

OBSERVATIONS AND THE AIM OF DESIGN

By Steve Kroeter

Well conceived and well executed, design has the potential to make our lives fundamentally better. Despite the profound implications of this, in the United States the general public has not had the opportunity to develop an extensive understanding and appreciation of design. Unlike the British and Scandinavians or the Italians and Japanese, for example, our culture does not yet have a history and tradition of design literacy. As a society we appropriately organize to eliminate language illiteracy, but design illiteracy is not generally acknowledged to be a problem. There are no programs in place to address it, and the only American students exposed in any serious way to design are those on a professional track to practice it. DESIGNnewyork consequently was envisioned as a design advocacy initiative—a small, local first step in addressing a larger, national problem.

The first step in beginning on this book was the development of a simple working definition of design. As a starting point, I looked at the collections of the three major cultural institutions in New York that deal with design from the curatorial perspective: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. It was particularly useful to note the Cooper-Hewitt's belief that "design shapes our objects, environments, and communications."¹ From the synthesis of these three institutional perspectives, and from a consideration of varied research and my own experience, I have come to think of design as the core disciplines of architecture, fashion, graphic design, interior design, and product design. In the less academically precise but more colorfully descriptive words of wallpaper magazine, design is the everyday "stuff that surrounds us."

The concepts of design literacy and design advocacy in the United States might not be such a compelling topic right now if design were still receiving the level of attention it was twenty or twenty-five years ago. At that time it was a very low-profile pursuit—something of extremely great interest to an extremely small group of people. Even as recently as 1998, 87 percent of U. S. adults could not name a single living architect.² Today, however, things have changed. Beginning in the mid to late 1980s, and with increasing momentum through the 1990s, design has come to be recognized as a significant factor in American culture and commerce. By March of 2000, a cover story in Time magazine, "The Rebirth of Design," declared that "from radios to cars to toothbrushes, America is bowled over by style."

The Magazine Publishers Association estimates that on American newsstands there currently are well over 500 magazines that cover the five disciplines of design I have noted. Many newspapers now have some sort of dedicated design coverage; a number have entire sections devoted to design (for example, the "House and Home" section in the New York Times on Thursdays). On television, there are cable networks that focus exclusively on design, as well as a wide variety of individual programs, including This Old House and the Antiques Roadshow (the most popular show on PBS, drawing almost 14 million viewers each week).³ On the Internet, the search engine Google.com lists 11,500,000 results for architecture, 9,860,000 for fashion, 2,510,000 for graphic design, 1,870,000 for interior design, and 4,300,000 for product design. A search on Amazon.com for books on architecture produces

32,000 titles; fashion, 3,923; graphic design, 1,826; interior design, 3,409; and product design, 410.

What brought about the change heralded in the Time cover story?

My view is that most Americans have had their primary exposure to design through business and commerce. That milieu, by definition, has always been dominated by the objective of maximizing near-term revenues and profits. This perspective over time produced a national mindset focusing on factors of function and efficiency (which are part of design) but excluded attention to factors such as aesthetics, social concerns, and environmental considerations (which are also part of design). In *A History of the American People*, Paul Johnson argues that American business has always been skilled at understanding complex technologies and making those technologies available to a large mass market at an affordable price. Johnson cites Henry Ford, the invention of the assembly line, and the production of the Model T as prime examples of this. He points out that one of the most ingenious aspects of Ford's vision was the production of cars with prices low enough to be purchased by the workers making them.⁴ In this example it is obvious how targeting a mass market in order to maximize potential sales revenue would necessarily have led to placing a premium on minimizing costs, and in the process marginalized design. This dynamic appears to be generally true in the early life cycle of a product when function and utility may drive consumer interest but an affordable price point is needed to stimulate trial.

By the late twentieth century, technology and manufacturing in many product categories had evolved to the point where the public viewed the function and efficiency of many competitive products as essentially comparable. The critic Paul Goldberger, in a July 1999 article in *The New Yorker*, asserted that by the 1990s the American car-buying public was able to operate under the assumption that almost all cars were “reasonably well made, reliable, safe, and easy to maintain.”⁵ He suggests that this created an environment in which “it is what the car looks like that sells it.” Similarly, Robert Lutz, now responsible for design at General Motors, was quoted in early 2002 in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that car makers are converging in their ability to offer reliability, good mileage, and safety. Echoing Goldberger, Lutz asserted that, “styling is one of the only avenues left [for car manufacturers] to stand out.”⁶ The insight that Goldberger and Lutz provide applies as much to computers and toasters as it does to cars. If to this set of circumstances the momentum of three additional “tipping point” factors is added—1) the beginning in 1993 of the longest economic expansion in the history of the United States; 2) the arrival of the Internet in the mid 1990s (a pure graphic design experience); and 3) the maturing of baby boomers into their peak earning years with houses to furnish and egos to satisfy—then it becomes clear that at the end of the twentieth century in America the stage was set for design to arrive.

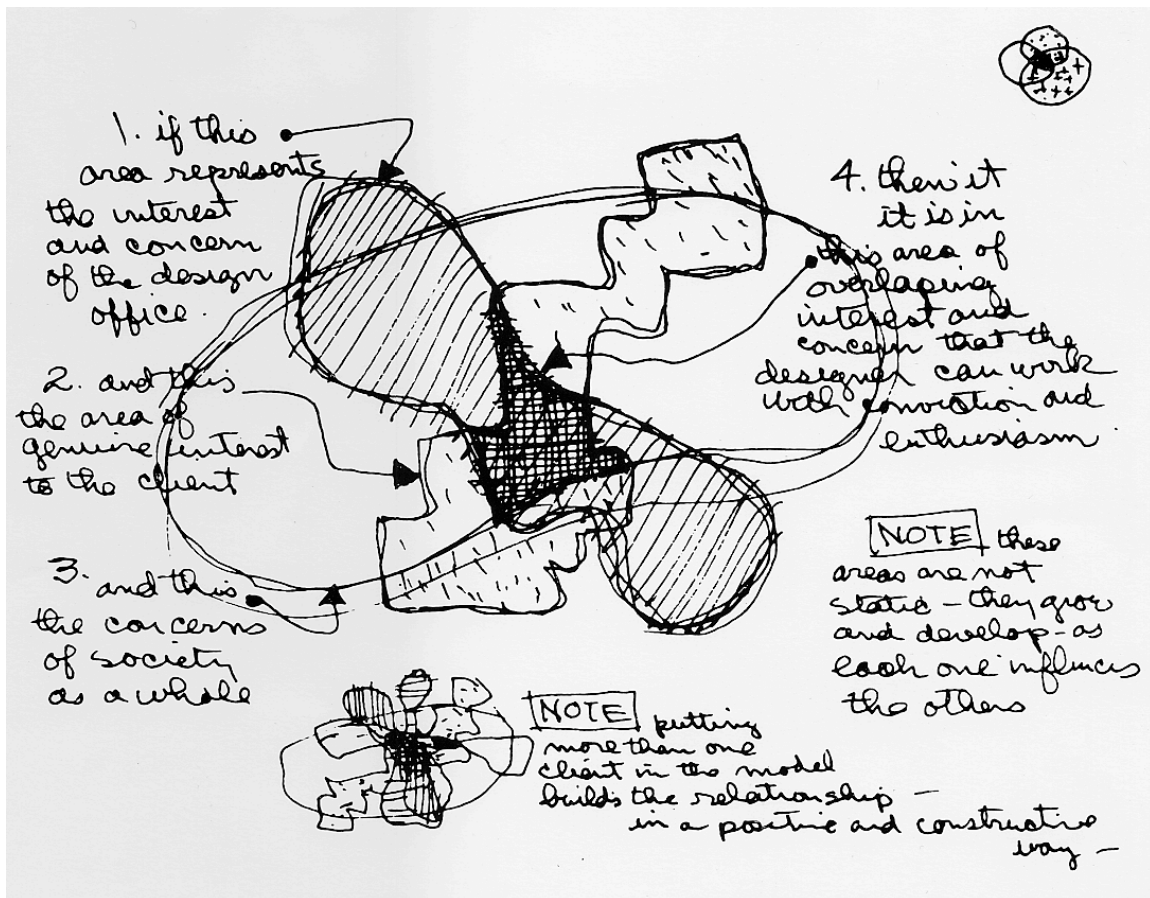
And arrive it did. Branding was the most talked about business concept during the decade of the 1990s, but design evolved as the strategic initiative driving differentiation among brands. This strategy was evident in computers from Steve Jobs at Apple; hotels from Ian Schrager; household products from Michael Graves for Target; “everyday” household products from Martha Stewart for K Mart; complete lifestyle concepts from Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, and Donna Karan;

kitchen utensils from Oxo; the reintroduced Beetle from Volkswagen and the new PT Cruiser from Chrysler; house plans from Robert A.M. Stern and Michael Graves for Life magazine; air travel from David Neeleman's JetBlue; furniture and just about every other possible household accessory from Terence Conran; and even in museums, as illustrated in the expansion of the Guggenheim, led by Thomas Krens via Frank Gehry.

Looking at the profile and trajectory of design today—as compared to two decades ago when design was highly marginalized, specialized, rarified, and in some cases essentially declared off limits to the general public—it's pretty exciting to see what has developed. The importance of design now seems to be acknowledged everywhere. Hotel designers are frequently as well known or better known than the owners; restaurant designers are as celebrated as chefs; how stores look is often as interesting (and as noted by the media) as what is sold; design classics, like Mies and Corbu furniture, are widely available for purchase (in stores and on the Internet) without the assistance of an architect or designer. But with all this, a new aspect of the discussion begins to emerge: How do we evaluate the quality (or level of success) of the design that now surrounds us? Designer Karim Rashid, in the Time article mentioned earlier, is quoted as saying: "Our entire physical landscape has improved, and that makes people more critical as an audience." But is this assertion really true? Are audiences now "more critical" of design? Are we more discerning and informed consumers of the design marketplace in which we now find ourselves? Ultimately, this requires asking, and being able to answer, the question: What is good or successful design? Even though the idea of the "crit" (the ongoing discussion about a design that accompanies its initiation, evolution, and ultimate introduction into the marketplace) is at the heart of the design development process, it seems that very few people these days are willing to embrace the idea of creating standards and critically evaluating design in relation to those standards. But this was not always the case.

During the 1950s, as part of a very early effort to focus attention on design, The Museum of Modern Art initiated a series of exhibitions called Good Design. Showcasing "the best modern design in home furnishings available to the American public,"⁷ the initial exhibition included clocks by George Nelson, glassware by Russel Wright, fabrics by Anni Albers and Ray Eames, and furniture by Charles Eames. The products included in the exhibition were selected "for their excellent appearance and their progressive performance." In subsequent years, the statement of selection criteria for the exhibition was expanded to include "eye appeal, function, construction and price, with emphasis on the first."⁸ Among the eligibility requirements was that the product "did not attempt to imitate the past."⁹

In 1969, for an exhibition entitled *What is Design?* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, American designers Charles and Ray Eames exhibited a diagram outlining their concept of the design process. This drawing, reproduced below, proposed the idea of design as a system of interrelated interests and concerns: the interests and concerns of the designer, of clients, and of society as a whole. The Eameses suggested that the optimal opportunity for success in the design process occurred when the concerns of all three parties were simultaneously addressed (represented by the crosshatched area in the middle of the diagram).



Charles Eames. Conceptual diagram of the design process shown in the 1969 exhibition *Qu'est-ce que le <design>?* (What is design?) at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

Today, too few of us pause to consider the types of issues that MoMA explored in the 1950s and that the Eameses pondered in the 1960s: What is design? What is good (or successful or responsible) design? What are its basic contexts? And how do the contexts successfully interrelate? If we (designers, design manufacturers and marketers, and consumers) were appropriately introspective on this level, the design we create, distribute, and buy would not only be “reasonably well made, reliable, safe, and easy to maintain,” but also more artful and enlightening, more socially responsible, and more environmentally intelligent. In short, as William Morris, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and Frank Lloyd Wright believed in the nineteenth century, design would be more “life-enhancing.” But what does the concept of good design or life-enhancing design actually mean in our time? What precisely would it mean to design in that crosshatched area on the Eameses’ diagram? Addressing these questions would require the development of a set of standards reflecting the values of our society and culture and clearly signaling our intentions regarding the objects, environments, and communications we create.

But where on earth (literally) would we look to find such standards? I have a simple idea about this based on a set of principles I was exposed to as an undergraduate in college, and that is now being incorporated into the curriculum of the Department of Design and Management I am responsible for at Parsons School of Design. The concept is that the merit and success of design should be subject to, and evaluated

on the basis of, the general conceptual framework of the liberal arts and sciences. This consists of the core principles of the biological, physical, and social sciences, and the humanities. One of the appealing characteristics of this model is that it envisions a clearly definable “destination” without mandating a specific trajectory; it provides conceptual direction while simultaneously allowing latitude for creative interpretation and implementation. Essentially, it means turning to the four areas of the liberal arts and sciences to discover ideas about the fundamental ethics of design. For example:

- * Looking at the biological sciences (or the life sciences) might mean developing and applying principles addressing ergonomics, toxicity, and sustainability. This would lead, for example, to the simple and obvious conclusion that toxicity is not a good design result and should be avoided (although judging from the reality of many “ingredients” lists of products manufactured today, apparently this conclusion is not so simple and obvious).
- * The study of the physical sciences might prompt examination of appropriate materials choices, manufacturing methods, and waste management—all at the front end of the design process, not as an afterthought.
- * The study of the social sciences might suggest consideration not only of issues like pricing and utility, but also of topics such as managing natural resources and addressing social justice and social equality.
- * The study of the humanities might recommend consideration of the relationship between design and the arts, and how design, like the arts, can improve and enhance the quality of our lives through enlightenment of the intellect and the spirit.

This last point is particularly important. In an essay for a 1998 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art called *Japonism in Fashion: Japan Dresses the West*, curator Patricia Mears observes:

In the West, it is common to set the fine arts, such as painting and sculpture, far above the minor or decorative arts, including furniture, textiles, and fashion. Japanese artists, however, have traditionally understood that everyday objects can be imbued with great intellectual and spiritual importance. Japan’s cherished aesthetic values thus produced textiles and costumes of very high quality, which were alluring to Europeans and Americans.¹⁰

If we can read the term “everyday objects” as synonymous with design, then Mears implies that expectations at the beginning of the design process can directly and profoundly affect the results at the end of it. Further, she seems to suggest that if we hold design accountable, as the Japanese do, to the same standards established for the fine arts, something different and remarkable—something of “intellectual and spiritual importance”—can be produced. This is an eloquent way of asserting that art is at the heart of design.

Gratifyingly, at this early point in the twenty-first century we can say with confidence that design has become embedded in the American consciousness. Despite fluctuations in the economy and despite other social or cultural developments that

may arise, attention to design in this country will not now fade away. Rather, the role of design will continue to evolve and expand as a primary strategic commercial tool, used in increasingly sophisticated ways to establish corporate identities, to develop brands, and to distinguish products from competition. In this way, design will increasingly be recognized as critical to generating revenues and profits. If for no other reason than this, design is assured of a place of growing importance in American culture as the twenty-first century unfolds.

Still, what finally are we to conclude of the actual and specific aim of design? We must embrace the connection to revenues and profits, because, after all, those concepts are integral to the inherent notion of what design is (in contrast to art). But in the more fully realized world in which we now increasingly find ourselves, isn't it better, more noble, and indeed absolutely necessary, to acknowledge and embrace the idea of pursuing in design that which is also of "intellectual and spiritual importance"? In the end, at its most fundamental level design creates meaningful connections between each of us and our surroundings—between us and the buildings we inhabit; the clothes we wear; the newspapers, magazines, and books we read and the Web sites we visit; the interior spaces we live in, pass through, and work in; and the vast array of products around us. As design succeeds at expanding and enhancing the quality of these connections—in ways that are grounded in the biological, physical, and social sciences, and also the humanities—then the quality of our lives is transformed. Achieving this intellectual and spiritual transformation is the elegantly simple, extremely challenging, and ultimately satisfying aim of design.

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Notes

1. Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Web site; ndm.si.edu/INFORMATION/index.html, July 1, 2002.
2. From *Design in America*, a survey commissioned by Archetype Associates to identify the general attitudes and level of awareness of Americans about design. The study was conducted by Yankelovich Partners during the fourth calendar quarter of 1998. Research results were obtained via a Random Digit Dialing telephone survey of 1,007 adult Americans age eighteen or older and were weighted to reflect the adult American population at large.
3. PBS Web site; www.pbs.org/whatson/press/winspring/antiquesroadshow.html, July 1, 2002.
4. Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 606–607.
5. Paul Goldberger, "Detroit Tiger: What Will J. Mays Do to the American Car?" *The New Yorker*, (July 12, 1999), p.32.
6. Quoted in Gregory L. White and Todd Zaun, "The New Celebrities: Car Designers," *Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2002, p. B1.
7. Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., *Good Design* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1950), introduction.
8. Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., *Good Design* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1952), inside front and back covers.

9. Ibid.

10. Patricia Mears, *Japonism in Fashion: Japan Dresses the West* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1998), pp. 4–5.