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Design traps

> There is a great deal of wishful thinking in such cases; it is the easiest thing of all to deceive one's self.
>
> Demosthenes

> The physician can bury his mistakes, but the architect can only advise his client to plant vines.
>
> Frank Lloyd Wright, *New York Times*

Traps for the unwary

No area of human thought is as full of pitfalls as design. Perhaps because design problems are so complex and 'wicked' or tricky it is comparatively easy to make decisions which, with the benefit of hindsight, may seem quite ridiculous. The life of the design critic is in truth far easier than that of the designer! Since designers create things for other people to use they find themselves surrounded by critics all of whom seem to know how to design but just choose not to earn their living that way! No field of design is more prone to exposing its creator's weaknesses than architecture. The great architect Frank Lloyd Wright, responsible for the famous advice quoted at the head of this chapter, was clearly speaking from first-hand experience of this! As a teacher of design students I have seen more design mistakes than most and in many cases they result from the designer falling into a mental trap which it is relatively easy to learn to avoid. This chapter identifies some of the more common traps and discusses ways of avoiding their clutches!

The category trap

The most obvious trap of all for the unwary or inexperienced designer is to identify the problem by the category of solution most commonly found. Thus architects speak of 'housing design' or

'school design'. Whilst schools undoubtedly share much in common, they are also all different. Thus to transfer solutions previously seen at other schools to a new one may be quite inappropriate. What is worse, is that the designer working in this way may not even notice the difference or be aware of the parts of the problem which have not been addressed. Not long ago a group of staff and students in my department became quite understandably fascinated by the urban design qualities of Italian hill towns. This gave rise to a spate of students creating designs based on these ideas without sufficiently examining their relevance to their own sites. While the qualities of these many lovely little Italian towns are indisputable, there are many reasons why they may not work elsewhere. Apart from the topography, the materials, climate and, most importantly but also most easily missed, the variations in culture which cause people to use space differently, all suggest problems with the transfer of these solutions.

This is problematic for designers since they are by their very nature very interested in designs. Architects look at the buildings they visit, industrial designers examine the products they use. Even more alarmingly, these designers study design solutions remotely through magazines and journals which tend to focus attention on purely organisational and visual properties. It is quite understandable and almost inevitable that designers will develop ideas about solutions and bring these to bear on their own problems. The category trap yawns wide open when a designer is looking for an opportunity to use some of these ideas and is tempted to do so too uncritically.

The puzzle trap

As we have already seen in Chapters 6 and 7, design problems are not puzzles. There are no correct or, even, optimal answers to design problems. This means that neither the designer nor others can recognise a 'right' design solution, although designers often experience an emotion similar to the feeling of 'rightness' when a design idea suddenly emerges which seems to satisfy many aspects of the problem. However, we all enjoy puzzles and gain enormous satisfaction from solving them. A visit to any airport bookshop will reveal shelves of crossword puzzles, logic puzzles, brain-teasers and the like for the entertainment of those who find themselves spending more hours than they would choose in and around planes. Add to these the range of rather less portable