Art historian Timo de Rijk was appointed Professor of Design, Culture and Society in Delft and Leiden last September. He calls this combination ‘a real breakthrough’. ‘Leiden University studies the workings of culture, while TU Delft aims at creating new things. These are fundamentally different approaches. I am the bridge between the two.’

Saskia Bonger

Hanging from Timo de Rijk’s coat rack are two intriguing little bags. Both contain artificial hair, but the locks in one bag are straight and blond, and those in the other black and red and curly. The new Professor of Design, Culture and Society at TU Delft and Leiden University keeps them as a memento of a research project in Rotterdam-Zuid. He had his students from VU University Amsterdam’s Design Cultures programme spent several weeks trying to uncover the aesthetic ideal of the residents of a multicultural neighbourhood built in the 1980s.

He laughs: ‘One of my fascinations is the history of hair. I found these hairpieces in a beauty shop. Pieces like these costs five euros. It’s a pretty insane sight seeing all that hair hanging here in these bags. But they are popular, especially among black women. I wanted to know what the habitat was of the groups living in this neighbourhood. How do they dress and why? What is their beauty ideal? These were the things I wanted the students to find out.’

What can a designer do with this information? You can think about how you can design products for specific target groups. If your goal is a social one, you can discover how to reach these groups. In that case you will need to know how they live their lives and what they find important. The government has a grand ambition to prevent society from falling apart. In order to do this you need to understand cultures and subcultures. One way of doing this is to look at the products they use. This is all the more important now that the cohesion between the various groups is breaking down and people are keeping to their own circles more and more.

People often do not know themselves why they do or like something. ‘We take many things for granted because we believe that this is the way it should be. That is how culture works. All your prejudices are part of cultural framing. A researcher has to interpret this. People rarely give a direct answer to a question. That makes the designed environment an important source of information.’

Do you take to the streets together with the students of Leiden University and TU Delft? ‘We have not yet done so in groups. Teaching at TU Delft is at a larger scale than in Amsterdam or Leiden. There are some fifty first-year students of Art History at Leiden University, while at TU Delft we have a hundred new students participating in the programme. My chair was created because the deans of the faculties in Delft and Leiden believe that the philosophical-analytical side and design practice have much to learn from each other. This is a real breakthrough: the one studies the workings of culture while the other aims at creating new things. These are fundamentally different approaches. I am a bridge, with one foot in art history and the other in the world of design. One of my ambitions is to make the potential offered by Leiden University available to TU Delft. In Leiden, you have academics who know everything about themes such as the culinary history of Japan, pop culture in the Islamic world and the relationship between East and West.

How can a designer and someone who knows all about the culinary history of Japan help each other? ‘I admit it is highly specific. Our students at...’
‘TU Delft students are less sensitive to what I call the ‘metaphysics’; the symbolical meanings in the world’
TU Delft conduct a lot of target group studies. These studies could be enriched by the knowledge available in Leiden. For example, the Chair of East-West Relations carries out in-depth studies into cultural differences. This information is very useful to TU Delft.

Are the students of TU Delft interested in this information?
'Not all of them, but we can see that it is catching on. We are increasingly able to communicate the importance of culture for designers. Design history is no longer the same subject it was when I came here in the late 1990s. The question then was: Where do we come from as designers? Were we engineers who translated technologies into the needs of consumers? Or artists who came up with artistic applications? The latter situation applied in the 18th century. In those days there already was something like a consumer society. At manufacturers, artists learned to create products for groups of customers who they did not know themselves. This had never been done before. You might well ask why it is we train people to become designers at TU Delft. It was the government who conceived this idea after the Second World War. The Netherlands had to be transformed into an industrialised society. TU Delft resisted at first, but in the late 1950s the University decided to include the discipline in its Architecture programme. They were almost too late, because in the 1960s it became clear that the Netherlands was failing in its goal to create an industrial society following Germany’s example. We make too few end-products. Take the automotive industry; for example. Germany has several car manufacturers, the Netherlands can boast only suppliers at most.'

Is that bad?
'Not at all. We have a large SME sector who build all kinds of things. And the original disadvantage of producing too little while at the same time training too many designers has turned into an advantage. Design is not limited to making products, and in fact this aspect may well be becoming less and less important. Moreover, the relative distance to industry has become standard practice. We now outsource a lot of the manufacturing to countries such as China. That means it has become less important to be in direct contact with the factory and what is going on there. Our designers are given a broad education. A designer trained in Germany is trained in such a way that he can start at Siemens or BMW straight away. And yet you do see a lot of Dutch designers working for companies like these. Their role is typically that of supervising the design process, in which engineering, design, ergonomics and marketing all play a role.'

Are the students of TU Delft capable of writing design history?
'We don’t make attractive flower vases. In fact, we do not make anything; we train students. They are not asked to make things that look nice and shiny on an exhibition stage. They are supervised through a process. Sometimes the result is unsophisticated or incomplete. But we do plant the seed. Design is powerful because it involves a product and a place for this product in society. That is where it acquires its meaning. A piece of art in a museum has the meaning that the artist has given it.'

What is the difference between the students of Leiden University and TU Delft?
'TU Delft students are less sensitive to what I call the ‘metaphysics’, the symbolical meanings in the world. They are more interested in facts. What you see is what you get. Yet no designer creates a design based only on figures. You can't say: 98 per cent of the users of a space is female, so I will design a female space. The design is determined by research, facts and figures. The shape this takes is up to the designer. This is contrary to the classical idea of engineering; that there is only one unavoidable solution.'

What are your plans for the coming years?
'I want to focus more on socially engaged design, social design. How can you use design to help implement social processes or behavioural change? I want to know more about how products are used in different cultures. Then we will be able to design products that are more attuned to public spaces. I once did a research project on barbecues. North African and Turkish people sometimes spend a whole Sunday outside with the family. Have we ever thought about this properly in the Netherlands? Hardly. We have parks and we say: you can sit there. But there are few specific facilities. The government has to ensure that public spaces meet the needs of the people. If they do not then there will be widespread frustration. Most products have a cultural component. Take cleaning products, for example. Smell is partly culturally determined. Our idea of a fresh smell is different to that in India. Designers can take this into account.'

**Who is Timo de Rijk?**

Timo de Rijk (1963) graduated from Leiden University as an art historian in 1988. He started his career at the auction house Van Stockum and then made the move to TU Delft. In 1998 he submitted his doctoral thesis entitled ‘The electric house’, in which he provided an overview and analysis of the design and acceptance of household electrical appliances. He has been working at TU Delft ever since. Between 2010 and 2013 he also served as a professor by special appointment of Design Cultures at VU University Amsterdam. As of September 2013, De Rijk is Professor of Design, Culture and Society. This is a joint chair shared by Leiden University and TU Delft. He teaches two subjects in Delft: Design History in the Bachelor's phase and Design, Culture and Society in the Master's. De Rijk has organised countless exhibitions and is Editor-in-Chief of the Dutch Design Yearbook. He is also president of the Association of Dutch Designers.