

DESIGN

AN OPERATING RAINBOW

BY FRIDAY FOR THE LOBBY

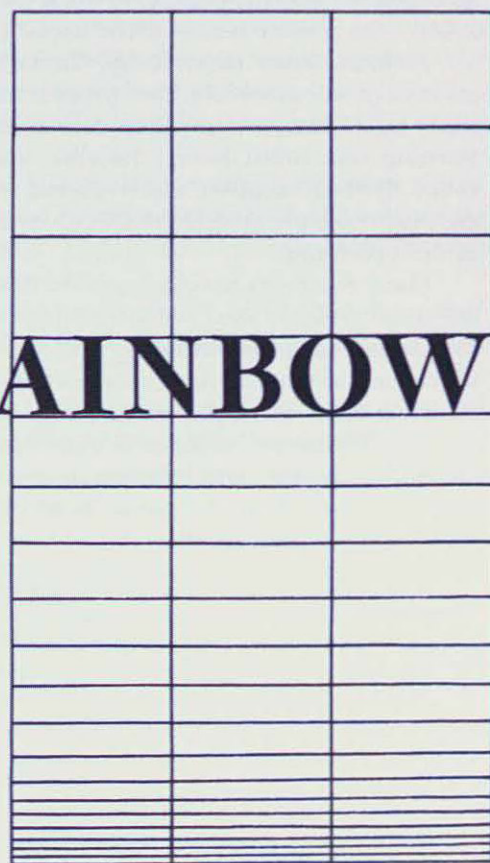
by Charles Gurd

Quiconque s'étant assis à une table ou un écran pour produire un design peut comprendre les angoisses ressenties alors qu'il faut faire des choix ou encore plus dessiner la prochaine ligne.

L'auteur, ayant travaillé avec plusieurs idéalistes "utopiques", présente l'idée qu'il existe une attitude, une méthodologie que l'on pourrait qualifier d'utopique et qui mène à des solutions aux problèmes de design.

Certain design decisions have far reaching implications and some of those can be called utopian in nature or attitude. Anyone who has sat down at a board or computer to design has experienced the rather terrifying doubt of his reason-for-doing-things or, more terrifying, his reason for drawing the next line. It is my experience, having worked with several designers who could be called utopians, that there exist an attitude, methodology and range of concerns which are the precursors of utopian design solutions. Since the process of designing occurs in part on a mental level and in part on an intuitive level, it is difficult to pinpoint and describe an appropriate utopian way of working or methodology. However, here is a shot at it, which by necessity follows a catalogue of concerns. This is written with apologies for a tendency to abstract, exaggerate and polarize, none the less intended in the spirit of the subject.

Layout by: Sophie Bolduc and Vince den Hartog



The Question

On occasion, through the ever present morass of time constraint and technical limitations, in an instance of calm or maybe just when the moment permits, arises the question of "what should or should not be". The question is a kind of definition of utopian thinking—it is the operative question. It asks where in the realm of possibility should we place the boundaries which enscribe a desirable state of being, of human existence. It is the answer to this question which should guide the process of change.

Even to address the question is to face a rather frightening conceptual void—an experience similar to a painter facing a blank canvas—waiting patiently for some internal intuition to indicate where the first brush strokes should be placed.

Designers address the question as do philosophers, although their answers usually take the form of a specific, delineated and concrete existence. For this reason, and because nobody answers the question easily, many would say that designers have a tougher time of it than philosophers. The designer, like the philosopher, approaches the question with a certain trepidation, an intent or thematic concern and searches for technical devices with will, power and appropriate attitude, not unlike the painter approaching the canvas.

The difficulty in answering the question is how to break it down, how to define it in a way that is useful. The solution requires isolating "limitations". This, of course, is a process of rational analysis, similar in most ways to the way that scientists describe a problem by isolating variables.

Limitations tell us most things about the problem and, accurately described, can not only lead in the direction of the solution, but actually provide it. So, if the right questions are asked—the answer is very often implicit.

Perhaps more importantly, limitations make possible creative problem solving. This process has been described in many ways. The most universal definition, which comes from learning association theory, describes it as an association between defined variables which are not usually associated or are only remotely associated. Creativity flourishes as a result of defined limits.

Many designers have recognized this process of seeking limits as crucial to their work. Architect Bill Cawdill of CRS has described a methodology called "problem seeking," which basically states that if you can define the problem, you probably have the solution right in front of you.

Charles Eames, utopian designer par excellence, often alluded to the problem inherent in abandoning limitations, or as he called them, restraints. In an interview over twenty years ago, he said:

It is virtually impossible to do something without restraints. If you look at the history of great things, of all times, the greatest were produced where the conditions of restraint were so great that there was relatively little choice—like the obsidian knife of the Aztec or a play of Euripides...When somebody is on the ball, they eliminate choices and establish limits...we have to rediscover our limitations.

The operative question of utopian thinking is "what should or should not be." Answering the question and solving the implied problem requires carefully isolating limitations to the range of the problem.

The Relevance of the Question

The question "what should or should not be" is not an unimportant one, for it guides our way on the path of survival and of living happier lives, both as individuals and as a species. Other forms of life do not have the opportunity to ask it. It is precisely the possibility of such a reflective approach to daily circumstance which distinguishes humans from "lower" forms of life. It is our tool for improved survival in an increasingly complicated environment. The question is not only useful but critical.

Asking the operative question of utopian thinking is relevant to improving one's chances of survival and increased happiness.

The Evidence

Of course, questions of a utopian nature have been asked for a long time. There is therefore an extensive catalogue of answers. So, it is no surprise that a review of those answers uncovers a number of common attitudes.

Great civilizations give evidence that the overall direction of utopian thought has most often been described in terms of generalities which can be considered as "higher concerns" because they take many "lower concerns" into account. They are higher because of a pre-eminent position in their order of consequence. In other words, if you address a pre-eminent thought, several other thoughts will automatically follow, or be affected.

The generalities, like the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), are used by civilizations to judge themselves, to keep on track and to head in the direction of assured survival.

Such generalities are a reference point for success or failure, i.e., for progress. If they are missing, the overall direction is missing—like the rudderless ship which cannot proceed on course.

The relationship between the higher and lower concerns is also important. It must remain dynamic: one must be able to alter the other. It must remain strong: communication of information between the two is vital.

The evidence of history is that other civilizations were guided by generalities or "higher concerns". The lack of these concerns has always been disastrous in the end.

The Context

Of course, utopia is never described in a vacuum. The question is never asked out of context—just as a painter is tied subconsciously or consciously to the influence of the times as he approaches the blank canvas. Perhaps this should be recognized as the first family of limitations. For, regardless of the subject-matter, the philosophical and mental contexts in which limitations are sought is of primary importance.

The context is defined by two main forces or factors. One is our relationship to history. The other is the influence of the current environment. The implications of this duality requires further definition and exploration in order to be useful.

Any discussion of utopia is influenced by the context in which it occurs.

History

Looking back, it can be said that we have entered a period which is unique—described by some writers as "post historical". The activities of the past that collectively described civilization previously are in most ways unrelated to present circumstances. The variables, or elements of current historical analysis, have little similarity to previous ones. While it cannot be denied that we of skin and flesh have always been of skin and flesh, today's mind is sending information to that same skin and flesh with dramatically different reference points than previously.

In these times, our culture has become fragmented. There is now a separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion, metaphysics and art. These have become differentiated because the unified world of varying levels of religion and metaphysical concerns has fallen apart.

Historians have described the present as "modern" or even "post-modern"; however, these are inappropriate terms. This is because the term *modern* expresses the consciousness of an epoch that translates itself into the past in order to view itself as the result of evolution. This is the idea of being modern by looking back to the infinite progress of knowledge and the infinite advance towards social and moral betterment. The term *modern* appears exactly in those periods in time when the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through a renewed relationship to the ancient one. However, this reference to the past does not relate to the consciousness of today, let alone to utopian thinking. Both address by necessity the unseen future.

We have entered a period of post-history which has little useful reference to the past.

Contemporary Environment

The current environment also influences our attitude towards utopias and now the question is answered. For, we make decisions in terms of what we see and know; i.e., our mental and physical environments.

The *mental* environment results from a diversity of experiences and emotional forces. Today's highly mobile mental environment is heavily loaded with information (though mis-information and distractions are present as well). The overwhelming influence of television and mass communication shapes our spirit and attitudes.

The *physical* environment is what exists. For most people, it is the city of the second half of the twentieth century and all its impacts: from the rapid speeds of vehicular movement to the toxic gas-laden atmosphere to the deprivation of the visual, auditory and tactile environment around us which we recognize as "natural".

The current environment is unique in history and is comprised mainly of high intensity mass communication and dense urbanism.

The Design Architects

As utopian designers are a sub-breed of utopian thinkers, utopian design architects are a sub-breed of utopian designers. The difference between them is a difference in the range they address—the variables they attempt to realize utopia with.

Long ago, Vitruvius described the principles of architecture and the role and activities of the architect. However, those roles and activities have changed substantially. While the requisite durability, convenience and beauty are still required of contemporary architecture, other issues have become more important. Although considered with disdain and disappointment in some camps, architects are still viewed by most to be guardians of the environment—as Plato would describe them: saviours and helpers.

What architects do today is in some ways the same as they have always done; they oversee the construction of buildings and built spaces. However, they are also responsible for the future environment. They must be the muscle—the actualizers of utopian thinking concerning the physical environment.

This has not been happening, as architects have lost the confidence of the societies which they serve. They have not safe-guarded the environment as forward-looking utopian thinkers should have. Consequently, they have been stripped of their power to make decisions—even those concerning their own projects. In their place, bankers, insurance executives, market analysts and construction managers have become the utopian actualizers.

The problem that architects face is that they have lost touch with the changing limitations which lead to answers to the operative question of utopian thinking. Also, they have lost the ability to question deeply—in a fundamental way. It is thus impossible to provide buildings or built spaces which are truly relevant, addressing the problems of the times, let alone to anticipate the problems of the future. The tragedy is that the built environment being constructed today has, in large part, no relationship with the metaphysical, emotional or mental reality of the people using it.

Design architects have not been shouldering the responsibility of utopian thinking, and have lost touch with the changed limitations

which should inform planning decisions—they are not safe-guarding the built environment.

Designing for Utopia

Utopian thinkers have always been people who ask more questions—the right ones of course. They have an ability to ask "what should or should not be" without prior prejudice, constraint, fantasy or other blinding factors. By considering the following questions, evidence suggests that utopian solutions are, at the very least, closer at hand:

1. Have limitations to the operative question of the utopia been identified?
2. Has it been recognized that the design decisions will affect the health and happiness of people who will use the built environment, and, in the broader sense, the very possibility of survival?
3. Have the generalities or range of "higher concerns" been identified, to guide decision-making, which in turn affects "lower concerns"?
4. Is the context in which designing occurs being taken into account as an influence on the design process?
5. Is a view towards the future given as much emphasis as a view towards the past?
6. Is the present environment and all that defines and describes it being addressed as a key factor in the appropriateness of a solution?
7. Do you feel responsible as a professional to the society at large for the planning decisions which you are recommending and attempting to implement?

This was a design problem brought to the office of Charles and Ray Eames by IBM for their new headquarters building, constructed a few years ago in New York.

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