



## AN AUTOPSY OF TRUTH IN DESIGN PROCESS: HOW DESIGNERS THINK IN POST-TRUTH ERA

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### ABSTRACT

Post-truth has an impression that the facts have been only corrupted with it. Many examples support this impression. However, it should not be perceived as just a disruption of the truth considering only political events. In different fields, such as creative industries, it may have different implications. Despite studies regarding education, there has not been much discussion on the design process and education. The objective of this research is to develop an introductory examination of what the design process (with statements in the book 'How Designers Think') can produce in post-truth cases and to seek the productive potentials of post-truth. Therefore, the claims were reviewed - as design problems, solutions and process itself - within the framework of the post-truth era. Some of the results are as follows: For design problems, designers need to find a way to oscillate among objectives without based on truth. Post-truth environments may trigger finding out unique spatial possibilities with designs of unique hierarchies. For design solutions, in post-truth era, the only optimal thing is to be apathetic about truth. There is no need to seek the optimal solutions. The ideal of wholeness is expired for the solutions. This situation fosters free circulations of tiny parts of solutions in the post-truth universe. For the design process, the correctness of the process is much more questionable anymore. Identifying problem is a crucial part of the design process. As the truth disappears, it becomes more difficult to discriminate the characteristics and value of the problems.

**Key Words:** Post-truth; Design Process; Design Education; Architecture; Productive Force.

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## INTRODUCTION

Post-truth has been shown its presence in the literature in the early 2000s (Keyes, 2004). However, it was acquired popularity through the increase of 2000% in the use of the term in the Oxford Dictionary in 2016 - compared to the previous year (McIntyre, 2018) and selected as the word of the year in 2016. According to the definition in the dictionary, post-truth is "relating to circumstances in which people respond more to feelings and beliefs than to facts" (url-1). The fact that it was frequently mentioned in the discussions about the 2016 US presidential elections and the UK Brexit referendum has brought about the re-emergence of the concept. In the first draft following these discussions, post-truth has an impression that facts have been damaged and that populist discourses have overcome the truth. Such examples can be found especially in various political and economic fields related to the irrational decision-making tendency of people. Post-truth, however, should not be perceived as just disruption of the truth and should not be considered only through the political events that are the source of popularization of it.

In current examples, speculations created through conspiracy theories stand out. A conspiracy theorist, for instance, has blamed 5G (as a feature of new generation mobile phone technology) for the rapid spread of coronavirus (url-2). It has aroused some echoes on social media. Such one and many similar conspiracy theories are produced and circulated on social media regarding the emergence and infection of coronavirus. However, what makes this example particularly critical one is that this theory is accepted as truth and has a practical reaction. In some cities of England, such as Birmingham and Merseyside, someone attempted to set on fire to cell towers as a response to this claim (url-3). Out of this baseless fear, protests were also held in various regions (see, Figure 1).



Figure 1. The protest of those who accept the theory that the coronavirus spreads with 5G technology (url-2 & url-3)

Considering them, the claims and the reactive actions of the claims seem to have weak foundations. For this reason, pseudo-truths ignite much faster and fade out in a short time, parallel to their rashness of circulation. The desire to consume and finish up the input, coming from social media, as soon as possible may also be the partial reason for it. Examples with such impulsive action and weak content are more common for the media, even if there are stronger examples that are established more systematically. Additionally, they are consumed as an element of entertainment. However, it should be noted that coming up conclusion quickly regarding post-truth



through examining such examples with their weak foundations would be weak reasoning for the intellectual world.

## KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH IN POSTMODERNISM

Thoughts on the truth have taken different forms in different eras. Here, at the beginning of the paper, it is useful to have a quick historical summary. In ancient philosophy, the sophists claimed that there is not a single truth but multiple truths. Socrates, on the other hand, argued that there is a universal truth that applies to everything (Cevizci, 2015). In the following of Socrates, there has been a presupposition of an absolute truth parallel with the arguments regarding God. The dominant re-appearance of the truth arguments has been accelerated by the postmodern period. In this period, there was somehow a turning back to the thought of the sophists. Postmodern discourse mostly denies the existence of universal truth. There may be different truths parallel to the position of the individual. While this proposition has caused ontological chaos, it has replaced grand narratives with little narratives so which allowed the proliferation of little narratives. With the implications for the postmodern situation, Lyotard (1984) develops criticisms over the concept of absolute truth. Grand narratives will be replaced by little narratives led by feelings and experience. In the postmodern period, Baudrillard is one of the thinkers that stands out with his remarks on truth. Reality has been destroyed, thus defending the truth has been disabled so that reality has been replaced by hyperreality. Nevertheless, the method of this is not an imitation. While the imitated one can be easily recognized by comparing the original one, there is no such practice in simulation. Because there are no longer two distinctive phenomena as real and fake (Baudrillard, 1994). Disneyland is the most popular example of it. Indeed, it is a simulative tool that legitimizes the reality of the rest of America. In other words, the simulation that serves to reproduce the reality of America is Disneyland (Baudrillard, 1994). Thus, hyperreality has the competence to produce itself without a reality.

## Same Structure? Comparison of Post-truth and Postmodernism

The question that arises here is whether post-truth is the practical reflection of postmodern discourses today or not. The Internet has provided the appropriate conditions for the loss of the idea of truth and the prevalence of post-truth. The responsibility has disappeared with anonymous identities and it has provided a ground for the truth to be ignored. Thus, reality has left its place in a simulation (Keyes, 2004). With this aspect, post-truth becomes similar to Baudrillard's discourse. There is also another similarity with his discourse: The denial of information that creates public opinion before, but which is not correct, imposes a truth that is perceived as an unquestionable one. In other words, the new information, after the denied one, is often justified as reality without the need for ongoing verification. Just as Disneyland provides a perception of the rest of America as reality (Baudrillard, 1994), the information that is found out to be post-truth and has

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no basis for truth causes a tendency to perceive the other information as reality without any doubt. Further, the multiplicity of little narratives in postmodern discourse seems to coincide with post-truth practices. However, it would not be correct to claim that post-truth completely overlaps with postmodern discourses. Along with little narratives, we have mentioned criticisms of absolute truth. In postmodern theory, there is the existence of different truths shaped by the position of the individual. This indicates that postmodern theories still pay attention to the truth. However, truth has completely lost its significance in post-truth. This aspect makes them different approaches. To sum up, even if there are some similarities with previous theories such as postmodernism, we are in a novel circumstance and there is a need to review it focusing on different fields.

## POTENTIALS OF POST-TRUTH

Let's consider post-truth by observing how people grasp it and its other potential conception. When the post-truth is understood only with the 2016 US elections and the UK Brexit referendum that made it popular, it is perceived as if it has just a problematic and corruptive structure. The major literature offers suggestions for the prevention and suppression of post-truth. There is, however, another way: starting with the acceptance of living in the post-truth era and examining the relations that are built up in this era. It allows us to frame the reflections of post-truth in a different comprehension.

First of all, having the power of denial reveals a tendency to claim that he/she knows the truth clearly at any rate and to become prudent about what the truth is (unquestioning acceptance may follow it). This situation may cause another bias while trying to ensure impartiality. But the more hazardous side is the power to dominate the easily acquired (by denial opposite one) truth. In such a case, the critic of post-truth is not aware that he/she has brought himself/herself to the position she criticizes by having power. In other words, the ability to decide what is not truth can quickly generate a belief that one is competent about what is truth as well. While this situation 'quickly' leads to the judgment of acquired truth, it also undermines the practice of critical thinking about the "truth". In the age that truth has lost its importance, it would be better to react appropriately to the dynamics of this age and to adopt an attitude that does not condemn post-truth immediately.

The trust problem and the emphasis on impartial information caused some components of the information to be ignored. Keyes (2004) mentions that dramatic elements are preferred more than factual ones in television. It is acceptable for television to make this choice as a result of its demand to get our attention and keep it alive in-itself. In the examples in the system of media, the dramatic items only turn into a means of attracting attention and manipulation if the person is in a "passive" position. Nevertheless, it does not seem reasonable to focus only on such a condition and remove the dramatic qualifications from the reasoning systems. It is obvious that the media prefers dramatic intensity due to the emphasis on emotions and the



lingering importance of reality (Keyes, 2004). However, the fact that the media has used it instrumentally to develop results contrary to reality does not mean that information about truth cannot be produced from the dramatic intensity. Abusive use by dominant means does not place the phenomenon itself in a malicious attitude. The quick acceptance of "dramatic intensity" here causes individuals to exclude potential knowledge that they can acquire with it and affirm only scientific knowledge that is completely devoid of emotion. A similar issue resulted from the isolation of scientific knowledge is also pointed out by Lyotard (1984) (Since the postmodern designations, the discriminating attitude regarding knowledge seems to be felt more sharply isolated rather than dissolved). Following that, the facts may lose their profound content in their essence. In short, perceiving the dramatic intensity as a criterion that offers a different dimension to the truth, instead of excluding immediately, may offer novel perspectives to make sense of it.

Even if post-truth is considered a manipulative practice, it is not just the manipulation of public opinion within political issues. For instance:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of this manipulative attitude in productive activities such as design and architecture?
- Are designers able to liberate and encourage themselves through new pseudo-possibilities (as a result of post-truth)?

The change caused by post-truth should be considered as the trivialization of the truth, rather than as a distortion of it, which was understood by the case studies of 2016. Trivialization of truth manifests things that are not based on truth. If one does not seek to produce/reproduce a truth, the projects here may be able to have a productive force. Because it is not simply a manipulative bias towards the truth, but an act of production that ignores the truth and liberates itself from the truth (Koro-Ljungberg, Carlson, & Montana, 2019). Hence, starting to build ideas with the presumption that the search for truth is unnecessary may integrate designers into the post-truth era.

## **INITIAL TRANSLATIONS OF POST-TRUTH FOR THE DESIGN PROCESS**

It is possible to find various studies at the intersection of education and post-truth (e.g., Howell, 2017; Peters, 2017). However, there has not been much discussion on specifically design education and the design process. Since it is based on "human", it is not possible to isolate design education from post-truth discussions and to keep going as if there is no post-truth.

Design education is mostly based on producing fictional realities and creating a discussion ground from them. Studies have been carried out to increase the creativity of the design process by generating alternative realities and fictions (e.g., Hatipoğlu 2020). To date, inquiries about the truth in the design process have been made using various terms: Alternative truths, quasi-truths, deconstruction or reconstruction of truths are some of

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them. However, in these studies, similar to the postmodern discourse, there is a concern about how the truth can be understood rather than the loss of truth. In this study, we present the claims of Lawson (2005) - the author of *How Designers Think* - who analyzes the design process and the structure of the design activities. Then the claims will be reviewed within the framework of the post-truth era. The objective of this research is to develop an introductory examination of what the design process can produce in post-truth cases (with statements of Lawson (2005)) and to seek the productive potentials of post-truth.

Design knowledge identifies itself by its ambiguity. Nature of design activity is grasped uncertain, ambiguous and exploratory by Lawson (2005). The designers need to get the ability to deal with the ambiguous process. It may provide to generate and keep many alternative solutions open for as long as possible. In the recent conditions, however, we need to cut down the connection of truth for solutions.

Lawson (2005) developed a suggestion regarding the design process which identifies it as a negotiation of problem and solution (see, Figure 2). It involves three activities: analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

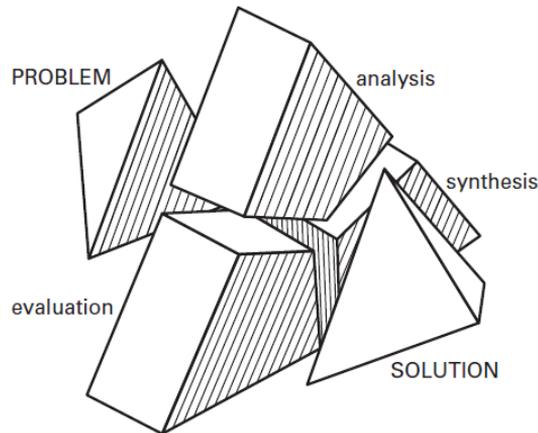


Figure 2. The design process between problem and solution by three activities (Lawson, 2005, p. 49).

A highly critical source (truth) for three of them is lost now. Even if the problem is clear enough, it is difficult to make them one total piece (as in the previous figure) because of non-compatible parts (i. e., analysis, synthesis and evaluation). Although it may seem purely chaotic at first, it would be chaotic when designers have just an ideal regarding truth. If there is the loss of the idea of truth, then harmonic and holistic one piece is not a concern for the designer.

We'll review the examinations of Lawson (2005) as design problems, solutions and process itself.



Regarding design problems:

(1) “Design problems cannot be comprehensively stated” (Lawson, 2005, p. 120). It is difficult to compose a map of the design process. Because design problems are full of ambiguous objectives. They are inclined to change during the process. However, search for truth won’t be one of those objectives. It strengthens the difficulties of mapping the process.

Designers need to find a way to oscillate among objectives without based on truth. It may facilitate to associate several objectives with totally different foundations. Because the similarity of their truth is unnecessary anymore. The statement of the design problem is still incomprehensible, but now, they have not just ambiguous but also groundless objectives.

(2) “Design problems require subjective interpretation” (Lawson, 2005, p. 120). Designers from different fields generate a different solution to the same problem. As aforementioned, the examples of post-truth from different fields demonstrate (sometimes) that people respond much more to feelings and beliefs than to facts. Thus subjective area for discernment of incidents and objects is expanded. However, we need to find a novel verification system, not for the acceptance of truth, but for the problem to be considered valid in design practice.

(3) “Design problems tend to be organized hierarchically” (Lawson, 2005, p. 121). For instance, designing a doorknob may emerge considerations of doors, walls, buildings. From now on, what are the obstacles to think a doorknob in a tough and direct relation with the sky? There will be still a hierarchy (this is a crucial part of design actions). Nevertheless, it is not squeezed into just physical “facts” anymore. People may deny it and say that it is impossible in the sense of some perceived truths. However, designers don’t need to restrict themselves into known spatial relations. It is an opportunity to find out unique spatial possibilities with designs of unique hierarchies. Post-truth environment will allow it.

Regarding design solution:

(1) “There are an inexhaustible number of different solutions” (Lawson, 2005, p. 121). The reason is that design problems cannot be comprehensively stated. Owing to its similarity, we have similar implications as the first feature of the design problem.

(2) “There are no optimal solutions to design problems” (Lawson, 2005, p. 121). However, there are acceptable solutions. There is not a perfect solution so that designers should not escape from recognizing the wrong parts of each alternative. Without an optimal solution, there is still a motivation to search for truth. Hence, this statement points out the existence of a repository containing various truths (via solutions). In post-truth era, the only optimal thing is to be apathetic about truth. As long as the truth is no longer a significant part of the solution, any solution can be tested out and there is no need to seek the optimal one. Because the designers don’t hope to discover the universal truth with such an optimal solution.

(3) “Design solutions are often holistic responses” (Lawson, 2005, p. 122). Now, the ideal of wholeness is expired for the solutions. Because there is

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no need for it. This situation fosters free circulations of tiny parts of solutions in the post-truth universe. Still, possible integrations could come out, for this time, with anonymous identities and deliberate ignorance of the truth. Mostly, they may be partial integrations without any claim of wholeness. Further, it is still difficult to dissect these integrations.

(4) “Design solutions are a contribution to knowledge” (Lawson, 2005, p. 122). If designers appreciate the knowledge beyond just scientific ones... The contributions don’t have to intensify the foundation of the knowledge. Because a weak foundation is not a big deal or a problem to be solved from post-truth perspective. Yet there is a need to investigate the characteristics of such contributions.

(5) “Design solutions are parts of other design problems” (Lawson, 2005, p. 122). When the designers apply their solutions to the problem, new problems may appear. From now on, the capacity of problems’ diversity is expanded considerably. The expansion of it resulted from new associations that relatedness is not a criterion based on truth.

Regarding the design process:

(1) “The process is endless” (Lawson, 2005, p. 123). As a consequence of limitless different solutions and no comprehensive formulation of problems, we cannot expect a finite design process. Adding the groundlessness coming from the absence of truth, the infinite ongoing waves of design fits also in post-truth era. The designers may need to improve themselves to swim safely in this ocean. But how? This question needs an in-depth investigation.

(2) “There is no infallibly correct process” (Lawson, 2005, p. 123). Despite attempts for design methods that would provide the best solution, there is no good way of designing which is valid for all design processes. The correctness of the process is much more questionable anymore. Similar to current examples of post-truth, some parts of the design process may flare up much faster and fade out in a short time, parallel to the rashness of their circulation. In spite of quick changes, the designers should find a way to build up a little bit stable structure. Even if they can’t do it, they need to avoid quick decisions as a reaction to quick changes.

(3) “The process involves finding as well as solving problems” (Lawson, 2005, p. 124). Identifying problem is a crucial part of the design process. Problems are becoming easy-to-catch in post-truth era. Nevertheless, it doesn’t indicate that all problems could be crucial to developing design ideas. As the truth disappears, it becomes more difficult to discriminate the characteristics and value of the problems. When we renounce the search for truth, we need to develop more systematic ways to identify problems. Or, there is a need for pre-acceptance that design problems will be lost their value in the understanding of the design process. Then, we need to explore something else, in a similar vein with previous characteristics of design problems, to build up the design process in post-truth era.

(4) “Design inevitably involves subjective value judgement” (Lawson, 2005, p. 124). Success is a subjective parameter for design and depends on



judges. Owing to its similarity, we have similar implications as the second feature of the design problem.

## CONCLUSION

Post-truth has been used mostly in political and economic issues. It, however, should not be perceived as just a disruption of the truth and not be considered only through political events. Because to conclude quickly regarding post-truth through examining some examples with their weak foundations would be weak reasoning for the intellectual world. Starting with the acceptance of living in the post-truth era and examining the relations allow us to frame the reflections of post-truth in a different comprehension. The change caused by post-truth should be considered as the trivialization of the truth, rather than simply as a disruption of it. There are studies with education and post-truth. However, it is not discussed much on specifically design education and design process. In this respect, the claims of the book 'How Designers Think' was reviewed. We have had reflections about design problems, solutions and processes. This study is the initial and introductory translation of post-truth discourse for the design process. Thus, different relationships have been revealed between the design process and post-truth. In future studies, unquestionably, each of these reflections should be discussed in detail and investigated with experimental conditions.

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