Wiley Wiggins

Huhtamo

Desma 10

October 23rd, 2019

Look and Feel: Design Culture and the Function of Ornament

The question of whether ornament should be removed from the design of functional and mass-produced objects often serves to perpetuate a false dichotomy that separates the form of an object and its holistic functioning- which includes not only its mechanical function but cultural and psychological considerations.

If we define (Industrial) Design Culture as a tradition beginning in the nineteenth century with the dawn of mass-production, we can say that a tendency towards ornamentation and a subsequent pitched argument against it by various designers has been consistent for as long as Design Culture has existed. As machines found their way first into places of work and then into homes as consumer products, ornament has been used to place unfamiliar forms in a historical context, help foster an intuitive understanding of an item's intended use, and to blend an item in with a surrounding aesthetic. The Amos beam engine (an early steam engine) had neo-classical columns of wrought iron supporting its frame. Early Singer sewing machines were redesigned from industrial-looking shapes and given organic, curved lines and concealed mechanical workings in order to blend in with other home furnishings. Early locomotive engines and train-cars were styled in a manner that reflected the nascent branding of early train companies and furnished in ways meant to make rail-travel tolerable to passengers. Tellingly, early American and British trains were designed in radically different ways– both because of cultural differences in respect to class considerations and cultural norms in both countries, but also in respect to the

landscape across which the trains traveled and the fuel that was readily available (Heskett 44-45). These radical differences are an early clue that it is not a simple matter to distinguish between utilitarian design elements and decorative design elements when evaluating the design of products.

Arguments against ornament included in functional designs has often been absolutist- a call for the abolition of all decorative elements. Influential modernist theorist and convicted child-rapist Adolf Loos went so far to assert a connection between ornament and crime, drawing a link between the urge to decorate and tattoos, which he claimed were the mark of criminals and degenerates. In an essay actually entitled "Ornament and Crime" he expounded–

> Ornament means wasted labor and therefore wasted health. That was always the case. Today however, it also means wasted material, and both mean wasted capital. […] Modern ornament has no parents and no offspring, no past and no future. Uncultivated people, for whom the greatness of our age is a closed book, greet it rapturously and then disown it after a short period of time.

Loos wrote this piece, which centers white aristocrats as the vanguard of the evolution of culture while denigrating decorative arts to the domain of "negro tribesmen", in 1908, at a time when Art Nouveau was beginning to gain ascendance, creating some of the most enduring and harmonious decorative forms in the history of design.

By the 20's and 30's industrial designers and architects, taking cues from designers like Le Corbusier and Louis Sullivan, advanced the notion that useful objects have an "ultimate form" dictated by the nature of their use, which is not so much designed as it is "revealed" by

constant iterative improvement. American industrial designer Walter Dorwin Teague (1883-1960) spoke to this idea–

> Designs are always latent in the things [the designer] deals with and it is his job to discover and reveal them. [A designer is] an explorer seeking the one perfect form concealed within the object beneath his hand. (Meikle 139)

Teague believed that a perfect, "ultimate" form, should it be found, would also be inherently beautiful. Teague's contemporary, automotive engineer Walter T. Fishleigh, argued that "functionalism" could not produce an inherently beautiful result alone because aesthetic sense was deeply subjective. I would add that the idea of an inherently beautiful "ultimate" form fails to consider that designed items, much like evolved life-forms, are neither more or less "perfect" than one another, but rather better adapted or maladapted to the culture and environment in which they are used. Victor Papanek, in his essay "What is Design?", uses the example of the Japanese tatami mat, which found its way into some cosmopolitan American homes in the 1980's, but which was inappropriately designed for American homes, houseware, and even the acoustic properties of musical instruments popular in American homes. The tatami mat, Papanek argued, was part of an entire system of design and architecture in Japan to which it was perfectly tailored (Papanek 18-19). The suggestion that a designed item has an "ultimate form" satisfied entirely by mechanical functioning both ignores the ephemerality of the jobs that these items are made for and the cultural and psychological needs that visual appeal and decorative elements satisfy. It's my counter argument that ornament should be judged as superfluous only when it interferes with the mechanical function of an object or fails to satisfy the psychological or cultural function it was added to fulfill. Furthermore, calls for "purely functional" forms and the abolition of ornament generally involve a blindness to the visual

styling that is implicitly added by designers due to the influence of their own culture (which their own biases judge to be “neutral” or “default”) and the huge design impact imparted by the materials and production technologies of the period.

One of Loos' slightly less outrageous arguments against ornament was that the forces of fashion that influence the look and feel of decorative elements mean that an item bought for the home and meant to last many years would seem dated and worthless as fashions changed. To think that minimalist, undecorated forms are not the product of and subject to such changes in fashion can no longer be considered an educated opinion from our current historical vantage point. Both minimalist and maximalist designs wax and wane with fashion and both can be equally clumsy or elegant based on their context. Concerns that decorated forms de-emphasize utility and functional quality in favor of marketing can be countered with a multitude of cases where designs were once considered sleek and minimal but seem completely anachronistic now. The streamlined, Buck-Rogers-esque model dirigibles and rocket cars of Norman Bel Geddes were once the height of modernism, with forms thought to be necessitated by the physics of air itself, now these forms, still novel to the eye, immediately conjure the retro-futuristic style of pulp science-fiction covers.

The radical transformations that mass-produced forms such as office chairs and typewriters underwent in the post-war period echoed changes in the culture and sexual politics of the day. No industrial designers of the day would have argued for a return to a the raw, unembellished form of a pre-Remington civil-war typewriter, these new designs were considered simple and modern, even though they were designed to visually assert ideas about gender roles and office hierarchy, welcoming women to the workforce while clearly defining the limitations

imposed on them (Lupton 85). Industrial design created a twain of functional understanding from typewriters to computer terminals and finally microcomputers, even though these devices were mechanically very different from one another. In the late 90's, Jonathan Ive's use of translucent plastics that showed the actual working components of Apple computers, in streamlined organic shapes, became immediately imitated and seems almost decadently decorative now. While one could argue that the beige, boxy personal computers that Ive's globular creations dethroned were the ones that could actually be called minimal and without ornament, they were encased in molded plastic that hid their inner workings and their band-aid colored exteriors had been picked by marketers to blend-in innocuously with office surroundings. There is a repeating pattern in these discussions where critics of ornament are blind to the aesthetics of the current moment, assuming the most modern forms to be the most basic. This never-ending re-evaluation of visual design has extended to the software that we use daily. In the early days of computing, and again during the dawn of devices with touch interfaces, skeuomorphic designs became popular. These interfaces– ones in which virtual surfaces and interactive elements visually mimic real-world counterparts, helped users intuitively understand how to use new software patterns. These same skeuomorphic elements called back to design gestures most vocally opposed by earlier industrial designers. Papanek echoed critiques of skeuomorphism in industrial design–

> An honest use of materials, never making the material seem that which it is not, is good method. […] The steel beam in a house, painted a fake wood grain; the molded plastic bottle designed to look like expensive blown glass; the 1967 New England cobbler's bench reproduction ("worm holes $1 extra") dragged into a twentieth -century living room to provide dubious footing for martini glass and ashtray-these are all perversions of materials, tools, and processes. (Papanek 16)

Within the space of a few years many of these new software designs were also reconsidered as gaudy– just as users had internalized patterns of software use enough to no longer require visual metaphors to ground themselves in. Obsolete interfaces were iterated upon and “flat” visual design became popular. Trends in user interface design seem to change as new interactions become possible with advances in technology, however. There is no “perfect” form of a software interface, just one well or maladapted to its individual users, who each have their own cultural biases, experiences, and tastes.

Works Cited

Heskett, John. *Industrial Design*. Thames and Hudson, 2004.

Loos, Adolf, et al. Ornament and Crime: Thoughts on Design and Materials. Penguin Books, 2019.

Lupton, Ellen. *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines Frome Home to Office: Cooper-Hewitt, National Museum of Design, Smithsonian Institution.* Princeton Architectural Press, 1993.

Meikle, Jeffrey L. *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America 1925-1939*. Temple University Press, 2001.

Papanek, Victor J. *Design for the Real World*. Thames and Hudson, 2019.