Introduction

Design is an increasingly popular subject in schools, colleges, industry, retailing and the mass media. After many years of lukewarm support, the British Government too is now promoting a greater consciousness of design because it realizes that its 'added value' is a vital factor in the economic success of businesses and nations.[1] Not only has design come to be regarded as crucial in economic terms, but also as a means of social control and harmony: design against crime and vandalism; new housing designs and the re-design/renewal of city centres such as Belfast as a way of countering the effects of civil strife. Furthermore, it would seem an obsession with design and style among so many in Britain during the 1980s is a mask or compensation for a spiritual lack. In the absence of social unity and a sense of community, people seek relief from alienation in the hedonistic pleasures of consumerism. The motto appears to be: 'Living well, with style, is the best revenge.'

Disasters of all kinds occur with monotonous regularity in humanly devised systems. This impresses upon us the fact that good design is not simply a question of taste or style, it is literally a matter of life and death. The sheer number of failures indicates that design is too important to be left to designers or to politicians who think of it as merely a means of achieving higher profits for commercial companies or as a way of revamping their image to win elections.

As the crowded shelves of the bookshop in London's Design Centre testify, publications on design are becoming ever more numerous and wide-ranging. Many of them are histories of design but, as yet, there is only one introduction to the discipline of design history – *Design History: a Students' Handbook* (1987) edited by Hazel Conway – and it is aimed at the beginner. This text is also intended as an introduction to the discipline

but the level assumed is that of final year undergraduates and postgraduates studying for an MA qualification.

Conway's anthology consists of short essays by different specialists devoted to particular sub-categories of design: dress and textiles, ceramics, furniture, interior design, industrial design, graphics and environmental design. To divide the subject in this way is a perfectly valid, if conventional, procedure and it matches the way it tends to be organized in educational establishments; however, this is not how the subject is tackled in this text. No doubt historians do encounter differences between the study of dress and graphics but, arguably, these differences are minor compared to the basic theoretical issues common to both. The disadvantage of dividing the subject into separate fields is that discussions of these basic issues are bound to be scattered. Furthermore, despite the wide range of subjects featured in Conway's anthology, it still fails to encompass design in its totality. For instance, architectural, engineering, theatre, military and transportation design are not discussed in their own right.

The aim of this book is to raise questions rather than to reproduce conventional wisdom. It begins with an account of the discipline of design history, it then problematizes the concept of design and, after reviewing the general difficulties of history-writing, it considers the various kinds of histories of design being produced with particular reference to the methods of analysis employed. Finally, it looks at certain important concepts such as style and taste.

This book seeks to provide an overview of design history and its conceptual and methodological problems. Because the potential range of the material is so vast and complex, it aims to be a guide to orientate the novice historian, so that, for example, some discussion of the relevance of structuralism and semiotics to design history is included but no attempt has been made to treat either of these topics in any depth or detail. I have assumed that anyone intrigued by these modes of analysis will read the published introductions and the key works in those fields.

Any survey of such a diverse and heterogeneous subject as design history is bound to be, to some degree, eclectic or plural in the sense that various methods and approaches have to be

considered as objectively as possible. However, my own inclination is towards a critical theory/materialist approach to the writing of the history of design.

In the course of this text a wide range of literature on the history of design is analysed. This literature varies from the scholarly-scientific to the popular-journalistic. In bookshops the latter type predominates. Design is a subject which most publishers feel requires large-format surveys on glossy paper with full-colour picture spreads. The texts of such books tend to be short and superficial. Nevertheless, this kind of material has not been excluded because it is often here that the theoretical issues and problems facing the discipline are most glaringly obvious. Criticisms of other writers should not be taken as a sign that I am unaware of the commercial pressures which limit what can and cannot be published and of the real intellectual difficulties standing in the way of an improvement in the standards of design history-writing. I am only too conscious of the fact that many of the faults I identify I have been guilty of myself in the past.

Design is a particularly fertile and challenging subject for the historian because it occurs at a point of intersection or mediation between different spheres, that is between art and industry, creativity and commerce, manufacturers and consumers. It is concerned with style and utility, material artefacts and human desires, the realms of the ideological, the political and the economic. It is involved in the public sector as well as the private sector. It serves the most idealistic and utopian goals and the most negative, destructive impulses of humankind. The task of the design historian is a daunting one requiring as it does familiarity with a multitude of topics and specialisms. This makes a guide all the more necessary.

Complementary Reading

A bibliography of all the books cited is provided at the end of the book, together with notes and references at the end of each chapter. However, there are certain publications which merit mention here as complementary reading or sources of reference. Undergraduate students, for instance, may well be uncertain

about the meaning of such words as 'ideology', 'materialism' and so forth. Besides standard English dictionaries, certain specialist glossaries and encyclopedias are helpful in this respect.

Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983). This paperback does not include 'design' but it does feature 'class', 'empirical', 'ideology', 'industry', 'consumer', 'taste' and 'materialism'. Williams' discussion of keywords is most useful because it is historical.

D. Runes (ed), *Dictionary of Philosophy* (1960). This one-volume book contains short articles by various scholars on individual philosophers, schools of philosophy and key concepts.

David Sills (ed), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968–79). This 18-volume work is stocked by most major reference libraries and includes lengthy articles on questions of theory and method including 'content analysis', 'typology', 'historiography', 'values', 'culture', 'mass society', 'technology', 'fashion', 'culture', 'crafts', 'aesthetics' and 'advertising'.

The Encyclopedia of World Art (1958-68). This standard work includes articles on 'design', 'designing' (in art), 'graphic arts', 'industrial design', 'publicity and advertising'.

T. O'Sullivan and others, *Key Concepts in Communication* (1983). Although concerned with media and cultural studies rather than design, this paperback is of value to the novice design historian. Among the concepts featured are: 'gender', 'functionalism', 'hegemony', 'discourse', 'determination', 'pluralism', 'base and superstructure'.

Adam and Jessica Kuper (eds), *The Social Science Encyclopedia* (1985). A one-volume reference work which includes entries on 'advertising', 'Annales school', 'business cycles', 'consumer behaviour', 'institution', 'mass media', 'nationalism', 'structuralism' and 'subculture'.

For more sophisticated readers with an interest in questions of theory and method in relation to material culture, I would recommend David L. Clarke, *Analytical Archaeology* (1978), a

mainly systems theory approach to archaeology, and Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968), a critical and detailed survey of anthropological thought.

Note

1. In 1982 the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, head of a Conservative administration, held a design 'seminar' at 10 Downing Street. Government spending on the promotion of design was subsequently increased from £4 million to £12 million.

   A 1987 report by the Design Council estimated that the rapidly expanding British design consultancy business was worth over £1 billion a year and employed 29,000 people.

   Most of the examples cited in this book refer to a London/British context because this is the situation I know best. However, it is assumed that the points being made have a general validity.

A modern empirical discipline ought to be able to aim at more rewarding results than piling up data and a steady output of imitation history books.

David L. Clarke, *Analytical Archaeology* (1978)

It cannot be said too often that the progress of intellectual life requires confrontation between the widest possible variety of theories and hypotheses. The penalty of provincialism is always the same: errors are piled upon errors, because everyone is tolerant of similar faults.

Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968)