

Chapter Title: Production—consumption Model

Book Title: Design History and the History of Design

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Published by: Pluto Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt18mvngc.9>

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Production-consumption Model

The bulk of the literature on design consists of ‘partial’ studies in the sense that there are books on designers, products, styles, design education, etc., but what is lacking is a general account of how all these specific studies interrelate and, taken together, constitute a coherent totality. A general model of the production, distribution and consumption of design can be presented diagrammatically. Such a systematic representation makes clear the logical relationships and connections between the various elements. One advantage of this kind of model is that it enables us to see at a glance where a particular study belongs and to identify those topics which currently receive little attention.

A general model is necessarily highly abstract. No doubt it would need modifying when applied to any particular country. The model is not completely a-historical: it was designed with modern Western society in mind (1700–1980s), the era of the capitalist mode of production, so it would need to be changed drastically to apply to a tribal or feudal society. (Some degree of applicability to the latter is presumed because of the fundamental importance of production and consumption to human life.) How applicable it is to non-capitalist societies such as Cuba, China and the Soviet Union is also a moot point.

In Figure 2 the processes of design, production and consumption are treated as a fairly autonomous system, although it is obvious that these processes take place within a wider social environment. (Therefore we should always speak about design *within* society, rather than design *and* society.)

Any specific application of the model would need to take account not only of the boundaries which ensure design’s relative autonomy but also the interactions between the microsystem and its encompassing macrosystem. A general economic recession or boom would affect the sphere of design, as would more minor changes such as revisions in the laws relating to safety standards.

Within the capitalist mode of production more than one type of production occurs and some of these depart from the dominant mode. For instance, the handicraft mode typical of feudalism to some extent persists in the era of mass industrial production, even though its status *vis-à-vis* the dominant mode is anachronistic and marginal. Design in terms of an industrial system of manufacture, rather than craft production, is the subject of the illustration.

Orthodox Marxism employs a base/superstructure model to account for the structure of society in which a material foundation supports an ideological superstructure:



In the final analysis, Marxists argue, it is the base which determines what happens in the superstructure. Design cuts across the divide between these two realms because it is clearly part of the economy, part of industrial production and technology, but, equally clearly, it is an ideological phenomenon involving ideas, feelings, creativity, tastes, styles and so forth.

In Figure 2, for the purposes of exposition and clarity, the two processes of production and consumption are treated separately in a linear, sequential order, but it should be recognized that in practice the two processes are interdependent. As Marx explains in *Grundrisse*, production and consumption, together with distribution and exchange, are simply separate moments in a totality, a cyclical system. Their reciprocal nature is indicated by Marx as follows:

Without production, no consumption; but also, without consumption, no production; since production would then be purposeless . . . Production mediates consumption; it creates the latter's material; without it, consumption would lack an object. But consumption also mediates production, in that it alone creates for products the subjects for whom they are products. The product only obtains its 'last finish' in consumption . . .

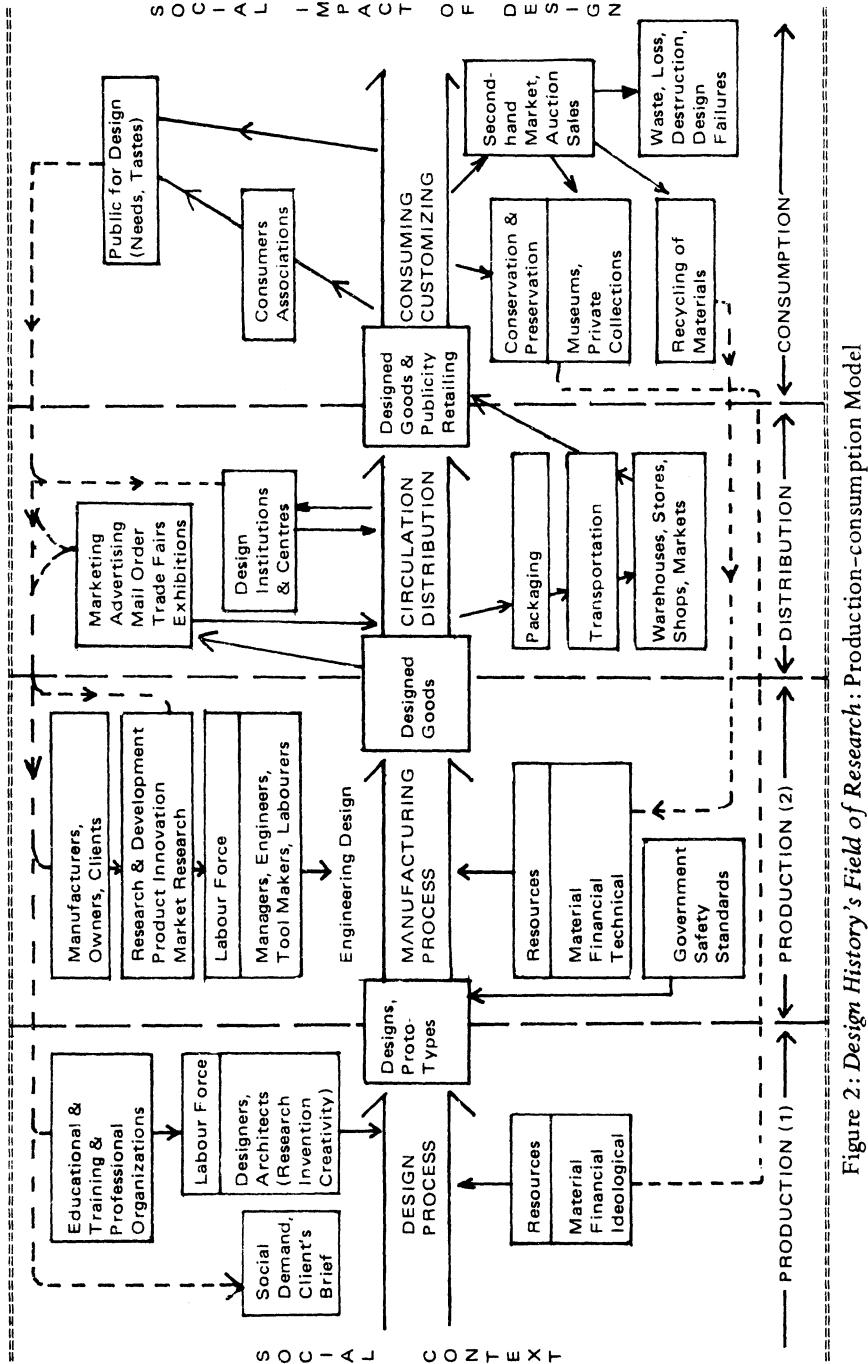


Figure 2: *Design History's Field of Research: Production-consumption Model*

Notes

1. Figure 2 is divided vertically into four sections representing different phases: production of a design; production of designed goods; distribution; consumption. The horizontal axis is thus one of time. Each process takes time and the sequence of events is logically ordered. One cycle of events is represented by the diagram. The actual length of cycles depends, of course, on the type of product being manufactured.
2. The dotted lines indicate the relative autonomy of the design realm. This signals the permeability of the boundary between micro and macro systems.
3. The reciprocal nature of production and consumption is indicated by various feedback lines which reveal, for example, the influence of the tastes of consumers upon the design process.
4. Figure 2 begins with the assumption that there is a social demand for design, otherwise it would not exist. This demand may be manifested by a specific commission to a designer or design team by a manufacturer, public utility or government department, or it could be a private initiative in which a designer devises a design or invention speculatively.
5. During the phase of production two labour processes occur. At the end of the first there is a design and, at the end of the second, a designed product. Both processes mobilize various forces and resources.
6. The particular labour force – designers – brought into existence by the division of labour and specialization of knowledge need to be trained, hence the inclusion of art and design colleges, architectural schools and so on. Architects and designers also form and join various professional and trade organizations which promote and regulate their activities.
7. Resources can be divided into three categories: (1) material (premises, plant, machines, tools, raw materials); (2) financial (fees, capital, loans, income); (3) aesthetic-ideological (skills, techniques, image banks, graphic conventions, styles, earlier designs, theories such as functionalism and modernism).
8. In Figure 2 the design process is separate from the manufacturing process. This represents the situation where a firm commissions a freelance designer or design team to undertake a specific task. However, in large firms such as motor car companies, design may be ‘in-house’, though even these usually have separate design departments. In car manufacture it is not only the

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vehicles which have to be designed but also the machines, the tools and the factories to make them – so engineers employed by the company or other subsidiary companies also engage in design.

9. Design is not mentioned in the distribution phase even though, of course, advertisements have to be designed, as do transportation vehicles and systems, exhibitions, shops, stores, supermarkets and mail order catalogues. This indicates that a great deal of design takes place between manufacturers, between different businesses, rather than for the public directly.

10. The consumption or reception phase. Consumers and users of designed goods are not a homogeneous mass – people are differentiated according to sex, age, race, class, religion, politics, nationality, region, occupation, language, family status, education, wealth, tastes, interests, etc. Manufacturers generally seek to ‘target’ potential consumers and their marketing departments use various systems of classification to assist this process, for example, crude categories AB, C1/2, DE, representing social groups according to a descending scale of income and social status.

During the consumption and use of designed goods a process of ‘reading’, interpreting and critical evaluation can be said to take place (decoding the meanings, stylistic references, connotations and practicality of the design). Perceptual, aesthetic and emotional responses are involved. It follows that the insights of aesthetics, psychology and psychoanalysis could be fruitful at this point.

11. Finally, it is assumed that design has an effect, for good or ill, on society as a whole. Design’s total impact on the quality of life is, of course, very difficult to measure, though it becomes obvious in particular instances especially when poor design results in a disaster of some kind.

12. Since Figure 2 represents a ‘steady-state’, cyclical model, it does not explain how innovation and radical change comes about. Such changes are the result of either alterations in the external environment – wars, revolutions, economic crises – or those internal to commodity production – saturated markets, customer boredom, falling sales due to the competition of rival firms.

13. Since the model only concerns itself with professional design, the designing which all people do to some extent is ignored, apart from the inclusion of customizing in the consumption phase.

because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed.¹

Furthermore, each process includes its opposite; that is, in the course of production, labour-power, tools and raw materials are used up, 'consumed' (Marx calls this process 'productive consumption'). And in the course of consuming (e.g. food) human beings produce themselves (hence the term 'consumptive production').

A material which is the culmination of one process of production often serves as the raw material for a second process of production in which it is used up. It follows that whether something is regarded as production or consumption depends upon the viewpoint adopted: a computer, from the point of view of the designer, is a design tool, an aid to production; but from the point of view of the computer manufacturer, the designer is a consumer or user of computers. Despite the duality of the two processes, Marx is inclined to assign priority to production, in part because production 'produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption'. Whether this remark still applies today is debatable: recent design and production is often said to be 'consumer led'.

Note

1. K. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973) pp. 90–4.