' The God's Script with a search into the inter-relationships of life experiences. The ending, **Story Three**, returns the course to architecture through Borges' *New Refutation of Time*.

STORY ONE

Experience, Memory and Desire

In my childhood I was a fervent worshipper of the tiger: not the jaguar, the spotter "tiger" of the Amazonian tangles and the isles of vegetation that float down the Parana, but that striped Asiatic, royal tiger, that can be faced only by a man of war, on a castle atop an elephant. I used to linger endlessly before one of the cages at the zoo; I judged vast encyclopedias and books of natural history by the splendor of their tigers. (I still remember those illustrations: I who cannot rightly recall the brow or the smile of a woman.) Childhood passed away, and the tigers and my passion for them grew old, but still they are in my dreams. At that submerged or chaotic level they keep prevailing. And so, as I sleep, some dream beguiles me, and suddenly I know I am dreaming. Then I think: This is a dream, a pure diversion of my will; and now that I have unlimited power, I am going to cause a tiger.

Oh, incompetence! Never can my dreams engender the wild beast I long for. The tiger indeed appears, but stuffed or flimsy, or with impure variations of shape, or of an implausible size, or all too fleeting, or with a touch of the dog or the bird.

- Jorge Luis Borges *Dreamtigers*

From these words which dispel any sense of a linear and definite world, like archeologists, we should seek to unearth the realm of design from within the sediment of language. The story is only seemingly contained [in a structure] within the structure of the written word. Looking beyond that which is confined in language, we discover a highly composed relationship between the internal realms of memory and desire, and the external world of experience. The story is only seemingly about tigers.

The work begins with looking back: an act of re-creating the tiger that is "worshipped" by the child (presumably Borgreshimself), through the language of the writer's present. Present within the writing are the components of design: the

direct experience at the zoo; the vicarious tigers illustrated and contained in vast encyclopedias; the desire or will to *cause a tiger*; the bindings of memory that both comprise the work itself (by Borges) and the fragments of experience of *tiger*.^{1,2}

Both *external* and *internal* are defined according to that which lies between: the transition, the *bridge*.³ Both of these wor[ld]ds imply a system of ordered relationships at the in-between, the middle landscape, or crossing. They are defined with respect to the body that recedes until it is no longer present at the place and time of transition. That body that, when most vitally present, disappears altogether. One is essentially composed of life experiences which return as so many memories, or fragments, linking the universe with the internal realm of the particular.

Direct Experience:

Direct experience is bodily interaction of the I with the external world, or *site*.⁴ As an analog, I propose the piazza, that place of sensory perception and stimulation. The smell of coffee. The old man in the silk fedora. The loaf of bread: hard crust between your fingers. The volume of space, above the pavers, contained by the rhythm of the walls, filled with the silhouetted moving body of a thousand pigeons. The vendors calling their wares. Borges' tigers at the zoo.

Vicarious Experience:

Indirect experience is interaction of the I, filtered through the vicarious nature of language (*program, theory or description*). As an analog, I offer the library, that vast storehouse of history and knowledge. Words of others are carefully and painstakingly ordered through the abstraction of number. The titles of a hundred million volumes. The names of those who have recorded their pursuit. An etched journey, reclaimed in the act of reading. An unveiling which also shrouds the world under the cloak of language. The tigers caged in illustration.

Memory:

The experience through memory is the internal re-composition of direct and indirect experiences. This is a continuous flux which hierarchically re-combines and re-orders, and in so doing posits meaning. The analog is the museum. Memory, mother of the muses, is not so much preserved as recalled through the dead things deposited, out of their time and place. In the museum, it is our interaction that re-builds the great empires or the world of the artist. In recall, both the illustrations and the cages are re-membered (re-figured).

Desire:

Desire is Borges' "cause," as in: *I am going to cause a tiger*.⁵ It is present both as will and that which brings together the internal dimensions of memory with the external THOU - making present, and hence, tangible, a transitory moment. Making is initiated by desire. Design, as effective desire, is causal, and not merely the catalyst that

provokes but remains outside of the building."

Of course, these categories, like the definition that I seek, provide only false assurances. They call into being a structured world populated with well-ordered and clearly distinct things: in short, a fiction.

I offer the first definition, which, although incomplete, offers a sense of the state of design: 1. [de]sign — a transitional state that exists wholly at the moment of coming into being, making present, visible, or tangible an idea.

STORY TWO

Reticulum and Discovery

Impelled by the fatality of having something to do, of populating time in some way, I tried, in my darkness, to recall all I knew. Endless nights I devoted to recalling the order and the number of the stone-carved serpents or the precise form of a medicinal tree. Gradually, in this way, I subdued the passing years; gradually, in this way, I came into possession of that which was already mine_ I consider that in the human languages there is no proposition that does not imply the entire universe; to say "the tiger" is to say the tigers that begot it, the deer and turtles devoured by it, the grass on which the deer fed, the earth that was mother to the grass, the heaven that gave birth to the earth.

- Jorge Luis Borges *The God's Script*

Design encompasses that incredible event of discovery, a re-discovery of the relationships present interlocking part to part, and part to whole, a re-discovery of the connection between I and **THOU**. The point stressed here is of the web of relationships present that connect the two realms: a reticulum that is discovered through designing.^{7,8,9}

The fragment, when in combination with other parts to compose, or at least, suggest, the whole, contains the entire universe. In the fictions of Borges, such a moment or thing is named the aleph. Meaning, posited by memory, emerges from the ordered relationships of part to whole to part. It is with these parts, fragments of life experience, that we design, that we build.

Meaning is perceived in the world because it is within us. Its origin is through the crossing between I and **THOU** in the reticulum that binds the constellations — that ordered pattern within the world — with an inner matrix.

Returning to the center, to discovery. Discovery occurs through interaction with the external world: through direct and vicarious confrontations that draw the external world into the designer and simultaneously place the designer in the world. A consistency is unveiled as an order to the fragments. There are two places which dis-veil: the act of making and the reciprocal act of questioning. Both of these are active rather than passive disciplines. The weaving of direct making and indirect questioning leaves its trace upon both the designer and the world.¹⁰

Let us imagine a world in which a chair is designed. The designer, approaching the project with the named program,

chair, holds within the flux of memory all previously seen, drawn or imagined chairs as well as a vast catalogue of both related and unrelated memories, which may or may not enter into the act of design. Through the cycle of imagination, model making and drawing, the designer interacts with the external world. In this process, entitled design, the map is in continual flux as we sort out our perception of the territory. Discoveries within the territory include those of means, materials and methods of construction which enable making chair present. This is not a process of translation of idea to thing, an objectification of chair, although it involves passage between the internal and external worlds. Translation depends on two definite states of being, whereas, through design the two merge.

In the thing that has come into being (the chair) is present both the idea (chair) and the temporal/material world. These relationships, both intentional and unintentional are there for discovery and re-view after the thing is present. Questioning the relationships and continuity of thinking must likewise be integral to the act of designing. The map must be made visible in order to pursue, through questioning, the territory. Hence, as designers, we pursue the map in order that the territory be made visible. The map is an inextricable part of design: it both influences design and is indistinguishable from design. The map becomes the territory of design.

In looking back, we perceive that we have returned through projects, drawings and direct experiences, to a place and time not wholly known to us. Like Borges' tiger that is designed, we do not perceive the tiger of our childhood passion, but one "tainted" with the intervening events of life experience. Indeed, the "childhood tiger" never existed outside the composite of our experiences and desire in memory."

Designing is not so simple as de-ciphering the past and re-ciphering it — from re-collection to collection — and yet, the landscape or still life which designers seek to make present is intimately connected with their past experiences and the ache of the unfulfillable.

Only when the fragments of life experience have entered into our very breath and gesture are they ours, for these fragments become inseparable from our very being. It is then that they will rise to the surface, their presence will be inextricably bound, through design, to the external world. In the emergence of the building, we will perceive the referents. The past is traced and re-traced, the fragments discovered and re-discovered, the meaning, hidden is revealed. But in this revelation, in this unveiling, what is covered? (certainly that childhood tiger can never again be recovered.)

The second definition: 2. [de]sign — a highly disciplined ordering that attempts to make tangible a transitory moment in all of its nuances.

STORY THREE

A Slight Return

Let us consider a life in which repetitions are abundant; mine, for example. I never pass Recoleta cemetery without remembering that my father, my grandpar-

ents, and my great-grandparents are buried there, as I shall be; then I remember that I have already remembered that, many times before. I cannot walk down my neighborhood streets in the solitude of night without thinking that night is pleasing to us because, like memory, it erases idle details ... each time I remember fragment 91 of Heraclitus: "You will not go down twice to the same river," I admire his dialectic skill, because the facility with which we accept the first meaning ("The river is different") clandestinely imposes the second one ("I am different") and gives us the illusion of having invented it ... Those tautologies (and others I shall not disclose) are my whole life ... Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that carries me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am that tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am that fire. The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges.

- Jorge Luis Borges *New Refutation of Time*

Borges presents a world of ordered relationships and meanings whose sum total (in flux) composes Borges himself, and yet, Borges is the composer. Siza defines ordering as the bringing together of opposites. (*Poetic Profession* p. 8) The opposites, as Siza states, are not merely placed in juxtaposition, but inter-related, one to the other in a temporal and spatial weaving. Empedocles, likewise, struggles with this same relationship among opposites. Many is not merely the composition of 1+1+1+1+1.

In designing we seemingly begin with the program and the site— however, we perceive this external world of program and site only through that which is within us; a filter that we bring to the site, to the program. We commence with memory and desire. The external conditions or limitations determine the field in which we pursue through design, they do not determine the pursuit. The pursuit is in evolution within us. In other words, whether we make a chair or a building, the issues are the same.

The tools vary due to the field present in which we pursue.

Here, we become bricoleurs (Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*): we must hold onto and be possessed by that which we already have. Direct and indirect experience must be sought and treasured not for any inherent meaning or importance, but rather, for an unrealized potential. These fragments of life experience are carried within us — our interaction with the world of things. As architects, our interaction is through the causal act of design, of making present through the tools at our disposal. The positions of I and THOU can only be understood at the moment of coming into being, through making.

For we begin with fragments and hope to both secretly and publicly embrace them through building, through the re-composition of scattered fragments, into a designed thing or referent.

Perhaps here I must no longer attempt to define design, but rather attempt to clarify its position: 3.[de]sign - design occurs through the pursuit and discovery of the hidden

nature of obvious things.

Having initially lost myself in an intellectual pursuit, I found that I must continually return to the ordinary: **design occurs through the pursuit and discovery of the hidden nature of obvious things.** What is the nature of birth? of light? of a ruler? of a stone in a cemetery? of a paint brush? of a tiger?

NOTES

- ¹ Experience, itself, can be regarded as the composition of these the two realms of interior and exterior. In order to more clearly perceive the multi-faceted nature of experience, I resort to diagramming:
- ² Alfred Schutz, a student of Henri Bergson, in his posthumously published discourse, entitled *Life Forms and Meaning Structure*, a phenomenological study of memory and duration, proposes that there are no deterministically set boundaries between I and THOU. Language itself, defines, separates and conjoins. Memory serves as the active ordering device, positing meaning and filtering experience. As seeing is the faculty of the eyes, so memory is the faculty of the mind. Perception can never be wholly objective, for memory assigns relative importance and meaning at first through naming and later through re-collection: a dynamic and ever-continual flux within the mind. Yet language sets before us seemingly clear delineation, drawing a line around a set whose distinctions become regarded as conventions. With this in our thought, we pursue further through an expansion of the diagram—
- ³ external - situated or lying outside some thing or body. internal: situated or existing within the interior of something or ordered body. (inter- between or among parts.)
- ⁴ Aside: *The transition from the world of the inner I experience to the outer world of the THOU is already executed in memory, image and symbol.*
- Alfred Schutz *Life Forms and Meaning Structure* p. 33 (my emphasis)
- ⁵ Aside: *Our present words for "cause" reflect [two] aspects of the concept of causality. Thus its source, the Latin "causa" is continued in the French "chose" and in the Italian "cosa." While the Latin translates into our "cause," the French and Italian translate into "thing."*
- J.T. Fraser, *Of Time, Passion and Knowledge* p. 106
- ⁶ Aside: The gerund form of to build is intentionally used here, denoting the presence of the action of building (v) within the edifice or construction (n). Continuing, we find that making any thing can become an act of building (v), with the closure offering us a building (gerund). The potency of the presence of the energy of the act of coming into being (endowed with its multi-folds and strata of meanings and potentiality) within the thing itself, is the focus of designing.
- ⁷ *all that which is observed, felt, and enjoyed during the experience of a summer evening, remains closely bound with this experience in its unity - even though only for its duration. That which is remembered differentiates itself into mountain and lake, sun and tree, ringing of the bell and conversation - only for the consciousness which turns back to the experience after it has passed away, and now forms sharply delineated images. Established in retrospect, their simultaneous side-by-side makes the experience, "summer evening," comprehensible*
- Alfred Schutz, *Life Forms and Meaning Structure* p. 31
- ⁸ *Scattered fragments of [life experiences] are preserved in us. We then build with these fragments, creating an intermediate space which is transformed into an image and we invest then with meaning so that each one [of the fragments] signifies something in the light of the others.*
- Alvaro Siza, *Poetic Profession* p. 7

⁹ Siza is proposing a similar web that extends between the individual and the world. In the inter-relationships that compose this reticulum, made present through the action of the designer, is held the universe. The act of designing (or building) is the craft that allows us to cross: an awareness of the meaningful relationship between I and THOU.

¹⁰ It is not coincidentally that I draw from Siza, Borges or Schutz, for they are among the constellation that I find myself within. Indeed, this constellation permits continued pursuit

of position and the meaningful, in short: design. The reticulum, though arguably projected from a singular source (my mind/body — desired and willed into being by myself), is nonetheless valid, for it is that by which the individual is oriented in the world.

¹¹ I perceive my own life experiences in many of Rossi's projects, abandoned, and their ruins haunt me in Siza's built work. My mind searches for the hidden sections of buildings in my own built works and explorations.