

Book Reviews

Hugh Dubberly

The Invention of Design: A Twentieth-Century History by Maggie Gram
(New York: Basic Books, 2025), hardcover, b/w illustrations, 336 pages, \$30.00, ISBN: 9781541600638 (Book Review)

Maggie Gram has published an important book about design. That's a feat on its own, made even more impressive by her relative newness to the field. Gram did not study design. Instead, she has a BA in African American studies and English from Columbia and a PhD in English from Harvard. Nevertheless, she made herself a designer and has practiced design for around ten years. Now, she manages an experience-design team in Google's cloud services business.

Her book, *The Invention of Design*, is an excellent survey of modern design history. Every graduate student in design should read it as a portal into "the discourse of design." Professional designers may also find that it provides perspective and context on their practices.

The Invention of Design is not a picture book nor a history of artifacts nor even a history of heroes. Rather, it is a history of ideas—a history of ways of framing design.

Gram focuses on six major frames, each paired with a character or characters who bring the histories to life and ground them in particular practices:

- Beauty [or aesthetics], with Eva Zeisel (née Striker)
- Function, with Walter Dorwin Teague
- Problem solving, with Paul Rand and Herbert Simon
- Human-centeredness, with Horst Rittel, West Churchman, and Lucy Suchman
- Experience, with Don Norman and Dori Tunstall
- [Design] Thinking, with David M. Kelley and Tim Brown

Throughout the book, Gram has several theses, including

- Design is not one, fixed thing; it is many things, continuously evolving.

- Ways of framing design are invented and have histories.
- Design attempts to paper over problems in the capitalist system—or, at least, designers' aspirations to make better worlds often conflict with the realities of the marketplace, and sometimes designers promise more than they can deliver.

She confronts the elephant head on: "Inventing design helped people imagine reversing some of the damage wrought by the Industrial Revolution. ... 'Design,' in short, made capitalism feel, both to its participants and to its subjects, less brutal and inhumane..."¹ She cites several examples, and yet, she still ends on a positive note: "Chipping away at wicked problems—using broadly participatory methods—is how communities build social power, and building social power is how communities make structural change. Design can contribute to that project, and it should."²

Gram covers a lot of material (design practice from roughly 1910 to 2010), in little more than 250 pages. Her writing is fast paced and interesting, an easy read. *The Invention of Design* is also a serious piece of journalism. Gram has done an impressive amount of research, but she has avoided writing an academic tome. The book is well indexed (when too many design books are not). And it has forty-four pages of endnotes (which are all too rare in design books).

Yet, the book may also leave some readers wanting more. Historians of design will likely wonder why Gram left out various frames, events, and people. For example, the writers Gui Bonsiepe, Richard Buchanan, Nigel Cross, J. J. Gibson, Donna Haraway, Donella Meadows, Marshall McLuhan, Donald Schön, and Langdon Winner do not appear, which is a pity, since they all influenced design discourse.

While Gram brings a critical (even Marxist) lens to the book (without overwhelming), a longer, more academic book might have acknowledged efforts to move design outside the frame of capitalism—efforts such as transition design (cf. Terry Irwin) and work in critical and speculative design (cf. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby) and the many threads of academic design discourse, such as semiotics, cybernetics, systems design, ontological design, and discursive design (cf. Bruce and Stephanie Tharp).

Gram sidesteps the common framing of design in terms of media and production techniques (i.e., architecture, product design, graphic design, interaction design, and service design). But in so doing, she ignores the emerging future of design—the rise of communications networks, data, and AI as materials of design, which John Maeda has called “computational design.” Recently, Shelley Evenson and others have begun to describe the emergence of a new design discipline: “design for agents” or “agentic design.” And the book does not mention synthetic biology, which already invites a new sort of design.

Also, readers might benefit from a comparison of Gram’s model of six frames of design with Richard Buchanan’s model of four “orders” of design (which he defined as symbolic and visual communications, material objects, activities and organized services, and complex systems or environments).

Gram also skips over the role of time or the pace-of-change in design practice. Stewart Brand’s pace layer model describes “fashion” as changing more quickly than commerce, which changes more quickly than infrastructure, which changes more quickly than governance (cf. Bruce Sterling’s wonderful essay on the model). Jorge Arango describes how design often focuses on the top, faster layers (i.e., fashion and commerce), but he also notes a shift among some designers to grapple with deeper, slower layers (i.e., infrastructure and governance).

Gram ends the book with a cautionary tale of hubris about designers who tried to reinvent the city government of Gainesville, Florida, with little success. But she does not include more successful case studies, such as design work helping reinvent the Australian tax system.

My biggest critique of the book is that it is not more explicit about two major frames of design—design as politics/rhetoric and design as play.

First, it does not explicitly define design as essentially political (though the book does touch on design’s relationship to capitalism and government). It does not acknowledge that, in large part, the role of designers has become one of facilitation, gaining consensus on problems or goals as a prerequisite to agreeing on means. But to her credit, Gram does report on Horst Rittel, among the first writers to frame design in terms of politics. I hope she will expand the next edition to

include the frame of design as politics and rhetoric (cf. Buchanan) and that she will expand the sections on design justice and co-creation.

Second, the book does not mention play and its role in the design process—accepting constraints and experimenting within a set of rules as a generative process—riffing on a theme with variations. She does report on Paul Rand, but she does not mention his classic essay on education, “Design and the Play Instinct.”

While *The Invention of Design* is a survey (not a complete history), it is an important contribution to design discourse and a hugely helpful contribution to design education. It is the first book I know of that attempts to provide a history of the major frames of design practice. It deserves a wide audience.

If you’re a design student or a practicing designer, I urge you to read it.

1 Maggie Gram, *The Invention of Design: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: Basic Books, 2025), 2.

2 Ibid, 257.

Lina Hakim

Design Otherwise: Transforming Design Education in the Arab Region by Danah Abdulla (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025), paperback, b/w illustrations, 208 pages, \$29.95, ISBN: 9781350295773 (Book Review)

There is an urgency to Danah Abdulla’s approach and writing, her decolonial and activist agenda declared from the outset in the book title’s call to *Design Otherwise*.¹ This is a project that sets out to “think from another place,”² adopting the discourse of decolonial scholarship to center the Arab region as the context of its inquiry and to thereby affirm its significance as a historical, cultural, and epistemological frame of reference. This is also a project that is invested in the transformative potential of both design (“as an opening of possibilities through negotiation with the given”) and pedagogy (as an “imperative to change”³), and that is driven by this revolutionary promise in its call to “imagine design education and design *otherwise*.”⁴

Abdulla clearly recognizes the importance of defining the “Arab region” as the context of this research project—an area that uses a common language, holds similar cultural values, and shares experi-