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Comments on Richard Buchanan's "Declaration by Design"

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Richard Buchanan starts his article "Declaration by Design," *Design Issues*, vol. 2 no. 1, with the recognition that the instrumentarium of analyzing human expressive behavior has been largely focused on the understanding of language. This is understandable, because verbal discourse is indeed the most versatile, the most information bearing, and probably the most uniquely human vehicle of communication. Yet, as Buchanan observes, the vast output of manmade objects presently represents another, largely unrecognized mode of communication urgently needing attention. To accomplish this, he proposes to extend rhetoric, the theory of persuasion through verbal argument to design – not to graphics in which the communicative aspect is all too obvious, but to objects varying from consumer products to architectural spaces. What are the limitations of such a proposal and what needs to be done to succeed in such a program?

Speakers of a language make statements and construct arguments with the aim of (a) reporting observations, feelings or ideas, and evaluating facts; (b) persuading listeners to change their attitudes, beliefs or ways of behaving; (c) developing suitable interpersonal relationships; (d) participating in the rituals of a community of which they are or wish to

be a part, etc. Designers too construct something, and the resulting objects could be considered analogs of arguments in that they are composed of recognizable elements whose unity is created or recreated by a user when discovering an operating logic for them. An operating logic, which assigns functions to each part and suggests how they work together, is to a thing like a syntax is to a sentence, except that it is more tied to physical knowledge, obtainable by experimentation with the material world, than to mere cultural conventions. Buchanan recognizes this when he introduces "technological reasoning" as one of three qualities of design communication.

With technological reasoning required to understand design as argument, the analogy to verbal communication nearly stops. Objects of design do not typically *report* about facts outside themselves. They are visible manifestations of their own origin, family memberships, and practical use. It is therefore difficult to see how objects *persuade* a user except in the sense of being appealing to the senses and inviting possession, use, and play, which might entail changing that user's preconceptions as to what the object is or can do. To be sure, designers may have a great deal of influence over whether and how someone uses an object and the needs, especially the social-psychological needs, that may be satisfied with it, but this does not persuade in ways we think political arguments do or how personal appeals for actions are effective. Even mere listening to arguments is different from using something. Maybe design is more like poetry, to be appreciated *in use* not convincing of anything else.

"Character" or "ethos" is Buchanan's second quality of design communication. Accordingly, objects become persuasive by reflecting the values, integrity, and competence of their maker. Historically, designers, or one should then say craftsmen, established such *relationships* with their clients by addressing personal needs as individuals, but in our industrial society this is less and less the case. Designers have become anonymous like the mass of their products' users and remain largely hidden behind the facade of corporate advertising. Design labels no longer stand for an admired artist, they are bought and sold behind the scenes. Famous brands are made in Taiwan and the Colonel may have never seen the Kentucky Fried Chicken sold in his name. Yes, the designer of a product may be important but only if he, she, or it can be built into an advertising strategy that tends to be concerned more with selling than with using and employs verbal-visual appeals rather than lettting the objects speak for themselves. It is true that designers at Braun and Krups attempt to deny this "character" by cultivating an ethos of nearly unnoticeable usefulness, but

is this not a reflection of the *ritual* of a community they wish to belong to rather than of their outstanding reputations as individual creators?

"Emotion" or "pathos" is the third and last quality of Buchanan's proposed rhetoric for design. It refers to an object's persuasiveness that stems from its own inherent value, unrelated to what it might be intended to do and is roughly equivalent to pure esthetics.

Extending rhetoric to objects of design is obviously appealing. But what needs to be done to succeed in such a venture? Let us look first to rhetoric proper. One of its functions is educational, to make speakers aware of what they are doing and the forms of arguments they do and could use and to thereby broaden their horizon. Designers could similarly benefit from a design rhetoric if it develops a language richer than the one currently in use to talk about objects, their perception, and use. A second function of traditional rhetoric is normative. The ancient Greeks' idea of science was simply to legislate, perhaps by consensus, what is acceptable and what is not. Designers tend to accept normative restrictions by joining a school or movement or they encounter them in clashes with other design philosophies. I myself would hope that a rhetoric for design would not set such norms implicitly, if at all, and rather open up opportunites not yet envisioned. Although this was not part of its intention, rhetoric has recently served a third function: inviting the possibilities of scientific research on verbal communication. Cumulative empirical evidence about which rhetorical forms have which effects has slowly developed psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge, brought the subject of speech pathology into being, and facilitated the teaching of verbal communication. Designers badly need to develop an analogous body of knowledge in the domain of manmade objects. A rhetoric of design needs to be informed by or validly represent the constraints a society imposes on the use of objects. Too often such constraints are only seen in terms of market conditions that reflect both the values of our consumer-oriented society and the structural limitation of a rhetoric paradigm interested in and limited to persuasion. Not only do we experience different kinds of constraints on the objects we design, for example, psychological, social, and political, but contemporary society also imposes many new ones, for example, ecological constraints, and is in transition to what other writers have called an information society that entails attitudes to objects and values quite different from production/service and consumption-oriented society. Buchanan's categories must be vastly expanded to capture these.

To facilitate research, a rhetoric for design cannot stop where the analogy to verbal communication fails. It must transform itself, take off on its own, and develop ideas, categories, descriptive devices, and explanatory structures that (a) show how the (rhetorical) forms of design (as argument) influence the perceptual-motivational effects, social-psychological roles, and political-economic implications of these objects; (b) correlate its account of the origins and development of these relationships (between forms and use as materialized by objects) with simultaneous technological, political-economic, and cultural changes; and (c) make the function of manmade objects within society (past, present, and future) transparent so as to make options for decision available.

Such aims go far beyond the aims of traditional rhetoric, and I wonder whether other approaches to design might further this program, as well. There is communication research that has transcended rhetoric by developing somewhat more general theories of how people interact with each other and through technical systems. There is semantics that asks questions about meanings and has recently ventured into the domain of the meaning of objects (product semantics). There is cultural anthropology that has always been interested in the functional or constitutional roles objects play in a culture. There is political economics that has focused on the political implications of production and consumption (who is enabled to use what at which price and for what purpose). There are cybernetics and systems theory that have expanded the complexity we can describe. Buchanan's article is insightful, a good step in the right direction, along a path that many people should pursue, taking design seriously as a responsible activity.

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