

1 **Design & Agency, John Potvin and Marie-Ève Marchand, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020, 328pp, 40**
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4 Who – or what – has the power to effect historical change? Historians have long been
5 interested in agency, questioning the extent to which certain people at certain times – enslaved
6 people, women, other minorities for example – have been able to act rather than simply be acted
7 upon. Design historians, historians of material culture and museum curators have long considered
8 the power of objects to influence our lived experience. This book goes one step further, drawing
9 attention to the ways in which designed objects can be understood to have agency through their
10 power to both facilitate and constitute identities. Designed objects imply an intended use, an
11 imagined performance, and thus to pay attention to them is to consider who is afforded agency
12 through design, and who might not be. The ‘tricky’ and ‘slippery’ nature of agency is acknowledged
13 in the introduction: ‘Agency is not monolithic, unidimensional, or unidirectional... Agency is not
14 equally experienced or expressed precisely because it infers a degree of access and power.’ (p2).
15 Therefore, the book asks, what do objects enable, and for whom?

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17 Notions of design and of agency, this book suggests, are intimately linked to questions of
18 identity: repeated use of designed objects helps to define and constitute the user: ‘Design renders
19 identity itself tangible, manifest and material. It makes it live and grow. Design facilitates a
20 consciousness of identity itself. Design is the very thing and thingness of identity, of human agency.’
21 (page 5). We are all, in a sense, made by the everyday things that surround us, just as we in turn
22 shape them through repeated use. Yet, as the chapters in this book explore, there are differing ways
23 in which design helps to activate agency outside of, despite, or in deference to privilege. Broadly
24 speaking, designed objects and spaces tend to work well for those who are white, male, adult, able-
25 bodied and straight, while other people have to navigate them differently. It is this notion of the
26 complexity of lived experience that the authors, in their different ways, are grappling with here.
27 Chapters cover a broad range of themes, with a deliberately open-ended definition of design,

28 offering a wide variety of approaches and case studies that: ‘allow us to provide a broad, rich and yet
29 as deep a study as possible on the complexities of design’s agentic horizon of possibility.’ (page 7).
30 This allows the book to avoid a designer-as-hero approach to design history, and instead to
31 foreground the people, places and things that challenge and shape the function of design.
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33 The first part of the book, entitled “Designing Identities” looks at the complex relationship
34 between performance and agency, asking us to consider what ‘work’ things do in particular contexts.
35 Several chapters in this section address women’s roles in the context of their interior design choices,
36 or as designers or artists operating within male-dominated environments. One chapter is highlighted
37 here as an example: Elaine Cheasley Paterson’s discussion of the needlework banner *Our Lady of the*
38 *Snows*, by Mary Seaton Watts, which hangs in the warden’s hall at McGill University’s Royal Victoria
39 College, Montreal. The author argues that the banner sits at the intersection of histories of craft and
40 skills education, of social reform in the context of colonial settlement, and of histories of British child
41 migrants to the colonies. The banner is partly an expression of middle class women’s agency in
42 relation to benevolence and philanthropy, linking back to Mary Seaton Watts’s personal connections
43 to social work in London’s East End. It also draws attention to the agency of child migrants who were
44 sent to the colonies on the promise of a better life. To focus on the agency of the banner, therefore
45 is to draw attention in turn to the various human actors in this colonial story, and also to the current
46 plight of migrant children. The banner can be seen as having played a part in shaping ideas about the
47 appropriate development of imperial subjects, and to have been emblematic of the relationship
48 between the empire’s metropolitan centre and its periphery.
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50 As this example suggests, one of the strengths of this book is its origins in a Canadian
51 context. The range of largely, though not exclusively, Canadian topics explored provide a refreshing
52 perspective and casting new light on histories of design. The editors’ intention was to make a
53 contribution to the decolonization and decentring of design history, and this is achieved through the

54 choice of subject matter, by drawing attention to the colonial structures of thought traditionally
55 inherent within design histories, and also by attributing agency to people and objects who have
56 resisted those colonial narratives. As an example, the second part of the book, “Systems and
57 Institutions of Design” widens the focus to take a more general look at designed environments and
58 the structural forces that influence them. One key chapter here is “From *Indian* to *Indigenous*
59 Agency” by David T Fortin, which explores the idea of the agency of Indigenous peoples in relation to
60 the built environment in Canada. Fortin draws attention to the ways in which Indigenous knowledge
61 is valued – or not – within a system in which design tends to reinforce existing power relationships
62 and capitalist structures. More than this, there is a difference between colonial and Indigenous
63 approaches to the built environment as a whole. As Fortin notes, an architectural drawing of an
64 ‘Indian Boarding School’ of 1919 expresses a: ‘placeless approach to design [which] is antithetical to
65 the spiritual and existential connectivity between all things that is central to Indigenous value
66 systems.’ (page 247). Thus the chapter draws attention to the ways in which the agency of things,
67 land and place are already taken for granted within an Indigenous world view, and raises questions
68 about the future role and agency of young Indigenous people within the architectural profession.

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70 The seemingly divergent range of themes covered in this volume are brought together by
71 the overarching question of how design shapes action, how people, institutions and objects exert
72 power, and how change might be achieved through design. The editors have succeeded in creating
73 an interdisciplinary volume which will undoubtedly provoke further consideration of the issues. One
74 small criticism, however, would be the frequent use of wrong words throughout the text: not
75 spelling mistakes exactly, but similar-sounding words or near-homophones. For example: ‘...object-
76 driven analysis has led to material fetishism to the *determinate* of human agency’ (p5). Surely the
77 correct word here would be *detriment*? Similarly, the words *immigration* and *emigration* are
78 confused in several places. This has the effect of wrong-footing the reader and slightly undermining
79 the credibility of the book as a whole. With that caveat aside, this book will be of interest to design

80 historians keen to think differently about objects and their relationships with people, and those
81 interested in decentring the discipline of design history from its previously Euro-centric frame of
82 reference.

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