



### **Resource Review**

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<b>Name of reviewed item:</b>	The Design History Reader
<b>Editors:</b>	Grace Lees-Maffei and Rebecca Houze
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#### **Review:**

There are two (main) reasons for students to read resources. The first is for content: they need to find out the terms, main ideas, and debates surrounding their area of study. The second reason is that of modelling the structure of good, clear writing. By no means all, but many students who choose to study art, design and media subjects, are choosing positively – because they love the subject – but also negatively – in a kind of anti-academic manner. This can mean that trying to get beginning students not only to write with academic form, but also to read in sufficient depth or length, is sometimes tricky.

A reader is always very useful for students, as it introduces them to concepts and writers in manageable chunks and can either enthuse them and get them wanting more, or in a research project, let them know quickly they are not on the right track with a line of enquiry. For students for whom reading (or indeed time management) poses difficulties, the reader is a very welcome first port of call. And the format of short essays which get to the point of an argument quickly and succinctly is one which allows excellent modelling of academic writing.

In this resource, not only are the chosen writings excellent examples, but the structure of the book itself is a model of clarity. I would advise any student planning

an extended piece of critical writing to look at the table of contents, from which it is possible to see the whole trajectory of the project of the book – its scope and its limitations. The clarity of planning – of the way to go about introducing design history topics and concepts – has lent much to the success of the reader.

The structure of the book is sound and useful, with the sections both thoughtfully created and containing well-selected entries. Part 1 is called 'Histories', with the emphasis happily on the plural. As one might expect, this section follows a broadly chronological path, either in terms of the original writing or of the artifact being considered. I particularly liked how the first section is entitled 'New Designers 1676-1820': we were all young/avant garde once... Often design is seen as if it is the constant search for the new; as if the new were always necessarily an improvement – it is salutary and sobering to cast early design theorists in the same light, and to assess their impact on history.

Section introductions by Lees-Maffei and Houze are useful, scholarly, and provide context. Each section is selected or abridged in order to give as much content as possible (according to the selection criteria) for the given length. Design history is perhaps a relatively new area of publication but the potential pitfalls of compiling a reader remain, amongst which is that of including the basic building blocks of the subject without becoming entirely predictable. It is particularly pleasing to have what might be seen as the expected next to the surprising or unknown: in the 'Sustainable Futures' section, in between the necessary Papanek and *The Green Consumer Guide*, is an examination of the material and emotional relationship between American culture and plastic by Jeffrey L. Meikle. Less well-known, perhaps, but contributing to what is a comprehensive and eclectic coverage.

Part II, 'Methods and Themes', challenges the slightly linear narrative of Part 1 by looking at the variety of work in design history through thematic groupings. As the introduction to Part 2 states, 'following two sections that examine debates around the nature of design history and interdisciplinary examinations of design as a process of negotiations, the thematic sections that make up Part II of the *Reader* highlight themes of gender, consumption, mediation and globalization.'

Although Part I is clearly necessary, Part II for me is the highlight of the book. Subjects which can sometimes seem ignored or shied away from, such as gender and design, are given plenty of scope to develop a palette of exploration. (Penny Sparke's segment, where she talks about a modernist architect's wife going into the one room where she is 'allowed' curtains, and quietly weeping, was both affecting and confronting: it's not just the home or personal environment which is 'a thinly-disguised attempt by masculine culture to set the cultural terms of reference for modernity'.) Once again I enjoyed the eclecticism of this section: in the section on 'Consumption' we see Marx, Veblen, Barthes and Bordieu followed by Alison J. Clarke's analysis of the ascent of the Tupperware party. My own work with students leads me to be completely in agreement with the proposal by the authors here that the object is less the site of meaning than the processes or negotiations which surround it – and the authors also point out the necessity and value of the use of, and contribution to, a range of neighbouring subjects of study.

At the end of each section is an annotated guide to further reading. In my own teaching I seem to continually renegotiate the line between giving advice to help students become self-reflective without being prescriptive, and making sure they do not feel lost or adrift. I wondered if perhaps more lines (or other kinds of connections) could have been drawn in these sections. The 'Histories' section, as I have said, was admirably clear and structured; perhaps it would have been good to draw parallels

beyond those with similarly historical treatments. For example, Thomas Hine's *Popaluxe*, in Section 4 (War/Post-War/Cold War, 1943-70) in my mind has links to – is part of the history leading to – Sparke's *Architect's Wife* in Section 9. Or for each article the 'further reading' could be grouped according to which direction this further reading might take you. So, for example, Adam Smith's *Of the Division of Labour* could have led on to an exploration of haptic skill, to Marx, or to Papanek, depending on the reader's need or interest. I would have liked the links to be the one part of the book where the firm grip on structure was loosened enough to display more of a lateral or at least associated selection of links. It is not as if Houze and Lees-Maffei are lacking in either knowledge or enthusiasm for the subject; and I am sure these sections could have been more taxonomic, more about a web of relationships.

But perhaps I am erring on the side of the overly prescriptive in this. *The Design History Reader* is a very useful, ecelectic and elegant resource for understanding and exploring the history and development of design. Its range – in terms of issues, geography, time and style, is impressive, and it would prove an excellent model and introductory resource, not just to design students but to those interested in other areas such as media, art, and critical, cultural and historical studies.