

Rise of the User

Replacing the modernist ethos of “good design for all” with “from all, good design,” designers in the late 1960s and 1970s sought to understand what people—or users—most want and need. The research and writings of design theorist Christopher Alexander were particularly influential for those interested in taking a human-centric approach, learning from the behaviors of users, and even involving them in the design process.

It was in California that design thinking, a popular offshoot of human-centered design, first came into wider use. Defined by principals at the design company IDEO, including Jane Fulton Suri, this practice decenters the designer’s traditional authority and generates products in response to individual needs. Crucially, it depends on insights gleaned through data analytics, fieldwork, interviews, and other means of surveying the people for whom the designs are intended.

Today many designers not only involve users in the design process but also increasingly acknowledge technology as an active collaborator. Autodesk designers relied on algorithmic software—Fusion 360 and Project Dreamcatcher—to produce plans for a better chair based on input from popular and practical examples, establishing a new role for the designer as an editor of computer-generated design proposals. Emerging Objects, designers who explore the affordances of 3-D printing technologies, envision a future in which customized housewares are printed on demand and waste is transformed into construction material.