

## THE CONCEPT OF THE DESIGN DISCIPLINE

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### **ABSTRACT**

In their previous work, the authors have demonstrated that the discipline of design has been superseded by a condition where conventionally set design disciplines have dissolved.<sup>1 2 3</sup> In this age where design is typified by fluid, evolving patterns of practice that regularly traverse, transcend and transfigure historical disciplinary and conceptual boundaries, the authors have argued that globalization and the proliferation of the digital has resulted in connections that are no longer ‘amid,’ cannot be measured ‘across,’ nor encompass a ‘whole’ system. In short, this ‘disciplinary turn’ has generated an ‘other’ dimension—an alternative disciplinarity.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this reliance on the ‘exhausted’ historic disciplines has become obsolete as the boundaries of our understanding have been superseded by a boundless space/time that we call ‘alterplinary.’<sup>5</sup> The fragmentation of distinct disciplines has shifted creative practice from being ‘discipline-based’ to ‘issue- or project-based.’<sup>6</sup> Consequently, this paper presents a manifesto for the future design discipline that emphasizes disposing carefully of what you know, teaching what you do not know whilst always taking design

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<sup>1</sup> Rodgers, P.A. & Bremner, C. “Alterplinary—‘Alternative Disciplinarity,’ in Future Art and Design Research Pursuits.” *Studies in Material Thinking*, 6 (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Rodgers, P.A. & Bremner, C. “Exhausting Discipline: Undisciplined and Irresponsible Design.” *Architecture and Culture*, 1.1 (2013): pgs. 138-158.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Rodgers, P.A. & Bremner, C. “Alterplinary—‘Alternative Disciplinarity,’ in Future Art and Design Research Pursuits.” *Studies in Material Thinking*, 6 (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Rodgers, P.A. & Bremner, C. “Exhausting Discipline: Undisciplined and Irresponsible Design.” *Architecture and Culture*, 1.1 (2013): pgs. 138-158.

<sup>6</sup> Heppell, S. “RSA Lectures: Stephen Heppell: Learning 2016,” *RSA Lectures*, 30 June, 2006. Online. Available at: <http://www.teachers.tv/video/4957> (Accessed December 22, 2010).

seriously, protecting us from what we want, objecting to sustaining everything, designing without reproach, ensuring that objects are invisible but designed with care and within history whilst exploring design as an *idea* rather than an ideal.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1950s, the adoption and application of the word *design* has been expanding continuously both in type and remit, and now extends from the design of objects and spaces that we use daily to cities, landscapes, nations, cultures, bodies, genes, political systems, and the way we produce food, to the way we travel, build cars and clone sheep.<sup>7</sup> The reach of design has expanded way beyond Ernesto Rogers' description from "...*from the Spoon to the City*" ("...*dalla cucchiaino alla città*")<sup>8</sup> to the way we formulate business and, more recently, think.<sup>9</sup> With accelerated design activity anticipated well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is clear that an increasing number of researchers and practitioners across a diverse range of creative and other disciplines routinely regard their methods as rooted in design practice or are using methods, techniques and approaches that could be considered "*designerly*."<sup>10</sup> It is equally clear that design is expanding its disciplinary, conceptual, theoretical, and methodological frameworks to encompass ever-wider disciplines, activities and practice. As a result, design is either copious and being smeared as a viscous layer over the problems of the world, or what we call design is being stretched into an impermeable film expanding to keep in capital and consumption.

The boundaries of what were once recognized as discrete design disciplines such as product, graphic, textile, and fashion design have been and continue to dissolve.<sup>11</sup> Key amongst these changes is the realization that an indeterminacy of professional boundaries now exists, and fluid patterns of employment within and between traditional design disciplines is commonplace. Moreover, many modern day design pursuits have a core of designerly activity backed by other subject specialist areas such as fine art, engineering, anthropology, computer science and business. The edges between product design and service design, for example, continue to be increasingly fuzzy. Mobile phone companies now offer more than a mere physical artefact (*i.e.* a phone), rather, they now regularly offer users the opportunities to subscribe to their services comprised of music and video downloads, among many others. Similarly, the work of design companies and designers such as Hella Jongerius,<sup>12</sup> Ronan and

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<sup>7</sup> Latour, B. "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (With Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)." In *Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society*, edited by F. Hackne, J. Glynne & V. Minto, pgs. 2-10, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Sudjic, D. *The Language of Things: Understanding the World of Desirable Objects*. New York, NY, USA: W.W. Norton, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Kimbell, L. "Rethinking Design Thinking: Part I." *Design and Culture*, 3.3 (2011): pgs. 285-306.

<sup>10</sup> Cross, N. *Designerly Ways of Knowing*. London, UK: Springer, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Rodgers, P.A. "Design Now." In *Perimeters, Boundaries and Borders*, edited by J. Marshall, pgs. 8-11.

<sup>12</sup> Schouwenberg, L. and Jongerius, H. *Hella Jongerius*. London, UK: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2003.

Erwan Bouroullec,<sup>13</sup> Marti Guixe<sup>14</sup> and IDEO<sup>15</sup> now all regularly transcend historical disciplinary frameworks such as interior design, fine art, product design, and graphic design.

Thus, design today is characterized by fluid, evolving patterns of practice that regularly traverse, transcend and transfigure disciplinary and conceptual boundaries. This mutability means that design research, education, and practice is continually evolving. Tony Dunne, Professor of Interaction Design at the Royal College of Art, London, states: “*New hybrids of design are emerging. People don’t fit in neat categories; they’re a mixture of artists, engineers, designers, thinkers.*”<sup>16</sup>

This paper posits that the terrain of design practice, education, and research, and its subsequent points of inquiry, are continuing to shift and extend well beyond the boundaries of the (single) discipline. That is, the discipline that was once recognized and acknowledged as design, which was born of the split of idea from manufacture, now has little to do with manufacture and a single idea. Now the idea of design includes multiple disciplinary perspectives (*i.e.* multidisciplinary) to cross-disciplinary pursuits, to the get-together of interdisciplinarity to the bricolage of transdisciplinarity and now beyond—to alter-disciplinarity, where globalization and the explosion of digital possibilities has resulted in connections that are no longer ‘in the middle of...,’ cannot be measured ‘across,’ nor encompass an ‘entire system.’ As such, the digital has generated an ‘other’ dimension, so we might now need to consider ‘alter-disciplinarity’ or ‘undisciplinarity’ as the most effective approach in the research required for a future of design.

### **AN ALTERNATIVE DISCIPLINARY (‘ALTERPLINARY’) FUTURE MANIFESTO**

As a way forward for the discipline of design, the authors propose an ‘alterplinary’ manifesto (a portmanteau of ‘alternative’ and ‘disciplinary’). Alterplinary is the condition contemporary design finds itself in.<sup>17</sup> The fluid, evolving muddle of practice that regularly cross, exceed and alter historical disciplinary and conceptual boundaries has resulted in research, education, and practice that is constantly shifting, creating, contesting and negotiating new terrains of opportunities and re-shaping the boundaries of design. This “other” dimension<sup>18</sup> or, as we propose, an “alternative disciplinarity”—an “alterplinary” that does not rely on historic disciplines of design as the boundaries of our understanding has been superseded. The digital has modified the models of design thought and action,

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<sup>13</sup> Bouroullec, R. & Bouroullec, E. *Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec*. London, UK: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2003.

<sup>14</sup> van Hinte, E., ed. *1:1 Marti Guixe*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: 010 Publishers, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Myerson, J. *IDEO: Masters of Innovation*. London, UK: Laurence King Publishing, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> West, D. “A New Generation.” *ICON*, 43 (2007): pgs. 56-64.

<sup>17</sup> Rodgers, P.A. & Bremner, C. “Alterplinary—‘Alternative Disciplinarity,’ in Future Art and Design Research Pursuits.” *Studies in Material Thinking*, 6 (2011).

<sup>18</sup> Bourriaud, N. *Altermodern*. London, UK: Tate Publishing, 2009.