Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, the curators of the 2016 Istanbul Design Biennial.

Human by Design

Introduction David Michon
Photographs Luca Pizzaroni

"Design is everywhere." It's an adage one finds scattered throughout the design world, slapped onto press releases and slipped into speeches – a whoop of collective triumph. We like to see design as progress, a smile on the face of human history (with the exception of the atomic bomb and its ilk, perhaps). Whether it's an app, a laptop, a chair or an entire skyscraper: with each innovation, we take a step forward. Not so, however, for the co-curators of the third Istanbul Design Biennial, the academics Mark Wigley and Beatriz Colomina.

Professor and dean emeritus at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, and director of the architecture PhD programme at Princeton respectively. Wigley and Colomina talk about "good design" as an anaesthetic, something we create to dull the pain of life and distract us from the world's woes. Design, the argument runs, is implicit in creating the great inequalities of the world. It's a darker side of the discipline that we mostly choose to ignore – especially when there are big sponsorship dollars involved (for those interested, Vitra bathrooms and the Enka Foundation are the headline sponsors for Istanbul).

Wigley and Colomina's biennial, which opens to the public on 22 October is not solely focused on design from the past two years. Instead, it is due to examine far more varied timescales. Exhibitors have been asked to look at anything from the preceding two seconds to the last 200,000 years, all the while considering the central question, "Are we human?" The results ought to debate how an entire human history of design has shaped and continues to shape us.

In Wigley and Colomina's worldview, design isn't passive and it doesn't solve problems per se. Instead, it transforms us. We create something and then we adapt to that creation, rewiring our psychology and even mutating physically. We are the sum of all the design that has gone before. It's an approach that is discordant with the dominant thinking around design or architecture biennials – usually optimistic and reassuring. One example of the stark contrast is this year's Venice Biennale of Architecture, curated by the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena. *Reporting from the Front* demanded solutions, almost styling itself as a crusade to elevate humankind through design. Wigley and Colomina, conversely, aren't looking for answers, let alone trying to solve them. Are they nihilists?

In the wake of the violent political and social disorder in Turkey, with 265 causualites after an attempted coup in July and a subsequent lockdown on the country's academics, the Istanbul Design Biennial's question of "Are we human?" may be greeted with added heaviness. It is almost as if the curators have asked us "What have we done?" For their part, however, Wigley and Colomina don't at all embody the weight of what is implied by Istanbul's theme or the trouble in Turkey.

David Michon You've said that design always presents itself as serving the human, but its first ambition is to redesign the human. Does that hint at a deceitfulness in design?

Beatriz Colomina We don't think about it in terms of deceitfulness, it's more that people are not aware that's what design is doing. Consider how the invention of shoes led to atrophy of the toes. In principle, shoes protect your feet from the environment, enabling you to walk further and faster, but in fact they redesign you. That example is very physical, but this idea applies mentally too. We will evolve from the cellphone, for example. There is a closer relationship between design and the human than simply that humans design tools to serve humans – all tools redesign the human. There is a constant redesign of the human by design and the important thing is that it has always been like that. From the beginning of humanity, design has been what makes us human and has been designing us as humans.

Mark Wigley Designers always say they're just solving a problem, but consider why you went to a designer in the first place. Designers almost say, "I will make a new you. You will be much better after my work." No designer ever says, "You're not going to feel good after my work." Design is never just solving a little puzzle or providing for a certain function: it always has the aspiration to redesign the human, to make the human more human than before.

Beatriz Clothing stores do that all the time. You put on a new jacket and they say "That's so you!" How can it be so you? Who were you before you had the jacket? So our ambition with the biennial is to make people think about design and what design is, and to claim a much more ambitious draw for the field. Within art we regularly ask questions about our humanity and philosophical questions about the world, but we don't expect those kinds of questions within design. In a world in which art is becoming more and more commercialised, and more about responding to the market than questioning humanity, we want to claim that role for design and expand it to become a field for cultural contributions.

David Do you not think that it gets difficult to talk about design if its definition becomes so incredibly broad?

Mark People use the word "design" so frequently and we live in a time in which a chief design officer is equivalent to a chief financial officer. The word has become more useful and powerful than ever, but it's not a matter of saying that it's difficult that the word "design" seems to apply to everything, because the real issue is determining what we think given that. Now that everything is being designed, what do we think? We live in an age of total design, so what do we want to do about it? The concept of design needs to be more attuned to the world we're living in.

David Is it the concern of the biennial that the designed world we live in isn't as good as we believe it to be? Is it a problem that we live in a totally designed world?

Beatriz The idea that we have managed to cover the planet in design is also the idea that we are the only species that has managed to design its own extinction. We are very aware that we are on our way to that goal – exhausting every possible resource, for instance.

Mark We are the self-consciously kamikaze species. It's interesting that you use the word "good". I think a big part of this project is trying to undermine the concept of "good" design. We are surrounded by good design, heaps and heaps of it: well-designed telephones, networks, systems, communication, government products, genetic codes, the weather. These things are all being designed, but maybe the design community is a bit stranded amidst that.

Beatriz We live in a world in which design has taken over; in which politicians talk about design-thinking; in which there's a culture of business schools with design departments; in which the success of Apple is inseparable from its design; a world in which design extends itself over everything. In that context, the ambition of designers is very small. They don't seem to realise how design could be construed differently.

David Why do you think that is? Is that a result of the way commerce works?

Mark In the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was a thought that we could redesign everything, every system, and that would make for a better humanity. It was the idea of the "new man," the suggestion that we could invent a new version of the species. But when design went viral it's as if the world said that it didn't need designers any more. There's an important lesson to be learnt there because what we're trying to suggest is that design

All of the photographs accompanying
this interview were taken in Colomina
and Wigley's New York apartment in
July 2016.
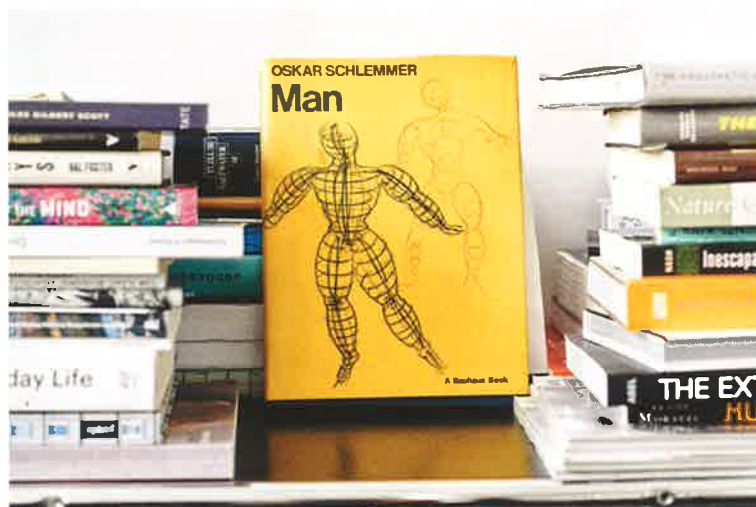
Interview

is the thing that makes humans human. Design is not something that a designer does – design is something that a human does. Design is making an object or a system that perfectly, seamlessly, helps the economy move. The concept of design was invented to rationalise the production of objects in a world of industrialisation and globalisation. It was about minimising friction.

David Yet in the technology world disruption has become such a powerful idea.

Mark Disruption may be what design should aspire to. If I were going to redesign the human, would it be an evolution or a smoothing out, or would it be quite a radical jump? We expect our artists to shock or disrupt us, whereas we expect our designers to blend in. Design has been thought of as not just non-disruptive but anti-disruptive. We are very interested in the anaesthetic quality of this as the smoothing out of so-called good design is often a very bad thing. It's a kind of blindness.

Beatriz Disruption is always important and you have to take people out of their conventions because otherwise we don't move forward. One aspect of the biennial has been studying the difference between what the human brain can do and what a machine can do, and something that has come up is the idea of curiosity. Humans always have the idea that something may work, but we also consider whether we might do that thing differently. We are always thinking about what could also be, which creates disruption. An animal finds that something works and then keeps doing the same thing – they don't think of a new, crazy way of doing it. Humans actually design very beautiful and useless things – things that don't work.

Mark Maybe the most important thing in design is hesitation. That's what disruption produces – a gap in which you have to think or you have to make a decision. We're interested in the ability of design to make people think and to see their world. And in this case to see their world as design. So one possible definition of design is that it's simply human curiosity about doing something differently. Progress implies that A leads to B, which leads to C. But the idea that things could be different means that even the very nature of that journey is up for consideration. If you came to Earth from Mars you would notice how in the last 200,000 years humans have accelerated a lot of transformation of themselves in terms of their bodies and mental

capacity. They have formed a kind of geographical crust of design. The whole planet is designed. If I were coming from Mars I probably wouldn't have a concept of nature – I would just have a concept of design.

Beatriz Which you would have even before you hit the Earth because of all the space junk around the planet.

Mark You might collide with design on your way in; you might hit Voyager 2 even before you get to our solar system. But let's say that as a Martian, you see that this species has made this unbelievable spider's web of design. If you asked why they were able to do that you might discover huge patterns of disruption. We're a species that is always trying to do things differently, always interrupting, always hesitating. We're so reliant on friction, conflict and silences, yet the grand narrative of modernity, progress and technological evolution has been to try to wrap all of that up and make the methods predict the outcome. At any one time there are a number of options and possible viral mutations within design, but modernity or industrialisation meant ignoring vast numbers of technologies and huge numbers of people – all of those narratives had to do with keeping more than half of the planet suppressed and on the edge of death. So this 19th-century notion of progress through design doesn't sound good. Evolution doesn't necessarily mean progress.

David Is there such a thing as frivolous design? You talk about design as a journey or as a very complex set of influences, so is there any piece of that puzzle that we could do without?

Mark We're interested in who decides whether something is frivolous. A big part of our social life is determining what's frivolous and what's not, but things that were once deemed frivolous have since proven transformative. One of the responsibilities of designers is to challenge what is frivolous and what's not. That's where this idea of good design is a bit of a nightmare because it implies virtue: good people have touched good design; good design produces good people.

Beatriz What is good for one person is not good for another. What is good? People talk about how great everything was in the 1950s, but in fact there was a lot of racial and gender inequality, depression, violence, the threat of nuclear annihilation and so on. The society that gave rise to this idea of good design was actually very problematic.

Mark And when we're thinking about design, it's not simply the work of designers. Consider Instagram posts and this gesture of saying, "Look." That's what makes us human and in that definition we are all designers through Instagram, Facebook and so on. Kids, for instance, are very precisely choosing which filter to communicate with on Instagram or which emoji to use. They have a highly trained aesthetic eye and are curating life in the most sophisticated way. Maybe for the first time, children have been brought up to be designers.

Beatriz We're saying that design is also philosophical and cultural, and has been from the beginning. The world of design for the most part hasn't taken on big philosophical issues, but it should. Design is everyone.

Mark I was thinking of something that Beatriz noted the other day: why do so many of the most important thinkers of our time now write about design? People in the fields of psychology and business feel like they have to have design, but so do people working in scientific research. Could we be living in a moment in which a single concept is exerting so much influence, has so much charisma, that it's in almost any corner you look at? It's not so much about whether design is related to psychology or philosophy, rather "design" has started to be the word we use to think about relationships to things.

David You were talking about design as engineering neglect and disparity, so is that a difficult thing to discuss in a place like Turkey with its recent conflicts?

Mark Turkey doesn't have a monopoly on the horrors of our time, but it's a better place to talk about design than London, Paris, New York or Milan. Those places may not have the obvious conflicts that you get in Turkey, but they do have exactly the same issues because these are global issues. The heat of Turkey is never going to go away, but it seems like the right place to talk about design. Because there is conflict, let's talk design.

David Yet good design has traditionally been conceived as the thing that protects us from hardships or makes our lives easier.

Mark If you have a design biennial, you're supposed to see tables, lamps and chairs solving problems in a beautiful way: practical, smooth, industrialised, good business, good life. Each object radiating the word "good". To go to a design biennial is to bathe in goodness. But we're more interested in the visitor,

"Good design provides people with a smooth package such that they don't have to face the horror of the life we're living." —Mark Wigley

because if what we're saying is true then a visitor is far more radically designed and more of a designer than anything they will see in the biennial.

Beatriz The idea of good design has a sense of morality embedded in it. Consider Max Bill's *Die gute Form* exhibition after the war: people talked about that with a straight face, as if a display of "good" objects or a school like the Ulm School of Design would be able to reform society. The Americans put a lot of money into that school and from it emerged the theory of the "good form" that would reform those terrible Germans and make them more democratic. That idea persisted for a long time.

Mark But could we risk some thoughts about what the characteristics of "good design" are? What about smoothness? Almost every work of good design is an essay in smoothness. Rounded corners, but also smoothness in the production line and marketing. That's what we mean about anaesthetic – the feeling that everything is in its place and everything is OK. Good design provides people with a smooth package such that they don't have to face the horror of the life we're living. Imagine the smooth object you hold in your hand while you're watching refugees in the Mediterranean. Marshall McLuhan had this wonderful argument that each new technology changes us, but that change is so shocking that we can't face it. We anaesthetise ourselves so strongly that we only realise that the change has happened when the technology is replaced by another one. We're not saying that anaesthetic is a bad thing, we're just identifying the anaesthetic role played by most design. **END**

The third Istanbul Design Biennial is on from 22 October to 20 November 2016.