

'Good Design' is neither a book of etiquette nor a social register. What follows is one of many attempts to remove the heavy hand of authority from what should be an area of personal enjoyment:

Within the past few years the phrase 'good design' has taken on a new meaning over and above its original one: a programme jointly sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Merchandise Mart of Chicago. Such is the power of an idea when backed by effective publicity. I make mention of this at the outset because my subject has the same title as this programme, but otherwise no connection. 'Good design', as popularized by the Museum and the Merchandise Mart, has come to mean a certain number of objects selected by Mr Kaufmann and his juries, objects which may then carry a kind of label of approval when displayed for sale in stores. What I plan to discuss is much less specific, and it would be well, therefore, to avoid any possibility of confusion.

Among these 'less specific' matters is the question of how a design comes into existence and how it is refined to a certain degree of excellence. The process is not a simple one, and I doubt seriously if anyone understands it with any degree of completeness. In spite of this, a tentative exploration of the question has some value.

Tradition vs technology

For a design to emerge at all, a definite situation has to exist. There has to be a need – or at least a possible use for it – and there has to be a designer. The designer may think of himself as a farmer or a machinist, or he may call himself a designer. It doesn't matter particularly as long as there is someone around with the urge and the competence to give form to an idea. The channel through which the designer's idea flows to become a finished object is shaped by tradition and by technology. These two do not always function smoothly together. In primitive cultures the need for designed products is expressed in a series of relatively simple implements, utensils and religious objects. The designer is frequently the maker and the user as well. With technology moving slowly, tradition becomes the main guide towards suitable form, and design development tends to go on over generations. Once developed, forms settle into fairly rigid moulds and 'design' would be described more precisely as imitation of standard patterns, with individual variations. There are any number of examples of forms which have persisted virtually unchanged over centuries and even millennia. In

societies which saw themselves as permanent – Egypt is an outstanding example – the persistence of established forms also served to support prevailing belief in an eternally static situation.

Function highly overrated

When we talk about the 'need' for a certain kind of object, it is a good thing to realize that there is no necessary connection between the level or type of need and the quality of the design. This is an important point in any discussion of design and it is worth expanding. Let us say that the 'need' in question concerns a vessel to hold liquids. The response to the need – a designed and manufactured object – may be a perfectly adequate container with no aesthetic interest, or it may be a thing preserved through the ages as an incomparable work of art. In other words, functional sufficiency is no guarantee whatever of good design – it is merely the floor below which a design cannot go without failing to serve its purpose. I think it important to realize this because there is a widespread misconception today regarding the role of function, and a very general tendency to overemphasize its significance. And just as the role of function is not necessarily a major one, so with the type or level of the need. It makes no difference, from the viewpoint of good design, whether a container for liquids was made for a prince or a pauper. To be sure, until relatively recently the princes had a better time of it because they were better able to take over the production of the best designers. But the level at which the artist or designer worked has always been far more significant a factor than the social or financial level of his client. [...]

The 'designer' need not be an individual

No design can exist in isolation. It is always related, sometimes in very complex ways, to an entire constellation of influencing situations and attitudes. What we call a good design is one which achieves integrity – that is, unity or wholeness – in balanced relation to its environment. The reason good design is hard to come by is that its creation demands a high degree of emotional and intellectual maturity in the designer, and such people are not found too often. Earlier generations solved this problem by using many hands and minds over periods of centuries, as in the case of the axe, or the teacup. The 'designer' then was not an individual, but an entire social process of trial, selection and rejection. Today he is still that, though in a somewhat different sense, and we tend to overestimate his significance as an individual.

An impossible comparison

If someone posed a question like 'which is better design, a Roman chariot or an

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Italian automobile?' an interesting characteristic of all design would reveal itself. It is that the usual yardsticks for measuring relative excellence do not work. If the question were 'which is better for stopping a headache: aspirin or baking soda?' we are well equipped to find an answer. In the case of the first question, you can say that a modern motor car is faster, more powerful or more comfortable than a chariot, but you cannot say that it is better designed merely on the basis of these technological improvements. Each is a unity, created in response to the opportunities and limitations of a given environment. The quality of each, as a design, relates to the emotional intensity and clarity of thinking brought to bear on each problem. This is why many old things, functionally unsuited for present-day use, still look good to us. This is why we can enjoy museums; differences in time and techniques do not act as barriers in this area. To paraphrase a very profound observation of Picasso, there is no past in art.

A Kleenex culture

We live in a period which tends to reject old things and to get bored with new ones. This is not entirely bad. In part, at least, it is a logical consequence of the fantastic increase in knowledge and expansion of productivity, both of which generate new and exciting opportunities. And in part it reflects an apparently irresistible move toward what might be described as a 'Kleenex culture', in which more and more consumer products shift from a semi-permanent to a disposable basis. To the extent that this shift reduces interest in possessions I suspect that it is all to the good. But the concomitant emphasis on novelty as *the* desirable quality tends to obscure the facts of design development and the understanding of superior performance in this area. New designs, like biological mutations, may represent a better adaptation to changing conditions, and they may not.

Rapidity of recent changes

The past twenty years have seen a rapidly accelerating development of what we call modern or contemporary design. By this I mean an approach which begins with rejection of the forms and symbols of earlier periods in an effort to find something more accurately expressive of the contemporary environment. This movement, as you know, has been worldwide in scope and it has embraced all the arts. Painting especially, which made some of its most important statements around the turn of the century, not only became a major centre of controversy, but also contributed substantially to developments in other arts, notably architecture. The seeds of change were first visible shortly after the mid-nineteenth century. Since the last war so much progress has been made that for all practical purposes one can consider the battle won. To use the biological

analogy for the last time, this century-long history provides an almost perfect example of a series of design mutations appearing, taking hold and flourishing in a steadily more favourable climate, to the point where the new forms become dominant. As a result when we talk about good design today, it is contemporary design of one variety or another we are talking about.

By pretty general consensus, the only good design today is contemporary design. But it is pretty hard to explain to the enthusiasts that not all contemporary design is good design. And it is even harder to explain that just because modern has taken over in the design of houses, interiors, accessories, and consumer products, this is not because it makes for easier living, less maintenance and so on. The fact happens to be that all design in this general area today, whether modern or period, makes for these things, and for the simple reason that nobody – rich or poor, old or young – can any longer put up with design that doesn't. All this takes us back to the earlier discussion of the relation of functionalism and good design, and what I am again saying is that the requirements of function have to be met regardless of quality or type or design.

It may shock you to learn that when some of these requirements happen to conflict with the overall scheme in the designer's mind, they are quite as likely to be honoured in the breach as in the observance. Some years back, when I was trying to do my first houses, there were repeated discussions with clients about the relative merits of one- and two-storey houses. At that time it was taken for granted that all houses outside of Florida and California should be two-storey houses, and we wanted to keep ours down to one. Why did we want to do this? We wanted to keep our houses down to one storey because we found them more satisfying aesthetically. What we said to our clients, however, was quite different: we said one-storey houses were more functional. The same arguments were used in favour of the glass wall and the open plan, although both have serious disadvantages. What the architects and designers were driving at was a new kind of total expression which made more good sense in terms of a changed environment than the older kinds. Functionalism was emphasized partly because it had a grain of truth in it, but mainly because it offered the most convincing argument to laymen.

Extravagant claims for good design

A good bit of the support given the modern movement came from people imbued with a real crusading spirit, and it is inevitable that enthusiasts make extravagant claims. Yet these unfounded claims do not further the modern movement in any substantial way, and they have nothing whatever to do with good design. The dedicated folk who still buttonhole me from time to time give the impression that if one could live in a well-designed modern house, fitted out

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with discreetly furnished and accessorized contemporary interiors, life would somehow become very full and very beautiful. Since my trade has to do with the design of houses, interiors and products, I suppose I should be very pleased to hear all this, but somehow it never works out that way. I find it impossible to believe that life is so simple that a new garment of whatever description can transform it. Albert Einstein lived in a drab, ill-furnished little house (to judge from published photographs) on a side street in Princeton. Can you see this man's life enriched or deepened in the slightest by an immersion in good, modern design? Or Picasso's? Picasso could have the services of the best architect in the world any time he wanted; he happens to have three dwellings, none of which could be accused of being either good or contemporary design. Braque lives in a conventional Normandy farmhouse. Matisse has occupied a very commonplace hotel suite for years. Yet all of these people are extraordinarily sensitive and fully aware of what has been going on. One could hardly accuse them of not understanding the meaning of good design. And yet, as consumers, they ignore it.

What good design is not ...

All of this brings me to the main, and concluding point. Good design, like good painting, cooking, architecture, or whatever you like, is a manifestation of the capacity of the human spirit to transcend its limitations. It enriches its maker through the experience of creating, and it can enrich the viewer or user who is equipped to respond to what it has to say. But it is a statement and not a gadget. If it happens to make something easier or more comfortable, this is quite incidental – a bad design could do just as well in this respect, and very often does. Used to demonstrate one's superior taste to the neighbours it loses its essential quality and becomes one more item of conspicuous consumption, like a yacht or a Cadillac. It cannot transform a dark brown little life into a large, brightly coloured one – only the person living the life can do that. It is not a vitamin pill or a sulfa tablet. It reaches its full potential when it is experienced by a person fully equipped to understand and enjoy what it has to communicate. But such a person has no need of it for enrichment, for he is already rich. This, I think, is why people like Einstein and Picasso seem to ignore its more general manifestations – they are busy making good designs of their own and need no further distraction.

The purpose of good design is to ornament existence, not to substitute for it.

George Nelson, 'Good Design: What is it for?', *Problems of Design* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1957) 8–14.