The generators of design problems

At first sight it may seem obvious where design problems come from. Clients bring them to designers! As we shall see, whilst that is often true it is not always so, and it turns out to be only a small part of the story. It is certainly possible for designers to discover a problem without a client and much interesting design work is done under exactly these clientless conditions. We also to need to draw a careful distinction between the clients who present problems to designers and the ultimate users of the outcome. As we shall see, clients may or may not be the users of design. We have seen in the last chapter, how legislators can often pose considerable problems for the designer and they may sometimes even be in conflict with the client. Town planning legislation for example exists chiefly to protect the general public from the possible selfish excesses of individual architectural clients. Whether such development control is actually so beneficial, however, is probably debatable! However, we are in danger of getting ahead of the argument.

Clients

In design, the problem usually originates not in the designer's mind but with a client; someone in need who is unable to solve the problem, or perhaps, even fully to understand it without help. Whilst the fortunate artist may occasionally be commissioned, the designer almost always works this way. The design task, albeit ill-defined, is usually initially generated and expressed by a client. However, it is quite misleading to think that clients are a homogenous group. In many commercial situations the client may be represented by a professional, acting in that capacity more or less as a job. At the other end of the scale, many buildings are commissioned by people who have never acted as a client before. Sometimes the designer will work with an individual client, and at other times the client body may be represented by a whole committee. In the case of very large buildings commissioned by institutions or companies the programme may last several years and the membership of the client committee may change substantially.

The architects Stirling and Wilford have had considerable experience of these large institutional clients and have built many civic

and educational buildings. Michael Wilford has emphasised the importance of the role of the client in the design process:

> Behind every building of distinction is an equally distinctive client, not necessarily high profile, but one who takes the time and trouble to comprehend the ideas of the architect, is supportive and enthusiastic, who is bold, willing to take risks and above all can hold his or her nerve during the inevitable crises.
>
> (Lawson 1994b)

This suggests quite firmly that Michael Wilford does not just see the client as the source of the brief but as a creative partner in the process. The architect Eva Jiricna agrees with this by suggesting 'the worst client is the person who tells you to just get on with it and give me the final product' (Lawson 1994b). The client then is the most obvious example of a source of design problems and constraints. Ideally, and frequently those constraints can be explored creatively through an interaction between designer and client. It is certainly misleading to think that a client simply presents a designer with a complete brief in which the problem is totally defined and the constraints clearly articulated. The relationship between client and designer itself actually constitutes a significant part of the design process. The way that designers perceive and understand problems is to some extent a function of the way this relationship works.

Users

A great deal of design today is commissioned by clients who are not themselves the users. Public architecture such as hospitals, schools or housing is usually designed by architects who have relatively little contact with the users of their buildings. Industrial design and graphic design are directed at a mass market and are usually commissioned by commercial clients. The traditional image of the designer establishing a personal relationship with a client/user is grossly misleading. Even architects commissioned to design new buildings for large organisations such as universities are likely to be buffered from the actual users by a client committee or even a full-time buildings department. Frequently communication between designers and their users is both indirect and, as John Page has argued, filtered by organisational politics. In his study of 'planning and protest' (Page 1972) he describes the 'people barriers' erected in many organisations to prevent too much disruptive user feedback reaching designers.