

Why the overwhelming numbers of design flops?

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Christoph Büchel's exhibition at the Coppermill gallery in London, showing junk parts from failed machinery. (Mike Bruce/ Hauser & Wirth Zurich London)

Sometimes I wonder whether I owe our readers an apology. Like most design critics, I tend to write about what happens when design projects work, when intelligent designers try to make our lives a little better - and succeed.

Luckily, those successes happen from time to time, but not nearly as often as new designs flop. The inspiring innovations are exceptions. All you've got to do, if you can bear it, is glance at the contents of a shopping mall, an e-commerce Web site or a trade fair to realize that most of the new designs flooding onto the market are failures.

They're not especially efficient or environmentally responsible. Nor are they lovely to look at, to touch and to use, or any of the other things we expect from "good design." The grim truth is that most new designs are much more likely to be derivative, pretentious, ugly, cumbersome or wasteful. That's why buying some new products - cars and cellphones are regular offenders - is a dispiriting process of choosing the one you dislike least, rather than one you really love.

The odd thing is that no one sets out to design something that's mediocre. So why does design go wrong so often? Let's set aside the rational reasons why projects can fail - like budgetary constraints, deadline pressure and lack of talent - to concentrate on the scenarios that should be easily avoidable, but crop up again and again, with predictably dire results.

1. Designing for other designers.

Car designers are among the chief culprits by appearing hellbent on designing principally to impress their peers. That's why automotive design seems immune to the design trends that influence every other sector; why all of the emphasis is on the exterior of the car, not the interior; and why the industry has been guilty of ignoring entire consumer categories - like the 51 percent of the population that's female, unlike car designers, who are mostly male.

2. Change for change's sake.

This often happens when an industry scents sudden sales growth. A regrettable example is the espresso machine. The classic Italian machines, like lovely old Gaggias, were fantastic: simply styled, no-nonsense exercises in engineering. But, as soon as Starbucks's success convinced the espresso industry that there was money to be made by persuading us to make a latte or macchiato at home, manufacturers start to mess with their machines. Cue the new breed of fiddly, fussy, over-styled espresso machines.

3. They made us do it.

A feeble excuse from school kids, and any industry bossed about by another. Unfortunately for the rest of us, this is one reason why cellphones are so infuriatingly difficult to use. The market is dominated by the cellular networks, which are understandably anxious to ensure that new phones are compatible with their technology. Unless the manufacturer complies, they refuse to sell the phone. That's why user interface software is designed to placate the networks, rather than to be easy and enjoyable to use. But it lumps us with fiendishly over-complicated cellphones, and with having to learn how to do the same thing differently after switching to a new model by the same manufacturer.

4. Innovation for innovation's sake.

There's nothing wrong with innovation (quite the contrary), but why invent a new version of something that doesn't need to be improved? Take the Sideways Bike, designed by the Irish software engineer, Michael Killian, as a bicycle on which you sit - and pedal - sideways. It's ingenious and endearingly nutty, but what's wrong with the classic bikes on which we've cycled facing forward for 150 years? Well, says Killian, "an inventor needs to have disrespect for the past." He admits that cycling sideways is counterintuitive, but claims that it also offers "exhilaration, grace and control." I'll stick to cycling forward, but you can judge the Sideways Bike for yourself by watching a YouTube clip of Killian riding it on www.sidewaysbike.com.

5. As long as it's green.

Of course it's important, but sustainability is often used to excuse other deficiencies in design. Think of all of the clunky sustainable products you've bought because your conscience told you to. Or look at the eco-cars featured in "The Sexy Green Car Show," which runs until April 15 at the Eden Project in Cornwall, England (www.edenproject.com). Energy efficiency aside, is there anything about them that would make you want to own one? Why can't eco-cars be beautifully styled, and fun to drive too?

6. Design by committee.

It's the curse of so many corporate design projects, particularly company logos, or visual identities, as graphic designers call them. The more ambitious - and expensive - the project, the more vulnerable its orchestrators seem to feel. That's why such projects end up being subjected to so many people's opinions, that they become as bland as a Hollywood blockbuster with a plot determined by repeated test screenings.

7. Up, up and away.

As corporate life expectancy shortens, ambitious executives have so little time to make their mark in particular roles that they meddle unnecessarily. Why else would packaging change so frequently, often at the expense of brand recognition? And what other reason could there be for companies to dump great corporate identities for mediocre ones? Exhibit A: UPS's otherwise inexplicable decision to replace its beautiful Paul Rand-designed "parcel" symbol.

8. But it worked for them.

Otherwise known as me-tooism, or copy the competition. This is another corporate security blanket guaranteed to produce dreary design. It explains why every other MP3 player now looks like a homemade iPod; why so many glossy black digital products have surfaced recently; and why so many Web sites have suddenly switched to Georgia typefaces. Designers often grumble about clients demanding that they "give me another" of whatever's the best-selling product of the moment. But why do they do it?

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