

**Stephan Moebius and Sophia Prinz (eds.)**

*Das Design der Gesellschaft: Zur Kultursoziologie des Designs [Society's design. Insights into design from the sociology of culture]*

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It is well known that studies on science and technology pay particular attention to the role played by artifacts in social processes. But this is not an interest exclusive to STS. Nor, as sometimes claimed, is it a theme raised for the first time by Bruno Latour in the gestational phase of actor-network theory. It is instead a topic whose origins date back to the birth of industrial society and its attendant socio-economic analysis, particularly Marxian. It then found fertile terrain especially in semiotics (Barthes, Baudrillard) and the anthropology and sociology of material culture (Douglas, Kopytoff, Miller). More recently, it has appeared with increasing frequency in interdisciplinary studies ranging among technology, design, consumption, and cultural production.

It is therefore not surprising that the book edited by Stephahn Moebius and Sophia Prinz – whose purpose is to lay the bases for treatment of design from the standpoint of the sociology of culture – focuses precisely on this topic within the theoretical framework illustrated by the editors. Whilst the book's title specifically refers to a sociology of design, the introduction furnishes a general scheme for a sociology of objects. This seems to produce a sort of mismatch between the book's title and its content. In fact, not all design is the design of objects, and not all objects are objects of design (at any rate, not all things are artifacts). Designing is a much more complex activity, whose object is a multiform reality. This complexity should be handled by a sociology of design.

Instead, the design that the two editors have in mind is not the activity of design as such. They consider a specific, though important, sector of it: the industrial design of the three-dimensional objects (*Dinge* - things) that populate the world in which we live. It is to this design that they apply the overall thesis of the book: that the world of things and its choreography cannot be reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of the process by which human beings associate with each other. On the contrary, things should be viewed as constitutive elements of practices and subjectivities because they actively give form to body movements, attitudes, sense impressions, and visual perceptions. To paraphrase Bourdieu, they are simultaneously structured structures and structuring structures. According to the authors, only scant reference is made to this idea in contemporary sociological theory.

Whilst to my mind the agency of objects is actually a recurrent, though marginal, theme in some recent sociological theories, strangely

enough the area in which it is almost entirely lacking is that of design studies, design research, and the recent methodological approaches to design. In recent decades, the world of design has discovered 'diffuse creativity': that is, the importance of social networks (rather than the individual's creativity) in determining the outcomes of a design process. The focus is, for example, on participatory design, self-production, or crowdsourcing. Nevertheless, the things, the products, still remain in the background as mere inanimate outputs of complex human processes. Things are not considered to be endowed with agency. I would not rule out that this neglect of the structuring impact of inanimate material on people's lives is due to a sort of guilt complex of contemporary design as it seeks to redeem its 'original sin': that of being born as an instrument which served industrial capitalism to subjugate the masses to the culture of consumption.

Additionally, the theoretical approach entirely centred on the equivalence between design processes and the world of objects is not matched by an equally unitary structure of the contributions collected in the book. They instead range among very different and complementary themes, thus justifying the book's generic title. Architecture takes up the most space in the book, but two articles also deal with communication design. By contrast, no space is given to the most current forms of design, those that go by the names of service design, experience design, design for social innovation, etc.

In this regard, it should be made clear that the book serves a purpose strictly related to the German context, in which the issue of the relationship between the design of objects and social forms has not yet found a recognized ambit of expression and discussion. Moebius and Prinz's intention has therefore been to collect into a single volume contributions (some unpublished, some already published elsewhere) by the principal scholars now seeking, in various respects and in very different ways, to develop a sociology of design in German-speaking countries. The aspect of interest is that, by undertaking this task, the book at the same time furnishes to readers external to the German linguistic space a composite and unitary picture of the debate, the themes, and the research currently ongoing within it. And because the contributions are numerous and well-documented, the book's contents also furnish a detailed account of how the social takes shape through the design activity that (actively or passively) involves material things. The disciplinary backgrounds of the authors – sociologists of culture with a particular interest in design – means that a linking theoretical theme runs through all the contributions. The authors are sensitive to STS approaches, in particular to the omnipresent actor-network theory (but not only this), but they usually frame them within socio-anthropological theories: cultural studies, organizational studies, sociology of culture, cultural anthropology.

The book consists of two main parts. The first part comprises six multidisciplinary essays which, with no claim to consistency, discuss the theo-

retical bases of the topic. The second part of the book instead collects empirical analyses of concrete situations of everyday working and non-working life.

It is difficult to provide an overview of the first part of the book (authors: Karl Hörning, Aida Bosch, Albena Yaneva, Joachim Fischer, Heike Delitz and Gert Selle), and I shall not attempt to do so. However, I would stress that reading the book confirms the difficulty for a contemporary theory of objects to contemplate the two opposed aspects of their social role with consistency and thoroughness. As Aida Bosch also points out in her chapter, objects have a twofold nature. On the one hand, they are semiotic entities: that is, they possess a *segnic*, symbolic dimension. They are (almost) never in and of themselves, but instead refer to something else. In other words, they are dense with meaning. On the other hand, they are also material entities, and as such they incorporate the traces of an existence, an individual biography, and they then interact with human bodies to open up unexpected possibilities of new experiences. As semiotic entities, they ‘speak’ to humans with an apparent personality, but they are ultimately the product of the human capacity to produce meanings. As material entities, they seem inert, but in fact they silently exercise their agency in human and non-human networks. Hence the effective social action of every thing is always the product of the inextricable interweaving between its agency and that of the humans whose experiential domain it inhabits.

The second part of the book is a collection of case studies that show the influence of the sphere of objects on everyday life and social organization. They are grouped according to the different social spaces with which they are concerned. First considered is the private space of everyday life, with particular regard to the home and the car (authors; respectively Christiane Keim and Mareike Clauss). In both cases, the emphasis is on the gender constructs that architecture and design contribute to producing through the action of their respective artifacts. Then several contributions (Claudia Mareis, Hannes Krämer, Guy Julier, Sophia Prinz and Roger Häussling) are devoted to professional life as regards both the designer profession and other professional activities. If some of these contributions – those on design practices and cultures – are merged together, one obtains a first important nucleus of a sociology of design on the production side. In this regard, it should be pointed out that, while the sociology of fashion has since its origins (e.g. in Simmel) jointly considered the two sides of production and consumption, still today the sociology of design tends to divide between two distinct areas, where production is largely the subject of organizational studies and STS, and consumption the subject of cultural studies and sociology of consumption. This division recurs in the book. Finally, a third group of contributions (by Michael Erlhoff, Ann-Lisa Müller, Hanna Steinmetz and Lutz Hieber) address the issue – sociologically highly topical and delicate – of public space. Here the treatment extends to urban spaces, and design is almost

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exclusively thought of as architecture and urban planning. One contribution analyses visual communication in public (urban) space, while the objectual dimension disappears. This is striking, because it highlights a historical shortcoming of design studies compared with the large body of literature that now exists, at global level, on public art.

Overall the book, notwithstanding the inevitable limitations of a collection of unrelated studies, is a rich and important source for the sociology of design, and it makes a stimulating contribution to study on the social role of objects.