Back to the Future
The Future in the Past

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o Opening Pages

In memory of Anna Calvera (1954–2018)

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National Design and *Desenho Industrial*: Brazilian Issues in Historical Perspective

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Today, there is a mismatch between the practice and the understanding of 'design' inside and outside Brazil. While the meaning of the term began to expand from the 1960s onwards across the world, the effects of a semantic and conceptual restriction are constantly challenging the very notion of 'design' in Brazil. This is quite evident due to differences between Brazilian design research and the international debate on design issues. There are multiple and complex causes for this phenomenon. In any case, we must return to the time when the activity in its modern way was established in the country in the 1950s. That was a period of intense industrial expansion associated with nationalism, identified as 'national-developmentalism'—and the arriving of 'industrial design' as *'desenho industrial'*. This return to a historical time seeks to understand not only the translation of the American industrial design and the influence of the German model of Ulm in the creation of the first Brazilian institutions of design education, but also the singularities and difficulties encountered since then. Also in the 1950s, following an international trend, planning practice emerges in public and private spheres, affecting the broader understanding of the field of design (or *projeto*).

In Brazil, the noun 'design' does not have the same meaning as in other parts of the world. At the international level, in the last 40 years, debates on design deal with a productive *activity*—that is, mainly, a *verb*—capable of altering the future state of things according to predetermined goals. Having emerged from the practice of trades and ranging from the casting of graphic types and printing to the increasing needs imposed by the transformations in the productive processes of the 18th century, today design, as an expanded field, is a practice and knowledge shared by professionals in multiple areas, and its dissemination inside organizations and in the establishment of public policies is growing, leading to an intense diversity of actions. In contrast, the understanding of design in Brazil has changed very little since the 1960s. In fact, in the Brazilian context, "design" still means, at its very best understanding, a distinct professional practice—that is, a *noun*—set apart from other design activities, such as architecture and engineering.

A Brazilian Story

The reasons for the peculiar meaning of design in Brazil are diverse. It is certain, however, that a study of the possible causes of this mismatch leads to the arrival of the notion of industrial design in the country in the 1950s. This is a key moment in Brazil's shifting towards a new role in the global economy, precisely when the presidency of Juscelino Kubitschek promoted a policy for industrial modernization known as national-developmentalism (*nacional-desenvolvimentismo*). Kubitschek's Goals Plan (*Plano de Metas*) can be seen as the culmination of a long process of modernization and industrialization initiated in 1930, with the arrival of Getúlio Vargas to public power. Milestones of this process are the founding of Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional in 1941 and Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento in 1952. Announced in 1956, the Plan followed the general guidelines of CEPAL, initials for Comissão Econômica para a América Latina e o Caribe (COLISTETE, 2001), and established high goals for production in several sectors. It is after all mostly successful (LAFER, 2002: 27), regardless of inflation (LESSA, 1981: 10).

In cultural terms and through the arts scene, 1951 is the year of the first International Art Biennial of São Paulo held by the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM–SP). In the same year, the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) presented the first international retrospective exhibition of the work of designer, architect and sculptor Max Bill, with a huge reverberation specially among graphic designers such as Alexandre Wollner e Antônio Maluf, who integrated an art group named 'Ruptura'. This is a Portuguese word for 'disruption', for they were practicing an abstract art immediately linked to Concrete Art, as named many years before by Van Doesburg. Five years later, the National Contest for the Pilot Plan of Brazil's New Capital, Brasília, was won by the architect and urban designer Lucio Costa. By then, modern Brazilian architecture was gaining a definitive international recognition and the practice of planning expanded to other territories, beginning to guide actions in politics and public administration,[1] at least in a modest way.

In a time of internationalization of the term 'design', Italy and Brazil are examples of countries where industrial design settled definitively only after the Second World War: in the first case, the American model was a real reference, in the second case, the German one. The Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm (HfG–Ulm) served partially as a model for the founding of Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial (ESDI) in Rio de Janeiro in 1962, and henceforth to other design education institutions in Brazil. However, it must be said, Brazilian design education was not strictly mastered by the notion of design as professed by HfG–Ulm, where students were severely taught methodologies.[2] Quite differently, Brazilian education was firstly organized around professional practice and a certain style in the arts derived from Concrete Art.

At the founding of ESDI, '*desenho industrial*' was already the translation in use for 'industrial design'. At that time, debates

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[1]   Roberto Campos, "A experiência brasileira de planejamento", in SIMONSEN, 1976: 47.

[2]   As Tomás Maldonado puts it, citing Charles Sanders Peirce, HfG–Ulm could be transformed into a "university of methods" (MALDONADO, 1966).

about 'design' and its translation difficulties were aborted (Niemeyer, 2007: 26–27), and only surfaced again in 1988, first by a national committee of school represents (Canasvieiras, 1989) and then at the 5th National Meeting of *Desenhistas Industriais*. Following the suggestion made by practitioners and educators, the Brazilian State sanctioned the term 'design' as the official denomination of the professional activity. However, no discussion on the change of meaning took place. In effect, 'design' still means exactly the same as *'desenho industrial'* as understood in the 1960s.

Things could be different if the suggestion of the neologism *'projética'*, conceived by Brazilian philologist Antonio Houaiss in the 1970s,[3] was adopted. It pointed to a broader understanding of the activity and tried to offset the sense of 'drawing' present in *'desenho'*, which may have led to an excessive identification of *desenhistas industriais* with visual artists and technical draughtsmen. A result of that misconception is that, until nowadays, Brazilian designers are seen by others and by themselves as a distinct professional class, in spite of the close historical relations between architecture, engineering, fashion and all others forms of art and production, and the recent broadening of the term, now in use also by managers and policy-makers. For all intents and purposes, 'design' in Brazil still refers mainly to the practice of product and graphic designers.

Post-War Management and Planning
At the time of the arrival of modern design in Brazil, we witnessed the establishment of the concept of planning at the international level.

After World War II, the consolidation of the European and American welfare state was accompanied by the rise of large multinational corporations, driven by the wide supply of high-quality industrialized products and investment in technological development. Industrial complexes, no longer dedicated to the war effort, adapted to a new consumer society. This was also the moment when the greatest expression of modernity in architecture and the arts—the *urban planning* promulgated by groups such as CIAM[4]—loosed space for another character of planning: *strategic planning*. In this type of *planning*, strategies should result from a formal and controlled process, divided into distinct steps, delimited by checklists and supported by techniques (Ahlstrand, Lampel and Mintzberg, 2001). The 1960s watched the remodeling of administrative theory founded at the beginning of the century by Frederick W. Taylor and Jules Henri Fayol.

One of the second-generation exponents of management theory was Herbert A. Simon. His studies both on decision-making and the sciences of the artificial prepared the ground for future understanding of design in the context of organizations (Simon, 1996). Simon's early work, *Administrative Behavior* (1997), mainly concerns the behavior of large organizations, exploring decision-making processes as a method to determine better satisfying courses of action. Nevertheless, the end of the 1960s also represented a deadlock for the logic of vertical and centralized planning, as economic and social policies find resistance from the arising civil movements. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber broadcasted a new understanding of planning problems as they articulated the inner contradictions of problem-solving when social patterns were presented in a fragmented and constantly litigated manner and named "wicked" the problems of a new order of complexity (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

In the early 1970s, the world was almost knocked-down by a major economic crisis, accentuated by the oil embargo of 1973. The model of social welfare was placed under intense debate concerning its eco-

[3] This was suggested by Antonio Houaiss in a letter to Brazilian designer Aloisio Magalhães, in the early 1970s.

[4] CIAM: "Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne"–an organization founded in 1928 by European architects, among them Le Corbusier, Gerrit Rietveld, the Russian artist El Lissitsky and the historian Siegfried Gideon.

nomic, social and administrative dimensions. The Weberian bureaucratic model of the state gradually declined, leading to the adoption of managerial standards in public administration more common to the private sector, such as performance reviews, subcontracting and competition (Abrucio, 1997). This approach between these sectors established an ideological movement based on managerial precepts: the New Public Administration (NPM), which mirrors structures of the private sector (Osborne & McLaughlin, 2002). In this context, the fragmentation of the design processes was intensified through the multiplication of numerous specialized services.

Managing Design and Managing as Designing
The 1970s consequently watched the ascent of design management as a competitive resource, grounded in marketing principles amidst the global transition to a service economy (Julier, 2010). Example of that is the work done by Robert Blaich for Herman Miller and Philips beginning in the 1960s (Blaich and Blaich, 1993). From the 1990s onwards, design institutions such as the British Design Council move away from the purely industrial design concept, addressing issues of public interest as the role of design in health, education and the provision of public services. The relationship between design and management evolves over the following decades and brings forth the idea of "managing as designing" (Boland et al., 2004). This was accompanied by the concept of new orders of design, surpassing those defined historically by product and graphic design (Buchanan, 1992). Richard Buchanan refers to the design of systems and environments as the 'fourth order of design' (*Idem*).[5]

In this scenario, the image of the designer as an artist attached to industry and follower of the Modern Movement is bound to rethink his own social position. What role can this new professional play in organizational decision-making and planning structures? What training should he receive and which skills does he need to develop? No longer a hierarchical art professional —entitled to dispatch orders to executive bodies—this new designer conception can now perform an integrative role in organizations (Buchanan, 1992), linked to collaborative processes and able to take on diverse functions in different decision-making bodies.

From *desenho industrial* to *projeto nacional*
In contrast to the state-of-the-art of design research, the adoption of the name 'design' in Brazil throughout the 1970s and 1980s was based on media coverage and discourse (Canasvieiras, 1989). In this context, 'design' corresponds most of the time to an adjective attributed to a certain class of products. And in spite of the multiplication of design educational institutions throughout the whole national territory,[6] the prospect of updating the professional activity to the new economic and social circumstances practiced broadly and intensely on the international scene takes no hold in Brazil. In this sense, the framework for redesigning design practice needs to be accompanied by a critical re-

vision of the process of the emergence and consolidation of the concept of design in the country. This review brings us immediately to the heyday of the *projeto nacional de desenvolvimento*, that is, a national development design in the 1950s.

In general terms, a 'national design' amounts to a capacity to *collectively* define and put into effect plans and designs. It depends fundamentally on the agreement on ideas, values and policies enabled by a *culture of planning and designing* shared by a plurality of social agents. We can notice the first manifestation of this culture between the 1930 and 1980, when the country enjoyed high rates of economic growth (Bresser-Pereira, 2014: 9). The recovery of the larger sense of a national design—and from which no peripheral country can shirk from in the face of constant global rearrangements—offers a fresh perspective to the debate on design and planning in Brazil. That being said, a 'national design' is fundamentally *a design for the nation*, i.e., a process for determining its future or so-called "destiny" (Souza Leite, 2017: 9). This process concerns not only technological and economic development, but it is also of a political and social character.

Considerations Regarding Future Studies
What we propose is a conceptual-historical investigation of the development of the concepts of design and planning in Brazil, considering a possible new role for design professionals in the world of organizations, whether public or private. What initially encourages this research is the sign of a growing gap between the debates inside and outside the country on the meaning of design. Unlike previous times, however, we do not intend to simply import theoretical and educational models, but to provide a sounder theoretical basis to the creation of a Brazilian sense of design in concert with a renewed culture of planning and designing. And doing so, this debate proposition can be of good help to improve in some measure the models of design education usually in practice throughout the country.

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[5] Buchanan (1992) formulated the idea of 'four orders of design' as disposed through time, where "The first order of design is communication with symbols and images. The second order of design is design of artefacts as in engineering, architecture, and mass production. In the middle of the 20th century we realised that we can also design activities and pro-

cesses. […] That's the third order of design. […] The fourth order of design is the design of the environments and systems within which all the other orders of design exist".

[6] There are circa 750 design courses in Brazil, and still one cannot note its capacity and, one can say, will to promote change in Brazilian society.

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