The Challenge of the Modern

Around 1900 the world was changing. The new topics of culture included speed, new technology, urbanization, new communication media, changing social formations and gender roles. The big question was: how can design reflect these changes and contribute to them?

Art Nouveau was the first design movement that purported to be truly modern and international. It wanted to introduce a total aesthetic encompassing all forms of creativity, and - most importantly - bridging art and design. Art Nouveau claimed to be free from the stylistic trends of the past, but in fact was still very eclectic. However, its influenced were often different from those that influenced design in the Victorian era.

Art Nouveau showed much interest in simulating natural phenomena and ornaments. For some observers this seemed to be in contradiction with the scientific, mathematical and industrial principles of the dawning machine age.

Modernism and the afterlife of romanticism

- The paradox of modernism: it purported to be a total break with the past, but it was in many ways associated with the Romantic era.

- Modernism inherited the idea of the visionary larger-than-life artist-hero (Le Corbusier, Tatlin...)

- Modernism looked for a new unity of the arts, recalling Richard Wagner’s quest for “Total Work of Art” (Gesamtkunstwerk) that would be more than a sum of its parts. Richard Wagner (1813-1883) created operas for the Bayreuth festival, purporting to unify all the arts.

Searching for the New Unity
- The unity of the arts was often also seen as a spiritual unity. Search for the synthesis of all the arts manifested itself in Synaesthesia (interchangeability of the senses).

Cosmic, mystical tendencies encountered the modern ‘scientific’ spirit in complex and even paradoxical forms.

Aleksandr Skriabin’s Prometheus, Poem of Fire, (symphony no. 5, 1908-10) combined music with color lights produced with a “Chromola” or light piano. Prometheus anticipated synaesthetic works in “visual music”, “lumia” or color light compositions.

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Art Nouveau

As a design movement its heyday was from the 1890s to c. 1910.

The name came from the design shop ”L’Art Nouveau” in Paris (S. Bing, 1895-); a ”Pavillion de l’Art Nouveau” was exhibited at the Exposition Universelle (World’s Fair), Paris, 1900. Many names in different places: Art Nouveau (France), Jugendstil (Germany), ”Stile Liberty” (Italy), ”Modernisme” (Spain)...

Art Nouveau was an attempt to create an universal style, covering all forms of expression (“an umbrella style”).

It claimed to have abandoned the “historicism” of the past; the goal was to create a truly modern form of expression.

Influences: John Ruskin (who said: “turn to nature for inspiration”), Arts and Crafts, folk art, Rococo and Baroque, non-Western sources: Japanese design, Islamic ornaments.

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Art Nouveau had many backgrounds:

- Political (it often flourished in states that were struggling to gain independence and international recognition, helping them to create their own identity – small countries like Finland created significant Ars Nouveau traditions)

- Social (it was present everywhere in the modern environment from print publications, illustration and underground stations to department stores)

- Cultural (proposed a new unity of visual arts, embracing both art and design)

- Technological (used industrial materials such as wrought iron and glass; utilized industrial production methods)
Art Nouveau's stance was "Against Historicism"

- "We want it to be modern so that any reminiscence of the past is ruthlessly excluded." (critic Roger Marx about a planned exhibition, 1907)

- In spite of modern tendencies Art Nouveau was often accused to be a decadent “fin de siècle” phenomenon; rejected by a younger generation of ‘modernists’ who were looking for purity and more radical break with the past.

- Art Nouveau became a powerful influence on Art Deco (1920-30s), and later on Psychedelic art and design (1960s).

Art Nouveau: important designers

- Aubrey Beardsley (1872-98), drawings, graphic designs
- Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933), glassware
- Louis Majorelle (1859-1926), furniture
- Hector Guimard (1867-1942), ironwork (Paris metro stations)
- Emile Gallé (1846-1904), glassware
- Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939), posters
- Victor Horta (1861-1947), architecture
- Antonio Gaudí y Cornet (1852-1926), architecture
- Henry van de Velde 1863-1957), tableware, interiors
- Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), architecture, furniture, interiors; pioneer of the Scottish rectilinear style

Audrey Beardsley (1872-1898) was a talented English graphic artist. Although he died young, he was a huge influence on Art Nouveau, defining its irregular organic lines as a graphic style.

Henri Van de Velde's words about reconciling art, design, industry:
“Artist, producer and salesman don’t coincide anymore with the collapse of the crafts system. A new unity must be found by collaboration. Machine must be spiritualized.”

- Henri Van de Velde became the leader of the new Deutsche Werkbund in 1907, an attempt to achieve this goal. This development ultimately led to the founding of the German Bauhaus, possibly the most influential art & design school of the 20th century.

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Modernism in Design, some Principles

- The need to harmonize design with the modern world: the world of technology, urbanism, speed
- The machine considered as the central element of modern life and design
- “Form follows function” (Louis Sullivan) as a guideline
- Ornamentation should be controlled, or even totally eliminated
- Barriers between art, engineering, design, science should be removed

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Constructivism and Modernist Design

Constructivism was an art and design movement born in the Soviet Union after the October revolution (1917), but it was influenced by Russian Futurism and Suprematism that were already introduced before the revolution in the 1910s.

Constructivism was an effort to harmonize art with industrial production; to bring intellectuals and workers together; remove the barriers between art and design.

Art and design was considered as “production”, and the artist and the designer as a kind of engineer or mechanic.

"Modern factory at work is the culminating manifestation of our times, surpassing the opera or ballet." (the Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin)

Eventually turned into an international trend and style (mostly in graphic design) which was adopted in other countries around the world, often without any reference to the original political-ideological connection to communism and bolshevism.

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Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953)

Tatlin was the best embodiment of the idea of the artist-designer-engineer.
Tatlin was called the “Soviet Leonardo da Vinci”, because he designed so many kinds of things, including stage-sets, a flying-machine (letatlin), clothes, stove, chairs for mass production, interiors for cafés, magazine layouts, paintings, sculptures.

Tatlin’s most famous work was the unrealized Monument to the Third International. It was a huge tower, that was also a rotating machine. Never built in St. Petersburg (Leningrad), but was considered a symbol of constructivism and the Soviet culture of the 1920s.

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Important Constructivists

- Vladimir Tatlin: workers’ clothing, “Monument to the Third International”

- Aleksandr Rodchenko: photographs, poster designs, multi-functional furniture for workers’ clubs

- Varvara Stepanova: radical clothing and textile designs designs

- El Lissitsky: founder of “the new typography.” A huge influence on the development of graphic design.

- Liubov Popova: stage design for Meyerhold, ”The Magnificent Cuckold” (1922): stage set as an ”acting machine”; also textile designs

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Bauhaus, 1919-1933

Radical art and design school, first in Weimar, then Dessau, Berlin. Eventually closed by the Nazis. Many teachers and students emigrated, often to the United States.

Founding director architect Walter Gropius (1883-1969) stated: “The Bauhaus believes the machine to be our modern medium of design and seeks to come to terms with it.” (1923)

The Slogan of Bauhaus: ”Art and Technology: A New Unity”(1923)

The teaching ideology of the Bauhaus: learning by doing (in workshops, by experimenting with material); the destruction of previous learning;”the freeing of the mind”

Bauhaus became an international stronghold for Constructivism, particularly after the influential Hungarian avant-garde artist and designer László Moholy-Nagy joined the faculty in 1923.

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De Stijl

-A modernist movement that developed around the Dutch magazine De Stijl (“The style”), founded 1917.

- Leading members Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, J.J.P. Oud, Gerrit Rietveld (Red, Blue and Yellow Chair, 1918), Rob van t’Hoff

- Based on idealist philosophy; search for a new vision of modern life.

-Towards total geometric abstraction; influenced by theosophism and the idea of the mathematical order of the universe.

-Back to basics: line, plane, color; horizontal and vertical lines; colors and non-color; seen as universals.

-Equation between geometric forms and machine production.

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Le Corbusier (1887-1965)

- Swiss architect, mostly active in France, an ”arch-modernist”

- With Amadée Ozenfant founded Purism; journal Esprit Nouveau (1920-)

- Purism = Platonic idealism + mechanization and modernity

- Emphasis on function, efficiency, precision, harmony

- Famous book Vers une architecture (Toward an Architecture, 1923): a radical manifesto for modernist design.

- Le Corbusier’s famous Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau (Pavilion of the New Spirit) was shown at Exposition des Arts Décoratifs, Paris (1925). It promoted truly modern design ideas, including the use of standardized mass-produced units and components for interior design.

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“A Machine for Living”

- According to Le Corbusier, a house should be a ”machine for living”- a perfectly functioning organism to provide for the utilitarian needs of man

- Factories, industrial buildings as models for homes (functionality!); portholes, steel railings
Concrete as material; smooth undecorated surfaces; flat roofs (like factories); free-flowing interior spaces; large expanses of glass

Le Corbusier declared that houses should be mass-produced, made by machines; still most designed for rich clients (paradox?)

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Design Culture in the USA

Art Deco

- Art Deco was a post-World War I phenomenon; blossomed in the 1920s: exoticism, escapism, luxury, hedonism

- Influences from Europe (particularly through the exhibition Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs, Paris 1925 - the USA did not participate because it did not think it had anything important to show)

- In the USA Pre-Columbian influences (stepped shapes from Aztec temples): applied from skyscrapers to radios. Attempt to compensate for the ‘backwardness’ of American design. “Jazz Modern” was a famous design slogan: a famous example was the Chrysler Building (NYC, 1928-30, by William van Alen)

- “Zig zag style”: luxury, extravaganza, escapism. Major influence on ”atmospheric” movie palaces and Hollywood musicals (laving scenes created by Busby Berkeley for musicals produced by Warner Bros)

- Art Deco style was gradually influenced more clearly by machine aesthetics (it moved towards true “Machine Age” design)

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The Skyscraper Style

- A conscious effort to create an ‘American style’

- Skyscraper was seen as the symbol of the American civilization, thus it became a model for design

- Emphasized vertical forms; piles of “modules”

- Applied to many kinds of items from textiles to cabinets, radios and kitchenware.

- Paul Frankl created skyscraper style designs, such as a skyscraper style combination desk and bookcase, ca. 1927.
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The American Modern Industrial Design

- Emerged from the late 1920s onward. The designer was defined as an “artist-technologist,” working together with industrialists, marketing people and advertisers.

- Motivation: the Wall Street Crash 1929 led to a social and economic crisis. “Re-designing” objects was offered as a solution, to make them more attractive to consumers. The focus was on the surface aesthetics, not so much on the principles behind the surface.

- Search for machine age aesthetics, which could also be considered as “American aesthetics” (concept ‘The Machine Age’ was influenced by groundbreaking exhibition Machine Art at the Museum of Modern Art, NY, 1934).

- Influenced by European modernism, but there was an important difference: in the USA there was a constant interest in non-functional traits (‘machine age ornament’); design slips from functionality to surface effects (this led to another design debate).

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Pioneers of American Industrial Design

- Norman Bel Geddes: famous book Horizons, 1932 (streamlining); futuristic designs; the Futurama exhibit for the General Motors Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair 1939.

- Raymond Loewy: Gestetner duplicating machine redesign (1929), Coldspot Refrigerator (Sears, Roebuck, 1935); Rocketport of the Future (N.Y.W.F. 1939)

- Walter Dorwin Teague: redesigned Kodak cameras, office machines and many others

- Henry Dreyfuss: Redesigns of Bell telephones, tractor designs for John Deere, Democracity (inside Perisphere, N.Y.W.F., 1939)

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Streamlining

- Concept that symbolizes American design in the 1930s.

- Popularized by Bel Geddes in his important book, Horizons, 1932

- Two basic principles:
  1) ovoid gliding form (“the teardrop”)
  2) smooth, continuous surface
- Scientific background: research on birds, fishes, teardrops. Goal: finding the form with the least air resistance.

- First applied to submarines, airships, aeroplanes (first windtunnel to test automobile models 1921 at Zeppelin works, Germany; Paul Jaray).

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Streamlining applied to Concept Cars

Norman Bel Geddes: rear engined car (1932)

-Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion car, three-wheeled teardrop design

-The Stout car, the first rear-engined design to appear on the market
The evolution is shown 'naturally leading toward streamlining.

- Chrysler Airflow (1934) was one of the first streamlined cars that came into production. An advertising text claimed: "You have only to look at a dolphin, a gull, or a greyhound to appreciate the rightness of the tapering, flowing contour of the new Airflow Chrysler."

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The Influence of the New York World's Fair (1939)

The New York World's Fair gave the American industrial designers an opportunity to apply their ideas about streamlining to large-scale pavilions and other exhibits.

Particularly famous was the General Motors' Futurama pavilion. Designed by Norman Bel Geddes, Futurama was a classic example of innovative exhibition design. It influenced future design of freeway systems, like those of Southern California.

Streamlining aesthetics spread to ever new forms, including more household gadgets, house designs, and automobile designs of the 1950s.

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Interpretations of Streamlining

- Streamlining was soon inflated as an idea: some people said sarcastically that it was applied to "short fiction and false teeth, wastebaskets and underwear."

- Instead of being something really functional, streamlining became often a decorative element, and was used as a marketing gimmick.

- The pioneering design critics Sheldon and Martha Cheney defended the idea of applying streamlining applying to "oil-burning furnace, pencil sharpener, the typewriter
and the electric iron, because these are related to the most conspicuous symbol and inspiration of the age, the aeroplane” (Sheldon & Martha Cheney: Art and the Machine, 1936)

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“Streamlining was a form of symbolic packaging, a visual metaphor of aspiration and progress.”

Design Historian Bevis Hillier

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