Design Culture - an Introduction
Notebook No. 2

Meeting 2, October 1, 2010

Visible and Invisible Design
High and Low Design
Design and Art

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Designing for Extraterrestrials?

Design issues between people can be complicated; how about those between humans and extra-terrestrials?

In the 1970s, NASA wanted to send a plaque into deep space as a message from the humankind to extraterrestrials. It was sent outside our solar system with Pioneer 10 and 11 (1972). It was designed by the scientists Dr. Carl Sagan and Dr. Frank Drake.

Maybe they should have studied design semiotics... The scientists may not have realized how difficult it is to create intelligible designs for creatures who don't share anything with us, including our semiotic codes.

The famous graphic designer Edward Tufte suggested a funny but intelligent redesign of the plaque, see http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/space.

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Visible and Invisible Design

- Many designs are meant as visible - to draw attention to themselves, their message, owner, designer, manufacturer, etc.

- Most everyday designs are invisible. Above all, they are meant as functional, to make our daily lives possible. They may be good or bad, but they are everywhere!

Sometimes a design functions (nearly) unconsciously (traffic lights!), sometimes it requires conscious attention.

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Audible and Inaudible Design
Sounds in everyday life can be either “audible” or “inaudible” or both, depending on the situation and the listener. Habit can turn audible signs into inaudible.

- Muzak: inaudible sound design that is meant to have an effect on behavior by being barely noticed.

- Alarm signals: highly audible design.

- Freeway noise: not really a design, but a by-product of multiple designs. Design is used to limit it (mufflers, sound walls, etc.).

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The paper clip is one of the greatest invisible designs of all time. It has a long design history of its own.

- Unknown invention from the 2nd half of the nineteenth century.
- First patented in 1899 by Norwegian Johan Vaaler, but existed earlier.
- Made possible by the availability of steel wire.
- Based on Hooke’s law 1679: Ut tensio, sic uis (‘as is the extension, so is the force’).
- Predecessor: the peg. known already 3000 BCE.
- Symbolic meaning: in occupied Norway during World War II wearing a paperclip became a symbol of resistance.
- Success: 20 thousand million produced yearly.

Read more about the paper clip and many more design objects from Henri Petroski: The Evolution of Useful Things, 1993.

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High and Low Design

- High design ~ “design for display”, luxury design. Often bought for symbolic value, which is at least as important as practical use. Highly visible design.

- Low design ~ “design for living”, practical designs for everyday use. Function often dominates, symbolic value secondary. Everyday use makes these objects invisible.

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- Some objects are made to look classy and stylish, although they are affordable (IKEA, MUJII, Target)

- Some objects are designed to give the impression of ‘street cred’, although they may be expensive (“pre-used” jeans; designer clothes based on hip-hop styles that originated as ‘bricolage’).

- Reading the ‘value’ of these things depends on the semiotic codes observer has internalized.
Philippe Starck and Juicy Salif

Design objects have become collectable status objects, rather than things for use. Example: Philippe Starck: kitchen utensils for Alessi.

Philippe Starck's Juicy Salif (1990), created for the Italian design company Alessi, is one of the most famous design objects of our time. It is made of cast aluminum with polyamide feet, is 11.5 inches high, and costs 96 dollars.

“While eating a dish of squid and squeezing a lemon over it, Starck drew on a napkin his famous lemon squeezer.” (Alberto Alessi)

“This product is a perfect example of, ‘Humans have been on the planet too long.’” (Hari Matsuda)

Philippe Starck (1949-) about ‘Juicy Salif’:

"This is not a very good lemon squeezer: but that's not its only function. I had this idea that when a couple gets married it's the sort of a thing they would get as a wedding present. So the new husband's parents come around, he and his father sit in the living room with a beer, watching television, and the new bride and mother-in-law sit in the kitchen to get to know each other better. 'Look what we got as a present', the daughter-in-law will say.” (1999)

Beatriz Russo on Juicy Salif:

“I must say that, after testing Juicy Salif, a couple of my participants were actually bleeding… it is extremely unstable and once it falls, you not only break the glass that is under it (collecting the juice) but its sharp legs turn into a weapon. I remember that by the time I was doing my masters I read somewhere in the web that Juicy Salif was used as a weapon to kill people in a b-horror movie… I would love to see that! Another problem of Juicy Salif is that, if you bought it to catch people’s attention in your house/kitchen, or to start a conversation (as Philip Starck claim is it’s function), never try to use it as a lemon juicer… because you will have to throw it away the next morning… the day after I had the first pilot of my study (where the participant was asked to squeeze a lemon in it, wash it, dry it…) I could see the first signs of rust. It didn’t shine anymore and there were dark spots all over it… I must say that, after 30 lemons were squeezed on it, I had to throw it away… it was disgusting to look at it.” (2008)

from: http://deconstructingproductdesign.com/ The website analyzes many more interesting design objects - check it out!

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F.F.F. = Form follows function (coined by architect Louis Sullivan, late 19h century)
Used to be the most famous slogan of design culture, associated with modernist design. Many still believe in it. In a world where ‘Starck reigns’, “function” should perhaps be replaced by something else:

Fashion
Finances
Fantasy
Feelings
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Read more from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Form_follows_function

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Design and Art

Design and Art have often been considered as clearly separate from each other.

Emphasizing this divide, ‘design’ used to be known as “Applied Art,” or even as “Decorative Art.”

Today the relationship is far less clear.

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Art and design:
the traditional view

- An artwork is an expression of the creative freedom of an individual, a design object is determined by industrial and commercial concerns.

- An artwork is unique, a design object is mass-produced.

- An artwork does not have a practical purpose, a design object serves a concrete function.

- An artwork has a spiritual "surplus" value, while the design object is more down-to-earth.

- An artwork is a goal in itself, while a design object serves a goal.

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Art and Design:
the contemporary view
An artwork can be mass produced and commercially distributed. Andy Warhol and Takashi Murakami are good examples.

Some recent design object are not - primarily - functional. They emphasize symbolic and 'emotional' values.

Design objects are also produced as “limited editions” and kept and stored much like “works of art”.

Much contemporary art is conceptual - so is much of contemporary design!

Classical artworks have inspired artworks, but they also inspire designs for various purposes!

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Anticipation of things to come: the Machine Art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1934. Functional mechanical machine parts were exhibited as aesthetic objects. Museum of Modern Art collects design and displays it side-by-side with art, bridging the worlds of art and design.

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Andy Warhol’s hand-made Brillo Boxes are a famous example of Pop Art from the 1960s. Are they art or design?

- Obviously they are art inspired by product, package and graphic design, pop art inspired design in return, as we will later see.

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Artist as a Brand: Takashi Murakami (1963-)

The Japanese neo-pop artist Takashi Murakami has been bridging and blending high culture and low culture, art, and design, history and contemporary, East and West.

Murakami had a big exhibition at LA MOCA in 2007. There was Louis Vuitton’s fully operational design store inside the @Murakami exhibition. This was something new and controversial, and was much criticized as a commercial gimmick. However, it made sense, because of Murakami’s goals and the fact that he has designed objects for Vuitton.

Kaikai and Kiki are Murakami’s “spiritual” guardians. They are cartoonism figures that appear in many of Murakami’s art and design objects, including collectable figurines and wall papers.

Murakami’s sayings often sound enigmatic and paradoxical, considering that he is a very successful artist:
"I express hopelessness"

- "When I consider what Japanese culture is like, the answer is that it all is subculture. Therefore, art is unnecessary."

- "If my art looks positive and cheerful, I would doubt my art was accepted in the contemporary art scene. My art is not Pop art. It is a record of the struggle of the discriminated people."

- "I wanted to be commercially successful. I just wanted to make a living in the 'entertainment' world, but since then my motivation has changed."

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Toshio Iwai

Toshio Iwai (Japan) is a famous Japanese media artist who has also designed products for game consoles and even created new audiovisual instruments used by famous DJs (check performances with the "Tenori-On" from YouTube).

Iwai created the innovative playful music-creation software ElectroPlakton for Nintendo DS. It is not a game; rather it is a kind of interactive artwork. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electroplankton

For more about Tenori-On, created by Iwai for Yamaha, see http://global.yamaha.com/design/tenori-on/swf/index.html

Toshio Iwai also designs highly successful children’s books with his little daughter.

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Maywa Denki ('Maywa electric company'), a famous Japanese artist and designer group that actively blurs the boundary between art and design. They create products for sale and organize "product demonstration" performances, give concerts, perform on television and music videos, etc.

Maywa Denki products: The Knockman Family, Otamatone, etc.

For more, see their great website:

http://www.maywadenki.com/english/00main_e_content.html

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