Alexandra Midal's Design: from architecture's accident to a totality of its own.

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"Design by Accident: For a New History of Design" is a book by historian Alexandra Midal, published in 2019 by Sternberg Press. It is a translation of Midal's doctoral thesis, supervised by Pascal Rousseau, and defended in 2012 at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

We are in a particularly fertile period of historiographical production in the field of design. Doctorates, master's degrees, bachelor's degrees, conventions, and conferences generate abundant research that rarely reaches a broad audience. However, this new production almost always relies on a restricted and sometimes outdated group of historiographical texts. Each "new history" tends to "answer" more to this canon than to contemporary texts. The result is the reinforcement of the canon, even when attempting to correct or surpass it.

The problem is evident in the field of graphic design. "A History of Graphic Design" by Philip Meggs (1983)[1] is the original canonical text in this discipline. Although criticized for not being inclusive or being superficially formalistic, its objects, protagonists, chronology, and format tend to reappear in later histories, such as "Graphic Design: A New History" by Stephen J. Eskilson (2007) or "Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide" by Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish (2008). Martha Scotford originally addressed the canon problem in "Is There a Canon of Graphic Design?" (1991), which, predictably, became the canonical text on the canon. Similarly, Clive Dilnot's "The State of Design History" (Parts I and II) (1984a, 1984b) is the canonical text on design historiography.

This body of work is mostly over thirty years old, which in itself does not devalue it but compels its potential successors to a dual movement: trying to overcome the canon while paying tribute to it. For this reason, each "new" history, even when deeply revisionist, reinforces the canonical texts. "Design by Accident" follows this scheme, albeit more consciously than usual. Although it builds on the classic design canon, the result is a revisionism that reorganizes its pieces, documents, protagonists, and institutions, creating new readings and novel dynamics between them.

Midal's primary sources are two texts that she considers the founding histories of the discipline: "Pioneers of Modern Design" by Nikolaus Pevsner (1936) and "Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History" by Sigfried Giedion (1948). She pits these stories against each other, seeking to reveal their blind spots. Midal draws this dialectical method from the historiographical work of Reiner

1 In this review, the choice was made to indicate the original publication dates of the design history works in parentheses. The aim is to give the reader an overview of their chronological distribution.

Banham (Midal, 2019, p. 62), particularly "Theory and Design in the First Machine Age" (1960) and "Design by Choice" (1981) — where she also found inspiration for the title[2] of her book.

A work of history inevitably has references, but "Design by Accident" has a special relationship with its sources that is important to stress. An urgency to produce a history of design "on its own terms" spans the book — which is not a new ambition among design historians. Usually, it means demanding a history created by designers, not architects or art historians. Under the pretext of involving people with direct knowledge of the subject, corporatism often closes design to new methods and leads it to errors and biases that other disciplines have long resolved — Midal does not entirely escape this problem.

However, when calling for a history produced "on its own terms," she also conveys something more interesting than this underhanded corporatism. The book's central idea, announced in its title, is that design as a discipline emerged by accident. Initially, architects created it as a vehicle to expand their discipline, upscaling architectural methods to design cities or downscaling it to design objects. According to Midal, the first histories of design were written by Pevsner and Giedion, who were not genuinely interested in design but in architecture's quest for expansion. She aims, crucially, "to identify and investigate the sources that can be said to belong exclusively to design[.]" (2019, p.79)

When Midal asks what is distinctive about design, she is not searching for answers in the profession or the design institutions. She seeks them in the domestic space, a place where architecture and design intersect. Midal treats it as a contested border, not only between design and architecture but where industry, economy, hygiene, science, management, the body, racism, and gender intersect. "Design by Accident" could easily be a history of domestic space.

Midal tracks how American abolitionist Catharine Beecher applied industrial management techniques to domestic work to prove that slave labor was unnecessary or how the physician Henri Cazalis used William Morris' ideas to build a hygienist program to redesign the home. Invoking the work of women like Beecher, Paulette Bernège, or Christine Frederick, who applied industrial insights to the domestic space, Midal argues against the "consensus among historians of design that the exclusion of women can be attributed to their relative distance from industrialization and their confinement to the domestic sphere[.]" (2019, p.73).

2 This title follows the aforementioned scheme of reinforcing the canon while attempting to revise it. The main title is a play on words with Banham's book, while the subtitle states that it is the proposal for a new history.

The domestic space is, finally, the chosen focus by Midal to map the disciplinary ambitions of design. She selects the work of the Italian designer Joe Colombo as the moment when design becomes autonomous because he radically transforms the domestic space. Colombo's "Total Furnishing Unit" (1972) was a piece of furniture that combined all the functions of a house — sleeping, eating, storage — yet was autonomous from it. It was a total design object.

If "Design by Accident" can double as a history of domestic space, it could also be the history of design as a discipline. However, Midal tackles this subject unusually. She does not favor schools, State institutions, or magazines as central places for the design discipline. She mentions the Bauhaus, the Deutscher Werkbund, or figures like Henry Cole (who organized the 1851 Universal Exhibition and the first design magazine). However, by focusing on domestic space and viewing it as a nuanced design entity, she steers clear of discussing design exclusively in institutional and technical terms. This approach gives her the flexibility to delve into usually neglected aspects like form and aesthetics that, far from being irrelevant or superficial, dictate how design ideas materialize and are perceived.

Overlooking form and aesthetics is a usual trait of design history and criticism. Its origins lay in the functionalist and rationalist movements and their belief in a universal form and aesthetics derived from a Puritan idea of function. Midal knows better. She understands that it is in form that a crucial part of the political and disciplinary program of design resides. Form is how design materializes and engages with the world. It is in form that eccentric and unexpected connections become possible. Where one truly perceives the difference between an uninteresting design that merely fulfills and a design that matters and cares.

When Midal chooses the "Total Furnishing Unit" as the moment when design becomes autonomous, this autonomy bases itself on a formal unity that goes beyond the mere sum of functions and materializes in an aesthetic experience. Colombo turns the functions of a home inside out, isolating them from the building's architecture and concentrating them in a complete piece of furniture.

Like Colombo's domestic space, Midal inverts design's disciplinary field to seek unexpected, eccentric connections that may reveal underground links. Focusing on the margins and eccentric details may seem to contradict the fact that "Design by Accident" can also be read as a history of design as a discipline. There is no paradox. Disciplinary power operates in the margins as much as in the center. Every inch of a discipline's territory is a contested border. A discipline is a totality, not because it is

everywhere, but because it is a will for totality (Foucault, 2005). What Midal constantly seeks are the signs of the disciplinary struggle for totality.

"Design by Accident" could be, in addition to a history of domestic space and design as a discipline, a history of totality in design. The disagreement between design and architecture is the struggle between two concepts of totality for the same territory. On one side, there are those who claim that "architecture is everything," while others insist that "design is everything." Midal presents a succession of concepts of totality, culminating in Joe Colombo (the book could also be a history of this designer's work). As the name implies, his "Total Furnishing Unit" represents a total design program that goes against architecture's aspirations of totality. After Colombo, what remains is an omnipresence of design (from "jeans to genes," as Hal Foster quipped [2003, p.17]) — a totality from which design as a discipline risks exclusion. Colombo's brief gesture risks being both the discipline's beginning and end. It is a stimulating and tempting reading of the history of design. But inevitably incomplete.

We spent the first part of this review trying to understand "Design by Accident" on its own terms. Now, we will address the problems the book raises. When reviewing, it is necessary to distinguish formal flaws (conceptual problems in the work), and "flaws" in the sense of "fissures" the work causes in us and its field of study. This wariness is essential when dealing with "Design by Accident."

It is a book based on extensive, almost always rigorous research,[3] with an exciting and relevant purpose. The title expresses its most stimulating idea: design as a discipline emerged by accident, as a byproduct of architectural disciplinary ambitions, an architecture of small things and interior spaces that would become a fully-fledged totality. Midal seeks to go from this accidental origin of design to Banham's "design by choice", from design as a casual byproduct of architecture to a deliberate, "designed" design. She aims for a "new history of design liberated from the perspective of 'design by accident[.]'" The problem is that design will never lose its contingency, no matter how refined or how much it tries to reduce itself to its "own terms." As "Design by Accident" demonstrates, autonomous design is a rarity limited to eccentricities like Colombo's work.

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3 A rare slip-up: Midal states that "Sir Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave coined the term "design" in 1849 with their Journal of Design and Manufactures" (Midal, id., p. 41) However, the Government School of Design was inaugurated in 1837. The following year, the Manchester School of Design opened.

Later, she says that Cole "was the first to use the term 'design' in print as it is understood today" in the Journal of Design and Manufactures (id., p. 102) and that he created Britain's first design schools (id., p. 106). Even if Midal is just signaling the first time the word "design" was used in print, it is highly improbable that the Journal was the first public appearance of that term.

Dealing with totalities when tracing the history of a discipline is unavoidable, but it is necessary to understand that totality is always an ambition, never a done deal. Foucault warned that disciplines build themselves on disputes over scarce resources. These resources are material and institutional, but also ideas, concepts, words, and actions. Foucault's key concept is "statement," in the sense of something that is actually said or put into practice instead of something that only potentially exists (2003, p.163). It is in this sense that design as a totality is a rarity. It exists mostly in potential.

Another issue is that "Design by Accident" limits its scope to the interactions between design and architecture. These two areas are adjacent, but design also owes its autonomy to other disciplines such as art, engineering, history, or humanities. More importantly, design itself is a collection of disciplines. When "Design by Accident" talks about disciplinary autonomy, it means only industrial, furniture, and interior design. It does not refer to graphic design or fashion design. Perhaps this problem can be attributed to a common but lazy habit. For instance, the author of this review frequently slips into the habit of calling graphic design just "design." In most situations, the distinction is irrelevant. When writing, even in the context of the disciplinary specialty, it is necessary to have a range of synonyms and economical ways of naming the basic concepts at hand. However, using only "design" is also a way of not dealing with the difficulty of defining design. Writing just "design" does not differentiate between graphic and communication design or between both of these and industrial design. Thus, "design" is not an abbreviation or an "x" to be solved later but merely a placeholder. It is a murky note written out of circumstance and convention, postponing the need to reveal what it means. However, this placeholder is too often promoted to represent the whole of design.

After reading "Design by Accident," it is inevitable to conclude that one of the blind spots of design is the unnamed rift between different designs. One of the marks of modernism was the belief that a general project method, a "design," could be deployed to the most diverse areas – graphic work, furniture design, advertising, or fashion. The model was architectural design, as can be seen, for example, in "The Bases of Design" (1898), where Walter Crane placed architecture as the central foundation for all types of design. For Crane, decoration, for example, originated in the need to fill up certain architectural elements. Using an ideal building as a stand-in for a concrete image of different design applications was a recurrent trope during modernism — from Morris' cathedral to the Bauhaus. Different designs found their common ground in architecture. However, these branches quickly grew apart.

Midal's concern is not with articulating the different types of design but only with problematizing the relationship between industrial design or furniture design and

architecture. Her purpose is to find blind spots; the method is contagious. One of these blind spots is the relationship between all the distinct designs. Are they all part of the same discipline? Are they distinct disciplines? Following Midal's method, one could look for the actual instances where connections between these areas occur. For example, "Pioneers of Modern Design," served as a model for graphic design histories, such as Herbert Spencer's "Pioneers of Modern Typography" (1969). Spencer would be the graphic designer for the 1960 edition of Pevsner's Pioneers (1936). These genealogies were dealt with in works by the author of this review (Moura, 2019, p. 30-43), Justin Zhuang (2023), and, primarily, Irene Sunwoo (2010).

It is especially relevant to confront Sunwoo's research with "Design by Accident" because it reveals curious issues. Midal states that it was Allen Lane, the editor of Penguin, who suggested changing Pevsner's book title from its original "Pioneers of the Modern Movement" to "Pioneers of Modern Design" (Midal does not provide the source of this information) (Midal, 2019, p. 59-60). By emphasizing the input of the English editor, she downplays the crucial role of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in the significant changes made during the second edition of "Pioneers." According to Sunwoo, this museum played a central role in promoting design in the United States through an ambitious and innovative program of exhibitions and publications. When MoMA reissued Pevsner's book, it already had an ambitious design program. Convincing Pevsner to turn his history of the modern movement into design's first history furthered that program. Sunwoo's research, based on the documentation exchanged between Pevsner and his counterparts at the museum, challenges the hypothesis that "Pioneers" is a history of design accidentally produced by architects (Sunwoo, 2010). The central role of MoMA suggests that, from a curatorial point of view, design already had autonomy preceding the existence of a history. The additional fact that Colombo's "Total Furnishing Unit" was designed for MoMA's 1972 exhibition "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape" only confirms a seminal connection between design and curating.

In other words, other than architecture, some disciplines contributed to the invention of modern design. Curating is one of them. Pevsner allowed that possibility when he chose the 1851 Universal Exhibition as one of the starting points of his history ([1936]1960, p.40). Midal also approaches this idea. She devotes a chapter to Norman Bel Geddes' Futurama exhibition (p. 315-320). Curating became a fully-fledged discipline in the early years of the 21st century. However, for a long time, some of the tasks now done by curators were the responsibility of designers who conceived the organization of exhibitions, their circulation, and exhibition devices. A clear demonstration of the connections between design and curation is, for example,

Rui Afonso Santos' "O Design e a Decoração em Portugal, 1900 – 1994," published in 1995, and thus unsuspected of contamination by the recent trend that "everything is curating." Afonso Santos (1995) devotes much of this Portuguese design history to various exhibitions and exhibition spaces such as pavilions or stores). It would be possible to create a history of design similar to "Design by Accident," but using the exhibition space instead of the domestic space.

These remarks are not about pointing out a failure on Midal's part in not addressing all of this. Their purpose is to argue that the history of design, and design itself, are inevitably accidental, not only in their origins but always.

Using the same method as Midal but shifting the perspective to graphic design, it would be possible to argue that William Morris was the first autonomous designer. In the same way that Colombo produced a "Total furnishing unit" embodying the unity of design, Morris did so with book design. He brought all the elements that industrial production had isolated in a design unit: the body of text, illustration, margins, and even the letters themselves.

As for autonomy, graphic design's was not achieved in relation to architecture but rather to areas like advertising. In Portugal, architecture was a regular stand-in when typographers wanted to talk about design when that English word was still unavailable. For instance, Manuel Canhão, a typographer, talked about the "book's architecture" (1952). Nevertheless, graphic designers often invoke architecture as a role model, endowed with a respectability that still eludes them.

How is it possible to tell design's history on "its own terms" when design itself is so fractured? It is not even simple to agree on a common timeline among distinct branches of design. For instance, while Streamline is an unavoidable polemic in industrial design, it is irrelevant to graphic design. Even if the general social conditions and aesthetic programs are similar, the technologies involved, and objects produced are dramatically different. When browsing the most recent crop of general design histories, the rarity of moments where different design branches come together is striking (Margolin, 2015; Fiell and Fiell, 2016). De Stijl, Bauhaus, Ulm, and Post-modernism are the rare places we can find, at the same time and under the same roof, architecture, furniture, and graphic design.

If we look at the issue from the perspective of formalist historians like Hayden White (1975), who study history as a literary genre, the disparity between chronologies comes not from the objects of history but from how history is written. Constructing

many distinct historical narratives on the same events, protagonists, or documents is possible. For example, Irene Sunwoo (2010) shows how Pevsner, in his communications with MoMA, was quite open to negotiating when his history begins or ends — emphasizing the relative arbitrariness of its scope. Different historians can build, on the same objects, narratives that unite or isolate different kinds of design. The implications are, of course, very different in each case. The attempt to create a history of design "on its own terms" will never fully resolve the arbitrariness of being able to build different historical narratives about the same objects.

Midal's historical narrative is not entirely linear but polyphonic and hybrid. This results from the intersection of Pevsner's heroic linearity with Giedion's distrust of chronology and his investment in anonymous protagonists. This crossover leads to the tutelary figure of Colombo through a narrative that is not clean and rounded. "Design by Accident" is an excellent example of what Martha Scotford called "messy history" (2012) — the pristine formats of history tend to elevate figures of the white North European and North American man. Any history that seeks other protagonists will seem "messy". History also has its forms, which are not inevitable but constructions.

Midal proposes not just a reinterpretation but a new narrative framework for design. Drawing from established sources, she offers a new timeline for the autonomy of design, shifting this point from the beginnings of the modern movement to the seventies, when Joe Colombo created his Total Furnishing Unit. In doing so, she relegates modernist design to the status of a "proto-design" practiced by architects. It is a refreshingly polemic and stimulating act of revisionism, which transforms design into an inherently post-modern discipline — although not in the usual sense that designers use that term. That is definitely a debate for another day.

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