

# The Esthetic Mystique

## *For the Businessmen, Instant Status; And Art, of Course, Is Beside Point*

**By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE**

Once upon a time there was a businessman, and he was an extremely successful businessman, and he looked upon his millions and found them good, but he wanted something better.

He wanted the aura of art and the charisma of culture to sweeten his commercial success and give elegance to his enterprise, but these were things that people said money could not buy. It did buy them, however, in the form of artistic advisers and a corporate art collection, cultural programs and abstract institutional advertisements that emphasized art and intellect. (The product was barely mentioned).

The business became not just a business, but a Force in the Community, and the businessman became a Medici. Much that was done was admirable and beyond the call of the buck, and it was achieved through the Esthetic Mystique.

### **Cultural Perfume**

From time immemorial there has been an Esthetic Mystique. It is a kind of indefinable cultural perfume that has surrounded those who practice the arts and the allied professions which suggests that they are somehow better, nobler, more sensitive, refined, knowledgeable and deserving of respect and worthy of leadership than others, and therefore very high in the social pecking order.

In more pragmatic terms, it means status. Or rather, Status. For the businessman it means Instant Status, which is almost better than Instant Money, because one inevitably leads to the other. For the corporation, it provides impressive prestige and promotion mileage.

Now this should be a good thing for the artistic professions—architecture and design—for architects and designers

are in business, too. They deal in that nebulous but very real thing, creativity and by extension, in the Esthetic Mystique.

But the architect or designer soon discovers that the Esthetic Mystique does him no good at all. What he finds is that there is a great, big Understanding Gap between what he is talking about and what the businessman expects and comprehends.

Faced with a design decision, Medici turns into Midas. To the businessman, design, or the Esthetic Mystique, is artistic frosting on the commercial cake. It has little to do with the building, or product, that he is buying. He is back to basic economics.

To the architect or designer, it is not a mystique, or frosting, at all. It is his basic product, the fruit of a very particular kind of talent, developed by education and experience, leading to specific, creative problem-solving. It is his combined esthetic and inventive sense, an innate feeling for function and form, applied to utilitarian requirements. The result is a superior object or building. This is his stock in trade.

### **Price Is Competitive**

He deals in something that looks and works appreciably better than its routine counterparts, and his price is competitive with all except cut-rate junk. But alas, he finds that virtually no one understands this or is professionally perceptive about what makes his product better.

There is no real communication between him and the businessman on the only level that counts: the meaning and measurement of the creative ability that produces the best solu-

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# ART AND BUSINESS: AN EXAMINATION

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tions. It cannot be recognized or labeled by easy rule or measured and graded on a handy scale. The businessman, therefore, looks for a practitioner who talks his own language. There are plenty to fill the bill.

And so we have a curious twist. To exist and to profit, the average architect or designer today resorts to what could be called the Business Mystique. Since so few understand what he is qualified to sell, he offers what experience has taught him the businessman will buy. He clothes himself and his products and operation in the recognizable language and protective coloration of the Business Establishment, and more often than not, successfully sells himself and his work down the river. He cries, as the expression goes, all the way to the bank.

In the Business Mystique, the singular contribution of the artistic professions is soft-pedaled. The pitch is efficiency, not esthetics or design and functional excellence. The promise is economy and market omniscience.

Each phase is a large financial bite in the design budget, and most corporations want it that way. Too modest a fee too simple or direct an answer to the problem, is highly suspect. Extensive data substitute a sense of statistical security for esthetic insecurity on administrative levels. The documentation is usually impressive, even when the design is a dud.

This is not meant to indicate that market research and analysis in product design, or space planning for architectural installation, is without value. These modern techniques are extremely useful. But they are only tools to be used in the larger, creative, problem-solving context of the design process. Unfortunately, they have become an end in themselves.

Sharper promoters may suggest that the Esthetic Mystique is a bonus offered with their regular services, usually hinted by slightly longer hair, double-vent tweed jackets, laceless shoes and references to McLuhan and Op Art. But the Business Mystique has proved to be the safest and most profitable mark up.

The creative professional who has caught this message will never be too far out. He will see that his office is a reasonable facsimile of his corporate client's. Nothing too arty; just

language and his attaché case will be comfortably familiar.

This has a basic logic. Business is wary of working with the talented or unpublicized individual. With few exceptions, corporate distrust of the individual runs deep. The corporate Esthetic Mystique seldom seeps down to dealings with the architect or designer. Gambling on personal talent is a pretty big risk for big business, especially when no one is particularly equipped to judge the quality of the payoff.

Corporate buck-passing requires a big name to take the blame if the product or the building is a bomb. It can always be said that by corporate decision and corporate standards the company had gone to the "biggest" or the "best."

No one really loses. A new building seems better than an old one, and the product can be pushed in a seller's market. The fee has been fat, and one client leads to another.

All that has been lost, unfortunately, is the chance for excellence, and the understanding that the arts of design are no better than the men who practice them. No research data will change that timeless truth. The Business Mystique has been a singularly effective instrument for downgrading the creative professions. The path, by computer or otherwise, seems to be profitably downhill.

something appropriately avant-garde in the reception room behind the modish, but not mod, receptionist. His approach, his