

The Design Politics of the Passport: Materiality, Immobility, and Dissent.

Mahmoud Keshavarz, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018. 144 pp., 10 b&w illus., cloth, \$102.60.
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While much of design history has been inscribed in experiences of migration,¹ mobility has been overlooked as a design question in and of itself. Mahmoud Keshavarz seeks to correct this by examining how the passport has revealed hegemonic practices of design and global politics in historical and contemporary contexts. With a focus on the passport as a material object, Keshavarz uncovers the socio-political implications of design, as well as the nuanced ways in which the designed artifact dictates movement across geopolitical borders. Building upon his doctoral research at Malmö University, the book is the product of seven years of fieldwork conducted with refugees, undocumented migrants and border transgressors, and complements his wider activities in helping to establish the *Decolonising Design* platform. The result is an original and much-needed contribution to design history that skilfully interweaves critical theory with political histories of migration, whilst ensuring that the lived human experience remains at the core of the study.

The introduction sets out Keshavarz's argument that the passport is a dynamic object that has a profound effect on the everyday lives of people who do not enjoy the straightforward privileges of citizenship in the Global North. Keshavarz explains that 'the passport is not neutral but a real and powerful device with its own specific history, design and politics, mediating moments through which socially constructed power relations can be enacted and performed' (p. 2). Considering the passport as an object of thought encourages marginalised voices to be heard, as it is only through such non-privileged experiences that the design and commodification of mobility becomes clear. It also allows for a wider understanding of the 'politics of design' and the 'design of politics'; as Keshavarz writes, these are of acute

contemporary relevance in light of ethno-nationalist modes of identity formation. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of the regime and Stuart Hall's work on articulations, Keshavarz emphasizes the need for historical contextualization, particularly given the role of colonialism in the emergence of global mobility regimes and their decision-making bodies. As a material object, the passport does not have a named designer, but is instead the materialization of the complex negotiation among various participants of the mobility regime, from politicians and security companies to activists and graphic designers. This is crucial for understanding the critical perspective of the book, which is that 'of those who do not own one [a passport] or do not have access to one that can guarantee them equal admission into the current mobility regime' (p. 11). Keshavarz ensures throughout that the experiences of the subaltern are heard, as these are the narratives that have been written out of the histories and policies designed by mobility regimes and their institutions.

The book is structured into five main chapters that examine different 'passport situations' (p. 13) in which a passport is central to the articulation of specific relationships. Following the introduction, 'Histories' does not attempt to provide an exhaustive history of the passport, but rather considers how histories of passports reveal histories of state formation. Keshavarz makes a series of important points about postcoloniality, race and gender in determining the privileges and prejudices intertwined in the act of traveling across borders. Locating these practices at key historical junctures from the sixteenth century to the present, Keshavarz discusses how beggars, Roma, Indian subjects of the British Empire, and Chinese women immigrating to the United States have all experienced the exclusionary implications of the passport. This is problematized further by situations in which mobility regimes have deprived some citizens of functional passports, as was the case in the Soviet Union in 1922, as well as with the Nazi government's redesign of passports belonging to German Jews.

These histories form the methodological basis for the following chapter on ‘Power,’ which focuses on contemporary issues of movement within political ecologies. One of the most striking discussions here is the case of Maryam Khatoon Molkara, the first Iranian citizen who received legal permission to undergo sex reassignment surgery. By recounting Molkara’s experience of traveling with a passport that classified her as ‘male,’ Keshavarz demonstrates how ‘passports regulate bodies’ (p. 36), and indeed exist ‘at the point where the body and population meet’ (p. 40). This is supported further by an autoethnographic moment in which the author narrates an experience at Istanbul’s Atatürk Airport, where a young black man’s Swedish passport was questioned for its authenticity. The passport thereby facilitates and negotiates global understandings of gendered and racialized bodies, which are much more heterogeneous than the binaries designed by mobility regimes.

The highlight of the book are the chapters on ‘Passporting’ and ‘Dissent,’ and it is here that Keshavarz makes his most important contribution to the fields of design history and design studies. He proposes ‘passporting’ as a term to encompass ‘passports and their associated practices’ (p. 57), building upon histories and theories of crossing borders, and extending his notion of ‘design politics.’ Most of the material in these chapters comes out of his rich conversations with refugees, undocumented migrants and migration brokers from Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, offering crucial perspectives on the real-life effects of mobility regimes and their designed components. Interviews with participants reveal that the lack of a passport can also be an opportunity for creating a new, more mobile identity, one that often transgresses hegemonic understandings of race and ethnicity; for example, Nemat, originally from Afghanistan, has physical features that enable him to ‘pass’ as South Korean, which Keshavarz frames as an ‘internal error of translation, which yet again affirms the artificial relations between a body and its bound citizenship’ (p. 69). Benjamin’s notion of the

political role of the translator is discussed in this respect, and is merely one example of how Keshavarz gives new relevance to critical theoretical writings. Theory shifts into practice in the chapter on ‘Dissent,’ examining passport forgery as a critical design practice. By reconsidering the criminality of migration brokers and border transgressors, Keshavarz suggests instead that their design practice, though not devoid of violent exploitation, subverts the mobility regime by forging the relations of mobility in addition to the object itself.

The concluding chapter on ‘The Design Politics’ addresses the ethical limitations of design; in a world of increasing technological interactivity, designers often neglect the disconnections that many experience through the hegemony of the Global North. Herein lies the valuable lesson for the field of design history, which is that design historians often privilege the ‘utopian’ and the ‘good,’ whilst overlooking the precarious experiences of those who remain nameless in the Global South. With this in mind, Keshavarz’s book is essential reading for those engaged in global design history and related fields such as politics and sociology.

While I would have liked more images, including a few in colour, this might not have been possible due to the protected identities of interview participants. Keshavarz is to be commended for an engaging and provocative book that succeeds in communicating historical and contemporary experiences of migration, as well as illuminating critical issues that are largely underrepresented in design history.

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¹ See for example, A. Clarke and E. Shapira (eds.), *Émigré Cultures in Design and Architecture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).