

## Book review

Rojek-Adamek, Paulina, *Designerzy. Rola zawodowa projektanta w oglądzie socjologicznym* [*Designers. Professional role of the designer in the sociological perspective*], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar: 2019: ISBN 978-83-7383-966-3

Interest in the design process observed in sociological analyses is related to the post-Fordist era and development of knowledge-based economy as well as the disappearance of certain professions from the job market and appearance of new ones. Therefore, publication of the book *Designers. Professional role of the designer in the sociological perspective* by Paulina Rojek-Adamek comes as no surprise. The monograph offers a relational approach to the analysis of the designer's profession and makes an attempt to characterise it by presenting descriptions of the job from three different perspectives: designers themselves, recipients of their work and experts from design-related institutions. Originality of the book and presented findings results from relational approach adopted in the description of the designer's profession the fact that profession is relatively new, particularly in Poland. Currently the increasing role of the design in the contemporary culture and economy generates a larger number of analyses related to the issue. However, as Magdalena Piłat-Borcuch (*Socjologia designu*, 2014) emphasises majority of them usually adopt a historical perspective. The increasing interest of social sciences in the designers' work and its historical perspective is also reflected in the book by Julia and Lidia Pańkow (*Kreatorki. Kobiety, które zmieniły polski styl życia. Historia 10 niezwykłych Polek*, 2018 – *Women creators. Women who have changed the Polish lifestyle. History of 10 unusual Polish women*) who aim to commemorate women designers who contributed to creation of the Polish design in the times of the Polish People's Republic (PRL)

in the areas of photography, fashion and stage design. In comparison to previous publications, the monograph by Paulina Rojek-Adamek stands out because it focuses only on the description of current designers' functioning and various aspects of their jobs. On the other hand, it also reveals certain similarities to previous publications because it shares their ambition to show their versatility as well as many faces and various specialisations of the same profession.

The monograph consists of nine chapters, introduction, conclusions, references, a list of tables and attached photographs, a name index and an annex presenting research tools. Well done graphics as well as very readable language encourage the reader to immerse oneself in reading the book.

The first chapter focuses on processes of work transformation and its contemporary dematerialised nature. It provides a context for showing the designer profession as a job that contributes to the creative industry. Specificity of the job is shown with a particular stress put on the historical perspective. It also presents the issues of designer's skills (professional and social) desired in the job ones concerning the relationality. The author indicates the issue of designers' noncontinuous employment as they are seldom full-time employees and they usually work in projects system. However, this thread of the analysis is not further investigated by the author. Instead, she concentrates on the relationality and significance of social networks in the designer's professional life and emphasises that on the one hand, this job is an individual act of creation and the team work, on the other.

The second chapter shows the design both as a product and as a process, its complexity and a multitude of other areas related to it, including: industrial design, graphic design, fashion design or stage design. Taking all that into consideration, the author analyses relationships of the design with industry, art and, market. What seems particularly interesting are analyses juxtaposing artists and designers, which reveal social responsibility of the latter in stimulating or even controlling people's behaviour due to the potential commonness in the use of their products and their reception.

Third chapter expands the issues of the designer's social responsibility and participational design. It describes designers' duties from three perspectives: society broadly understood, other designers and their. The author emphasizes contradictory interests occurring in the relationships between these three areas, which in turn may lead to potential ethic dilemmas such as confidentiality related to orders, ecological issues or methods of ethical competition. Thus, socially responsible design is shown as one which can support various social groups, marginalised for different reasons e.g. disability or age. In that sense socially responsible design can be treated as

a certain type of response to aggressive marketing, and consequently encourage people to shift their attitudes predominantly oriented on having rather than being. The author also describes in detail participational design which is closely connected to relationality of the designer's roles and ask clear-cut questions about who actually participates in the design process, who should be invited and whose interests should be considered in the process. The chapter exemplifies roles of design in increasing aesthetic values of the social life and, more generally, increasing its overall quality.

Consequently, design can be approached either commercially and serve the purpose of maximizing profits of business clients or, on the other hand, may be used for equalising social inequalities, preventing marginalisation or discrimination.

Chapter 4 focuses on critical role that can be played by objects in everyday life. This type of design influence is close to artistic approach which is reflected in works of Krzysztof Wodiczko (and among them the photos presented in his book called *Vehicle for the homeless*), and those belonging to the design fiction – the one that makes use of the design narrative as a way of questioning current solutions already functioning in the social surroundings. This shows a gap between affirmative and critical design, and indicates that the latter requires thinking outside the box and giving more thought to the way of social functioning on the part of the recipient. Such an approach is also illustrated by the author in her analysis of attitudes of Polish contemporary designers in their project called *People from the porcelain factory*. It presents statements and opinions of young critical designers on the role of factory employees in the production process. In my view, the chapter deserves particular interest because it effectively reveals multiple nature of the profession and describes the role of designers facing numerous challenges related to the very nature of their professional activity.

Theoretical part concludes with chapter five devoted to complex issues related to attitudes to social roles in the structural approach and looking to interactional orientation. Finally, the author decides to adopt the approach inspired by Florian Znaniecki. It is also compliant with the relational approach, which seems to be significant, in particular in the case of the designers, whose work cannot be categorised by means of simple classifications.

Generally, the author claims that it is not possible to provide a complete picture of designer's role without taking into account a network of relationships in which the role is immersed. Having presented research assumptions, the author moves on to formulating research questions. In the sixth chapter the author describes research methodology she applies. It provides a comprehensive description of the research topic and specific research objectives. Other methodological issues such as sample

selection and a scheme of qualitative and quantitative analyses are also described in the introduction.

Research findings are presented in the last three chapters. The chapters provide significant insights into the way in which designers functioned professionally in the times of Third Polish Republic (since 1989). The first empirical chapter focuses on perception of designers' professional role from the designers' perspective, people directly involved in this role. This is based on qualitative analysis (partly categorised interview with 51 professional designers) and quantitative analysis (questionnaire on 102 professional designers). Both types of research and respective research tools were used to analyse character of their work, relationships with other participants of the design process as well as in the analyses of cooperation and competition.

Interviews extend the scope of knowledge about motivation behind the choice of the profession, and allow to specify tasks and competences required in the profession, define its responsibilities and social expectations, as well as the ways of understanding its attractiveness and measuring its success. It seems, however, that publishing limitations did not allow the author to expand on the interviews conduct and encountered problems in the course the research (a few interviewees refused to answer questions related to their professional situation connected with the form of their employment e.g. whether it is a stable employment and types of employment agreement). As far as the interviews are concerned, the analysis seems to be lacking as to the reasons why interviewees refuse to discuss some formal or legal aspects concerning their employment. These aspects should also be considered in an analysis of professional success because financial situation and sense of financial stability contribute to success. What is more, the respondents were not willing to share information relating their incomes. Thus, it would be worthwhile to investigate if and to what extent precarious work relates to the designers' profession but this aspect has not been investigated.

The subsequent chapter focuses on analysis of designers' professional role from the perspective of institutional experts on the basis of in-depth interviews which focused on establishing the definition of the professional role and accompanying social and economic contexts. The research revealed a paradox of the designer's professional role as, on the one hand, it is profit-oriented and on the other hand, dedicated to the broadly defined society. The designer's role can be seen as close to that of artist-visionary, serving the needs of business clients contracting their work or sometimes combining these two contradictory approaches. Another important advantage of the analyses is that it indicates problems resulting from insufficient knowledge of the design process on the part of business

people and designers' lack of business competences. A specific focus is put on the situation of designers who are constantly *between* their vision of the product and expectations of their business clients. Other factors contributing to the relational combination in designers' work are financial issues related to profits and protecting their author rights. Besides, this is work 'from a project to a project' which causes lack of employment stability. The author also mentions the issue of precarious work but does not directly analyse it.

Empirical part, based on qualitative and quantitative research, finishes with the chapter defining designers' work and roles from the perspective of their recipients and other participants of the design process. Due to the fact that author is deeply rooted in the group under scrutiny it was possible to invite to the research experts participating in the Design Silesia I and Design Silesia II projects. It is of great importance since this provides a unique opportunity to show and compare views on the role of design and designers before and after the work is completed. As expected, the research proved that expectations and definitions of designer's work and roles differed at the beginning and on the work completion but the differences difficult. Additionally, in my opinion, reference to the projects Design Silesia I and Design Silesia II also allowed the author to show and illustrate significance of communication processes accompanying the designers' work.

In the nationwide quantitative research, the author used questionnaires and purposive sample selection which involved customers of big shopping malls. The author does not describe organisation of the research, but she presents in detail its findings referring to 474 questionnaires. The area of the research was related to the way of perceiving design-related jobs, opinions on what personal traits are desired in the profession as well as associations with the word *design*, prestige assessment and recognition of the profession. The research constitutes one of the first attempts of showing how the prestige of the designer's work is perceived in comparison with other professions.

To sum up, the monograph by Paulina Rojek-Adamek makes an attempt to provide a characteristic of the designers' job and its overall diversification in terms of its various specialisations and from the perspectives of various participants of in Poland's job market. On the whole, analysis is situated between sociology of work, or – to be more precise – occupational sociology and sociology of design, which can be of interest to both sociologists, designers or students of sociology or design.

The book, apart from presenting challenges faced by the critical design, also encourages to think creatively and search for unconventional solutions, which in the times of knowledge-based economy situated in a competitive environment is not to

be underestimated. Therefore, it can be recommended to all those who take interest in the modern twenty first century economy who are interested in the moder economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## References

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