



Writing Visual Culture

Towards a Post-Anthropocentric 'Political Context' in Design Historiography

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Abstract

Context stinks – Rem Koolhaas

That design artefacts and practices ought to be understood in terms of their 'contexts' has become a moot point in design scholarship. Yet, what exactly design's contexts are, what role design plays in their making, and how to study the relationship between the two are still topics in need of elaboration. This paper contributes to these debates by contextualizing the changes in the notion of 'context' in design historiography and by proposing a 'new materialist' understanding of the relationship between design and its contexts beyond anthropocentrism. In the 1980s, design historians seeking to bypass the 'art historical' approach to design turned to the idea that design's social contexts provide insights into its meanings. This strategy has contributed towards the 'de-essentialization' of design as autonomous object. Yet, it has also introduced a problematic anthropocentric perspective on the relationship between design and its contexts, implying as it does that design artefacts are passive vessels whose arbitrary meanings are inscribed by its social contexts. In contrast, 'new materialism' views things not as reflections of social relations, but as their co-creators. This perspective thus entails examining how the materiality of design creates its own contexts, contexts that do not necessarily coincide with those of established—read: human—geographies or temporalities. This approach thus rethinks afresh the relations between design and its contexts beyond anthropocentrism. I focus on the Dutch situation as a case of this problematic and tie it in with broader debates in design historiography.



Dutch design historiography has often been criticized for following the 'art historical template' (Huygen 2007: 430, Simon Thomas 2008: 8, Meihuizen and Tollenaar 2016). This critique entails an understanding of design as an autonomous aesthetic phenomenon situated in a context-less vacuum (Fallan 2010: 4-15). In fact, however, as early as the 1950s, Dutch design historians resisted this framework in search for a contextual understanding of design.

The first attempts contextualized design from the Netherlands in terms of the Dutch *nation*, understood as an entity made up by a homogeneous group of people that share a common culture, ancestry, language and religion. Exemplary of this approach is Jaffe's 1956 study of *De Stijl 1917-1931* (Jaffé 2008 (1956)). There, Jaffe rejects the art historical 'descriptive cataloguing of phenomena' in favour of understanding 'the artist's work' as 'principally a social activity' (Jaffé 2008 (1956): 2). Crucially, however, Jaffe, understands this 'social activity' to be De Stijl's 'national entourage' and 'its inherent traditions' (Jaffé 2008 (1956): 3).

It was not long before Dutch design historians rejected this reductive essentialist approach to the nation as inadequate for understanding design. For this reason, some of them turned to social, political and economic contexts to understand the country's design instead. However, these studies have tended to assume those contexts as coterminous with the *state*, here meaning a self-governing, politically defined territory. The first study on Dutch design to position its topic in terms of social contexts was *Holland in vorm: Dutch Design 1945-1987* (Staal and Wolters 1987). Significantly, however, *Holland in vorm* limited the analysis of those contexts to dynamics endogenous to the Netherlands; for example, by looking at Dutch professional design organizations, Dutch design education, and domestic aspects of post-industrialization. *Holland in vorm* thereby implicitly positions the state as the most relevant explanatory context for design, where the state is understood as a spatially fixed entity limited to the Netherlands' political territory and that develops according to its own internal dynamics independently from external influences.

Social science scholars call the tendency to limit the explanation of phenomena to the horizon of the nation-state 'methodological nationalism' (about methodological nationalism, see: Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003, Chernilo 2006, 2007, 2011, Amelina et al. 2012). One of methodological nationalism's key shortcomings is that it omits the fact that the formation of nation-states is deeply entangled with transnational developments. Therefore, fundamental to transcending the methodological nationalism inherent to studies that contextualize design in terms of the nation or the state has been, what I call, a 'social



constructivist approach' to the nation-state. Starting in the 1980s, social constructivist theorists of nationalism (e.g. Edensor 2002, Anderson 2006, Billig 2010, Hobsbawn and Ranger 2010) started arguing that rather than natural and perennial entities, nation-states are relatively recent cultural constructs, 'imagined communities' that came into being as a result of nineteenth century nation-building processes. Increasingly since the end of the 20th century, some design historians started adopting, even if implicitly, social constructivist perspectives in their studies of national design (by way of example and without any aim at comprehensiveness: Fry 1988, Sparke 1988, Narotzky 2009, Taylor 2010, Fallan 2012, Lees-Maffei and Fallan 2013, Yagou 2013).

I would argue that this had two significant ramifications for the study of national design. The first is a focus on the role of transnational dynamics in shaping national design canons. Building on social constructivist theorists of nationalism, some design historians started examining national design canons as *political constructions*, which is to say, as products of political nation-building efforts rather than as natural embodiments of the nation (again by way of example and without aiming at comprehensiveness: Julier 1996, Gimeno Martínez 2006, 2007, Korvenmaa 2012, Bártolo 2014, Jerlei 2014, Serulus 2016). For many of them, this meant examining how the political construction of national design canons happens not only 'from within' (= methodological nationalism) but is also deeply entangled in developments that transcend country borders. This social constructivist approach has certainly contributed towards the necessary 'de-essentialization' of design as autonomous object. Yet – and this is the second ramification of a social constructivist perspectives for the study of national design – it has also covertly introduced a problematic and tenacious *anthropocentric* understanding of politics design's context.

Classical political philosophy conceives of politics as a separate domain of life where explicitly 'political' activities take place in official institutions and procedures: the state, political parties, policy documents etc. (Latour 2007). Significantly, this view assumes that the source of power is located in *humans* – so much so, that, from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt, classical political philosophy has held that participating in political life even entails one's disentanglement from 'the world of things' (Pocock 1998 (1992)). This is therefore to imagine politics as a distinctively *social* realm and as humans' sole prerogative; when the material appears in these accounts, they play a wholly subordinate function (Schouten 2013). In that humans are positioned at the centre of meaning and action, political philosophy can be characterised as *anthropocentric*.



I would argue that many social constructivist design historical accounts portray politics in terms of classical political philosophies. In these studies, 'politics' has also often been understood as happening within the realm of 'officially political' institutions, with the state emerging as a privileged actor. Accordingly, authors have examined how state discourses – such as design policies, institutes, centres, publications and exhibitions – have contributed to the creation of national design canons.

This political model can thus likewise be said to be anthropocentric. This may sound contradictory given design history's focus on design, or in other words, material artefacts. Yet, an anthropocentric approach to politics implies a view of design artefacts as the passive 'props and resources for the [human] performance' of national identity where their materiality is understood to be, well, immaterial to the creation of the symbolic meanings of national design canons (Griswold, Mangione, and McDonnell 2013: 345). To put it differently, all political agency to create, maintain and disseminate national design is allocated to humans with materials emerging as 'passive surface[s] upon which social forces act and impart meaning' (Domínguez Rubio 2014: 618). In sum, to say that national design historiography is anthropocentric does not imply that it lacks objects but rather that these appear as the mute objects of human politics.

This human-centred imagination of politics has come under fire by new materialist scholarship on political thought. I use the term 'new materialism' here to refer to a shared sensibility among scholars who hold that instead of acting as the passive products of social forces, materials and things actively participate in the shaping of meaning, cultural forms and social relations – and that their agency therefore also needs to be accounted for to understand political reality (Joyce and Bennett 2010). To new materialist scholars, the Anthropocene demonstrates the impossibility of defining a clearly delineated human realm. They argue that, rather than standing *outside* a nature that can be dominated, the Anthropocene reveals that humanity exists in symbiotic relations with a global nature from which it cannot be distinguished; as political scientist Antoine Bousquet puts it: 'We are merely a particular manifestation of a wider material continuum in which we are deeply entangled' (Bousquet 2012: 3).

For this reason, new materialists hold that reality is inherently 'hybrid' rather than composed of humans and non-humans as two distinct spheres (Latour 1993). This understanding replaces the notion of culture as comprising only humans and the notion of the natural, material world as strictly non-human with a notion of a hybrid ontology, which is to say, as comprising both subjects and objects. To be precise, this hybrid reality implies that



no a priori distinctions can be made between different types of being. Thus, the emphasis is not on the interaction between essentially distinct spheres of culture (humans) and nature (non-humans), but rather on transcending binarism altogether by recognizing an ontology that is, as sociologist John Law has called it, inherently messy, impure and heterogeneous (Law 2010 (2004)).

I would like to argue that this new materialist recognition of the entanglements between humans and nature has deep implications for a design historical anthropocentric understanding of politics. Commentators have frequently seized on the new materialist 'flattened out' perspective as proof of its apolitical orientation (for overviews of this critique, see: Berker 2006, Harman 2014). But this is based on a misunderstanding. New materialism holds that all entities are *ontologically* equal. Consequently, no distinctions can be made in advance concerning their relevance to a given situation based on their 'nature'; for example, that the state is automatically more relevant to understanding the construction of national design than a country's climate or a pedestal's colour and shape. What new materialism does not say, however, is that they are all thereby equally *strong* (Harman 2014: viii-ix, 18). Indeed, for new materialism, which actors are decisive and which are inconsequential in the construction of national design is a matter of empirical investigation. These investigations need first of all to be *open* to the possibility that some unexpected things (volume, weight, plasticity, surface area) may acquire significant political capacities rather than deciding in advance that this is the sole entitlement of human discourses and institutions.

In fact, it is precisely this new materialist 'flattening out' that enables the circumvention of anthropocentrism and articulation of a post-anthropocentric concept of politics. Crucially, the conceptualization of reality as hybrid eliminates humanity as a distinct and delimited sphere that politics can be restricted to. Instead, it proposes a flattened space where anything can *in principle* acquire political capacities. Accordingly, new materialism views politics as thoroughly distributed between people and things. New materialism thus moves away from an anthropocentric politics towards a post-anthropocentric political model.

What are the implications for design history? I would argue that adopting a new materialist model of politics requires design history to fundamentally move beyond an understanding of politics as a human affair since it implies that design history's restriction of its investigation of politics to social institutions and discourses is inadequate for capturing the workings of a much more complex and scattered political reality. Accepting this basic premise has two closely related corollaries:



First, *broadening the notion of politics and its sites*. Rather than confined to human actors, discourses and institutions, political agency is dispersed, moving across a range of different, not necessarily human, actors. This means that, rather than confined to 'political' locations and procedures, politics occurs in a variety of sites and practices (as I examine in my PhD thesis: a country's climate, an artefact's visual and material characteristics, the design of a pedestal, global transportation systems) (Ozorio de Almeida Meroz 2018).

Second, *broadening the focus of analysis to the political agency of materials and things*. Transnational design historians have examined national design as a form of material condensation of social processes. To put it differently, they have focused on how (transnational) cultural, economic and political structures shape materials into design objects and practices. In contrast, new materialism is concerned with how materials and things not only *passively* register but can also *actively* influence the creation of shared meanings and cultural products – such as national design. This shift in focus requires design scholarship to broaden its attention from how human politics can structure design artefacts to the diverse roles that a range of materials, physical settings and infrastructures play in enabling and constraining some things in occupying the symbolic object position of national design.

In conclusion, I argue that a new materialist model of politics can contribute to a post-anthropocentric understanding of the transnational construction of national design by enabling design historians to expand their understanding of social and discursive factors in the transnational production of national design with an understanding of the material factors involved in this production.

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