

## Conference Paper

# Design Discourse: An Outline of the Terminological Apparatus

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### Abstract

Design is a relatively young field, increasingly in demand in modern culture – not only within its professionally established limits but also as a technique for generating new ideas and products in business, education, urbanism etc. Strengthening the professional boundaries of design as a form-building activity whose purpose is harmonization of human material environment can be done through a discursive approach. It provides the opportunity to “equalize” the material and ideal origins of design. This article explores the implementation mechanisms and the specific language means of design discourse. The necessity of giving conceptual status of such terms as “concept”, “sketch”, “layout”, “module”, “thing” and various others is shown. This research into the social-communicative aspect of design allows to develop an original and relevant system of concepts that can help not only to analyse the design processes and forms but also to establish its limits. This could help to address a number of more concrete theoretical problems, including specific design methods that distinguish it from artistic, architectural, marketing and general research methods.

**Keywords:** design, design discourse, design thinking, form, objectivity, project, project implementation, concept.

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## 1. Introduction

Design is a relatively young, briskly developing synthetic type of creative activity. It is increasingly in demand in modern culture, and not only within its professionally established limits but also as a technique for generating new ideas and products in business, education, urbanism etc. In this “active” stage of development, design lags behind in thinking through its own opportunities and achievements. Consequently, design theory and philosophy move slower than practice, especially in establishing systematic terminology that could be used to describe and explain morphogenesis. Russian books, dissertations, educational programs on design usually combine a mixture of engineering, marketing, advertising and art history terminology, often equalling graphic design with advertising, design with art etc. This is not only characteristic for

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design (which acutely needs its own terminology), but also hinders social acceptance of design as a profession.

## 2. Methods

The theory of design, which is a mid-level theory, needs methodological grounding, whose search is also difficult, since post-nonclassical thinking has been deeply transformed. At the beginning it is important to eliminate unsuitable or outdated frames and interpretations.

For example, classical rationalism, which, especially in its Russian incarnation, develops the theory of design based on the idea of artistic construction and imagery and, therefore, interprets design as a type of art, cannot serve as a methodological foundation of the theory of design under the new sociocultural and economic conditions. Design is *not* just a construction of objects, it does *not* reflect reality in artistic images, it is *not* a type of public consciousness, and it *cannot* be classified through the material/ideal opposition. To be more precise, if we describe design through this framework, we are unable to provide scholarly explanation of its present and its future.

Classical aesthetics with its origins in early modern period is based on the value opposition of beautiful vs ugly and on the comparison of every object with an ideal; it also cannot serve as a methodological basis for technical aesthetics that requires certain criteria to assess design products, including their practical applicability.

The classical stylistic practices that had produced a stable system of formal and aesthetic requirements bound by inner logic and coherence have lost their cohesiveness and have become outdated. The more relevant approach appeared, based on specialized conceptual projects, where the criteria of formal unity are determined by an author. The most important thing is innovation, the criteria of which are often subjective or vague, as well as economical and use efficiency that sometimes allows to deliberately utilize artistic and extra-artistic tools. [1] For example, kitsch, which is off limits for high art, can be used in graphic or costume design and can produce strong emotional impressions and attract consumer attention; in this case an average designer usually determines how far to deviate from the standards based on intuition, often without any conscious reflection on his/her decisions and their consequences for the aesthetics of for the consumer psyche.

The pragmatism of design thinking, its integration with business processes and marketing communications, create a lot of ethical challenges: manipulation of user perception or behaviour, exploitation of aesthetic values for commercial purposes (as

in styling), correspondence between the declared project approach and the resulting shape, etc. [2].

Therefore, to develop a categorial toolkit of contemporary design, we need a methodological concept that would connect design's material and value-oriented, spiritual and economic, anthropological and environmental dimensions, while allowing to determine its invariable characteristics. It is possible to use theoretical approach to professional design as a type of "discourse" (Fr. "discours", from Lat. "discursus" – movement, circulation, talk, speaking, language activity, mode of linguistic expression). In Western literature this approach is widely used; it is discussed in conferences; discourses of different types of design are discussed (communicative, graphical etc.). [3, 4] The traditional co-existence of Western European and Russian theories of design will likely continue in this respect as well, since their sources, contexts and interdisciplinary connections differ considerably.

### 3. Discussion

Earlier I have shown that design can be interpreted as a system that includes at least five elements: customer, designer, project, its material implementation, critical assessment or criticism, users. It is an open system that can be extended to include, for some types of design and for some time periods, other elements (for example, fashion, national tradition etc.) [5] This system has communicative, economic, technical, value-based and other aspects; it is also "permeated" by the unified understanding or, at the very least, by intuitive perception of a designed form in the unity of its pragmatic goal and expressive qualities.

A concrete form of consciousness becomes a discourse and can be studied as such when it has logical reflection [6]; professional design thinking is a discourse that can be empirically studied. Apart from this, we have, as starting components, a theoretical understanding of design language as a language of forms (W.Gropius, T.Maldonado, P. Rand, D.Normann etc.), as well as the linguistic and philosophical concepts that highlight social preconditions and aspects of realization of discourse.

The theoretical rejection of metaphysical understanding of essences, which happened after F.Nietzsche, makes irrelevant any attempts to interpret designing as such, as an abstract entity (M.Klyuyev, I.Rozenson etc.). On the contrary, discourse analysis aims to study designer as a social actor, as well as social institutions that shape designer's activity, their influence on the design process, the possibility of interactive

projecting technologies increasingly relevant in contemporary media-saturated world. [3]

According to the definition of O.I.Genisaretsky, project discourse is a “process of intellectual and symbolic production of project as text made in a concrete professional project language.” [7] A single object is seen not only as an original authorial “statement” but as a sum result of many paradigmatic attitudes: cultural, regional, subcultural, scientific, technological etc.

Since discourse is an actually spoken texts, for designers its units are objects that answer the questions and needs of various groups of people. These objects are projected based on the results of the preliminary analysis of situation and group; their form is determined not by fantasy or imagination but by the concrete scenarios of human behaviour, movements and conditions [8, 9]. These objects possess the innovative quality, usually arising within a pre-existing type of things to answer more complex needs, specific “demands” etc.

The main concepts of design theory based on discourse approach can be defined as follows. The ideal forms of realization of design project discourse, i.e. its narrations, are: “idea” (in Aristotle meaning of the word, as a form of a concrete object), “image” or “concept” expressed as a “draft” and subsequently as a mock-up. Computer versions, despite their non-materiality, are produced under the same rules as historically earlier material ones. Starting from the initial draft, design discourse manifests itself differently compared, for example, with art: in design the most important consideration is not the object’s artistic expressiveness but its visual clarity, precision of details, technological clarity of rendering, possibility to translate the draft into a production drawing. [10] Object aesthetics in design is intrinsically tied to practicability, functional and practical qualities, convenience and cost-effectiveness of production.

The result of material implementation of design narrations is a form that is commensurable with a human user and his/her needs. [5, p.247] Comprehensibility and practicability of form is based on careful consideration: design discourse has a conceptual quality. The correlation between an initial idea and an object’s shape, and between the object’s shape and the user’s expectations is only possible when the original idea determines the choice of various expressive means and qualities of the object. This may happen in two ways: through images and through logic, which are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually complimentary. [11]

Based on everything discussed above, composition of design product may be defined as a meta-language that contains its own laws of functioning, its own schemes, general knowledge and use limitations. Unlike art language, its themes, metaphors and means

of expression are necessarily correlated with the use of an item; expressiveness cannot be the only goal – it inevitably includes a narrative of use and co-existence with the item. Form is a result of expressiveness shaped by use circumstances.

Design's specific language tools consist not so much of colour or line but of the "modular" elements of different level of complexity, the "combined" and "transformed" shapes and dynamic constructions [12].

Based on its origins, design can be understood as a certain type of project discourse that had appeared in concrete socio-economic and cultural conditions, the most important being technological progress and the development of modernist paradigm of thought connected to pragmatism. Therefore, design's project discourse is highly rational, but it also inevitably has intrinsic contradictions. The conditions under which design first appeared made it an intermediary between the technical systems and forms on the one hand, and humans as individualized holistic beings on the other; design serves the interests of the people and, at the same time, it serves the interests of technology and economy. [2, 5, 9] Since it deals with serial production and tends towards standardisation, there is no need for personalization and for ability to invoke unique emotions. Already during the first decades of its existence, while exploring the ancient idea of the target person of form under the conditions of industrial mass production, design faced the question of priorities. While human beings prefer to exist in a holistic environment, market profitability demands maximal differentiation of this environment through diversification of goods categories. While people differ in age, gender, culture or ethnicity, the designer finds it more "convenient" to draft a standardized average model; as a result of weak decisions, people are often forced to accommodate themselves to an object's shape, and not vice versa.

These are not so much "growth diseases" but rather immanent features of design discourse, which exclude possibility of universally applied correlation between the utilitarian and the aesthetic, the standardized and the individual, the timeless and the fashionable in every design object. Discourse is implemented in a variable way, flexibly reacting to social demand. As such, since 2010s it has attracted an increasing interest of a post-recession business world, as attested by the abundance of unusual solutions. [13] Design thinking begins to replace design as such [14] not just by narrowing the discourse but by depriving it of its most important quality: object expression. It is probably useful for other professionals [15] but dangerous for the design itself, which quickly loses its quality markers and professional borders.

## 4. Conclusion

This research into the social-communicative aspect of design allows to develop an original and relevant system of concepts that could help not only in the analysis design processes and forms but also in establishing its limits. This could help to address a number of more concrete theoretical problems, from the time of design origins to the determination of specific design projecting methods differing from the artistic, architectural, marketing and general research methods.

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