

Objects of Desire



DESIGN AND SOCIETY SINCE 1750

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Introduction

*Anthony J. Coulson, *A Bibliography of Design in Britain 1851-1970*, London, 1979, gives a good indication of the range of British design literature available.

Nearly every object we use, most of the clothes we wear and many of the things we eat have been designed. Since design seems to be so much a part of everyday life, we are justified in asking exactly what it is, what it does, and how it came into existence. In spite of all that has been written on the subject, it is not easy to find the answers to these apparently simple questions.* Most of the literature from the last fifty years would have us suppose that the main function of design is to make things beautiful. A few studies suggest that it is a special method of solving problems, but only occasionally has design been shown to have something to do with profit, and even more rarely has it been seen as being concerned with the transmission of ideas. This book developed out of my realisation that, especially in its economic and ideological aspects, design is a more significant activity than has usually been acknowledged.

Particularly in Britain, the study of design and its history has suffered from a form of cultural lobotomy which has left design connected only to the eye, and severed its connections to the brain and to the pocket. It is commonly assumed that design would somehow be soiled if it were associated too closely with commerce, a misconceived attempt at intellectual hygiene that has done no good at all. It has obscured the fact that design came into being at a particular stage in the history of capitalism and played a vital part in the creation of industrial wealth. Limiting it to a purely artistic activity has made it seem trivial and relegated it to the status of a mere cultural appendix.

Just as little attention has been given to design's influence on how we think. Those who complain about the effects of television, journalism, advertising and fiction on our minds remain oblivious to the similar influence of design. Far from being a neutral, in-offensive artistic activity, design, by its very nature, has much more enduring effects than the ephemeral products of the media because it can cast ideas about who we are and how we should behave into permanent and tangible forms.

Since 'design' is a word that will figure large in this book, it is as well to state at the outset what it means. In everyday speech, the word has two common meanings when applied to artefacts. In one sense, it refers to the look of things: saying 'I like the design' usually involves notions of beauty, and such judgements are generally made on that basis. As will already be clear, this book is not about the aesthetics of design. Its purpose is not to discuss whether, say, William Morris's furniture designs were more beautiful than those displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851, but rather to try to discover why such differences existed at all.

The second, more exact use of the word 'design' refers to the preparation of instructions for the production of manufactured goods, and this is the sense meant when, for example, someone says 'I am working on the design of a car.' It might be tempting to separate the two meanings and deal with them independently, but this would be a great mistake, for the special quality of the word 'design' is that it conveys both senses, and their conjunction in a single word rightly expresses the fact that they are inseparable: the way things look is, in the broadest sense, a result of the conditions of their making.

History, as I use it here, is concerned with the explanation of change, and the subject of this book is therefore the causes of change in the design of industrially-made goods. In other aspects of human existence that have been studied by historians – politics, society, the economy and some forms of culture – the theories that have been developed to explain change appear highly sophisticated compared to those employed in the history of design. Such a poor showing has come about largely through the confusion of design with art, and the consequent idea that manufactured artefacts are works of art. This view has been fostered by the collection and display of manufactured goods in the same museums as painting and sculpture, and by much that has been written about design. Thus, in a recent book, the statement 'Industrial design is the art of the twentieth century', seems calculated to obscure all the differences between art and design.*

*S. Bayley, *In Good Shape. Style in Industrial Products 1900 to 1960*, London, 1979, p.10.

The crucial distinction is that, under present conditions, art objects are usually both conceived and made by (or under the direction of) one person, the artist, whereas this is not so with manufactured goods. Both conceiving and fabricating their work allows artists considerable autonomy, which has led to the common belief that one of art's main functions is to give free expression to creativity and imagination. Whether or not this is an accurate view of art, it is most certainly not true of design. In capitalist societies, the primary purpose of the manufacture of artefacts, a process of which design is a part, has to be to make a profit for the manufacturer. Whatever degree of artistic imagination is lavished upon the design of objects, it is done not to give expression to the designer's creativity and imagination, but to make the products saleable and profitable. Calling industrial design 'art' suggests that designers occupy the principal role in production, a misconception which effectively severs most of the connections between design and the processes of society.

When it comes to explaining change, the confusion of design with art has led to a theory of causation which is as common as it is unsatisfactory. In many histories of design, change is accounted for by referring to the characters and careers of individual artists and designers – Chippendale's furniture designs might be said to differ from Sheraton's because Chippendale and Sheraton were different people, each with his own artistic ideas. It is when we try to identify the reasons for these differences that we run into difficulties, which become more acute when we consider not simply the work of individuals but the appearance of whole classes of goods involving a multitude of designers: why, for example, was office equipment designed in the 1900s universally different in appearance from that produced in the 1960s? Putting this down to differences in artistic temperament would be ridiculous.

Historians of design have often tried to get around the problem by attributing the changes to some sort of evolutionary process, as if manufactured goods were plants or animals. Changes in design are described as if they were mutations in the development of products, stages in a progressive evolution towards their most perfect form. But artefacts do not have a life of their own, and there is no evidence for a law of natural or mechanical selection to propel them in the direction of progress. The design of manufactured goods is determined not by some internal genetic structure but by the people and the industries that make them and the relationships of these people and industries to the society in which the products are to be sold.*

*P. Steadman, *The Evolution of Designs*, Cambridge, 1979, discusses the problems of biological analogies at length.

Yet while it is easy enough to say that design is related to society, the precise way in which the connection occurs has rarely been dealt with satisfactorily by historians. Most histories of design and of art and architecture have treated their subjects as largely independent of the social circumstances in which they were produced. Recently, though, it has become fashionable to refer to the 'social context' or the 'social background'. For example, Mark Girouard, in *Sweetness and Light*, a book about the nineteenth-century 'Queen Anne' style of architecture, begins by describing the critics' reception of the style, and continues:

'Both the fury and the rapture seem surprising until one examines its background, out of which it appeared with something approaching inevitability. "Queen Anne" flourished because it satisfied all the latest aspirations of the English middle classes.*'

*M. Girouard, *Sweetness and Light*, Oxford, 1977, p.1.

These remarks are followed by a few pages of generalisation about nineteenth-century society, after which Girouard proceeds to describe the work of the 'Queen Anne' architects almost entirely in architectural terms. Such cursory references to the social context are like the weeds and gravel around a stuffed fish in a glass case: however realistic these may be, they are only furnishings, and taking them away would have little effect on our perception of the fish. The use of 'social context' is rarely more than an ornament, allowing the objects themselves still to be regarded as if they had an autonomous existence where all but purely artistic considerations are trivial. To historians, the great attraction of the 'social context' has been to save them the trouble of having to think about how objects are related to their historical circumstances, and statements as imprecise as Girouard's 'something approaching inevitability' abound in other histories. The casual use of 'social context' is particularly deplorable in the study of design, which by its very nature, brings ideas and beliefs up against the material realities of production.

In this book, therefore, the history of design is also the history of societies: any account of change must rest upon an understanding of how design affects, and is affected by, the processes of modern economies.

One of the more elusive aspects of these processes is the part played by ideas, by what people think about the world they live in. Design, I believe, features large in this particular realm, and its role can be clarified, albeit in a somewhat mechanical way, by reference to Structuralist theory. The Structuralists argue that in all societies the troublesome contradictions that arise between people's beliefs and their everyday experiences are resolved by the

invention of myths. These conflicts arise just as often in advanced societies as in primitive ones, and myths flourish equally in both. In our own culture, for example, the paradox of the existence of rich and poor and of the great inequality between them in a society that maintains a belief in the Christian concept of the equality of all is overcome in the story of Cinderella who is sought out and married by the prince, proving that despite her poverty she can be his equal. Cinderella is a fairy story and thus remote from everyday life, but there are plenty of latter-day variants (e.g. secretary marries boss) which enable people to think that the paradox is unimportant or non-existent. Stories have been the traditional means of conveying myths, but in this century they have been supplemented by films, journalism, television and advertising.

In his book, *Mythologies*, the French structuralist critic Roland Barthes set out to explain the way myths work, and the power they have over the way we think. Taking a wide variety of examples, ranging from the language of guidebooks to the imagery of cooking in women's magazines and the reporting of weddings by the press, Barthes showed how these apparently familiar things signify all kinds of ideas about the world. Unlike the more or less ephemeral media, design has the capacity to cast myths into an enduring, solid and tangible form, so that they seem to be reality itself. We can take as an example the common assumption that modern office work is more friendly, more fun, more varied and generally better than office work was in 'the old days'. The myth serves to reconcile most people's experience of the boredom and monotony of office work with their wish to think that it carries more status than alternatives, such as factory work, where there is no pretence about the monotony. Although advertisements for office jobs, magazine stories and television serials have been responsible for implanting in people's minds the myth that office work is fun, sociable and exciting, it is given daily sustenance and credibility by modern equipment in bright colours and slightly humorous shapes, designs that help make the office match up to the myth.

For entrepreneurs, the utilisation of these myths is necessary to commercial success. Every product, to be successful, must incorporate the ideas that will make it marketable, and the particular task of design is to bring about the conjunction between such ideas and the available means of production. The result of this process is that manufactured goods embody innumerable myths about the world, myths which in time come to seem as real as the products in which they are embedded.

Design's extensive influence and complex nature make it far from easy to deal with historically. The number of industrially made artefacts is infinite, and even the most insignificant seeming design can prove on analysis to be extraordinarily complicated. Rather than making a vain attempt to be comprehensive, I have set out to suggest how the history of the design of any manufactured article might be approached, the kinds of question that could be asked and the answers that the study of its design might yield. Although I have discussed a great variety of articles in the course of this book, many of them in some detail, my choice has inevitably been somewhat arbitrary, and there are many cases where another article would have illustrated the argument equally well. Indeed, it would be true to say that the book could have contained a different set of designs and yet retained its argument intact.

Instead of discussing every aspect of each design introduced, an approach that might quickly become tedious, I have chosen to treat design in a series of essays, with each chapter developing one theme. As no object is dealt with exhaustively, I must leave it to the reader to pursue the other themes that arise from any particular design. Although the chapters should each stand on their own, they are intended, taken together, to suggest the significance of design in our culture and the extent of its influence on our lives and minds.