

Charles Eames

What is Design?//1972

- Q What is your definition of 'design'?
- A A plan for arranging elements in such a way as to best accomplish a particular purpose.
- Q Is design an expression of art (an art form)?
- A The design is an expression of the purpose. It may (if it is good enough) later be judged as art.
- Q Is design a craft for industrial purposes?
- A No – but design may be a solution to some industrial problems.
- Q What are the boundaries of design?
- A What are the boundaries of problems?
- Q Is design a discipline that concerns itself with only one part of the environment?
- A No.
- Q Is it a method of general expression?
- A No – it is a method of action.
- Q Is design a creation of an individual?
- A No – because to be realistic one must always admit the influence of those who have gone before.
- Q ... or a creation of a group?
- A Often.
- Q Is there a design ethic?
- A There are always design constraints and these usually include an ethic.
- Q Does design imply the idea of products that are necessarily useful?
- A Yes – even though the use might be very subtle.
- Q Is it able to cooperate in the creation of works reserved solely for pleasure?
- A Who would say that pleasure is not useful?

- Q Ought form to derive from the analysis of function?
- A The great risk here is that the analysis may not be complete.
- Q Can the computer substitute for the designer?
- A Probably, in some special cases, but usually the computer is an aid to the designer.
- Q Does design imply industrial manufacture?
- A Some designs do and some do not – depending on the nature of the design and the requirements.
- Q Is design an element of industrial policy?
- A Certainly; as is any other aspect of quality, obvious or subtle, of the product. It seems that anything can be an element in policy.
- Q Ought design to care about lowering costs?
- A A product often becomes more useful if the costs are lowered without harming the quality.
- Q Does the creation of design admit constraint?
- A Design depends largely on constraints.
- Q What constraints?
- A The sum of all constraints. Here is one of the few effective keys to the design problem – the ability of the designer to recognize as many of the constraints as possible – his willingness and enthusiasm for working within these constraints – the constraints of price, of size, of strength, balance, of surface, of time, etc.; each problem has its own peculiar list.
- Q Does design obey laws?
- A Aren't constraints enough?
- Q Are there tendencies and schools in design?
- A Yes, but this is more a human frailty than an ideal.
- Q Ought the final product to bear the trademark of the designer? of the research office?
- A In some cases, one may seem appropriate. In some cases, the other, and certainly in some cases, both.





Q What is the relation of design to the world of fashion (current trends)?

A The objects of fashion have usually been designed with the particular constraints of fashion in mind.

Q Is design ephemeral?

A Some needs are ephemeral. Most designs are ephemeral.

Q Ought it to tend towards the ephemeral or towards permanence?

A Those needs and designs that have a more universal quality will tend toward permanence.

Q To whom does design address itself: to the greatest number (the masses)? to the specialists or the enlightened amateur? to a privileged social class?

A To the need.

Q Can public action aid the advancement of design?

A The proper public action can advance most anything.

Q After having answered all these questions, do you feel you have been able to practice the profession of 'design' under satisfactory conditions, or even optimum conditions?

A Yes.

Q Have you been forced to accept compromises?

A I have never been forced to accept compromises but I have willingly accepted constraints.

Q What do you feel is the primary condition for the practice of design and its propagation?

A Recognition of need.

Q What is the future of design?

(No answer)

These questions by Madame L. Amic and answers by Charles Eames were the conceptual basis of the exhibition *What is Design?* (1972). An edited and slightly changed version of the questions was used as the basis of the 1972 film *Design Q & A*.

Charles Eames, 'What is Design?' (1972) *Eames Design*, ed. Charles Meier (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989) 14–15.