

Beware the backlash: A rising tide of disaffection towards design

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There's a storm brewing in designland. A backlash is gathering momentum, and what's more, some of its chief dissidents are design's leading lights.

Philippe Starck sheepishly peered out of the cover of December's *Icon* magazine, under the 'I killed design' banner. In an *Observer* article a few months earlier Stephen Bailey, the fiery British design critic, exclaimed "When I hear the word 'designer', I reach for my chainsaw."

Just as critics from outside design are sharpening their knives, designers are becoming racked with self-doubt and -loathing. We have surfed the wave of adoring interest, but the shifts that have taken place have left designland in intellectual disarray and in bad shape to defend itself.

This rising tide of disaffection tends to share two themes: a distaste for the superficiality of design's media-celebrity nexus; and a growing discomfort with design's role in generating 'useless stuff'. These two complementary critiques could be abbreviated as Anti-fluff and Anti-stuff.

Anti-fluff

As ever, the ad agencies were among the first to sample the anti-designer zeitgeist. In 2004 the British agency Karmarama created the 'Elite Designers Against IKEA' campaign, for the ubiquitous purveyor of \$20 chairs. It featured the fictional Van den Puup, a kind of histrionic lovechild of Starck and Marcel Wanders, railing against cheap IKEA furniture.

Soon after, Ford ran a campaign for the Focus in which Oglivy updated the caricature to a shaven headed and stubble-chinned pseud. The implicit message of both campaigns was clear—Design with a capital 'D' has disappeared up its own behind, and IKEA/Ford deliver democratic design at non-pompous prices.

Virginia Postrel eloquently explained how design became a mass-market preoccupation, in her seminal 'The Substance of Style'. In parallel, it mainstreamed in business, to the extent that ethnography and innovation became the new black. Even Government got in on the act; it is now 10 years since Tony Blair's 'New Labour' took the reigns of power in the UK and turned to the 'creatives' to help recreate everything from Britain's national identity to its national health service.

At one level the backlash is not much more than elitist resentment of design's success. Witness Starck's Icon(ic) outburst: "Nowadays you fart and are a designer... When design was nothing there was a lot of good designer because they was obliged to fight." This school of thought holds that design has lost its magic now that everyone has an opinion on it. Wasn't it just more special when only we cognoscenti swooned over the latest Apple product?

Stephen Bayley, a design critic and the first director of London's Design Museum, lodges an altogether more substantial critique. He bemoans design's fall from grace, which he paints as "a rapid descent from saint to sinner, from ennobling industrial art to the silly designer chair." He pines for a bygone era when design stood for "intelligence made visible," instead of today's "attention-seeking frivolity."

Paola Antonelli, Curator of MOMA's Department of Architecture and Design, recently lamented that "Design is treated as fluff and pushed to the lifestyle sections of newspapers."

To underline that this is not just the concern of the chattering design classes, two of the profession's most respected figures—Jasper Morrison & Naoto Fukasawa—have launched a riposte. Their SuperNormal exhibition, which showed in Tokyo and London in 2006, is a design response to the 'fluff' issue. In his introduction to the exhibition booklet Morrison reflects that "design, which used to be unknown as a profession, has become a major source of pollution. Encouraged by glossy lifestyle magazines, and marketing departments, it's become a competition to make things as noticeable as possible by means of colour, shape and surprise." Taking a leaf out of Dieter Rams' book he goes on to expound an "approach to design, of leaving out the design, [which seems] more and more of the way forward." By this he means working hard to 'design out' designerly flourishes, so as to get at the essence of an object and reach an understanding of its appropriate position within a historical visual context—or as he puts it, crafting objects that know their 'place in the society of things.'

This is not the first time that Morrison has played his part in saving design from its excesses. He helped rehabilitate design in the early nineties, at the heights of the backlash against the previous 'designer decade,' when it had become bracketed with yuppies and facile post-modernism. His thoughtful approach will undoubtedly provide a key point of reference when the mud starts to fly this time around.

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Anti-stuff

There is nothing new in accusing designers of being superficial, what is more novel is designers re-conceiving of themselves as the creators of landfill. A growing number of designers share environmentalists' concern that design is part of the problem.

Let's begin with Starck, the contrite clown (also from the Icon feature): "I design useless Christmas gift... That's why don't ask me to be proud or to be interested in what I do. I am so ashamed of what I do..."

Bayley too situates design's malaise within the context of the paradox of choice: "No longer is the designer helping to edit dross from the boggling universe of choice, he is contributing to excess." ("Chair wars").

Criticising designers' role in consumerism is not new; Vance Packard castigated planned obsolescence in 'The Waste Makers' in 1960, Victor Papanek made the case for socially responsible design in the seventies, a baton Nigel Whiteley picked back up in the nineties. What is new is that an anti-consumerist agenda is being welcomed in from the critical margins to the mainstream by designers.

The central concern here is that designers are contributing to over-production of stuff that we don't need. Styling is suspected as a form of aesthetic manipulation that stimulates the urge to

buy. While innovation is criticised as often amounting to little more than meaningless feature tweaks. Too much stuff, too much choice.

If the Anti-fluff argument is a reaction to the mainstreaming of design into society, Anti-stuff is a reflection of the mainstreaming of environmentalism into design.

So just as critics from outside design are sharpening their knives, designers are becoming racked with self-doubt and -loathing. We have surfed the wave of adoring interest, but the shifts that have taken place have left designland in intellectual disarray and in bad shape to defend itself. First, the frontiers of design have expanded well beyond its traditional heartland. From championing design thinking in the boardroom to the re-engineering of public sector services, 'design'—often practised by people without a design training—now encompasses a far wider spectrum of activity. Second, the old certainties of disciplinary boundaries appear increasingly blurred and irrelevant. For example, when designing an experience that includes product, service, communication and retail elements, the coherence of the experience matters much more than breaking it down into individual disciplines. And how useful is it really to ask whether Thomas Heatherwick is an artist, designer or architect?

Some accuse designers of 'mission creep', others of over-promising and under-delivering. 'What is design?' is no longer purely a question for first year student seminars, but for design magazine editors. Design is now used so widely and loosely, it has been stripped of much of its meaning. If we are to navigate ourselves out of this morass, we will have to answer some big hairy questions like: what is the constructive alternative face of design to the fluffy emotionalism promoted by the media? Is there a positive case for consumerism and designers role within it? Is there a more useful way of discriminating between different areas of design activity than the old disciplinary boundaries?

If we intend to sidestep the backlash, we need to develop a point-of-view on whether we're going to defend design in all of its guises or just particular areas. It's time to draw some distinctions between which we want to support and which deserve the lash.

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