THOMAS FEICHTNER

EDGE TO EDGE

Experimental Design
Experimentelle Gestaltung
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EXPERIMENTS IN DESIGN

In the past several years of design, few terms have been used as often as ‘experiment.’ For me, however, it seems to me that there’s hardly any design that is not somehow experimental. Students, especially, frequently use the term, since the word ‘experiment’ suggests a moment of failure but of course also occasionally a moment of success. It thus contains both positive and negative connotations. I’d like to express straight away that ‘Thomas Pöcklmer’ is one of the very few current designers for whose work the word ‘experiment’ can rightly be used, with surprising many positive – i.e. successful – examples. I’d like to take on an opportunity to explore the notion of ‘experiment’ more closely.

From design’s history, we know that Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was the very first designer. He conducted countless scientific studies (experiments), in disciplines including anatomy, optics or mechanics, but he also designed and created numerous objects. For him, knowledge was based on visual perception and mental recognition; he developed, for his time, a kind of coherent synthesis between the arts and sciences. Leonardo designed individual constructions, urban planning concepts, palaces, gardens, and much more. He also invented many technological products, such as engines or parachutes, and developed such transport systems as cranes, bicycle-like vehicles, military equipment...

Leonardo can be attributed with immensurable successes, but, like all creative innovators, not all of his experiments were spot-on: the results of his research on human anatomy, for example, were recently revealed as astonishingly erroneous: in one of his images, there is a canal that leads from the uterus to the breast and filled it with milk. Such notions do not really represent a break in his design decisions, however, as is impressively obvious in Milan’s Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnologia: there, replicas of the models that make Leonardo’s work so vivid are exhibited next to his drawings. He did not differentiate between the ‘low’ and the ‘fine’ arts, thus his importance as a truly universal artist. And whether he created artwork (his paintings, for example), or developed musical instruments, he was always concerned with making the invisible (the work) visible, therefore also revealing an interaction of mind and hand. Thus seen, Leonardo is still ‘modern’ in the best sense of the word.

Martin Kemp3 describes this modernism very clearly in his biography on Leonardo: ‘In some respects the modern Leonardo is a product of concrete evidence from the likes of Vasari. Yet, he is ‘modern’ in a time-specific sense. His science and technology, especially, were part of a movement of assumptions that drove the modern age. He became a man ahead of his time, a pioneer of things to come: he was, for example, as an engineer – as well as an exceptionally gifted inventor. In this area, a significant aspect is that he was always concerned with highly exact experiments. Thus, he explored, for example, the relational dimensions of the human body on himself: He began with the measurement of the lips, which corresponded to the 12th part of the size of the face but also the 12th part of the length of the head and the 112th part of the length of the body, which equals, in the decimal system, a medium build of 1.6 meters. Leonardo was a scientist and artist in one person, and he graciously succeeded in uniting these two, namely on the one hand to augment knowledge and learning, and on the other to find new creative forms of expression.

Leonardo’s scientific explorations addressed questions of mathematics, anatomy, physics, mechanics, and much more. Especially notable is his attitude that ‘nothing is certain, except when one can utilize one of the mathematician’s sciences.’ But he was not dogmatic: ‘while Galilei is so logical that he at times becomes pedantic, Leonardo sees and observes without agonizing over theories too much. He also very often determines facts without even attempting to find an explanation (that is one of his merits, if you can’t come up with a good theory, it’s better to leave it well enough alone).’

Thus, completely incidentally – although this is not at all questioned here – this principle can be used for any number of design-theoretical efforts.

In his role as an architect, Leonardo was always concerned with creating a connection between research and experiment, so that his scientific approach could be designated as empirical: ‘thus, for example, he incorporated statics into his studies of curves and arches, geometry into the symmetrical development of proportional masses, and physiology to the sensual and ethical design of urban planning and street construction.’ Looking at this approach from another perspective, Leonardo was concerned with ‘hypotheses,’ for example which curved shapes could be built and how, and then was concerned with an empirical examination of these hypotheses.
At this point we could make a reference to the “experimental design” in which, in many cases, no hypotheses are recognisable at all, let alone those we could speak of as a scientific, empirical examination. To express it somewhat ironically, this is the case when we speak of design frameworks, in which people can be found at endless design exhibitions (at fairs, at design events) who pick up ideas and then perhaps follow up on them. But even in the environment of international furniture fairs in Cologne or Milan, young designers are stuck simply to attracting attention. The fact that this is important in the media age may remain unconsidered, and an entire theoretical school has emerged that follows this phenomenon. “Without advertising, PR, cultivating an image and product design, the economy would stand still,” just look around: Our entire world is mutating in an advertising campaign. Wherever we go, wherever we are, we encounter things whose entire purpose is to tug on our emotions and say: ‘look here!10’

But back to Leonardo. In his work, we can very clearly see that he understands himself within an historical continuity, for example in that of the legendary Roman master builder Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, otherwise known as Vitruvius.11 With his Ten Books on Architecture, Vitruvius laid the foundation of creation and construction that could also be considered the basis for design. In the third chapter of his first book, Vitruvius states that all constructions must fulfill three categories: firmness (firmus), usefulness (utilitas) and beauty (bonitas). Incidentally, he did not speak of art – a debate that currently occurs so often in his design – but rather essentially created the fundamentals for a notion of constructive objects with a high degree of beauty and the surfaces that result from them.12

Leonardo very carefully and thoroughly studied the logic of Vitruvius and implemented his statements on the proportions of the human body and also the Attic-Doric-Muslim-Byzantine wall-building accounts.13 Leonardo was generally very keen to adapt design fundamentals and continue to develop them; he was thus very aware of his position in history. This, too, is a moment that utterly departs from “experimental design.”

And to speak – for the last time – of Leonardo, since he is so often designated as the father of today’s design, in the sense of an inventive draftsman, we should again illuminate the connections in his work. “Thus, for Leonardo, theory is a part path toward practice. It has to show the inventor and technician the methodical way: it must be the certain guide into the zone of experience …; otherwise this inventor or technician would be incomparable to the experimental activity of Leonardo, who soon calls himself the master without teacher to the son and pupil of experiment.”14

At this juncture, it would of course be interesting to more deeply explore the development of the term “experiment” through the following centuries. And although I must refrain from diving so here (not least because of this essay’s length) there are a couple of thoughts on the current debate as it is conducted by scholars like Hans-Jörg Rheinberger.15 He is considered one of the most important representatives of scientific history and has explicitly delved into the history of experiments. He represents a discrete role of the experiment as a “method of creating knowledge.” In contrast to earlier concepts – as they became viable also with Leonardo da Vinci, who saw the experiment as a confirmation of a theory – he pleads for the

Leonardo’s independence. Rheinberger is not only concerned with the exact mathematical calculability of hypotheses, but also stresses the equal importance of experiment’s social and material conditions. Today, experimental sciences represent the apex of natural-science research. We will henceforth explore whether the term “experiment” is also meaningful in design.

Then we need to have a look at how the term “experiment” is understood in the creative, artistic disciplines. In contrast to the natural-science approaches, the term indicates pushing the boundaries of traditional design methods. It is thus not a defined definition of a project (for example through a corporate brief), but more an independent search, liberated from any clients. After this somewhat long preface, which seems important in this context, we now move on to the work of Thomas Feichtner – and his experiments. Feichtner can look back on an extremely successful practice as an industrial designer, which the examples in this catalog vividly illustrate. He began to work on new ideas in the early 2000s. He was certainly not tired of his commercial work, but rather saw it, for himself, as a one-way street – there must be more to life and work than the narrow path of the industrial designer. He became visible also on the international art stage, which he had initiated by Jürgen W. Braun, the grand master of design, and his work is now considered to be that of an independent designer.

Feichtner also explores categories beyond his numerous chairs and other seating furniture. His cutlery set Cutt, for example, emerged from the same constructive-artistic philosophy. The folded surfaces become angular, constructive objects with a high degree of creative weight – we could even speak of “stubborn design.”

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...by Siegfried Gortzen. \* Door handles should therefore always be tactile, which is considered an essential aspect of a tool used so often and over such a long time. Door handles (for simply handling) are used for an extremely short time – open the door, close the door, and that’s it. Feichtner’s handle is therefore not at all an homage to all of the allegedly ergonomic principles, but rather an additional statement relating to his folded surfaces. Form doesn’t really have to follow function. It works the other way around as well.

Feichtner’s teapot design (2008) is similar. One might consider understand it directly in the tradition of modernism that began in Vienna at the beginning of the 20th century. But the design doesn’t exactly represent another example of the Austro-based aesthetic that is flooding to-day’s product market. It is rather the result of an approach that marks Feichtner’s work in general. The folded surfaces mutate into an object possessing a very special design quality: the product’s visual and functional rigor – equipped with the term “experimental designer”. Illus- trative for the 21st century.

On the occasion of Linz, Austria, being European Capital of Culture in 2009, Simone and Thomas Feichtner presented Maxes Bed as part of the ‘Pixel Hotel’. Redecorated as a hotel room, Galerie Simone Feichtner became the bedroom-doorway. With an amnesia (equipped with the PXU Lounge Chair and some of his pictures), a bathroom unit and a bed room as “bedroom”, the entire ensemble represented an impressive Gesamtkunstwerk that was connecting through its usability. Unfortunately I was only able to view the “Pixel Hotel” in October 2009, but not to sleep overnight in the bed. The emotional overall impression was extremely impressive, in any case.

Feichtner’s Linz Stool is thus a contemporary design answer to a product that has a long tradition and is somehow still necessary. Whether the steel tube stool by Marcel Breuer from the Bauhaus era or the replicas of the Ulm Stool through the “Ulm grey” (20, the color’s effect adds the application and execution of folded surfaces. Made of synthetic material (former beverage crate) processed multiple times by a local synthetics manufacturer, the Linz Stool could absolutely become a 21st-century icon. Its formal and functional rigor – equipped with three legs, this stool can never with- lure – Feichtner perfectly represents the notion of sustainability. He exhibited the current prototype of the stool, which is stackable and easy to carry in a hole in a seat (through which water can also run, making it suitable for outdoor use). Vita distributes the product, which becomes an additional element on its creator. Beyond its practical function, the stool serves as a symbol of Linz’s status as capital of culture in 2009.

This of course reminds me of the legend- ary Ulmer Hocker (Ulm Stool). More than 50 years ago, a multifunctional stool was developed in the workshops of the then newly opened School of Design in Ulm. Designed by the then-lecturers Max Bill and Hans Gugelot and realized by the shop’s director Paul Hildegger, it was a product that was considered a seat, le侃en and object to transport. The first two functions are very familiar but the last one only remember from the old years of the 19th century. At the School, the Ulm Stool belongs to the identity of a legendary institution that significantly detennined 20th century design.

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Besides these “micro architectures”, as Volker Fischer once called them – meaning accessories whose design dynamic and appearance primarily emerges from architectural thinking – Feichtner also pushes other boundaries, namely that of architecture. In his designs, Maxes Bed (250 x 200 x 200 cm) for example, is an oversize sculpture whose practical function is unmistakable. Here we again find the folded surfaces, this time executed in large dimensions, creating a place to sleep with a high degree of symbolic meaning. This traditional canopy bed of rulers and monarchy, nowadays on display in big box furniture stores of the periphery of every large city (design knobs say hotel) gets a brand new dimension in Feichtner’s design. One might hope, if of- fers a kind of genuine active and passive surface I’ve never seen before.

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