Professionalism, Amateurism and the Boundaries of Design

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The focus of this special issue is the constantly changing relationships between amateur and professional practice during the last century or so, over the course of the ascent of modernism in design. In Europe and the USA, this period has seen the emergence and growth of the design professions and concurrently the development of design practice as an unpaid undertaking in myriad forms ranging from handicrafts, to DIY, to digital tinkering. Given the porous nature of the boundaries between professional and amateur, this introduction does not attempt to define once and for all these slippery terms. Indeed, this special issue demonstrates that it is impossible to do so. Rather, it examines the themes of influence and alterity that recur in design in diverse locations, periods and practices. As we shall see the terms ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ can have both positive and negative connotations and are often contrasted with each other.1

As a whole, the special issue demonstrates that professional and amateur practices are always connected, even when the relationship is one of repudiation. Professional practice defines itself by its distance from the unschooled practitioner yet, as the essays in this collection show, the vernacular is an inescapable part of modern design. At the same time, the professional is often a categorization that amateur designers reject, as a limitation to their creativity or originality. These essays look at the conscious appropriations of vernacular design by professionals and at the rejection by amateurs and working designers alike of professional specialization. They emphasize the complexity of the interchanges between the professional designer and the dilettante and the amateur and the vernacular maker. Professional organizations, educational standards, journals and systems of licensing are instruments through which professions try to define themselves. In the design professions, this self-definition is a continual struggle, in part because everyone engages in design through the quotidian choices we make, from the font and type size in which we set an office notice to the colour we paint our homes.

The professional and the amateur

The term ‘profession’ originally referred to a public statement or vow, and it is only in the sixteenth century that it was used to describe a range of upper class work, principally the practice of law, medicine and divinity. By the nineteenth century, other forms of endeavour sought the social and economic status enjoyed by these elite professions. Nonetheless, the boundaries of the three established professions had been somewhat hazy, as medicine, law and the Church were not closely regulated and had no systematic training. Professional status had generally depended on a liberal university education followed by an apprenticeship that required economic support from family or a patron.2 Gradually these, and newer fields such as engineering and pharmacy, developed specialist graduate and professional schools and systems of licensing and legal regulation that controlled entry and limited competition. Professionalization acts as a system of exclusion by setting up criteria that, intentionally or unintentionally, bar individuals and groups on the basis of money, class, ethnicity and gender. In broad terms, professionalization in Europe and the USA became a means of creating business networks and social arenas that were largely middle class, white and male, maintaining the gentlemanly hierarchies characteristic of divinity, law and medicine.

In design, Jill Seddon has traced the pseudo-inclusion of women in the British design professions in the first half of the twentieth century when women were effectively excluded from upper levels of groups such as the Design and Industries Association (founded 1915) and the Society of Industrial Designers (founded 1930) but were encouraged to take the lead in design activities that were connected with the home.3 The
recent special issue of this journal, ‘Professionalizing Interior Design 1870–1970’, addressed matters of gender in one of these domestic areas, recognizing that ‘issues of professional and amateur status in relation to interior design are intrinsically gendered within a broader gender divide in the history of design’. Women’s needlework in Austria–Hungary, professional female interior decorators and the feminized promotion of synthetic materials for interior decoration in the USA were shown as arenas in which stereotypically gendered roles were, in fact, renegotiated.

Until the 1980s, the history of design was usually seen in terms of the personal genius of individual professional designers and the objects they produced. Indeed, the idea of the design profession is bound up with the establishment of creative individuality, the separation of tasks and the suppression of collaboration with artisans and craftsmen. Rozsika Parker’s The Subversive Stitch traces the origins of this shift to the sixteenth century and the split between professional artists and craftsmen. Artists promoted their individuality whereas artisans were anonymous workers whose labour was collective. Parker also notes an important division within embroidery, as amateur work became associated with the home and femininity.\(^5\) Parker’s study is an instance of the interest in material culture and the significance of design in everyday life that has, since the 1980s, focused design historians’ attention on the work of often anonymous non-professionals. Studies have moved beyond the examination of paid work to demonstrate the importance of leisure activities, for instance Pat Kirkham’s study of the resurgence of handicrafts in Britain between the wars. Craft activities undertaken during leisure time by members of organizations such as the Women’s Institute were outside existing artistic and design hierarchies. Kirkham locates them within a growing appreciation of ‘primitive’ art and crafts and the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement. She states ‘Certain amateur craft work … flourished only when notions of early specialization, narrow professional training and the isolated individual artist as genius were challenged’.\(^6\)

In 2006, a special issue of this journal, edited by Paul Atkinson, drew attention to DIY across a range of activities. The issue traced the democratization of the design process through amateur practices—practices that allowed individuals to find personal meaning and that opened up design to a wider range of participants. Domestic crafts, construction projects such as boat building and fanzine production, among others, allowed those who would otherwise have been excluded by gender, class or lack of expertise to be independent of the professional and gain a sense of creative satisfaction. The issue also demonstrated the importance of fora such as magazines in the support and encouragement of these activities.\(^7\)

It is not only in academia that DIY has become more prominent. Over the last decade, there has been a renewed popular interest in DIY, as evidenced by numerous television programmes such as Changing Rooms and DIY SOS in the UK. In the USA, the resurgence of making can be traced in magazines such as ReadyMade, Craft and Make, which often promote ideas of bricolage and customization. These magazines target a younger and more experimental readership than the audience for the more conventional domestic skills promoted by the Martha Stewart media empire. Indeed, craft is now posited as a form of self-reliance and an earth-friendly means of subverting conformity and passive consumption. ReadyMade promotes the reuse and appropriation of objects, turning tennis racket cases into bags, broken speakers into coffee tables and popcorn containers into lamps. Its publicity states ‘Your home should be a reflection of your own personality, not a hodgepodge of mass-produced whatnots from a big box store’. Its projects often reference the classics of modernism, offering ‘Eames-style’ designs. ‘ReadyMade will excite and stimulate your modern design eye, and help you make your place all yours.’\(^8\)

These attitudes have been supported by recent books, including the contributions of the prominent American designer, writer and educator Ellen Lupton. In 2006, she published D.I.Y. Design it Yourself, a book addressing a general audience that attempts to provide some basic design principles as well as some inspiring practical projects.\(^9\) Lupton regards DIY graphic design as a means of bypassing commercial uniformity and gaining a sense of self-satisfaction in an increasingly corporate world. For Lupton, design skills are essential tools in modern life. In particular, she identifies a generational shift, pointing out that in the current digital environment the impulses to design and to share your designs are now second nature to young people. As Lupton’s book demonstrates, readily available technologies from desktop computers to high street copy shops and digital printing now allow...
individuals to produce graphic design without recourse to trades such as typesetting, print reproduction and commercial printing. Nonetheless, the amateur design that Lupton’s book is intent on encouraging is not envisaged as a challenge to professional designers or their ways of working; indeed, her aim is to provide amateurs with a set of design principles that are at the core of established design education. In fact, she sees DIY graphics as a first step towards paid design work for some, and she maintains that there is room in the business for many more designers.

In practice, since desktop publishing software such as Aldus PageMaker opened up design to the public in the mid-1980s, professional graphic designers have regularly voiced concerns that the status of their discipline is being undermined. These anxieties were epitomized by the designer and design historian Steven Heller, in an interview with Lupton on the publication of *D.I.Y.* Noting the ready availability of computer hardware and software such as PhotoShop and Illustrator, Heller argued:

By making our work so easy to do, we are devaluing our profession. I like democracy as much as the next person, but because of new technologies, the definition of ‘amateur’ in fields like graphic design, photography, film and music, among others, is being redefined. With everything so democratic, we can lose the elite status that gives us credibility.

He urged that a rigorous and specialist education was needed to ensure the authority of designers and maintain the respect of their clients. Lupton countered by asserting:

Perhaps our credibility shouldn’t come from design’s elite status, but rather from its universal relevance to daily life. Not everyone is a design ‘professional,’ a person dedicated to solving complex problems and carrying out large, capital-intensive projects. But everyone can design elements of their own life, from their personal business cards or letterheads to their own flyers and wedding invitations.

Noting that huge numbers of untrained individuals undertook media production in their jobs and daily lives, whether these were personal websites, newsletters or PowerPoint presentations, Lupton suggested that helping some of these people to understand the principles and complexity of visual communication would raise design literacy and the appreciation of professional design. She urged that those who needed design take on a more proactive role, while operating within the conceptual and formal boundaries established by the design profession.

The debates raised within the graphics industry by the advent of desktop publishing are being raised once more, this time within the areas of industrial design and even craft production, as the emerging technologies of rapid prototyping and direct digital manufacture give users the potential not only to design three-dimensional products but also to produce them at will. Such processes question not only the authorship of the resulting products but also the very nature of craft and design. Modernist principles of professional influence become meaningless. Recurring developments such as these are a reminder that notions of professional and amateur are not fixed, but fluid.

Nevertheless, in the Lupton interview, the influence travels in one direction; it trickles down from the professional canon to inform amateur practice. One focus in this special issue is on amateur practice that does not emulate commercial design, but serves instead as a critique of the professional. Since the 1960s, particularly in the sphere of architecture, there has been a call for a greater participation by users in the making of the designed environments in which they live. The essays in this issue suggest that amateurs develop ways of working and aesthetics that exist outside those approved by the experts, and in doing so they can act as models for a revised professional practice. The remainder of this introduction will explore texts that examine this critical role of amateur practice and relate the issues they raise to the contributions in this special issue.

The ghosts of the profession

The rise of the professions in the nineteenth century was associated with modernity, rationality and scientific progress and was embedded within institutions of control, training and regulation such as universities and professional associations. Professional work is intellectual, based on a body of theoretical knowledge that can be applied above the local and singular instance. The professional practice of architectural design, graphic design and product design is tied to the emergence of the designer as a distinct individual, apart from the trades and crafts. The designer is able to achieve an overview of the increasingly complex
production processes in industrial society and direct the work of the artisan, the builder, the sign maker, the potter, the printer and compositor. The English Arts and Crafts movement of the last decades of the nineteenth century, inspired by John Ruskin and coalescing around William Morris, was a response to the tensions and ambiguities that were spawned as mass production both created the role of the designer and also removed designers from direct contact with making. The movement encouraged amateur practice, inspiring men and women to produce their own furnishings and decorative objects.

One of the key figures in the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the nineteenth century was the architect Edward Prior, a founder of the Art Workers Guild. The title for this special issue is taken from Prior’s polemic ‘The Ghosts of the Profession’, one of the essays in Architecture: A Profession or an Art. The book, edited by Norman Shaw and T. G. Jackson, was published in 1892 as a response to the proposed imposition of professional standards by the Royal Institute of British Architects. Shaw and his contributors feared that RIBA’s move would result in a narrow specialization within architecture, accompanied by an inescapable loss of creativity. The writers called for a hands-on architectural apprenticeship that would enable the young architect to understand the practicalities of construction in addition to mastering architectural theory.

Like many of the contributors to the book, Prior was closely associated with Norman Shaw’s practice, having been an assistant in his office for six years before starting his own firm in 1880. Prior’s essay summarizes some of the key objections by the Arts and Crafts to professionalization and was highly critical of the products and practices of an architecture that had become divorced from human needs and society. In contrast, he praised the ‘unarchitectured’ building of the past as proof of the intrinsic design ability within human communities. ‘In the histories of all peoples we find progressive forms of architecture, in which the expression of fitness, instinctively applied to building, shows itself in beauty.’

This ‘instinctive’ fitness and functionality, arising from the people and rooted in place, is something that a later generation of architects in the early decades of the twentieth century would adopt as an inspiration for modernist design.

Prior suggested that it was the commercially driven separation of client, builder and architect that had produced the poor architecture of the day. The disconnection of the architect from the community as a whole led the majority to take a narrow, inward-looking careerist approach to design. In Prior’s account, things started to go badly awry in 1834 with the founding of the Institute of British Architects. Prior believed that this professionalization moved scientific, formal and historical theory to the centre of architectural practice, leading to an empty historicism and formalism. According to Prior, architecture started to be concerned with architecture itself rather than being about making buildings for people. He argued that as firms became more prosperous and expanded, architecture developed into a trade in which large numbers of clerks and assistants laboured at segmented specialist tasks. These invisible workers, whose efforts advanced the reputation of the master architect, were the ‘ghosts’ of Prior’s title.12 This special issue has appropriated Prior’s phrase to describe those outside the design professions whose presence cannot be ignored, figures who are always there in the background whispering that something is rotten with the state of design, that all is not well and that things could be done differently. The strands of non-professional design practice can be broadly grouped under a number of headings, several of which are discussed in the contributions to this special issue.

Vernacular design

In architectural terms ‘vernacular’ was used by Sir George Gilbert Scott and others in the nineteenth century to denote everyday domestic and secular buildings, common structures that were not designed by architects.13 These could include the ‘traditional vernacular’ produced by the mostly rural builders and craftsmen whom the Arts and Crafts movement embraced. They also included the ‘commercial vernacular’ consisting of the furniture and decorative art and the suburban homes that so appalled Scott, as well as Morris and his followers. These were the mass-produced, low brow, brash, mercantile objects that designers from Morris onwards had rejected in favour of the rural vernacular. The commercial vernacular was a challenge to good taste and good design. These vernaculars are associated therefore with traditional or popular culture rather than high culture. There are good and bad vernaculars depending on one’s viewpoint.
Michelangelo Sabatino’s essay examines the ways in which Italian vernacular buildings inspired modernist architects from the 1930s through to the 1960s. His study engages with the complex ways in which the national vernacular was regarded and used by architects and critics at a number of key points. In the 1920s and 1930s, for modernists such as Giuseppe Pagano, the vernacular embodied simple, functional, timeless design, the very qualities that modernism espoused. Vernacular building was placed within a rational discourse of the undecorated, the minimal and the geometric. The economy of means visible in the rural vernacular had, for Pagano, a moral force. As Sabatino shows, this representation was in fact highly problematic and ignored the specifics of economic and cultural change within Italy.

He demonstrates this by unpicking the range of terms used in Italian architectural discourse to describe buildings produced by non-architects, including primitive architecture, popular architecture, rustic architecture and spontaneous architecture. These terms, with their potential for positive and negative associations, suggest the ways in which the vernacular was deployed by different political and architectural factions over a period of time. The relationship between the vernacular and the nation is a key to these shifts; for instance, in the 1930s, traditional rural architecture was being employed by Fascist architects as a basis for a national style of building. These rural dwellings provided Italian designers from both the right and the left with a means of combining the site specific and local with the national in the construction of a modern state. The idea of the unchanging rural locality that we can see in Italian and English discourse was in fact essential to the construction of the modern imagined national community. Design is central to ideas of the nation, and locality has been a significant element in the ways in which amateur and professional intersect. Clearly, much work remains to be done in addressing the relationships between amateur and professional design practices in Asia, India, Latin America and Africa, and the subject would be a stimulating topic for a later special issue.

Dilettante design

Dilettantes are individuals who dabble in a range of activities without dedicating or committing themselves to any one field. The term nowadays has a derogatory implication and suggests those who skim over the surface and do not engage with a practice or subject in depth. Anna Winestein’s essay looks at the historical specifics of dilettante practice in late Imperial Russia. She reclaims the notion of dilettantism as a positive position in opposition to political control and official art, as well as commercial orthodoxies. Winestein discusses the group of highly educated young Russians who came together in the Mir Iskusstva movement, whose practices embraced a very wide field from magazine and book design to advertising and exhibition design, the book arts, stage design and fashion. The breadth and hybridity of their designs for a vast range of media challenged the narrow specialism of establishment practices.

Winestein notes that the educated and urbane Miriskusniki were part of a tradition of ‘amateur participation in the arts in Russia that was largely the product of dominant Imperial institutions and censorship …’. As one response to this authoritarian system, wealthy Russians founded private theatres that avoided official constraints and encouraged experiment and freedom of expression. Many of the Miriskusniki also took advantage of the growth of private art academies and non-Imperial art schools. The Miriskusniki were the products of an educated upper-class culture of dilettantism, whose members were expected to display a broad knowledge of Russian and European arts.

The essay reveals a number of important ways in which the lack of attachment to a specific practice enriched the Miriskusniki’s approach. The members of the group were not tied to institutional hierarchies or to commerce. The open collaborative methods that resulted from this position allowed for cross-fertilization between different creative fields: design, theatre, music and literature. The dilettante’s ability to dabble, combine and cross disciplines, without attachment to an institution or a professional viewpoint, encouraged hybridity. This was most noticeable in the production and staging of ballets and plays, most famously in their involvement with the early Ballets Russe. Up to this point, costumes and sets in the theatre had been the territory of separate specialists. Unlike these professionals, the Miriskusniki were ‘ardent and knowledgeable theatregoers, balletomanes and opera lovers’, who saw all these elements in terms of the effect of production as a total experience. Their ability ‘to be both viewers and creators’ resulted in a
multi-sensual event in which performance, costume, set design and staging were all considered as a whole rather than being confined within specific technical purviews. All aspects of the production, from the costumes of minor characters to the audiences’ sightlines, were judged to be of equal importance.

Who are the amateurs?

Amateur refers to a practice that is not limited or confined by the demands of the marketplace. Like the term ‘professional’, the word has both positive and negative connotations. Although the word amateur is now often used condescendingly and pejoratively to imply an unskilled or naive approach, the Latin root of the word is amator, someone who loves what they do and does it for its own sake rather than financial reward. For example, in the 1880s and 1890s, the title ‘Amateur Photographer’ was used by British and American photographers who wanted to distance themselves from the commercial limitations of high street professionals. Amateur practice is nowadays associated with leisure or hobbies, activities that are part-time, occasional and unpaid.

Two of the essays in this issue, those of Roni Brown and Gregory Turner-Rahman, use interviews to examine unpaid design practice in a nuanced fashion. In both cases, the work undertaken by their subjects is more sustained and more akin to professional work than the label of amateur might suggest. Brown and Turner-Rahman’s focus on the motivations of the amateur is in contrast to studies such as Bernard Rudofsky’s influential book and exhibition Architecture Without Architects (1964) in which the specifics of the maker and their culture are effaced and their designs are recast as aesthetic exemplars of timeless functionalism.14 Both Brown and Turner-Rahman use relatively small, focused samples in their attempts to uncover the impulses and social meanings behind amateur practice.

Roni Brown’s contribution looks at self-building in southern England in the past twenty-five years or so, highlighting the subjective experience of amateur building. By engaging with a small and geographically specific sample of individuals, she is able to look at the vernacular from within. Her builders are not the local craftsmen that Prior praised but untrained individuals undertaking ambitious self-building projects to produce homes in which they will eventually live. Her case study shows that informants acquired complex new skills, in both designing and construction, a process that was both frightening and stimulating at the same time. Self-building allows for a flexible design methodology that is far from the norm in architecture and design.

The design process of self-building, alongside other forms of DIY, is far more continuous and iterative than is the case within mainstream product design and manufacture where design in all of its detail generally precedes manufacture.

The self-builders were able to creatively shape homes that evolved over relatively long periods.

Details are planned, designed and completed over time as resources, and the experience of living in the property, inform the next more detailed set of decisions.

These practices can be seen as examples of adhocism, a term coined by Charles Jencks to describe a post-modern approach to architecture that responded to the needs of local communities. Jencks cited Newcastle’s Byker Wall housing estate as an example of an approach that puts the user, rather than a pre-existing plan, at the centre of the design process. As with the self-build projects that Brown describes, professional adhocism takes time. The bricolage of local and vernacular styles and modernist elements that formed the Byker estate were put together between 1969 and 1982.15 In effect, adhocism involves the adoption by professionals of approaches that have always informed local construction methods.

As Brown shows, self-building is closely bound up with individual narratives and self-identity. Her study demonstrates that becoming an amateur builder and taking on the role of producer rather than consumer gives individuals a valuable sense of agency. These self-initiated designs make the personal tangible. In many cases, the plan for the self-build home is informed by earlier local vernaculars, and is rooted in a locality and, furthermore, connected to the life history of the builder. The design of one home in her sample was based on a desire to reflect the perceived stability of the surrounding Victorian villas, in addition: ‘The local topography was also mnemonic, recalling outings and camping in the woodland to the rear of the property’.

Brown notes that self-building depends on the support of a range of professionals. In some cases, self-builders use pre-made kits as the basis for their homes.
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or employ architectural firms to draw up their plans. Inevitably, these plans come under the scrutiny of local planning authorities, whose regulations limit the freedom of the self-taught builder. In addition, these building designs and the ideas of domestic life that they embody are influenced by professional design discourse in the media. In this case, it is the profession that is the ghost, always lurking in the background, whether for good or ill. Brown observes that the relationship between amateur and professional in self-building has yet to be satisfactorily resolved; the profession is not yet able to nurture and give shape to amateur creativity.

Back in the 1890s, Edward Prior bemoaned the vulnerable status of the freelance architectural ‘ghost’, who could be laid off when business was slack. Greg Turner-Rahman’s essay examines an equally precarious situation for designers in the 1990s. As we have seen, the coming of desktop computing and software opened up graphic design to a much larger group of participants. This is particularly the case in digital design, such as Web design and animation. Turner-Rahman examines the intersections of professional and amateur in the design portals of the 1990s and the idea of ‘design as a pastime as opposed to an occupation’. These network communities provided space for an open exchange of software, images and critiques, an ‘electronic gift economy’ where status was dependent on the ‘coolness’ and novelty of the work one posted. The endless playful exploration of technological options became an end in itself. In these design subcultures, the terms amateur and professional were beside the point, what mattered were programming and visual design skills.

Turner-Rahman notes that in the early days of commercial Web design, these talents were in great demand and those who possessed them had considerable creative freedom. The design press promoted individuals who were able to take complete control of their projects, apparently exercising an artistic independence previously unknown in the design field. This mythology of the ‘design star’ whose practice was more akin to fine art coincided with the ‘Hollywoodization’ of commercial design where ‘jobs are scarce and finite in length’. Commercial digital design struggled to define itself, after the dotcom bubble burst, as designers fought to make a living. The essay traces the shift from the expressive amateur design aesthetic developed through early online net-work communities to a corporate grid-based structure informed by the principles of professional graphic design.

Vernacular modernism

As we have seen, the traditional and rural vernaculars, whether the chairs produced by craftsmen or the structures created by local builders, were perceived to be in a harmonious relationship with their natural settings. Vernacular designs were characterized as particularly pure and authentic as they were made by man rather than machine. Modernity was characterized as sweeping away the traditional and the past, and the rural vernacular became a space of resistance to homogeneity and industrialization, a space from which to critique the alienating effects of modern production. Yet, as Michelangelo Sabatino’s essay demonstrates, these anti-modern spaces were implicated in the rise of the modern. The integrity, directness and simplicity that Prior ascertained in vernacular designs, their fitness of purpose, were to be embraced by European and American modernist architects.

The vernacular then, rather than being in opposition to modernism, can be seen as a means of imprinting a sense of place onto modernity. Indeed, Umbach and Hüppauf have recently coined the term ‘vernacular modernism’ to describe the mix of the local and the universal, which they see as an essential element of modernism. ‘It is not the discovery of the vernacular per se, we contend, that makes it interesting. It is, rather, the negotiation between, and the interdependence of, the regional and the global, concrete località, and border-devouring abstraction, that can generate a new and more complex narrative of the modern.’ They see the vernacular as ‘one of the generative principles of the modern condition’. Despite the fact that the vernacular is the ‘other’ of modernity and is generally invisible in modernist theory, they suggest that it is an other that is within modernism, rather than being somehow outside it.16

Designers continued to alert their peers to the amateur and the vernacular through the 1960s and onwards, choosing different vernaculars and reading diverse meanings into them. Of course these ghosts exist, but their messages are open to the interpretation of those who see them. Take, for instance, just two examples of how the vernaculars were deployed. In Learning From Las Vegas (1972), Denise Scott
Brown, Robert Venturi and Stephen Izenour make the point that it had been easier for professionals to accept the ‘primitive vernacular’ of Rudofsky’s *Architecture without Architects* or the ‘industrial vernacular’ of factories and machines than the ‘commercial vernacular’. Their analysis of the Las Vegas Strip was a means of interrogating modern design practice in order to see more clearly how the formal language of modernism operated. They argued that the study of the commercial vernacular opened up an awareness of the symbolic to architecture, not only the obvious symbolic of the Strip but also of the hidden symbolic in modernist architecture. In an early postmodernist challenge to ‘High-Design’, they saw their methodology as a means of making the architectural profession less authoritarian and more pluralist.17

In 1989, Tibor Kalman and Karrie Jacobs condemned the corporate vernacular. Addressing the American Institute of Graphic Arts, the organization for professional graphic designers in the USA, they restated the Arts and Crafts position in a somewhat different form. The commercial vernacular of *Learning from Las Vegas* had now become a dominant global language. In order to counter the dominance of the market, Kalman and Jacobs urged that ‘We have to learn to listen to our gut instincts instead of corporate rhetoric’. Whereas Scott Brown and Venturi urged architects to look at the Las Vegas Strip, Kalman and Jacobs advised that designers should turn to the local street and its ‘non-corporate, non-designed vernacular’ for inspiration. This simple, almost invisible design was clearly not driven by marketing or focus groups but was, Kalman and Jacobs suggested, natural and instinctive. It was commissioned by small businesses taking care of their local needs using neighbourhood craftsmen such as signwriters and print shops. This process resulted in work that had an unfiltered, emotional directness. Kalman and Jacobs described vernacular design thus ‘Vernacular is slang, a language invented rather than taught. Vernacular design is visual slang.’ The designs they invoked were, they claimed, personal, down-to-earth responses aimed at people. Design should not be an exclusive activity, ‘the sacred mission of an elite professional class’, but should connect with the user. Kalman and Jacobs’ somewhat romantic positioning of vernacular design as honest, intuitive, communal and sincere takes us back to Prior’s image of the vernacular embodied within the community it served, generated by that community and effective because it served community needs. Of course, one might point out that the focus groups that generated the new corporate design that Kalman and Jacobs deplored are composed of everyday people, non-professionals whose responses help to shape the design of their world.18

In the twenty-first century, the relationship between amateur and professional design continues to change. Technologies have had, and continue to have, a democratizing effect on design, from the photomechanical reproduction processes that allowed untrained illustrators such as the Miriskusniki and Aubrey Beardsley to make reproducible images, through power drills, photocopiers, IBM Golfball typewriters, to the desktop computer and digital manufacturing. In addition, amateurs are now tweaking and customizing these very technologies, through, for instance, hacker culture. Professional attitudes to these activities have continued to oscillate between fear and admiration. What does seem constant is that the amateur designer, the self-builder, the Miriskusniki and the vernacular maker are intimately connected to the user, indeed they often are both designer and user. In these cases, the fluctuating boundaries between designer, maker and user have disappeared altogether. For professional designers, whether they design buildings, products, information, furniture or experiences, it is imperative that they find ways of accurately envisioning those who use design, in order to become partners in the creation of successful solutions.

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Notes


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8 Quotations from *ReadyMade* promotional brochure ‘Hands-on inspiration for the savvy designer in you!’ (October 2008). This encouragement of DIY as an alternative to commercial mass culture is not new; the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968–1972) included a great deal of information on making as part of an ecologically driven countercultural self-reliance.


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