

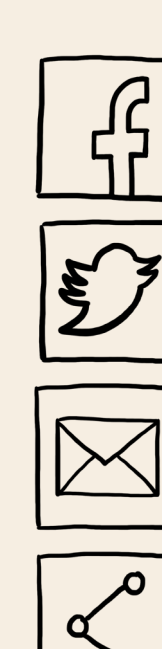
DESIGN

The Beautiful and The Useful

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“ Graphic design - which fulfils esthetic needs, complies with the laws of form and the exigencies of two-dimensional space; which speaks in semiotics, sans-serifs, and geometrics; which abstracts, transforms, translates, rotates, dilates, repeats, mirrors, groups, and regroups — is not good design if it is irrelevant.



Graphic design - which evokes the symmetria of Vitruvius, the dynamic symmetry of Hambidge, the asymmetry of Mondrian; which is a good gestalt; which is generated by intuition or by computer, by invention or by a system of co-ordinates — is not good design if it does not co-operate as an instrument in the service of communication.”

Visual communications of any kind, whether persuasive or informative, from billboards to birth announcements, should be seen as the embodiment of form and function: the integration of the beautiful and the useful. In an advertisement, copy, art, and typography are seen as a living entity; each element integrally related, in harmony with the whole, and essential to the execution of the idea. Like a juggler, the designer demonstrates his skills by manipulating these ingredients in a given space. Whether this space takes the form of advertisements, periodicals, books, printed forms, packages, industrial products, signs, or TV billboards, the criteria are the same.

That the separation of form and function, of concept and execution, is not likely to produce objects of esthetic value has been repeatedly demonstrated. Similarly, it has been shown that the system which regards esthetics as irrelevant, which separates the artist from his product, which fragments the work of the individual, which creates by committee, and which makes mincemeat of the creative process will, in the long run, diminish not only the product but the maker as well.

John Dewey, commenting on the relationship between fine art and useful or technological art, says: “That many, perhaps most, of the articles and utensils made at present for use are not genuinely esthetic happens, unfortunately, to be true. But it is true for reasons that are foreign to the relation of the 'beautiful' and 'useful' as such. Wherever conditions are such as to prevent the act of production from being an experience in which the whole creature is alive and in which he possesses his living through enjoyment, the product will lack something of being esthetic. No matter how useful it is for special and limited ends, it will not be useful in the ultimate degree - that of contributing directly and liberally to an expanding and enriched life.”

The esthetic requirements to which Dewey refers are, it seems to me, exemplified in the work of the Shakers. Their religious beliefs provided the fertile soil in which beauty and utility could flourish. Their spiritual needs found expression in the design of fabrics, furniture, and utensils of great esthetic value. These products are a document of the simple life of the people, their asceticism, their restraint, their devotion to fine craftsmanship, and their feeling for proportion, space, and order.

Ideally, beauty and utility are mutually generative. In the past, rarely was beauty an end in itself. The magnificent stained-glass windows of Chartres were no less utilitarian than was the Parthenon or the Pyramid of Cheops. The function of the exterior decoration of the great Gothic cathedrals was to invite entry; the rose windows inside provided the spiritual mood. Interpreted in the light of our own experiences, this philosophy still prevails.



Parthenon, Athens. 447-432 B.C.

The Designer's Problem

An erroneous conception of the graphic designer's function is to imagine that in order to produce a “good layout” all he need do is make a pleasing arrangement of miscellaneous elements. What is implied is that this may be accomplished simply by pushing these elements around, until something happens. At best, this procedure involves the time-consuming uncertainties of trial and error, and at worst, an indifference to plan, order, or discipline.

The designer does not, as a rule, begin with some preconceived idea. Rather, the idea is (or should be) the result of careful study and observation, and the design a product of that idea. In order, therefore, to achieve an effective solution to his problem, the designer must necessarily go through some sort of *mental process*. Consciously or not, he analyzes, interprets, formulates. He is aware of the scientific and technological developments in his own and kindred fields. He improvises, invents, or discovers new techniques and combinations. He co-ordinates and integrates his material so that he may restate his problem in terms of ideas, signs, symbols, pictures. He unifies, simplifies, and eliminates superfluties. He symbolizes—abstracts from his material by association and analogy. He intensifies and reinforces his symbol with appropriate accessories to achieve clarity and interest. He draws upon instinct and intuition. He considers the spectator, his feelings and predilections.

The designer is primarily confronted with three classes of material:

- a) the given material:
product, copy, slogan, logotype, format, media, production process
- b) the formal material:
space, contrast, proportion, harmony, rhythm, repetition, line, mass, shape, color, weight, volume, value, texture
- c) the psychological material:
visual perception & optical illusion problems, the spectators' instincts, intuitions, & emotions as well as the designer's own needs

As the material furnished him is often inadequate, vague, uninteresting, or otherwise unsuitable for visual interpretation, the designer's task is to re-create or restate the problem. This may involve discarding or revising much of the given material. By analysis (breaking down of the complex material into its simplest components... the how, why, when, and where) the designer is able to begin to state the problem.

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