From Designer Identities to Identity by Design: Educating for Identity De/construction

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THE LURE OF DESIGNER IDENTITIES

"Be the person the chatroom thinks you are." This was the text of an advertisement I saw posted on a wall in New York several years ago. The line suggests that one can reinvent oneself, come up with a new, desirable identity, and purchase the goods" — a car in this case — to back it up.[1] It is the epitome, the most direct and unapologetic example of a public curriculum that says, "You are what you buy."

It is a popular notion, perhaps informed by a vague and not particularly refined understanding of postmodernism, that "fluid and multiple identities" means that one can slip into and out of identities the way one can slip into and out of pairs of designer jeans. This notion is popular especially among youth who have been seduced into believing they can "design" their own identity, often with the help of consumer products. The new possibilities of plastic surgery and biotechnology have made designer identities seem even more plausible. It is the American dream, the celebration of entrepreneurship and the idea that "You can be anyone you want to be."

In education, these ideas manifest themselves in, for instance, the ideal of "color-blindness" and "gender-neutrality." After all, in this day and age, students need not feel bound by their class or ethnic backgrounds in the identities they wish to construct for themselves. By teaching female students women's history, or encouraging black students to read literature by black authors, one unnecessarily confines students to particular identity categories. "Never mind the past, the future is yours!" Students are encouraged to use their "freedom of choice" not only when shopping for clothes, but also when deciding on the identities they wish to construct.

In this essay, I argue that this conception of designer identities is a serious misunderstanding of "identity by design." It is not the absence of an "essence" of identity that is the problem in the notion of designer identities. On the contrary, I would argue that much has been gained by the unmasking of essentialist metanarratives as metanarratives. But the understanding of "identity by design" as the possibility of creating, in real life, the identity one has created in a chatroom, is deeply flawed. It posits identity as an a-contextual and a-historical product of an individual mind, and it blames the individual whenever the creation of fluid and multiple identities fails. As the power of biological, historical, and metaphysical determinism has waned, the pendulum has swung far to the other extreme: a belief in self-determination. I do not argue for a belief in cultural determinism, but rather for an understanding of human agency, especially in the area of identity design that is both enabled and constrained by its historical and cultural situatedness.

Rather than bashing design, I aim to retrieve the underlying richness of the concept of identity by design.[2] In the first part of the essay, I draw on etymological

analysis and on the work of Martin Heidegger for a deeper understanding of the concept of design. In the second part of the essay, I draw on the work of Donald Schön for deeper understanding of the practice of design. Without endorsing all aspects of Schön's work, I will make use of his analysis of (architectural) design as reflective practice for investigating the notion of identity by design. Architectural design will serve as a metaphor for understanding identity design; in both practices, the designer needs to listen carefully to the situation (be it the architectural site or her own thrownness), and in both practices, the designer needs to formulate transformative responses to this situation.

DE/SIGNING AND *ENT/WERFEN*

Heidegger has described the human condition as one of being "thrown" into this world.[3] This "thrownness" is the given, the condition in which the individual carves out an existence: *Dasein* (being-there). In German, the word for "thrown" is *geworfen*, from the verb *werfen*. To design is *entwerfen*, to be designed *entworfen*. If I am *geworfen* (thrown), what do I do to that *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) when I engage in *ent-werfen* (designing)? Is *ent-werfen* an un-throwing, an un-doing of the throw? Heidegger's "thrownness" means that I am never un-signed: I am always already inscribed with meaning, from before I am born. As Henk Oosterling says, "*Dasein* becomes Design. But shaping a life never starts from scratch: before we can even say 'I,' we have'…already been 'thrown' into many histories and discourses. The throw is a chance hit."[4] In other words, my being-in-the-world is contingent, dependent upon circumstances beyond my control. Coming to understand identity means untangling the knot of meanings: I de-throw my thrownness: I de-sign.

But terms such as "de-throwing" and ""un-doing the throw" do not do justice to the productive nature of designing (*entwerfen*): designing does not undo something, but rather it creates something. Several German verbs with the prefix "*ent*" refer to a double move of taking something away in order to enable something else. A good example is *entknoten*, which means undoing a knot. But like in the French *dénouer* and the Dutch *ontknopen*, this move also refers to the bringing forth of plot in narrative. The untangling or unraveling of the knot produces a view of what was hidden in the knot. A similar example is *entwickeln*, much like the Dutch *ontwikkelen*, which means to develop. The root verb *wickeln* (*wikkelen*) means to wind, to wrap. So the productive "developing" consists in an unwinding, unwrapping.

I propose that *entwerfen* refers to a similar double move as is made by verbs such as *entwickeln* and *entknoten*. When I say "un-doing the throw," I do not mean a destruction or negation of the throw, but rather a recognition of the throw. This same double move is recognizable in the English "designing," which is at the same time a""de-signing." It is only when I recognize my thrownness, that is, when I recognize my signedness, that I can design (*entwerfen*) in the productive, creative sense of the word. In interpreting *entwerfen* and designing, one should not look for an either/or; the removal, the taking something away and the aspect of producing, of bringing forth are rolled into one. Hofstadter writes that thrownness (*Geworfenheit*),

refers to the facticity of human beings' being handed over to itself, its being on its own responsibility; as long as human being is what it is, it is thrown, cast, "*im Wurf*." Projection,

> *Entwurf*, on the other hand, is a second existential character of human being, referring to its driving forward toward its own possibility of being. It is not the mere having of a preconceived plan, but is the projecting of possibility in human being that occurs anteced-ently to all plans and makes planning possible. Human being is both thrown and projected; it is thrown project, factical directedness toward possibilities of being.[5]

Hofstadter translates *Entwurf* here as "projection" rather than "design," but his explanation highlights precisely the two sides of the human condition that are inextricably connected: I am signed, that is, cast in circumstances beyond my control, *and* I can design, that is project my signed self into possibilities of being. Recognizing these two aspects of the de/signed self is recognizing that self-design entails more than the simplistic notion that one can construct oneself through what one buys and wears. Heidegger's student Jean-Paul Sartre also emphasized these two sides to the human condition: I have the responsibility both to recognize my facticity *and* to reinterpret that facticity in a new language that transcends, but does not deny, my thrownness. Refusing to do either is bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), the mistake of viewing oneself as fixed and settled, or, equally serious, of viewing oneself as a being of infinite possibilities and ignoring the always restrictive facts and circumstances within which all choices must be made.[6]

The practice of Designing

With this richer understanding of the concept of design in mind, I now turn to design practice. In *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schön takes the reader through steps in an architectural design process.[7] Schön's analysis of architectural design has much to offer for an understanding of identity design, for it seems that the two processes have much in common. He writes of architects that "designers juggle variables, reconcile conflicting values, and maneuver around constraints — a process in which, although some design products may be superior to others, there are no unique right answers" (*ERP,* 42). I would say that the process of identity design is aptly characterized by this juggling of variables, the reconcili-ation of values and the maneuvering around constraints.

Schön describes how "practitioners respond to the indeterminate zones of practice by holding a reflective conversation with the materials of their situations" (*ERP*, 36). The "reflective conversation with the materials of one's situation" is a compelling image that has a direct parallel in the process of identity design. An architect could focus on the constraints of the situation. Much has been decided for her: the site has a certain size, shape, slope, and context. The program dictates what activities must be enabled by the building, limiting possibilities of size and layout. There are the inevitable budget and time constraints. There are the government's safety and environmental regulations. And there are the practical construction constraints, strength and durability of materials, et cetera. Looking at it that way, architecture really is not a very creative profession. But good architects would not look at it that way.

The good architect holds a reflective conversation with the materials of the situation. She recognizes the constraints, recognizes the contingency of her design upon the situation, but steps right into that contingency and engages with it. In a way, the architect demonstrates that double courage of appreciating the contingency of

her design before it even exists, and then making the Nietzschean move of saying, "Thus I willed it."[8] Of course, the architect has not literally created the site by the power of her own will. But she can make the present moment and situation fully and affirmatively hers by using the material she has received to do something she can positively value.[9] This move marks the shift from mere thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) to active designing (*entwerfen*). Schön describes how the master-architect urges the student "to step into the problem freely, imposing her own constructs on it" (*ERP*, 63). In other words, the master-architect urges the student to acknowledge the complexity of the web of constraints, but not to be thrown off by it. Instead, he asks the student to make it *her* web of constraints, to say to the site: Thus I willed it — which should enable the student not to let that web of constraints dictate the outcome, but to find an entirely new way of looking at it. Identity designers, similarly, face the very real constraints of their thrownness (for example, class, gender, and race). The good identity designer does not deny these constraints, nor is she paralyzed by them, but finds a new way of looking at them, a new language that shows the possibilities for response, for design.

LISTENING TO THE BACK TALK OF THE SITE

Architectural design relies on recognizing partial similarities — if one can discover nothing familiar whatsoever, one has no scaffolding even to begin making sense of a situation — without subsuming "the situation as a whole under a familiar category" (*ERP*, 66). In designing an answer to the question who or what I am, it is much the same: I recognize my connections with identity categories such as race or gender, my similarities with others also inhabiting those identity categories, but the total (if incomplete) configuration of my individual identity cannot be subsumed under anyone else's identity. The architect, says Schön, "experiments rigorously when he strives to make the situation conform to his view of it, while remaining open to evidence of his failure to do so" (*ERP*, 74). In other words, the architect needs to listen carefully to what the site tells him. The good architect finds new "language" to describe the situation, and the new language not only describes or represents, but also constitutes the situation. The situation will "talk back" to the architect (*ERP*, 64) and tell him, "If you this is how you understand me, this is what you make me."

There are limits to the freedom of the architect in finding new language to understand the situation. No matter how beautiful the language, the architect will have to take the constraints of the situation into account. Even though new ways of seeing and describing the situation is constitutive, the slope, soil quality, budget et cetera do not change. Denying these real constraints leads to a simplistic understanding of design, as it leads to a simplistic understanding of Nietzsche's views on self-design. I agree with Kathleen Higgins that although for Nietzsche "the significance of the past is mutable because the interpretation given to it is mutable," this does not mean one denies the particularity of one's condition.[10] In architectural design, one is interpreting a particular situation and not another, and in designing one's identity, one is interpreting one's own past and context, not someone else's. If I try to design my identity in a way that stretches the facticity of my history or my current context too far, my design will fail.

<p style="text-align:center">Learning from other Designs</p>

One cannot move *beyond* where one has not been. In order for designers to be able to invent new language, they must know a great deal of existing language — they must have an extensive "*repertoire* of examples, images, understandings, and actions" (*ERP*, 66). A small repertoire of design choices limits the view of the designer, and often leads to an application and reapplication of those familiar design choices. An extensive repertoire, however, gives the designer such a level of comfort in the field, that the need to faithfully apply the known options disappears, and the designer can invent new options, new meaning. So where does this repertoire of identity design choices come from? Michael Oakeshott believes it is the initiation into and participation in the "conversation of mankind."

> Selves are not rational abstractions, they are historic personalities, they are among the components of this world of human achievements; and there is no other way for a human being to make the most of himself than by learning to recognize himself in the mirror of his inheritance.[11]

Although I distance myself from Oakeshott's conservative political views, and object to his Eurocentric language, I do believe Oakeshott describes well how one needs to engage in the conversations that are called culture, in order to gain a better understanding both of one's contingency and of ways that people have responded to that contingency in the past.[12] I can learn from the design choices people have made for their identities in the past — not in order to copy them, but in order to understand the context of my own thrownness, and the "back talk" I may expect from the conversations to which I add my voice. An architectural design emerges in the conversation between the architect and the situation in and for which she has been asked to create a design. An identity design emerges in the conversation between the designer and the existing conversations, discourses, into which he finds himself thrown.

Several years before Oakeshott, Hannah Arendt wrote not about the conversation(s) of mankind, but about "the storybook of mankind."[13] Participation in this "storybook" is the realm of action (which she distinguishes from labor and work). Action is always action in a context.

> The realm of human affairs, strictly speaking, consists of the web of human relationships that exists wherever men live together. The disclosure of the "who" through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact.[14]

Arendt emphasizes that identity, that "unique life story," is not created by the individual in an act of self-determination, but emerges in the interplay of the new voice and the existing conversations. Only through knowing many threads of the conversations, many stories in the storybook, can one make good design choices. This is the role of repertoire in identity design.

<p style="text-align:center">Designing through Hermeneutic Experiments</p>

In the practice of design, understood as reflective practice, experiments play an important role. Design experiments are different from research experiments in that

the former are transactional and transformative (*ERP*, 72-73). Although Schön does not use this term, I would call the kind of experiments Schön relates to design, *hermeneutic* experiments. By "hermeneutic experiment" I do not mean an exegetical experiment aimed at the discovery of any inherent and true meaning, but to an interpretive experiment that generates meaning. Schön refers to the hermeneutic, dialectical nature of design and design experiments in his use of words like "conversation" and "oscillation." Design experiments are dialectical in that they go back and forth between the constraints of the situation, the testing of moves that impose a certain order, listening to "the situation's back-talk" (*ERP*, 64) and trying new moves. Furthermore, the design experiment is not detached and aimed only at distanced understanding; it is an engagement with the situation in which understanding is transformative. By testing out certain moves on the drawing table, and listening to the back talk of the situation, the architect comes to a new way of seeing and understanding the situation. This new way of seeing transforms the situation itself and always has effects beyond those intended by the designer (*ERP*, 63). In designing an identity, one designs ways of being-in-the-world. Being-in-the-world also always has effects beyond those intended by the designer.

Charles Bingham has formulated a Nietzschean pedagogy in which, similarly, the self emerges in a constant interpretation and re-interpretation. In this view, the kind of organized learning that typically takes place in schools is directly involved in the hermeneutic experiments of self-design that I described above. "Thus, the school is not a place where students should come to express who they are day after day. Nor is it a place where students should learn more precisely how to express who they are."[15] Instead, the school is a place where students should come to experiment with new ways of seeing themselves, where they can listen to the "back talk" in experiments in which those new ways of seeing themselves interact with their pasts and their contexts.

Some people may say they do not understand what the fuss about "designing" is all about. I have heard people object that everyone can draw a sketch to visualize what they mean — some just have better drawing skills than others. But "visualizing" (or "representing") is not the same as designing. Schön describes the case of one student who "sees drawing not as thought-experimenting but as a way of presenting ideas" (*ERP*, 130). The master-architect sees this and points out (in Schön's words): "You are not really designing at all. You are simply having 'ideas' and putting them down on paper" (*ERP*, 130). In identity design, the same unwillingness or inability to design may occur. It seems to me, in fact, that quite often people think they have to "make up their minds" about who they are. They want to "have an idea" that "works," that enables them to live their lives. And indeed it may work — like the student in the above case may very well come up with a building that does not fall down. But "not falling down" does not make good architecture, and "having an idea about one's life" does not make good identity design.

A good design is a response to a particular situation; if the situation changes, the design will have to change too. If one takes a closer look at architecture, one discovers that many designs are not as fixed as they may seem at first glance. Homes

get extended with conservatories and porches, old warehouses become expensive condominiums and a church may be converted into a theatre. Even if the building physically stays the same, one could say it has been "re(de)signed," because the structure has been invested with an entirely new meaning. The same would apply to identity by design. If my situation changes, a new identity design is needed to respond adequately to the new situation. Moreover, the new situation changes my (retrospective) understanding of the old design. In other words, the new situation not only changes who I will become, but also my understanding of who I have been. Sometimes the changes in my situation are drastic, sometimes they are small. But since my situation changes all the time, identity by design is a constant re-design. That design and re-design are never arbitrary, never at the whim of an individual who decides to change jeans just because she feels like it. A pedagogy of self-reformulation does not mean reformulation of the self *ex nihilo*, but reformulation of the self based on a changed context, hence a changed understanding of the old design of the self.[16]

Educating for Identity De/construction

With a better sense of the richness of both the concept and practice of design, I now turn to the question of what this means for parents, school teachers, and others who play educative roles in youths' lives. In a nutshell, the message of this essay is to allow — or even encourage — students to design their identities, but to accompany this with a better understanding of what "design" means. The first implication of this message is that an understanding of one's context and historicity are crucial to designing identity. Without a thorough understanding of one's thrownness, of one's signedness, of the situation that will produce "back talk" when one imposes the order of a design on it, the design process has no direction. Identity is not the product of an individual mind, but the result of an interplay between the actions of the individual and the situatedness of that individual in a history of other actions. This means that students need to be encouraged, and given the opportunity, to learn about their social, cultural, and historical context. For instance, gay and lesbian students need to be given the opportunity to understand the (heteronormative) culture and society in which they live today, as well as the history and literature of gays and lesbians.

This brings me to the second implication. When one understands that there is no such thing as the design of the self by an autonomous subject who chooses and creates the self out of her own free will, the subject who does the designing needs to become more modest. A nuanced conception of identity by design means design by a subject for whom design is not a magnanimous move, but a small move, in the limited maneuvering space of her thrownness and historicity. Students need to be taught both that they speak through discourses not of their own making, and that they influence these discourses by speaking as they do. "There is no deconstruction that does not start with the attempt to respect a text or discourse."[17] There can be no identity de/construction, no identity that is truly de/signed, without an attempt to respect the particularity of one's thrownness and historicity.

Rather than teaching youth that they should not think of identity in terms of design, I propose to make them good designers. If they are not passive consumers

of designer identities, but have carefully designed their chatroom identity, it may not be so bad if they want to be the person the chatroom thinks they are. And if they do not take all the credit — nor all the blame — for their design, but understand that it has been both constrained and enabled by the context, then perhaps they have made the shift from "designer identities" to meaningful identity by design.

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1. In this essay, I will use "identity" and""selfhood" as synonyms, and will treat identity as a construct.

2. I take this strategy from Charles Taylor who argues that the "malaise of modernity" is caused not by the ideal of authenticity, but by a superficial and "debased" understanding of this ideal. See Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1991).

3. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962).

4. Henk Oosterling, *Radicale middelmatigheid* [Radical mediocrity] (Amsterdam: Boom, 2000), 130-31.

5. Hofstadter writes this in a note to his translation of "The Origin of the Work of Art." Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 71-72.

6. Robert Solomon, "Sartre, Jean-Paul," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy,* 2d ed.*,* ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 813.

7. Donald Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1987). This text will be cited as *ERP* for all subsequent references .

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954), 251.

9. Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 273.

10. Ibid., 269.

11. Michael Oakeshott," Learning and Teaching," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning. Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 48. Essay originally published 1965.

12. I use the plural "conversations" in recognition of the multitude of conversations and the multitude of voices participating in those conversations.

13. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 184.

14. Ibid., 183-84.

15. Charles Bingham, "What Friedrich Nietzsche cannot stand about Education: Toward a Pedagogy of Self-Reformulation,""*Educational Theory* 51, no. 3 (2001): 349.

16. Ibid.

17. Jacques Derrida in Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 63.