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Disegno

JOURNAL OF DESIGN CULTURE

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Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design and, visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavor welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academy by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

All research articles published in Disegno undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process. This journal does not charge APCs or submission charges.

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VICTOR MARGOLIN, “CULTURAL PROVOCATEUR” (1941–2019)¹

Alain Findeli

ABSTRACT

Since this special issue is also published in the memory of the late Victor Margolin (1941–2019), a homage to Victor’s intellectual biography is presented here in the form of a journey through his academic career as well as a chronology of his work as editor of Design Issues, the journal he launched in 1984.

#Victor Margolin, #Design studies, #Design Issues, #Social Design.

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AN ESSAY IN THE FORM OF A TRIBUTE²

In November 2019, the international design community lost one of its pioneers, historians, and theorists, the cultural provocateur Victor Margolin. The victim of a serious accident during a symposium in South Korea at the end of 2015, Victor spent the last few years in extremely difficult conditions that significantly slowed the completion of volume III of his magnum opus on which he had been working for fifteen years, *World History of Design*, whose first two volumes (Margolin 2015) cover Prehistory (yes, Prehistory!) until the First World War (600 pages), followed by the inter-war period (1000 pages more than 400 illustrations). It was with great courage and serenity that he pursued this work, the conditions of which he details "ethnographically" in one of his last published texts (Margolin 2017) and the method of which he presents in a video made by his daughter Myra, a teacher and doctoral student in social design (M. Margolin 2015) (fig. 1). "My spirits are still good, and I continue to work on recovery", he emailed me, still full of hope, in November 2017.

With a bachelor's degree in English Literature and Film Studies (1963, Columbia University) and, after a long break during which he published on graphic design (posters, agit-prop) and did various jobs, Victor obtained his PhD in Design History in 1981 (Union University) and the following year, at 41, was appointed Professor of Art and Design History at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a position he held until his retirement in 2006. Soon after this appointment he joined the "Chicago Group", a multidisciplinary body of colleagues leading a reflection on design in order to come up with "new ideas for the study and practice of design". As he would recount later, the figure of Moholy-Nagy was a major influence on their work: "Two of the founders [of the group] had been students at the Institute of Design in Chicago, where they absorbed some of the spirit that László Moholy-Nagy infused into the school when he was still alive". It is from

¹ This essay is an English adaptation of the homage I wrote after Victor's death at the kind request of the editors of the French journal *Sciences du design*, where it was eventually published (Findeli 2020). Since it is simultaneously a personal remembrance of my own companionship with Victor, a tentative intellectual biography of Victor Margolin, and a synoptic history of the journal *Design Issues*, this essay does not exactly follow the standards of scholarly writing. To maintain the fluidity of the narrative, I have skipped the exact references to most of Victor's quotes used in the text, all of them having been retrieved from his well-known writings.

² The readers of this essay may wonder why this obituary tribute to Victor Margolin is included in a special issue devoted to Moholy-Nagy. Readers are indeed aware of Margolin's early and lasting interest in Moholy-Nagy's work, which he illustrated in his writings. As relevant and interesting as this could indeed be, such is not the purpose of this essay, my motive here being partly biographical. In the mid-1980s, when I started my study of the pedagogical oeuvre of László Moholy-Nagy in Chicago (Findeli 1995), I had the privilege to meet Victor Margolin at the University of Illinois in Chicago, where he had just started teaching design history. He was so happy to be able to share his enthusiasm about Moholy-Nagy with someone who was as familiar as he was with the paramount influence of what he and his students realized at the New Bauhaus/School of Design/Institute of Design during its first ten years of laborious existence (Findeli 1991). Victor had then recently founded the journal *Design Issues* and was working on his book on Rodchenko, Lissitzky and Moholy-Nagy (the subject matter of his PhD). It is therefore easy to imagine how long and thrilling our discussions became.

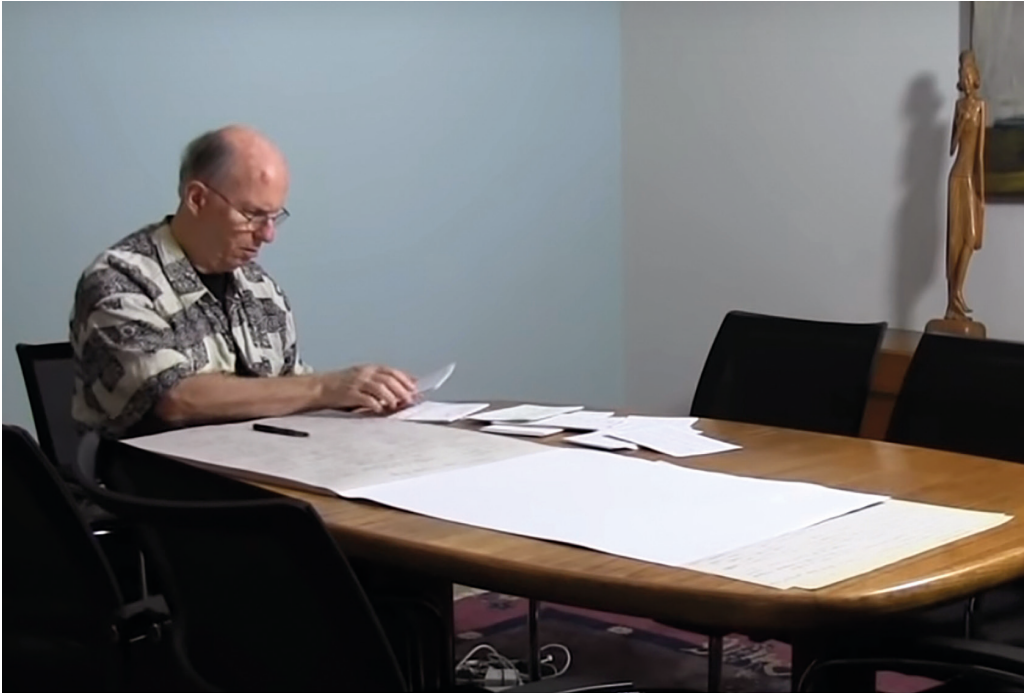


FIGURE 1. Victor Margolin at work on his *World History of Design*, courtesy of Myra Margolin

this initiative that the journal *Design Issues* originated in 1984. Victor would be its sole editor for the first six issues, then become a member of the successive editorial committees until 2019.

The period was conducive to the creation of such a journal and of the corresponding academic programs that Victor had long wished for, because it was a time in which departments and faculties of “studies” in the Anglo-Saxon academic world proliferated, following the waves of “postmodernism”, “poststructuralism”, “cultural studies” or “French theories” that countered the strictly compartmentalized structure of universities and promoted the interrelationship of multi-, pluri-, inter-, and transdisciplinarity that ended up, not without struggle, infiltrating those well-guarded fortresses.

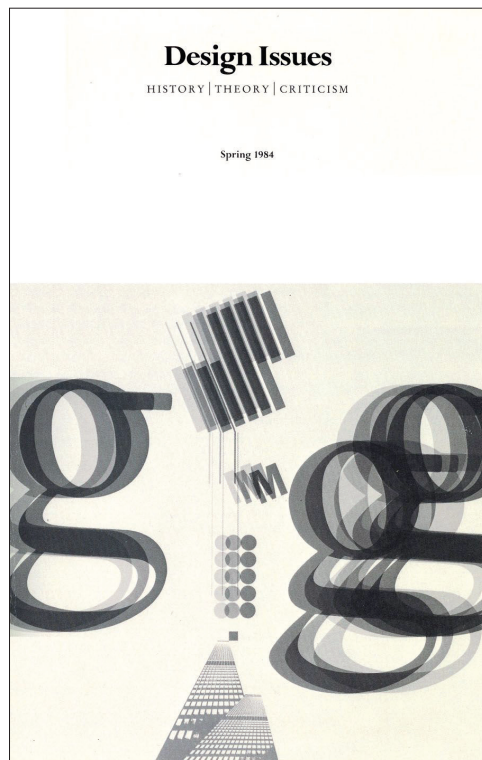
Design research, however, was distinguished from other fields by the fact that its territory was still relatively pristine and everything was to be built. Since the title *Design Studies* had already been adopted by the British research journal founded by the Design Research Society (DRS) five years earlier, the name chosen was *Design Issues*, which the subtitle of the journal specified as: *History/Theory/Criticism*. Throughout his career, Victor would strive to build, develop, clarify, and consolidate the intellectual project of these “design studies”, according to the following program: “Design studies is about reflecting on design as it has been practiced [*History*], is currently practiced [*Criticism*], and how it might be practiced [*Theory*]” (Margolin 2016), in other terms, the field of design studies should include historical perspectives on the past

state of design, critical discussions on its current state and theoretical discussions that may reveal where it will orient itself in the future. Margolin will constantly ensure, with the generosity that all those who have worked with him will acknowledge, that the journal maintains the following two main gestures towards its contributors and its audience: openness and pluralism.

In this essay, I have selected some key milestones of Victor's itinerary and of the journal *Design Issues* (fig. 2), a personal choice guided by my admiration for the scale and scope of his work and by my gratitude for the fruitful influence resulting from an intellectual friendship and our shared affinities that led me to cross his path several times and to have been welcomed in the pages of the journal and associated anthologies. For a more scholarly and historiographical (less hagiographic) approach, one can start with the complete and recent CV of "dropout" Victor,³ as he qualified himself with his well-known sense of humor, and continue with the retrospective written by the *Design Issues* editorial team to mark its twenty-fifth anniversary (Buchanan, Doordan, and Margolin 2010). The introduction to the latter includes the philosophical anthropology on which the journal is based and which it continues to express: "*Design Issues* has not ceased to insist on the need to appreciate human beings as autonomous individuals, members of communities sharing distinct forms of cultural, ethnic or other identities and experiences".

³ See online:
<https://disegno.mome.hu/victor-margolin/>
 (kindly transmitted by
 Sylvia Margolin).

FIGURE 2. Left: cover of the first, Spring 1984 issue of *Design Issues*; right: cover of the Winter 2010 issue



THE JOURNEY OF VICTOR MARGOLIN

Three main periods may be roughly distinguished in the intellectual journey of Victor Margolin:

- **From 1982 to the mid-90s:** Beginning of his academic career at the University of Illinois at Chicago; organization of thematic meetings between researchers and practitioners; creation and positioning of the journal *Design Issues* as a place of "controversies and debates" wanting to distinguish itself from a scholarly journal in the strict sense, hosting manifestos and an original graphic contribution, with, as backdrop, the visionary utopia of Moholy-Nagy, who died in Chicago in 1946.

- **From the mid-90s to the mid-2000s:** Intensive publication (essays and books) and lecturing activity in international symposia; consolidation of the field of design studies and academic orientation of the journal; development and promotion of a vision of research and training in design; environmental issues; global geographical opening; spiritual dimension in design.

- **Since the mid-2000s:** In addition to working on his *World History of Design*, continued international activity and presence in many important forums; with priority given to the ethical, social, anthropological, and spiritual/metaphysical issues of design; design and democracy ("the good society").

The following are some highlights from this more than thirty-five-year journey, illustrated by significant quotes from him or the editorial board of the journal.

FIRST PERIOD

→ **1984:** Editorial of the first issue of *Design Issues*: "Our goal is to provoke and raise controversial issues".

→ **1989:** International and multidisciplinary meeting "Design at the Crossroads" in Evanston (fifteen participants, by invitation). The aim was to "define and structure the role and function of designers in a culture in continuous change".

→ **1989:** Publication, titled *Design Discourse*: an anthology of the first six issues of *Design Issues* (vols. 1–3) that he edited alone before the broadening of the editorial board: "We need a new discipline of design studies to train scholars of design". The book opens with a dizzying introductory text of twenty-five pages and closes with a no less impressive commented bibliographic corpus of twenty-two pages (*Postwar Design Literature*, limited to monographs only).

→ **1990:** Organization of another international and multidisciplinary meeting ('Discovering Design') in Chicago (twenty-five participants, by invitation): "Design deserves attention, not only as a professional practice, but also as a subject of social, cultural and philosophical inquiry". The full reports of the meeting were published under the same

title in 1995, along with Richard Buchanan (Buchanan and Margolin 1995). Throughout his career, Victor continued to advocate the urgent construction of this form of "social, cultural and philosophical inquiry" called design studies, of which this meeting was in a way a prototype. To make himself better understood, he insists that "we have to ask ourselves what a word processing software and a comfortable chair have in common or how a nuclear power plant and a tax return form work similarly as forms of material culture". Inspired by Schütz's phenomenology and Dewey's pragmatism and adopting the concept of "product milieu", Margolin emphasizes that we should research the reception of design products as much as their conception, manufacture and distribution: "For designers and design researchers, Dewey's theory of experience opens up a rich space for new reflection. Once we recognize that there is an inextricable relationship between product quality and how we experience the world, we realize how much we have to learn about how products influence our lives", adding that there is "no set of studies more useful to cultural studies researchers from different fields in understanding the role of products in human societies [than design studies]". Unlike the usual and widespread rationalizing, operational, and methodological approach adopted in design, the design studies approach is cultural and focused in this volume on the four following topics: the practice of design, the products of design, the discourse of design (mediation) and the metadiscourse (reflection) of design. Throughout, like in his "Design Studies: Tasks and Challenges" (Margolin 2013), he tirelessly returns to this crucial issue.

→ **1990:** Thematic issue of the journal devoted to the teaching of design (*Educating the Designer*): "A discussion on design training with designers on one side of the table and design teachers on the other will usually result in a draw. [...] The editorial board of *Design Issues*, understanding that this is a never-ending discussion, wishes to suggest that a stimulating, continuing dialogue among designers, critics, historians, and educators might be productive". As one can see, the journal adopts no other doctrine than that of arranging a space for the confrontation of ideas, thus inviting its readership to form its own point of view. The special issue, edited by Leon Bellin and Marco Diani, took a year of preparation, during which about one hundred contributions were solicited and from which eight would be published.

→ **1992:** Organization of a meeting of historians and design theorists on the theme "Design History or Design Studies" in Washington, DC (fifteen participants, by invitation). Victor criticized the design history research community, particularly the British, for its conservatism and lack of interest in the epistemological foundations of the discipline. He also called for the expansion of the geographic and thematic boundaries of a field deemed too narrow, in order to "question what has or has not been accomplished to establish the history of design as a productive academic intellectual enterprise". That is why he proposed to update the field by considering history as a branch, clearly important but

nevertheless ancillary, of design studies. Indeed, such a proposal did not have the good fortune to please Adrian Forty, the British author of a very commendable social history of design (*Objects of Desire*, 1986), who replied in the British *Journal of Design History* (Forty 1993) to the article in which Victor presented his argument (Margolin V. 1992). In 1995, the editorial board of *Design Issues* published a special issue dedicated to this lively debate (11, 1, Autumn 1995), which includes Victor's original article, Forty's answer, and Victor's reply to this answer, all augmented by six articles by confirmed historians. This debate, as Victor hoped, was a landmark in the field of design history. He will return to it in his own way several times in symposia and articles, but especially when he justified the historiographic approach adopted for the composition of his monumental *World History of Design*.

→ **1994:** The journal expanded to three issues per year and narrowed its editorial board (Richard Buchanan, Dennis Doordan, Victor Margolin), a stable team joined by Bruce Brown in 2006 (22, 4, Autumn 2006), the year of Victor's retirement, followed by Carlo DiSalvo in 2012 (28, 4, Autumn 2012). Previously housed at the University of Illinois at Chicago, it was now to be housed at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh (and MIT Press) and, since 2009, in the brand-new building designed by Frank Gehry, at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland (25, 1, Winter 2009) where it followed Buchanan. The editorial, titled "To Begin Again" (10, 1, Spring 1994), which confirms that "the mix of history, criticism and theory had become a signature of *Design Issues*, accompanied by a commitment to pluralism [...] advanced through the interplay of contrasting perspectives and approaches represented among those who practice design as well as those who study it", then sets out a detailed description, not only of the desired authors, but also of the interested readers, summarizing the editorial board's evaluation criteria in this laconic formula: "Our primary test in selecting manuscripts is simply this: 'Why should anyone interested in design read this article?'. The answer, they state, must be "that it contributes to the understanding of the conception and planning of the human-made environment of graphic images and symbols, products, services and activities, or systems shaped by designers to support the activities of men and women in all walks of life", that is, as we sometimes say today, to ensure the habitability of their world. This is followed by a long list of intended issues and the guarantee that "the unity of the journal lies in the judgment of the editors that these articles contribute to the advancement of design, in practice or in study". But, they hasten to add, "Who shall judge our judgment? Time, and the reader". As one may conclude from this significant and decisive manifesto, there is no fundamental change of editorial line, except that from now on several thematic issues will be entrusted to guest editors.

→ **1995:** Publication of the second anthology (vols. 4–9), edited by Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan and titled *The Idea of Design*, a set of twenty texts divided into three themes: Reflecting on Design, The Meaning of Products, Design and Culture (Margolin and Buchanan 1995).

Buchanan had just made, since his initial training in rhetoric, a remarkable entry into the academic world of design with his famous essay on wicked problems in design thinking (Buchanan 1992), quoted more than 3000 times since. It is in this essay, sketched on paper and delivered in 1990 at the first conference devoted in France to design research ("Recherches sur le design", UTC de Compiègne), that he distinguishes the four "areas" of increasing complexity of design objects, a taxonomy to which design research still refers to today: the signs of symbolic and visual communication, the material objects, the activities and organized services, the complex systems or environments for living, working, playing, and learning. In their introduction, both editors recall the principle of "radical systematic pluralism" that drives the journal and, referring in particular to John Dewey, assign design the task of helping to elucidate "what it means to be human in the contemporary world".

INTERMEDIATE PERIOD

→ **1997:** Victor returns to his doctoral thesis and to the corresponding fields of research (archives and interviews in Moscow, Berlin, Chicago) for the publication of *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946*. He has certainly drawn lessons from such "disillusioned hopes", from these failed attempts to enrich and change the political-social situation through art and design.

→ **1998:** The journal is the main coordinator of the first international conference on doctoral studies in design ("Doctoral Education in Design") held at Ohio University in Columbus, the first in a series of biennial meetings on the same theme. Opened by a plenary conference by Buchanan, the event stages a series of nearly thirty speakers from around the world in front of a full room. This meeting and those that followed have long been the most active and controversial forum to clarify the nature of such a doctorate and to discuss the epistemological, methodological, praxeological, criteriological, and ethical issues it raises. At the end of the symposium, Victor kindly confirmed his invitation, transmitted to me two years earlier in Helsinki, to guest edit the first issue of the journal devoted to research in design (15, 2, Summer 1999), for which eight authors were selected and in the introduction of which the principles of "research by design" are specified, following the ceaselessly quoted and still discussed taxonomy proposed by Christopher Frayling in 1994 (Frayling 1993/94).

→ **1999:** Thematic issue "Design Research" where Victor and I discover the incompatibility of our respective visions of design research, one of the few disagreements of our otherwise friendly intellectual collaboration. Victor will return on many occasions to the issue of research and its associated theme of doctoral studies, to which he has devoted several articles, without ever changing, much less fundamentally revising, his original perspective. First sketched in a paper titled "The Multiple Tasks of Design Research" delivered in Helsinki in 1996 at the memorable

"No Guru No Method? Discussion on Art and Design Research" symposium (Margolin 1998a), his model is then specified and refined, indeed at Columbus in 1998 (Margolin 1998b), then in 2000 in "Building a Design Research Community" at the "Design Plus Research" symposium of the Politecnico di Milano (Margolin 2000), the following year in "Design Research and its Challenges" at the fourth EAD Conference in Aveiro (Margolin 2001). After an interlude devoted to other issues and activities, he resumes and persists in "Doctoral Education in Design: Problems and Prospects" (Margolin 2010a) and, the same year but now as historian, in the paper "Design Research: Towards a History" delivered at the DRS conference in Montreal (Margolin 2010b), and finally one last time in 2016 at the conference celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Design Research Society, held in Brighton: "Design Research: What is it? What is it for?" (Margolin 2016). His model is built on the radical distinction between the field of *design*, its practice and products, and the field of *design studies* (corresponding more or less to what is often called research *about* or *into* design). These two fields should, he maintains, always be so well distinguished that they would yield separate doctorate programs and even separate education and research institutions (schools, departments, faculties). Indeed, one recognizes here the practice/theory (or power/wisdom) polarity, the central, metaphysical, and highly controversial dichotomy that has occupied (at times poisoned) and still animates the field of design. Victor actually called for the creation of a department of Design Studies analogous to others such as Gender Studies or Afro-American Studies, separate from design schools, granting equivalent academic degrees. He also insisted that future practitioners trained in schools acquire some scholarship in design studies and become familiar with a body of literature that would be drawn, for example, from the one he provides in his already mentioned anthology *Design Discourse*, with the purpose of enlightening their practice as to its social, cultural, political, environmental, and spiritual consequences. Similarly, he proposed to distinguish the doctorate in design from the doctorate in design studies, as is the case for instance in many faculties of music (D. Mus. in composition and performance on one hand, Ph.D. in Music or Musicology on the other) and as do some schools or faculties of architecture (D. Arch. and Ph.D. in Architecture). Since such a model further accentuates the existing gap between practitioners and theorists, some design institutions strive to adopt an alternative approach to design research (sometimes called research *by* or *through* design, or *project-grounded*, or *practice-based* design research) (Chow 2010; Jonas 2014), in order, not merely to reconcile both poles but, somehow like the mythological androgynous figure, or faithful to Dewey's or Lewin's pragmatism, to cross-fertilize each other. Nonetheless, Victor and I tended to agree on the aim and purpose of design research, since he unequivocally held that "research must prove its value to those who train designers and produce design". In "Design research and its challenges" (Margolin 2001), he raises the question

of membership in the design research community, whose constitution he traces back to the creation in 1979 of the DRS organ, the journal *Design Studies*: "I believe it is more useful to consider membership in the community from a constructivist position than a taxonomic one. A taxonomic definition of design research is based on fixed categories while a constructivist definition is based on more pragmatic considerations. What problems do researchers address? Whom do they collaborate with and how are the results of their collaboration evaluated and disseminated?" Consequently, one may ask how the research field and approach thus considered will get academic recognition. Here it is: "The most fundamental objectives [of our research community] are to show how design research relates to work being done in other fields and to demonstrate how it might lead to an improvement of human welfare".

→ **2001:** The journal becomes a quarterly, proof of its success, without compromising its positioning and editorial policy.

→ **2002:** Publication of a major book, *The Politics of the Artificial*, an anthology of thirteen of Margolin's texts, mainly from the 1990s, most of which had been difficult to access (lectures, interventions, unpublished texts). The book is actually an attempt at a comprehensive intellectual biography, structured in two parts, "Design" and "Design Studies", preceded by an introduction of nine pages. Victor reveals the diverse influences that contributed to his vision of the world and of design. We learn that in his twenties he was thinking of conceiving a cosmology (actually, a cosmogony) that would have accounted for the different forces at work in the world, an undertaking "that no philosopher in the past had successfully done". The world thus envisaged, structured hierarchically in several levels, somewhat in the manner of Teilhard de Chardin, was the result of a "highly intuitive [process], developed from spontaneous images and spontaneous flashes rather than from logical deduction". Having realized the idea in the form of a structure composed of a cosmosphere, a biosphere and a sociosphere in constant interrelationships, and after having filled a thousand pages "which a few years later seemed totally incomprehensible to [him]", Victor finishes, "in an act of liberation", by throwing "the whole lot out, having decided that [his] goal was unachievable". One would be greatly mistaken to believe that such an effort leaves no trace in an intellectual biography, even several years later. Indeed, such metaphysical and existential questions very often continue to make their way into the inner world and feed one's inquiries as researcher and writer. That's exactly what Victor tells us: "I did not return to the three spheres, but I did begin to think about design as a vehicle that revealed human intentions for making the world". Such intellectual program, he adds, resonated with "St. Augustine's belief that 'by means of corporeal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual'. I was not then thinking consciously about how design provided evidence of spirituality or signs of what life in a world beyond might be like, but this did emerge later as a theme of my reflection, although I rarely foregrounded it in my

lectures or my essays". Rather astonishing, isn't it? Not if one returns, for instance, to the early writings of Walter Gropius when he was founding the Bauhaus. Indeed, his famous 1923 maxim "Art and Technology: A new Unity" may be interpreted as the more metaphysical and perennial quest for the unity between spirit and matter (Findeli 1999/2000). Notwithstanding, Victor had explicitly addressed the issue in 1995 in an essay (actually, the transcript of a lecture given in California in 1991) published in *Leonardo* (Margolin 1995), in which he calls for "a new sense of spirituality [that] can address the increasingly complex relations between the natural and the artificial and offer the basis for a new project for designers". Such a conviction is based on his commitment to what he called a "secular humanism" and on his personal spiritual practice which strongly influenced the way he presented the task of what will soon be called social design. In his texts he provides strong criticism of the postmodernism of Lyotard, Vattimo, Baudrillard, and others, convinced that, without one or more meta-narratives whose contours remain to be specified, the world would become uninhabitable. Spirituality is for him "a means to confront the nihilism of postmodern theory and the materialism of posthumanist discourse". Victor seeks "a transcendental source of accountability that can inform our judgment about how to set limits for design interventions", remaining firmly convinced that design and technology would have much to gain from being inspired by a spiritual meta-narrative. Accordingly, in his critique of neuroscience and cybertechnologies, he testifies that the practice "of a lived spirituality induces a fulfillment of human experience and thus leads to a firmer attitude to assimilate or resist new technologies". In a review published in the newly created Australian journal *Design Philosophy Papers* (Lopes 2003), the book was criticized for not being sufficiently political, despite what its title indicates. Not surprisingly, Victor struck back without delay (Margolin 2003) by opening the dialogue on the reasons why the current design practice hesitates to engage in projects with stronger ethical or social content. His diagnosis is followed by the following "solutions": more critical discourse, more voices advocating alternative models, less promotion of theorists and critics who simply reproduce or refine the dominant model and more risk-taking in academic programs, adding: "May those who feel concerned raise their hands!" In the same year, he co-authored, with his wife Sylvia—a doctor, social work practitioner, and educator—"A 'Social Model' of Design: Issues of Practice and Research" (Margolin and S. Margolin 2002), sometimes considered a groundbreaking programmatic text and conceptual founder of social design. It is, by the way, Victor's only co-authored essay, apart from the editorials of the journal and some introductions to collective works and anthologies. If the question of the social commitment of designers and the ethical foundations of design were not really new issues in his and other author's writings, it is in this text that both authors express themselves most explicitly. Beginning by observing that, unlike the ubiquitous "design for market",

"product design for social need" was poorly theorized, arguing that while "[Papanek's] efforts provided evidence that an alternative to product design for the market [was] possible, they had not led to a new model of social practice". While it is true, they continue, that there have been some interesting initiatives, particularly in design for development in poorer countries, "regarding the broader understanding of how design for social needs might be commissioned, supported, and implemented, little has been accomplished". As for the training of designers, the situation is hardly better since it is the business model that still largely dominates. The authors then point out that the field of environmental psychology (or ecopsychology) is concerned with the living conditions of people, especially vulnerable populations, within their environment, a topic leading to interdisciplinary research and projects involving architects, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, among others. But nothing like this, they regret, exists in product design, a good reason for proposing "a 'social model' of product design practice" and establishing a research agenda that "would examine and develop [such model] in the same way that comparable research has supported design for the market and environmental psychology". However, in a first step, they limit their proposal to the methodological dimension by discussing the possibility of considering and teaching the process of product design just like the intervention process is taught and practiced in social service. The authors do not wish to oppose commercial design and social work, which have distinct aims and objectives, but to consider them as poles of a spectrum where the division and arbitration between the economic purpose, on one hand, and the social purpose, on the other, are conditioned by the project owner, by the sponsors or by the stakeholders, in short by the situation. The theoretical framework of the field of social work is ecological and transactional and it is actually the complex dynamics of interaction between two systems that constitutes its core: the system of the client (the person, his relatives and his social network) and the system of the environment in which s/he evolves, the latter considered in its biological, psychological, cultural, social, natural, and physical/spatial dimensions. According to Sylvia and Victor Margolin, the focus of design is largely limited to the physical/spatial realm. They then specify the six steps of a general "problem-solving process" in social design, in which we may easily recognize the corresponding stages of a product design process: the engagement with the project ("commitment"), the diagnosis and problematization of the brief ("assessment"), the design hypotheses and their visual representation ("planning"), the materialization and development of the chosen concepts ("implementation"), the prototyping and testing phases ("evaluation"), the delivery and closure of the project ("termination"). Importantly, social work interventions are always carried out with the active and permanent participation of the parties concerned (family, marital, social, professional system, etc. of the client or beneficiary), in close collaboration with a multi-professional team of specialists.

The Margolins then ask the following question, while providing elements of an answer: how could the skills of a product designer integrate and enrich such a team and at what stages of the process would his/her contribution be most relevant and useful? The research agenda that the authors set out at the end of the article addresses the alleged lack of interest and support of the design community for social design services, due to "the lack of research to demonstrate what a designer can contribute to human welfare". In a later essay where he contrasts the field of contemporary art studies with that of design, evoking "the crisis of design" (Margolin 2013), especially in design related to the public sector, Victor writes that "officials in that sector have difficulty understanding design as an activity that is relevant to their concerns. They are similar to the public that still does not understand why Duchamp's urinal should be considered a work of art". Fortunately, one can observe with satisfaction today that things have changed rapidly in a decade and that much of that program has begun and will continue to be realized, both in practice and in design education. Although being very busy writing his monumental *World History of Design*, the publication of which has been announced (and repeatedly postponed), Victor will nevertheless return several times to the theme of social design, associating it with environmental issues and, more broadly, as Dewey had done in his own way, with the ethical-political commitment of designers and the future of democracy.

LAST PERIOD

→ **2006:** Victor retires from the University of Illinois at Chicago, which means he can now invest twice as much time, energy, and conviction into his activity and continue his work. In "Design, the Future, and the Human Spirit", an essay written that same year and published in the journal in 2007, he again strongly urges designers to commit to the future in a more direct way if they want to have a say in giving it shape. He then develops a broad, somewhat disjointed, diagnosis of the world situation in various fields (geopolitical, humanitarian, technological, medical, ethical, etc.), followed by a critical discussion of various scenario techniques used by futurologists, and by a conceptual return to the cosmological model of his early years, to conclude that it is up to us designers to give priority to the creation of an ethics of design "because the milieu of products and services in which we live does not enhance and affirm human potential and well-being, [a situation] for which we must hold designers at least partially accountable".

→ **2010:** Publication, by the editorial triumvirate, of the third anthology (if we exclude the one reserved exclusively to history, edited by Dennis Doordan in 1995) devoted to the last ten years of the journal, entitled *The Designed World. Images, Objects, Environments*, a choice of twenty-seven articles divided into three sections: Conceptualization, Manufacturing, Evaluation. It opens with the question

"What will be the future of design?", the latter to be understood at once as a professional practice, a subject of research, an opportunity for debate, and an object of evaluation. The journal having achieved, after a quarter of a century, a good cruising speed and undisputed recognition by the international design community, it seemed appropriate for the editorial board to return to the genesis and development of what constitutes its primary and fundamental topic, namely design studies. Three distinct historical periods are thus distinguished, characterized by the following main phenomena or trends. From the beginning of the twentieth century to 1985, the erasing of boundaries between history, theory and criticism; from 1985 to 1995, the entry of researchers from other disciplines into the field of design (philosophy, economics, social sciences, communication, management, technology); and from 1995 to 2010, the entry of design into other fields (philosophy, psychology, anthropology and material culture, management sciences, history), the latter phenomenon arising from the fact that design is a way of engaging knowledge in action, a mark that constitutes its epistemological specificity. The editors of the book think they have, by their selection, been able to show how much design had changed in a significant and meaningful way by becoming a much more "pervasive" practice. Victor does nevertheless deliver a more pessimistic picture of this change when, in the above-mentioned article (Margolin 2013), he speaks of a "crisis of design" occurring in the fields of practice, research, discourse (mediation), and education. His diagnosis is severe and, once again, the remedy lies in the construction "of a framework integrating in the most effective way the various voices, theories, arguments and assertions taking design as subject matter". As expected, such framework can be no other than the field of design studies. A similar turn, according to him, was provoked in art by analytical philosophers of art, who in the 60s declared that the search for an ontology of art was vain and pointless, preferring the laconic "art is what the art world recognizes as such". One should indeed be surprised by such a strong relativistic position, incompatible with Victor's call for a transcendental instance of previous years. Does this indicate a turn in his own worldview? Let's see.

→ **2012:** Under the thematic of "Good Society" or "Good City" or even "Citizen Designer", Victor pursues his project of a global policy of design. Whether in his Carnegie Mellon University lecture of April 2012 ("Democracy and Design in a Troubled World"), in his inaugural speech at the 2013 Cumulus Meeting in Kalmar ("The Good Society: An Action Frame for the 21st Century"), or in published essays (e.g. "The Good City: Design for Sustainability", 2015a; "Social Design: From Utopia to the Good Society", 2015b), Victor believes that it is now time, after a decade or so, for social design to widen its scope, initially dedicated to disadvantaged populations, to a more comprehensive "design for a new society". In order to achieve this, it is important for designers to adopt the point of view of the recipients of design, i.e., all of us who dwell in the artificial world conceived and constructed by designers,

before establishing what he calls an "action frame [or matrix]". By that he means the source of the values that guide the actions of designers as well as the source of the worldviews that justify their behavior, a source that Otto Scharmer, in his *Theory U*, considers the "blind spot" to be located in every project (Scharmer 2007). However, he observes, the current action frame, constrained by capitalist ideology, is no longer sustainable; it is necessary to invent a new one. In this regard, "it is not only a matter of changing values, he warns, it is necessary to change strategies [of action] as well" and for this, Victor proposes eight conditions and suggests institutions and design centers such as Cumulus or DESIS tackle the task. He maintains that it is their special skills and competences (the term "design thinking" is avoided, having become too mundane) that best equips designers to contribute to the design of such a "good society".

→ **2015:** Publication of the first two volumes of *World History of Design*, a major and long announced masterpiece on the specific approach of which he has repeatedly expressed and justified himself by resolutely departing from the proponents of mainstream historiography. The initiative, Victor recalls, emerged around 2000 when he "became intrigued with the idea of writing a world history of design". The book begins with the following question: "How does one write the history of a subject whose boundaries are indeterminate and whose subject matter has already been partially claimed by other disciplines" like archaeology, art history, linguistics, the history of techniques and crafts, material culture? Sharply disassociating himself from the traditional typological or formal distinctions that have entrenched the discipline in "narrow geographic and temporal borders", Victor insists on the interdisciplinary and globalized stance, as well as on the expanded periodicity (from prehistory to the present day) adopted in his narrative: "My own priority [...] is to show how human beings have conceived, planned, and produced the artifacts, whether material or even immaterial, that they have used to satisfy their needs and desires, and to organize and manage their lives". But, adds the citizen-Margolin, "there were also intellectual and political reasons to write a world history of design: I came to feel that it was unjust to perpetuate a history that did not integrate the accomplishments of peoples in parts of the world outside Europe and the United States into a narrative that treated design everywhere as valuable on its own terms rather than in terms of whether it measured up to what was being done in the Western industrialized countries". He concludes by stating that "the project has given [him] a vision of how design had developed in all parts of the world at all times" and that "[he] now believes that [he] understands the world a lot better for that".

→ **2017:** Open letter to the design community ("Stand Up for Democracy") co-written with Ezio Manzini urging the design community "to stand up, speak out, and act, [to] take a strong stand against the on-going de-democratization process, and support broader and richer opportunities for democracy and well-being" (Manzini and Margolin

2017). The convergence between design and democracy is reduced into the four figures of “design of”, “design for”, “design in” and “design as” democracy, a nod to Frayling’s categories.⁴ The platform “Design and Democracy” resulting from this letter was to build, through collective dialogue, an open body of knowledge by exploring the intersection between design and democracy. From such a perspective, the two authors invite members of the community to “write a personal statement of less than 500 words, make it public and circulate it in their networks, finally organize an event in the next few months”. They are also asked to send their point of view in the form of a short video. Just before the pandemic broke out in 2020, nearly forty messages had been collected, among them Victor’s message calling to resist the efforts of “nationalists” who attack democratic values, otherwise “the disruption of policies that favor well-being and justice would be a disaster for nations that hold these values or even embed them into their constitution”. The video is not dated but obviously points to the situation that prevailed then in US policy.⁵

→ **2018:** The *Maryland Institute College of Art* in Baltimore awards Victor Margolin an Honorary Doctorate, which is certainly not the only distinction he has been awarded for his achievements as evidenced by his CV. The few written references I have chosen for this essay are but a sample of a record of nine books, more than sixty essays, about fifty book reviews and nearly a hundred lectures, speeches, keynotes, and papers around the world. But the Baltimore distinction is symbolic in several ways. It takes place in an institution that bills itself as the first in the United States to have launched a full program in social design (M.A. in Social Design, 2011), associated with the Center for Social Design, an institution dedicated to highlighting the contribution of design to social equity and justice, as well as inspiring and preparing the next generation of changemakers. It was also probably one of the last public appearances of Victor who, very affected by his accident, gave from his wheelchair and dressed in the Doctor’s robe a very moving reception speech. Addressing the students of the program, he closed his speech with these words: “Your training has given you the skills and motivation to promote the values of equality, justice and beauty. By doing so, you will be able to make the world more livable and contribute to what I have called the ‘good society’”.

TO CONCLUDE

As Clive Dilnot points out in his obituary and biographical sketch, at the ceremony held in Washington DC on December 3, 2019 in memory of Victor Margolin, “by far the dominant term that writers and speakers used to try to capture him, at once as a person *and* as a scholar, was “generosity” (Dilnot 2020). To which he adds: enthusiasm and a sense of humor. It’s all there: all those who have had the privilege and joy to cross his path will remember his generous hospitality, both intellectual and social, and his passion.

⁴ These categories update the ones Victor had already identified in his 2012 Carnegie Mellon University lecture: “Democracy and Design in a Troubled World.” Video 1:23:46. <https://vimeo.com/51090940>

⁵ Victor’s statement is published on the platform, along with other authors’ (<http://democracy-design.designpolicy.eu/statements/>)

⁶ See: <http://design-altruism-project.org/category/margolin/>

Victor recounts having been marked by his one-year stay in pre-1968 Paris and by the stature of influential intellectuals, a figure on the absence of which so much is written today. Victor did embody this figure of the intellectual both in his style, his particular way of reading his texts on the microphone, and in his arguments. As a living encyclopedia, never short of references, he became the indispensable whistle-blower of the design community, and at times even its prophet. He always displayed an irreproachable rigor, while being endowed with an insatiable intellectual curiosity and a sincere active listening ability, animated by his sense of the human experience, whatever its form and nature.

Some criticized him for his lack of practical experience in design and his style, sometimes close to mere erudite and scholarly journalism. While it is true that, as a historian, his basic research material was mainly textual (and visual), he nevertheless showed a very attentive, deeply phenomenological, ability to observe and listen, a sample of which can be found in the thirty vignettes he published on his "Design-Altruism-Project" platform to which he had remained faithful since 2006.⁶ These vignettes display a precious (and humorous) ethnographic material, illustrating the adventures of human dwellers of the artificial struggling with the difficult conditions of habitability of the contemporary world.

In order to stick more closely to the theme of this special issue of *Disegno*, it would have indeed been relevant to see if the above "intellectual and cultural legacy" of Victor Margolin actually achieved what he intended at the outset, i.e., to position his own journey in the continuity and influence of Moholy-Nagy's work in Chicago. There is no doubt that the intellectual, political, and pedagogical program that Moholy-Nagy presents in the first two chapters of his posthumous *Vision in Motion* (1947)—the topicality of which certainly still deserves to be meditated—find a strong resonance with Margolin's programmatic call to establish the new field of design studies. How could one not sense this resonance in Moholy-Nagy's often quoted (and often misunderstood) statements that in design, "not the product, but man, is the end in view", adding that it is "the whole man" that is required in the future since the task is "to see everything in relationships", in order to remember that "design is not a profession but an attitude"? To develop such an argument would arguably be the task of another, maybe future, essay.

Victor Margolin was a member of the editorial board of Disegno since its inception in 2014.

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Another interesting and comprehensive list is to be found here:
<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=DpXcgxEAAAAJ&hl=en>. See also footnote 2.

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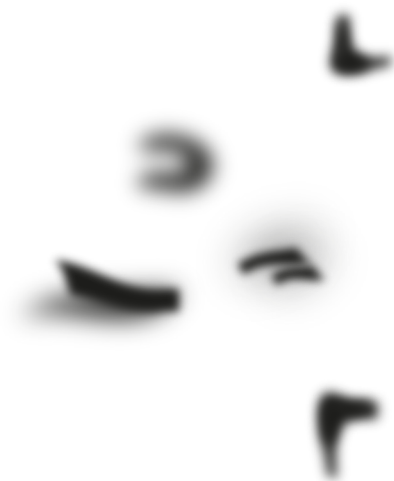
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