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Designers and Designed Goods – the Proper Objects of Study?

Initially, the agenda for design history was set by the precedents established by art and architectural history. And since art and architecture historians tended to construct their narratives around famous artists and masterpieces, many design historians followed suit. Hence the assumption that the proper object of study of the discipline was either designers or designed objects (or a combination of the two). Let us examine these topics to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

The Designer as the Object of Study

At the outset it is necessary to distinguish between monographs and biographies. A monograph is taken to be a study of the *work* of an individual artist, while a biography is taken to be an account of the *life*. Of course, in practice there is an overlap, but one can perhaps differentiate between those texts which foreground the work and those which emphasize the life.

A cursory examination of the stock of a specialist art bookshop will confirm that the monograph and the biography are extremely popular forms of presentation among art historians. They are not quite so popular among design historians though there are, of course, many books and exhibition catalogues celebrating the achievements of such famous architects and designers as William Morris, Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Eileen Gray, Ettore Sottsass, Gordon Russell, Walter Gropius, Harley Earl, Terence Conran, Christian Dior, Mary Quant and so on. Closely related to such books are the memoirs and autobiographies of designers themselves (some of which are boastful accounts and/or public relations exercises written by industrial designers).

It is easy to understand the appeal of the monograph/biography: to write or read about the life and work of one person is reassuring because the subject matter is limited and sharply defined; the story has a clear beginning, middle and end; the hero or heroine serves as a fulcrum around which everything else revolves. This type of text has a compelling unity.

Yet there are problems. Since identification with the central figure is more or less inevitable, it is difficult for writers and readers to maintain a critical and objective attitude. Also, the author has two objects of study: 'the life' and 'the work'. Few texts treat both with equal success. If 'the life' is given priority, 'the work' suffers and vice versa. Furthermore, the relationship between the two is problematical: the incidents and traumas of a designer's private life do not necessarily map neatly on to the development of his or her professional career. (A recent biography of a leading British architect contained a good deal of information about his adolescent sex life; what precisely this had to do with his architecture remained obscure.) Many designers lead routine lives; the excitement is in their creative and intellectual life which the biographer often finds difficult to convey. In those cases in which individuals led melodramatic lives, 'the work' is all too frequently swamped by the biographical saga.

Even supposing the biographer manages to cope with both life and work adequately, there still remain vexed questions concerning the relationship between the designer and the society of which he or she was a member.

Nicos Hadjinicolaou has argued that the monographic approach to history-writing entrenches two notions, both of which he rejects: first, the idea that individuals make history; and second, the idea that the history of art and design is the history of great artists and designers.[1] It is difficult for us to see that these notions are peculiar to our age and culture, an age in which the ideology of individualism is so pervasive, but their inadequacy can be revealed by considering projects which are clearly social and collective in character: the American and Soviet space programmes, major civil engineering works, modern motor car production, and so on. Such projects are impossible to ascribe to the genius or labour of a lone individual.

Further objections to biographies have been voiced by George Kubler: 'In the long view, biographies and catalogues are only way stations where it is easy to overlook the continuous nature of artistic traditions. These traditions cannot be treated properly in biographical segments. Biography is a provisional way of scanning artistic substance, but it does not alone treat the historical question in artists' lives, which is always the question of their relation to what preceded and to what will follow them.'[2] In other words, such studies, however numerous and thorough, do not constitute a history of art or design because they are too atomistic and narrowly focused. Texts recounting the story of design in terms of chronologically-arranged summaries of the careers of individual designers can encompass longer spans of time but are similarly of limited value because they present mountain peaks without foothills and, to change the metaphor, offer a single line of development akin to the progress of the Olympic torch from runner to runner which cannot cope with the multiple, parallel (and cross linking) strands taking place in reality.

For these reasons, and others, recent design historians have searched for an alternative to narratives centred upon individual designers. The favourite alternative – the social history approach – will be discussed later.

Anonymous Design

Before going any further it should be acknowledged that not all art historians have conceived of the history of art as the story of great artists. When, for instance, the Swiss scholar Heinrich Wölfflin proposed 'an art history without names' he undermined the artist-centred approach. Some writers have taken Wölfflin at his word, for example Bernard Rudofsky's books, *Architecture without Architects* (1965) and *The Prodigious Builders* (1977), focus upon the work of anonymous builders. Wölfflin's candidate for the object of study of art history in place of artists was *style*. A number of design historians have agreed and privileged the styles of design in their histories. In this context, the subtitle of Siegfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948) – 'a

contribution to anonymous history' – is relevant. Significantly, Giedion was once a student of Wölfflin; however, unlike his mentor, Giedion's approach was not stylistic but typological.

Art historians, archaeologists and anthropologists have frequently been confronted by collections of pots, carpets, icons, etc., whose individual makers were unknown. In this situation the approach to material culture based upon the life stories and personalities of exceptional individuals (the biography/psychology approach) becomes patently inadequate. Those design historians who believe that the history of design should encompass vernacular design are also faced by objects whose creators are unknown or about whom very little is known. They too, therefore, are compelled to seek an understanding of design based upon the behaviour of social groups rather than that of named individuals. Of course, in the modern period the names of designers – professional ones at least – are known or can be discovered. Even so, the ascription of design achievements to individual genius is much too simplistic. There is no doubt that individuals *do* make unique contributions to design but the magnitude of this element is generally exaggerated out of all proportion as a result of the ideology of individualism which has been so powerful in the West since the Renaissance.

Auteur Theory

At this point it is necessary to consider the concept of authorship. According to common sense, the designer is the person wholly responsible for the form and style of a designed artefact, in other words its author. In practice, however, authorship is much more complicated. For example, the film theorist Richard Dyer has distinguished four kinds of authorship in the cinema: (1) *individual* (a single person is identified as the sole originator of the film); (2) *multiple* (several people have cooperated to produce a film but individual 'voices' are still evident within it); (3) *collective* (a group or team of people have collaborated to make a film in such a way that individual contributions can no longer be identified); (4) *corporate* (organizations, firms or social

structures - e.g. film studios, Hollywood, capitalism - for which, or within which, many individuals work, are regarded as 'the author' of the film).[3]

Clearly, type one is the most personal and type four the most impersonal. Type one is primarily associated with the practice of the fine arts, and type four with large-scale, highly industrialized forms of production typical of the mass media and industrial design.

The film-making undertaken by major Hollywood studios is a clear-cut instance of collective cultural production: hundreds of different specialists combine together for months at a time to make films for the commercial cinema. But even here the ideological pressure to attribute manifestly collective products to the genius of a single individual is overwhelming; hence the habit of treating the director as the 'artist' responsible for the film. Before the 1950s only a few directors were treated as great artists. However, in that decade French film theorists associated with the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* began to promote previously little regarded American directors of 'B' movies to the status of *auteurs*. By examining a series of films by one director the theorists began to discover recurrent themes and motifs which, they thought, could only be ascribed to the influence of the director's personal vision. In this way directors came to be regarded as authors comparable to those who write novels.

Intellectual fashions are subject to rapid change, especially in Paris. In the 1960s the author theory was abandoned and superseded by its exact opposite: the 'death of the author' was announced. (This marked the liberation of the reader or viewer.) Works of art, it was now considered, were structures of meaning independent of their creator's intentions.

Clarity was introduced into the debate by Michel Foucault in his 1969 paper 'What is an author?'.[4] As Foucault explains, the positive aspect of the critical approach that attempts to dissolve the author is that it highlights the various roles which the 'author-function' plays in Western culture. In other words, authorship is a function of specific social and historical circumstances, economic systems, institutions and discourses (e.g. the legal one

relating to copyright). It is a role or place certain individuals occupy at particular times while others who write and paint do not. The same can be said of designers.

The Social Production of Design

Underpinning the ideology of individualism is a simplistic conception of the human subject: a unitary monad which somehow develops and functions independently of, or even in opposition to society. This view of the subject has been challenged by theoretical developments in several systems of thought since the mid-nineteenth century: Marxism drew attention to the economic and ideological determinants of human behaviour and thinking; psychoanalysis showed that the mind of the individual is divided (conscious and unconscious) and at the mercy of various hidden drives and complexes; twentieth-century linguistics, anthropology and sign theory have demonstrated the extent to which the subject is constituted by social structures, languages and codes.

One of the negative side-effects of the ideology of individualism has been to obscure the *social* nature of the production of art and design. Artists and architects have often been presented as the archetypal rebels against society. A vivid depiction and advocacy of such absolute artistic individualism is to be found in Ayn Rand's popular novel about an ultra-modern architect *The Fountainhead* (1943), later made into a movie directed by King Vidor and starring Gary Cooper. Marx, in contrast, contended that: 'production by an isolated individual outside society ... is as much an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to one another.'[5]

Various non-individualistic kinds of authorship have already been identified and these will be discussed in more detail shortly, but even when designing is undertaken by a single person alone in a studio it can be regarded as social for the following reasons: first, most designers have the benefit of education/training in design and engineering colleges provided by society as a whole; second, contemporary influences (few designers escape the influence of their peer group or current trends and fashions); third,

the power of tradition and precedent (new design is always dependent to some degree upon the accumulated knowledge and achievements of previous generations); four, the social character of design 'languages', codes and styles (these are the product of groups and classes, they develop over many centuries); five, the dependence of the designer upon clients and consumers without whom any large-scale production would be impossible.

An American sociologist once described the designer as 'the man in the middle', that is, a figure mediating between manufacturers and the public. It follows that the designer's creative freedom is limited by a series of pre-conditions and constraints – financial, technical, temporal, aesthetic, etc. – imposed by the client and the market. Designing usually involves many compromises. It also means performing work upon determinate materials in relation to specific problems. Often, the task set is not the creation of something new but the redesign of an old product. Perhaps the unique ability of the designer is to synthesize. It is in this context that the qualities of imagination, inspiration, invention and intuition play their part.

When emphasizing the social nature of human beings there is a danger of giving the impression that 'the social' is a kind of straitjacket, when of course what limits also *enables*: it is the shared, social phenomenon of language which enables people to communicate and to write poetry. Even as social beings individuals vary; they are capable of dissent and creativity, consequently it would be wrong to present designers as either completely free agents or as robots whose actions are totally determined by external powers. The historian's task is to analyse the degree of freedom enjoyed by designers in practice; and this varies from place to place, from time to time, and from commission to commission.

A final point about 'the social'. Since it embraces all human behaviour, it necessarily includes the bad as well as the good, that is, the kind of behaviour we call 'anti-social'. While all design takes place within society, it seems essential to preserve a distinction between *socially beneficial* and *socially detrimental* design (hence 'anti-social' or 'anti-human design') even though, of course, people disagree as to what is beneficial and what is detrimental.

When the word 'social' occurs within the discourses of design and design history it is invariably used in the sense of socially beneficial. A debate about the social nature of design and the social responsibilities of the designer took place in April 1976 at the Royal College of Art at a symposium organized by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design. The proceedings were published as *Design for Need: the Social Contribution of Design* (1977). The idea of human needs or demands is equally problematical: can one distinguish between true and false needs, between real, authentic needs and those fostered by modern marketing and advertising? Peter Lloyd Jones, one of the contributors, writes of a group of designers 'who reject the idea that design should be, as it usually is now, "a secondary activity responding to the needs of governmental and industrial organizations who are largely responsible for the initiation of design and the formulation of briefs". They claim that many human needs, even some of the most important ones, are ignored by industry and government alike. The problems they want to solve simply never turn up in the briefs they are given. These designers, who see themselves as itinerant problem-solvers to society at large, feel that designers themselves must initiate design activity in direct response to their own perception of human needs.'[6] Another contributor, Mike Cooley, described ideas for new, socially useful products generated by the workforce of the British company Lucas Aerospace. The workers in this company were faced by structural unemployment. Cooley writes: 'we saw that when society doesn't want the products that you make, the morale of a workforce making those items very quickly declines. We therefore evolved the idea of a campaign for the right to work on socially useful products.'[7] In this instance, therefore, there was a grassroots attempt to fulfil the human needs of both producers and users.

Marketing the Designer

One reason for the tenacity of the 'great designer' syndrome in the discourse of design, despite endless critiques of it, is that the ideology of individualism and the Romantic conception of the

artist remain potent in business and the mass media, amongst designers and consumers. Designers are thus promoted as charismatic figures as a means of selling goods. Batches of products are endowed with labels carrying the name of an individual 'author' (the equivalent of the artist's signature on a series of canvases) even if the label is, in reality, a trademark, even if the products in question are the work of a team, a fashion house or a corporation.

Modern industry's mass production capability makes available to the populace large quantities of identical consumer goods. This means that many people will drive the same type of car, wear the same type of clothes, etc. For supporters of individualism this poses a problem because they associate commonality of dress and lifestyle with totalitarian regimes hostile to personal freedom. They value what differentiates people, not what they share. They desire an exclusivity incompatible with mass prodution and consumption. (The only truly individual goods are, of course, those which are one-off, tailor made, and which depart from all existing styles and conventions.) Manufacturers and designers negotiate this problem in various ways, one of which is designer-named goods.

Meanwhile, on the consumer's side, advertising seeks to persuade customers that by *choosing* certain goods they will be expressing themselves and exercising individual taste even though thousands of other customers may be making the same 'individual' choice. Such paradoxes arise because there is a deep-seated refusal in our culture to recognize the contradiction between the ideology of individualism on the one hand, and the mass production and democratization of goods, on the other.

Designers as a Professional Group

In one sense the concentration upon the designer which has hitherto been criticized is justified, because although all human beings participate in design to some extent, only a tiny minority become professional, full-time designers. The existence of designers as a particular occupational group is, of course, the consequence of centuries of development, the division of labour,

and the specialization of function associated with the growth of human knowledge, industry and the emergence of ever more complex societies. In the person of the designer the power of planning and conception which all humans possess has been concentrated. Once could say the designer has virtually monopolized this power and by so doing has diminished the ability of the majority to influence the design of goods, services and environments. Concerned professionals periodically attempt to overcome this alienation - by means of public participation, community architecture, and so on - but it remains a difficult problem to solve.

While there are sociological studies of artists and art students, so far as I am aware comparable studies of designers (as a particular social group) have yet to be undertaken.[8] One category of designers has, however, attracted the interest of design historians, namely the consultant designer. Witness F. Mercer's 1947 book *The Industrial Design Consultant* and P. Sparke's 1983 book *Consultant Design: the History and Practice of the Designer in Industry*. Texts such as these are not concerned so much with individual designers as with the particular social role or function they fulfil in relation to industry.

Histories of Design Teams

In the twentieth century design has often been the result of a team effort rather than an individual achievement. Small groups of young designers and architects have repeatedly joined forces to found agencies, partnerships and practices. In this way they can offer clients a wider range of skills and specialist knowledge, they can share office and advertising expenses, and they can handle larger volumes of work. Several accounts have been written about a famous British example - Pentagram - founded in 1972 by five designers: Theo Crosby, Colin Forbes, Alan Fletcher, Mervyn Kurlansky and Kenneth Grange.[9]

A text devoted specifically to the topic of group practices is Michael Middleton's *Group Practice in Design* (1967). After a general discussion of the benefits and problems of such collaborations, the author reviews a number of examples which

range from the design of tractors to buildings, from the interiors of ocean liners to the production of a television serial. Middleton believes that designers cannot work successfully in teams unless they share 'a common language of appearances' (an aesthetic programme?). He also makes the point that distinct design teams from different specialisms can combine forces to tender for particular projects, for example, a team of engineers and a team of architects.

During major projects small architectural practices can expand considerably. Richard Rogers Associates, for instance, employed 30 to 40 architects and engineers while designing the Lloyd's Building in London. A structure designed by such a large number cannot surely be credited to the creative genius of a single individual – Rogers – however dominant he may have been. One presumes that in such cases the chief designer's contributions involve a major input into the overall conception and, later, synthesis and coordination.

Teams of designers have also been established by large industrial companies, particularly motor car manufacturers. For instance, the American giant General Motors once had five design studios (one for each division of the company). As Stephen Bayley's *Harley Earl and the American Dream Machine* (1984) records, Earl took charge of 50 staff when he was appointed 'Head of Art and Color' in 1927; when he retired in 1959 that figure had risen to 400.

Any design historian who regards the issue of individual contributions to team projects as crucial is faced with the task of discovering exactly who did what. Essentially, this is the venerable skill of connoisseurship and art history: making correct attributions.

Entrepreneurial and Company Histories

Within the discipline of art history, patronage is an important subject. It is one which undermines the idea that artists are totally independent beings because patrons have frequently contributed to the decision-making involved in the production of art. Patrons can be wealthy individuals or groups of people (organizations

and institutions). In the realm of craft, architecture and design there are still individual patrons but the majority of commissions derive from commercial firms and public bodies. Sometimes, the latter are led by enlightened entrepreneurs who are enthusiastic supporters of design. A well-known example is Frank Pick (1878–1941), the commercial manager of the London Passenger Transport Board, who did so much to improve the design of the city's underground system in the 1930s, as C. Barman's *The Man who Built London Transport* (1979) recounts. Histories of such entrepreneurs and of companies who employ designers are, therefore, the equivalent in design history of studies of patronage in art history.

The company history is a genre of history-writing which shifts the emphasis from the individual designer to a more collective design process. A large company may employ teams of 'in-house' designers and/or a succession of freelance, consultant designers, and as a consequence its design profile and corporate image are not individual achievements but collective ones which evolve and change over time. Examples of such histories include: Alfred Sloan, *My Years with General Motors* (1965); L. Whiter, *Spode: a History of the Family Factory and Wares* (1970); G. Rees, *St Michael: a History of Marks & Spencer* (1969); B. Phillips, *The Habitat Story* (1984); Akio Morita and others, *Made in Japan* (1986) (the Sony Corporation); P. Kleinman, *The Saatchi Story* (1987).

Texts such as these generally blend some social and economic history with the history of trade, business, management, marketing, invention and product innovation. Well-researched company histories can provide the design historian with essential contextual information but they can suffer from two limitations: first, a lack of critical evaluation and objectivity (some accounts are little more than public relations exercises which flatter the company and ignore its failures and any anti-social or corrupt activities; they are often commissioned by the firm or written by its managing director; they are even, at times, published by the firm in question); second, a dearth of information about the role of design in the success or failure of the company (unless, of course, the company concerned was founded

by a designer: Terence Conran's 'Habitat' chain of stores is a case in point).

It is perhaps necessary to distinguish between the design of a company's products and the design of its corporate image, that is, the difference, say, between the goods manufactured and the company's logo, letter headings, truck liveries, and so on. Of course, the two are usually intimately linked because the firm's visual identity is normally stamped on all it produces. Nevertheless, corporate design is a topic in its own right, as books such as *Design Co-ordination and Corporate Image* (1967) by F. Henrion and A. Parkin, and *The Corporate Personality* (1978) by W. Olins and M. Wally, testify.

Officially commissioned company histories will almost inevitably represent the company from the point of view of its owners or management. A very different perspective of the same organization may emerge if one descends to the shop floor and listens to the experiences of employees. To cite just one example: in 1978 *History Workshop*, a journal of socialist historians, published the memories of Arthur Exell, a car worker for 48 years, of life in the Morris Motors factory, Oxford, during the 1930s. Such accounts may include little that is directly about design, but the historian can glean many details of factory layout, assembly methods and management/labour relations from them.

Studies of particular trades encompass the histories of many companies and their employees. A notable recent example was the exhibition 'Furnishing the World: the East London Furniture Trade 1830–1980' held at the Geffrye Museum, London, in 1987 (a book by Pat Kirkham was published to accompany the exhibition). This show was particularly valuable for its documentation of the conditions of production and employment in the many small workshops of the East End, of the several crafts involved in the making of cheap furniture, of the various types of poorly paid labour – skilled and unskilled – upon which the trade depended. A trade of this kind was half-way between craft and industrial manufacture; it could survive only for a limited period while certain geographical, economic and technological conditions prevailed. Designers as such were not normally

employed. Designs were based on past examples and copied from photographs, other firms' catalogues and West End shops.

While it is essential to establish the context within which design occurs, there is a danger in trade histories that so much attention will be given to economic, social, labour and market issues, that little space remains for questions of design and style in their own right.

Designed Goods as the Object of Study

> It is obvious that the new Citroën has fallen from the sky inasmuch as it appears at first sight a superlative *object*. We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance – a transformation of life into matter . . .[10]

Roland Barthes' remarks concerning the impact of a new car call attention to the aura with which goods can be endowed when displayed under spotlights at motor shows. Many advertisements and illustrations in design books convey the same impression. They present industrial products as if they were precious works of art: isolated from people and the everyday environment, surrounded by a halo of light, the designed object becomes a fetish. In design history too a fetish is made of the designed object as indicated by books such as *One Hundred Great Product Designs* (1970) and *Cult Objects* (1985). Goods, products and appliances of all kinds are, undoubtedly, of major importance to design historians. The appeal of washing machines, cars, shoes, chairs, telephones and so forth is easy to understand: they are discrete, concrete entities which make highly convenient research materials. Unlike the thoughts of a designer, the tastes of a consumer or the influence of a design institution, they can be seen, touched and photographed.

Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to equate *the study of a designed object* with *the object of study of design history* for the following reasons. First, in order to understand a product the historian's research has to extend well beyond the limits of

the object itself, to the design process of which the object is simply the end-result, for example. Second, design historians are interested in such phenomena as styles and while these are perceived as qualities of objects, they cut across the autonomy of individual items. Also, in the fields of architectural and environmental design, historians often study not single buildings but extended areas such as housing estates, shopping malls and whole cities, which consist of a disparate assembly of things. The historian, in these cases, is concerned with design as diffused throughout the whole system rather than as distilled in a solitary artefact. Third, design historians are concerned not so much with single objects as with groups of objects arranged in types and series and in the relations *between* those objects and the people who make, use and profit from them. Four, since design historians are *historians* it is the *history* of designed objects which concerns them, that is, objects in particular periods and social contexts, objects undergoing changes through time.

To elaborate on point four: the complexity of the task of describing and explaining change in design can be discerned even if we restrict ourselves to the example of a single product type. A type of artefact can alter over time in several respects both quantitatively and qualitatively:

(1) A product-type can be invented; it can also cease to be made.
(2) It can increase in numbers, then remain in a steady state, or decline in numbers. A 'population' of objects can oscillate in size, alternately growing and declining.
(3) Products can remain in one area or they can be dispersed ever more widely.
(4) A type can change its form by means of gradual, cumulative additions, variations and improvements or by means of more drastic periodic revisions. Such revisions may transform the type to such an extent that it crosses a threshold and becomes a new product-type. By the addition of features products can become more complex; they can also be simplified. They can oscillate between the poles of complexity and simplicity.

(5) A product can be combined with others so that it becomes an element in a larger assembly.

What archaeologists and anthropologists have tried to do when considering artefact populations over long periods of time is to identify any patterns or regularities in the data, such as cycles or increases in the pace of change, and then to seek explanations of them. This process has at times involved the use of graphs and charts to present the data and plot any results. Since most design historians have been trained in the humanities rather than the social sciences, the techniques for manipulating data routinely employed by social scientists are unfamiliar to them.

It follows from the above that the designed object is simply the nexus of a whole series of relationships which it is the task of the design historian to explore. The designed object is one starting point or focus for research, not its ultimate destination. This view is shared by Jean Baudrillard, who writes:

> The empirical 'object', given in its contingency of form, colour, material, function and discourse ... is a myth ... the object is *nothing*. It is nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it, as such - the hidden logic that not only arranges this bundle of relations, but directs the manifest discourse that overlays and occludes it.[11]

There is no intention here to deny the materiality of designed goods, but I would argue that artefacts are more than physical things: they are also ideological phenomena. They are ideological in two respects: (1) a designed product consists of materials which have been *organized* in a specific way to serve specific human purposes, its organization or form or design is not a substance in the same sense as the physical materials from which it is made (it is also worth adding that if the materials humans need are not to be found ready-made in nature, new ones can be invented); (2) immediately products are bought and used they gain symbolic or signifying dimensions, they begin to communicate meanings and values. For instance, people who own the

most expensive cars not only tell the world what kind of transportation they possess, they also indicate their high social status and/or wealth. Any departures from the standard product, such as additional decoration, will communicate further information about the owner's individual tastes. To capture the double-sidedness of artefacts the Soviet literary theorists P. Medvedev and M. Bakhtin devised the expression 'object-sign'.[12] Appropriately, the word 'design' includes the word 'sign'.

Depending upon the nature of the economic system within which they are produced, designed goods acquire yet further non-physical characteristics. Within capitalism, for instance, the majority of goods enter a marketplace where they gain *exchange-values* in addition to their *use-values* dependent upon their physical attributes. In other words, they become *commodities*. At first sight it might seem that this economic fact has nothing to do with the design of consumer goods, but when manufacture takes place with the marketplace in mind, then this can indeed influence how they are designed.

In *The Codes of Advertising* (1987) Sut Jhally observes that when goods appear in the marketplace, information about how they were designed and manufactured is not normally available, with the result that the social relations of production which gave rise to the artefacts in the first place are concealed. (The Barthes' quote made the same point.) Our perception of such goods and our behaviour towards them could certainly be changed if we learnt from other sources that they were, say, made by exploited child labour in a Third World dictatorship, that they used up scarce non-renewable resources, and so on. One valuable function the design historian could perform is precisely to reveal such hidden relations. Jhally goes on to argue that the lack of information about production creates a meaning-gap which in consumer societies is filled with *advertising*, hence the real is hidden by the imaginary.

When the whole spectrum of products generated by a modern industrial society is considered, it becomes evident that design historians feel more at home with some kinds of designed objects than others. They manifest a preference for consumer durables. These are artefacts which last several years, so one can understand

why scholars tend to concentrate upon them rather than upon the multitude of non-durable products also generated by modern consumer societies. Ignoring the latter causes a lop-sided account of design. Contemporary snack foods, for example, are as much the consequence of research and design as more permanent goods, and they too deserve the historian's consideration.

Making a fetish of the *physical* object also unnecessarily limits the discipline's potential subject-matter. Besides physical artefacts there exist what have been called 'mentefacts', that is, conceptual systems and structures (logic systems, computer programs, educational courses, stacking structures for aircraft above airports, etc.) which also involve design. Mentefacts are frequently ignored by design historians because they lack the tangibility of objects like typewriters and chairs.

Object-centred histories or guides can be linked to two social developments. First, the growth of design museums and exhibitions which find objects convenient things to collect and display. Curators want to document their collections as fully as possible, so research accretes around the objects. Secondly, the growth in the market for second-hand designed goods, especially those which can be attributed to famous designers. This tendency reproduces the connoisseurial tradition of art history which serviced private collecting and the antique trade. The collecting/connoisseurial approach to design concerns itself with questions of aesthetics, attribution, monetary value and the pleasures of collection and possession. It can generate much useful information but no adequate history of design can be based on this approach.

The Canon

Once a number of histories exist which celebrate more or less the same set of 'great' or 'pioneer' designers and their 'classic' or 'cult' objects it is fair to say that a *canon* has been established comparable to those canons of great artists and masterpieces found in literature, music and the visual arts. Critics of such histories do not wish to deny that there are qualitative differences

between designers and between products, but they argue that the geography of a mountain range cannot be understood in terms of peaks alone. (It is surely necessary to include bad and mediocre examples in order to reveal qualitative differences by comparing them to the best.) Also, they question the process by which the canon comes into being: it is a historian's construction not a natural phenomenon and some wonder why, for example, the pantheon of designers includes so few women.

Critics of the canon suspect, too, that a simplistic conception of history underlies it, that is, the 'relay race' conception: the baton of genius or avant garde innovation passes from the hand of one great designer to the next in an endless chain of achievement.

Few design historians have reflected on the nature of the canon and studied the critical labour involved in its reproduction. One who has is Juan Bonta. His book *Architecture and its Interpretation* (1979) traces, via a case-study of the critical reception of Mies van der Rohe's 1929 Barcelona Pavilion over several decades, the process of canonization in action. To generalize from this example: the first stage, Bonta demonstrates, is pre-canonical: the work is increasingly mentioned, praised and predictions are made in the professional literature as to its future canonical status. When a single positive interpretation/evaluation crystallizes within the scholarly community, the work attains canonical status. Bonta argues that pre-canonical interpretations are the most creative. Once the work is fixed in the canon initial insights tend to be lost or blurred as they are regurgitated by commentators at some distance from the original. Works which fail to achieve canonical status are weeded out and forgotten; they then become invisible. Canonization is followed by a dissemination phase in which the authoritative interpretation of the specialists is conveyed to a wider public via popular articles and textbooks. After this there are three possibilities: the work may become a cultural monument beyond the reach of criticism, or it may suffer a decline in reputation and be forgotten, or it may be subject to re-interpretation and re-evaluation by a younger generation of critics examining it from new perspectives.

The Design Process as the Object of Study

A plausible case could be made for the contention that the central focus of design historians ought to be *the process of designing* because designing is the heart of the subject. Any process is, of course, much harder to observe than a finished product. Processes take time - perhaps years in the case of a major architectural project - and they are, to some extent, hidden from view: the ideas and unconscious inspirations of designers are not readily accessible to the historian. Also, in the case of certain sensitive products - military weapons for instance - official secrecy may prevent access to the necessary information and personnel. None the less, pictures of industrial design processes can be built up from clients' briefs, notes of product planning meetings, sketches, working drawings, models, interviews with designers and so forth.

In some cases the design process relating to particular products has been documented from start to finish. An exhibition was mounted at the Boilerhouse, London, for example, in 1983 which traced the evolution of the Ford Sierra car from inception to completion: 'The Car Programme: 52 months to job one or how they designed the Ford Sierra'. Similarly, Graham Robson's *Metro: the Book of the Car* (1982) recounts the story of the British Leyland £270 million project which culminated in the launch of the Metro in October 1980. (Robson, incidentally, is not an academic historian but a motoring journalist and motor sport enthusiast.) Bryan Appleyard's sophisticated 1986 biography of the British architect Richard Rogers also contains a great deal of detail and insight into the long-drawn-out design processes involved in the construction of major structures such as the Pompidou Arts Centre in Paris and the Lloyd's building in the City of London.

Even better than exhibitions and books for recording processes are, of course, the moving-image media of film and video. Hence the value of films and TV programmes about design.

Relevant to any historian interested in the design process is the growing body of literature on what is termed 'design methods'. This literature represents the reflections of practitioners and

theorists on designing. Their aim in making the methods used explicit and discussing their various strengths and weaknesses is, of course, to make designing more effective and scientific.

Design Institutions as an Object of Study

Institutions are organizations founded to promote particular purposes. They can be formal structures with premises and permanent staff or they can be more informal networks of like-minded people. Within the field of design several types of institution exist and there is a small body of literature devoted to them. Writings on design institutions are relevant here because they extend the object of study beyond designers, products and processes.

There are histories of museums with design collections such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York; histories of schools of design (in general) and of single educational establishments such as the Bauhaus, Ulm and the Royal College of Art; and histories of organizations concerned with the promotion of design such as the Design Council in Britain and the Deutscher Werkbund in Germany. In addition there are more wide-ranging surveys, for instance, Richard Stewart's *Design and British Industry* (1987). This book concentrates on the efforts of institutions to improve the quality of design of British products. It includes accounts of the Royal Society of Arts, the Design and Industries Association, the British Institute of Industrial Art, the Council for Art and Industry and the Design Council. As minor themes it also discusses design education and the role of exhibitions in promoting design.

Three dangers beset institutional histories: (1) boredom – accounts of the doings of bureaucrats and officials can be very tedious; (2) an uncritical identification with the assumptions and policies of the institutions under review; and (3) a failure to situate them in the larger context of social and economic change.

Necessarily, the study of institutions shifts the emphasis away from products and individuals, though this is not to deny that

certain forceful individuals have a strong impact upon the direction or policies of institutions. Institutions are run by groups of people cooperating and/or disputing. Relations of power usually exist between them and the organizations of the state. Some carry out government policies but others pursue different ideals. During the 1930s a conflict arose between the aims of the Bauhaus and those of the Nazi regime, with the result that the design school had to close.

Institutions - especially public ones - have to define and make known their objectives and policies. They tend, therefore, to generate many documents. These records can provide the historian with valuable sources of information about changing attitudes towards design. Hans Wingler, for example, established a Bauhaus archive in 1961 which is now housed in a purpose-built museum, designed by Walter Gropius, in West Berlin.

Measuring the success or failure of an institution remains problematical: has the Design Council and its exhibition centre in London really managed to improve the standard of British design and public taste? In the absence of a control, how can one tell? The case of the Bauhaus is more clear cut. No design historian is likely to disagree with the opinion that it has had a tremendous influence upon twentieth-century art education, architecture and design. It is easily the design school with the greatest volume of books, articles and memoirs devoted to it.

Aside from official institutions, significant contributions to the discourse of design can also be made by informal, short-lived groups such as the so-called 'Independent Group' (IG) - British artists and intellectuals - who met at the ICA, London, for a time in the early 1950s. Their small discussion meetings and later articles on design and mass media were to have a surprising impact upon the development of British visual culture. (Reyner Banham was a member of IG, as was Richard Hamilton, the pop artist. Hamilton wrote a series of papers on aspects of design and mass media that were as intelligent and perceptive as those of any professional design critic.)[13] As a result, the IG has been the subject of intensive research on the part of certain scholars for a number of years.[14]

It is clear from the above that the overriding interest of design

institutions is their role as ideological battlegrounds, as the sites where different ideas about design are made explicit and struggled over. Institutional studies are to be welcomed because they add another layer of complexity to the object of study but, even so, they only represent a step in the right direction. A comprehensive picture, it is proposed, can only be achieved by situating studies of designers, goods and institutions within a broader field of research, one capable of displaying, systematically, the relationships between all the various elements involved. Accordingly, it is to such a model that we now turn.

Notes and References

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