

the designer receiving a new commission is looking forward to being able to continue exploring problems which were identified in earlier projects. The extent to which the designer is allowed this artistic self-gratification is a function both of the nature of the problem and of the client–designer relationship. For this reason there is inherently an element of tension in the client–designer relationship. Both are dependent one upon the other and yet both in their different ways are anxious of the other exerting too much control. On the one hand the designer probably needs the fee, while on the other the designer also has a reputation which is largely the result of past work and is thus anxious to continue developing a coherent body of work for all to see. The client on the other hand cannot actually design but nevertheless may to some extent know what is wanted and is anxious lest the designer gets quite different ideas. Obviously the wise client chooses a designer who, on the basis of past work, looks likely to share an interest in the client’s problems. No one could have ever expected Mies van der Rohe and Edwin Lutyens to have designed even remotely similar houses for the same client on the same site: as architects their own personal interests were too different.

It is worth noting at this point that the distinction between art and design is, like all such man-made conceptual boundaries, rather hazy and easily blurred. Students, groping to establish their role as designers are often confused by work which defies easy classification. When Peter Cook produced his highly influential ‘Plug-in-City’ in 1964 it at first appeared to be a piece of design; a city, admittedly imaginary and of the future, but which nevertheless looked like architecture and many of the drawings were themselves very architectural. In fact the process and intention behind such work is in some ways more akin to the artistic than the design process. ‘Plug-in-City’ did not solve any immediate problems, nor was it intended to be built. Rather it explored and expressed ideas, beliefs and values, and asked provocative questions about the future direction of city design and patterns of life. It is entirely appropriate that design students should be interested in, and influenced by such work, just as they might be by poetry, prose, paintings or films about similar issues. But they should not expect to approach real-world design problems posed by clients in the more introspective and personally expressive mode of the artist. Designers, unlike artists, cannot devote themselves exclusively to problems which are of interest to themselves personally.

Legislators

So far we have seen how design problems, whilst usually initiated by a client, may be contributed to by both users and designers themselves. Finally we must briefly turn our attention to another generator of design problems, perhaps the most remote of all from the designer, the legislator. Although frequently not involved in the actual design itself legislators create constraints within which designers must work. Such legislation and control may range from standards and codes of practice to guidelines and recommendations. Such standards may govern factors of safety, utility or appearance. They may have to be satisfied in order to sell products on the market, to allow conventional trade descriptions or to permit building construction to commence. Design legislation today may cover anything from the safety of electrical goods to the honesty of advertising or the energy consumption of buildings. In many cases complete bureaucracies exist to administer and interpret this general legislation for each specific instance. The architect today must satisfy the fire officer, the building inspector and the town planner and in addition, depending on the nature of the particular project, the housing corporation, health inspectors, Home Office inspectors, the water authority, electricity authority, the Post Office, factory inspectors, and so the list goes on. There is no point in disguising the tension which exists between designers and those who administer the legislation within which society has determined they must work. The designer may, at times, see the legislator as mindlessly inflexible, while to the legislator the designer may appear wilful and irresponsible.

This conflict is exemplified in Richard Rogers's account of the problems he encountered with the Parisian Fire Department when designing the Pompidou Centre.

As this was the first public building of grand hauteur, every regulation ever promulgated in the city of Paris since antiquity was applied in the most stringent manner conceivable to the tune of 50 million francs, some 10% of the total construction budget.

(Suckle 1980)

As Rogers himself puts it, no architect would want deliberately to construct a dangerous building. However, often regulations have to be applied in situations which were not predicted when they were framed; since no designers had previously conceived such extraordinary architecture as that of Piano and Rogers, it seems unreasonable to expect this of the legislators.