

# Industrial design and the difficult task of making products for other people.

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Industrial design has always been about what the product should look like. In contemporary practice of industrial design this is of course not the only task undertaken by the designer. In this essay I would like to argue that there has been a continuing rejection by designers of popular preferences in the development of products for industry. In this matter I think the question of *look* or *style* plays a significant role in designers relation to popular preferences or taste. So I would like to use the changing rules and criteria for product form as an example in this essay.

Joseph Rykwert argues in the article “Die Sitzhaltung – ein Methodenproblem”<sup>1</sup> that the predominant quantification of ergonomic rules and guidelines, should be supplied with a consideration of culturally and socially established preferences and conventions.. He illustrates this by the different ways different cultures choose to sit when they seek relaxation and comfort. This leads him to conclude that it is not possible to *calculate* the perfect chair. This argument could also be applied to most other aspects of the products that industrial designers seek to define and gestalt. In this essay I will use the formal aspect of the product as an example. From the design reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and until late modernism the design criteria concerning product form was believed to be some kind of an objective or universal criteria. The application of these criteria was generally believed to result in products of “good taste” or “good form”.

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<sup>1</sup> Rykwert, Joseph, *Ornament ist kein Verbrechen, Architektur als Kunst*, 1983

## ***The changing definitions of design; a sweep through history***

From the early beginning the concept of industrial design was to bring art and “taste” to industry (design reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). The discussion was not so much whether industry needed the help from the field of art and design, but rather what style or criteria (rules) of style which should be considered appropriate.

With functionalism came the idea that form should be derived from the function of the product. Although the formal language of functionalism can be said to be based on basic geometry or a kind of post-cubism, the idea that form *follows* function nevertheless established a *conception* of the form as an end result or even a bi-product of a rational design process. To insure a best possible product and good form it became necessary to develop a more and more all embracing design methodology. The better the process, the better the product seems to be the logic behind the methodology movement. Simplified we might say that if all choices made on all stages and on all aspects of the product development were the best possible (rational), the resulting product (and form) would logically have to be good.

When Italian anti-design and other critics of modernism<sup>2</sup> brought this process oriented design in discredit, the designer stood without legitimisation of the shapes and forms that he earlier could claim was logic or rational solutions. In this “emptiness” after the fall of modernism different strategies were developed to maintain the designers role as an authority on the gestalt and form of the product.

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<sup>2</sup> Sparke, Penny, *An introduction to design and culture in the twentieth century*; London, 1989

## ***Survival strategies employed by designers after the loss of authority regarding good form:***

- Seeing *design as critique* (modernism was believed to have been taken over by capitalism and the radical designers felt the need to take action)
- Seeing *design as art*
- Become a *star designer* (Starck, Morrison, Arad, etc.)
- Launching *product semantics* (the modernist reaction to the loss of physical/material framework for their “form follows function” )
- Launching “green design”/environmental conscious or sustainable design.
- Denying the problems of modernism.

Lets take a closer look at each of these strategies:

Seeing *design as critique* can in many ways be applied as a tag on many movements through the history of design. Modernism can be seen as both an explicit and an implied critique of the use of historical forms or of popular taste and preferences. With the Italian anti-design movement modernistic style was seen to have been taken over by corporate powers and it became a symbol of the fast growing consumerism and multi-national corporations. Designers which choose to use designed products as a vehicle for critique will usually have to confine to the use of prototypes, small series or exhibitions. The message of the critique has to be shared both with the producing company and the buyers of the products if this kind of design should have any monetary value for industry. *Design as critique* in fact constitutes a market orientation towards the consumer (and company) that are likely to agree on the critique. However, designers engaged in *design as critique* are not likely to agree with me on this account.

*Design as art* can be seen as a conception of two strands of thought. The first is the never dying myth of the designer as some sort of inspired artist even within the modernist tradition. The other strand can be summarised as “*anything goes*”. The critique of modernism in many ways resulted in a free pass to for the designer break any modernistic rule of design. In this subsequent exploration of the endless possibilities of form, many

designers (especially in Germany) increasingly perceived themselves as artists. Similarly to *design as critique* this expressive experimentation with product forms resulted in an endless stream of “one off” products and exhibitions of these. Also this direction in design has a limited value for industry or production companies. As inspiration or “avant garde”, it is only slightly more relevant than any other production of art. As for the consumers the “one off” pieces only requires a marginal market, and the value will mostly rely on the product’s association with art and it’s uniqueness. It might be *design*, but it can hardly be called *industrial design*.

In the eighties we saw a upraise of so called *star designers*. Philippe Starck might serve as a good example of this new phenomenon in design. Through his confident development of a personal style and expression in his designs, he has managed to build himself a reputation in certain parts of the “design conscious” market. He has practically developed his own name and signature into a *brand*, which receives its value from his ever growing range of distinctive and famous products. The companies buying the services of Starck will get the opportunity to inject or transfer the value of his name and signature on to some of their own products. In this way Starck is highly market oriented and dependent on the popularity of his designs. However, the companies aiming to sell to a different market segment than the ones who know Starck and like his style, will have to sign on a different designer. So the cost of being a star designer is also that you project an image that can only be utilised by companies looking for exactly your style. And then, of course, we can’t all be star designers.

The Norwegian design historian Jan Michl suggest in a book review<sup>3</sup> that *product semantics* should be conceived as a continuation of the modernistic search for objective and universal guide lines for design. In contradiction to the critics of modernism it was not the failure of the modernistic ideas that lead to the search for new design methods through product semantics. The rapid growing interest in product semantics was rather a consequence of the virtually unlimited formal possibilities in products that were based on microchips and other miniature components. Although the alleged father of product semantics, Klaus Krippendorf,

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<sup>3</sup> Michl, Jan, “Review of Väkevä, Seppo, ed. *Product Semantics '89*. Helsinki and Vihma, Susann, ed. *Semantic Visions in Design*. Helsinki”, *Scandinavian Journal of Design History*, Copenhagen 2: 123-7, 1992

claims that product semantics is a shift of paradigm in industrial design, he still subscribes to the idea that forms not connected to the “real” function of the product should be abandoned. He also strongly opposes using product semantics to enhance the market value of the product, thus continuing the modernistic view that any value not connected to the “use-value” is false and “unreal” and therefore immoral.

The development of *Green design* or *environmentally sound design* has also contributed to a revival or continuation of modernistic design principles. Early on it was taken for granted that “timeless” and long lasting products with the “honest” use of natural materials would be the most logical answer to the environmental challenge. Although *green design* has developed into much more sophisticated and scientifically correct models and methods for estimating the environmental impact of a product, they still don’t supply any principles or rules for what the product should *look* like.

The *denial of the problems of modernism* can be said to be a common reaction of older generations of designers and other people deeply involved in the spreading of “gospel” of “good form”. Especially in Scandinavian countries the wide correspondence between wide spread cultural values and modernistic ideology, seems to have led to a rejection of any post-modern design strategies or theoretical implications. This has led to a continuing development of a methodological focused design process with the later additions of semantic, aesthetic and even marked considerations on the checklist of product functions. None of these later additions seem to rock with the belief in a rational and methodological design process as the best way to develop products with “good form”.

This list is meant as a general overview, and there are of course many designers and teachers of design that subscribe to two or more of these strategies. The point I would like to make, however, is that these strategies leave some fundamental challenges for people working with design on a normative level, like educators, promoters and curators of design. For the educator the question will be which of these strategies the designer should be prepared for and trained to master. For the *promoters* and curators the question would be which of these strategies they should put forward as a framework for selections to exhibitions, the evaluation and presentation of “good form” or in the promotion for the use of

designers in industry. The question can in a simplified version be, what understanding of the industrial designer should we promote or teach in this diversified present.

### ***A possible re-construction of the designer as a competent authority on the form or style of industrially produced products.***

I would like to suggest that we separate between the ever changing *practice* of design and the *definitions* we need to make of industrial design, in order to be able to establish curricula and programs for the teaching and promotion of industrial design. It's my opinion that we can not and should not, make any normative programs on how design should be *practised* or better put; what a industrial design graduate chooses to do with his hard acquired competence and carefully nurtured talent. But nevertheless we need some basic definitions of what industrial design is, or should be, if we shall be able to have an qualified opinion on what industrial design students should learn, how they should be trained and how we should promote or present industrial design in an official context. This is why I would like to put forward a conception of industrial design that will restore the designers "hegemony" on product form and style, establish industrial design as predominantly a form giving or product "gestalting" activity, and last but not least, suggest that industrial design is an *industrial* and thereby a *commercial* activity subjected at the time being to the market laws of western capitalism.

#### The concept of interdisciplinary work and the role of the industrial designer

First some preconceptions I will like to regard as evident. The main conception of an industrial designer is that he designs products for industry. And most industry is based on a commercial goal of dividends usually obtained by having higher earnings than expenditures (this definition does not necessarily imply high sales numbers). Therefore I will suggest that the *industrial* designers role would be to help his client to reach this goal. And to do this the industrial designer is usually assigned to work in a interdisciplinary development team or he will make use of people with supplementary competence in his design work.

In an interdisciplinary team there will (hopefully) be others that have better insight into economy, material technology, production technology, marketing and even ergonomics than the designer. The late American designer and utopist Victor Papanek argues in his book *Design for the Real World*, that the designer through his lateral competence, should be the natural leader of such a development team. Not because that the designer necessarily is smarter, but because the others, through their narrow expert competence, wouldn't have the overview that the designer could provide. This perspective in effect proposes that the designer should be considered as some kind of a project leader. The image of the designer as a project leader also corresponds to the modernist assumption that if the process is rational and the best choices are made in all areas, then the product also will be good. Whichever conception we subscribe to I think it is possible to conclude that the designer usually isn't expected to possess *expert* knowledge in the areas of technology, marketing, economy or ergonomics.

But the idea of *interdisciplinary* work is based on the existence of *separate* disciplines. And the most obvious reason an industrial designer is invited to take part in a product development team is because he is believed to be in possession of an expert knowledge on what the product should *look* like (or maybe better; what *gestalt* the product should have). Since modernist design theory, in principle, presents form as a bi-product of a rational process, the modernist designer will have to refer to the overall process to find arguments to support his design. This can be clearly reflected in the way the industrial design profession often has promoted their role in a product development team. The unique abilities of the designer is most often referred to as creativity, interdisciplinary knowledge, analytic abilities or the ability to act as the *users* advocate. Only the last role, as the users advocate, can be said to refer to the question of style or the form of the product. The one problem not addressed is; how does the designer know what the user or consumer would prefer? With modernism this was no issue. The designer himself knew what a good product should look like. The problem as the modernist designer saw it, was how to convince the consumer to accept the formal solutions the designer put forward as the "good form".

With the fall of the universal design principles of modernism the designer needs to find new guidelines to be able to claim authority on what the product should look like. To sum up these first preconceptions I would

like to suggest that industrial design should be perceived as a profession dedicated to the conception and development of *commercially liable* and *industrially* produced end products. As there are several professions and disciplines which share this activity, the industrial designer should be bring his own field of *expertise* to the interdisciplinary table. I would suggest that this core expertise should be the competence to propose and give advice on what the product should look like.

## The impact of cultural theory on the practice of industrial design

Since I don't subscribe to the modernistic notion of rational or objective rules for product forms nor any of the strategies that I listed on how to cope with the fall of modernism, I would like to point out an alternative strategy. It's my opinion that the development of cultural studies, new cultural theories and especially contemporary changes in theories on consumption could open up a vast new area investigation and challenges for industrial design. Within the limits of this essay I would like to point out one important change, that could have great impact on the practice of industrial design.

Since the early modernist clearly acknowledged the symbolic value of products, they wanted to "strip" products and buildings from their symbolic and identifying elements, in order to reach equality and a non-hierarchical society. In later modernism it seems like the designer took the effect of this "stripping" for granted. But we don't have to look far to see the that "stripped" products is not without symbolic values. Vitra reproductions of functionalist furniture for example, connotes large amounts of symbolic and mythological value. (Ironically these myths were mainly created by design historians and curators which sought to praise the anti-symbolic design principles of the modernistic pioneers.) But today symbolism and identity connected to products are no longer only an aspect of hierarchical societies. Youth culture, professions, lifestyles, nationality, regionality, music, sports and all kinds of new sub-cultures and social groupings is signified through the use of products and clothes to show *who* they are or *what* they would like to be. This is not a situation likely to go away just because the designer would like it to. Whatever product the designer puts forward will be subject to judgement and valuation from different cultural perspectives. Both to avoid total flops, but also to be able to use the cultural aspect of a product to his

advantage (or to his clients advantage), the designer needs knowledge, competence and training in making design within such a complex context.

The training and insight into this dynamic, social and cultural use of products as signs and symbols is what I perceive as a possibility for the industrial designer to regain expertise and authority on what the product should look like. In spite the loss of hegemony on objective or universal form there are still the existence of strong culturally and socially constructed rules for what a product should look like. My suggestion is merely that the industrial designer should take these important aspects of products into serious consideration when designing a product. Whether the designer seeks to exploit, change or work against these social and culturally established preferences is a question of personal ethics and convictions. The social construction of preferences and taste will persist no matter what.

Some problems inherent in a cultural oriented design:

1. The designer would have a great chance of being asked to design for cultural groups which taste he dislikes.

*Possible strategies:*

- Stick with “designer aesthetics” and only design products for people who subscribes to this style or genre.
  - Specialise in a few styles and genres closely related to his own preferences. (This would create a need for designers from different sub-cultures and walks of life, as companies seek to make products for different marked segments.)
  - Adopt social anthropological methods in order to submerge into the culture the product design is intended for.
  - Use intuition and general cultural knowledge to “take a shot” and hope for a “hit” product. (This strategy can be supplied with market test and 0-series and I would claim this is the way most industrial designers in fact work)
2. A cultural orientation in the development of products do not in any way “secure” or guaranty the success of the product.
  3. A cultural orientation opens the possibility to transfer ethical considerations and rules from the *profession* and to the *professionals* of industrial design and all the other people involved in the conception and production of a product.

## **Sources:**

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