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Storia e Ricerche

PER UNA STORIA DELLA FENOMENOLOGIA DEL DESIGN

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CONTATTI
caporedattore@aisdesign.org

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Elena Dellapiana, Politecnico di Torino
Jeffrey Schnapp, Harvard University
direttore@aisdesign.org

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Ricerche

Disquiet in the Graphic Design Archive

ALICE TWEMLOW

Royal Academy of Art,
The Hague (KABK)
a.twemlow@kabk.nl

This paper is part of the base-camp-preparation for a research project in which I seek better understanding of the role of design history in negotiating the relationship between graphic design as heritage and graphic design as contemporary professional practice. It leans on perspectives and dispositions derived from decolonial aesthesis and intersectional feminism being used to question and disrupt representational biases and imbalances in cultural heritage preservation generally, and explores how such theories and tactics might also support critical intervention in the graphic design archive, specifically.

KEYWORDS

Graphic design
Graphic design archives
Intersectional feminism
Heritage preservation
Archive network

PAROLE CHIAVE

Graphic design
Archivi di graphic design
Femminismo intersezionale
Conservazione del patrimonio
Reti di archivi

L'articolo affronta la preparazione delle basi per un progetto di ricerca in cui si cerca di comprendere meglio il ruolo della storia del design nel negoziare il rapporto tra il graphic design come patrimonio culturale e il graphic design come pratica professionale contemporanea. Si basa sulle prospettive e sulle disposizioni derivate dall'estetica decoloniale e dal femminismo intersezionale, utilizzate per mettere in discussione e distruggere i pregiudizi e gli squilibri della rappresentazione nella conservazione del patrimonio culturale in generale, ed esplora il modo in cui tali teorie e tattiche potrebbero sostenere l'intervento critico nell'archivio nel campo specifico del graphic design.

The preservation of works of graphic design and their accompanying documentation is undoubtedly important, especially for a medium whose materiality is inherently ephemeral. But the graphic design archive continues to be dominated by an operative conception of the practice as a product of late-capitalist Global North industrial democracies, and the work and worldviews of the white, male, solo artist-designer who specialised in printed publications and posters. To what extent have the hegemonic power structures and hierarchies of value in which these works of graphic design were produced and circulated become sedimented into the canon? And to what extent do they continue to accrete around contemporary practice?

I see this investigation as an essential first step in inhabiting my new role as

Special Professor in the Wim Crouwel Chair of Graphic Design History, Theory and Sociology at the University of Amsterdam. What does it mean, as a woman design historian, to hold a professorship in the name of a male designer – a position created by a foundation also in his name and all of us funded by Pictoright, the Dutch visual copyright protection organisation? What does this role allow for and what does it preclude?

And, probably because I am design historian, I start in the archive. A set of 25 archives, in fact, collected by the Dutch Graphic Designers Archive foundation (Nederlands Archief Grafisch Ontwerpers, or NAGO) between 1992 and 2014 and also funded by Pictoright. The foundation's objective was to acquire the archives of Dutch graphics agencies and graphic designers of Dutch nationality or living in the Netherlands, to organize, describe and pack them, to find them homes in suitably equipped institutions where they might be accessed, and thereby to promote Dutch design heritage (fig. 1).

Out of the 25 archives assembled by NAGO, on the original initiative of the designer Ben Bos, only two concern women. One is devoted to the Holland Festival. Five are the records of design agencies. The remaining 18 are those of individual cis-male, white, Dutch graphic designers.

NAGO was disbanded in 2014, and the responsibility for the archives was passed to the Wim Crouwel Institute, which had been founded in 2013. The online database developed by Fabrique in 2004, still exists, however, and the rather dated but still-functioning interface provides the impression of one cohesive collection even though the archives have been dispersed among four institutions: the Graphic Design and Typography collection at The Allard Pierson Museum / University of Amsterdam Special Collections; the Graphic Design collection at the Stedelijk Museum; the Municipal Archives; and the International Institute of Social History.

These locations, connected by a few-minutes walking in Amsterdam, are the site of my research – compost for the development of a set of critical interventions or tactics that I hope can be used in their own specific re-readings and re-seedings but also in efforts to foster more responsive, inclusive, and just archival engagements with the globally *distributed graphic design archive*.

Fig. 1 — Next page:
NAGO archive overview.

For many artists and designers, archives are the material and the medium *du jour*, or *du décennie*. They have been variously and imaginatively interpreted as data for AI pattern recognition, as productive zones of conflict, as spaces of play or performance, as sites of speculative fictioning. The reality, however, at least as far as the International Council on Archives is concerned, is more prosaic: “Archives are the documentary byproduct of human activity retained for their long term value.”¹

NAG Nederlands Archief Grafisch Ontwerpers

wim crouwel instituut

NIEUWS

OVER NAGO
Colofon
Wat doet het NAGO?
Videos
Meer over het NAGO

ARCHIEVEN
Anthon Beeke
Ben Bos
Benno Wissing
Dick Eijffers
Gerard Wernars
Hand Werken
Holland Festival
Jan Bons
Jan van Keulen
Joijje van de Wouwer
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Jurriaan Schrofer
Karel Suyling
Ko Slijgers
Mart Kemper
Ootje Ozenaar
Otto Treumann
Pietor Brattinga
Ralph Prins
Studio Dumbar
Susanne Heynemann
Tafel Design
UNA
Wild Plakken
Wim Crouwel

WAT IS NAGO?
De Stichting Nederlands Archief Grafisch Ontwerpers (NAGO) is in 1952 opgericht met als doel om de archieven van Nederlandse of in Nederland wonende grafisch ontwerpers te verwerven, te ontsluiten en te behouden. [lees verder](#)

ZOEKEN

titel

ontwerper/vervaardiger

opdrachtgever

inventarisnummer

type vervaardiging
 Geen voorkeur

materiaal
 Geen voorkeur

techniek
 Geen voorkeur

soort object
 Geen voorkeur

archief
 Geen voorkeur

van jaar tot jaar [zoek](#) [help](#)



Fig. 2 — Paste up and final flyer for International Womens Day designed by Wild Plakken.

But even within that bald statement there is much to parse. Questions might be raised about what constitutes a *document*, or indeed a *byproduct*, how to measure its value, just how long *long term* should be, and who gets to make such decisions on behalf of the others now and in the future. When it comes to retaining the documentary byproduct of the human activity known as *graphic design*, there is another layer of complexity to factor in because what, for other archival categories might be considered a supporting document, is, in the case of graphic design, its actual product – the main event.

For example, the flyer for an International Women’s Day protest (fig. 2), designed by Dutch design collective Wild Plakken, is simultaneously document and artifact. It can be collected and presented as a work of design in itself, or as a souvenir of an individual’s life and interests. Additionally it documents the process of its own making – and opens a window on how graphic design was produced in 1980s Netherlands.

There is also, arguably, a heightened sense of urgency with graphic design when it comes to archives since in its materiality and its status graphic design is so ephemeral. It is often in danger of disintegration and, perhaps worse, disregard.

This is why the box is so key to the archival project. And I don’t just mean the one made of acid-free cardboard, the mainstay of physical archives. Nor just the one made of code that shapes most digital collections. Beyond its more

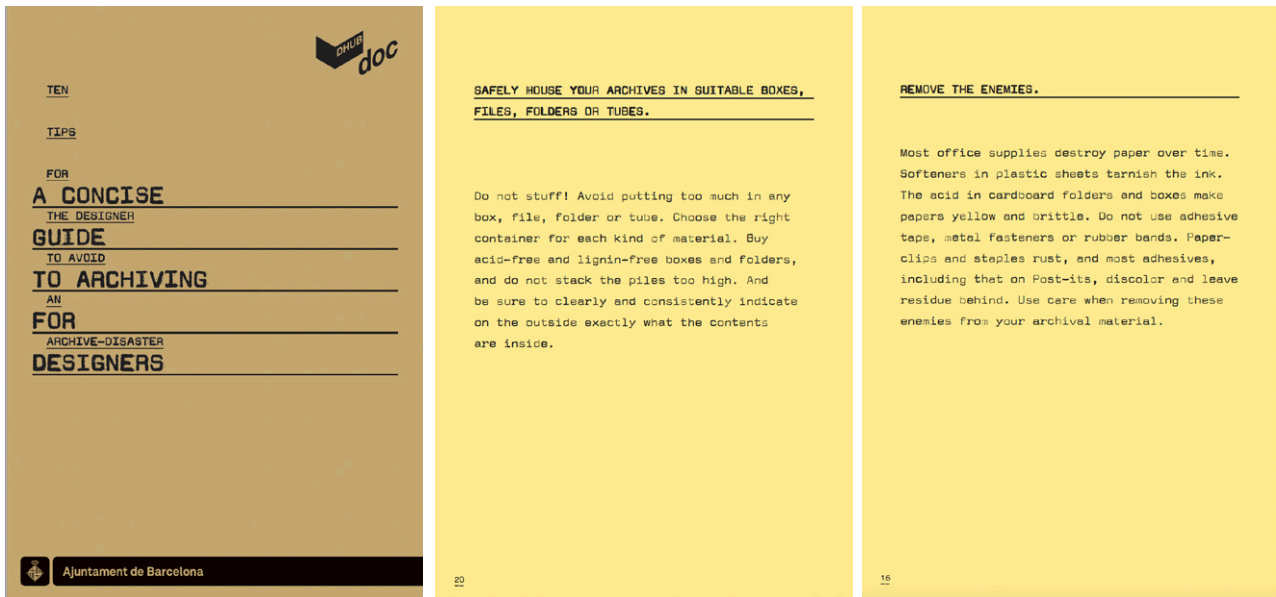


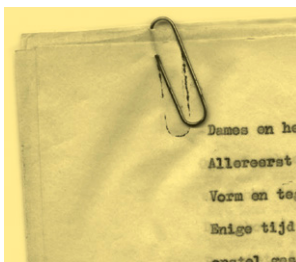
Fig. 3.1-3.3 — NAGO *Concise guide to archiving for graphic designers*: publication cover, publication Boxes and publication Enemies.

prosaic role as a material holder of things, the box is a theoretical and political construct. What is used to prevent the physical document from getting out and moisture and bugs from getting in, also acts on its meanings and interpretations – as an epistemic enclosure (fig. 3).

In his mid-1990s thinking about the concept of the archive, Jacques Derrida began with how the archive's ancient Greek etymological roots – the *arkheion* – puts its birth at the same address as the *archons* themselves, those who commanded.

The citizens who [...] held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or represent the law. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that place which is their house [...] that official documents are filed [...] It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place (Derrida 1995, p. 9).

Fig. 3.4 — NAGO *Concise guide to archiving for graphic designers*: publication Enemy paperclip.



This tripartite connection, forged so early on – between the archive, the political power of those that governed it, and its housing – still lingers.

Archiving conventions are archives themselves, documenting shifts or continuities in the values of the gatekeeping bodies – including their estimation of graphic design. Being forced to use a pencil and not being able to take photos of the documents you are accessing is annoying. Anyone who has used an archive has been confronted with long lists of house rules, which are

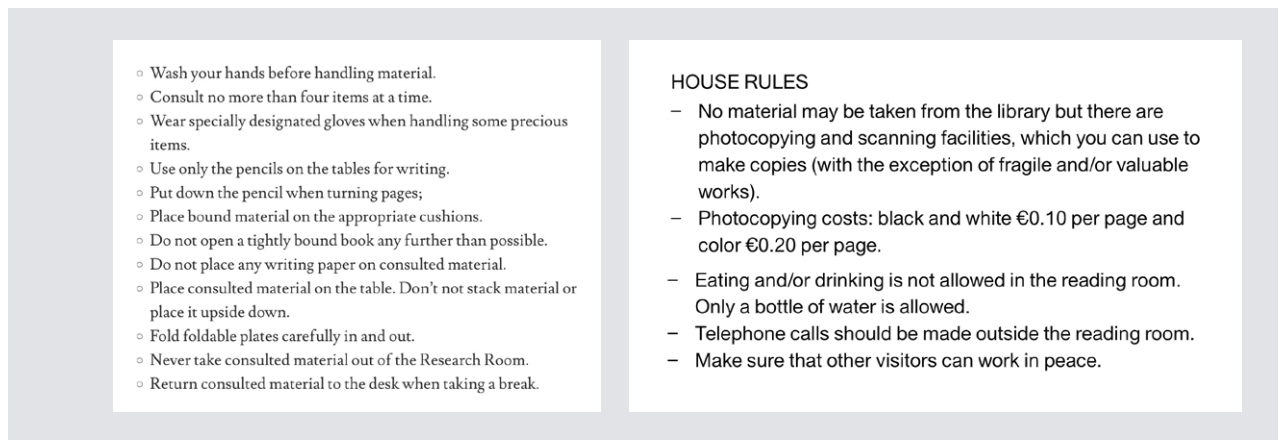


Fig. 4 — Typical Archive House Rules.

Fig. 5 — More Typical House Rules for Archives.

ostensibly there to protect the materials but, when it comes to something as mass-produced as graphic design, are often baffling in their logic. But what is more concerning is the possibility that how an archive is surveilled, its conception of neutrality, and what and who it excludes can also seep into the ways histories are ultimately written. Because, beyond documents and boxes, the archive is an ideological apparatus by which the canon is produced and hegemonic hierarchies maintained (fig. 4-5).

With graphic design, it's the apparatus by which the residue of a practice and mode of cultural expression, becomes its histories, its heritages, its memories. But it is also the apparatus by which a practice, and mode of cultural expression is performed and understood in the present.

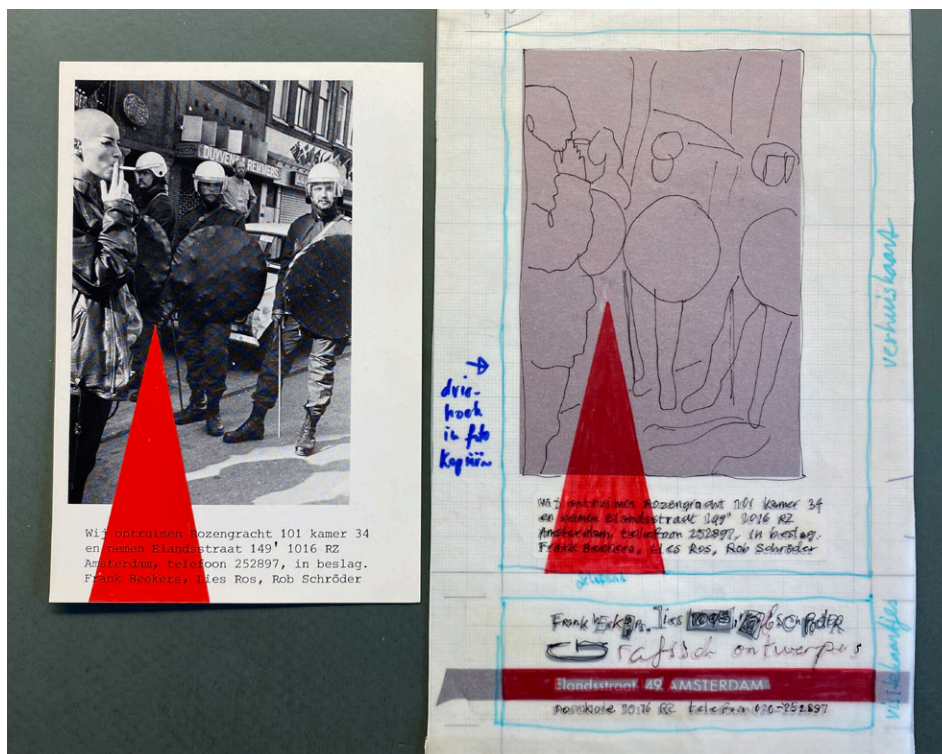
To elevate a human activity into an occupation, a profession and even to the heights of a discipline, your activity needs to accumulate a checklist of accoutrements. This includes: accredited qualifications and schools to administer them; an industrial sector label; local, national and international member associations with bylaws and newsletters; spokespeople and ambassadors; conferences; peer-reviewed journals; awards; museum collections; curators; professors; protection of intellectual copyright. Oh yes, and archives.

In parts of Europe and the US the activity of purposefully arranging words and images for the multiply produced communication of a message or product or idea began its transition from hobby to industry, profession and discipline in close association with industrialization and capitalism in the late 19th and early 20th century. But it really picked up speed in the immediate post-war years. It was labeled by its practitioners and chroniclers *graphic design to*

Fig. 6 — Studio moving card designed by Wild Plakken.



Fig. 7 — Paste up and final studio moving card designed by Wild Plakken.



differentiate its outputs from similar but so-called amateur or vernacular variants of visual culture, and its processes and culture from those of neighboring disciplines or professions such as art, illustration, industrial design, and advertising.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the pioneers of this categorization project were aging. It occurred to them individually and collectively, through the museum departments, associations, and organizations they had provided the graphic identities for, and in some cases directed, and helped to found, that there should be a historical record of their contributions. Some of them gathered at Rochester Institute of Technology in upstate New York in April 1983 for what was titled optimistically the “First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design” (fig. 6-7).

Here the designer Massimo Vignelli gave a passionate keynote address during which he shared a shopping list of what he thought was needed to elevate his profession – to give it gravitas or what he called “cultural structure” (Vignelli, 1984). According to Vignelli, graphic design needed its own philosophy and criticism and, more urgently and specifically, its own historical, archival

turn. “We need to document everything we do,” said Vignelli. “We need to perceive ourselves as steps in a historical process.” He concluded by saying “If we don’t make this step forward, we are all culturally dead and if that is the case, Amen” (p. 10).

In 2010, four years before his death, Vignelli’s own archives were lodged at the Rochester Institute of Technology in a purpose-built Design Studies Centre named for him and his wife and design partner Lella. A Freudian reading of Vignelli’s 1983 keynote (or at least a Derridean reading of Freud) might detect traces of “death drive” – a fevered desire to exchange the physical body for a place in the historical record. While the archive is a gilded coffin (or at least a cryonic chamber) for the artefacts of graphic design; as the repository for “an excess” or “triumph” of life, it offers their creators the possibility of resisting annihilation, of being remembered beyond death – a transaction with even higher stakes in the case of graphic design, because of its extreme ephemerality (Derrida, 1995, p. 41).

When, the hosts of “The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design” reflected that, “Many of us feel that the recognition and formal study of graphic design history is essential to the recognition of the graphic design profession,” they were celebrating the cultural contribution of the conference they had organized and the initiatives it had inspired (a second conference, the launch of *Design Issues* journal of design history theory and criticism, an archival resources listing by AIGA among others) (Hodik, Remington, 1983, p. 5). There was indeed reason to celebrate. Historians of graphic design have benefitted immensely from the commitment of attendees of this conference, and of numerous other programs, dedicated to the preservation of graphic design artifacts and accompanying documentation.

But with the advantage of hindsight we can also see just how much weight – especially economic weight – was riding on that term “recognition.” The statement suggests a widespread belief in a closely dependent relationship between graphic design’s cultural capital in the form of a historical canon, an archive and a historical discourse and its market worth as a service.

This enmeshing of commerce and culture, past and future is evident at the tangible, micro-scale of a design firm, where the archiving of work is often built into the procedural, architectural and economic structures of a studio. In a 2009 article, titled *The Private Archive of the Graphic Designer as Cultural Heritage*, published on the occasion of a seminar held in Amsterdam

to discuss the formation of graphic design archives, for example, the author observes that, “creating their own archive is common practice for the graphic designer because they use the archive as a portfolio for future clients” (Van der Horst, 2009).

And this sense of “common practice” isn’t confined to the studio. Indeed, because of the way institutional archives are arranged and catalogued – in adherence to the “Principle of Provenance,” and the “integrity of accumulation” – the ways that a design firm decides to archive their work tracks through to how it is subsequently archived in a museum or library (usually with sections devoted to a designer’s early life and training, followed by the high points of their career, with the work and its development organized by client). Such arrangements can even influence the narrative structure of a design history monograph.

Even though graphic design historians have also benefitted immensely from these historiographically pioneering monographs; today, at a time when the assembly and administration of archives are being questioned through a decolonizing lens, the graphic design archive also needs its own moment of reckoning.

On the one hand, it is suffering from overload. Institutions have run out of physical storage space and the resources to catalogue and administer it. And, as we start to see the ecological impacts of data storage, and the ways in which the Earth itself is an archive of Anthropocenic values, it becomes increasingly evident that digital archiving is not the panacea that it was one hoped it would be.

On the other hand, the archive is punctured with glaring absences and echoing silences. Even though women, people of colour, as well as numerous interns and students may have contributed to the making of the works that are collected and documented, for the most part their names – let alone their experiences – are not visible. And when they are, largely irrelevant details such as whether or not a female graphic designer was married or had children are logged, at the expense of more insightful information about her contribution to the field.

While there are aspects of the graphic design archive that might need deletion, repatriation, and redress; there is also much work to be done with what exists, in situ. As the historian Achille Mbembe reminds us, “the Western

archive is singularly complex. It contains within itself the resources of its own refutation” (Mbembe, 2022). And even though designers and design historians are complicit in how the dominant narratives and assumptions of the graphic design archive have settled around it; if we have the inclination, it is also designers and design historians who have the skills and the opportunity to unsettle them.

The sociologists Walter Dignolo and Rolando Vázquez urge us to engage in a “praxis of reconstitution, of re-existence and the re-encounter with the communal. Learning to unlearn,” he says, “is a step towards disobedient delinking and the beginning of a walk towards re-making and re-learning ourselves in communal and decolonial paths of re-existence” (Dignolo, Vázquez, 2022).

In a quest for new tactics and tools for unfixing not just the contents, but also the categories, of the archive, theoretical perspectives and dispositions derived from decolonial aesthetics are welcome travel companions, but also those from intersectional feminism, data feminism and hauntology. And it is a journey, I believe since, just as the archive is never complete and always in the process of becoming; so its decolonizing and depatriarchalizing, its unbecoming and un-displacing, is a temporal project as much as a spatial one.

I hope that by illuminating some of its colonial and patriarchal tendencies – by focusing in on the “resources of its own refutation” and identifying opportunities for “disobedient delinking” – the graphic design archive might be reconstituted as a site of critical interventions and debate, as the field, grounds and the means for a communal walk towards “relearning” the archive’s potential and “remaking” its reality.

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NOTE

- ¹ *What Are Archives?*, International Council on Archives. <https://www.ica.org/en/what-archive>.

Biografie autori

Antonio Aiello

Laurea magistrale (2015) in Interior Design presso il Politecnico di Milano, dal 2020 è dottorando presso il Politecnico di Milano (Dip. Design) con una tesi di ricerca sul professionismo colto milanese nel secondo dopoguerra. Ha svolto attività di ricerca sugli allestimenti, e la relazione tra arti e design. Dal 2017 presso il Politecnico di Milano è cultore della materia nell'ambito della progettazione di interni e allestimenti, storia del design e storia dell'arte contemporanea. Presso istituti privati ha svolto attività di docenza e tutorato riguardo la storia del design e delle arti.

Giampiero Bosoni

Professore ordinario di Storia del design e Architettura degli interni al Politecnico di Milano.

Ha collaborato con Figini e Pollini, Vittorio Gregotti ed Enzo Mari, con i quali ha sviluppato l'interesse per la teoria e la storia del progetto d'architettura e di design. Ha scritto e curato circa venti libri e pubblicato oltre trecento articoli. Su incarico del MoMA di New York ha realizzato il volume *Italian Design* (2009) dedicato alla sezione italiana della loro collezione. Presidente di AIS/Design (2018-2021), dal 2022 è direttore di AIS/Design: Storia e ricerche (con E. Dellapiana e J. Schnapp).

Gianluca Camillini

Progettista, ricercatore e docente nel campo della comunicazione visiva. Combina ricerca e insegnamento con la pratica comprendendo la critica e la storia del design. Dopo laurea triennale e specialistica all'ISIA di Urbino, consegue il dottorato di ricerca in tipografia e comunicazione presso l'Università di Reading. Dal 2013 è professore aggregato in progettazione grafica alla Facoltà di Design e Arti della Libera Università di Bolzano. Dal 2017 è direttore di *Progetto Grafico*.

Beatriz Colomina

Beatriz Colomina è storica dell'architettura, teorica e curatrice. È direttrice fondatrice del Program in Media and Modernity presso la Princeton University, Howard Crosby Butler Professor of the History of Architecture e Director of Graduate Studies presso la School of Architecture.

Tra le sue pubblicazioni, *X-Ray Architecture* (Lars Müller 2018); *Are We Human? Notes on an Archeology of Design* (Lars Müller, 2016), *The Century of the Bed* (Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2015), *Das Andere/The Other: A Journal for the Introduction of Western Culture into Austria* (MAK Center for Art and Architecture, 2016), *Manifesto Architecture: The Ghost of Mies* (Sternberg, 2014), *Clip/Stamp/Fold: The Radical Architecture of Little Magazines 196X-197X* (Actar, 2010), *Domesticity at War* (MIT Press, 2007), *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (MIT Press, 1994), and *Sexuality and Space* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).

Giancarlo Consonni

È professore emerito di Urbanistica presso il Politecnico di Milano e poeta.

Le sue ricerche hanno intrecciato il progetto urbano con un ampio quadro di conoscenze e di esplorazioni: la storiografia, l'antropologia, l'economia, la geografia, la filosofia e con esperienze artistiche, in particolare la letteratura, il teatro e la pittura, come parti essenziali per la corretta lettura dei processi di formazione della metropoli contemporanea. Dirige l'archivio Bottoni. Tra le sue pubblicazioni, *Piero Bottoni: architecture and design in Milan* (con M. Cassani Simonetti e V. Finzi, Silvana 2018); *Urbanità e bellezza* (Solfanelli 2016), *Terragni inedito* (con G. Tonon, Ronca 2005); *Piero Bottoni opera completa* (con G. Tonon, L. Meneghetti, Fabbri 1990).

Elena Dellapiana

Professoressa ordinaria, insegna Storia dell'architettura e del design al Politecnico di Torino. Si occupa di storia dell'architettura, della città e del design del XIX e XX secolo. Tra le pubblicazioni, la collaborazione al volume *Made in Italy: Rethinking a century of italian design*, a cura di K. Fallan e G. Lees-Maffei (Bloomsbury, 2013), le monografie *Il design della ceramica in Italia 1850-2000* (Electa, 2010), *Il design degli architetti italiani 1920-2000* (con F. Bulegato, Electa, 2014), *Una storia dell'architettura contemporanea* (con G. Montanari, Utet, 2015-2021), *Il design e l'invenzione del Made in Italy* (Einaudi, 2022).

Dario Mangano

È professore ordinario di Semiotica presso l'Università di Palermo e l'Università di Scienze Gastronomiche di Pollenzo, dove tiene anche un Laboratorio di pubblicità alimentare. Si occupa dei rapporti tra progetto e significato nei vari aspetti della cultura del design. Ha pubblicato diversi libri e articoli fra cui *Ikea e altre semiosfere. Laboratorio di sociosemiotica*. (Mimesis 2019). *Che cos'è la semiotica della fotografia*. (Carocci 2018); *Che cos'è il food design*. (Carocci 2014); *Archeologia del contemporaneo. Sociosemiotica degli oggetti quotidiani* (Nuova cultura 2010), *Semiotica e design* (Carocci, 2008); nel 2020 ha curato il volume *Quando è design* (Ocula).

Jonathan Pierini

È un disegnatore di caratteri e progettista grafico. Ha ottenuto un diploma di laurea triennale presso ISIA e un diploma specialistico in Type & Media presso KABK in Olanda. A Londra ha lavorato presso Dalton Maag Ltd. Dal 2011 al 2017 è stato ricercatore a contratto e professore aggregato presso la Facoltà di Design e Arti della Libera Università di Bozen Bolzano. Da settembre 2017 è direttore di ISIA Urbino dove insegna Storia del Libro e della Stampa, tipografia e progettazione grafica. Dal 2017 è direttore di *Progetto Grafico*.

Jeffrey Schnapp

Jeffrey Schnapp è il fondatore/direttore del metaLAB (ad) Harvard e co-direttore di facoltà del Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society dell'Università di Harvard. È titolare della cattedra Carl A. Pescosolido in Lingue e letterature romanze e Letterature comparate presso la Facoltà di Arti e Scienze di Harvard, ma è anche docente presso il Dipartimento di Architettura della Graduate School of Design di Harvard. Attualmente è presidente del Dipartimento di Letteratura comparata.

Le sue numerosissime pubblicazioni spaziano dalla storia al progetto con particolare attenzione per la comunicazione e la conoscenza intorno alla categoria del Knowledge Design.

Marco Scotti

Marco Scotti (Parma, 1980) storico dell'arte, assegnista presso l'Università Iuav di Venezia, è dottore di ricerca in Storia dell'arte presso l'Università di Parma, ateneo con cui ha collaborato anche come studioso, curatore e borsista al Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione (CSAC). Nella sua attività curatoriale, ha realizzato mostre per MAXXI, Fondazione Cirulli, CSAC Università di Parma, MSU Zagreb; ha ideato, con Elisabetta Modena, il museo digitale MoRE www.moremuseum.org dedicato alla valorizzazione e conservazione di progetti di arte contemporanea mai realizzati.

Manuela Soldi

Assegnista di ricerca presso l'Università Iuav di Venezia con un progetto relativo all'archivio aziendale Bottega Veneta. Docente di Heritage e progetto della moda presso la stessa università e di Catalogazione e gestione degli archivi presso l'Accademia SantaGiulia di Brescia. I suoi interessi di ricerca comprendono la storia della moda, dell'artigianato e del Made in Italy. Collabora con varie realtà culturali per la valorizzazione di archivi e collezioni. Ha pubblicato *Rosa Genoni. Moda e politica: una prospettiva femminista fra '800 e '900* (Marsilio 2019).

Alice Twemlow

È research professor presso la Royal Academy of Art dell'Aia (KABK), dove dirige il gruppo di lettura "Design and the Deep Future", e professore incaricato presso la cattedra Wim Crouwel di Storia, teoria e sociologia del design grafico e della cultura visiva dell'Università di Amsterdam (UvA). La sua ricerca affronta le complesse interrelazioni del design con il tempo e l'ambiente e si manifesta in scritti, mostre, conferenze e formazione.

Tra le sue pubblicazioni, *StyleCity New York* (Thames & Hudson, 2003); *What is Graphic Design For?* (*Essential Design Handbooks*) (RotoVision, 2006); *Sifting the Trash: A History of Design Criticism* (MIT Press, 2017).

Pierparide Vidari

Architetto, docente di progettazione presso il Politecnico di Milano e in diverse istituzioni internazionali. Nel 1970 diventa consulente nel dipartimento di Olivetti Corporate Identity coordinato da Hans von Klier e avvia e organizza l'*Archivio e Centro Documentazione dell'industrial design Olivetti* di cui diventa il responsabile. Realizza diversi incarichi progettuali e curatoriali Olivetti, con particolare attenzione al mezzo audiovisivo.

Fra le sue numerose pubblicazioni, si ricordano, *On my Vespa, Italy on the move* (Ed. Triennale di Milano, Ed. Charta, 2006); *Lezioni su Olivetti - Storia, editoria, design. Con un'intervista a Renzo Zorzi* (con M. Broggi e Pier Unicopli, 2018).

