A COMPARISON OF GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED INTEGRATION OF DESIGN AND SOCIETY IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE NETHERLANDS

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, as the term Design Thinking has infiltrated the boardrooms of American companies, business schools and technology media, the design cognoscenti have frequently referenced a 2015 study by the Boston-based Design Management Institute. According to the study, an index tracking the stock performance of 16 design-centric companies like Apple, IBM, Nike and Steelcase – the Design Value Index – over a 10-year period shows an impressive 211% greater investment return compared to the rest of the S&P 500 (Destoop, 2019). Some designers go so far as to ask: if design delivers success, quantified in the form of growth and revenue figures, for these businesses – can't every business realize similar success by following human-centered design methodologies? Or, for that matter, can't even more significant problems facing the world today – climate crises, pandemics, income inequality – be solved by design?

"What are the most pressing challenges faced by American communities? How can design and innovative approaches address those complex and systemic issues?" asks Cynthia E. Smith, Curator of Socially Responsible Design at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum in the forward to her book *By the People: Designing a Better America* (2016, p, 13). There are certainly scenarios where better design can make a positive social impact, delivering benefits for larger swaths of the population than executives and investors. This year, as the impacts of COVID-19 ravaged the American economy and a record number of Americans filed for unemployment, attention was brought to the strain placed on state-maintained unemployment benefit application portals (Adamczyk, 2020). A detailed study by The Century Foundation, the National Employment Law Project and Philadelphia Legal Assistance explains the risks posed by

these poorly designed systems, and "draws lessons from state modernization experiences and recommends user-friendly design and implementation methods for future projects" (2020).

But can design truly be leveraged as a tool to solve big problems if there is little connectivity between the design profession and the government? That is the central question this thesis seeks to explore, through the lens of two countries: the United States and the Netherlands. On the one hand, the comparison is imperfect: both countries are very different in terms of population and physical size, government structure, economic output and global influence. On the other hand, they both represent extremes: the United States being a place where the design profession is largely supported by corporate America, while in the Netherlands designers have access to both a robust environment for corporate work and taxpayer subsidized projects for cultural institutions and government agencies. Dutch designers have historically had the ability to apply for government subsidies to help them fund the development of their practice. In America, limited opportunities exist for designers to earn income outside of traditional client work or academic appointments. This is one reason that, despite being able to make significant contributions to the profession in the world's largest economy, some American designers have expressed jealousy of their Dutch counterparts. "I think we American designers are fascinated by Holland because real design actually seems to get built here," American designer Michael Rock said in a 2003 lecture in Amsterdam. "You don't know how novel this is for us (especially when the work is commissioned by the government)."

The United States and the Netherlands also share a love for industry. The Dutch East India company was the world's first multinational company, and the Dutch golden

age birthed many of the capitalistic structures that are now essential to the United States, such as the concept of the stock market. Today, Amsterdam is home to European operations for American companies like Nike and Uber, and the country plays an integral role in Europe's banking, manufacturing and technology sectors. Many Americans likely fill up their cars at Shell gas stations without realizing the full name of the fifth largest company in the world: Royal Dutch Shell. The historical connections between design and commerce yields interesting case studies throughout the history of both countries. But in the formative post World War II years that birthed many of the structures and systems that have come to define contemporary life both in countries, the government has played a vastly different role. As Dutch typographer, designer and entrepreneur Peter Bilak writes: "more than any other form of art, graphic design directly reflects the prevailing historical, economic, political and social contexts" (2014). Thus, this thesis begins with an investigation of the recent economic, political and social histories of both countries, primarily as they impact the design profession and its connection with society. From there, specific designers and studios from the canon of communication design in both countries are reviewed. It would be naive to assume that the United States will suddenly become more like the Netherlands, with an overwhelmingly progressive government and robust social welfare state dedicated to funding design for collective benefit. However, American designers could potentially think about small ways in which they could advocate for government support for key initiatives, and the benefits that could be realized in a world where not all work was dependent on corporations. The objective of this thesis is to encourage a comparison of the pros and cons on both types of design economies – primarily supported by corporate work versus a hybrid – and reflection on

which approach delivers the most benefit beyond the insular world of the design industry to a broader audience.

II. GOVERNMENT & ECONOMICS

A. Defining the Intersectionality of Business and Design

"Graphic design is popularly considered a commercial activity," designer, writer and educator Kenneth Fitzgerald writes in *Volume: Writings on Graphic Design, Music, Art & Culture*. He goes on to argue that this "popular" conflation of graphic design and business is "problematic," citing the political impetus of early twentieth-century European avant-garde art at the "root of contemporary Western graphic design" as well as a period in the mid-1990s when "graphic design interrogated consumer culture" (2012, p. 23). While there are certainly examples of designers using visual communication – sometimes, even within the context of commercial work – to provoke, criticize and agitate, the majority of design work today, particularly work pursued by agencies, is closely tied to commercial activity. At the time of writing, Eye Magazine – which brands itself as the "international review of graphic design" – recently celebrated its 100th issue with interviews by "11 prominent designers…originally intended to sketch out an array of graphic design and visual culture at the moment…" (Waters, 2020, p. 29). Spanning multiple continents and mediums, the featured designers all practice in a commercial context: branding restaurants (Jessica Walsh of Sagmeister & Walsh), editing covers for popular magazines (Francoise Mouly of the *New Yorker)*, rebranding educational institutions (Bobby C. Martin Jr. of Champions Design).

This does not negate the power that designers might have to influence or interrogate through their work. In the same issue of *Eye,* British designer Sophie Thomas explains how her agency's identity work for Dr. Martens expanded into sustainable manufacturing consulting (Waters, 2020, p. 90). But it is imperative to understand that

design and industry are closely intertwined, likely a product of the mediums through which design is primarily applied. As Fitzgerald explains: “Graphic design is a form of popular entertainment. Design is out in the world offering accessible visual gratification. Also, the majority of its applications are for things that are frivolous, ephemeral and disposable” (2012, p. 13). Even within the context of editorial work, where a designer might be afforded the opportunity to create a politically charged illustration to accompany an article, the reality is that the success of editorial publications depends on the sale of advertisements. It is important to understand this contemporary reality of design as a business, because businesses and/or industries exist within the context of greater economies, on local, regional, national and global scales – and economies are closely related to the governments that regulate them.

B. The Postwar Emergence of the Contemporary Profession

The origins of the contemporary graphic design industry in both the United States and Europe and can be traced back to postwar economic expansion. This is not to say that graphic design was not employed as a mechanism for selling goods or products before World War II, or that there are not graphic designers practicing today in a fine art as opposed to commercial context. But generally speaking, the late 1950s through the 1970s were transformative years for design and birthed many of the structures, institutions and firms that continue to dominate the industry today. “Traditional connections between the fields lingered as dramatic changes in the 1940s from which modern graphic design emerged,” writes R. Roger Remington. “The advertising layout man and the illustrator were being replaced by the graphic designer, whose work was based on Modernist principles” (2013, pp. 97-98). British designer and writer Richard Hollis expresses

similar sentiments about World War II as a pivotal moment for design, offering in a 1991 interview:

> One of the things I've found is that most of the interesting designers in Europe until the Second World War, and a bit beyond, were primarily artists: nearly all painters or sculptors. Kurt Schwitters, Willi Baumeister, Fredrich Vordemberge-Gildewart – these are among the most obvious (2012, p. 48).

In other words, graphic design and designers certainly existed pre-war and influenced the profession profoundly, the 1919-1933 Bauhaus being one of the most prominent examples. The infamous adage "form follows function" was regularly espoused by Bauhaus leaders, but in the realm of communication design, this related more to the visual construction of work than its actual purpose. Laszlo Moholoy-Nagy described typography as "a tool of communication" and argued that the emphasis "must be on absolutely clarity." Such virtues are certainly visible in reviewing the work of the Bauhaus masters, but much of that work was somewhat limited in its reach (Meggs, 2012, p. 328). As Meggs explains:

> Much of the creative innovation in graphic design during the first decades of twentieth century occurred as part of modern-art movements and at the Bauhaus, but these explorations were often seen and understood only by a limited audience outside the mainstream of society (2012, p. 335).

The mid-20th century is associated with an ascendance of the importance of utility in design – not that design became completely void of visual ornament, but rather, design was employed as a tool to achieve a specific objective. Designs were deemed effective

based on the extent to which they fulfilled a communication objective. According to Hollis:

> And when the Americans, like Bob Gill, came to Britain in the early 1960s, they had worked in American advertising…. The Americans came with the idea that you had to have a 'concept'. When they taught in art schools here they were ramming home the idea of a concept – 'you've got to have a concept'…. Students were reduced to tears because they had no 'concept', although they might have very good typography, with a decent headline and properly chosen type (2012, p. 53).

This focus on concept coincided with the rise of advertising to support the expansion of an economy for consumer goods: the primary patrons of designers' work were corporations looking to sell products to a rapidly expanding middle class via advertising. "It seems to me that graphic design is for the middle classes," argues Hollis. It's a distinctly bourgeois activity, which has occasionally, probably through pop music, had connection with some sort of mass culture" (2012, pp. 54-55). And as design and advertising became further intertwined, advertising became a more dominant force in American culture. In *The Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America,* American studies scholar Lizbeth Cohen quotes historian David Potter's prescient 1954 writing: "In the early twentieth century that abundance took the form of 'consumer's culture,' and advertising 'joined the charmed circle of institutions which fix the values and standards of society'" (2007, p. 10).

Postwar economic expansion was not isolated to the United States: the 1950s saw reconstruction and modernization efforts throughout western Europe, partially aided by

the Marshall Plan, and the formation of NATO. In the Netherlands, "the economy healed and Dutch companies thrived," journalist Ben Coates writes in *Why The Dutch are Different. "*…The country's international outlook, trading links and thrifty business sense proved a perfect recipe for profitability." He goes on to cite the postwar growth of globally recognized companies Heineken, Royal Dutch Shell and Unilever as examples of the boom (2017, p.153). The Netherlands has a love for industry not entirely dissimilar from the United States: the world's first stock market was founded in Amsterdam in 1602 and the part of Manhattan that now houses the New York Stock Exchange was first discovered by the Dutch East India Company, arguably the world's first conglomerate (Petram, 2017). However, while advertising and design also intersected in the Netherlands, they were not as intertwined as in the States. While the reasons for this will be explored throughout this thesis, it is first important to understand broader themes related to government and economic policy and how those themes proliferated all facets of life.

C. The Dutch Welfare State

While not quite Nordic in its location, the Netherlands closely follows the economic model of the Nordic welfare state (and therefore is indeed labeled Nordic by some economists), which typically espouses free markets and innovation while levying high taxes to provide universal access to education, healthcare and other social services (Blomgren, 2019). It is well-accepted that "middle-class residents of the Netherlands…can easily pay more than half their income in taxes;" the official tax rate in 2021 for individuals making upwards of €68,000 euros (equivalent to $80,000 US dollars) is 49.5% (Ewing, 2018). A middle-class resident of the United States, making the

same amount of money, faces only a 22% tax obligation. Many western European nations levy higher income taxes than the United States, but the Netherlands' figure is high even when comparing it to the two largest economies in Europe: the United Kingdom, with a rate of 40% for the same income bracket, and Germany, with a 42% rate (PWC). According to Russel Shorto, author of *Amsterdam: A History of the World's Most Liberal City*, the contemporary Dutch welfare state has its origins in the postwar era. "People suddenly got subsidies: unemployment payments, sick leave" he writes. "Amsterdam came out of the 1950s and 1960s with a renewed commitment to its liberal heritage" (2014, pp. 299-300).

Ben Coates offers an interesting perspective: his book is largely based on his own personal experience assimilating to the Dutch way of life after marrying a woman from Rotterdam he met on a boat in Belize. "As a recent immigrant, to me one of the most striking consequences of the Dutch liberal approach was the generosity of the welfare and unemployment systems," he writes. "One Dutch friend was paid roughly three-quarters of her former salary when she found herself 'unemployed' for a month while on holiday in Indonesia, after quitting one job and waiting for the new one to start" (2017, p. 252). He goes on to discuss the average Dutch work week (less than 27 hours) as well as the customary practices of employer-covered train fares and extensive government-subsidized housing (even for the wealthy).

The trip to Indonesia sponsored by government unemployment benefits is similar to schemes Shorto describes in his book as "the socialism-gone-wild comedy set in Amsterdam and other Dutch cities as the lowercase-l liberalism of the late twentieth century reached its absurdist low point." He goes on to describe another Dutch

government program, which lasted through the mid-1980s, dedicated to subsidizing the arts:

> Through the Beeldende Kunstenaars Regeling (BKR), or Fine Arts Subsidy, the government paid virtually anyone who applied and said he or she was an artist – three thousand people at the program's height – a living wage, which totaled $70 million a year in public funds. In exchange, the artist had to produce three works per year for the government.

Apparently, some of the artists subsidized by the BKR were actually "scammers" who "sent in pieces of household trash and called them sculpture" (2014, p. 311).

One could point to such "scammers" as an example of the problems with generous welfare states such as the Netherlands. The point of this thesis is not to opine on such issues of economic policy, but rather to contextualize the rise of the contemporary design profession in the context of such a government operating model. Specific government subsidies for designers and their impacts will be explored later, but at this point in time, it is simply important to note that the story of the Netherlands in the aftermath of World War II is a story of simultaneous economic expansion and the sustainment of political leftism. The construction of the early social welfare state in the aftermath of the war gave way to the Provo movement of the 1960s which "paved the way for Amsterdam's reputation as a Mecca of counter-culture and youthful revolt" (Bailey, 2015). While there have, as with any other nations, been periods of divergence from political norms, the Dutch march to the left has largely continued through recent history. "The year 2000 was a watershed for the kind of liberalization for which Amsterdam in its recent guise has become famous," Shorto writes. "The governing

coalition of parties…working together, and operating from different philosophical perspectives…passed a slate of laws that [legalized] prostitution, gay marriage and euthanasia." The story of economic policy and government social intervention in postwar United States, however, is quite different.

D. American Capitalism

In their seminal work *Capital in the Twenty-First Century,* French economist Thomas Piketty and translator Arthur Goldhammer explain the scale and problematic nature of wealth and income inequality in both the United States and Europe since the 18th century. However, in comparing the United States to his own country, Pikkety writes:

> The most striking fact is that the United States has become noticeably more inegalitarian than France (and Europe as a whole) from the turn of the twentieth century until now, even though the United States was more egalitarian at the beginning of this period. …U.S. inequality in 2010 is quantitatively as extreme as in old Europe in the first decade of twentieth century… (2017, p. 367).

The economic, social and political influence of the United States on the world stage is undeniable, but contemporary liberal political discourse here has often pointed to our struggles in healthcare, education and general well-being of the population compared to Europe. (Toyama, 2013). Zeroing in on healthcare as one issue provides powerful evidence: compared to the 37 member countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the U.S. "spends more on health care as a share of the economy – nearly twice as much as the average OECD country – yet has the lowest life expectancy and highest suicide rates among the 11 [similarly high-income OECD

member] nations," according the Commonwealth Fund. The U.S also has "the highest chronic disease burden and an obesity rate that is two times higher than the OECD average" as well as "the highest number of hospitalizations from preventable causes and the highest rate of avoidable deaths" (Tikkanen & Abrams, 2020).

In a similar vein as Piketty's observation that the United States was more egalitarian than Europe in the early part of the twentieth century, Cohen pinpoints the rise of America as a nation guided by the pursuit of individual welfare to the postwar era. "Private opulence amid public squalor" was how economist John Kenneth Galbraith described "what he saw around him," he blamed "the voracious American pursuit of private consumption and the engines of corporate advertising that fed it for neglecting 'social consumption' – the roads, schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure needed for a human society." At the crux of Cohen's entire book is the premise that mass consumption "was a strategy that emerged after the Second World War for reconstructing the nation's economy and reaffirming its democratic values" (2007, pp. 10-11).

The macro story of American politics and economics in the twentieth century – reaching a more rapid acceleration point in the aftermath of World War II, as Cohen argues – is one that has placed more power in the hands of corporations and less in the hands of individuals. This arc has continued until the present day, but reached an apex in the 1970s and 1980s, according to sociologists J. Craig Jenkins and Craig M. Eckert. At that point in time, "the United States experienced a major transformation in the policy paradigm guiding economic policy," they argue in *Sociological Forum* (2000, p. 308). While there are numerous causes of this "right turn," the rise of "business policy organizations (BPOs)," controlled by cohorts of business leaders, and reduction in the

budgets and therefore power of regulatory agencies (like the Environmental Protection Agency and Occupational Safety and Health Administration), were primary contributors. Programs established under Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society domestic agenda, intended to equalize, were ultimately abolished or shifted to states' responsibilities (Jenkins & Eckert, 2000, p. 321).

In the United States, the term welfare is often used to describe direct cash assistance to poor families, and partisan political discourse often revolves around claims of wealth redistribution – i.e., levying higher taxes on corporations and/or wealthy individuals and giving that money to poorer individuals in the form of cash. However, social welfare is a relatively all-encompassing term that can refer to many types of programs, places and experiences designed to equalize social inequalities or generally improve the well-being of large swaths of a particular country's population. According to economists Alberto Alesina, Edward Glaesner and Bruce Sacerdote:

> European governments redistribute income amongst their citizens on a much larger scale than does the United States government. European social programs are more generous and reach a larger share of citizens. European tax systems are more progressive. Europe has more intrusive regulations that are often meant to protect the poor (2001, p. 4).

While Coates's example of the Dutch government subsidizing his unemployed acquaintance's holiday to Indonesia may be somewhat hyperbolic, the general evidence that America's political and economic policies are less advantageous to the poor than those in European countries is clear. Such policies in both the United States and the

Netherlands inform cultural values and attitudes that ultimately become reflected within design communities.

III. CULTURAL VALUES

A. The Institutions That Support Arts & Culture

"…I really believe [Europeans] have cared for a long time, for their entire lives they've been interested in Aesthetics; Americans don't get it ever," David Kelley, cofounder of IDEO, tells Gary Hustwit in his 2009 film *Objectified.* He goes on to explain how his own elementary education in the 1950s emphasized inventors like Eli Whitney and Alexander Graham Bell: "in fact, we believe everything was invited in the USA, he quips." His European colleagues, on the other hand "learned about painters and the names of architects and those types of things…in grade school" (2015, p. 250). A particular society's generalized belief in the inherent value of design is difficult to quantify. However, reasonable inferences can be made about a population's desire to consume well-designed products and thought-provoking art based on the writings of artists and designers, government activities related to the institutions that support those individuals, and data about how the population engages with such institutions. There are many opinions about where lines are drawn between art and design, but generally, as Kelly mentions, an appreciation on the part of consumers for aesthetically pleasing things has origins beyond the contemporary design industry. In describing Dutch type design and graphic design in a 2015 interview, designer Gerard Unger emphasized the "Dutch tradition" of a "thin line between design and fine arts" (Smirnova). Similarly, in reflecting on their own educational experience at the Rietveld Academie – which Unger also attended – the Amsterdam-based design trio Danny van den Dungen, Erwin Brinkers and Marieke Stolk who work under the name Experimental Jestset describe an

environment that was “dedicated to the synthesis of all arts (and perhaps even more important, the synthesis of art and the everyday)” (Fuller, 2017).

With the statements of these Dutch designers about art in mind, it is valuable to briefly look at the two primary government supported institutions that promote the integration art and design with broader society: museums and universities. “In contrast to the European tradition, the federal government in the United States does not directly own art museums other than those directly supported in Washington, DC” (Skinner et al., 2009). The largest art museum in the United States, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City, has a multibillion-dollar endowment chaired by Wall Street tycoon Hamilton E. James, and came under fire recently for past donations received by the Sackler family, responsible for the mass production and marketing of highly addictive painkiller OxyContin that is currently identified as a chief culprit in America’s opioid addiction crisis (Harris, 2019). The largest art museum in the Netherlands, the Rijksmuseum, receives approximately one third of its financing from the government (Siegal, 2019). The origins of both museums have roots in equally problematic imperialistic and capitalistic structures, and in recent years, European governments have actually become less generous towards museums and encouraged them to adapt a more American funding model (Fabrikant, 2016). But returning to the primary lens of this paper, we see two different postwar realities for the arts: a Dutch state dominated model and American philanthropy dominated model. In a 1973 essay, the prolific American postwar artist Donald Judd described American museums as “charities that are monuments to the rich,” with “almost all money and interest [coming] from private collectors through the dealers” (2017, p. 239-240).

Returning to Experimental Jetset's description of their formative higher education years, they describe the Rietveld Academie – which also has programs in Fine Arts, Architecture and more – as "basically a trade school – it's the sort of education that in the Netherlands is called 'beroepsonderwijs', training you to be a skilled manual worker, like a plumber or a carpenter" (Fuller, 2017). The fact that an institution described as a "trade school" can produce students who go on to exert such significant international influence in their profession – others include Joost Grootens and Wim Crouwel – presents quite a contrast to the United States. The Netherlands, like many other European nations, has a highly diversified education system that allows for students to receive quality education at a variety of different levels: i.e., students that show more promise early on in more applied fields as opposed to theoretical fields have plenty of options from their teenage years through college to specialize. In the United States, on the other hand, universities essentially compete to attract students, selling a promise of future income in traditionally lucrative fields like business and medicine. Rankings systems are a key element of the campaign to attract students, and according to a recent McKinsey report, the competition among educational institutions for the same rankings spots can lead to a "homogenization" of educational offerings (Dua et al., 2020). And then, of course, there's the oft-discussed cost, which is much greater than in many European countries, even at public universities. In U.S. News & World Report's – a premiere educational institution rating body in the U.S. – 2020 index of Best Graphic Design Programs, only one of six institutions in the top four (three are ties) is public (2020). The top-ranked school, Rhode Island School of Design, costs $53,820 per year – just for tuition. The Rietveld Académie costs €1,560.

What Silvia Barisione, Chief Curator of The Wolfsonian Museum at Florida International University, describes as "…a powerful belief in the social role of artists, designers, and architects" (2016, p. 7) permeates Dutch society, and is upheld by a commitment to maintaining strong institutions that support this advancement of art, design and architecture. This notion of institution-building for collective benefit has its origins in the initial building of the country.

B. Designing Cities

It's impossible to discuss the history of Amsterdam and the Netherlands without discussing water. Any visitor to the city will crisscross dozens of canals going from Point A to Point B, and this unique geography has certainly impacted the Dutch design industry. These impacts are not necessarily manifested via designers practicing biomimicry – not all typefaces designed in the Netherlands are inspired by the shapes of canals – but rather in the previously-discussed pervasive societal attitude that not only respects but elevates the work of the designer. In his essay *Tulips and Windmills Forever: From the Holland Brand to the Dutch Design Brand*, Aaron Betsky traces contemporary Dutch design culture to its origins in the landscape, writing that "The Netherlands is largely a man-made country, of course…protected from the sea and rivers with dikes that are continually strengthened and heightened" (de Neef & Van Woerden-Tausk*,* 2005, p.22*).* These man-made dikes date back to the 13th century, when the Dutch built "primitive water-pumping mills" to make low-lying land farmable (Shorto, 2014, p. 122). The ubiquitous windmills in the Netherlands are certainly aesthetically pleasing – hence their memorialization in ubiquitous tchotchke form – but also serve an important function. In other words, they're an early manifestation of design: the marriage of form

and function to solve problems. Shorto explains that, in the early 17th century, to coincide with the ascendance of the Verenigde Ooost-Indische Compagnie (better known in English as the Dutch East India Company), the Dutch went to great lengths to remake their capital to match their global ambitions. In order to accommodate the import and export of goods from Southeast Asia by water during this time – known as the Dutch Golden Age – warehouses were built throughout the city and strategically linked via canals, which were dredged by hand and foot in a time before machinery. And centuries before Le Corbusier wrote *Towards an Architecture* and presented utopian visions for urban living, the Dutch canals "served the ordinary individual and his or her upwardly mobile aspirations" (Shorto, 2014, pp. 122-124). The city was thoughtfully designed to meet the needs of its residents and propel their personal economic growth as well as the maturation of the greater society, in a time when Amsterdam was a leading global center for finance and trade.

The bicycle is another ubiquitous symbol of Dutch life, and much of contemporary Amsterdam has been designed with the simple two-wheel form of transportation in mind. Nearly half of Amsterdam's working population commutes daily on over 300 miles of dedicated bicycle paths – one of the reasons that a cyclist is 20 times more likely to be injured in a bicycle accident in the United States than in the Netherlands (Bloomberg, 2018). Popularity of the bicycle in the Netherlands, which dates to the early 20th century, can partially be attributed to the early urban planning of Amsterdam: water vessels were emphasized over vehicles, and homes built around waterways left little room to later incorporate streets for vehicle traffic. Novelist Virginia Woolf wrote in 1935 of "cyclists who go in flocks like starlings." The flat landscape of the country is

naturally conducive to cycling, and the postwar move towards a more progressive and heavily taxed society led to additional duties on both fuel and imported vehicles. And when cities like Rotterdam, largely leveled by World War II bombings, were rebuilt, "care was taken to plan not only new roads and train lines but also miles of new cycle lanes, complete with clear signposting and dedicated bicycle-only bridges, tunnels and traffic lights" (Coates, p. 135). Cycling as a primary means of transportation is also an easier sell when most things can be reached via relatively short bike rides, a product of the density of many Dutch cities. According to the government statistics office (Central Agency for Statistics or Bureau voor de Statistiek), the typical Amsterdam resident lives in an 800 square foot space, while the average home size in the rest of the country is 1,500 square feet (2016). Contemporary homes in America, on the other hand, average around 2,505 square feet. According to Sonia Hirt, professor of landscape architecture and planning at the University of Georgia, U.S. homes are consistently larger than those in similarly industrialized countries. In contrast to the Dutch emphasis on cycling and pedestrian activity in postwar urban planning, the United States federal government incentivized suburbanization by constructing interstate highways and underwriting mortgages for white Americans (Sisson, 2020). A recent *New York Times* article about Prime Minister Marke Rutte, who has been in office since 2010 and is generally quite popular, described a relatively average Dutch urban lifestyle: "he likes to ride his bicycle to the office. If time is an issue, he opts for the aging Saab parked in front of his modest apartment in the Hague" (Erdbrink, 2020). The lifestyle of the President of the United States, in contrast, involves many vehicles and mansions. While security concerns might be different and the United States and the Netherlands are very different nations in terms

of size and international influence, the lifestyles of their respective leaders can be viewed as a metaphor for how American and Dutch approaches to living have unfolded from the middle of the 20th century to present day. The American philosophy places greater emphasis on private, independently controlled spaces (homes with lawns and cars in the driveway) while the Dutch philosophy places greater emphasis on smaller scale, dense housing with shared public spaces. The latter is more easily achieved in a system of government that is not entirely unlike a highly functioning design studio – dedicated to critical discussion of the needs of users (or constituents).

C. Polders vs. Individuals

Returning to the story of the Dutch largely designing and engineering the Netherlands by taming and managing one of Earth's most potent forces – water – we learn of the term polder, which essentially refers to any tract of low-lying land that has been reclaimed from a body of water, generally for agricultural purposes. A window seat on a flight in or out of Amsterdam's Schipol Airport provides a unique view of a Dutch countryside characterized by hundreds of these small polders separated by canals and dikes. As such, the term polder has also been coopted in a political context to refer to "a deliberative structure" that "brings together all stakeholders on a given issue in order to reach a conclusion at least minimally acceptable to all" (Traub, 2019). The poldermodel "reflects the origins of Medieval Dutch Society, which came together to build dikes and canals so the land could be livable" (Erdbrink, 2020). This attitude at the government level is simultaneously reinforced by and upholds a broader societal attitude: "The Dutch tend to give a lot of credit to the man with the best plan – not necessarily the person with the best political connections or the cheapest solution," Jan Middendorp offers in *Dutch*

Type as a potential explanation for the country's flourishing design culture (2018, p. 9). In explaining the impact of the poldermodel on their own work, Nikki Gonnissen and Thomas Widdershoven of renowned Dutch design studio Thonik write:

> The wish to be constructive and future-oriented is foundational not only to Muller-Brockmann's grid systems but also to Dutch society. Broadly shared interests have led to the design of regulations and landscape projects that protect the population rom rising tides and water scarcity. Without the organizing system of centuries-old public bodies such as the water boards, the Low Countries would have been practically uninhabitable. From the thirteenth century onwards, this fostered the emergence of a democratic form of governance, which seems, first of all, to have become part of our national DNA, and which ultimately proved to be a very early forerunner of today's Dutch parliamentary democracy. The structure that it provided offered security and therefore greater freedom for collective and individual development. And it is noteworthy that the structure was the outcome of a design (p. 68-69).

This idea of finding common ground is, in many ways, at the core of Dutch government: there are currently 15 political parties represented in Parliament, and it is never managed by one single party (House of Representatives of the Netherlands*)*. Similar to the United States, individual seats correspond to physical geographic units (provinces instead of states), but the breadth of parties and lack of a single majority means that the parties with the most seats must form coalitions after each election to have a ruling majority (Henley, 2017). After the 2017 elections the VVD party, D66 party, Christian CDA and Christian Union parties spent 209 days working to arrive at a Coalition agreement: a record amount

of time, but on average, the Dutch still take 90 days to form a government post-election (Netherlands: Coalition Deal, 2017).

The core of American politics and national identity, however, is generally not based on such ideas of compromise and collective action for mutual benefit. According to Deborah Schildkraut, a political scientist at Tufts University, constituents across party lines share a belief in individualism, which is "tied to the notion of minimal government intervention. So that people are free to pursue what they want, with rare exceptions where it may be necessary for the government to intervene so that they don't inflict harm on others" (Anathaswamy, 2020). While politicians on the right in America relish opportunities to describe those on the left as "socialist," even with a governing majority, Democrats would be unlikely to succeed in implementing taxation structures or social policies as progressive as those in the Netherlands. Bernie Sanders, the most progressive mainstream candidate in the 2020, has described himself as a Democratic Socialist. But his 2020 income tax proposal essentially maintained the status quo, except for higher taxes on ultra-high earning ($500,000 per year plus) individuals. Under his plan, only at the $4 million per year mark would individuals encounter tax rates comparable to the highest bracket in the Netherlands (Soderholm). Schildkraut affirms the idea that there is much to learn about the collective ideology of a nation's people through its politics, stating:

> Countries that have multiparty systems, where there might be a stronger Labor Party, or a Democratic Socialist Party, where you have a stronger history of a welfare state, places that have national health care systems, for example — those are all evidences of greater government intervention and less reliance on people

> going it alone and figuring it out for themselves. In those countries, there's an acceptance that government intervention is something of value so that there's some equity and equality, and that the government is going to play a bigger role to ensure some minimum quality of life (Anathaswamy, 2020).

In the United States, socialism is often presented as the antithesis of free-market capitalism. But it's clear that the Dutch – who, as previously mentioned, have a legacy of market and company creation – don't believe that making money is inherently evil. Rather, as Shorto suggests, their society has evolved – ever since early residents worked together to reclaim the land from water – as "a constant dance between society and the individual" and taken a lead in the cultivation of contemporary liberalism (2014, p. 126). In contemporary America, on the other hand, some have argued that Darwinian-style capitalism, as well as the exceptionalist mentality which asserts that America allows for more individual freedom than elsewhere – might be reaching a breaking point.

D. Society, Religion and Liberalization

America's "sense of itself as an exceptional nation empowered by providence to bring democracy, liberty, and Christian redemption to the world" has its roots in the theology of John Calvin, The *New Republic* contributing editor Damon Linker argues. Even a century ago, Max Weber argued that Calvin's "sternly ascetic version of Christian piety" laid the groundwork for the development of capitalism (2009). In 2008, then presidential candidate Barack Obama drew media attention and angered some working-class voters in an attempt to empathize with them by explaining that people "cling to guns or religion…as a way to explain their frustrations" (Pilkington). Opponents also loved to circulate rumors that Obama was in fact a Muslim, scaring many American

voters even throughout his presidency when he was seen attending church services. Religion is a big part of American politics: culture wars are front and center in every election cycle, when candidates continue to debate the legality and morality of issues like gay marriage and abortion. Religion professor Stephen Prothero wrote in his 2003 book *American Jesus* that "the United States now boasts more Christians than any other country in world history" and that Jesus "has stood…on the shifting hands of economic circumstances, political calculations, and cultural trends" (p. 6-8). While some have pointed to the increased secularization of America in recent decades, only 22% of Americans are non-religious while more than half of Dutch are (Pew Research Center; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek). And the decline of Christianity in the Netherlands goes back much earlier than it does in America. In their article *Why God Has Left the Netherlands: Explanations for the Decline of Institutional Christianity in the Netherlands Between 1966 and 2015,* Kregting et al. argue that the expanded educational opportunities via the postwar welfare state, as well as the modernization of the Dutch economy, have led to a consistent reduction in the influence of the Christian church since the 1960s (2018). Shorto describes the post-1960s shift in Dutch society: "in what had been one of Europe's most devout societies, people simply stopped going to church." He also argues that the welfare state replaced many of the previous functions of the church, with government subsidies replacing charity-like services (2014, p. 299)

The secularization of Dutch society colors another broad theme of the country for which it is quite well known today: liberalization. While the meaning of this exact term can shift depending on the context, Shorto defines it partially as "allowing people free exercise of their rights to pleasure themselves" (p. 301). In 2008, Thonik won a national

award for their commercial for the Socialist Party, in which a naked 80-year-old-woman explains that, due to government austerity measures, a rotating cast of home health aids have been helping her bathe, so she “might as well undress in front of the nation” (Betsky et al. 2019, p. 273). For a myriad of reasons, it’s impossible to imagine a similar commercial airing in the United States, but as it relates to the issue of nudity, such prime time “visibility” is not entirely surprising in a nation where prostitution is legal and “films that have R ratings in the United States for sexual content are open for all ages.” With the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision, the United States legalized same-sax marriage in all 50 states, 15 years after 2000 legislation in the Netherlands that, in addition to addressing same-sex marriage, concurrently legalized prostitution and euthanasia (Shorto, 2014, pp. 302-304). Perhaps the most well-known of all the liberal Dutch attitudes and policies relates to drug use: 1976 changes to the Opium Act outlined the differences between “List I” hard drugs like heroin and “List II” soft drugs like cannabis – with consumption of the latter considered far more acceptable and less risky to both the user and broader society. The commonly prevailing belief that marijuana is legal in the Netherlands is actually incorrect – it’s moreso that the government tolerates consumption that it believes is harmless (Coates, 2017, p. 258). “It’s a misconception that the Dutch state is pro-pot, or pro-prostitution,” Simon Kuper writes in the *Financial Times*. “Rather, the Dutch state is pragmatic. It prefers to keep risky activities out in the open where they can be regulated (and taxed), whereas other countries push them into underground zones of disorder” (2018). Coates also jokes that foreigners often inaccurately view the Netherlands as “a place where office workers smoked weed over their desks, visited prostitutes at lunchtime and euthanized their grandparents in the

evening" (2017, p. 242). In reality less Dutch people use cannabis than Americans, and drug deaths are less frequent (Shorto, 2014, p. 312). The Dutch approach is not completely absent of problems, but the pervasive laissez-faire attitude, dating back more than 40 years, is just another example of how the Netherlands has become more culturally and politically open than America in the aftermath of World War II.

IV. THE DESIGN IMPACT

A. Postwar Modernism

In the design world, the United States and the Netherlands were largely united in the postwar era by an expanding industry and a shared visual language of Modernism. "By the late 1940s and early 1950s, an increasing consciousness about graphic design and designers was evident because Modernism became more visible on the creative scene," Remington writes about America (2013, p. 137). In the Netherlands, "the postwar reconstruction and industrialization were favourable for freelance designers in agencies…" (Huygen & Lommen, 2019, p. 70). Wim Crouwel, who a 2019 obituary described as "defin[ing] the look of the modern Netherlands," worked almost exclusively in the Swiss-designed Fruitiger and Univers (Sudjic, 2019). With his partners Friso Kramer, Benno Wissing and Paul and Dik Schwarz, Crouwel founded Total Design in 1963. The studio's identities for corporate (Randstad) and cultural (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam) clients were formative in introducing the concept of "house styles" to the Netherlands (Huygen & Lommen, 2019, p. 84-86). In the interwar years in the United States, immigration of European designers contributed to the proliferation of Swiss principles through educational institutions like the Yale School of Design, Black Mountain College and Illinois Institute of Technology Institute of Design. Ivan Chermayeff and Thomas Geismar, who developed iconic logos and identity systems still in use today for brands like JP Morgan Chase, Mobil Oil and NBC both graduated from Yale's newly formed design program. In both the Netherlands and the United States, Modernist designers - Crouwel, Chermayeff, Greismar and many others – contributed to

elevating the status of design to a key professional service (Remington, 2013, p. 132-133).

B. The 1970s: Peak American Government Design

The postwar economic prosperity that significantly advanced the realm of communication design – in the form of identities for booming American corporations and advertising for a class of hungry consumers – came to a halt in the early 1970s. The abolishment of the gold standard, combined with a stock market crash and oil crisis, led to a tumultuous economic environment characterized by high inflation, rising unemployment and other challenges (Kramer 2020). Politically, these years present an interesting dichotomy: against the backdrop of increasing influence of conservative economic thought, particularly from the Chicago School of Economics and Milton Friedman, Nixon actually relied on some more Keynesian tactics to attempt to stimulate the economy via government intervention (Heinemann, 1972). One of these tactics was increased funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and, subsequently, federal design initiatives. At the start of Nixon's first term, Leonard Garment, a "liberal advisor to Nixon and lifelong arts advocate" argued that, with a relatively small investment in the NEA, Nixon could both win political influence and "emphasize the quality of life in our society." During the course of his administration, Nixon doubled funding to the NEA, and appointed Nancy Hanks as its chairwoman. The Federal Graphics Improvement Program was launched in 1972, and commissioned notable designers like Lella and Massimo Vignelli, Ivan Chermayeff, Tom Geismar and Raymond Lowey to set their sights on new identities for government agencies (Budds, 2018). Ahead of a 1973 Federal Design Assembly, attended by 1,000 bureaucrats and designers, Chermayeff published

The Design Necessity, articulating the importance of the U.S. government's embrace of design:

> Design will not create peace out of war, affluence out of poverty, commitment out of cynicism, or justice out of injustice. It will not right social wrongs. It will not even make up for lack of talent. But an environment can help bring out the best in people or the worst. We rise to our problems in order to design. We rise in response to designed environment. That is the design necessity. The problems of Government are complex, and their solutions depend upon diverse resources. As a way of applying interdisciplinary insights to the lives and work of human beings, design is necessary to Government. The effective design of public services is indeed an initial public service in itself (Chermayeff, 1973).

Government agencies were effectively convinced that design was a necessary tool, and more than 45 organizations received new identities under the Federal Graphics Improvement Program. Beyond just identities, many designers implemented comprehensive design systems that are still in use to this day, such as Massimo Vignelli's Unigrid system for the National Parks Service (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2020). In the 1978 essay *Grids: Their Meaning and Use for Federal Designers*, Vignelli explains how "the Federal Design Improvement Program, National Endowment for the Arts, recommends the grids as a device that can save the government time and money and take the guesswork out of graphic communication" (Vignelli & Cifuentes-Caballero, 2018, p. 56). Writings like these demonstrate the extent of the Federal Graphic Improvement Program's reach: beyond simply hiring designers to execute rebrands, the government

was dedicated to fostering dialogue and critical thought within the design discipline through symposiums, writings and more.

In 2015, the 1970s government-backed American design boom was thrust into the spotlight, particularly among the design cognoscenti, when then-associates at Pentagram Jesse Reed and Hamish Smyth launched a Kickstarter campaign to republish the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Graphics Standards Manual from 1975. As part of the Federal Graphic Improvement Program, NASA was one of the agencies that received an identity overhaul by Richard Danne and Bruce Blackburn, who later went on to create identity systems for the Department of Transportation, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Aviation Administration. Their custom logotype for NASA – affectionately nicknamed "the worm" – was a much more modern departure from the historic space iconography "meatball" logo (which was reinstated in 1992 and is still in use to this day). The 2015 Kickstarter campaign was an overnight success, quickly surpassing initial fundraising goals. Smyth explained the appeal of the NASA standards manual to the *New York Times*: "It is a wonderful example of modernist design thinking that was prevalent in the '70s and '60s. To me as a designer, technically, it's pretty perfect" (Chang, 2015). In a recent recorded Zoom session with hundreds of employees from around the world of strategy, design and communications agency Collins, the 86-year-old Danne said that the excitement around the standards manual had spawned a later-in-life speaking career for him. In his lectures at universities across the country, design students primarily practicing in UX and UI design were drawn to the permanence of his work – and the systematic thinking required to develop an identity system that could be applied across hundreds of

touchpoints ranging from small name badges to giant rocket ships. In answering the question of why he took on the NASA work, Danne told the Collins team:

> I think what attracted us to it was that our graphics for the government were so far behind, especially Europe, or even the standards in Asia. They do wonderful things. You look at the postage stamps, or money in the Netherlands and you want to weep, it's so beautiful. But not here. We just had this dearth of graphics in the federal agencies. And that's why NEA attacked it to begin with. And that's why we were – in one respect we were suckers; we were pulled in early and did a tough job. It was a huge scale: if we had done it for commerce, we would be rich today but that's certainly not the case (Collins, 2020).

Reed and Hamish have gone on to launch their own boutique publishing outfit, aptly named Standards Manual, that has memorialized similarly lost identity guidelines documents for the National Parks Service, EPA and New York City Transit Authority. The demand for such artifacts of work completed for American government agencies indicates a certain nostalgia for a bygone era of systematic government-sponsored design. The Federal Graphics Improvement Program was disbanded in the late 1970s; despite Nixon's initial commitment to increasing funding for The National Endowment for the Arts, its budget has remained infinitesimal compared to the larger United States budget since. "…It's still absolutely dwarfed by the cultural budgets in European countries where financial support for the arts is viewed as a government function," writes *New York Times* culture reporter Graham Bowely. "For example, Britain's culture ministry has annually spent more than $1 billion on the arts for years" (2021). The Dutch government's €80 million cultural funding budget is smaller, but significant when

considering the Netherlands' population and GDP are both more than 20x smaller than the United States.

C. Consistently Commissioned Dutch Design

While the commissioning of design by American federal agencies may not have ever returned to 1970 levels, some agencies still do emphasize their visual communications. The Central Intelligence Agency, for example, recently launched a new, more youthful look which leverages hip Swiss foundry Grilli Type's GT America (Inglis, 2021). However, there is not a contemporary analog to the Federal Graphics Improvement Program. The Netherlands, on the other hand, continues to comprehensively refresh and invest in its visual identity through multifacted government programs. In a striking contrast to Danne's description of America's "dearth of graphics in federal agencies," Dr. Linda King told Studio Dumbar Creative Director Liza Enebis in an interview for design conference Offset: "So many of Studio Dumbar's projects have been for the Dutch Government or various local authorities and it could be argued that the studio has visualized the infrastructure of contemporary Holland" (King). In 2019, Studio Dumbar launched a new identity – consisting of a logo combining "the letters NL with a stylized tulip," contemporary sans-serif supporting typography, bold colors and editorial photography – for the government to use in promoting its tourism and trade efforts globally (Griffiths, 2019). This is something of a follow up to the firm's 2008 design of a new visual identity for the entire Dutch national government – the Rijksoverheid – unifying 175 agencies and 13 ministries under one logo and house style. The impetus for such an effort, which took three years to implement, was "to improve communication and interaction between the citizens and government…[contributing] to

clarity and accessibility, where the National Government now presents a very fragmented image" (Paulmann, 2008).

In looking at the history of Studio Dumbar, it's difficult to imagine how the agency could have evolved into a dominant force of Dutch design without government commissions. Before selling his stake in the studio in 2005, founder Gert Dumbar spent the 1970s through the 1990s influencing Dutch public life through identities for the Dutch telecom and post authorities (PTT), Dutch Railways (NS), Dutch Police and Ministry of Culture. As a boom in government-sponsored design was dying down in the United States in the late 1970s, it was simultaneously picking up steam in the Netherlands, and was perhaps more prolific: "…terms such as 'welfare' and 'creativity' and 'social relevance' became common good also in the public discourse about art" (Huygen, 2019). "The Dutch public sector started to be aware that to talk to the Dutch public you need design," Dumbar said in a 2016 interview. "In this case visual design or graphic design and so the climate was very good for that." The PTT, in particular, was, "the biggest client for all of these creative professions in Holland," largely in part due to the head of its Aesthetic Department, Hein van Haaren, who had an "incredible budget to give jobs to artists, architects, landscape architects, furniture designers, industrial designers and graphic designers" (Sturt, 2020). Studio Dumbar is not the only Dutch studio that gained notoriety for its government-funded work in the same period: Total Design also worked for the PTT as well as the Stedelijk Museum (then largely government-funded) and Schipol Airport; Thonik continues to work with the Holland Festival and the City of Amsterdam. The country also has a history of notable design work produced by internal departments of government agencies. After his tenure at PTT,

Van Haaren went on to direct Sdu, the “bulwark” Dutch state-owned printing and publishing house (Huygen, 2019). In a 2010 lecture at the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis, Irma Boom described Sdu as “the most boring place,” but explained how the stamp books she designed in 1988 as a government employee were a foundational moment in her monumental career: “if you get this commission, it’s a special commission because all these guys like Wim Crouwel,..of course you know him, I guess, very famous Dutch designer…Karl Martens; you name all of these guys and they have done these books” (2014).

The Netherlands also has designers and architects embedded in its government ranks who are directly responsible for shaping projects that touch the lives of citizens. In 2007, Jo Coenen, The Chief Government Architect – or Rijksbouwmeester – designed the new 300,00 square foot Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (OBA), or Central Library, which is now a point of inspiration for public libraries around the world (Seward, 2018). Coenen and his colleagues worked with Thonik on the library’s internal wayfinding system and identity. In their book, the designers explain the rigorous thought process behind the OBA’s identity:

> We treated the library as the center of today’s democratic society, a city within the city, connected to major social themes such as migration, literacy, and digital transformation – in short, as a reflection of the city’s diversity. The library’s long Dutch name, “Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam,” did not lend itself to a typographic solution, but we wanted to make the presence of this important city service visible, not only in the central library, but in all its branches. The best way to do that is to express exactly what it is, namely a library. By placing the word

bibilotheek ("library") horizontally and the two other words vertically, almost like books on a shelf, we created an identifiable dynamic that we could apply to facades and in signage for the buildings. Once OBA became a widely accepted acronym for the Dutch name, the three letters were enough (2019, p. 72).

In reading about the design process behind this particular project, it becomes clear that Gonnissen and Widdershoven's contributions to the OBA were considered as important as the architects'. The visual identity was recognized as key to the building's ultimate success from the outset, and therefore government clients and state-appointed architects collaborated extensively with the firm.

D. State Prizes

In 2014, Boom won the Johannes Vermeer Award, the Dutch state prize for the arts, and with it a €100,000 euro grant to pursue a special project. She has elected to use the prize "for the quixotic, endless undertaking of creating a library of what she called 'only the books that are experimental'" (Barone, 2017). The collection of books primarily from the 1960s, as well as 1400 and 1500, occupy the top floor of her live/work studio space in Amsterdam. Perusing photos of her office, further evidence of the influence of state commissions and prizes abounds: dozens of books designed for the partially state-owned Rijksmuseum, and a box of booklets labeled "P C Fonds" (Winston, 2018). Boom has designed several retrospective catalogues for the Prince Claus Fund, named for the former husband of Queen Beatrix who reigned as monarch of the Netherlands from 1980 to 2013. In the introduction to the 2017 catalogue (designed by Boom's studio), the mission of the awards as defined as "honour[ing] people and organizations that are in some senses moving society forward" with a "…guiding principle that 'culture is a basic

need.'" The awards primarily focus on countries where "cultural expression is under pressure," supporting "artists and cultural organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, The Caribbean and Eastern Europe" (Derakhshani et al., 2017). While there are additional funding sources for the Prince Claus Fund, the largest is government grants, to the tune of approximately €4 million in 2019 alone. The Prince Claus Fund counts graphic designers among its past laureates – for example, Iranian graphic designer Reza Abedini – and commissions Dutch designers like Boom to design experimental catalogues and exhibitions. But out of the six public cultural funds in the Netherlands that subsidize arts and culture, the Mondriaan Fund and Creative Funds NL are two of primary interest to the realm of communication design. In 2019, the Mondriaan Fund doled out €38 million, while the Creative Funds NL provided €15 million, according to their respective annual reports. The seal for the Mondriaan fund is proudly displayed in the colophon of many of the books about Dutch designers cited in this thesis. And these are just two of six major funds that represent, according to the Mondriaan Fund's website, "a large part of the state funding for arts and culture" – not all of it. A 108-page PDF document published by DutchCulture (one of the other six public cultural funds, focused on international cooperation) outlines funding opportunities available to artists, designers and other creatives looking specifically to fund work-related travel. It's clear that the state-sponsored arts and cultural funding apparatus in the Netherlands is quite complex, and excceeds what is available via the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States.

"The government's generous cultural funding system is often purported to be the main reason for the 'advanced' nature of Dutch graphic design – the constant flow of

money facilitating unconventional approaches," Bilak writes in his essay *Contemporary Dutch Graphic Design: An Insider/Outsider's View*. In addition to affirming the importance of government agencies as commissioners, he writes that "the existence of young, small studios in The Netherlands is made possible through financial grants from various cultural funds." He points to the country's history of welfare as a primary enabler for such generosity (2014). In other words, for every Total Design and Studio Dumbar, built on the back on giant government-commissioned projects, there's small studios who are subsidized by public cultural funds. American designer and critic Michael Rock chalks the wealth of state-sponsored design in the Netherlands up to "a vast difference in the way we view design," explaining that "in America, design is always considered suspect: effete, luxurious, intellectual" versus the Dutch "sanctioning[ing] of design as a valid, vital cultural activity" (2003). Jan Hoekema, Former Ambassador of Cultural Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, captures the emotions of non-Dutch designers like Rock well in the foreword to *All That Dutch: International Cultural Politics:* "the system of cultural subsidies for international presentation and profiling that has been in the place since the mid-nineties is certainly well organized, and is the cause of jealousy in many other countries…" (7). Even Droog, the avant-garde furniture and product house that's one of the most famous international exports of Dutch design, has relied on government funding throughout its nearly three decades long existence. "…No matter how hard the organization tried to make and sell products, and no matter how many projects it was commissioned to do," Aaron Betsky writes in *Renny Remakers: Rethinking Design.* "The only way it could survive was through a combination of this

income with subsidies from the Dutch state and other donations – including Remakers' time" (2019, p. 151)

V. CONCLUSION: CHANGES IN & THE FUTURE OF THE PROFESSION

In a not-so-distant past, barriers within the world of design were primarily limited to distinctions between the worlds of communication / graphic design and product design. But as technology has expanded its reach into our daily lives, so has design. All of those applications we leverage on our smartphones to work, date, connect with friends, exercise, bank and much more generally require the touch of a designer – or many designers. As Pentagram partner Natasha Jen says, "We've been seeing that the discipline has been profoundly impacted by technology and is becoming more and more 'applied' with very specific professionalized specialties, such as branding, or user experience and user interface" (Wong, 2021). Today's Product Designer – the favored term by many who design digital interfaces – is drastically different from the Product Designer of the early 2000s, who likely was designing furniture or household goods. In design school, however, today's aspiring Product Designers are almost guaranteed to learn about the still-produced OXO vegetable peeler, created after designers at IDEO committed to crafting an incredible vegetable peeling experience for people with arthritis – and happened to make the chore easier for most other people too (Wilson, 2018). Some argue that the fundamentals of good design, revolving around a central tenet of seeking to understand your user to deliver a relevant solution to them, transcend minor details like the differences between print and digital. But are the objectives at the root of the work of designers practicing today aligned to the origins of the profession? Jen goes on to argue that the "discipline of graphic design has morphed into a super broad creative industry, detached from history…" and instead is more analogous to a "skill-based profession that hinges on the currents of market and technology evolution" (Wong, 2021).

Others have argued that the expansion of design into a larger industry with further reach has benefitted the field. Kate Aronowitz, who has held design leadership roles at eBay, LinkedIn, Facebook, Wealthfront and now, Google Ventures, wrote in a 2018 *Fast Company* article: "about 15 years ago when I started at my first tech company, design was seen by most as an afterthought… flash forward to today, and many designers hold the coveted seat at the table we've long been dreaming of. We're making key strategic decisions and helping to shape the direction of companies" (Arnowitz, 2018). And on the opposite end of the spectrum, some critics go even further than Jen. "We've been designing giant world-wide networks that manage personal relationships, generate abuse and harassment, and can't tell (or don't care about) the difference between a good or a bad actor," Mike Monteiro writes in *Ruined by Design*. "We're happy to have Nazis on our platforms because they count as engagement" (2019, p. 18). The conflict that all of these critics are addressing is inherently related to a struggle for the purpose of design: as a tool to unlock value and derive profit for select companies and individuals or something ascribed to a higher purpose. The debate disseminating in design circles today is not new. Wim Crouwel and Jan van Toorn, two leading figures of Dutch graphic design, famously debated the matter in Amsterdam in 1972. While Crouwel believed that "it is the graphic designer's sacred duty to present what the client, as message-maker, wants to say…," van Toorn argued designers should "make use of the opportunity construct and critique design's social meaning" (2015, p. 9).

Do designers have the ability to construct and critique design's social meaning while operating in the context of market-based work? It's important to contextualize Van Toorn and Crouwel's statements: the former's oeuvre primarily consisted of work in the

cultural sector; the latter is well-known for his work with the Stedelijk Museum but also practiced heavily in corporate identity. This is not to say that corporations are always creatively risk-averse, but as we see in examining the history of Dutch design, the medium has been successfully pushed by its practitioners when the outcome is more about fostering cultural experiences than selling products. This is where the role of the government and government agencies – as we also saw in the United States in the 1970s – can play a critical role in advancing and elevating design. While the Netherlands currently demonstrates a more significant commitment to supporting design via government commissions and federal subsidies than the United States, the future is somewhat uncertain. A Dutch designer and professor casually mentioned in private correspondence towards the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that the government was "heavily reconsidering its approach to cultural funding" due to current economic challenges. In the summer of 2020, however, a spokesman for the culture minister told the *New York Times* that the government committed approximately €600 million to "help protect its cultural life" that was suffering due to the pandemic (Marshall). This decision is consistent with other European nations and, in many ways, mirrors the broader struggle that has been taking place in Europe since the global financial crisis: a vacillation between austerity measures and the preservation of beloved social safety nets. The Netherlands has succeeded in building a brand around design that is now integral to its economy; therefore, it is unlikely that the government will pull the plug on all of its current efforts. The United States, of course, also has a vibrant design industry – but in recent months, the digitally-infused side of that industry, radiating across the country from its roots in Silicon Valley, is being called into question as designed digital

experiences have faltered and threatened key democratic institutions. Increased government regulation of that facet of the industry would not necessarily be a bad thing: but perhaps there's a lesson – likely applicable in other industries as well – that the government could also help facilitate alternatives to design purely as a tool for profit-seeking.

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