

**Power to the Client / Ole Bouman.** The world is changing, so what else is new? Not so much. Transformations of our daily life, our immediate environment, and even the more abstract dimensions of our existence such as working conditions, social contexts and frames of references are relentlessly molded to accommodate and facilitate the forces of modernization. This may sound thrilling, but the process has become simply another kind of historical routine. For a long time, sociologists have probed and explored this notion of change, trying to define its axioms. Politicians have fought over its direction. Scientists have pursued the knowledge and technology necessary to drive it. Modernity, the shock of the new, is no longer new itself. Destiny is on autopilot, and nobody is questioning the driver. The new doesn't break through, it just breaks, time and again. The imperative question is if we can envision any other way to unfold our future. Is there an alternative to 'progress', or for that matter, change? Perhaps the best way to gain insight into the answer is to focus on that modality that makes change visible and tangible. Let's concentrate for the sake of this argument on the specialism of change: design.

This may sound rather strange. Design is well known for its capacity to augment beauty and appeal, function and utility. And it is sometimes discussed as a social qualifier, a vehicle in which to pursue or represent social status. Finally, design has its own discourse upon the relationship between content and form, between intention and strategy. Design, in a way, exemplifies the concepts and ideas of very special group of people: designers. Rarely, however, is design understood as the embodiment of change itself, and as such, as the slave of the historical mission as described above – the mission of modernity. Secondary to a widespread amnesia, most talk about design is obsessed with its immediate source, meaning, shape and effect. Discussion starts with the piece and it ends with it. It lacks perspective. And the reason for this forgetfulness is as simple as its consequences: because nobody wants to see him or herself as only an instrument of a larger inexorable force of history. So, we prefer to stick to the buzz, the fashion and the hype and we flatter ourselves in thinking any of it makes a difference. Perspective can engender strong feelings of irrelevance, and it is understandable people want to avoid that. But let us make an attempt here to face the truth and consider design for what it primarily is: an important component of the juggernaut of modernization - the face of change.

To understand design as the embodiment of change, we need to shift our attention away from those we used to believe to be the originators of design – the designers, to the protagonists who are truly in charge: the clients. To understand how clients affect the nature of design and its mandate, we need to examine why they want to change. Clients are much closer to the magic of change than designers are. It is the clients who are the personifications of the capitalist logic of expansion, innovation and increased surplus value, the three main drivers of creative destruction. So it is the clients who need to be understood if we want to come to terms with change. Designers, for a long time, labeled clients as a 'necessary evil', impinging upon the luxury of the autonomous zone of artistic caprice. But this evil can no longer be understood as secondary. It simply exerts too much power. For our question we therefore need to focus on the *conditio sine qua non* for design: the client. What follows, in other words, is an analysis of this evil today. Is change really still its ideology, or are there other objectives in the making?

So we collected our evidence. Recently, Volume and Premesela, Dutch Design Foundation, organized an evening where this analysis could be pursued *in vivo*. By inviting three different kinds of the species: one commissioner for product design, one for architectural design and one for network design, we tried to grapple with how this urge to change functions in practice, and how change can become less mindless and less a goal in itself. So, we posed two pairs of questions to these clients. Firstly: 'What do you want and how do designers help you or frustrate you in achieve it?' Secondly (and more implicitly):


‘Should the design you ask for always bring change?’

It was an enlightening debate. It was difficult, but possible, to identify design whose biggest revolutionary power was in its unwillingness to revolutionize. The first client, in the head of a kitchenware company, gave a presentation underscoring his company’s need for a product line that was simple and recognizable, facilitating activities that belong to the oldest of mankind: preparing, cooking, eating food and cleaning the utilities. He appeared to deny design’s attempts to make these activities ‘contemporary’. In contrast, he wanted design to be ‘universal’.

The second client, a very successful real estate developer, had an equal claim on the realm of simplicity, leading him to bash the designer’s class as a group overtly self-obsessed with conceptual innovation at the detriment of pleasant inhabitation. He also made an appeal for respect to ‘eternal’ values of functionality and a common aesthetics.

Even the third client, a creative strategist for a global mobile telephone company, and as such, completely dependent on the successful implementations of new technologies and interface design, revealed an interesting attachment towards building communities, rather than networks, grounding his work in almost archaic principles of communication.

What was striking in the presentations of each of the three clients, was the degree to which they saw return on investment as stemming from permanence, rather than from change. These presentations were made before a large audience of design aficionados, who, of course voiced concern with the consequences of these attitudes. Most worrisome to the audience was the price the design disciplines would have to pay if there was a true conservative movement. If change were no longer to be the ultimate driver of progress, design would collapse, or so it seems. Yet beyond this predictable professional anxiety about losing the market to conservative idealism, a substantial question may be surfacing: if design loses its position in the center of modernity, does this mean an end to design or an end to modernity? In case of the former, jobs can be replaced. In the case of the latter, we need to address the issue if we can find a new historical destiny. And yes, what design could mean for that one. .



These observations were made in the aftermath of the New Years debate on January 6<sup>th</sup>, organized by Prensela, Dutch Design Foundation and VOLUME magazine in Amsterdam. The three invited clients were: Marko Athisaari, Director of Design Strategy at Nokia, Rudy Stroink, director of tcn Property Projects, and Joffrey Walonker, product development manager at Royal vkb. The debate on the Power of the Client took place in the Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam.