Ivan Illich, who inspired a critical appreciation of design and its limits, died his own death quietly at the home of friends in Germany, on December 2, 2002. He was 76 years old, and had suffered for more than a decade with what appeared to be a pancreatic tumor that he chose to treat as a difficult friend rather than an enemy. He was buried three days later on the outskirts of a city that had a tradition of independent hospitality for those who might ever be its strongest critics. For the last ten years, Illich had lectured regularly at the Universität Bremen on such topics as friendship, ao, and the history of the senses, in order to question "modern certainties." He had been preparing a lecture on mistrust in an earlier context, the mystery of evil, when he became tired, lay down for a nap, and did not wake again to this world. After being allowed to remain for three days simply where he had found a seat, kept company by a single candle, a bouquet of flowers, and friends, he was buried in the Oberursel cemetery.

The Early Illich
Illich was born in Vienna in 1926, grew up in Italy, moved to the United States in the 1950s, founded the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) in Mexico (1966–1976), and since the 1980s served as a visiting scholar at multiple universities. He remains best known for these widely influential books from the 1970s: Deschooling Society, Tools for Conviviality, and Medical Nemesis. In each case, Illich identified what he termed the phenomenon of "counterproductive" – that is, the pursuit of a technique beyond its inherent limits.

In the discovery of proper limits, Illich had been influenced by studies of organic morphology and natural design such as D. Aronowitz Thompson’s On Conviviality and Farm, J. B. S. Haldane’s On Being the Right Size, and especially Leopold Rutscher’s The Breakdown of Nations. Indeed, Illich liked to tell of meeting Kuhn quite by accident on a park bench in Puerto Rico, where both were staying during the late 1950s.
Kehr, a teacher of E.F. Schumacher, became a mentor to Illich as well, helping him to appreciate the dis-economies of scale and to understand the manifold failures of attempts at unlimited expansions across a variety of sectors. The system of public schooling, designed originally to advance learning, had become an impediment to real education. Advanced technological tools of transportation and communication were at odds with autonomous human development and the culture of friendship, in the name of which they were commonly invented and continued to be promoted. High-tech health care was making people sick. Intransigent illnesses, that is, illnesses caused by physicians—as when patients have negative reactions to drugs, are harmed by diagnostic X-ray treatments, or are otherwise mistreated and misdiagnosed—had, he argued, become an epidemic of counterproductivity. Perhaps the most detailed analysis of counterproductivity is that found in Energy and Equity—especially as extended in La Trahison de l'opulence by Jean Robert and Jean-Pierre Dupuy—which argues that increased use of cars actually deprives one of auto(self)-mobility.

The correct response, for Illich, was to learn to practice a more disciplined and limited use of technology, and to invent alternative, especially low-scale, technologies. To this end, Illich continuously searched for what he called an aesisis appropriate to the contemporary techno-liferworld. Often he refused to wear glasses or to speak using a microphone. During one period, he practiced the discipline of not word-processing any text that he had not first composed with pen and paper. More publicly, Illich became a promotional theorist of alternative technologies, as was reflected in Valentina Borzenana’s “Guide to Convivial Tools.” *Illich even timed to reflect that he had inadvertently contributed the Whole Earth Catalog motto, “Access to Tools.”

In many instances, however, the practice of such a fundamentally ethical imperative was made more difficult than need be by what Illich termed “radical monopolies.” Although no car manufacturer has a monopoly on the automobile market, cars themselves have a fundamental monopoly on roads such that they crowd out pedestrians and bicycles.

A Second Illich

In the late 1970s, Illich’s thinking took a new turn. His essay Toward a History of Needs—a volume which reprints “Energy and Equity”—points toward a new project in historical archeology that takes its first, full-bodied shape in *Gender*.

Originally titled “Vernacular Gender,” this book was among the first attempts to theorize the distinction between biological sex and its culturally constructed extensions in gender. The book provocatively attempted to recontextualize those social experiences of female/male complementary obscured by modern economic regimes. *HDO and the Waters of Forgetting* explores the possibility of a history of “stuff,” thus picking up...
on a phenomenology pioneered by Gaston Bachelard. ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind—a building on the work of such scholars as Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and Eric Havelock—carries historical archeology forward into the area of literacy, as does In the Vineyard of the Text. Both explore how the techniques of reading transform humans’ experience of themselves and each other, thus inviting contemporary consumers of automobiles and computers to consider that they might not be wholly unaffected users of neutral technologies.

Modern technology, for Illich, emerges from and then reinforces a distinctive ethos, the recognition of which is best appreciated by investigations into the moral environments of previous techniques. In this approach, there is some similarity to the attitude of Martin Heidegger, who defended his studies of Plato with the argument that what those who disparage as a “retreat into history” may actually be used to cultivate a critical assessment of the contemporary world, which in turn enables us “to leap out beyond our own present.” But unlike Heidegger, whose philosophical history justified a megalomaniac vision of himself as the vehicle for a new epochal “self-assertion” of that institution known as the German university, Illich’s history promotes the moderation and delineation of virtually all practices, but especially institutional ones. And again, unlike Heidegger, who seeks to understand the past better than it understood itself, Illich tries to on the perspective of the past to re-understand the present. As he writes in the introduction to In the Mirror of the Past:

I plead for a historical perspective on precisely those assumptions that are accepted as verities or “practical certainties” as long as their sociogenic remains unexamined. [Not infrequently I look at the present as if I had to report on it to the authors of the old texts I try to understand. [In each essay, I want] to suggest that only in the mirror of the past does it become possible to recognize the radical otherness of our twentieth-century mental topologies, and to become aware of its generative axioms that usually remain below the horizon of contemporary attention.]

At his death, another major collection of materials carrying forward this trajectory awaits publication.

**Toward an Archeology of Design**

In the mid-1990s, while Illich was a visiting professor at Pennsylvania State University, he made provisional forays as well into the historical archeology of design. As a collaborator during this period, I pushed for developing such a study in ways that would explicitly reconnect with earlier social-critical work, and we attempted to develop a piece with a sometimes working title of “Anti-Designs: Notes for a Manifesto on Modern and Postmodern Artifice.”
first paragraph of one version (Fall 1994) of this incomplete project
read as follows:

Critics widely promoted belief that design is something all human beings do and have done throughout history,
but now must do more consciously and thoroughly than ever before. Design is something that has had a history. Its
beginnings can be traced to the rise of modernity, and it will almost certainly come to an end with the modern project.
Indeed, we have an obligation not so much to promote

designing as to learn to live without it, to resist its seduc-
tions, and to turn away from its pervasive and corrupting

influence.

The argument in support of this thesis was to be twofold. In the first instance, design (especially engineering, but also architectural
design) was not capable of achieving what it promised in the way of
and expanded control and the well-managed reduction of unintended
consequences. In the second, even insistently as it did achieve
such goals, design as practiced by experts and professionals ulti-
mately would dehumanize the world. The aim was to reanimate the
moral criticism of designing as a lack of proportionality in ambition
and contrivance.

One modest result of this aborted effort was the offering, in
fall of 1995, of a two-week seminar in the Architecture Department,
conducted by Illich and his long-time colleague Joan Robert. Robert,
an architect, born in Switzerland but now a resident of Mexico, was
a tireless worker on questions of alternative technology design and
"design by people"—she later extending the ideas of John Turner's


Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments. Illich
also had been teaching a seminar at the University of Pennsylvania,
in the Graduate Program in Architecture, directed by Joseph
Rykwalter, whose The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form
in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World gave respect to the intuitive,
vernacular, promodern traditions of city construction. The Illich-
Robert seminar provided an critical review of developments in
design that tended to turn place and landscape into managed space,
depriving people of both roots and autonomy. What Illich had once
heard Jacques Marinan say of planning, "C'est une notion qui est le
pictet de la poétique," Illich and Robert applied to design. An
alternative, for Illich and Robert, is design in a fundament-
dally different sense—one that did not presume to social control and
individualistic self-realization, but instead sought to promote social
solidarity, live in harmony with greater orders, and to dwell. Too
often design treats the world as an enemy rather than a friend, and
calls in experts to manipulate and manage. What Illich and Robert
imagined was a design based on friendship, mutual give and take,
respect for the world, and ultimately suffering, in the positive sense of
creatively accepting and affirming limitations.

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An Ellich Community of Scholars

Ellich’s thought and life have had a strong influence on a circle of friends whose own insightful and independent work has its own implications for design. The works of Valentia Borremans, Jean Robert, and Joseph Rykwert have already been mentioned. Other representative works from what might be called the Ellich community of reflection are, for example, William Arney’s Experts in the Age of Systems, Barbara Duden’s The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor’s Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany and Disembodied Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Undead; Wolfgang Schacht’s The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power; David Stawartz’s Crossing the River: Creating a Conceptual Revolution in Cybersexuality and Disability and Who Cares? Rediscovering Community; Uwe Pirkse’s Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language; Len Huihui’s El Camino: Walking to Santiago de Compostela and Struggling toward Justice: Stories of Place; Madhu Sri Prakash and Gustavo Baretos’s Escaping Education: Living an Learning within Grassroots Cultures and Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Culture. A younger generation of scholars strongly influenced by Ellich also shows promise for contributing to this tradition: Andoni Alonso, Samaar Fazage, Silja Sonnenski, Bajay Samuel, and Matthias Ringer, to mention only a few.


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