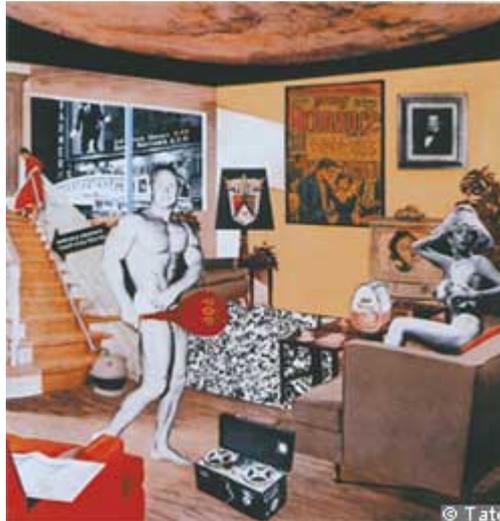


It's time we took design seriously

Edwin Heathcote



Richard Hamilton's 'Just What Was It That Made Yesterday's Homes So Different, So Appealing?' (1956)

Design is a word that is increasingly diffuse in its application, used in myriad contexts, occasionally spurious, occasionally absurd. From the "designer" jeans and must-have lemon-squeezers of the 1980s, to "designer" drugs and "process design", the word has been applied liberally to branded consumables and management-speak. Its most recent high-profile use has been in the notion of intelligent design, which transforms God into a creative. En route, we have become familiar with fonts, web layouts and graphic techniques that were formerly the preserve of trained graphic designers. In the astonishing array of "design" objects we now own, from iPhones, shoes and handbags to coffee-makers and cars, we consume design at an unprecedented rate, and are intimately familiar with its vocabulary and its tropes. You can now even buy "design art", a weird hybrid of the useful, the useless and the very, very expensive.

Of course, for as long as there have been objects they have been designed. Yet design only emerged as a dedicated discipline in the 19th century and its literature and theory is still very much in its infancy. It is curious that despite the increasingly prominent role that self-consciously designed commodities play in our everyday lives and in the way we define ourselves, the literature around the subject is hugely disappointing. In fact, beyond bland coffee-table books, it is barely there at all. Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design*, a classic Hegelian text treating modernism as the inevitable outcome of a historical process is, despite being first published in 1936 and hopelessly dated, still the key text. There have been other books, from quirky Bruno Munari (*Design as Art*) to deadpan Norman Potter (*What is a Designer: Things, Places, Messages*), and Deyan Sudjic's 2008 *The Language of Things*, which attempted a broader examination. Nevertheless there is surprisingly little critique, an almost complete absence of theory and little genuinely popular, compelling writing on the subject.

It is tempting to compare the situation in design with that in architecture. With its long and often dubious relationship to political and economic power, architecture has built up a body of theory: occasionally questioning, occasionally justifying and post-rationalising, but always aware of the paradoxes of its status and its effect on everyday life. Design, its much younger cousin, has built up no such body of thought. Perhaps its ubiquity in an era of gadget obsession and extreme fashion-consciousness has allowed it to bypass theory, to become everyday currency without the need for manifestos or ideas.

But for a discipline that professes to question basic principles and constantly reinterpret and revise, its practitioners can demonstrate an unsettling acquiescence, a willingness to accept the brief and the status quo. This is particularly true today when design, as part of the fabled "creative economy", is expected to shoulder responsibility for recreating a mixed economy, to effectively replace manufacturing and industry with intellectual product, the making of which can less easily be outsourced.

Perhaps the lack of theory is partly down to the subservience to the market. The roots of design are, after all, corporate. The cult of the designer is a 20th-century phenomenon. The architect Peter Behrens (1868-1940) was the first to look at design as branding when, before the first world war, he not only built factories for German electrical manufacturer AEG but also redesigned and unified its product range, logo and marketing. A decade later, the Bauhaus, heavily influenced by Behrens, created the modernist notion of design as an ideological, socialist programme applied to mass manufacture to improve the lives of everyday folk. However, like the socialist designers of the British Arts and Crafts movement before them, its adherents ended up producing expensive, hand-crafted status objects for the intellectual bourgeoisie.

It was the US that most successfully applied design to the mass market, using it as a tool for building in obsolescence, ensuring a product would be in, then rapidly out of fashion again. Ever since, design has remained almost exclusively a mechanism for generating sales, for increasing consumption. Its practitioners may not like the idea but they remain servants of capital.

A recent batch of books on the subject attempt to remedy this lack of critical theory with varying success. Warren Berger's *Glimmer*, with its aspirational subtitle, is an attempt to promote design as a universal solution. It is based largely around the ideas of "design guru" Bruce Mau (a Canadian multi-disciplinary "visionary"), the glimmer of the title being the moment of clarity (a close relative of the blink or nudge) in which an idea begins to emerge. Berger, though, has none of the storytelling skill of Malcolm Gladwell or Freakonomics' Stephen J Dubner and Steven D Levitt. A brief collection of his self-conscious chapter headings reveals the kind of banal management-speak cliché from which the book is compiled: "Ask Stupid Questions", "Jump Fences", "Make Hope Visible", "Go Deep", "Work the Metaphor".

This is not an effort to elucidate design but rather to apply a smidgen of its sexiness to business and it perfectly embodies a contemporary misconception. The application of design intelligence to business processes may be a fine thing but it is not in itself design; it is management consultancy for people who would rather not think of themselves as management consultants. *Glimmer* is jargon-packed and excruciating.

Another book that fundamentally misunderstands its subject, *Woman as Design*, prompted a withering critique from Germaine Greer as an exercise in mindless objectification. Stephen Bayley, a suave, articulate critic obsessed with cars, has produced an unsettlingly self-indulgent picture book of breasts and bums, which simply looks like an illustrated midlife crisis. Apparently prompted by a conversation with his wife in which he asked whether any designer would be capable of creating the complexities of a vagina, Bayley proposes that the female body is a masterpiece of design, yet one that far outstrips the capability of any designer in its blend of beauty and function, thus destroying his own argument at a single stroke. Unless we regress to intelligent design, the female body, like everything else in nature, is a result of evolution (and culture), not design. It is an astonishingly unsophisticated work and to see models and starlets juxtaposed with cars and fetishised as design objects is as disappointing as it is distasteful.

In establishing the Boilerhouse at London's Victoria and Albert museum in the 1980s, Bayley was instrumental in design being taken seriously (albeit in a museum established for exactly that purpose) and, ultimately, in the creation of London's Design Museum. Design in Britain is edited by Deyan Sudjic, Bayley's predecessor as The Observer's architecture and design critic and another Design Museum director. It takes us firmly back to the mainstream and is a conventional account of Britain's contribution to design culture, covering product, graphics, fashion, architecture, branding, automotive and so on.

This is largely a picture book with accompanying essays celebrating British design over the past century or so. The format, a series of brief, generally very good essays on the different fields, doesn't allow a real development of the themes or of crossover between the fields, which is a shame. It would be intriguing to begin to build up a picture of whether there is, or ever could be, such a thing as "British design", particularly as many of its most successful practitioners are not British (Israeli-born Ron Arad, Australian-born Marc Newson, Iraqi-born Zaha Hadid) or not working in Britain (Apple's Jonathan Ive). The question is neatly side-stepped by a smarter than average title which implies there is no such thing as British design, only design in Britain.

But individual authors do at least raise questions. Daniel Charny's excellent contribution sets the scene for design for production in a country with barely any manufacturing, while Sudjic tellingly entitles his architecture essay "Building in a Cold Climate". British politicians of all parties may incessantly sound off about the creative economy but they have proven largely ignorant of and uninterested in the details and dismal at supporting it.

An even colder climate is that of Denmark, yet that country has proved far cosier for designers. Thomas Dickson's huge book *Dansk Design* has none of the ambiguity of its British equivalent. It is proudly stuffed with Danish design, everything from longboats to Lego, and very impressive it looks too. The relationship of design to Danish character is examined; its blend of social responsibility, libertarianism and a willingness and ability to meld the modern into the homely has produced a culture of design that is at once coherent and eminently exportable.

Finally, Sophie Lovell's Limited Edition is, as far as I know, the first book to attempt to encompass the radical changes that have swept design over the past few years and have led to "design art". This is a new field for collectors, the result of the urge to impinge on the territory of artists, with their freedom from the restraints of commission, economy, function and manufacturing process. But it is also to do with the concomitant desire to make the kind of money associated with top art sales and the collusion of galleries in creating a new global market. It is telling that the phrase "design art" was coined by an auctioneer, Alexander Payne, of Phillips de Pury, a firm instrumental in the elevation of design to art status (Payne has since conspicuously disowned the term).

Lovell argues that the idea of design art, or limited-edition design, is nothing new, that the wealthy have always commissioned bespoke pieces and that the 20th-century furniture that we now see as the modernist canon was only ever produced in tiny numbers for a wealthy clientele. Certainly, items such as Charlotte Perriand's and Le Corbusier's tubular chaise-longue fit in to this category. But others, such as Marcel Breuer and Mart Stam's tubular chairs, do not. The designers of the British Arts and Crafts movement were, in effect, producing design art, to be made by craftsmen, but the modernists were not. That they barely sold any product was to do not with intention but with taste, and the lack of appeal to mass manufacturers geared to bourgeois style and the culturally engrained aesthetics of comfort.

It is often easy, and necessary, to criticise design art as ego-driven and distasteful, neither as useful as design nor as good as art. But that should not distract from its capacity to surprise and provoke. Because of the freedom from commission and brief it allows the designer, and because of the prices it can command, it allows designers to question tradition, function, appropriation and consumption and, most importantly, to introduce meaning and narrative into a work. The question, though, has to be: is hyper-expensive sculpture for the global super-rich the right medium with which to criticise the system? It remains a big question and one that is not entirely answered by this otherwise attractive, inquisitive book.

These three books all do something to fill the gap of serious criticism; but much more is needed. Now that we are all, from middle managers to coffee-shop bloggers, designers, it seems the big ideas, like drops of active agent in a homeopathic fluid, have been diluted to disappearance, existing only as a memory. A culture and an economy predicated on production and consumption, and threatened by recession and impending environmental disaster, are in urgent need of design and with it, critique, humour, insight, engagement, protest and provocation.

Fonte: Financial Times, Jan. 30th 2010, Essays, online.

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