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## PLANNING AND FREEDOM

*by Ursula Huws*

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**John Chris Jones, *Designing Designing*, Phaidon Press, (Architecture Design and Technology Press), London, 1991, paperback, xlv + 336 pp, £12.95**

**John Chris Jones, *Design Methods*, 2nd Edition, Van Nostrand Reinhold (International Thomson Publishing), New York, 1992, paperback, lxiv + 407 pp, ISBN 0-442-01182-2, £33.00**

**C. Thomas Mitchell, *Redefining Designing: From Form to Experience*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, (International Thomson Publishing), New York, 1993, paperback, 162 pp, ISBN 0-442-00987-9, £28.50**

When he was a student at Cambridge just after the Second World War, John Chris Jones discovered that a letter was as likely to reach its destination if chucked out of the window as if it were posted in the conventional way. The blithe optimism which inspired such an experiment still characterises his approach to life. After a decade and a half in which mistrust of one's fellow humans has gained overwhelming ideological dominance it is as welcome as a daffodil in a British January.

Jones's basic message is that freed from the imprisoning rigidities of abstract rules and systems, and the bureaucracies they generate, people can be trusted to find creative and mutually helpful solutions to the problems they encounter as inevitably as water can be trusted to find a sensible route down a Welsh mountain.

Though akin to some ideas current in anarchist thought, Jones's approach has quite different intellectual origins. During the 1950s he was employed by Metropolitan Vickers, then one of the largest electrical engineering company in Britain, as an industrial designer. His tolerant boss, spotting talent, gave him considerable freedom to rove between departments, evaluating new designs - for anything from an early mainframe computer to a turbo generator - to identify potential problems. In this role he developed a number of insights into the design process and the nature of technological change which began to be published as articles in the design press.

For the development of his personal philosophy, perhaps the most important of these insights was the discovery that there comes a point in any design process where the range of alternatives is so great that no single mind can possibly encompass them. At such moments most designers become conservative or arbitrary. They may make decisions based on copying the outward form of what others have done before them in similar circumstances ('this object is a desk-lamp/traffic control system/housing estate so I'll make it look like other desk-lamps/traffic control systems/housing estates I've seen'). They may take refuge in their personal sense of artistry ('this sketch I've done on the back of an envelope looks good').

Or they may allow economics to make the decision (the cheapest materials, for instance, or the option which involves least retooling). Jones's originality lies in his perception that it is precisely this abrogation of responsibility which leads to design problems. However great the designer, he or she is blinkered by innumerable preconceptions and prejudices. A decision based only on a single person's common sense will be fatally limited. Much better to recognise that there is no rational basis for an individual decision and consciously open oneself up to the full range of possibilities.

The most radical innovation in terms of its immediate impact was the dethroning of the designer from his role as the individual creator and the placing of users and their needs at the centre of the design process. In order to make it possible for the process to be democratised in this way it was necessary for it to be shared and a common means of communication to be developed. Jones pioneered the use of brainstorming and other techniques to enable new forms of dialogue to be developed between designers and users. He also set up one of the first ergonomics laboratories in the country as a way of collecting concrete evidence of the impact of designs on their users.

In 1961 Jones became an academic which gave him the chance to develop these ideas further. They eventually took form in *Design Methods*, the classic work of its genre which has now been reissued by Van Nostrand Reinhold with a welcome new introduction by the author. *Design Methods* takes the rational analysis of the design process to its logical limits. Indeed, chunks of it can be found, transcribed word for word, though unacknowledged, in the National Curriculum guidelines on the craft, design and technology curriculum. However contained in this work, though missing from its many imitators, is also a radical critique of this very rationality.

The central problem which Jones confronts is how, starting from a positivist scientific view of the world, designers can free themselves from the straitjacket of their own unconscious prejudices and open themselves up to a fuller range of creative possibilities. The answer he comes up with is one which also occurred to some artists - notably his friend John Cage - in the 1960s: the use of chance. Such techniques can, of course, be traced back to Surrealism and, even earlier to the I Ching and other ancient divining systems. *Designing Designing*, like much of Jones's writing and performance art of the 1980s, uses a variety of random processes to produce a series of sensitive observations about design which make up an extraordinarily coherent whole despite the disparate origins of the component essays. As a writer, Jones practices what he preaches, refusing to speak in the omniscient voice of the expert and encouraging the reader to share with him in the process of constructing new meanings from his encyclopaedic range of source materials. This sounds like post-modernism and, indeed, some would argue that it is. However even the most philosophical of Jones's essays contain no allusions to structuralist or post-structuralist texts and all are innocent of either pastiche or jargon. The flavour of the writing is tentative; conversational with an ineradicable Welshness of rhythm.

Since Jones's characteristic resignation from his post as inaugural professor of design at the Open University in 1975, inexplicable to those who cannot understand the impulse to live by one's beliefs, his work has been sadly neglected. Perhaps Thomas Mitchell's *Redefining Designing* signifies the beginnings of a recognition beyond the narrow circle of designers, performance artists and poets who currently admire his work.

Mitchell's main focus is architecture. His central argument is that whether they are Modernists, Post-modernists, Deconstructionists or Late (or Second) Modernists, twentieth century architects share a basic contempt for the users of their buildings. As well as exposing the egotism of architects, he also

criticises social scientists for their failure to carry out research on environment behaviour in ways which make it possible for their findings to be incorporated constructively into the design process. Drawing both on published work and on a series of taped interviews with him, Mitchell presents Jones's approach to design methods as a way forward from this impasse. Placing him, surprisingly, in the tradition of William Morris, Mitchell makes it clear that Jones's work has a direct political relevance. Quoting Jones's insistence that the Design Methods approach should be applied to the design of systems as well as artefacts, he argues that, applied at this level, the approach becomes a way of empowering ordinary people and making it possible to create a comfortable functioning environment for living, responsive to their needs. It becomes, in other words, a way to implement what the GLC called popular planning. The goal of design is transformed: the aesthetic becomes the social as, instead of trying to make beautiful objects, we try instead to find a way for people to live good lives.

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