Branzi's Dilemma:
Design in Contemporary Culture
Richard Buchanan

Introduction

My subject today is a challenge faced by many individuals and groups in the new circumstances of contemporary culture: how to find identity and moral purpose when central values are *essentially contested*. I call this challenge Branzi's dilemma because the problem was stated with elegance and clarity by Andrea Branzi in a 1985 essay called "We Are the Primitives." [1] I cite this essay neither because I agree with Branzi's way of solving the problem nor because I intend to discuss his philosophy of design in detail. Rather, it provides a useful way to focus attention on one of the fundamental changes that have taken place in design over the last two decades, a change that continues to unfold with gathering force in directions that few people can anticipate and no one can entirely comprehend. The occasion that draws us together, a conference on pleasure and responsibility in design, is a sign of that change. [2] Whether by accident or forethought, the organizers have selected one of the variations of Branzi's dilemma as our theme, and we will address this theme from a variety of perspectives. However, I want to raise a cautionary note before we begin. We should be concerned that unless the deeper dilemma that stands behind our discussions is well understood, we may simply repeat old doctrines or propound new dogmas, contributing little to the advance of design at a time when its disciplines and professions require thoughtful reconsideration that goes beyond ideology.

Perhaps the current situation would not present difficulty if the direction of design rested entirely in the hands of designers. In such a case, where we *would* go, we *shall* go in addressing the issue of pleasure and responsibility. Indeed, this is how some designers prefer to see the current situation, and they act accordingly. But the direction of design is not entirely in the hands of designers, no matter how much we cling to the old mythic idea of the designer as a heroic cultural figure leading the avant-garde. No doubt, there will always be an avant-garde. This is what sustains confidence among some people that the heroic model of design will remain adequate to new challenges—and there is a tincture of truth in this confidence. However, the fate of design does not lie entirely within the framework of design culture or in the hands of a few gifted individuals. It lies within the framework of culture as a whole. This framework is changing before our eyes, altering the attitudes of the

1   Andrea Branzi, "We Are the Primitives," in *Design Discourse: History Theory Criticism,* ed. by V. Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 37–42. This essay is reprinted from the Italian journal *Modo.*
2   Held at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki, Finland, June, 1994.

public, the environment of corporations, and the way we understand all of the professions with which we must collaborate in developing new products. I do not mean the constantly changing surface of culture, the ever-new, ever-shifting fads and styles that emerge and are discarded in the pursuit of novelty. This aspect of twentieth-century culture is what art critic Harold Rosenberg calls the "tradition of the new." [3] Surface changes will go on continuously because it is in human nature to seek out new experiences and expressions. Instead, what I am referring to is the philosophic engine that stands behind culture: the fundamental issues, problems, and ideas that are shared with varying degrees of understanding by all participants.

This engine is what Branzi perceives in his essay, and his perception is strengthened precisely because he is uncomfortable with the form that the new engine has taken. I believe he understands, at least in principle, that the cultural and philosophic revolution that began in the early decades of the twentieth century has taken another turn and continues to move forward with unabated force to the present. Indeed, Branzi deserves credit for the courage to engage the new cultural issues. Unlike Paul Rand, who fought bitter rear-guard skirmishes and then retreated to lofty silence, Branzi attempts to understand the philosophy of design in the context of current problems, despite the attacks to which he has been subjected by some members of the old guard and by many of the new guard. His voice has remained a presence in the pluralism of contemporary design, emphasizing the continued importance of aesthetics and artistic experimentation.

However, I do not intend this to be a paean to Andrea Branzi. Branzi is a participant in the new culture, but his response is idiosyncratic. His idea of a "second modernity" evades the deeper problem which design confronts in the contemporary world. We need Branzi and his artistic vision, but we do not know exactly why—and I am not convinced that he can adequately explain why. There is danger for design in a retreat to aesthetic self-expression, and there is hopelessness if the elegance of art is not included in its new visions.

The Dilemma of Identity and Moral Purpose
The circumstances of Branzi's dilemma are quite familiar by now, heralded in what some people refer to as the collapse of modernism. As he explains in his essay, the ideals of modernism no longer provide the unifying ideology of design and world culture. Those ideals, expressed in a variety of ways among the many forms of modernism, pointed towards the continual improvement of the human condition—in some minds perhaps even the perfection of humanity—through progress in art, design, and technology. However, the "ideological parachute" of modernism, Branzi says, no longer works.

3   Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

Culture and design no longer are forces that slowly but heroically move the world toward salvation through logical and ethical radicalism. They are mechanisms of emotions and adaptations of changes that fail to drag the world toward a horizon; they only transform it into many diffuse diversities. Progress no longer seems to be valued; instead, the unexpected is valued. The grand unitarian theorems no longer exist, nor do the leading models of the rational theologies. What exists is modernism without illuminism. We are witnessing a definitive and extreme secularization of design, within which design represents itself and no longer is a metaphor for a possible unity of technologies and languages.[4]

Whether we agree with the accuracy of Branzi's account is not the issue. It is an adequate account for present purposes, because it enables us to focus on one of the central problems of contemporary culture: if there is no unifying ideology shared by the design community and world culture as a whole, where does the individual find identity and moral purpose?

This problem immediately leads to what I have called Branzi's dilemma. It is a dilemma because both of the obvious alternatives to the contemporary problem of finding identity are either distasteful or dangerous. One alternative is to substitute a new general ideology for the old ideology, perhaps resuscitating a modified form of "modernism." I believe this is eventually what Branzi attempted to do three years later with the publication of *Learning from Milan*, particularly in the chapter "Toward the Second Modernity." After a brief and very insightful discussion of the changing nature of materials and technology, he explains the nature of his proposed second modernity: "What I mean by this term is an acceptance of Modernity as an artificial cultural system based neither on the principle of necessity nor on the principle of identity but on a set of conventional cultural and linguistic values that somehow make it possible for us to go on making choices and designing."[5]

Recognizing the Eurocentric origins of modernism, Branzi in effect capitulates to theorists of the postmodern by repudiating any substantial value in the various forms of modernism. He turns away from the value and integrity of identity to embrace conventional values. Furthermore, he proposes for the second modernity an agenda that amounts to a retreat to the themes of power and control in design. These are the themes which many of the leaders of design in the earlier decades of the twentieth century sought to oppose in public and corporate culture, too often without success. They are expressed in the destructive sophistry of the idea of art for art's sake and in the original version of this idea in economics: business for business's sake.

4   Branzi, "We Are the Primitives," 37.
5   Andrea Branzi, *Learning from Milan: Design and the Second Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988), 71.

Modernity represents the point of aggregation around which the European nations have attained the maximum of their potential, both industrial and humanistic. All in all it is the product of a range of technological and linguistic imagery, highly recognizable and acknowledged as the child of this continent. What is needed is to apply a strategy of international communication to it, converting Modernity into a commercial and political system. Culture is a great added value. It should be regarded not as indispensable and necessary but as the best sauce with which to season the development of postindustrial society. So it will be an enthusiastic Second Modernity, made up of new European sensations to be distributed round the world. It could be very good business.[6]

I cannot conceal the bitterness I feel about this proposal. From someone of less accomplishment than Branzi, it would be no more than a cynical gesture, born of a failure of imagination and ingenuity. Yet, we must take it seriously and examine its implications.

The steps leading to this proposal were prepared three years earlier in the essay we are discussing. In this essay, Branzi details his initial alternative to the dilemma of identity in the contemporary world, an alternative that is strikingly different from substituting a new general ideology for the old ideology of modernism. He suggests that without a unifying ideology in the culture around us, each individual must look within himself or herself for the original key—the language and code—of personal identity. There is no longer a world culture; there are only individuals, each grappling to make personal order and sense out of an increasingly complex world. Indeed, in 1985 Branzi suggests that this is the only viable alternative, and he embraces this side of the dilemma, expressing only mild regret and disappointment—something more than nostalgia but less than determined and well-argued resistance. An optimist, he tries to direct attention toward the positive features of the new cultural climate.

Complexity, real and theoretical, is spreading. Lacking in the postindustrial society is that unified symbolic universe capable of integrating various institutional environments and the individuals in them. Symbolic worlds proliferate and become differentiated. The very process that multiplies the integrity and the plausibility of that person's familiar world, also enormously widen the field of various possibilities perceived by individuals.[7]

6   Branzi, *Learning from Milan*, 73.
7   Branzi, "We Are the Primitives," 39.

However, he recognizes, and has the courage to express, the fate of individual identity in these circumstances.

> The range of choices becomes wider and more fluid. There occurs not only the disintegration of the strong type of identity, but also the development of a new weak identity, which is flexible, open to change, intimately differentiated, and reflexive. The weak identity considers every choice as temporary and reversible and becomes the object of "different biographies," at the border, but only at the border, of pathological dissociation.[8]

I doubt whether diversity is actually greater today than in earlier decades of the twentieth century—in fact, if anything, I suspect it is less. But the *idea* of diversity and of pluralism is clearly a prominent feature of the new cultural climate. Instinctively, however, Branzi understands where diversity may lead in the absence of a unifying vision outside the individual. It may lead to faction and tribalism, as some individuals emerge with greater power than others and exert subtle or overt control over their colleagues.

> The design panorama that awaits us in that extreme secularization of design consists of an ensemble of linguistic families grouped around ever more numerous family heads who will assemble around their own expressive minor archetypes and aggressive followers. That tribalization of cultural society is at once a result of the neoprimitive condition and awaiting the fall of the old cultural tinsels in front of a new and different civilization. Similar to the good savage, we are naked while awaiting the worse or the better.[9]

From this perspective, the idea of a second modernity proposed in, *Learning from Milan* is something less than the substitution of a new general ideology for the old—as if one could will a new ideology into existence by the force of personality. Instead, the second modernity is merely Branzi's personal code, projected as his own tribal rallying cry, which some will heed and others ignore. I prefer his aesthetic vision, not his weak rationalization of the value of Eurocentric aesthetics.

As a radical pluralist—someone who values intellectual, artistic, and cultural diversity on grounds of principle, not merely out of vague tolerance or benign neglect of others—I am not entirely distressed by the initial alternative of Branzi's dilemma. No one possesses all of the knowledge and wisdom required to understand and act responsibly in this world. We need diversity and alternative perspectives to keep alive the ongoing inquiry into ordering, disordering, and reordering that is the central enterprise of human

8   Branzi, "We Are the Primitives," 39.
9   Branzi, "We Are the Primitives," 38.

Spiritual and Cultural Ideals
Grounded in
Being or Transcendental Ideas

Power and Control ———— **Design** ———— **Character and Discipline**
Grounded in   Grounded in
the Agency Behind Action   the Environment of Action

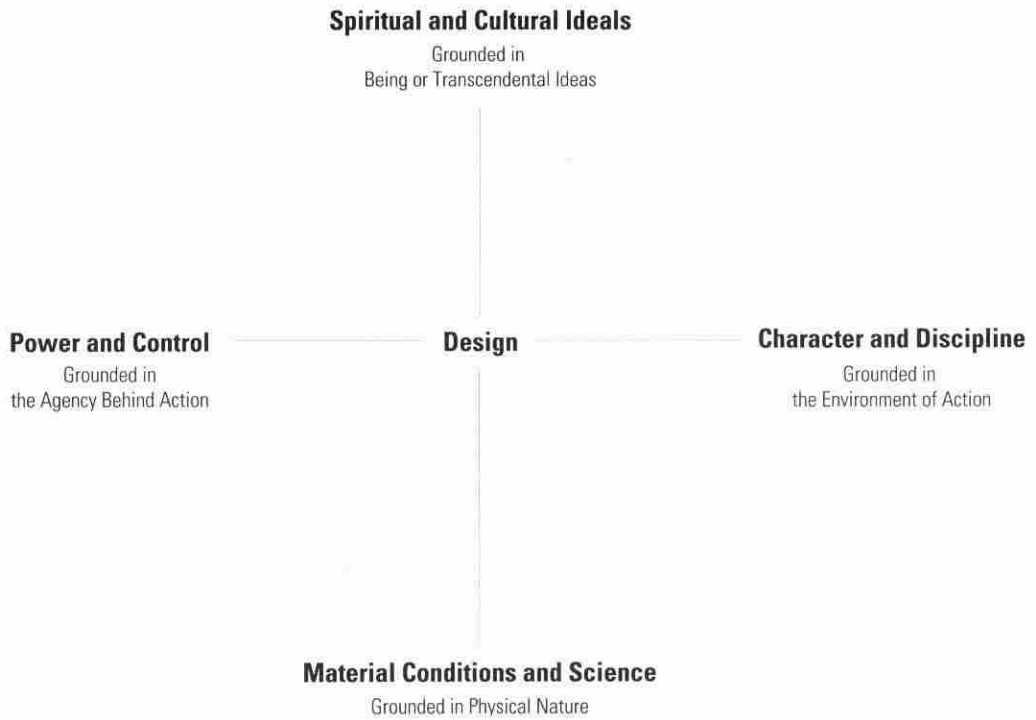**Material Conditions and Science**
Grounded in Physical Nature

Figure 1
Commonplaces of Design Theory and Practice

culture. We need the diversity of many personal visions to avoid entrapment in narrow thinking.

In the past, I have tried to survey the alternative approaches to design that have helped to form the discipline and professions of design in the twentieth century and whose energies continue to expand the understanding and influence of design in the contemporary world.[10] The approaches are endless in their subtle differences, but they may be grouped in four areas, each based on a rhetorical commonplace which has been made fundamental in design practice and speculation. This is illustrated in figure 1.

It is not necessary to elaborate these approaches for present purposes, but we may suggest a tentative mapping of some of the most prominent individuals and schools of design in the twentieth century. This is illustrated in figure 2. Without the diversity suggested in this map, design would be in a poorer state than it is today.

What concerns me about Branzi's alternative of personal codes is the danger for designers of arrogance and entrapment in narrow-minded and unexamined beliefs when there are no standards for evaluation and no grounds for challenging the limitations of ideology, aside from political and institutional power. Human beings have an unsurpassed ability to avoid questioning themselves and objectively examining the consequences of their beliefs and actions on others. There is no need to discuss the effect of this in politics, because there are so many examples of destructive tribalism

10 Richard Buchanan, "Rhetoric, Humanism, and Design," in *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), ed. by R. Buchanan and V. Margolin.

Spiritual and Cultural Ideals

• Shaker Craftsmen

• Early Bauhaus—
1919–1923

• George Nelson

• Ettore Sottsass

• Middle Bauhaus—1923–1928

New Bauhaus under Moholy-Nagy

Power and Control ———————— **Design** ——— • ——— **Character and Discipline**

• Herbert Read

• HfG Ulm

• Herbert Simon

• Bauhaus under
Hannes Meyer—1928–1930

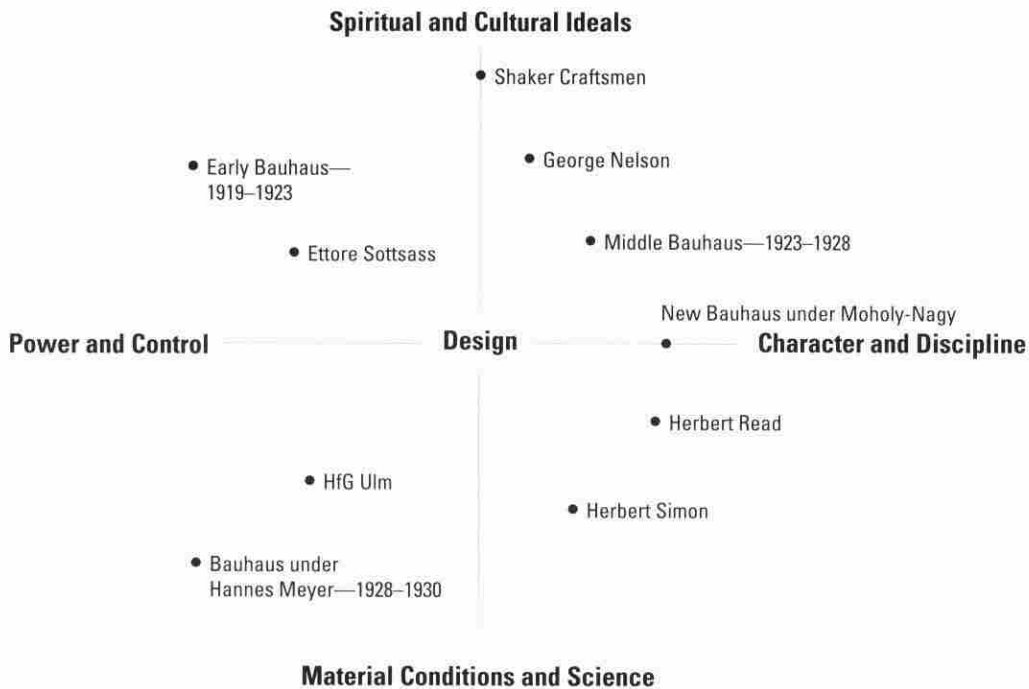**Material Conditions and Science**

Figure 2
Perspectives on Design

throughout the twentieth century, including recent tragedies in Europe, Asia, and many other parts of the world. But the impact of tribalism on design and the development of technology is unconscionable for individuals who have made creativity and innovation their life's work. The distinguished designer George Nelson has correctly pointed out that it is pretentious for design to take itself too seriously.[11] However, if designers do not take themselves seriously enough, even the limited influence that they do have will be wasted. At least as human beings, if not as designers and educators, we must think about the consequences of renewed factionalism and tribalism in the contemporary world. Where will our students find moral purpose to guide their work? Can anyone familiar with the events of the twentieth century seriously give their trust to personal sensitivity and good intentions in matters as complex as designers face today?

The danger of Branzi's first alternative—emphasis on personal codes and individual diversity—is a return to power and control as the central theme of design thinking, with the unintended but inevitable consequence of gradually squeezing out and eliminating diversity. When power and control are foremost, moral purpose is reduced to whatever is popular in the marketplace of ideas and commerce, rather than to what is right. This is the guiding principle of bad marketing and bad advertising, and it is also the guiding principle of bad design. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that design will have much power in such a world, where engineering and the business professions have claimed dominance

11 George Nelson, "What is Good Design For?" in *Problems of Design* (New York: Whitney Publications, 1965). For Nelson's view of the other side of the issue, see "Design as Communication" in the same volume.

for so long as the ministers of merchant princes and corporations. We may posture about the ability of designers to shape the course of corporations, but this ability, to the degree that it may exist, comes from having good ideas that others must recognize because of objective and demonstrable worth. Of course, here we are again, back in Branzi's dilemma: how will we know if an idea has objective and demonstrable value if there is no shared vision among those who must make a choice among many alternatives?

Design, Deliberation, and Organizational Learning

I began this essay by suggesting that a fundamental change is underway in design and that Branzi's dilemma is a useful way of characterizing one perspective on that change, focusing on the loss of a central ideology and the emergence of pluralism as a recognized feature of human circumstances. In the United States, this has led to what we call "culture wars." Skirmishes and battles are fought in a massive fog by diverse individuals and groups who believe, too often correctly, that they have been left out of earlier cultural debates. It is no surprise that design has been pulled into these culture wars, because design is an important tool of communication in popular culture.[12] Indeed, the images and objects created by designers in previous decades are often regarded as the symbols and instruments of oppression, serving the purposes and pleasures of an elite while quietly excluding other voices. Of course, this is a simplistic view of design. Designers have struggled and lost more often than they have won in trying to influence their clients and the general public. But it contains just enough truth so that many designers, particularly thoughtful young designers, are uncomfortable with their role in contemporary society.

In response, I would like to suggest that Branzi's interpretation of the change in contemporary culture is mistaken in its essential premise: the idea that culture is merely an ideology. By reducing culture to ideology, we neglect the original and more fundamental meaning of culture as cultivation. From this perspective, culture is not a state, expressed in an ideology or a body of doctrines. Rather, it is an activity. Culture is the activity of ordering, disordering, and reordering in the *search* for understanding and for values which guide action. Culture is the search for principles in the everyday engagements of life as well as in the special human engagements of science, art, politics, and design. In short, culture is what we do when we are alone or when we are together in such a pursuit.

What are the new circumstances of our culture? To properly characterize the philosophic engine of contemporary culture, we should examine two themes that echo quietly throughout our private conversations and public discourse. The first is the changed direction of deliberation in the twentieth century. Before this century, deliberation concerned *decisions about scarce means to be employed in particular circumstances to achieve generally desired and*

12 Consider, for example, the recent dispute involving the Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Plans for an exhibition of the aircraft that dropped the first atomic bomb in World War II were scrapped because of extremely intense controversy among many groups about the exhibit's proposed interpretation and contextualization of the event. Exhibition design is now a dangerous political act.

accepted ends. We debated the means, but seldom the circumstances or the ends that we sought to achieve. However, in the twentieth century, through the advance of technology, the scarcity of means available for human use is no longer a fundamental problem; the problem lies in the potential consequences of our vast technological resources and in our moral purpose and commitment to develop technology in the service of being human. We are forced to ask what circumstances and ends we wish to pursue. We deliberate more about the circumstances and environments that we wish to create and the ends we wish to achieve than about the adequacy of means, except as a technical problem which is manageable, if there is sufficient political will.[13] Indeed, the debate about the incredible strain we are placing on planetary resources is framed precisely as a debate about ends and purposes in the human community, about our responsibility to others living and unborn.

For another example of the new direction of deliberation, consider the issue behind our current discussion. Pleasure and responsibility frame a discussion about the ends and purposes of design. Pleasure is set in opposition to responsibility in order to identify a place of public controversy and draw out contrasting views. In the course of discussion, we will find that some participants are comfortable with the distinction and will argue for an emphasis on one term or the other. Other participants, myself included, will not be comfortable with the distinction and will suggest a more complex relationship. For example, I prefer to argue that the creation of pleasure is one of the responsibilities of designers. However, I also argue that pleasure in design must be tempered and integrated with three other considerations that are essential for understanding the range of the designer's responsibilities: the good, the useful, and the just. The relation of these terms is represented in the matrix in figure 3.

The ultimate purpose or function of design in society is to conceive products which express and, necessarily, reconcile human values concerning what is good, useful, just, and pleasurable. However, these terms no longer possess fixed and generally accepted meanings. Their meanings are the subject of our deliberations. They are *essentially contested* in society at large as well as in the complex processes of design and product development, although we seldom recognize the significance of the shift and are not well prepared to deal with it productively.

The shift in the direction of deliberation is inevitably perceived by some people as a weakening of culture, a sign of the loss of central vision and values, because vision and values are now an explicit subject of discussion. But it is a weakening only to the degree that we are frightened to have our values subjected to public examination, particularly if old ideologies are too rigid to allow for new expression—if they entrap our thinking in old solutions instead of helping us to find new ways of addressing the problems of order-

13   For a discussion of this theme in the context of the twentieth-century metaphysics of communication, see Richard McKeon, "The Future of Metaphysics," in *The Future of Metaphysics*, ed. by Robert E. Wood (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 306–7.
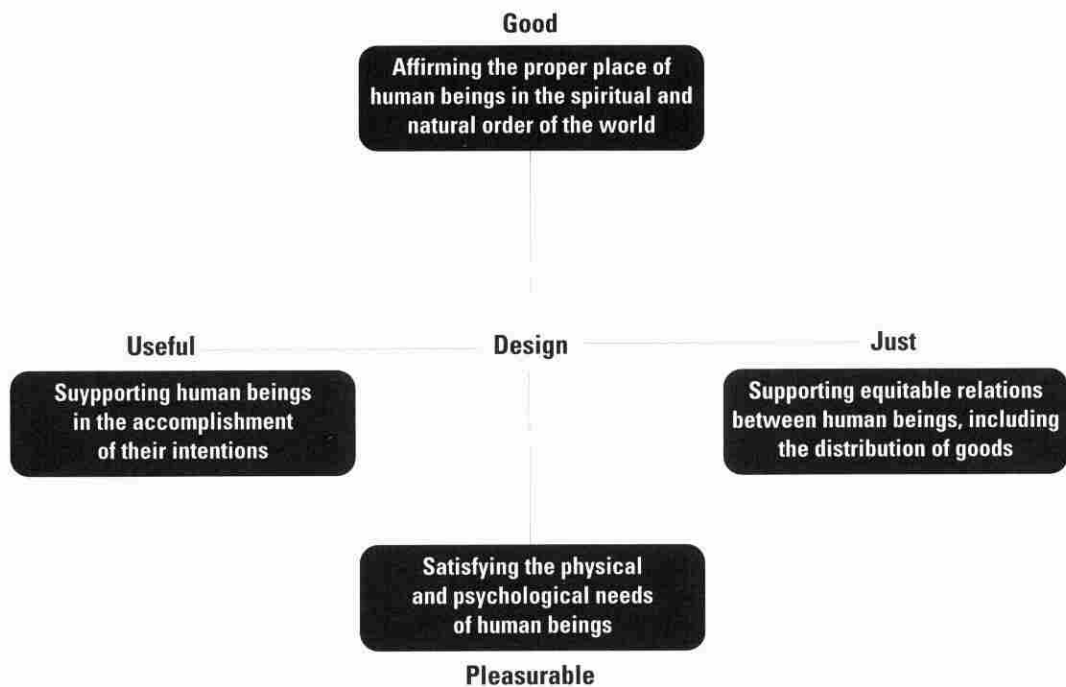
Good

Affirming the proper place of
human beings in the spiritual and
natural order of the world

Useful ———————————— **Design** ———————————— **Just**

Suypporting human beings
in the accomplishment
of their intentions

Supporting equitable relations
between human beings, including
the distribution of goods

Satisfying the physical
and psychological needs
of human beings

Pleasurable

Figure 3
Relationships Among the Ends
or Purposes of Design

14 One of the dangers for consultancies that
place an emphasis on strategic design
planning is to believe that graphic and
product design may be subcontracted
after a strategic plan has been
conceived. This is a new version of the
old fallacy of linear product development,
where plans are tossed over the wall
from specialist to specialist. The plan
may easily be lost in the details of execu-
tion.

ing, disordering, and reordering as they are emerging in the circum-
stances of contemporary life. Instead, the new situation is poten-
tially a strengthening of our culture, if culture is conceived as the
type of activity that we described earlier: an active search for new
principles or for new embodiments and expressions of trusted and
traditional principles. However, the problem is to find new tools
and disciplines to support the search for new principles or appro-
priate expressions of old principles. Our instrumentalities from
earlier in the century are not adequate to the task, so we flounder in
practical life and in design itself as we seek new approaches to
culture and the conflict of competing values.

It should come as no surprise that in this new deliberative
situation some designers have begun to shift their work away from
images and physical objects, as such, and to place design explicitly
in the context of strategic planning. They seek to place design at the
earliest moment in the product development process, at the point
where fundamental decisions are taken regarding the circumstances
and ends to be pursued. This is a repositioning of design as a central
agency of being human in contemporary culture. It is not the aban-
donment of the earlier disciplines of design, the disciplines of
communication and construction, the creation of images and the
fabrication of physical objects. Rather, it is an effort to place commu-
nication and construction in the context of action, with designers
serving as collaborative agents in determining public, corporate,
and private plans for action.[14]

	Communication Signs & Words	Construction Things	Strategic Planning Action	Systemic Integration Thought
Inventing	Signs, Symbols, & Images			
Judging		Physical Objects		
Deciding			Activities, Services, & Processes	
Evaluating				Systems, Environments, Ideas, & Values

Figure 4
Human Abilities and Design Disciplines

The emergence of strategic planning as a discipline of design thinking may be illustrated in a matrix of commonplaces formed from the fundamental *abilities of designers* and the closely related *disciplines of design practice*. The premise behind this matrix is that the natural abilities of designers—the natural design abilities of all human beings, which we may identify as *invention, judgment, decision making*, and *evaluation*—stand in need of disciplines or instrumentalities in order to become operative and effective in practice. In other words, disciplines are *enablers* of the natural abilities of human beings. Natural ability is not enough. The intellectual and moral character of designers is formed when natural ability is extended and supported by means of the arts and sciences, by the disciplines of thought, action, and production. In this sense, the history of design in the twentieth century is not merely the history of *products* or of *personal styles of expression* or even of *broad cultural ideas*. It is also the history of the *character and disciplines of design thinking as they are formed through encounters with new problems*.

The places of intersection between ability and discipline are illustrated in figure 4. They represent the broad areas in which design is explored in the twentieth century; they are the areas where designers continue to focus and reinvent their professions to meet new opportunities and circumstances.

This matrix may serve as a heuristic device for investigating the shifting debate about design in the contemporary period. My argument is that many designers are engaged in rethinking the nature of products—communicative symbols and images *as well as* physical objects—in the context of action. Indeed, action itself—in

the form of specific services, processes, and activities—has now become a recognized area of new products. And the broad discipline under development to support this rethinking in design is what I call *strategic planning* or *action-oriented design*. Emphasis on strategic planning leads to *third-order design* and *third-order design consultancies,* which expand the first and second orders of design that came to prominence in the early and middle decades of this century. Of course, there are many forms of strategic planning. The term is used in a narrow technical sense in business and in a broad common sense by many others, and the term is used explicitly by some designers and not at all by others. Nonetheless, the repositioning of design in the context of action and interaction is quite evident in contemporary work and requires little illustration. The issue is not decision-making, in the sense that designers have spoken of design as a problem-solving activity. The issue is how we find broader processes of deliberation that precede decision-making and allow the incorporation of diverse knowledge and values and an explicit discussion of ends and goals.

However, in addition to deliberation and strategic planning, I suggested that there is also a second theme quietly echoing through contemporary discourse. This is the theme of systems thinking or, as I prefer to call it, *systemic integration*. Emphasis on this theme leads to *fourth-order design* and *fourth-order design consultancies*. Systems thinking is not an elegant term. It does not strike the imagination with a vivid image. In fact, it can be quite misleading without a critical distinction between the early form of systems thinking that operated in the first decades of the twentieth century (and reached its clearest and perhaps most powerful expression in systems engineering in the 1950s) and the later form of systems thinking that is now emerging around concepts such as the networked enterprise, organizational learning, and the knowledge-based organization. The early form of systems thinking was fundamentally materialist and reductive in orientation, despite a concern for wholes. The wholes were material wholes—*things*, or information treated as a *thing*—such as one finds in systems engineering. This form of systems thinking was fundamentally concerned with the organization of means and offered only an anticipation of the deeper challenge of determining circumstances and ends.

Later forms of systems thinking began to emphasize the role of people in determining the course and results of systems and organizations. For example, the quality control movement began half a century ago as a form of high-end systems engineering, where statistical measures of manufacturing and performance provided concrete information on the successes and weaknesses of systems. However, the radical feature of this movement was not, as is sometimes suggested, a focus on statistical measures, but a rediscovery of collective human agency within organizations. Workers and managers began collaborating to discuss and evaluate problems of qual-

ity and to modify work processes. This was initially supported by statistical tools, but in essence it was a rediscovery of the value of dialogue and of the nature of rhetoric and dialectic as arts that are useful in shaping human affairs. This venture was both an extension and a relaxation of the traditional devices of dialectic, now separated from Marxist, Hegelian, or other philosophic ideologies which, in their academic and political forms, have too often limited the practical value of dialectic in the concrete circumstances and daily interactions of culture. Coupled with an ideology, dialectic is merely an art for interpreting things as they are and for promoting an ideology. However, separated from ideology, dialectic becomes a creative art for exploring opinions and knowledge, a form of cultural activity concerned with the exploration of ordering, disordering, and reordering in a search for understanding and for the human values which guide action.[15] Dialectic is, in fact, a powerful tool for collective deliberation about circumstances and ends, where a clarification and exploration of values and principles may be an essential condition for productive action.[16]

The potential of collaborative work was not achieved within the framework of quality control or total quality management. Although systems were expanded to include people and the focus became group planning and group execution, the orientation was still materialistic and quantitative. Indeed, in its worst form, total quality management remains a top-down approach, a tool of power and control within strongly hierarchical organizations. Nonetheless, the theme of systems thinking persists, focused on the collaborative nature of work and the need to integrate many kinds of knowledge in an effective enterprise, particularly when the enterprise is complex. This theme has found expression in the "learning organization" and the "knowledge-based organization," where dialogue is explicitly recognized as a new discipline of collaborative work.[17] The direction of this movement is illustrated in figure 5 by means of another matrix. This matrix suggests the relationships among some of the management theories associated with systems thinking or systemic integration in the twentieth century.

The management approach known as "process reengineering," which speaks of reinventing and redesigning work processes, is located outside the discipline of systemic integration in this matrix, although it is parallel with systems engineering and total quality management. The growing dissatisfaction with the results of process reengineering—simple downsizing of organizations, without a redistribution of the creative energy and purpose of workers—may be traced to its separation from the cultural values of organizations and its emphasis on information technologies, detached from collective human agency. (Proponents of process reengineering have found it increasingly important to argue that the use of information technologies is not central to this management movement, although such technologies do provide a control mech-

15 For background on the changing nature of dialectic and dialogue, see Richard McKeon, "Dialectic and Political Thought and Action," *Ethics* 65 (1954), 1–31, and "Knowledge, Community, and Communication," in *A Center for National Goals and Alternatives: Collected Papers* (New York: National Industrial Conference Board, 1971), 245–72. Also, see Chaim Perelman, ed., *Dialectics/Dialectiques* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975). Elsewhere, I have suggested that systemic integration or dialectic may be regarded as the fourth art of rhetoric. See R. Buchanan, "Rhetoric, Humanism, and Design."

16 In addition to the work of Richard McKeon and Chaim Perelman, the work of Stephen Toulmin has also played an important role in the rediscovery of dialectic as a practical art of deliberation. See Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

17 Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990). See William N. Issacs, "Taking Flight: Dialogue, Collective Thinking, and Organizational Learning," and Edgar H. Schein, "On Dialogue, Culture, and Organizational Learning," *Organizational Dynamics*, 22, no. 2 (Autumn, 1993).

	Communication	Construction	Strategic Planning	Systemic Integration
Inventing				"Early Management Theories"--e.g. Mayo, McGregor, Barnard, & Selznick
Judging			"Process Reengineering"	"Systems Enginering" "Total Quality Management"
Deciding				"Networked Enterprises"
Evaluating				"Learning Organizations" and "Knowledge-Based Organizations"

Figure 5
Systematic Management Approaches

anism as well as data for reengineering.) Recent literature on process reengineering seeks to address the problems of this approach by focusing on the motivation of managers. While this particular direction for rehabilitating process reengineering bears little resemblance to systemic integration, the turn toward people is a sure sign of the need to rethink process reengineering in the context of the cultural circumstances of an organization, not merely in the context of strategic business planning.[18]

The example of process reengineeging is worth discussion here precisely because it suggests one of the boundary conditions of strategic planning itself: strategic planning breaks down when the larger cultural context is undergoing, or in need of, major transformation. Designers involved in strategic planning sometimes suggest that their approach does encompass broad cultural change within organizations. However, the evidence for this is not clear, and one may remain skeptical. The volatile period of transition may be led, managed, and facilitated by *fourth-order design thinking* that focuses on systemic integration, but it is not managed through the methods of strategic planning. The problems of transition are not problems of action but of reaching a new understanding of purposes and ends. Transition depends on discovering the core idea, values, and thought which organize a culture or system and propel it forward in a new search for expression in appropriate activities and products, often through a pluralism of individual initiatives that lead to creative debate. Strategic planning requires a community vision but it does not provide that vision; strategic plans may express core vision, but they are a poor and sometimes dangerous substitute for it.

Earlier, we observed that the design disciplines of communication and construction do not disappear in the new discipline of strategic design planning. Similarly, in the new circumstances of the

18 See James Champy, *Reengineering Management: The Mandate for New Leadership* (New York: Harper Business, 1995).

learning organization and systemic integration the design disciplines of communication, construction, and strategic planning do not disappear. They are given new expression and development in the context of integration, where many kinds of knowledge and the participation of many people with different backgrounds and perspectives are required for effective product development.

However, it is not my goal in this paper to address the specific changes that are now underway in the design professions, design education, and some of the leading corporations and design consultancies in an effort to rethink the meaning of design in the new circumstances of organizational learning.[19] Rather, I want to explain the bearing of strategic planning and systemic integration on Branzi's dilemma, because these themes, operating in the philosophic engine of contemporary culture, suggest a third alternative which Branzi and others do not consider.

Design, Humanism, and the Philosophy of Culture

Branzi's dilemma presents two choices: the individual in the contemporary world may find identity and moral purpose either in individual vision, personal codes, pluralistic diversity, and tribalism or in a new general ideology—whatever that ideology may be— substituted for the old ideology of modernism. We have argued that both alternatives are distasteful and dangerous. Reliance on personal vision may easily lead not to productive pluralism but to relativism and a struggle for tribal power that ultimately suppresses alternative views. In turn, reliance on a new general ideology begs the question of what that ideology should be. We do not individually create a new cultural ideology; the candidates (such as Branzi's second modernity) are most likely to be no more than the projection of individual and tribal visions, *as if they had universal warrant and assent.*

The either/or form of the dilemma is characteristic of the style of argumentation in the impoverished two-term dialectic of most postmodernist theory. For example, some writers delight in the exercise of presenting two parallel columns of terms, with "modernist" terms on one side and opposing "postmodernist" terms on the other side, as if history or intelligence offered a clear choice between one term or the other. However, if we are correct in identifying deliberation and dialogue—dialogue as a new form of rhetoric and dialectic in community activity—as central themes in the new circumstances of the contemporary world, then a third alternative also exists, representing a more supple three-term dialectic suited to the needs of our complex situation. The third term is the mediated middle in any good discussion. It is the domain, not of dogmatically asserted truth on either side of an issue, but of honest uncertainty, hypothesis, and possibility. It is the domain of cooperation in common enterprise, despite differences of personal values or ideologies.

19 Some aspects are discussed in Richard Buchanan and Craig M. Vogel, "Design in the Learning Organization: Educating for the New Culture of Product Development," *Design Management Journal*, 5, no. 4 (Fall, 1994).

The key to this alternative lies in what we mean by culture and, subsequently, in a new relationship between culture and the individual. If culture is ideology, then there can be no single culture: no ideology achieves universal assent in the human community. Instead, there are many cultures, often in conflict and competition with each other on an ideological battlefield. Indeed, culture-as-ideology may be a tired and decadent stage in the development of culture, when conservative forces attempt to consolidate a particular philosophic, religious, or political position and close-off further exploration, hastening a descent into tribalism. But if culture is an activity of ordering, disordering, and reordering in an ongoing search for principles and their expression, then the picture changes. Culture can be, in the words of philosopher Richard McKeon, "the framework within which many cultures are developed, interact, and communicate."[20] Instead of a new ideology shared by all in the contemporary world, there is the alternative of responsible discussion, deliberation, and collaborative decision-making on critical issues of action, where the participants recognize that there may be some truth in the arguments, beliefs, and perceptions of their opposing colleagues.

The hope for such an alternative may seem dim at the moment. We are moving through a difficult period where conflicting values often seem irreconcilable in practical affairs. Yet this is where design and the work of designers may offer an example of new ways of thinking and acting. By focusing on concrete problems and practical situations—on what designer's call "the project"—design shifts attention away from ideology and theory as the ultimate goal of cooperative work and towards action and production. This does not lessen the value of theory, but it makes theory accountable in the objective results of what is done and what is made.

Perhaps the focus on the concrete and objective is one reason why design attracts increasing attention in the contemporary world and is given broader scope than at any time in the past: there is hope that design thinking, applied in many new areas, can serve as an alternative to the old forms of technocracy based on scientific specialization, where experts in narrow areas of learning once believed that they could improve and enrich life merely by applying technical knowledge to solve the problems of everyday life. In contrast with technocracy, design increasingly seeks to include in its processes of deliberation and decision-making all of those who will be affected by a new product. This is not a vague or sentimental gesture. The new disciplines of strategic design planning and systemic integration, as they are now explored by many designers, are providing the instrumentalities for inclusion in the group processes of product development. They are providing tools for addressing the conflict of competing values and directing attention towards agreement on what is possible.

20 Richard McKeon, "Fact and Value in the Philosophy of Culture," in *Akten des XIV. Internationalen Kongresses für Philosophie, Wien, 2–9 September 1968* (Vienna: Herder, 1969) 4: 503–11.

The result of the new disciplines of design thinking is typically not agreement on an ideology that may stand behind a new product. Instead, the result is an agreement that this or that is what shall be done today, so that ideological disagreement may be suspended and production move forward with the support of all of those involved in the planning process. Such support—practical agreements reached through discussion—serves as the shared vision of a group and as the ground for objective evaluation and choice among competing alternatives in product development. The ground is a mediated middle of reasonable possibility and intentional operations, not a claim of universal infallibility or truth. It is a contribution to the search that we have described as culture. Instead of a new general ideology that is substituted for modernism, design can advance culture as a an ongoing search for values and understanding.[21]

There is an important parallel between this approach to contemporary culture and the earlier cultural revolution in man's relation to nature that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. Philosopher John Dewey explains the earlier revolution as a change in the center of the universe: from the mind seeking to understand a separate exterior material world to the mind as part of nature.

> The old center [of the universe] was the mind knowing by means of an equipment of powers complete within itself, and merely exercised upon an antecedent external material equally complete in itself. The new center is indefinite interactions taking place within a course of nature which is not fixed and complete, but which is capable of direction to new and different results through the mediation of intentional operations.[22]

In the new turn of the revolution that began in the early decades of the twentieth century, culture is not a fixed ideology existing outside the individual, something comparable to the old metaphysical idea of nature. We are all embedded in the course of a culture that is not fixed and complete. Culture is what we do individually and together through our intentional operations and projects.

In contrast to Branzi's dilemma, where individuality is threatened in either of the two alternatives—threatened by the power of tribes or submerged in an oppressive ideological order—the new philosophy of culture offers a suitable ground for defending the individual. Universality in the new philosophy of culture is not achieved through consensus in a general ideology. Rather, universality is an *expression of individuality placed in its context*. The emphasis is on the dynamic functional relations among individuals and groups, not on the old dichotomies of ideology which impede interaction. Paradoxically, collaborative work and the group

21 McKeon, "Fact and Value in the Philosophy of Culture," 506. "Culture is the constitutive whole or regulative universal in which cultures have their being, their interrelations, and their communications; particular cultures are described and investigated as configurations, constellations, clusters, and transmutations of values. The objectivity of facts and values is not discovered or achieved in a structure of fixities but in an ongoing development of achievement and invention which is compounded of advancements of science, society, and art in the creation and establishment of truths and values."

22 John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study in the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (New York: Capricorn, 1960), 290–91. For a discussion of the bearing of these ideas on design, see R. Buchanan, "Design and Technology in the Second Copernican Revolution," *Revue Sciences et techniques de la conception,* I no. 1 (1992), 21–7.

processes which play an increasingly important role in the design and development of complex products is not a threat to individual vision. The task of the individual is to find his or her place in relation to others, and this is precisely what is at stake in exploring values in the context of what is good, just, useful, and pleasurable. Identity and moral purpose come from considering our relations with others, from learning to perceive what is true and valuable when the world is regarded from other perspectives. The pluralism of individual perspectives is essential to ensure that the exploration does not become entrapped in a single ideology. Design is the most vivid domain for this cultural activity in the contemporary world, because it deals with concrete and objective results whose consequences affect us all.

Conclusion: Designing for the individual

There is one observation that has immediate bearing on the work of designers today. If the arguments we have advanced are valid and useful, the task is no longer to design for a universal audience, or national groups, or market segments, or even the ideological abstraction known as "the consumer." Despite the continuing role of mass-production in many societies, the task is to design for the *individual placed in his or her immediate context.* Our products should support the individual in the effort to become an active participant in culture, searching for locally significant coherence and connection. Products should be personal pathways in the otherwise confusing ecology of culture.

Designing such pathways is a difficult challenge. However, there is some hope that designers are increasingly equipped for the task. Improvement of design education may help to make them more sensitive to the individual than they already are, while also increasing their awareness of the diverse kinds of knowledge that bear on design. There is no reason to be unhappy with the pluralism of design explorations in the contemporary world, so long as these explorations are not entrapped in ideology and each of us may pursue our own paths in design within the reasonable bounds of responsibility, based on informed discussions of what is good, just, useful, and pleasurable. We may be distressed by some of the work that we see in graphic and industrial design today and delighted by a wide range of other work. Design is very young and has far to go in the exploration of its role in culture. For many of us, this means better understanding of the disciplines of design thinking, not merely changes in style and surface treatment. Our hope that the quality of discussion about design continues to improve and that designers do not become afraid of having their ideas and work subjected to wider and more insightful discussion than in the past. We all have much to learn about living together in a culture that is not fixed and changeless, and this is both our pleasure and our responsibility.