

# *Permanence, change and standards of excellence in design*

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*This paper explores the relation between metaphysical commitments and the evaluation of design projects. The dialectical relation of permanence and change needs to be incorporated into current design more frequently. Any project which lacks a clear metaphysical status makes the challenge to address permanence and change more difficult. Metaphysical uncertainty also results in (a) evaluations that have no clear criteria of success and (b) a shift in the language of evaluation from objective criteria towards expressions of personal taste. The paper contains some examples and a case study of new courthouses in the USA. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.*

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Dichotomies and paradoxes of existence have not gone unnoticed by philosophers. The dualism of form as idea and function as its operative expression is analogous to the dualism of reason and practice that inspired the greek philosophers. They grappled with the ideas of permanence and change as puzzling features of the world. Plato<sup>1</sup> thought that our knowledge about the world was established by coming to understand its dualisms as dialectical relations. A dialectical relation exists between terms when each idea or claim represented by the two terms is necessary for the other one to be meaningful. For example, neither the idea of permanence nor the idea of change on its own is sufficient to account for our experience of the world. The dialectical relation between the ideas of permanence and change is a relation of logical necessity. Plato<sup>2</sup> developed a theory of metaphysics designed to incorporate opposing concepts that structured experience. Dialectical reasoning enables us to develop new concepts that incorporate opposing ideas and generate theories that help to unify a fragmented world of appearances. The relations between mathematics and the imagination, between beauty and the fragility of change and decay, between reason and passion, between appearances

**1** Cornford, F M (ed) *Plato and Parmenides* The Bobbs-Merrill Co., New York (nd) pp v-x, 29  
**2** Grube, G M A (trans.) *Plato's republic* Hackett Publ. Co., Indianapolis (1974) Book V, VI, VII



(and the deceptions they perpetrated) and truth can be accounted for as theory becomes more abstract and conceptually comprehensive.

Implicit in Plato's recognition of dialectical thought and each individual's capacity to exercise his or her rational faculties is the recognition that change will occur. The only sense of permanence for Plato will be found in moral truths and our grasp of essences or Forms. Form will remain as the idea of excellence and perfection. All else in the experienced world and the world of appearances will change.

The dialectic of permanence and change, of excellence and adaptability raises an interesting question for design practitioners and design critics: how does one establish criteria for judgements of excellence that account for the dialectical relation of permanence and change? If excellence in the Platonic sense includes timelessness, eternal and unchanging, a manifestation of beauty that surpasses cultural norms and changing expectations, then how are we to judge design that is expedient and adaptable? If we seek the universal and permanent as criteria of excellence can we also incorporate the factor of adaptability that increasingly designers have to address? I shall explore this question through examples and suggest that a metaphysical analysis of design problems, while not offering an answer to the above question, at least can shed some light on the awkwardness of establishing criteria of excellence.

### *I Metaphysics and criteria of evaluation*

Today aesthetic responses are a matter of choice, no longer dictated by historical standards of beauty and taste. Designers may develop their own criteria of aesthetic judgement but in a world of choice the consumer need not adopt the conventions revered by a particular design community. Today the individual's capacity to engage in rational debate with accepted canons of beauty and excellence undermines the authority of whatever judging body assumes the mantle of expertise. For example, what is considered timeless in aesthetic judgement may be based on criteria of excellence that emerge from bodies of knowledge no longer influential in our responses to design. More than ever before, the need to incorporate principles of adaptability and change into design weighs on the designer. If both permanence and change as dialectical components of normative judgements in design must be addressed and if neither component can sustain such judgements of excellence on its own, then we need to ask what other kind of knowledge will help us to judge excellence in design? The answer to this question will partly be influenced by what the thing *is* that we are evaluating.

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