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ETHICS IN DESIGN

10 Questions

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1. WHY MIGHT WE NEED AN ETHICS OF DESIGN?

Here is one reason. It comes from designer and educator Victor Papanek, from *Design for the Real World,* first published in 1974 but still unparalleled in its attack on the economic and social irresponsibility of design.

> There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. Never before in history have grown men sat down and seriously designed electric hairbrushes, rhinestone covered file boxes, and mink carpeting for bathrooms, and then drawn up elaborate plans to make and sell these gadgets to millions of people. Before ... if a person liked killing people, he had to become a general, purchase a coal-mine, or else study nuclear physics. Today, industrial design has put murder on a mass-production basis. By designing criminally unsafe automobiles that kill or maim nearly one million people around the world each year, by creating whole new species of permanent garbage to clutter up the landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breathe, designers have become a dangerous breed. ... As long as design concerns itself with confecting trivial 'toys for adults', killing machines with gleaming tailfins, and 'sexed up' shrouds for toasters, telephones, and computers, it ... is about time that design *as we have come to know it,* should cease to exist.
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> (Papanek 1974: 9,10).

Here is another. It comes from the Dutch communications and graphic designer Jan van Toorn.

> Capitalist culture organizes people as buyers of commodities and services [and] ... transform[s] information and knowledge into commodities. ... The corporate conglomerates of the culture-industry have created a global public sphere which does not offer any scope for discussion of the social and cultural consequences of the 'free flow of information' organized by them. The fusion of trade, politics and communication has brought about the sophisticated one-dimensional character of our symbolic environment, which is at least as menacing as the pollution of the natural environment.
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> This is partly due to the lack of a critical attitude to the social-cultural conditions of professional mediation. ... Cooperation with institutions and adaptation to their structures has resulted in ideological accommodation, expressed in a lack of insight into the social role of the profession. ... Under the pressure of neoliberalism and the power relationships of the free market ... not only is the designer's individual freedom, 'ostensibly still existing within a space of its own ... infiltrated by the client's way of thinking,' but design ends up discovering that at best it serves today as little more than a 'theatrical substitute for [missing] essential forms of social communication'—whilst at worst, 'drawing on its roles in the organization of production and in helping to stimulate consumption', it is

both hand-in-glove the 'extensive disciplining of the general public' in the terms of the market—a disciplining 'whose most far-reaching consequence is undoubtedly a political neutralization that is at odds with the functioning of an open and democratic society'

(van Toorn 1994: 151; 1997: 154).

Here is yet a third, this time by the architectural historian and critic Kenneth Frampton, reflecting on the contemporary urban condition.

> A recent publication by the artists Laurent Malone and Dennis Adams recorded in photographic form the random topographic panorama that unfurled as they took a walk in a straight line from a storefront in Manhattan to the initial threshold of Kennedy airport. A more unaesthetic and strangely repetitive urban fabric would be hard to imagine. It is a dystopia from which we are usually shielded by the kaleidoscopic blur of the taxi window. Looked at through [a] pedestrian optic this is an in-your-face urban fabric. It is oddly paranoid, rather ruthless, instrumental, and resentful landscape compounded of endless chain-link fences, graffiti, razor wire, rusted ironwork, fast food [outlets], signs of all kinds, housing projects that are barely distinguishable from penal institutions, the occasional fading ad or former cinema ... and as one gets further out ... closely packed parsimonious suburban homes with their white plastic siding. And everywhere, of course ... the signs of hardscrabble economic survival about to get harder. ... One cannot help asking oneself if these are truly the shades of the American dream for which we are ostensibly liberating the Middle East. Is there some fatal, inescapable paralysis that prevails, separating the increasingly smart, technological extravagance of our armaments from the widespread dumbness and meanness of our environment?
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> (Frampton 2003: 3)

2. WHAT DO THESE THREE QUOTATIONS HAVE IN COMMON? WHAT DO THEY SUGGEST IN RELATION TO THE ETHICS OF DESIGN?

Each of these three quotations—which touch respectively on the design of products, on the roles of image culture and the graphic designer, and on the forces that shape contemporary urban environments—have some things in common. Each

- attacks, in different ways, the venality, triviality, and paralysis of the imagination that market brings to design
- bemoans the loss of a public sphere outside of the market
- condemns the way that market forces tend to eclipse or obliterate the human
  - — by turning the human being into nothing other than a consumer and the designer as the irresponsible servant of those who wish to promote ever more unbridled consumption (Papanek)
  - — by inducing into a world that is daily being *made* more unsustainable an additional "dumbness and meanness" into the built and made environments within which we try to exist (this is Frampton's point when he looks at the degraded humanscapes of Brooklyn and Queens in New York)
  - — by reducing the conditions of our political and public life (at extreme, as van Toorn insists, helping to destroy the conditions that make democratic society possible)

In relation to design, each

- refuses the "false truth" of design as a practice that is only of occasion for the market
- opposes the denial of the other and of persons and their interests implicit in so much

contemporary making, whether that of the world as a whole or within the specialist practices of design
- sees current modes of designing or making the world as a betrayal of design's potential
- feels that design has become blind to its own possibility and therefore has lost the sense of its critical and affirmative capabilities

Overall, all three, implicitly or explicitly

- consider design's role as serving the wider (longer-term) interests of subjects rather than the narrow (and necessarily short-term) interest of private profit
- want to create an ethics and a politics of design sufficiently powerful to contest *both* the overall reduction of the human by the market and design's self-eclipsing as a critical agency
- understand design as an agency capable of helping us shape, in humane and sustainable directions, our relations with the artificial and natural worlds

3. IS WHAT IS NEEDED THEREFORE AN ETHICS?

The first answer is "Yes." We need to recover what the veteran designer Gui Bonsiepe has called the "virtues" of design (Bonsiepe, 1997). But, the answer must be conditioned with caution, for this cannot be ethics as we used to think of it, as a "weak practice," something external to design; a moral overlay that is "applied" to professional practice but which does not enter the act of designing. Neither is the ethics we need simply something that is called up to salve a conscience.

The ethics that Papanek, van Torn and Frampton are all implicitly calling for is

- not a "bandage"
- not an ethical statement of intent that has no force for practice (as the International Council of Societies for Industrial Design and other design organizations are fond of creating)
- not an excuse for inaction
- not a covert plea for maintaining the status quo, particularly the status quo of unequal, venal, and destructive economic forces. (On the problem of weak ethics see Badiou 2001 passim)

On the contrary, the ethics we need

- is against the capitulation of human interests to those of the market
- is emphatically opposed to the destructiveness of what is and to the catastrophe-inducing economic rapacity that global capitalism is now inducing
- sees itself as interruption of the processes of economic "errancy" (Badiou, 2005, 145) and "de-futuring" (Fry 1999) and therefore as a way of helping contend with the consequences of negative globalization
- refuses resignation in the face of the given and refuses to acquiesce to the current domination of modes of reactive, negative, and destructive actions (Badiou 2001: 30)

Affirmatively, whether couched as responsibility (Papanek), as the ability of the designer to address the public as citizens and not consumers (van Toorn), or as the infusing of "humane intelligence" into the made environment (Frampton) *this* ethics would

- counter the nihilism of our cultural and social inability to designate the dimensions of a human good beyond that of the market—and instead insist that the many and varied dimensions of the good can be articulated substantively and made evident
- have the confidence to reassert—over against the market—the absolute primacy of the interests of human beings in a humane future

- posit the possibility of truly human—humane, sustainable—ways of making and remaking the world

4. BUT WHAT, SPECIFICALLY, CAN DESIGN—CONSIDERED AS ETHICS—ADDRESS?

If we bracket the narrow professional concerns of design and rather begin to look structurally at design in this expanded field of relations—which is what positing the possibility of sustainable ways of making and remaking the world involves—we can understand that essentially design relates to four moments: those of persons, relations, situations, and contexts. The ethics of design concerns how we address these.

The First Is Persons

Design begins and ends with its relation to persons: the ethical core of design lies in the relation of reciprocity established in any act of human making. A perception about the frailty, resilience, and dependence upon things of persons is projected into an artifact that can reciprocally answer these needs (as the pain of standing is relieved by constructing a chair). Design—in no matter what form—is nothing more (or less) than the self-conscious elaboration and exploration of this fundamental relationship. The problem with this exploration is that, turned into a quasi-autonomous activity (or worse, into a profession), design forgets its ontological roots. The work of design ethics is to bring back design to these origins—and to think about the consequences of so doing. (On the relation of persons and making see Scarry, 1985, chapter 5; Dilnot 2005, especially 87–104).

The Second Is Relations

Relations means here the infinitely multiple, complex, and variegated relations of human beings to the things they make—*including, of course, themselves and, today, the world as a whole* (for today that too is a made thing). Design is, of course, in its essence, *about* relations. What design *designs* are the relations between things and persons and things and nature. Nonethical design reduces these to commodity relations (reduces all that a thing can be for us to the imaginary of the act of its purchase) or to a utilitarian operative relations (the kind that Adorno criticized when he lamented that

> technology is making gestures precise and brutal and with them men. It expels from movements all hesitation, deliberation, civility. ... Not least to blame for the withering of experience is the fact that things, under the law of pure functionality, assume a form that limits contact with them to mere operation, and tolerates no surplus ... which ... is not consumed in the moment of action.
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> (Adorno 1974: 40).

By contrast, ethically informed design (in the sense meant here) *contests* both reductions. It reverses the "loveless disregard for things that eventually turns against persons" (Adorno 1974: 39) and insists that if indeed evil is the reduction of things—including the reduction in the complexity and density of relations that a thing or a person is permitted to enjoy—then the good is the enhancement of relations. Ethics, we might say, works to *proliferate* relations.

The Third Is Situations

In the best and simplest definition of design we have (that by Herbert Simon in *The Sciences of the Artificial*), design is the process of planning and devising how we transform "existing into preferred" situations (Simon 1996: 111). Specifically, design addresses the infinite potential in situations. *Infinite* means here two things. It means, first, that the potential network of relations that a situation actually or potentially sustains always exceeds the state in which we encounter any situation (were this not the case no transformation could ever happen). Situations then are

inherently open, inherently full of possibility. Second, *infinite* means the ability *of all situations* to be transformed, for the better, in our interests. Design is the process, then, of seizing and realizing the potential of situations (a) to be transformed; (b) to be so on behalf of or in the interests of or for the project of, *persons.* (On the ethics of situations see for example Badiou 2005 and Bauman and Keith 2001: 13).

To put this another way, the difference between ethical design and design that eschews ethics is that the former insists that what matters in situations is not their market value, not the capacity to be exploited and reduced for profit, but the human implications of the situation: its capacity to hold promise for how we can better—*which today means more sustainably*—live our lives.

The fourth address is to the *context(s)* we inhabit. We will consider this in the next section.

5. IS THE ARTIFICIAL THE REAL SUBJECT MATTER OF DESIGN?

In truth, the contexts that design potentially addresses are multiple. Persons, relations, and situations are all contexts. It is easy to add to this the physical contexts of the environments within which we exist. But is the deepest context of design the artificial?

The Artificial

Design is bound to artifice. It exists only because we make things and because in making things we sunder them from us—and therefore require design to ameliorate this sundering. On the other hand, and particularly today, the artificial is the context for our lives. Industrialization induced the major break from modes of existence in which it was still possible to posit nature (and gods) as the horizons of our existence. Today, at least as far as our finite lives are concerned, these horizons have vanished. The years 1945 (Hiroshima) and then again 2005 (global warming) mark the points at which human society entered a watershed in which the artificial became the horizon and medium of our existence. Since then we have experienced a break not only with the past but with the continuity of the future. The destructive potentials first of unleashed technology (the A-bomb and then the H-bomb) and then of unlimited and rapacious economic growth (global warming) has instituted a break with the future such that today the future is no longer assured to us. This changes the work our culture has to do. Our work today is to create the conditions for a (humane) future to come about and to prefigure the possibility of a humane and mature attitude toward the artificial (and hence toward nature). But to do this we must know what the artificial can be, and this we do not know. Design is a way—in many arenas the only way—of exploring the artificial in terms of exploring what are its possibilities *for us.* (See Dilnot 2005: 15–35; 41–53.)

The Ethics of Discovery

As is made clear below, this is not without ethical or social importance. Milan Kundera makes the point that the ethics of the novel lives on the discovery of hitherto unforeseen possibilities for human existence (Kundera 1988). The same point applies to design: design is the discovery of what the artificial can be for us. Since the artificial is also today the frame of our possibilities as human beings, to discover what the artificial can be *for us* is to discover what our possibility can be, and hence (here its third dimension), it is also a discovery of what possibility can be. This too is ethically significant since for us, possibility has been reduced, very largely, either to the economic extrapolation of what is (more) or to what, technologically, can be made into a product. It is germane to the crises we face that we no longer think about possibility in general, nor do we by any means fully understand what artifice and the artificial can mean for us (meaning here: mean for us—for our lives—other than as the production of things for consumption and profit). By contrast, design is a deliberation about the possible conducted not only in thought (though its speculative, conceptual dimension

should not be ignored), but through emblematic constructions in the form of propositions—prototypes—that have the typographical form "this!?"—meaning that they are at once assertions and questions, both real and prefigurative (real and fictive) in the same moment.

What designed products emblematically explore are the possibilities of how we can live (well, badly) with the artificial, which is our product. Design is a teaching (which means also a learning) concerning how we can contend with what we have made.

6. WHAT IS THE RELATION BETWEEN THE ETHICS OF DESIGN AND ACTING ETHICALLY IN THE WORLD IN GENERAL?

We can answer this question three ways:

1. Traditionally, ethics concerns the assessment of well-being (in Greek, the search for the "good" way of being). Today, we understand that the search for well-being takes us *through* making. But this means that ethics today has to be not (only) a series of prescriptions for how we might behave but also—or even primarily—a mode of transitively and substantively acting in the world. Ethics in general is therefore a process of *exploring* the ways that we can live well with making. This is not different from the work of design.
2. One problem we now face in the world is that as the horizon and medium of the world becomes, increasingly, artificial—as, in effect, we displace nature and re-create our world over as artificial—so we have to think and understand what it means to live, well, in an artificial world. This, as we know, we are failing (dramatically) to do. Not only do we need a mode of acting in relation to the artificial that can allow us to develop more sensitive and attuned relations between persons and things and between the artificial and the natural as a whole, but we need to *learn* what it might be to act well in a world defined by the artificial. Design can be conceived of as par excellence an activity of learning how we can be (well) with the artificial.
3. Although conventionally we separate designing from acting in the world in general, this is a product of a historical division of labor induced by the Industrial Revolution, whose relevance may now be passing. That this might be so—and that therefore the difference between design action and acting in the world might be so much less than we have thought is suggested by work of the late English philosopher Gillian Rose. In her last book, *Mourning Becomes the Law* (Rose 1996), it is possible to discern the plan for a mode of acting that is simultaneously ethical in the work it can achieve and wholly congruent with design. In Rose's formulation, what she called "activity-beyond-activity" has as its characteristics that it privileges,

   - learning: for learning, "mediates the social and the political: it works precisely by making mistakes, by taking the risk of action, and then by reflecting on its unintended consequences, and then taking the risk, yet again, of further action" (Rose 1996: 38)
   - risk, or action without guarantee: "for politics does not happen when you act on behalf of your own damaged good but when you act, without guarantee, for the good of all—this is to take the risk of the universal interest" (Rose 1996: 62)
   - creative action as negotiation: for acknowledgment of the "creative involvement of action in the configurations of power and law" and of "the risk of action, arising out of negotiation with the law" (Rose 1996: 12, 36, 77) is a precondition to being able

to act in relation to these configurations, as against merely evading the ambiguities and anxieties that they give rise to

- positing: which refers, in Rose's language, to the "temporarily constitutive positings" (Rose 1996: 12–13) of actors, which "form and reform both selves"; this "constant risk of positing and failing and positing again I shall call "activity beyond activity"' (Dilnot 2005: 78)

Note that these characteristics of action are not only highly congruent with design; *they are a way of describing design.*

7. HOW DO THE SINGULAR ETHICS OF DESIGN CONNECT TO CRUCIAL QUESTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ETHICS AS A WHOLE?

Learning; risk, or action without guarantee; creative action as negotiation with power and law, and an understanding of action as iterative positing are all, and particularly in their combination, potentially modes of acting in the world in a design-congruent way that have resonance beyond the usual limits of what we think of as (non-transitive) ethical action. For example, against the failure of the (traditional) ethical imagination in relation to the "fast expanding realm of our ethical responsibilities" (Bauman 2006: 99) and in the absence of (other) modes of acting in the world that can put "what-is" and its de-futuring consequences at a distance (that can measure it and, in gauging it and its consequences for lives, reassert the primacy of the latter over the "errancy" of the former); then transitive and substantive imagination of design conjoined with Rose's "activity-beyond-activity" has something powerful to offer in terms of ethics as a whole.

In particular, an ethics that could conjoin (as an ethics informed by design could) imagination, transitive action, the perception of the possibility inhering in situations, and the capacitive to be prefigurative (to give only a random list of what would be within the ethics of design as sketched earlier) would have at least a chance of addressing; for example,

- the fear and trepidation, not to say stasis, that we feel vis-à-vis the future—since to break the grip of the latter we need prefigurative possibility as a core attribute
- the unsustainability of what is—since it is only as a praxis that combines ethical and behavioral injunctions with material inscriptions and enactments that sustainment can even begin to be realized as a project
- the radical incompatibility between the destructive potential of unleashed technological and economic forces and the weakness of ethical injunctions or social abilities to productively direct or orient technological and economic potential—since it is only when the latter is internalized in praxis is there the possibility of dealing with this threat

If this is the case, then it becomes possible to see design as one element in a militant material practice, executed on behalf of subjects and on behalf of the project of the sustainable and the humane.

8. HOW IS THE ETHICAL AXIOM MANIFEST IN DESIGN?

We will neglect here the interesting question of the ethics latent in the processes of design and the capabilities that it patterns and subtends. Answering these questions would confirm further a conclusion that should be already apparent—that ethics is internal to design, properly understood.

But if ethics is internal to design, there is also an ethics of drawing out and making manifest this potential. The modes of so doing are infinite, for no prescription can be given in advance as to what might constitute an ethical drawing out of these possibilities. Nonetheless, three strategies in particular stand out—the exercise of radical

compassion, the address to dignity, and the reconception of the "achievement of the ordinary."

Radical Compassion

At the core of design is an ontological and anthropological act—making as the making of self—which is also a meditation on and a realization of being. The obliteration of this origin is what marks most nonethical design and is the cause of the attacks that Papanek, van Toorn, and Frampton were each impelled to make. Conversely, all ethics begins with compassion. It is inconceivable to imagine an ethics (as against a morality) that does not begin from a solidarity toward living beings, which is founded upon something other than their formal rights as subjects, and which is grounded in substantive apperception of the suffering and possibility of others.

This is by no means only (only!) a moral injunction. We should equally see it as a historical project—for it is, after all, the loss of global compassion, or more precisely, the inability to make compassion matter and therefore keep it in play as more than a weak, transitory, and essentially personal matter (we could say: the inability to make compassion political)—that marks the last century and that already threatens this one. In this context, compassion and solidarity are political as well as ethical moments, and this should not be forgotten, particularly by those for whom compassion seems a somewhat less than sufficiently engaging political concept.

The element of compassion translates, in the first instance in design, in the language of one of the best accounts we have so far concerning this—the final chapter of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (Scarry 1985)—to a perception concerning the pain of others and the ability of the designer to relieve that pain, not merely through expressions of sympathy but though the translation of that understanding into a self-standing artifact that is operative in relation to that pain. The ethical moment of this designing–action is captured most economically in the formulation Scarry offers when she notes that although the resulting artifact cannot itself "be sentiently aware of pain, it is ... [in] itself the objectification of that awareness; itself incapable of the act of perceiving, its design, its structure, is the structure of a perception" (Scarry 1985: 289). What Scarry's observation immediately conveys is the sense that what the designer offers, ethically, is two-fold: that is, a quantum of (empathic and imaginative) perception concerning a situation, together with (and this is where professional expertise comes in) the capacity to translate that perception into an objective or standing form that is capable, simultaneously, of understanding, recognizing, meeting, and extending needs. All three are significant. None of the three are merely technical; none can be dispensed with, and in none can the question of ethics as we are posing it here be bracketed.

The Reconception of the "Achievement of the Ordinary"

If "radical compassion" equates, roughly, to the address to the subject, the reconception of the "achievement of the ordinary" equates to the manner in which we bring back under thought—under the aegis of a human project—the relations, situations, and contexts that constitute everyday life. This can easily be seen from a traditional point of view (conservative or radical it scarcely matters) as a descent into banality. Nietzsche might make us think differently about this, as might also a poet like Wallace Stevens. For Stevens, the task of the poet is the saying of the plainest things, to get "straight to the transfixing object" (Stevens 1955: 471). In turn, for Nietzsche, it is the plainest things that deliver us from the forgetting of being—or in Vattimo's paraphrase: "when the origin has revealed its insignificance ... then we become open to the meaning and riches of proximity. ... [In those moments,] the nearest reality, that which is around us and inside of us, little by little starts to display color and beauty and enigma and wealth of meaning—things which earlier men never dreamed of" (Vattimo 1988: 177, 169).

Perhaps this suggests that what Stevens elsewhere calls the "vulgate" of experience, or what Nietzsche calls the realm of the "nearest things," are the spaces in which design operates at once at its most subversive, and at its most ethical. The trope of modesty folded with those of the "plainest things" and the "nearest things" gives a double ethic: to deal at once, *as tenderly as possible,* with the proximity of things and life (my example would be the adult Shaker rocking cradle found in the infirmary in Hancock Shaker Village, used to ease with gentleness the last hours of aged Shakers) and, on the other side, to understand design as the activity in which one pursues a practice that can help deliver us, in Simon Critchley's words, from the "actual ... to the *eventual everyday*" (Critchley 1997: 118).

The first of these moments fulfills the requirement of responsivity identified by both Bahktin and Levinas (if differently) as the core of our ethical "answerability" to the world and to the other. To be *practically disposed* toward responsivity may in fact be the most fundamental mark of the ethical. But what is interesting about design is that the responsivity called for here is *double:* The subject is *also a situated possibility.* The situation is the everyday. Design lives in the impurity and even banality of the everyday: Its ethical work in this respect is the enhancement of the density of discriminated affirmative relations that a situation or an object is capable of delivering on behalf of the subject, seen, of course, not as a consumer, but as a project (the project of "becoming (finally) human").

The Address to Dignity

Finally, no adequate ethics is possible that does not address and today defend—to the point of extremity—the dignity of the subject. We are realizing today that only the defense of dignity saves the subject as a political subject and therefore preserves the possibility of our having some defense against the possibility that we may be dismissed even from the fragile position of the consumer and thus find ourselves literally in the wasteland of the superfluous—those declared outside the realm of the social. (On the day that I write this in May 2008, there are reports of attacks on refugees in South Africa; meanwhile, in Italy, the new government begins moves to expel the Romany population—whom, shades of 1933, it is treating as the scapegoats for the state of the Italian economy). In this respect there can be no compromise: the axiom or the criteria of dignity toward the subject or subjects to whom work is addressed is the beginning of the act.

If for design, the defense of dignity begins with the degree of recognition accorded the subject to whom work is addressed, design has a particular role, as is widely recognized, in terms of the public sphere. Gui Bonsiepe, in the paper referred to earlier, makes the case most elegantly:

> As the third design virtue in the future, I would like to see maintained the concern for the public domain, and this all the more so when registering the almost delirious onslaught on everything public that seems to be a generalized credo of the predominant economic paradigm. One does well to recall that the socially devastating effects of unrestricted private interests have to be counter-balanced by public interests in any society that claims to be called democratic and that deserves that label.
>
> (Bonsiepe 1997: 107)

This is a wonderful statement, which economically nails the case—the ethical, but also, in the broad sense, the political case—for the public domain.

It seems to me essential, politically speaking, but also on behalf of ourselves as subjects, that the public domain be revalued, and in more than honorific ways. This is not just a matter, though in my view this is not insignificant, of helping to create the "public sphere" (much maligned though that concept has been in the last decades). It is also an issue of creating the kinds of spaces and domains, mental as much as physical (though the latter seem to me in large part the necessary initiators of the

former) in which subjects can again find themselves as "citizens"—and this term seems necessary to revive in the sense that the term "subject" has today almost entirely lost all connotations of citizenship.

So denuded, in fact, is this latter concept that it becomes almost possible to forget that there is a complex realm of subjective life that is not delimited by work, the immediate demands of family, or consumption. This forgetting is not merely in the mind. In the last half-century it has begun to be reflected in the "habitus" we inhabit, literally as well as ideologically. When Bonsiepe talks about "the almost delirious onslaught on everything public that seems to be a generalized credo of the predominant economic paradigm," one aspect he is surely referring to is the erosion of the urban to a condition in which, particularly in the United States, but also in Europe (as well as globally across nearly all pockets of the "developed" economy), the urban is reduced to nothing but a finely calibrated machine or system for consumption. Today, generalized distributed and privatized settlement is linked not to the city as the locus of the public realm beyond the life of the family, but only to sites of consumption. In effect, the latter has consumed the former. The significant results of this process are not only such developments as the effective loss of the small town (with its, however small, sense of urban complexity and density introduced into rural areas; the necessary counterpoint to what was historically relative rural isolation), but, much more seriously, the wider flattening and closure of spaces and realms of experience, such that nothing else is now able to obtain except a spiraling interaction between family/home, consumption, and entertainment. In these spaces and environments, what is lost is everything that does not pertain to consumption in the moment.

9. WHAT EXAMPLES OF ETHICAL APPROACHES TO DESIGN MIGHT BE OFFERED?

Space does not permit elucidating examples. But in any case, they could be legion. For even in its most repressed moments, the negation of the ethical is rarely wholly complete—which is why, with much complacency, the design professions assure themselves that they are indeed, at heart, ethical. Given that we do not have the space to discuss individual cases, it might be better to list the virtues (in the old-fashioned sense) on which a radical ethics (one that takes the measure of a life and a practice) can be grounded. One of these is renunciation, in the sense of the ability to renounce what is false, for example, the architect Luis Barragan, in Mexico, in 1940, renouncing speculative modern architecture on the grounds that the activity corroded the conditions necessary for dwelling. The ability to take that critique and, rather than capitulate to what is, or retreat to cynicism or into the profession, to turn that critique into critical affirmation, is what makes ethical courage. Similarly, I think of the courage to originate: to place a paradigm at a distance and to draw on previously unthought configurative possibilities—and, in the case of Henry Beck and the London Underground Diagram, to create one of the exemplary *gifts* of twentieth-century design (the gift itself being one of the figures of the ethical). One wishes therefore to foreground *courage,* but also the ability that Richard Ellman, James Joyce's great biographer, discerned in *Ulysses,* namely the capacity—*without illusion*—to be able to disengage what is affirmable in life and to affirm that (Ellman 1972: 185).

10. WHAT, IN THE END, IS RESPONSIBILITY?

Since the essay opened with Papenek's attack on the irresponsibility of designers, it is right and proper to finish on the question of responsibility. To do so I will conclude with the paragraph with which I ended my extended Archeworks lecture on ethics (Dilnot 2005: 147–48):

The demand for the ethical is, at best, a demand for a way of being responsible. But even more emphatically, the demand for the ethical is a search for *lessons* in how to be responsible.

This sense is captured, if incompletely, by Peter Sloterdijk in the conclusion to his essay on Nietzsche. He says this:

> One's misery consists not so much of one's sufferings as in the inability to be responsible for them—one's inability to *want* to be responsible for them. The will to accept one's own responsibility—which is, as it were, the psychonautical variant of *amor fati*—indicates neither narcissistic hubris nor fatalistic masochism, but rather the courage and the composure to accept one's life in all its reality and potentiality. He who wants to be responsible for himself stops searching for guilty parties: he ceases to live theoretically and to constitute himself on missing origins and supposed causes. Through the drama, he himself becomes the hero of knowledge.
>
> (Sloterdijk 1989: 90)

For all its peculiarity, there is something in Sloterdijk's formulation that catches precisely what is required here. His formulation speaks to the precariousness of the enterprise of thinking and acting responsibly—the same precariousness-with-courage that was evident between-the-lines of Gillian Rose's "activity beyond activity," and that is present, to some degree, in each act of designing that takes the ethical axiom seriously and thinks and acts out its consequences. The ethical in this sense is a risk-taking activity, and the best conclusion to this essay is therefore to repeat the formulation that we gave earlier on this, namely, that the ethical "does not happen when you act on behalf of your own damaged good, but when," as Gillian Rose put it, "you act, without guarantees, for the good of all—this is to take the risk of the universal interest" (Rose 1996: 62).