118 Theories of Design[ing]

Edited by
Paul A. Rodgers
University of Strathclyde, UK
Craig Bremner
Charles Sturt University, Australia

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Contents

118 Theories

About the Authors 13
Foreword 17
Rachel Cooper

Introduction 21
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

118 Theories of Design[ing] 31
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#01 A Luxurious Theory of Design[ing] 47
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#02 A Duplicate Theory of Design[ing] 49
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#03 An Affordable Theory of Design[ing] 51
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#04 A Possible Theory of Design[ing] 53
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#05 A Disruptive Theory of Design[ing] 55
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#06 An Undisciplined Theory of Design[ing] 57
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#07 A Future Theory of Design[ing] 59
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#08 A Cheap Theory of Design[ing] 61
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#09 An Imperfect Theory of Design[ing] 63
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#10 A Humble Theory of Design[ing] 65
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#11 A Derived Theory of Design[ing] 67
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#12 A Cosmological Theory of Design[ing] 69
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner
#13 An Ultimate Theory of Design[ing] 71
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#14 A Utopian Theory of Design[ing] 73
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#15 A Rural Theory of Design[ing] 75
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#16 A Romantic Theory of Design[ing] 77
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#17 A Radical Theory of Design[ing] 79
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#18 A Transitive Theory of Design[ing] 81
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#19 An Unknown Theory of Design[ing] 83
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#20 An Automated Theory of Design[ing] 85
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#21 A Repairable Theory of Design[ing] 87
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#22 A Business Theory of Design[ing] 89
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#23 A Responsive Theory of Design[ing] 91
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#24 A Sharing Theory of Design[ing] 93
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#25 A Climatic Theory of Design[ing] 95
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

#26 A Misfit Theory of Design[ing] 97
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#27 An Anonymous Theory of Design[ing] 99
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#28 A Comfortable Theory of Design[ing] 101
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#29 A Paradoxical Theory of Design[ing] 103
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

#30 A Matriarchal Theory of Design[ing] 105
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>A Pornographic Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Craig Bremner &amp; Paul Rodgers</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>A Curious Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Constantin Boym</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>A Learning Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Maya Dvash</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>A Theoretical Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Chiara Alessi</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>A Practical Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Chiara Alessi</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Against a Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Chiara Alessi</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>A Data Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Will Holman</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>A Justified Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Clive Dilnot</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>A Mature Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Clive Dilnot</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>A Political Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Clive Dilnot</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>A Circumstantial Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Clive Dilnot</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>A Power Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Marco Petroni</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>An Educational Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Marco Petroni</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>An Evolutionary Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Mark Roxburgh</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>An Uncertain Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Mark Roxburgh</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>A Pessimistic Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Mark Roxburgh</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>A Thoughtless Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Mark Roxburgh</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>An Anthropocentric Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Mark Roxburgh</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#67</td>
<td>An Anecdotal Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Mark Roxburgh</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#68</td>
<td>A Jugaad Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Saurabh Tewari</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#69</td>
<td>A Gandhian Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Saurabh Tewari</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#70</td>
<td>A Rasa Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Saurabh Tewari</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#71</td>
<td>A Pluralistically Confusing Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Paul Rodgers &amp; Craig Bremner</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#72</td>
<td>An Anti-Design Thinking Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Jonathan Ventura &amp; Dina Shahar</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#73</td>
<td>A Bipolar Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Jonathan Ventura &amp; Dina Shahar</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#74</td>
<td>A Proud Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Jonathan Ventura &amp; Dina Shahar</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#75</td>
<td>A Studio-Based Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Jonathan Ventura &amp; Dina Shahar</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#76</td>
<td>An Inclusive Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Jonathan Ventura &amp; Dina Shahar</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#77</td>
<td>An Inflation of Design Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Jonathan Ventura &amp; Dina Shahar</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#78</td>
<td>An Idealist Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Jonathan Ventura &amp; Dina Shahar</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#79</td>
<td>An Irrelevant Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Joyce Yee</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#80</td>
<td>An Everything and Nothing Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Mashal Khan</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#81</td>
<td>An Immersive Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>James Fathers</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#82</td>
<td>A Failing Forward Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>James Fathers</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#83</td>
<td>A Tuning Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Heather Wiltse</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#84</td>
<td>A Ludic Theory of Design[ing]</td>
<td>Emmanuel Tsekleves</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Delfina Fantini van Ditmar

Delfina Fantini van Ditmar

Danièle Hromek (Budawang/Yuin) & Jacqueline Gothe

Nelly Ben Hayoun

Nelly Ben Hayoun

Arturo Escobar

Arturo Escobar

Arturo Escobar

Arturo Escobar

Arturo Escobar

Alfredo Gutiérrez-Borrero

Alfredo Gutiérrez-Borrero

Alfredo Gutiérrez-Borrero

Elaine Igoe

Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers

Acknowledgements
Contributor Biographies
Index
About the Authors

Paul Rodgers is Professor of Design in the Department of Design, Manufacturing and Engineering Management (DMEM) at the University of Strathclyde, UK. He is also the Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellow for Design in the UK (2017 - 2020). He is a co-founder of the Design Disruption Group, with Giovanni Innella, Freddie Yauner and Andy Tennant, who strive for positive change in health and social care and elsewhere.

Craig Bremner is Professor of Design at Charles Sturt University, Australia. His research deals with developing methods to discover and to value why ‘not-knowing’ is an essential beginning point of design practice.

Paul is from Glasgow, Scotland, and Craig is from Sydney, Australia. We met at Northumbria University where, on the same day in November 2009, we started working for the School of Design. In the new, large open-plan office in the new, large Design building, we were allocated the last two vacant seats, side by side, in the farthest corner of the office. Even though Craig had worked in Glasgow for several years and Paul had contemplated a very good job offer in Sydney, we hadn’t met until this moment. And a bit like schoolboys seated together randomly in a very traditional Design School, we quickly discovered we had a very well informed, but mutinous, take on Design.

With that shared knowledge and attitude, we began our collaboration with a paper for a conference on the PhD in Design, where we urged the candidate to be undisciplined and irresponsible. Soon after, we wrote our first Charter - “Design School: Undisciplined and Irresponsible” - which we have performed several times at conferences, often by invitation. To us, Design is now so affected that sometimes we cannot resist writing a response to calls that simply invite mutiny. More often we send each other ideas or challenges to fracture the commonplace Design promises. When an idea takes hold, we write and then search for a publisher. We get a bit peeved when what we write is rejected by orthodox reviewers who want affirmation, not critique. Despite this reaction, everything we write finds its way into publication. We also write in relay from different countries and
time zones - one writes until we have had enough and sends it to the other
and so on - which means that often one works while the other one sleeps.
If the morning email has an attachment, then we have to do something.
If not, we take it easy. Working together this way appears to us to be
inexhaustible and has produced a lot of publications over the years (see the
list below).

More recently, we have embarked on a series of international workshops
that focus on the relationship between the act of Design and the gesture of
Care. Something that is very dear to us. At the first of these workshops, we
produced our second Charter - “The Lancaster Care Charter” - a format we
like. Our main challenge is to always remain challenging.

Books
Design School: After Boundaries and Disciplines
Design School: The Future of the Project
Does Design Care…?! Head-to-Head Debates
An Illustrated A to Z for the Design of Care
Does Design Care…? An International Workshop of Design Thought and
Action

Charters
The Lancaster Care Charter
Design School: Undisciplined and Irresponsible

Book Chapters
The Design of Nothing: A Working Philosophy

Journal Papers
A is for Anthropocene: An A–Z of Design Ecology
Paradoxes in Design Thinking
The Concept of the Design Discipline
An A to Z of Contemporary Design
Exhausting Discipline: Undisciplined and Irresponsible Design
Design Without Discipline
Alterplinarity - “Alternative Disciplinarity
Conference Papers
Design School: Undisciplined and Irresponsible
Design School: Design Education in the Age of Digital Capital
Alterplinaritity: The Undisciplined Doctorate and the Irresponsible Candidate
Foreword

Rachel Cooper

Paul Rodgers and Craig Bremner will explain that their collaboration and writing in design is led by rejecting orthodoxy. They write together to present “ideas or challenges to fracture the commonplace that Design routinely promises”. So, one might ask why a book of 118 Theories of Design(ing)? As both a practising designer and now a design academic, I have always held a certain antipathy towards theory and theoreticians. And, to some extent, like the author and commentator Will Self (2019) have been “Against Theory”, because in his words theories (especially in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences) are “…fences of impenetrable prose designed to keep people out…” Actually, building on what Max Weber (1978) described as social closure and the tendency of groups to restrict entry to outsiders by building barriers, Design is not (should not) be a profession or a discipline built on that premise.

This is not a book designed to keep people out, nor one which aims to build a grand theory upon which we can predict the future, such as Charles Darwin’s Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection or Albert Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity. The basis for this work is that “…all design practice (designing) is embedded in discourse” and thus, these 118 Theories of Design(ing) are, in effect, a proposition, a challenge to orthodoxy. The first challenge is that the contributions are not long evidence-based arguments set up in an abstract language theory. They are short, philosophical, sometimes flippant, argumentative and challenging statements. 118 Theories of Design(ing) is written not only by Paul Rodgers and Craig Bremner, but by many contemporaries working in design that they have happened upon during this compilation journey.

The second challenge is that, unlike science, where theories are created to explain the past or the present and predict the future, the approach to theories of design(ing) taken here, is one that helps us to contest the future, and our fixation on designing the possible and to consider how we might give form to the impossible. Here as Paul Rodgers and Craig Bremner
state: “…theory becomes the de facto critique of practice…”, and therefore theory here is the beginning and not the end.

On this basis, if we consider one of the entries - #92 A Scientific Theory of Design[ing] in which Peter Lloyd Jones states that “…if design exists in the future, then neither the current spaces used to focus it nor the names used to frame it currently exist either. By way of extension, if we accept that design is a nameless, non-discipline that exists in the future within an imagined, but currently unknowable space, where it is made real, then it is plausible to speculate upon a theory of design that is boundless and pre-disciplinary.” Perhaps so and indeed we are presented with the beginning not the end, but with 118 Theories of Design(ing) to be used to spread the imaginary of design(ing) and enable the boundless, unrelenting combination of theory and practice to work with confidence in the unknowable space that is the future.

As I write this foreword, we are in week four of the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. Never in my lifetime has there been such a drastic social and economic event. Most designers working today have not experienced an event that has such local and global impact; community connection, but increased poverty, lower energy emissions, improved climate but smaller economies. We are undergoing a global reset, corporate and individual reflection on how to survive, what is survival and what it means to be human. Tomorrow, next month, next year are unknowns. For many, we hope we don’t go back to the ‘past normal’, but we find a ‘new normal’ or an ‘improved normal’ for the sake of the planet and it’s inhabitants. Reflection, observation, discourse, critique, challenging everything and taking action is still the baseline for design(ing). Let’s not use the theories here “…as a hose to water the scholarly allotment…” (Self, 2019) but to design the impossible and the unthinkable to create a better world post-Coronavirus.

References
Introduction

Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

“The time of theory is today.” Slavoj Žižek

If, according to the French poet Paul Valéry, a philosophy should be portable, then through this book, we illustrate how a theory should be palpable - perceptible to the senses but impractical to systemization. However, we did apply a system to its composition. Each theory is around 140 words (more or less) and that was a recoil from our initial challenge of 140 characters - the initial length of a tweet; once a benign and sweet description of birdsong but now so toxic we felt it was unseemly. We might give the impression we have also exchanged chirping for carping, but so little of what is ‘in theory’ possible is made actual by design that clearly, something is missing. This book feels the loss of the dream of design and compensates by making a contribution to the sizable account of what is missing.

Foucault has an interesting notion about the writing of books. He says “I don’t write a book so that it will be the final word; I write a book so that other books are possible, not necessarily written by me.” (O’Farrell, 2005: 9). Paraphrasing Foucault, we might be tempted to claim that the aim of this book is to once again make possible the future scenarios so essential for the existence of design(ing). But we have also written this book to make clear we are not concerned with the future nor the scenario, but the possibility of the possible – that design is possible. This book isn’t entirely written by us. We have assembled it to also make possible an obsolete meaning of theory; to illustrate a mental view of design(ing); to expand the ‘mental space’ or more fashionably to spread the ‘imaginary’ of design(ing).

The concepts, insights and arguments behind 118 Theories of Design[ing]

Why do we need theory? Where do theories come from? Is the parable “…design theorists [as opposed to design practitioners] are those that cannot design” justified? Are the only design theories worthy of consideration those that are rooted in practice? What can one hope to get from design theory? These questions and others are laid out in Gui Bonsiepe’s wonderful book
“Interface – An Approach to Design”. We cannot, of course, expect there to be a single clear answer to these questions.

Bonsiepe, however, articulates one solid argument in favour of design theory. That is, that all design practice (designing) is embedded in discourse. For Bonsiepe, theory and practice have always been closely interlinked. Moreover, design discourse exists amongst universes of linguistic variations that are all part of an indispensable part of practice. A world of design that focuses solely on practice and neglects theory endangers the act of designing to the shadows, “…which sharply contradicts the cultural and economic importance of design as a central domain of Modernity.” (Bonsiepe, 1999: 22)

We contend that design theory is important to the global culture of design but given its relative disregard, the concept of this book is to give theory a chance. Like the histories of design, design(ing) doesn’t seem to see much future in the past, and theories (or speculations) don’t seem to have much currency even while design(ing) seems continually intoxicated with possible futures. In this book we show how design(ing) is constantly rubbing against theories (and vice versa) because for every possible future there is a future impossible – for the irresistible promise of what-might-become there is increasingly the paradox of what-might-not-become.

When Terry Eagleton (2018) states in typically enigmatic style “…the only image of the future is the failure of the present” he exposes an inconsistency in design. A design fundamental has always been its ability to discern between the possible (what-might-become) and the actual (what-might-not-become). Design is nourished on the belief that almost anything is possible. But the infinite scope of the possible is limited only by the materialisation of the actual. Because of its addiction to the infinitely possible, the problem for design is almost anything is possible except the actual. This problem exposes a tension between theory and practice that seems to lie in wanting to comprehend a paradox that has vexed both (but mostly practice); namely, resolving the difference between what design does and what design only dreams of doing. This paradox can only find resolution in texts that are mostly disparagingly labelled theory.
The difference between a desirable and an actual state of affairs adds another dimension to theory; that of critique where the tension between theory and practice takes on a new complexion. In the absence of a platform of critique of design, theory becomes the \textit{de facto} critique of practice. Under the banner of critique theory thus becomes a beginning, not an end. In this scenario theory functions so you can read the operating instructions.

If design is about a possible future (or future possible) does theory come before or after all the attempts by design at putting this possibility into practice – i.e. is theory a history or a speculation? By definition theory is a speculation that habit tells us is derived from contemplating the world-as-found. But Flusser (1988: 17) maintains that “...\textit{theory may be understood not as the contemplation of form but of the shaping of it.}” In that sense, design theory is not knowledge gained from the act of designing what-might-become. Neither is theory a service to practice providing insights into designing. Following Flusser’s train of thought and contrary to the habitual use of theory as a way of explaining why the world looks like it looks (Foucault’s “what do does”), theory is a projection giving shape to the world. Flusser’s astute inversion of the role of theory is of critical importance for designing because having exceeded the carry capacity of the world ‘what-might-become’ has become ‘what-might-not-become’. Design is having to give form to the impossible – which for design is paradoxical (Rodgers, Innella and Bremner, 2017).

\textbf{Origins}

The word theory has its roots in the late 16th-century Greek term \textit{theoria} meaning ‘contemplation’ or ‘speculation’ – two words that frequently feature in contemporary design discourse. Theory, the dictionary tells us, is “\textit{a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something}” (e.g. Darwin’s theory of evolution). In this book of 118 theories of design[ing], however, we do not seek to explain anything. Rather we ask the reader to read the 118 theories of design[ing], reflect upon them and question everything...

We chose to write our theories using a limited word count in order to solicit a large number of theories, all of which give the reader ample room to explore the ideas, source their genesis, and expand them as seems to fit the thoughts and actions of design(ing).
Its engagement with or implications for practice and thought
The basis for a theory is the spectacle, meaning both a public show and to look, but if we accept the common notion of theory is ‘to speculate’ we also have to accept that ‘to speculate’ is also to play with financial risks for profit. There is then one implication for theories of design(ing) – dealing with the results of practice risking the carrying capacity of the planet with unnecessary stuff and unfulfilling services while chasing profit. In this book, we do not take a position on speculation but we position speculation as an everyday element in all design thought and action.

A sense of the substantive or theoretical issues that might be engaged
The belief that design comes from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that design is going somewhere (e.g. what design can do). Our view of design in this book reflects the various authors’ views of society. And as everyone now uses the same interfaces resulting in the blurring of disciplines, the theories in this book aim to re-focus our sights on the lost subject of design(ing). Each theory can be read individually and/or randomly, and now all theories have further reading resources that we have listed. Read as a whole the substantive contribution of the book is a restored picture of why design(ing) looks like it looks. Having surveyed this restored picture, it is then impossible for the reader to avoid asking what needs to be done? And we imagine this question will be answered differently by every reader.

How concrete examples might be drawn into the argument
Each theory is a concrete example of theory-in-action as the essential ‘carnival’ mirror for practice continuously distorting what-is to reflect new ideas about what-might-or-might-not-become.

How proposals for action might be derived from the arguments
Design is where theory and practice meet. The separation of theory and practice is another false dualism that we have to learn to overcome. By classifying initiatives as either theoretical or practical, we are not paying attention to the fact that our view of the world is already deeply informed by theories about the world. In saying we don’t have time to waste with
theoretical considerations, let’s get practical and start implementing solutions, what we are actually implying is that there is no need to question our perspective and explore alternative perspectives. We are jumping straight into action, offering answers to the questions and solutions to the problems at hand, without stepping back to make sure we are asking the right questions. We fail to explore whether the solutions we are aiming for are yet again solving one issue whilst causing harm and ugliness elsewhere.

Every practical act is deeply informed by a whole set of theories and perspectives. So, the question is not whether we are practical or theoretical, but rather whether we are implementing practice in full awareness of the theoretical frameworks — the worldview and value systems — that inform our practice. Taking a design-based approach can help us to make our practice more theoretical and our theory more practical.

Design[ing] involves activities and processes that lie at the intersection of theory and practice. Design[ing] is where art and science meet. Design[ing] integrates and exploits information from many disciplines where we have separated human knowing and doing. Design[ing] is where we can acknowledge the influences of the past and give rise to visions of different futures.

The book provides a conceptual basis of the subject and area of study – design(ing) – and as such is a classic text on theory. Even more ‘classic’ is our approach, which is intended to challenge or provide an alternative to critical methods and interpretations that are established and traditional. But we have reversed the ‘classic’ origins of theory by taking the practical experience and activity of design(ing) and turned it into explanations of somewhat overlooked and undervalued essays, papers, book articles, words, terms, authors and phenomena that swirl around design(ing), most of which are commonplace and therefore now functions of the mercantile spectacular.

References
Slavoj Žižek tells Owen Jones: ‘Clinton is the problem, not Trump’
PAGES MISSING
FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE
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Paul and Craig would like to thank all of the amazing contributors to the 118 Theories of Design[ing] book. We have had the privilege of working with all of these contributors in some capacity over recent years, and we are delighted to share their insightful thoughts on theories of design[ing] here.

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In particular, we would like to acknowledge the support and generosity of many talented individuals that we have worked with and met on our design research journeys. Here, special mention is due to Professor Rachel Cooper, Dr Giovanni Innella, Andy Tennant, Professor Ranulph Glanville, Adjunct Professor Martin James, and Adjunct Associate Professor Ian Coxon.

Last, and certainly not least, Craig would like to thank Laura and Elio, and Paul would like to thank Alison, Charlie, and Max for their never-ending support.
Contributor Biographies

Paul A. Rodgers is Professor of Design at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. He is also the current Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellow for Design in the UK. Before this, he was Professor of Design at Imagination@Lancaster University, Professor of Design Issues at Northumbria University, School of Design, Reader in Design at Edinburgh Napier University, and a Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge’s Engineering Design Centre. He has had an extensive career in design research with over 20 years of experience in product design research and development. He has led several research projects for Research Councils in the UK and design projects funded by the Scottish Government and The Lighthouse (Scotland’s National Centre for Architecture, Design and the City). He is the author of more than 150 papers and eight books, including The Routledge Companion to Design Research (2014). His current research explores the discipline of design and how disruptive design interventions can enact positive transformational change in health and social care and elsewhere.

Craig Bremner is Professor of Design at Charles Sturt University, Australia. Prior to this, he was Professor in Design Pedagogy at Northumbria University, UK, and before that Professor of Design at the University of Canberra, where he was also Dean of the Faculty of Design and Architecture. He holds a BA in Literature (UWA), a Masters in Design (Domus Academy, Milan) and a PhD (RMIT). His research deals with developing methods to discover how and why we don’t know much about the experience of design, as well as finding ways to clarify the reason why ‘not-knowing’ is an essential and valuable beginning point of practice. Some applications of his research methods have traced the experience of living in Glasgow, using banks and driving motorcars. In his private practice, he has curated design exhibitions in Australia, the USA, and Japan, and he has worked as a designer in Italy, Scotland and Australia.

Chiara Alessi is a journalist and curator in the field of design. She writes for many of the major magazines in this area, such as Domus, Interni and Klat. For several years she has been studying the new Italian design culture and its impacts and implications. On this subject, she lectures in some of the most important schools and universities. Recently she has published
“After the ‘00s. The New Italian Design” (Editori Laterza, 2014) and “Design without Designers” (2016), an essay and survey about the ‘other’ jobs in the Italian design sector. The independent video documentary “Travelling Commonplaces and Special Trades” is dedicated to this subject.

Jen Archer-Martin is a spatial designer, thinker and educator. Her transdisciplinary practise encompasses design, writing and performance, exploring spatial and material ecologies of care. Recent work includes taking note(s) _performing care, and collaborations Make/Use and bit-u men-at-work. Jen is a lecturer and coordinator of Spatial Design at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. She is of English, Scottish and Māori (Ngā Puhi) descent.

Constantin Boym is Head of Industrial Design at the Pratt Institute in New York City City, USA. Constantin Boym was born in Moscow, Russia in 1955, where he graduated from the Moscow Architectural Institute. In 1984-85 he earned a degree of Master in Design from Domus Academy in Milan. In 1986, he founded Boym Partners Inc. in New York City City, which he runs together with Laurene Leon Boym. Boym Partners Inc. brings a critical, experimental approach to a range of products and environments that infuse humour and wit into the everyday. The studio’s designs are included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. In 2014, Constantin Boym received an honorary doctorate from the Corcoran College of Art and design. From 1987 to 2000 Boym was a teacher and program coordinator at Parsons School of Design. In 2010-12 Boym served as Director of Graduate Design Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar.

Stephanie Carleklev is a graphic designer and senior lecturer at Linnaeus University in Sweden. Her work is driven by a strong interest in life and what sustainability could mean. As a course and former programme leader, Stephanie primarily exercises her design skills by designing education. Her most recent work and research focus on time and its potential in design for sustainable change.

Rachel Cooper OBE is Professor of Design Management at the University of Lancaster, where she is Chair of Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary
Arts and also Imagination@Lancaster (a centre for research into products, places and systems for the future). Her research interests cover design management, design policy, new product development, design in the built environment, design against crime, and socially responsible design. Between 2003 and 2008 she led ‘Vivacity 2020: Sustainable Urban Design for the 24-Hour City’, a £3m EPSRC funded project over five years looking at Manchester, London, and Sheffield. She has authored several books including “The Design Agenda” (1995), “The Design Experience” (2003), “Designing Sustainable Cities” (2009), “Constructing Futures” (2010), “The Handbook of Design management” (2011) and is currently the commissioning editor for an Ashgate series on Socially Responsible Design. Professor Cooper is President of the European Academy of Design, and Editor of The Design Journal. She was a member of the UK Research Assessment Exercise Panel for Art and design in 2008, and in 2011 she was invited to be a member of the European Design Innovation Initiative Leadership Board that produces recommendations on Design for Prosperity and Growth for the EU.

Clive Dilnot is Professor of Design Studies at the Parsons School of Design and The New School in New York City. Clive Dilnot was educated as a fine artist, and later in social philosophy. He has taught worldwide including at Harvard University, the School of the Art Institute in Chicago and in Hong Kong, as well as in Australia and the UK. Publications include Ethics? Design? (Archeworks, 2005) the essay for Chris Killip’s Pirelli Work (Steidl, 2006) and the co-authored Design and The Question of History (2015). He is the editor of A John Heskett Reader: Design History Economics (2016) and of Heskett’s seminar on design and economic Thought, Design and the Creation of Value (2017). He is currently working on a four-volume series Thinking Design: History; Ethics; Knowledge; Configuration (2019-20). He is founding editor of Designing for Dark Times/The Urgency of the Possible, a new series of short books and polemical essays, and Radical Design Thinkers, re-publishing significant texts in design thinking since 1960.

Maya Dvash is Chief Curator at the Design Museum Holon in Israel. Throughout her time at Design Museum Holon, Dvash has curated a vast array of design exhibitions and written on design for numerous platforms. In addition to her functions as editor, curator and writer, Dvash lectures at
leading design academies in Israel. Prior to her career at Design Museum Holon, Dvash held various leading editorial positions in some of the top-tier publishing houses in Israel (Kinneret, Zomora-Bitan and Modan). Dvash was then appointed Chief Editor of Binyan v’Diyur (Building & Housing) magazine, a seat she filled for six years. Dvash holds a Bachelor’s degree in Literature and a Master’s degree in Art and Curatorship from Ben Gurion University.

**Arturo Escobar** is Kenan Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA. His academic research interests include political ecology, anthropology of development, social movements, anti-globalization movements, and postdevelopment theory. He holds a BSc in chemical engineering from the University of Valle, Cali, Colombia, and he completed one year of studies in a biochemistry graduate program at the Universidad del Valle Medical School. He has a master’s degree in food science and international nutrition from Cornell University and an interdisciplinary Ph.D from the University of California, Berkeley, in Development Philosophy, Policy and Planning. He has taught mainly at universities in the USA, including the University of Massachusetts Amherst, but also abroad at institutions in Colombia, Finland, Spain, and England.

**Delfina Fantini van Ditmar** is a design researcher and lecturer whose work investigates the socio-ecological and political implications of technological ‘smartness’ when applied to human bodies, homes and cities. Delfina has a BA in Biology and completed a year of an MFA at Konstfack University in Stockholm. She holds a PhD from the RCA with a thesis entitled ‘The IdIoT’, which investigated the socio-political implications of technological ‘smartness’ and the algorithmic processes, characterised as the ‘Algorithmic Paradigm’. Delfina has a transdisciplinary background linking design research, critical algorithmic studies, architecture, biology and the sociology of technology. She has been a visiting lecturer in several institutions, including The Bartlett, Architectural Association, Canterbury University, Liverpool University and TU Berlin, among others.

**James Fathers** is Director of Syracuse University School of Design and the Iris Magidson Endowed Chair of Design Leadership. Fathers’ teaching
and learning activity focuses on sustainability, universal design, and design in a development context. His research interests lie in socially responsible design; his doctoral research focused on the role of design in a development context, which led to a 12-month research sabbatical to India, where he worked alongside local crafts groups to develop appropriate design training strategies to facilitate enterprise development.

Jacqueline Gothe is a design researcher in visual communication design and the Director of Visual Communication Design in the School of Design at University of Technology Sydney, Australia. Her research approach emphasizes research through design as a knowledge creating paradigm. Jacqueline has widely researched the application of communication and design principles in the natural resource management sector, investigating transdisciplinary approaches in projects dealing with the consequences of environmental flows and pesticide toxicity on the Hawkesbury Nepean River. Her PhD, awarded in 2016, investigated the role of the visual communication designer in complex interdisciplinary and cross-cultural environmental communication design projects. Since 2011 she has worked in partnership with Firesticks, an Indigenous-led network that mentors, shares and supports the revival of cultural burning practices in natural resource and fire management contexts. Her communication and information design contribution to Firesticks has been recognised in 2011 and 2014 by the International Institute of Information Design Awards (IIID).

Alfredo Gutiérrez-Borrero is Professor of Industrial Design at the Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano in Bogotá, Colombia. He is interested in opening ‘the future’ to other pasts and ‘the past’ to other futures. Gutiérrez explores the confluence between Western design and archaeology (the only ones, to tell the truth) and the polycardinal prefigurative forms (from outside the West) that he calls dessobons.

Nelly Ben Hayoun is a French designer, an award-winning director and experience designer; she works with scientists and engineers to devise events and experiences. Nelly is also an exhibitor and keynote speaker who has worked with museums and design centres across the world. In 2013, Icon Magazine nominated Nelly as one of the 50 international designers “shaping the future”. In 2014, Wired Magazine awarded her with a
WIRED Innovation fellowship for her work to date and for its potential to make a “significant impact on the world”. In 2015, Nelly was nominated for a Women of the Year Achievement Award. Also, in 2015, she released her feature film Disaster Playground. The film is based on an investigation of emergency procedures for disasters such as earth-bound rogue asteroids. In 2016, she began work on her next project: feature film, digital platform and exhibition entitled “The Life, the Sea and the Space Viking”. Nelly is a member of the International Astronautical Federation, Space Outreach and Education committee.

Will Holman was educated as an architect at Virginia Tech and the Rural Studio. Will is the Executive Director of Open Works, a makerspace that opened in central Baltimore in 2016. He is the co-founder of the Industrial Arts Collective; their mission is to be an online resource for communication, collaboration, and general education on all the amazing people living and working in Baltimore. Will is author of Guerilla Furniture Design, which is an innovative guide to dozens of strategies for upcycling scrap cardboard, metal, plastic, or wood into dependable shelving units, sturdy tables, and fun lamps. Most recently he has contributed two essays: The Toaster Paradox and The Open Source Object to the Open Making Manifesto: Field Guide in conjunction with the Open Desk exhibit at the Vitra Design Museum.

Danièle Hromek is a spatial designer, speculative designer and public artist, fusing design elements with installations, sculptural form and research. Danièle also works as a researcher, educator and cultural advisor considering how to Indigenise the built environment by creating spaces to substantially affect Indigenous rights and culture within an institution. She works at the intersection of architecture, interiors, urban design, performance design and fine arts. As an Aboriginal researcher and designer, her work is grounded in her cultural and experiential heritage, often considering the urban Aboriginal condition, the Indigenous experience of Country and contemporary Indigenous identities. Gaining her experience globally, she has lived in London, Paris, Barcelona, Vancouver and Sydney. Danièle is a Saltwater woman of the Budawang tribe of the Yuin nation, with French and Czech heritage. Danièle trades as Djinjama, a word in Dhurga that means ‘make or complete or produce or build something’.
Elaine Igoe is a Senior Lecturer in Textiles and Fashion at the University of Portsmouth as well as a visiting tutor at the Royal College of Art. She has acted as an external adviser for doctoral students at the University of Portsmouth, the Royal College of Art and Chelsea College of Art and Design. She holds a Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy and is a full member of The Textile Society and the Design Research Society. Her research, both practice-based and theoretical, has always taken an approach that is experimental and conceptual; questioning and exploring the innate and typical characteristics of textiles, materials and cloth, particularly in the context of the body. Her theoretical work in design research utilises feminist qualitative research methods, exploring relationality through storytelling, autoethnography and metaphor.

Mashal Khan is a strategic designer and visual researcher currently working for Kaarvan Craft Foundation, an NGO based in Pakistan, striving to empower women in low-income communities through life skills. Mashal sees the world through a sense of wonder, humility and respect – ever ready to confront complex social issues by designing new ideas, tools, methods and action agendas.

Peter Lloyd Jones completed his PhD in cellular and genetic pathology at Cambridge University, followed by post-doctoral fellowships at UC Berkeley and the University of Toronto. In 2005, Peter became a tenured Associate Professor of Pathology and Lecturer in Architecture at The University of Pennsylvania. Peter Lloyd Jones is an award-winning cell and molecular biologist and inventor, whose discoveries have uncovered fundamental mechanisms in embryogenesis and human disease, including breast cancer, lung development and pulmonary hypertension. Peter’s work constantly seeks and uncovers new solutions to complex problems in biology, medicine and design via extreme collaborations with diverse individuals from multiple fields, including mathematics, computation, chemical engineering, and industrial, fashion, textile and architectural design. Peter is a Professor of Design at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. Before this he was the first Associate Dean of Emergent Design and Creative Technologies at The Sidney Kimmel Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University (TJU), where in 2013, he became Executive Director of MEDstudio @JEFF; an anti-disciplinary research and education unit.
which is the first of its type within a US medical school, and is focused on
discovering new and dignified solutions in healthcare using approaches
deeply rooted in empathy.

**Marco Petroni** is a design theorist and critic. He is also Adjunct Professor
at Politecnico (Milan) and the Università della Campania (Naples). He is
Curator at large at Plart Foundation (Naples). He collaborates with several
art, architecture and design magazines such as Domus, FlashArt, and
Artribune. Petroni studied contemporary art and architecture. He develops
innovative curatorial projects and events related to the design world themes
with a transdisciplinary approach.

**Mark Roxburgh** is Associate Professor of Design at the University of
Newcastle, a management stooge, and a fading would be indie rock star
(google Joeys Coop). Mark’s scholarly interests cover design research, visual
communication theory and practice, and photographic theory and
practice. His PhD explored the central role that visual images and visual
perception play in design, with a specific emphasis on how photographic
images condition us to perceive, experience and transform the world in a
self-replicating manner. His more recent pursuits have been: developing
a phenomenological theory of photography to counter the dominance of
critical theory and semiotic deconstruction; developing a theory of design
as a form of embodied perceptual synthesis to counter the dominance of
the design problem-solving metaphor; and making music that generally
gets ignored to counter the dominance of youth-driven culture. More
recently he has grown suspicious of the instrumentalization of the
anthrochauvinist bandwagon known as human-centred design and thinks
it time to head to the hills and dig the bunker.

**Dina Shahar**, a graduate of the Royal College of Art, London (MA RCA),
is Head of the Inclusive Design Department, at the Hadassah Academic
College, Jerusalem. Her academic interests span the methodologies of
Inclusive Design and the evolving roles of the design discipline as a whole.
Her creative work focuses on design for public spaces.

**Saurabh Tewari** is Assistant Professor at the School of Planning and
Architecture Bhopal. He studied Architecture (B. Arch, 2003-08) at SSAA
Gurgaon and Communication Design (M. Des, 2008-10) at IDC IIT Bombay. He has been teaching basic design, graphics, and architectural history for eight years. He is a PhD candidate at Design Programme, IIT Kanpur researching on design and its history in India.

**Cathy Treadaway** is Professor of Creative Practice at Cardiff Metropolitan University and a founder member of the Centre for Applied Research in Inclusive Arts and Design (CARIAD). She is Principal Investigator on the AHRC ‘LAUGH’ design for dementia research project. Cathy is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy.

**Emmanuel Tsekleves** leads research at the intersection of design, health, wellbeing and technology at Imagination@Lancaster at Lancaster University. He conducts design research by working with communities to develop new ways about health, wellbeing and technology to create a ‘culture for health’ that is knitted into everyday community life. He is the co-editor of the Design for Health book published by Routledge.

**Jonathan Ventura** is a design anthropologist, specializing in design theory, research and practice in the fields of social and healthcare design. Jonathan is a senior lecturer at the Department of Inclusive Design at Hadassah Academic College and the Graduate Program of Design at Shenkar - Engineering, Design, Art and a visiting researcher at the Royal College of Art’s Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design.

**Heather Wiltse** is Assistant Professor at Umeå Institute of Design, Umeå University, Sweden, where she is also currently serving as director of PhD studies. Her transdisciplinary research centres around trying to understand and critique the role of digital, networked, computational things in experience and society in ways that can inform design.

**Joyce Yee** is Professor of Design and Social Innovation at Northumbria University Design School, UK. She holds a BFA in Graphic Design, an MA in Visual Communication and a PhD in Design. Her research focuses on the role, value and impact of design in areas of service design and social innovation. She is also interested in the role of practice as a form of inquiry and the inherent ‘messiness’ of design methods.
A
affordable, 32, 51, 197
against, 17, 18, 22, 32, 33, 36, 40,
   121, 139, 153, 159, 177, 183,
   271, 287
Agamben, Giorgio, 157
agile, 31, 39, 247
Ahuja, Simone, 181
Alessi, Chiara, 149, 151, 153, 249,
   283, 285
Alexander, Christopher, 97
Al-Wakrah Stadium, 201
Amazon, 49
AMO, 75
anecdotal, 36, 179
Angel, Shlomo, 97
anonymous, 40, 99
Ansari, Ahmed, 273
Anthropocene, 14, 117, 169, 177,
   253
anthropocentric, 35, 177, 223
Anti-Design, 44, 121, 189
anti-design thinking, 44, 189
Appadurai, Arjun, 67
Apple, 91
Apter, Emily, 123
Archer-Martin, Jen, 221, 223, 283,
   287
Archigram, 121
Archizoom, 79
Arendt, Hannah, 257
Arnoldi, Jakob, 67
Arvidsson, Adam, 67
ATM, 85, 197
Aunty Gloria Nipperess
   (Budawang/Yuin), 254
automated, 33, 39, 41, 59, 85, 125,
   197
autonomous, 40, 155, 197, 267
B
Bachelard, Gaston, 263
balancing, 34, 39, 55, 245
Balaram, Saranya, 183
Barad, Karen, 221
barbaric, 37, 139
Barcelona, 155, 281, 290
Barthes, Roland, 259
Bassett, Caroline, 127
Battaglia, Debbora, 69
Bauhaus, 167, 179
Bauman, Zygmunt, 73
Baumeister, Roy F., 229
Baxandall, Michael, 163
Beck, Ulrich, 165
Behrens III, William W., 113
Ben Hayoun, Nelly, 257, 259, 283,
   289
Benanav, Aaron, 85
Benjamin, Ruha, 155
Benjamin, Walter, 159
Berardi, Franco (Bifo), 59, 77, 85,
   89, 113, 143
Bernadet, Laura, 147
better, bettering, 18, 33, 34, 37, 38,
   39, 40, 43, 44, 51, 69, 73, 77,
   81, 83, 91, 95, 103, 105, 127,
Bharatanatyam, 185
Bichard, Jo-Anne, 195
Bijker, Wiebe E., 219
bipolar, 43, 191
Blakinger, John R., 167
Blum, Andrew, 95
Bodkin, Fran, 255
Bogota, 281, 289
Bollier, David, 261
Bologna, 113
Boltanski, Luc, 89
Bonsiepe, Gui, 21, 22, 25, 73
Bostrom, Nick, 173
bounding, 37
Bourriaud, Nicolas, 53
Bowker, Sam, 99
Boym, Constantin, 145, 283, 286
Branzi, Andrea, 79, 135, 141, 151
Bratton, Benjamin, 117
Brazil, 181
Brown, Tim, 189
Buchanan, Richard, 171, 223
Bucharest, 281
business, 33, 36, 40, 43, 61, 89, 91, 107, 111, 119, 189, 209, 233, 239
Campanini, Cristiana, 141
Cape Town, 281
capital, 15, 34, 39, 42, 67, 69, 73, 91, 93, 95, 107, 117, 121, 201, 203
capitalism, 40, 59, 61, 89, 93, 95, 131, 139, 151, 233, 251, 269
careful, 33, 89, 245
caring, 39, 40, 93, 221, 229, 263
Carlekliev, Stephanie, 243, 245, 247, 283, 286
Carlow, Vanessa Miriam, 75
Carnegie Mellon University, 171
Carpo, Mario, 225
Cartesian, 38, 225
Cassin, Barbara, 123
Castelli, Clino Trini, 81
Castiglioni, Achille, 99
Castiglioni, Pier Giacomo, 99
catastrophic, 35, 139, 231
Chambers, Robert, 207
Charles Sturt University, 13, 283, 285
cheap, 32, 34, 36, 61, 115, 117, 119, 131
circumstantial, 38, 163
climatic, 34, 95, 255
Club of Rome, 113
Cohen, Benjamin R., 105
Cohen, Jon, 231
Cohen, Leonard, 61
Collaborative, 35, 203, 211, 255
comfortable, 33, 44, 101
communal, 35, 105, 255, 265, 267
confusing, 41, 187
constructivist, 34, 219
Cooper, Rachel, 17, 217, 239, 241, 283, 286, 287
cosmological, 34, 69
Couldry, Nick, 233
Coxon, Ian, 283
CRISPR, 231
Cross, Nigel, 241
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, 101
cultural, 22, 33, 35, 42, 55, 89, 111, 121, 145, 185, 187, 195, 207, 213, 255, 267, 275, 289, 290
curious, 44, 145, 163, 247
Curious George, 145
Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Joel, 137
dangerous, 42, 107, 245
Danto, Arthur C., 111
dark, 31, 36, 37, 43, 61, 133, 233, 287
Darwin, Charles, 17, 23, 49, 169
data, 38, 91, 147, 155, 197, 211, 225, 233, 253
Dautry, Jehanne, 79
Davies, Jeremy, 75, 131
De Decker, Kris, 155
declassified, 41, 277
deflating, 43
Debord, Guy, 147
Deleuze, Gilles, 257
Deloria Jr., Vine, 275
derived, 23, 24, 39, 42, 47, 59, 67, 141, 143
Design Council (UK), 71, 111, 279
Design for the Real World, 38, 131, 201, 245
Design Issues, 57, 73, 151, 169, 175, 183, 219, 223, 281, 285
Design Journal (The), 26, 103, 127, 147, 197, 217, 223, 245, 287
design thinking, 14, 26, 34, 44, 103, 175, 179, 189, 191, 241, 279, 287
designer-as-mythologist, 34, 259
destabilising, 42
Devlieger, Patrick, 193
Dilnot, Clive, 157, 159, 161, 163, 171, 245, 283, 287
disempowering, 43, 233
dispiriting, 36, 37
disruptive, 42, 55, 285
DNA, 105, 231
Donzé, Pierre-Yves, 119
Dreyfuss, Henry, 199
Droste, Magdalena, 179
Dubberly, Hugh, 279
Dunne, Anthony, 191, 215
duplicate, 42, 49
Dvash, Maya, 147, 283, 287, 288
Earl, Terry, 22, 25
early learning, 34, 227
Edinburgh Napier University, 283, 285
Edison, Thomas, 41, 209
educational, 33, 111, 167
emoting, 35, 36
Escobar, Arturo, 203, 261, 263, 265, 267, 269, 271, 283, 288
Esquerre, Arnaud, 89
Ettinger, Bracha L., 279
everything, 13, 18, 23, 35, 36, 38,

Evolutionary, 34, 169
Exaggerated, 33, 43, 141, 191
Excessive, 33, 237
Eyben, Rosalind, 207

**F**
FabLab, 33, 137
Facebook, 67, 123, 133
Failing forward, 41, 209
False, 24, 43, 123, 203
Fantastic, 39, 41, 127, 197, 283
Fantini van Ditmar, Delfina, 251, 253, 283, 288
Fathers, James, 207, 209, 283, 288
Fictional, 38, 81, 235
Fiksdahl-King, Ingrid, 97
Fischer, Berenice, 221
Fitzgerald, Neil, 47
Flores, Fernando, 261
Florida, 139
Flusser, Vilém, 23, 26, 69
Forlano, Laura, 177
Foster, Hal, 147, 187, 263
Foucault, Michel, 21, 23, 26, 49, 53, 235
Foust, Mathew A., 185
Frank, Robert H., 47
Fraser, Peter, 59, 93
Fraser, Nancy, 93
Fry, Tony, 157, 161, 245, 261, 273
Fuad-Luke, Alastair, 55
Fuller, Buckminster, 231
Future, 14, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 25, 39, 41, 42, 43, 53, 57, 59, 61, 67, 73, 75, 79, 81, 85, 93, 95, 103, 105, 113, 131, 137, 139, 147, 173, 175, 193, 197, 211, 215, 229, 233, 245, 255, 257, 261, 275, 287, 289

**G**
galvanising, 40
Gandhi, Mahatma K., 32, 183
Gandhian, 32, 183
García Gutiérrez, Antonio L., 277
Gdynia, 281
gendered, 35, 279
generational, 35, 255
generative, 35, 147, 255, 277, 279
Gershenfeld, Alan, 137
Gershenfeld, Neil, 137
Gibson, James J., 51, 247
Gilligan, Carol, 221
Glanville, Ranulph, 133, 219, 283.
global health, 39, 217
global South, 267, 273
Goldstein, Rebecca, 49
Goethe, Jacqueline, 255, 283, 289
Graeber, David, 89
Graham, Mary, 255
Graham, Stephen, 87
Graz, 281
green, 37, 121, 131, 135
Greenfield, Adam, 49
grey, 37, 135
grey ecology, 135
Groll, Sandra, 73
Groys, Boris, 53, 77, 187
Guattari, Félix, 257
Gupta, Anil K., 181
Gutiérrez Borrero, Alfredo, 267, 273, 275, 277, 283, 289

H
hackerspaces, 137
Hadid, Zaha, 201
Hands, David, 239
Hara, Kenya, 65, 83, 103
Haraway, Donna J., 165, 167
Harman, Graham, 165, 167
Harrison, Max Dulumunmun, 255
Hauffe, Thomas, 119
Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 77
Hayek, Nicolas G., 119
Heidegger, Martin, 221
Helfrich, Silke, 261
Heppell, Stephen, 57
hermeneutics, 195
Hernández, Ricardo J., 241
Hesselink, Sinette, 281
Hoang, Phu, 95
Holert, Tom, 151
Holman, Will, 155, 283, 290
Hromek, Danièle (Budawang/Yuin), 255, 283, 290
Huizinga, Johan, 213, 249
human-centred design, 177, 197, 223, 292
humble, 32, 65, 205
Hurricane Katrina, 139

IKEA, 34, 199
imagination, 44, 73, 143, 175, 205, 243, 249, 253
Imagination@Lancaster, 283, 285, 287, 293
immersive, 41, 207
imperfect, 42, 63
inclusive, 41, 81, 197, 292, 293
India, 181, 183, 185, 207, 283, 289, 293
indigenous, 35, 181, 221, 255, 273, 275, 289, 290
inflation, 34, 43, 199
Ingold, Tim, 243, 265
Innella, Giovanni, 13, 23, 26, 103, 151, 283
instructing, 33
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 253
iPhone, 145
irrelevant, 44, 203
Irrgang, Daniel, 69
Irvine, Renwick, 207
Ishikawa, Sara, 97
Italian, 99, 113, 149, 285, 286
Italian Autonomia Movement, 113
iterative, 35, 209, 255
Izenour, Steven, 147

J
Jackson, Steven J., 87
Jacobson, Max, 97
James, Martin, 283
jealous, jealousy, 36, 109
Joselit, David, 263
Journal of Peer Production, 137
jugaad, 32, 181
Mejias, Ulises A., 233
Meaney, Thomas, 143
Mendini, Alessandro, 71, 125, 135, 149
messy, 32, 38, 205, 243
Miah, Andy, 115
Miami, 281
Midal, Alexandra, 53
Midgley, Mary, 125
Miéville, China, 73
Milan, 79, 81, 99, 141, 149, 153, 281, 285, 286, 292
Miller, Daniel, 101, 237
Minobimaatisiiwin (Anishinaabeg), 275
misfit, 42, 97
Mitakuye Oyasin (Lakota), 275
modernism, 113, 121
Monaghan, John, 207
Mondrian, Piet, 129
mongrel, 42, 111
Moore, Jason W., 61, 131
More, Thomas, 73
more-than-human(ist), 223
Morozov, Evgeny, 251
Morris, William, 179
Morton, Timothy, 117
Muni, Bharata, 185
Murnane, Gerald, 235
Murphy, Emma, 241
museum, 33, 147, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290

N
Nairobi, 281
NASA, 145
National Health Service (UK), 161

Natyashastra, 185
Nedelkoska, Ljubica, 125
Nelson, Harold G., 243
Nelson, Robert, 109
neoplasticism, 129
New Orleans, 139
Newman, Damien, 279
Nolan, Billy, 281
non-Cartesian, 225
Norman, Don, 51, 249
Northumbria University School of Design, 283, 285, 293
Nothing, 14, 33, 38, 43, 61, 63, 111, 117, 153, 159, 201, 205, 235

O
Obama Care, 161
of the South(s), 273
ontological, 261, 265
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 125
O’Shea, Lizzie, 79
Oxford English Dictionary, 239

P
Packard, Vance, 133
Paetz, Paul, 55
Pallister, James, 71
Papanek, Victor, 38, 131, 201, 245
paradox, paradoxical, 22, 23, 42, 103, 137, 139, 197, 235, 265, 290
Parker, George, 187
Parmesani, Loredana, 149
Partridge, Rebecca, 217
Patel, Raj, 61, 131
Perks, Martyn, 121
Pessimistic, 173
Peters, Tom, 209
Petroni, Marco, 79, 151
Pfeiffer, David, 193
philosophy, 21, 36, 47, 81, 111, 117, 125, 153, 185, 193, 257
Picasso, Pablo, 163
plastic, 43, 129, 263
play, 24, 39, 41, 47, 91, 137, 145, 213, 225, 247, 249, 257, 259
pluralistic, pluralistically, 41, 44, 187, 203
plurality, 41, 187, 223, 257
pluriversal, 265, 269
political, 33, 42, 44, 55, 59, 111, 119, 137, 147, 153, 161, 165, 183, 189, 239, 253, 257, 267
pop, 121
Pope Francis, 131
Popli, Saurabh, 183
Pornographic, 143
Possible, 17, 21, 22, 23, 36, 39, 41, 53, 67, 73, 79, 161, 163, 197, 215, 235, 247, 249, 251, 265, 281
post-economic, 271
power, 37, 41, 147, 165, 221, 225, 233, 235, 257, 259, 261, 275
Prabhakar, Nipun, 183
Prabhu, Jaideep, 181
practical, 24, 25, 40, 43, 149, 151
Prague, 281
Press, Mike, 239
pride, 109, 245
Puig de La Bellacasa, Maria, 221
Pullin, Graham, 193
Pye, David, 63
Q
Qatar, 201
Querétaro, 281
Quiggin, John, 117
Quintini, Glenda, 125
Quinz, Emanuele, 79, 153
R
Raby, Fiona, 191, 215
radical, 32, 44, 49, 71, 79, 119, 135, 141, 165, 203
Radio Alice, 113
Radical Design, 44, 71, 79, 135, 141
Radjou, Navi, 181
Railton, Peter, 229
Ramalho, Ana Quintela Ribeiro Neves, 109
Ramaswamy, E.A., 207
Rams, Dieter, 41, 91, 137, 197
Ranciere, Jacques, 65, 125
Randalls, Samuel, 95
Randers, Jørgen, 113
rasa, 185
Raunig, Gerald, 117
Ray, Gene, 117
Redgrave, Richard, 107
Redhead, Steve, 115
Redström, Johan, 191, 211
relational, 35, 44, 203, 221, 251, 255, 275, 279
repairable, 87
Resnick, Mitchel, 249
responsive, 91
Rey, Margret, 145
Roberts, Kevin, 181
Rochberg-Halton, Eugene, 101
Rolnik, Suely, 117
romance, 36, 77
romantic, 77, 261
Ross, Andrew, 95
Rowe, Peter G., 241
Roxburgh, Mark, 169, 171, 173, 175, 177, 179, 219, 237, 283, 292
Rumsfeld, Donald, 83
rural, 34, 75, 181, 290
Rusch, Frank R., 193

S
Sabin, Jenny E., 231
San Francisco, 281
Sanskrit, 185
sarvodaya, 183
satiating, 32
Schwartz, Susan L., 185
scientific, 18, 159, 227, 229
Scott Brown, Denise, 147
Scullion, Gerry, 177
Seligman, Martin E. P., 229
sentimental, 36, 125, 129, 175, 237, 281
Serres, Michel, 61
Shah, A.M., 207
Shahar, Dina, 189, 191, 193, 195, 197, 199, 201, 283, 292
sharing, 93, 137
Sharma, Kriti, 265
Shvo, Galit, 195
Signature Architecture, 201
Silicon Valley, 105, 159
Silverstein, Murray, 97
Simon, Herbert A., 163
Sloterdijk, Peter, 111, 177
SMART, SMARTness, 39, 183, 251, 288
Smith, Rory, 115
Snelson, Kenneth, 231
Snow, C.P. (Charles Percy), 227
Snyder, Jaime, 155
Solnit, Rebecca, 105
Sottsass, Ettore, 91
spectacle, 24, 107, 147, 187
speculative, 47, 81, 191, 205, 215, 221, 235, 290
Spitz, René, 73
Srinivas, M.N., 207
Sripada, Chandra, 229
Stadler, Robert, 63
star designers, 40, 99, 201
Starck, Philippe, 249
Steinmueller, Ed, 127
Stengers, Isabelle, 139
Steffensen, Victor, 255
Stephenson, Wen, 139
Sterling, Bruce, 215
Stewart, Susan, 101
Stewart, Susan C., 157
Stolterman, Erik, 243
studio-based, 195
Suma Qamaña (Aymara), 275
Superstudio, 121
Swatch, 119
Swatchification, 119

T
TechShops, 137
Tennant, Andy, 13, 283
Tether, Bruce, 241
Tewari, Saurabh, 181, 183, 185, 283, 292
Thackara, John, 115, 177
theoretical, 24, 25, 40, 149, 151, 165, 195, 219, 291
thoughtless, 175
Thrift, Nigel, 87
tired, 113
Tonkinwise, Cameron, 169, 203
Transition Design, 81
transitive, 81
Treadaway, Cathy, 249, 283, 293
Tronto, Joan, 221
Troxler, Peter, 137
Trump, Donald, 26, 159
Tsekleves, Emmanuel, 213, 215, 217, 283, 293
tuning, 38, 211
Turner, Fred, 251

U
ultimate, 39, 71, 115, 165
uncertain, uncertainty, 31, 39, 59, 67, 171, 245, 251
Uncle Greg Simms (Gadigal, Dharug, Gundungurra,
Budawang), 254
undisciplined, 13, 14, 15, 38, 42, 55, 57, 103, 239
United Nations, 75
University of Cambridge, 285
University of Strathclyde, 13, 285
University of the Underground, 257
unknown, 18, 31, 42, 44, 83, 103
utopia, utopian, 39, 73, 93, 183, 251
UX, 155

V
Vaillant, Alexis, 63
Valéry, Paul, 21
van Gemert, Femke, 281
van Lier, Bas, 281
van Tuinen, Sjoerd, 177
Vancouver, 281, 290
Vaneigem, Raoul, 271
Ventura, Jonathan, 189, 191, 193, 195, 197, 199, 201, 283, 293
Venturi, Robert, 147
Virilio, Paul, 135
Voss, George, 127

W
Wainwright, Oliver, 201
Wajcman, Judy, 219
Wark, McKenzie, 59, 119
Warman, Matt, 91
weather, 34, 35, 95
Weibel, Peter, 69
Wendt, Albert, 275
Whakapapas (Maori), 275
What Design Can Do, 24, 36, 281
Wiesing, Lambert, 47
Williams, R. John, 59, 173
Willis, Anne-Marie, 81
Wiltse, Heather, 211, 233, 283, 293
winning, 115
Winograd, Terry, 261
Wong, Julia Carrie, 135
Wood, John, 73
Wood, Michael, 123
World Bank, 75
Wright, Eric Olin, 93
Wuggenig, Ulf, 117

Y
Yee, Joyce, 203, 283, 293
Yeo, Stephen, 161

Z
Zapatista of Chiapas, 269
Zielinski, Siegfried, 69
Žižek, Slavoj, 21, 26, 35, 83.
zombie, 117
Zuboff, Shoshana, 233

#
1.5°C, 253