

# (re)Productions

## A Marxist Perspective on Design and Everyday Life

Associate Professor Nigel Power

*King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi*  
Graduate Office, School of Architecture and Design  
231/2 South Sathorn Rd, Bangkok 10120, THAILAND  
email: ipetower@kmutt.ac.th

### **Abstract:**

Of late, *everyday life* has emerged as a significant issue for a diverse range of fields and practices. The quotidian – usually characterized as the ordinary, the unremarked and the ubiquitous – has become a gravitational centre around which various disciplines – each with particular claims upon and ways of investigating the everyday – have found themselves drawn together. For design, the everyday has loomed ever larger, becoming increasingly woven into the fabric of a broader but related series of transformations that emphasize research, human-centredness and the cultural contexts of consumption and use. The myriad interactions between design, anthropology, psychology and qualitative social science, are all – in part at least – testament to the subject's attempts to address and make sense of everyday life. Within mainstream design and design research discourse, these developments are usually presented unproblematically; as indicators of a growing disciplinary confidence and maturity. In this paper, however, I argue that the relationship between design and everyday life is only partially articulated, and that this *partiality* masks important aspects of the socio-political function of design in the contemporary world. In particular I argue that, as it is currently used and understood, the concept of everyday life obscures a particular political agenda; the reproduction of capitalist social relations through an ever increasing commodification of more and more areas of our social and personal lives. Seen in this light, recurrent themes within contemporary design – for example, human-centredness, innovation, emotional design, socio-cultural research – themes that are, like the everyday itself, treated as self-evident and obvious, open themselves to critique, revealing as they do so contradictions and conflicts between form and content, intent and outcome, rhetoric and reality. The main aim of this paper is to explore these contradictions and in doing so, suggest ways of clarifying the complex and veiled relationships that connect design and everyday life with the broader social reality of which they are part. To achieve this I make use of ideas, approaches and concepts drawn from Marxism, in particular, Marx's own work and dialectical method, and that of the neo-Marxist philosopher of everyday life, Henri Lefebvre. The resulting critique sets out to provoke discussion and debate about an aspect of design discourse that is currently conspicuous by its absence; *politics*.

**Key words:** *Everyday life, Design, Marxism*