

# 118 Theories of Design[ing]

Edited by

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# Contents

## 118 Theories

<i>About the Authors</i>	13
<i>Foreword</i>	17
Rachel Cooper	
<i>Introduction</i>	21
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<i>118 Theories of Design[ing]</i>	31
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#01 A Luxurious Theory of Design[ing]</b>	47
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#02 A Duplicate Theory of Design[ing]</b>	49
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#03 An Affordable Theory of Design[ing]</b>	51
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#04 A Possible Theory of Design[ing]</b>	53
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#05 A Disruptive Theory of Design[ing]</b>	55
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#06 An Undisciplined Theory of Design[ing]</b>	57
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#07 A Future Theory of Design[ing]</b>	59
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#08 A Cheap Theory of Design[ing]</b>	61
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#09 An Imperfect Theory of Design[ing]</b>	63
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#10 A Humble Theory of Design[ing]</b>	65
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#11 A Derived Theory of Design[ing]</b>	67
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#12 A Cosmological Theory of Design[ing]</b>	69
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	

<b>#13 An Ultimate Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>71</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#14 A Utopian Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>73</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#15 A Rural Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>75</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#16 A Romantic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>77</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#17 A Radical Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>79</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#18 A Transitive Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>81</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#19 An Unknown Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>83</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#20 An Automated Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>85</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#21 A Repairable Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>87</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#22 A Business Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>89</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#23 A Responsive Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>91</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#24 A Sharing Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>93</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#25 A Climatic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>95</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#26 A Misfit Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>97</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#27 An Anonymous Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>99</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#28 A Comfortable Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>101</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#29 A Paradoxical Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>103</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#30 A Matriarchal Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>105</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	

<b>#31 A Dangerous Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>107</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#32 A Jealous Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>109</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#33 A Mongrel Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>111</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#34 A Tired Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>113</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#35 A Winning Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>115</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#36 A Zombie Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>117</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#37 A Swatchification Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>119</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#38 An Anti-Design Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>121</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#39 A False Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>123</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#40 A Sentimental Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>125</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#41 A Fantastic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>127</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#42 A Plastic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>129</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#43 A Green Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>131</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#44 A Dark Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>133</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#45 A Grey Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>135</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#46 A FabLab Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>137</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#47 A Barbaric Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>139</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#48 An Exaggerated Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>141</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	

<b>#49 A Pornographic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>143</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<b>#50 A Curious Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>145</b>
Constantin Boym	
<b>#51 A Learning Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>147</b>
Maya Dvash	
<b>#52 A Theoretical Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>149</b>
Chiara Alessi	
<b>#53 A Practical Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>151</b>
Chiara Alessi	
<b>#54 Against a Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>153</b>
Chiara Alessi	
<b>#55 A Data Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>155</b>
Will Holman	
<b>#56 A Justified Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>157</b>
Clive Dilnot	
<b>#57 A Mature Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>159</b>
Clive Dilnot	
<b>#58 A Political Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>161</b>
Clive Dilnot	
<b>#59 A Circumstantial Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>163</b>
Clive Dilnot	
<b>#60 A Power Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>165</b>
Marco Petroni	
<b>#61 An Educational Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>167</b>
Marco Petroni	
<b>#62 An Evolutionary Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>169</b>
Mark Roxburgh	
<b>#63 An Uncertain Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>171</b>
Mark Roxburgh	
<b>#64 A Pessimistic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>173</b>
Mark Roxburgh	
<b>#65 A Thoughtless Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>175</b>
Mark Roxburgh	
<b>#66 An Anthropocentric Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>177</b>
Mark Roxburgh	



<b>#67 An Anecdotal Theory of Design[ing] (or a theory about design theories)</b>	<b>179</b>
Mark Roxburgh	
<b>#68 A Jugaad Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>181</b>
Saurabh Tewari	
<b>#69 A Gandhian Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>183</b>
Saurabh Tewari	
<b>#70 A Rasa Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>185</b>
Saurabh Tewari	
<b>#71 A Pluralistically Confusing Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>187</b>
Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner	
<b>#72 An Anti-Design Thinking Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>189</b>
Jonathan Ventura & Dina Shahar	
<b>#73 A Bipolar Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>191</b>
Jonathan Ventura & Dina Shahar	
<b>#74 A Proud Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>193</b>
Jonathan Ventura & Dina Shahar	
<b>#75 A Studio-Based Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>195</b>
Jonathan Ventura & Dina Shahar	
<b>#76 An Inclusive Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>197</b>
Jonathan Ventura & Dina Shahar	
<b>#77 An Inflation of Design Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>199</b>
Jonathan Ventura & Dina Shahar	
<b>#78 An Idealist Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>201</b>
Jonathan Ventura & Dina Shahar	
<b>#79 An Irrelevant Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>203</b>
Joyce Yee	
<b>#80 An Everything and Nothing Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>205</b>
Mashal Khan	
<b>#81 An Immersive Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>207</b>
James Fathers	
<b>#82 A Failing Forward Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>209</b>
James Fathers	
<b>#83 A Tuning Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>211</b>
Heather Wiltse	
<b>#84 A Ludic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>213</b>
Emmanuel Tseklevs	

<b>#85 A Speculative Theory of Design[ing]</b>	215
Emmanuel Tseklevs	
<b>#86 A Global Health Theory of Design[ing]</b>	217
Emmanuel Tseklevs	
<b>#87 A Constructivist Theory of Design[ing]</b>	219
Mark Roxburgh	
<b>#88 A Caring Theory of Design[ing]</b>	221
Jen Archer-Martin	
<b>#89 A More-than-Human(ist) Theory of Design[ing]</b>	223
Jen Archer-Martin	
<b>#90 A Non-Cartesian Theory of Design[ing]</b>	225
Peter Lloyd Jones	
<b>#91 An Early Learning Theory of Design[ing]</b>	227
Peter Lloyd Jones	
<b>#92 A Scientific Theory of Design[ing]</b>	229
Peter Lloyd Jones	
<b>#93 A Catastrophic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	231
Peter Lloyd Jones	
<b>#94 A Disempowering Theory of Design[ing]</b>	233
Heather Wiltse	
<b>#95 A Fictional Theory of Design[ing]</b>	235
Craig Bremner	
<b>#96 An Excessive Theory of Design[ing]</b>	237
Mark Roxburgh	
<b>#97 A Management Theory of Design[ing]</b>	239
Rachel Cooper	
<b>#98 A Design Thinking Theory of Design[ing]</b>	241
Rachel Cooper	
<b>#99 A Messy Theory of Design[ing]</b>	243
Stephanie Carleklev	
<b>#100 A Careful Theory of Design[ing]</b>	245
Stephanie Carleklev	
<b>#101 An Agile Theory of Design[ing]</b>	247
Stephanie Carleklev	
<b>#102 A Ludic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	249
Cathy Treadaway	

<b>#103 A SMART Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>251</b>
Delfina Fantini van Ditmar	
<b>#104 A 1.5°C Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>253</b>
Delfina Fantini van Ditmar	
<b>#105 A Cultural Generational Communal Iterative Generative Collaborative Relational Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>255</b>
Danièle Hromek (Budawang/Yuin) & Jacqueline Gothe	
<b>#106 A Plurality Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>257</b>
Nelly Ben Hayoun	
<b>#107 A Designer-as-Mythologist Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>259</b>
Nelly Ben Hayoun	
<b>#108 An Ontological Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>261</b>
Arturo Escobar	
<b>#109 A Materials' History Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>263</b>
Arturo Escobar	
<b>#110 A Communal Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>265</b>
Arturo Escobar	
<b>#111 An Autonomous Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>267</b>
Arturo Escobar	
<b>#112 A Pluriversal Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>269</b>
Arturo Escobar	
<b>#113 A Post-Economic Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>271</b>
Arturo Escobar	
<b>#114 An Of the South(s) Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>273</b>
Alfredo Gutiérrez-Borrero	
<b>#115 An Indigenous Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>275</b>
Alfredo Gutiérrez-Borrero	
<b>#116 A Declassified Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>277</b>
Alfredo Gutiérrez-Borrero	
<b>#117 A Gendered Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>279</b>
Elaine Igoe	
<b>#118 A Better Theory of Design[ing]</b>	<b>281</b>
Craig Bremner & Paul Rodgers	
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<b>283</b>
<i>Contributor Biographies</i>	<b>285</b>
<i>Index</i>	<b>295</b>



# About the Authors

Paul Rodgers is Professor of Design in the Department of Design, Manufacturing and Engineering Management (DMEM) at the University of Strathclyde, UK. He is also the Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellow for Design in the UK (2017 - 2020). He is a co-founder of the Design Disruption Group, with Giovanni Innella, Freddie Yauner and Andy Tennant, who strive for positive change in health and social care and elsewhere.

Craig Bremner is Professor of Design at Charles Sturt University, Australia. His research deals with developing methods to discover and to value why 'not-knowing' is an essential beginning point of design practice.

Paul is from Glasgow, Scotland, and Craig is from Sydney, Australia. We met at Northumbria University where, on the same day in November 2009, we started working for the School of Design. In the new, large open-plan office in the new, large Design building, we were allocated the last two vacant seats, side by side, in the farthest corner of the office. Even though Craig had worked in Glasgow for several years and Paul had contemplated a very good job offer in Sydney, we hadn't met until this moment. And a bit like schoolboys seated together randomly in a very traditional Design School, we quickly discovered we had a very well informed, but mutinous, take on Design.

With that shared knowledge and attitude, we began our collaboration with a paper for a conference on the PhD in Design, where we urged the candidate to be undisciplined and irresponsible. Soon after, we wrote our first Charter - "Design School: Undisciplined and Irresponsible" - which we have performed several times at conferences, often by invitation. To us, Design is now so affected that sometimes we cannot resist writing a response to calls that simply invite mutiny. More often we send each other ideas or challenges to fracture the commonplace Design promises. When an idea takes hold, we write and then search for a publisher. We get a bit peeved when what we write is rejected by orthodox reviewers who want affirmation, not critique. Despite this reaction, everything we write finds its way into publication. We also write in relay from different countries and

time zones - one writes until we have had enough and sends it to the other and so on - which means that often one works while the other one sleeps. If the morning email has an attachment, then we have to do something. If not, we take it easy. Working together this way appears to us to be inexhaustible and has produced a lot of publications over the years (see the list below).

More recently, we have embarked on a series of international workshops that focus on the relationship between the act of Design and the gesture of Care. Something that is very dear to us. At the first of these workshops, we produced our second Charter - “The Lancaster Care Charter” - a format we like. Our main challenge is to always remain challenging.

### **Books**

Design School: After Boundaries and Disciplines

Design School: The Future of the Project

Does Design Care...?! Head-to-Head Debates

An Illustrated A to Z for the Design of Care

Does Design Care...? An International Workshop of Design Thought and Action

### **Charters**

The Lancaster Care Charter

Design School: Undisciplined and Irresponsible

### **Book Chapters**

The Design of Nothing: A Working Philosophy

### **Journal Papers**

A is for Anthropocene: An A–Z of Design Ecology

Paradoxes in Design Thinking

The Concept of the Design Discipline

An A to Z of Contemporary Design

Exhausting Discipline: Undisciplined and Irresponsible Design

Design Without Discipline

Alterplarity - “Alternative Disciplinarity

**Conference Papers**

Design School: Undisciplined and Irresponsible

Design School: Design Education in the Age of Digital Capital

Alterplinary: The Undisciplined Doctorate and the Irresponsible Candidate





# Foreword

Rachel Cooper

Paul Rodgers and Craig Bremner will explain that their collaboration and writing in design is led by rejecting orthodoxy. They write together to present “*ideas or challenges to fracture the commonplace that Design routinely promises*”. So, one might ask why a book of 118 Theories of Design(ing)? As both a practising designer and now a design academic, I have always held a certain antipathy towards theory and theoreticians. And, to some extent, like the author and commentator Will Self (2019) have been “Against Theory”, because in his words theories (especially in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences ) are “...*fences of impenetrable prose designed to keep people out...*” Actually, building on what Max Weber (1978) described as social closure and the tendency of groups to restrict entry to outsiders by building barriers, Design is not (should not) be a profession or a discipline built on that premise.

This is not a book designed to keep people out, nor one which aims to build a grand theory upon which we can predict the future, such as Charles Darwin’s Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection or Albert Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity. The basis for this work is that “...*all design practice (designing) is embedded in discourse*” and thus, these 118 Theories of Design(ing) are, in effect, a proposition, a challenge to orthodoxy. The first challenge is that the contributions are not long evidence-based arguments set up in an abstract language theory. They are short, philosophical, sometimes flippant, argumentative and challenging statements. 118 Theories of Design(ing) is written not only by Paul Rodgers and Craig Bremner, but by many contemporaries working in design that they have happened upon during this compilation journey.

The second challenge is that, unlike science, where theories are created to explain the past or the present and predict the future, the approach to theories of design(ing) taken here, is one that helps us to contest the future, and our fixation on designing the possible and to consider how we might give form to the impossible. Here as Paul Rodgers and Craig Bremner

state: “...*theory becomes the de facto critique of practice...*”, and therefore theory here is the beginning and not the end.

On this basis, if we consider one of the entries - #92 A Scientific Theory of Design[ing] in which Peter Lloyd Jones states that “...*if design exists in the future, then neither the current spaces used to focus it nor the names used to frame it currently exist either. By way of extension, if we accept that design is a nameless, non-discipline that exists in the future within an imagined, but currently unknowable space, where it is made real, then it is plausible to speculate upon a theory of design that is boundless and pre-disciplinary.*” Perhaps so and indeed we are presented with the beginning not the end, but with 118 Theories of Design(ing) to be used to spread the imaginary of design(ing) and enable the boundless, unrelenting combination of theory and practice to work with confidence in the unknowable space that is the future.

As I write this foreword, we are in week four of the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. Never in my lifetime has there been such a drastic social and economic event. Most designers working today have not experienced an event that has such local and global impact; community connection, but increased poverty, lower energy emissions, improved climate but smaller economies. We are undergoing a global reset, corporate and individual reflection on how to survive, what is survival and what it means to be human. Tomorrow, next month, next year are unknowns. For many, we hope we don't go back to the ‘past normal’, but we find a ‘new normal’ or an ‘improved normal’ for the sake of the planet and it's inhabitants. Reflection, observation, discourse, critique, challenging everything and taking action is still the baseline for design(ing). Let's not use the theories here “...*as a hose to water the scholarly allotment...*” (Self, 2019) but to design the impossible and the unthinkable to create a better world post-Coronavirus.

## References

- Will Self, *A Point of View: Against Theory*, BBC podcast 16 August 2019.  
 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.





# Introduction

Paul Rodgers & Craig Bremner

*“The time of theory is today.”* Slavoj Žižek

If, according to the French poet Paul Valéry, a philosophy should be portable, then through this book, we illustrate how a theory should be palpable - perceptible to the senses but impractical to systemization. However, we did apply a system to its composition. Each theory is around 140 words (more or less) and that was a recoil from our initial challenge of 140 characters - the initial length of a tweet; once a benign and sweet description of birdsong but now so toxic we felt it was unseemly. We might give the impression we have also exchanged chirping for carping, but so little of what is ‘in theory’ possible is made actual by design that clearly, something is missing. This book feels the loss of the dream of design and compensates by making a contribution to the sizable account of what is missing.

Foucault has an interesting notion about the writing of books. He says *“I don’t write a book so that it will be the final word; I write a book so that other books are possible, not necessarily written by me.”* (O’Farrell, 2005: 9). Paraphrasing Foucault, we might be tempted to claim that the aim of this book is to once again make possible the future scenarios so essential for the existence of design(ing). But we have also written this book to make clear we are not concerned with the future nor the scenario, but the possibility of the possible – that design is possible. This book isn’t entirely written by us. We have assembled it to also make possible an obsolete meaning of theory; to illustrate a mental view of design(ing); to expand the ‘mental space’ or more fashionably to spread the ‘imaginary’ of design(ing).

## **The concepts, insights and arguments behind 118 Theories of Design[ing]**

Why do we need theory? Where do theories come from? Is the parable *“...design theorists [as opposed to design practitioners] are those that cannot design”* justified? Are the only design theories worthy of consideration those that are rooted in practice? What can one hope to get from design theory? These questions and others are laid out in Gui Bonsiepe’s wonderful book

“Interface – An Approach to Design”. We cannot, of course, expect there to be a single clear answer to these questions.

Bonsiepe, however, articulates one solid argument in favour of design theory. That is, that all design practice (designing) is embedded in discourse. For Bonsiepe, theory and practice have always been closely interlinked. Moreover, design discourse exists amongst universes of linguistic variations that are all part of an indispensable part of practice. A world of design that focuses solely on practice and neglects theory endangers the act of designing to the shadows, “...*which sharply contradicts the cultural and economic importance of design as a central domain of Modernity.*” (Bonsiepe, 1999: 22)

We contend that design theory is important to the global culture of design but given its relative disregard, the concept of this book is to give theory a chance. Like the histories of design, design(ing) doesn't seem to see much future in the past, and theories (or speculations) don't seem to have much currency even while design(ing) seems continually intoxicated with possible futures. In this book we show how design(ing) is constantly rubbing against theories (and vice versa) because for every possible future there is a future impossible – for the irresistible promise of what-might-become there is increasingly the paradox of what-might-not-become.

When Terry Eagleton (2018) states in typically enigmatic style “...*the only image of the future is the failure of the present*” he exposes an inconsistency in design. A design fundamental has always been its ability to discern between the possible (what-might-become) and the actual (what-might-not-become). Design is nourished on the belief that almost anything is possible. But the infinite scope of the possible is limited only by the materialisation of the actual. Because of its addiction to the infinitely possible, the problem for design is almost anything is possible except the actual. This problem exposes a tension between theory and practice that seems to lie in wanting to comprehend a paradox that has vexed both (but mostly practice); namely, resolving the difference between what design does and what design only dreams of doing. This paradox can only find resolution in texts that are mostly disparagingly labelled theory.

The difference between a desirable and an actual state of affairs adds another dimension to theory; that of critique where the tension between theory and practice takes on a new complexion. In the absence of a platform of critique of design, theory becomes the *de facto* critique of practice. Under the banner of critique theory thus becomes a beginning, not an end. In this scenario theory functions so you can read the operating instructions.

If design is about a possible future (or future possible) does theory come before or after all the attempts by design at putting this possibility into practice – i.e. is theory a history or a speculation? By definition theory is a speculation that habit tells us is derived from contemplating the world-as-found. But Flusser (1988: 17) maintains that “...*theory may be understood not as the contemplation of form but of the shaping of it.*” In that sense, design theory is not knowledge gained from the act of designing what-might-become. Neither is theory a service to practice providing insights into designing. Following Flusser’s train of thought and contrary to the habitual use of theory as a way of explaining why the world looks like it looks (Foucault’s “what do does”), theory is a projection giving shape to the world. Flusser’s astute inversion of the role of theory is of critical importance for designing because having exceeded the carry capacity of the world ‘what-might-become’ has become ‘what-might-not-become’. Design is having to give form to the impossible – which for design is paradoxical (Rodgers, Innella and Bremner, 2017).

## Origins

The word theory has its roots in the late 16th-century Greek term *theoria* meaning ‘contemplation’ or ‘speculation’ – two words that frequently feature in contemporary design discourse. Theory, the dictionary tells us, is “*a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something*” (e.g. Darwin’s theory of evolution). In this book of 118 theories of design[ing], however, we do not seek to explain anything. Rather we ask the reader to read the 118 theories of design[ing], reflect upon them and question everything... We chose to write our theories using a limited word count in order to solicit a large number of theories, all of which give the reader ample room to explore the ideas, source their genesis, and expand them as seems to fit the thoughts and actions of design(ing).

## **Its engagement with or implications for practice and thought**

The basis for a theory is the spectacle, meaning both a public show and to look, but if we accept the common notion of theory is ‘to speculate’ we also have to accept that ‘to speculate’ is also to play with financial risks for profit. There is then one implication for theories of design(ing) – dealing with the results of practice risking the carrying capacity of the planet with unnecessary stuff and unfulfilling services while chasing profit. In this book, we do not take a position on speculation but we position speculation as an everyday element in all design thought and action.

## **A sense of the substantive or theoretical issues that might be engaged**

The belief that design comes from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that design is going somewhere (e.g. what design can do). Our view of design in this book reflects the various authors’ views of society. And as everyone now uses the same interfaces resulting in the blurring of disciplines, the theories in this book aim to re-focus our sights on the lost subject of design(ing). Each theory can be read individually and/or randomly, and now all theories have further reading resources that we have listed. Read as a whole the substantive contribution of the book is a restored picture of why design(ing) looks like it looks. Having surveyed this restored picture, it is then impossible for the reader to avoid asking what needs to be done? And we imagine this question will be answered differently by every reader.

## **How concrete examples might be drawn into the argument**

Each theory is a concrete example of theory-in-action as the essential ‘carnival’ mirror for practice continuously distorting what-is to reflect new ideas about what-might-or-might-not-become.

## **How proposals for action might be derived from the arguments**

Design is where theory and practice meet. The separation of theory and practice is another false dualism that we have to learn to overcome. By classifying initiatives as either theoretical or practical, we are not paying attention to the fact that our view of the world is already deeply informed by theories about the world. In saying we don’t have time to waste with



theoretical considerations, let's get practical and start implementing solutions, what we are actually implying is that there is no need to question our perspective and explore alternative perspectives. We are jumping straight into action, offering answers to the questions and solutions to the problems at hand, without stepping back to make sure we are asking the right questions. We fail to explore whether the solutions we are aiming for are yet again solving one issue whilst causing harm and ugliness elsewhere.

Every practical act is deeply informed by a whole set of theories and perspectives. So, the question is not whether we are practical or theoretical, but rather whether we are implementing practice in full awareness of the theoretical frameworks — the worldview and value systems — that inform our practice. Taking a design-based approach can help us to make our practice more theoretical and our theory more practical.

Design[ing] involves activities and processes that lie at the intersection of theory and practice. Design[ing] is where art and science meet. Design[ing] integrates and exploits information from many disciplines where we have separated human knowing and doing. Design[ing] is where we can acknowledge the influences of the past and give rise to visions of different futures.

The book provides a conceptual basis of the subject and area of study – design(ing) – and as such is a classic text on theory. Even more ‘classic’ is our approach, which is intended to challenge or provide an alternative to critical methods and interpretations that are established and traditional. But we have reversed the ‘classic’ origins of theory by taking the practical experience and activity of design(ing) and turned it into explanations of somewhat overlooked and undervalued essays, papers, book articles, words, terms, authors and phenomena that swirl around design(ing), most of which are commonplace and therefore now functions of the mercantile spectacular.

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Slavoj Žižek tells Owen Jones: ‘Clinton is the problem, not Trump’

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/video/2018/oct/24/slavoj-zizek-tells-owen-jones-clinton-is-the-problem-not-trump>

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# Acknowledgements

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We are especially grateful to the following people for taking time out of their busy schedules to write one or more theories of design[ing] - Constantin Boym (USA), Maya Dvash (Israel), Chiara Alessi (Italy), Will Holman (USA), Clive Dilnot (USA), Marco Petroni (Italy), Mark Roxburgh (Australia), Saurabh Tewari (India), Jonathan Ventura and Dina Shahar (Israel), Joyce Yee (UK), Mashal Khan (Pakistan), James Fathers (USA), Heather Wiltse (Sweden), Emmanuel Tseklevs (UK), Jen Archer-Martin (New Zealand), Peter Lloyd Jones (UK), Rachel Cooper (UK), Stephanie Carleklev (Sweden), Cathy Treadaway (UK), Delfina Fantini van Ditmar (UK), Danièle Hromek and Jacqueline Gothe (Australia), Nelly Ben Hayoun (UK), Arturo Escobar (Colombia/ USA), Alfredo Gutiérrez-Borrero (Colombia), and Elaine Igoe (UK).

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# Index

## A

affordable, 32, 51, 197  
 against, 17, 18, 22, 32, 33, 36, 40,  
 121, 139, 153, 159, 177, 183,  
 271, 287  
 Agamben, Giorgio, 157  
 agile, 31, 39, 247  
 Ahuja, Simone, 181  
 Alessi, Chiara, 149, 151, 153, 249,  
 283, 285  
 Alexander, Christopher, 97  
 Al-Wakrah Stadium, 201  
 Amazon, 49  
 AMO, 75  
 anecdotal, 36, 179  
 Angel, Shlomo, 97  
 anonymous, 40, 99  
 Ansari, Ahmed, 273  
 Anthropocene, 14, 117, 169, 177,  
 253  
 anthropocentric, 35, 177, 223  
 Anti-Design, 44, 121, 189  
 anti-design thinking, 44, 189  
 Appadurai, Arjun, 67  
 Apple, 91  
 Apter, Emily, 123  
 Archer-Martin, Jen, 221, 223, 283,  
 287  
 Archigram, 121  
 Archizoom, 79  
 Arendt, Hannah, 257  
 Arnoldi, Jakob, 67  
 Arvidsson, Adam, 67  
 ATM, 85, 197

Aunty Gloria Nipperess  
 (Budawang/Yuin), 254  
 automated, 33, 39, 41, 59, 85, 125,  
 197  
 autonomous, 40, 155, 197, 267

## B

Bachelard, Gaston, 263  
 balancing, 34, 39, 55, 245  
 Balaram, Saranya, 183  
 Barad, Karen, 221  
 barbaric, 37, 139  
 Barcelona, 155, 281, 290  
 Barthes, Roland, 259  
 Bassett, Caroline, 127  
 Battaglia, Debbora, 69  
 Bauhaus, 167, 179  
 Bauman, Zygmunt, 73  
 Baumeister, Roy F., 229  
 Baxandall, Michael, 163  
 Beck, Ulrich, 165  
 Behrens III, William W., 113  
 Ben Hayoun, Nelly, 257, 259, 283,  
 289  
 Benanav, Aaron, 85  
 Benjamin, Ruha, 155  
 Benjamin, Walter, 159  
 Berardi, Franco (Bifo), 59, 77, 85,  
 89, 113, 143  
 Bernadet, Laura, 147  
 better, bettering, 18, 33, 34, 37, 38,  
 39, 40, 43, 44, 51, 69, 73, 77,  
 81, 83, 91, 95, 103, 105, 127,



139, 145, 159, 229, 281  
 Bharatanatyam, 185  
 Bichard, Jo-Anne, 195  
 Bijker, Wiebe E., 219  
 bipolar, 43, 191  
 Blakinger, John R., 167  
 Blum, Andrew, 95  
 Bodkin, Fran, 255  
 Bogota, 281, 289  
 Bollier, David, 261  
 Bologna, 113  
 Boltanski, Luc, 89  
 Bonsiepe, Gui, 21, 22, 25, 73  
 Bostrom, Nick, 173  
 bounding, 37  
 Bourriaud, Nicolas, 53  
 Bowker, Sam, 99  
 Boym, Constantin, 145, 283, 286  
 Branzi, Andrea, 79, 135, 141, 151  
 Bratton, Benjamin, 117  
 Brazil, 181  
 Bremner, Craig, 13, 17, 21, 23, 26,  
 31, 47, 49, 51, 53, 55, 57, 59,  
 61, 63, 65, 67, 69, 71, 73, 75,  
 77, 79, 81, 83, 85, 87, 89, 91,  
 93, 95, 97, 99, 101, 103, 105,  
 107, 109, 111, 113, 115, 117,  
 119, 121, 123, 125, 127, 129,  
 131, 133, 135, 137, 139, 141,  
 143, 147, 153, 177, 187, 227,  
 235, 281, 285  
 Brown, Tim, 189  
 Buchanan, Richard, 171, 223  
 Bucharest, 281  
 business, 33, 36, 40, 43, 61, 89, 91,  
 107, 111, 119, 189, 209, 233,  
 239

## C

Campanini, Cristiana, 141  
 Cape Town, 281  
 capital, 15, 34, 39, 42, 67, 69, 73,  
 91, 93, 95, 107, 117, 121, 201,  
 203  
 capitalism, 40, 59, 61, 89, 93, 95,  
 131, 139, 151, 233, 251, 269  
 careful, 33, 89, 245  
 caring, 39, 40, 93, 221, 229, 263  
 Carleklev, Stephanie, 243, 245,  
 247, 283, 286  
 Carlow, Vanessa Miriam, 75  
 Carnegie Mellon University, 171  
 Carpo, Mario, 225  
 Cartesian, 38, 225  
 Cassin, Barbara, 123  
 Castelli, Clino Trini, 81  
 Castiglioni, Achille, 99  
 Castiglioni, Pier Giacomo, 99  
 catastrophic, 35, 139, 231  
 Chambers, Robert, 207  
 Charles Sturt University, 13, 283,  
 285  
 cheap, 32, 34, 36, 61, 115, 117,  
 119, 131  
 circumstantial, 38, 163  
 climatic, 34, 95, 255  
 Club of Rome, 113  
 Cohen, Benjamin R., 105  
 Cohen, Jon, 231  
 Cohen, Leonard, 61  
 Collaborative, 35, 203, 211, 255  
 comfortable, 33, 44, 101  
 communal, 35, 105, 255, 265, 267  
 confusing, 41, 187  
 constructivist, 34, 219

- Cooper, Rachel, 17, 217, 239, 241, 283, 286, 287
- cosmological, 34, 69
- Couldry, Nick, 233
- Coxon, Ian, 283
- CRISPR, 231
- Cross, Nigel, 241
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, 101
- cultural, 22, 33, 35, 42, 55, 89, 111, 121, 145, 185, 187, 195, 207, 213, 255, 267, 275, 289, 290
- curious, 44, 145, 163, 247
- Curious George, 145
- Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Joel, 137
- D**
- dangerous, 42, 107, 245
- Danto, Arthur C., 111
- dark, 31, 36, 37, 43, 61, 133, 233, 287
- Darwin, Charles, 17, 23, 49, 169
- data, 38, 91, 147, 155, 197, 211, 225, 233, 253
- Dautry, Jehanne, 79
- Davies, Jeremy, 75, 131
- De Decker, Kris, 155
- declassified, 41, 277
- deflating, 43
- Debord, Guy, 147
- Deleuze, Gilles, 257
- Deloria Jr., Vine, 275
- derived, 23, 24, 39, 42, 47, 59, 67, 141, 143
- Design Council (UK), 71, 111, 279
- Design for the Real World, 38, 131, 201, 245
- Design Issues, 57, 73, 151, 169, 175, 183, 219, 223, 281, 285
- Design Journal (The), 26, 103, 127, 147, 197, 217, 223, 245, 287
- design thinking, 14, 26, 34, 44, 103, 175, 179, 189, 191, 241, 279, 287
- designer-as-mythologist, 34, 259
- destabilising, 42
- Devlieger, Patrick, 193
- Dilnot, Clive, 157, 159, 161, 163, 171, 245, 283, 287
- disempowering, 43, 233
- dispiriting, 36, 37
- disruptive, 42, 55, 285
- DNA, 105, 231
- Donzé, Pierre-Yves, 119
- Dreyfuss, Henry, 199
- Droste, Magdalena, 179
- Dubberly, Hugh, 279
- Dunne, Anthony, 191, 215
- duplicate, 42, 49
- Dvash, Maya, 147, 283, 287, 288
- E**
- Eagleton, Terry, 22, 25
- early learning, 34, 227
- Edinburgh Napier University, 283, 285
- Edison, Thomas, 41, 209
- educational, 33, 111, 167
- emoting, 35, 36
- Escobar, Arturo, 203, 261, 263, 265, 267, 269, 271, 283, 288
- Esquerre, Arnaud, 89
- Ettinger, Bracha L., 279
- everything, 13, 18, 23, 35, 36, 38,

40, 41, 42, 63, 73, 77, 83, 85,  
115, 145, 149, 165, 167, 175,  
191, 205, 207, 215, 245, 251,  
255, 265

evolutionary, 34, 169

exaggerated, 33, 43, 141, 191

excessive, 33, 237

Eyben, Rosalind, 207

## F

FabLab, 33, 137

Facebook, 67, 123, 133

failing forward, 41, 209

false, 24, 43, 123, 203

fantastic, 39, 41, 127, 197, 283

Fantini van Ditmar, Delfina, 251,  
253, 283, 288

Fathers, James, 207, 209, 283, 288

fictional, 38, 81, 235

Fiksdahl-King, Ingrid, 97

Fischer, Berenice, 221

Fitzgerald, Neil, 47

Flores, Fernando, 261

Florida, 139

Flusser, Vilém, 23, 26, 69

Forlano, Laura, 177

Foster, Hal, 147, 187, 263

Foucault, Michel, 21, 23, 26, 49,  
53, 235

Foust, Mathew A., 185

Frank, Robert H., 47

Frase, Peter, 59, 93

Fraser, Nancy, 93

Fry, Tony, 157, 161, 245, 261, 273

Fuad-Luke, Alastair, 55

Fuller, Buckminster, 231

future, 14, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 25,

39, 41, 42, 43, 53, 57, 59, 61,  
67, 73, 75, 79, 81, 85, 93, 95,  
103, 105, 113, 131, 137, 139,  
147, 173, 175, 193, 197, 211,  
215, 229, 233, 245, 255, 257,  
261, 275, 287, 289

## G

galvanising, 40

Gandhi, Mahatma K., 32, 183

Gandhian, 32, 183

García Gutiérrez, Antonio L., 277

Gdynia, 281

gendered, 35, 279

generational, 35, 255

generative, 35, 147, 255, 277, 279

Gershenfeld, Alan, 137

Gershenfeld, Neil, 137

Gibson, James J., 51, 247

Gilligan, Carol, 221

Glanville, Ranulph, 133, 219, 283.

global health, 39, 217

global South, 267, 273

Goldstein, Rebecca, 49

Gothe, Jacqueline, 255, 283, 289

Graeber, David, 89

Graham, Mary, 255

Graham, Stephen, 87

Graz, 281

green, 37, 121, 131, 135

Greenfield, Adam, 49

grey, 37, 135

grey ecology, 135

Groll, Sandra, 73

Groys, Boris, 53, 77, 187

Guattari, Félix, 257

Gupta, Anil K., 181

Gutiérrez Borrero, Alfredo, 267,  
273, 275, 277, 283, 289

## H

hackerspaces, 137  
Hadid, Zaha, 201  
Hands, David, 239  
Hara, Kenya, 65, 83, 103  
Haraway, Donna J., 165, 167  
Harman, Graham, 165, 167  
Harrison, Max Dulumunmun, 255  
Hauffe, Thomas, 119  
Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 77  
Hayek, Nicolas G., 119  
Heidegger, Martin, 221  
Helfrich, Silke, 261  
Heppell, Stephen, 57  
hermeneutics, 195  
Hernández, Ricardo J., 241  
Hesselink, Sinette, 281  
Hoang, Phu, 95  
Holert, Tom, 151  
Holman, Will, 155, 283, 290  
Hromek, Danièle (Budawang/  
Yuin), 255, 283, 290  
Huizinga, Johan, 213, 249  
human-centred design, 177, 197,  
223, 292  
humble, 32, 65, 205  
Hurricane Katrina, 139

## I

idealist, 39, 201  
IDEO, 189  
ideology, ideological, 35, 36, 39,  
179, 201, 257  
Igoe, Elaine, 279, 283, 291

IKEA, 34, 199  
imagination, 44, 73, 143, 175, 205,  
243, 249, 253  
Imagination@Lancaster, 283, 285,  
287, 293  
immersive, 41, 207  
imperfect, 42, 63  
inclusive, 41, 81, 197, 292, 293  
India, 181, 183, 185, 207, 283,  
289, 293  
indigenous, 35, 181, 221, 255, 273,  
275, 289, 290  
inflation, 34, 43, 199  
Ingold, Tim, 243, 265  
Innella, Giovanni, 13, 23, 26, 103,  
151, 283  
instructing, 33  
Intergovernmental Panel on  
Climate Change (IPCC), 253  
iPhone, 145  
irrelevant, 44, 203  
Irrgang, Daniel, 69  
Irvine, Renwick, 207  
Ishikawa, Sara, 97  
Italian, 99, 113, 149, 285, 286  
Italian Autonomia Movement, 113  
iterative, 35, 209, 255  
Izenour, Steven, 147

## J

Jackson, Steven J., 87  
Jacobson, Max, 97  
James, Martin, 283  
jealous, jealousy, 36, 109  
Joselit, David, 263  
Journal of Peer Production, 137  
jugaad, 32, 181

Junginger, Sabine, 239  
 Just, Peter, 207  
 justified, 21, 38, 157

## K

Kant, Immanuel, 159  
 Kathakali, 185  
 Kelley, David, 223  
 Kelley, Tom, 189, 223  
 Kenya, 181  
 khadi, 183  
 Khan, Mashal, 205, 283, 291  
 Kimbell, Lucy, 279  
 Kindle, 49  
 King's Fund Hospital Bed Project,  
 217  
 Kirby, David, 215  
 Koolhaas, Rem, 75  
 Krippendorff, Klaus, 73, 277  
 Kume Mõngen (Mapuche), 275  
 Kwaymullina, Ambellin, 255

## L

Lambert-Beatty, Carrie, 263  
 Lancaster University, 221, 283, 285,  
 293  
 Langrish, John Z., 169  
 Lapland, 281  
 Las Vegas, 147  
 Latour, Bruno, 111  
 Law, John, 219  
 Lawson, Bryan, 241  
 learning, 33, 34, 57, 147, 151, 195,  
 197, 207, 209, 213, 227, 289  
 Lederach, John Paul, 205  
 Lego, 91  
 Lepore, Jill, 105, 127

Lezra, Jacques, 123  
 Limits to Growth, The, 113  
 Lloyd Jones, Peter, 18, 225, 227,  
 229, 231, 283, 291  
 Lockwood, Thomas, 239  
 Łódź, 281  
 Louisiana, 139  
 Lovell, Sophie, 197  
 Lovink, Geert, 77, 123, 153  
 ludic, 41, 213, 249  
 luxurious, 33, 47  
 Lyotard, Jean-Francois, 69

## M

MacDonald, Stuart, 111  
 Mackenzie, Dorothy, 131  
 MacKenzie, Donald, 219  
 makerspaces, 137  
 Maldonado, Tomás, 199  
 management, 13, 38, 55, 209, 231,  
 239, 255, 286, 287, 289, 292  
 manual of design, 107  
 Manzini, Ezio, 107, 129, 175, 223,  
 267  
 Mars, 145  
 Maser, Siegfried, 73  
 materials' history, 43, 263  
 matriarchal, 36, 105  
 mature, 37, 131, 159  
 Maxigas, 137  
 May, Theresa, 187  
 Mazé, Ramia, 247  
 McConchie, Peter, 255  
 McLuhan, Marshall, 73  
 Meadows, Dennis L., 113  
 Meadows, Donella H., 113  
 meagring, 31, 32

- Mejias, Ulises A., 233  
 Meaney, Thomas, 143  
 Mendini, Alessandro, 71, 125, 135, 149  
 messy, 32, 38, 205, 243  
 Miah, Andy, 115  
 Miami, 281  
 Midal, Alexandra, 53  
 Midgley, Mary, 125  
 Miéville, China, 73  
 Milan, 79, 81, 99, 141, 149, 153, 281, 285, 286, 292  
 Miller, Daniel, 101, 237  
 Minobimaatisiwin (Anishinaabeg), 275  
 misfit, 42, 97  
 Mitakuye Oyasin (Lakota), 275  
 modernism, 113, 121  
 Monaghan, John, 207  
 Mondrian, Piet, 129  
 mongrel, 42, 111  
 Moore, Jason W., 61, 131  
 More, Thomas, 73  
 more-than-human(ist), 223  
 Morozov, Evgeny, 251  
 Morris, William, 179  
 Morton, Timothy, 117  
 Muni, Bharata, 185  
 Murnane, Gerald, 235  
 Murphy, Emma, 241  
 museum, 33, 147, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290
- N**
- Nairobi, 281  
 NASA, 145  
 National Health Service (UK), 161  
 Natyashastra, 185  
 Nedelkoska, Ljubica, 125  
 Nelson, Harold G., 243  
 Nelson, Robert, 109  
 neoplasticism, 129  
 New Orleans, 139  
 Newman, Damien, 279  
 Nolan, Billy, 281  
 non-Cartesian, 225  
 Norman, Don, 51, 249  
 Northumbria University School of Design, 283, 285, 293  
 Nothing, 14, 33, 38, 43, 61, 63, 111, 117, 153, 159, 201, 205, 235
- O**
- Obama Care, 161  
 of the South(s), 273  
 ontological, 261, 265  
 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 125  
 O'Shea, Lizzie, 79  
 Oxford English Dictionary, 239
- P**
- Packard, Vance, 133  
 Paetz, Paul, 55  
 Pallister, James, 71  
 Papanek, Victor, 38, 131, 201, 245.  
 paradox, paradoxical, 22, 23, 42, 103, 137, 139, 197, 235, 265, 290  
 Parker, George, 187  
 Parmesani, Loredana, 149  
 Partridge, Rebecca, 217

- Patel, Raj, 61, 131  
 Perks, Martyn, 121  
 Pessimistic, 173  
 Peters, Tom, 209  
 Petroni, Marco, 79, 151  
 Pfeiffer, David, 193  
 philosophy, 21, 36, 47, 81, 111,  
 117, 125, 153, 185, 193, 257  
 Picasso, Pablo, 163  
 plastic, 43, 129, 263  
 play, 24, 39, 41, 47, 91, 137, 145,  
 213, 225, 247, 249, 257, 259  
 pluralistic, pluralistically, 41, 44,  
 187, 203  
 plurality, 41, 187, 223, 257  
 pluriversal, 265, 269  
 political, 33, 42, 44, 55, 59, 111,  
 119, 137, 147, 153, 161, 165,  
 183, 189, 239, 253, 257, 267  
 pop, 121  
 Pope Francis, 131  
 Popli, Saurabh, 183  
 Pornographic, 143  
 Possible, 17, 21, 22, 23, 36, 39, 41,  
 53, 67, 73, 79, 161, 163, 197,  
 215, 235, 247, 249, 251, 265,  
 281  
 post-economic, 271  
 power, 37, 41, 147, 165, 221, 225,  
 233, 235, 257, 259, 261, 275  
 Prabhakar, Nipun, 183  
 Prabhu, Jaideep, 181  
 practical, 24, 25, 40, 43, 149, 151  
 Prague, 281  
 Press, Mike, 239  
 pride, 109, 245  
 Puig de La Bellacasa, Maria, 221  
 Pullin, Graham, 193  
 Pye, David, 63
- ## Q
- Qatar, 201  
 Querétaro, 281  
 Quiggin, John, 117  
 Quintini, Glenda, 125  
 Quinz, Emanuele, 79, 153
- ## R
- Raby, Fiona, 191, 215  
 radical, 32, 44, 49, 71, 79, 119,  
 135, 141, 165, 203  
 Radio Alice, 113  
 Radical Design, 44, 71, 79, 135,  
 141  
 Radjou, Navi, 181  
 Railton, Peter, 229  
 Ramalho, Ana Quintela Ribeiro  
 Neves, 109  
 Ramaswamy, E.A., 207  
 Rams, Dieter, 41, 91, 137, 197  
 Ranciere, Jacques, 65, 125  
 Randalls, Samuel, 95  
 Randers, Jørgen, 113  
 rasa, 185  
 Raunig, Gerald, 117  
 Ray, Gene, 117  
 Redgrave, Richard, 107  
 Redhead, Steve, 115  
 Redström, Johan, 191, 211  
 relational, 35, 44, 203, 221, 251,  
 255, 275, 279  
 repairable, 87  
 Resnick, Mitchel, 249  
 responsive, 91

- Rey, Margret, 145  
 Roberts, Kevin, 181  
 Rochberg-Halton, Eugene, 101  
 Rodgers, Paul A., 13, 17, 21, 23, 26, 31, 47, 49, 51, 53, 55, 57, 59, 61, 63, 65, 67, 69, 71, 73, 75, 77, 79, 81, 83, 85, 87, 89, 91, 93, 95, 97, 99, 101, 103, 105, 107, 109, 111, 113, 115, 117, 119, 121, 123, 125, 127, 129, 131, 133, 135, 137, 139, 141, 143, 147, 153, 177, 187, 227, 235, 281, 285  
 Rolnik, Suely, 117  
 romance, 36, 77  
 romantic, 77, 261  
 Ross, Andrew, 95  
 Rowe, Peter G., 241  
 Roxburgh, Mark, 169, 171, 173, 175, 177, 179, 219, 237, 283, 292  
 Rumsfeld, Donald, 83  
 rural, 34, 75, 181, 290  
 Rusch, Frank R., 193
- S**
- Sabin, Jenny E., 231  
 San Francisco, 281  
 Sanskrit, 185  
 sarvodaya, 183  
 satiating, 32  
 Schwartz, Susan L., 185  
 scientific, 18, 159, 227, 229  
 Scott Brown, Denise, 147  
 Scullion, Gerry, 177  
 Seligman, Martin E. P., 229  
 sentimental, 36, 125, 129, 175, 237, 281  
 Serres, Michel, 61  
 Shah, A.M., 207  
 Shahar, Dina, 189, 191, 193, 195, 197, 199, 201, 283, 292  
 sharing, 93, 137  
 Sharma, Kriti, 265  
 Shvo, Galit, 195  
 Signature Architecture, 201  
 Silicon Valley, 105, 159  
 Silverstein, Murray, 97  
 Simon, Herbert A., 163  
 Sloterdijk, Peter, 111, 177  
 SMART, SMARTness, 39, 183, 251, 288  
 Smith, Rory, 115  
 Snelson, Kenneth, 231  
 Snow, C.P. (Charles Percy), 227  
 Snyder, Jaime, 155  
 Solnit, Rebecca, 105  
 Sottsass, Ettore, 91  
 spectacle, 24, 107, 147, 187  
 speculative, 47, 81, 191, 205, 215, 221, 235, 290  
 Spitz, René, 73  
 Srinivas, M.N., 207  
 Sripada, Chandra, 229  
 Stadler, Robert, 63  
 star designers, 40, 99, 201  
 Starck, Philippe, 249  
 Steinmueller, Ed, 127  
 Stengers, Isabelle, 139  
 Steffensen, Victor, 255  
 Stephenson, Wen, 139  
 Sterling, Bruce, 215  
 Stewart, Susan, 101  
 Stewart, Susan C., 157



Stolterman, Erik, 243  
 studio-based, 195  
 Suma Qamaña (Aymara), 275  
 Superstudio, 121  
 Swatch, 119  
 Swatchification, 119

## T

TechShops, 137  
 Tennant, Andy, 13, 283  
 Tether, Bruce, 241  
 Tewari, Saurabh, 181, 183, 185,  
 283, 292  
 Thackara, John, 115, 177  
 theoretical, 24, 25, 40, 149, 151,  
 165, 195, 219, 291  
 thoughtless, 175  
 Thrift, Nigel, 87  
 tired, 113  
 Tonkinwise, Cameron, 169, 203  
 Transition Design, 81  
 transitive, 81  
 Treadaway, Cathy, 249, 283, 293  
 Tronto, Joan, 221  
 Troxler, Peter, 137  
 Trump, Donald, 26, 159  
 Tseklevs, Emmanuel, 213, 215,  
 217, 283, 293  
 tuning, 38, 211  
 Turner, Fred, 251

## U

ultimate, 39, 71, 115, 165  
 uncertain, uncertainty, 31, 39, 59,  
 67, 171, 245, 251  
 Uncle Greg Simms (Gadigal,  
 Dharug, Gundungurra,

Budawang), 254  
 undisciplined, 13, 14, 15, 38, 42,  
 55, 57, 103, 239  
 United Nations, 75  
 University of Cambridge, 285  
 University of Strathclyde, 13, 285  
 University of the Underground, 257  
 unknown, 18, 31, 42, 44, 83, 103  
 utopia, utopian, 39, 73, 93, 183,  
 251  
 UX, 155

## V

Vaillant, Alexis, 63  
 Valéry, Paul, 21  
 van Gemert, Femke, 281  
 van Lier, Bas, 281  
 van Tuinen, Sjoerd, 177  
 Vancouver, 281, 290  
 Vaneigem, Raoul, 271  
 Ventura, Jonathan, 189, 191, 193,  
 195, 197, 199, 201, 283, 293  
 Venturi, Robert, 147  
 Virilio, Paul, 135  
 Voss, George, 127

## W

Wainwright, Oliver, 201  
 Wajcman, Judy, 219  
 Wark, McKenzie, 59, 119  
 Warman, Matt, 91  
 weather, 34, 35, 95  
 Weibel, Peter, 69  
 Wendt, Albert, 275  
 Whakapapas (Maori), 275  
 What Design Can Do, 24, 36, 281  
 Wiesing, Lambert, 47

Williams, R. John, 59, 173  
Willis, Anne-Marie, 81  
Wiltse, Heather, 211, 233, 283,  
293  
winning, 115  
Winograd, Terry, 261  
Wong, Julia Carrie, 135  
Wood, John, 73  
Wood, Michael, 123  
World Bank, 75  
Wright, Eric Olin, 93  
Wuggenig, Ulf, 117

## **Y**

Yee, Joyce, 203, 283, 293  
Yeo, Stephen, 161

## **Z**

Zapatista of Chiapas, 269  
Zielinski, Siegfried, 69  
Žižek, Slavoj, 21, 26, 35, 83.  
zombie, 117  
Zuboff, Shoshana, 233

## **#**

1.5°C, 253

