

Design and the Creation of Value

Jan Michl

To cite this article: Jan Michl (2017): Design and the Creation of Value, The Design Journal

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1350362>



Published online: 28 Jul 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



BOOK REVIEW

Design and the Creation of Value, by John Heskett, edited by Clive Dilnot and Suzan Boztepe

London, Bloomsbury, 2017, 234 pp.
Hardback ISBN 9781474274302. £85.00.

Jan Michl 



This book presents a pioneering, though not entirely successful, attempt to explore the relationships between the realm of design and the world of economics. John Heskett (1937–2014), with his background from the London School of Economics and an impressive number of design-related publications, was no doubt uniquely equipped for such a project. The problem, however, is that the book is really a draft manuscript from Heskett's estate. As his multifaceted text was obviously never exposed to a cleansing editorial review during the author's lifetime, it has various conceptual issues, and suffers from many loose ends – as problems, themes, criticisms and arguments, often only sketched, were never properly tied up. Also lacking is the authorial summary of the project. So notwithstanding the

glowing presentation and evaluations on the back cover, and despite skillful editing and augmentations in various parts by Clive Dilnot, the book's principal editor, the reader should be warned: the text is no pleasure to read.

The manuscript is based on Heskett's seminar at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago, and mainly seems to address a US audience, a circumstance that narrows its impact. Heskett, who spent some 16 years as professor at the Institute of Design at IIT, found it repeatedly puzzling, and frustrating, that at the US governmental level there was hardly any interest in establishing institutions such as the UK Design Council, with the task of promoting innovative design. These American disappointments apparently inspired Heskett's seminar, with its striking thesis that there is 'a deep schism of mutual incomprehension', separating the domain of economics and the realm of industrial design (45). Heskett ascribed the schism mainly to the influence of Neoclassical economic theory, and also to formalist tendencies on the part of designers – though the latter, in contrast to the former, was not developed.

The text is structured as follows: After the author's Preface and Chapter 1, 'Introduction: Design in Economic Life?' follows Part I, 'Economic Theory and Design', where five economic doctrines are outlined and discussed: the Neoclassical economics, the Austrian economic theory, the Institutional theory, the New Growth theory, and the National System theory. These form Chapters 2 to 6, while the sixth doctrine, the Socialist theory, since it was too brief and provisional, was editorially relegated to Appendix 1. Part II of the book, called 'Design and the Creation of Value' (Chapters 7 to 9), then discusses design from the standpoint of economics, and economics from the standpoint of design and, finally, design and value from the standpoint of practice, although these themes are interlaced in all three chapters. The second provisional text, 'Value and Values in Design', closes the book as Appendix 2. The book is furnished with a thorough editorial introduction, comments on editing, and three other, somewhat too respectful, guest commentaries, related to Heskett's topics.

In the following I will focus on several issues which I believe need critical comments, and also point out what seems to be the most valuable parts of the manuscript. In the somewhat disorderly 'Preface' and in Chapter 1, 'Introduction: Design in Economic Life?', the author argues, sketchily but vigorously, for what he calls a 'high level of design practice'. His aim is to move design-related deliberations up in the business hierarchy, or, as he put it, from the 'executant' to 'executive' level. This seems to be his general aim throughout the manuscript. Here he proposes the concept of design as a strategic factor in an organization, with three main functions: design planning, management of design, and design implementation. That is why he insists that any designer, if aspiring to such a strategic role, needs to understand and employ economic arguments for the value of design in a business context (60). For this purpose, he provides the aforementioned extensive reviews of different economic theories in Part 1, Chapters 2 to 6.

The weakness of the introductory Chapter 1, however, is not only that it is more a string of proclamations than a persuasive, well worked-out argumentation. A much greater problem is the author's failure, throughout the manuscript, to provide an easy to remember explanation of what the term design actually stands for. Such problem, incidentally, never arose with Heskett's *Industrial Design* (1980), his first and very successful book. There, already on the first page, he offered a straightforward explanation of the term as 'the conception of visual form'. Such description was, of course, not covering all modes of designer contributions, but the clear understanding of what the author was talking about, when employing the term design, gave the book a unity, which probably greatly contributed to its success.

Here, however, 'design' seems to be the most problematic notion of the manuscript. The reader is offered only an enormously broad definition of the term that, in addition, leaves out any reference to visual aspects or aesthetics: 'Design is the human capacity for shaping and making in ways that satisfy our utilitarian needs and create meaning ...' (45). Apart from this unwieldy definition – do businesses seek a human, or a professional capacity? – Heskett repeatedly uses the term design as a stand-alone lingo word, employed without modifiers, as if everybody was supposed to know what the term means. At the same time, he complains not only that there is a 'huge confusion about what the word "design" means' (46), but also that 'design means many things' (52), which appears to annul any explanatory value the introductory definition might have. In his brief 'Preface', the reader is treated to this stand-alone, reified term 'design' more than 20 times, but in hardly any of these instances does Heskett's definition of design as a human capacity help us to understand what the author had meant in concrete contexts. Heskett speaks for example about how 'design' should be implemented in an organization, though he seems to have 'design planning' or 'design projects' in mind. He writes about confusing 'design' (rather than 'design approach') with art approach, about understanding 'design's' (instead of 'designers') potential contribution, or about the importance of discussing certain problems, if 'design' (rather than 'design profession') is to be more than a borrowing discipline (49, 54, 49, 50). Such vagueness seems to be a highly doubtful way of selling a profession to business executives.

The presentations of the five economic doctrines in Part 1 of the book form the most descriptive and informative content in the publication. Here I offer only a brief remark on the impact of the first and last of the discussed doctrines. Heskett viewed, no doubt rightly, the Neoclassical theory, which largely ignores entrepreneurial economic activity, as inhospitable to design innovations. However, the theory's uninviting attitude to design contributions seems to have had a much stronger influence on the officials of the US Department of Commerce that Heskett complained about, than on the US design practice – probably because US businesses are not run by state departments. On the other hand, the sixth doctrine, the sketchily-treated Socialist theory, was in fact the only one among the presented economic doctrines that

became, in very many countries, an all-embracing, state-run economic system. The manuscript, however, provides no comments, neither on the design implications of the Socialist theory, nor on the largely inimical design impact of its practice, probably because of manuscript's understandable but narrow focus on the US.

By far the most useful chapter in the book, in my opinion, is the rich concluding Chapter 9 in Part II, 'Design and Value from the Standpoint of Practice'. Even though the structure of its subchapters is no less disorderly than in many other chapters, Heskett finally comes to unpacking of his mysterious black box term 'design'. Here, his classifications and short analyses, observations, and discussions of varied types of design approaches within a firm are enlightening, and will be of great use both to students of design and design management.

But the chapter also provides a corrective to Heskett's own, strangely uneasy attitude to aesthetics. Earlier in the manuscript he had repeatedly and at times bitterly railed against perceptions of design as a 'superficial visual form' (138), or 'icing on the cake to make a product more marketable' (52), and deemed this 'a severe distortion of the [design] activity' (54). Nevertheless, here in Chapter 9, he pointed out, among other things, that, depending on whether a firm operates within an existing market, or aims at a novel market, many different types of demands on designers emerge. He observed that 'innovation is not necessarily about radical or fundamental change' (172). Here, after he had listed differing levels of innovation, he implicitly admitted that what had been branded as superficial aesthetic additions was in fact something that, at a certain innovation level, was fully legitimate.

However, even this kind of admission appears to regard the aesthetic competence of designers as a marginal rather than an integral part of the design profession. This seems to characterize the manuscript as a whole: there are simply no positive words about the aesthetic capability of designers. But if the design profession ceases to regard its aesthetic qualifications as a core competence, why should designers, rather than engineers, or human factor people, or marketing departments, be in charge of the high level design planning? These crucial issues are dodged.

As to the discussions of value, announced in the book's title, they appear rudimentary. Heskett's proposed hard distinction between 'adding value' and 'creating value', though vaguely useful, seems tenuous. If we agree that designers never start from a clean slate, any 'new value' is strictly speaking an 'added value'. While Heskett has firmly embraced the Austrian subject-anchored value theory (143, 194), he was also taken by Thorstein Veblen's idea of 'economic beauty' as something objectively valid (90, 137), though without any comment on the possible incompatibility of the two positions. There are other undeveloped themes, such as tensions between the notions of 'users' and 'consumers' (150), Heskett's flat rejection of the term 'good design' as 'meaningless' (179), or his single line statement that 'Moral and ethical value seems to have limited relation to design' (195).

Clive Dilnot, as if not entirely certain whether the manuscript was worth publishing, concludes his valuable editorial Introduction with an over-intellectualized chapter, cogitating on the manuscript's 'intellectual force'. There he offers a reification feast of his own, where not only 'design', but also 'value' and 'economy' are treated as if the concepts were Things out there. The chapter grows increasingly dense and closes with a discourse on a Martin Heidegger text, but there, in the heavy Black Forest fog, the editor becomes increasingly difficult to follow.

For all its problems, Heskett's incipient but multifarious text can serve as an inspiring starting point for all who wish to revisit the problems sketched there. In such case, I would plead for a different, down-to-earth introductory definition of design, one that starts by pointing out that 'design' is what designers do, and that what designers do can easily be described as redesigning what other designers, or they themselves, have done before, in order to improve upon the earlier solutions. Dilnot, in his penetrating notes 56 and 60 (203–204), points in a similar direction. He proposes to see design-led innovations in terms of 'reconfiguration and reconceptualization of an existing model or norm', and also quotes Bruno Latour's claim that the meaning of 'design' has moved towards 're-': reengineering, remodeling, redeveloping, redecorating, restyling, redesigning. Such alternative terms promise to make what designers offer to businesses less of a mystery than the tired lingo word.

P.S. Ironically, Bloomsbury, the book's publisher, has provided an instructive example of a design failing to increase product value. How is the reader to get from the note number in the text to the note itself in the endnote section at the back of the book? The running heads in individual chapters provide chapter titles, but no chapter numbers. The chapters' note segments in the endnote section give chapter numbers, but no chapter titles. The only way out of the fix is, first, to leaf back to the content section, where chapters are numbered, and then leaf forward to endnote section, in order to link the chapter number with chapter title. Why on earth not provide both chapter numbers and chapter titles in both places? Or even better: why not put 'Notes to pages xx–xx' in the endnote section's running head – a long-established and pain-free solution? (Luckily, in the e-book version, the use of hypertext links took care of this problem.)

Biography

Jan Michl is a professor emeritus of Design History and Design Theory at The Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Norway, and, until 2017, was an adjunct professor at the Institute of design at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Gjøvik, Norway. His website is janmichl.com

ORCID

Jan Michl  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8464-3617>

Address for Correspondence

Jan Michl, professor emeritus, Oslo School of Architecture and Design,
Maridalsveien 29, 0175 Oslo, Norway.

Email: michl.nor@gmail.com