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Dyer, James

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Bastard Design Practices: An Archaeological Perspective

Abstract

Design is a bastard practice, it is fundamentally detached from its own inherited ethos so as to appear progressive, virtuous and fashionable. Such abstinence from knowledge and past experience models a practice that advocates competition over communion – a renunciation of experience and sanction of illusory solutionism. The design discipline would benefit greatly from the principle ideologies of archeology, a practice which uncovers the past to inform the present and shape the future. It is proposed here that a practice of Design Archeology be installed into fundamental design practices to create responsibility in the agency of design. Are we all archaeologists? not quite yet.

Article

This article is written from the perspective of the design discipline. It is proposed that a developed practice of Design Archeology be installed into fundamental design practices to create deeper contextual knowledge and responsibility in the agency of design. As such, this promotes archaeological principles for those designers who are not, yet, archaeologists.

To claim “we are all archaeologists now” is to provoke a particular value in the currency of contemporary archaeological practice. The value is assumed in the potency of archaeological application, its contemporary relevance and transdisciplinary potential, as opposed to the fashionable or glib status of archeology. “We”, being the supposed readership, are most likely archaeologists, or at least enthusiasts. However, the collective reference of “we” also requires an antithesis of “they”, and “they” are not archaeologists, however they most definitely should be. Specifically in this instance, “they” are identified as designers who are involved in the bastard practices of contemporary design!

Archeology is a discipline concerned with “things”, it is an open ended transdisciplinary practice that examines a diverse texture of phenomena. The multiplicity of archaeology resists any absolute definition, however there is a resounding motif in the objective of an archaeological investigation. It is to “excavate” past phenomena so as to reveal potential contemporary cultural or historical truths; it is to uncover the accessible past so as to inform the receptive present and shape the indeterminate future. This aphoristic definition should not appear to be painting archaeology as a practice scrambling to create meaningful connections between unrelated phenomena – archaeology is not

about blindly jabbing linchpins into unassociated events. Rather, the idiosyncratic approach of archeology presents a definitive scepticism to accepted and applied “truths”.

Via the critical optic of archeology, new narratives are written and new meaningful connections are made. As such, archeology enables the conditions of possibility for potential alterity. It permits a beneficial evaluative discourse that is concerned with maintaining diversity and contesting the normative, rather than distilling and synthesising absolutist truth to usurp outdated dogma. This is the contemporary value of archeology and why it should be adopted by all with an inquisitive and critical manner. However, it is entirely absent in, amongst other disciplines, design.

Design is defined here as a process of dialectical reason, whereby the contingency of progressing “virtuous design” relies on the necessary condition of conflict: “new conceptions of good design arise from a rejection of those immediately preceding” (Tomes and Armstrong 2010, 30). As such, the image of virtuous design is principally based around the renunciation and detachment of the past. Design practice is therefore a withdrawal, a practice of abstinence through proscription – it is modeled on competition over communion. In design there is a total disinterest to uncover an accessible past because the shaping of the indeterminate future is based on the capricious fictions of fashion, it is a dialectic heading to nowhere in particular. Design is rootless, detached from tradition and unimpeded by an inherited ethos. Undoubtedly, this presents an explicit tension between the present design practice and its obfuscated origin. Therefore, the principles of contemporary design fundamentally oppose those of archeology, the past is not accessed and the present remains unreceptive.

The pedagogy and practice of design must adopt archaeological ideologies. This will enable critical engagement within the design discipline and encourage an agency and responsibility in the design process. Currently, design is largely devoid of critical historiographies, as such now is the ideal time to begin writing alternative, challenging and provocative narratives. These narratives will re-contextualise contemporary implementations of design and historic recollections of design practice. To repeat, this is a vital and necessary archaeological practice that will uncover the accessible past so as to inform the receptive present and shape the indeterminate future.

The archaeological methods implemented by Media Archaeologists such as Jussi Parikka (2013) and Erkki Huhtamo (2011) may be re-appropriated and re-purposed for specific use in “Design Archeology”. For example, the notion of excavating topos (ibid., 32-36), being the cliché and the motif, reveals recurrent constellations that connect present phenomena to the past. This potentially exposes the pre-fabricated nature of contemporary narratives which are tacitly embedded within phenomena, this is what Michel Foucault calls a “pre-existing form of continuity” (25-27, 1982). In a developed

Design Archeology this would serve to contextualise and explicate a contemporary practice of design. Ultimately, this requires a critical investigation into a contemporary phenomena by contextualising it in opposition or concurrence with a past phenomena. Such designed “phenomena” do not necessarily need to be designed objects but may encompass all concerns with the artificial (Herbert 1969).

Arguably, the ideologies of a Design Archeology have already, to some extent, been implemented over half a century ago by The Independent Group (IG); a self-analytical and active group of designers and thinkers (Massey 2007). IG was an amalgamation of artists, performers and critics from myriad disciplines. They introduced critical arguments concerned with culture, aesthetic and value, to a wider audience beyond the esoteric orations of “high art”.

A fascinating output by Richard Hamilton, a member of IG, was *Man, Machine and Motion* (Alloway 1990). Exhibited in 1955, Hamilton produced an environment filled with photographs of cultural artifacts and visual ornaments, all of which were concerned with the human relationship between speed and modes of travel. It was a designed exhibition that acted as an archival platform which presented a critical optic of specific phenomena, this presented a particular and analytical narrative vision. Retrospectively, Hamilton’s exhibition was a curated exposé of Design Archeology. From this perspective, IG represents the first wave of design practice that engages design critically on a transdisciplinary level, yet IG’s practice was never inherited. Rather, the next generation of “innovative” designs remain static, bastardised without the inherited wealth of critical thought and analytic narrative. Design Archaeology may help manifest the second wave that never materialised.

Conclusively, “are we all archaeologists now?” the short answer is no. However – a call to action – there is a vital importance for disciplines, such as design, to accommodate archaeological ideologies at their core level. To do this will create access to, and development of, an independent and critical voice that is grounded in contextual knowledge. As digital archival resources grow, the accessible past is ever increasing. There has been no better environment than now for us all to become archaeologists. This is to explicitly re-contextualise existing phenomena, to challenge age old unities and to surpass disciplinary boundaries. In utilising archaeological ideologies for critical awareness, a discipline is afforded sensibilities that are not disowned of heritage but are rather steeped in knowledge. If we are all to become archaeologists the discourse of discipline, practice and pedagogy would not necessarily be concerned with unearthing roots or defining absolute origins. Rather, it would focus on acknowledging where one’s practice may have been jettisoned from and in what direction it is drifting towards.

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