
Book Reviews

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Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life

by John Heskett

(Oxford University Press, New York, 2003)

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Design matters, according to John Heskett, an internationally renowned expert in the economics of design and design history. This message is clearly expressed in his 2003 book, *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life*. In this short yet densely packed study, Heskett, author of among other books, *Phillips: A Study of the Corporate Management of Design* (1989) and professor at the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology channels his formidable knowledge about design to provide a historical and global overview of the breadth and influence of the design field. In an area that tends to polarize those who theorize about and those who practice design, Heskett's study takes neither, choosing instead a managerial approach to the field, arguing that it is efficient business practice to take design seriously and to understand a single product's relationship to the larger designed environment. This includes urban planning, domestic environments, the media and pretty much every aspect of daily life. The book seems geared towards business students with its application of the case study pedagogical method, its exploratory rather than scholarly analysis and its focus on business applications of design strategy. While Heskett acknowledges the field's rich scholarly analysis of the social, political and cultural meaning of design in his excellent annotated bibliography, much of the book is concerned with the argument that design is a significant aspect of business practice. This does not diminish the book's value; rather its focus on globalization and multiple examples would make it accessible and useful for students of business and their critics, who want to get a handle on how managerial theorists conceive of the world market.

Heskett is able to write about design as a business strategy and as an aspect of modern political and social life by arranging the book into a series of conceptual categories, rather than focus on the achievements of great designers or exemplary projects. These categories include: utility and significance, objects, communications, environments, identity, systems, contexts and futures. This method allows Heskett to explain design as an interlocking aspect of modern life, rather than merely the look of the products we individually consume. In addition, Heskett's approach to the field from both a scholarly and managerial perspective enable him

take into account the major debates within the movement while revealing corporate strategies to address larger social issues, such as environmental destruction, advertising's false claims and, more broadly, the homogenization of taste and domination of American corporate values and style.

This material may be familiar to anyone who has studied design; particularly the message that cultures are diverse and marketing to a global market can be tricky. We may already know that design is not only the shape of an object, but also the words and meaning attached to a product and by extension to its producer. Or that objects are not always used in ways that were originally intended, so producers need to know their audience. These points are not new, but as the many examples show, they are still not heeded by corporations who due to lack of research and development ignore culturally specific needs of their market, to their peril.

Heskett's call for plurality and sensitivity to users, a major theme in the book, is not all for the social good, a la Ruskin or to enhance the efficiency of society, vis a vis Corbusier. Rather, "cultural awareness" then is revealed not as social engineering, but as a way to improve sales, a major theme of the book. That political and economic issues like globalization are addressed under a notion of cultural diversity, identity, and the role of design as bridge by which American manufactures can better reach foreign markets ignores the real damages that this cultural arrogance, not to mention economic disparity, inflicts. His examples, many of which not surprisingly draw from the currently emerging markets of Asia, are both humorous and telling of a sympathetic approach to the marketplace where all products are part of a larger project by companies to "design" and "communicate." Numerous examples include the story of how a Coke Cola slogan translated into Chinese as "bite the wax tadpole" (p. 50) and other cultural faux pas that suggest the necessity for corporations to know their users better. Coke's value in the user's life, its contribution to caloric and nutritional intake, for instance, is not taken into account rather; all business practices are viewed from a neutral perspective in the free market of design practice that Heskett upholds. Selling more coke, more fridges and services, like air travel and package delivery, requires a deeper understanding of the user, and this is simply part of good design. In fairness, Heskett would point to the emergence of local alternatives, Meca-Cola, for example, of counter-design strategies that speak to the market's ability to accept multiple participants in the design or shall we say consumer culture.

Indeed, this celebration of the consumer seems too quaint in light of other chapters such as "systems" where he discusses the strengths of homogenization as a business strategy and the necessity for modularity in manufacturing processes, but is in keeping with the book's

somewhat neutral tone throughout and render the whole process somewhat simplified and innocuous. Really, Heskett is proposing a bridge between the economies of scale and the need to tailor products and marketing to cultural specificity by advocating for careful corporate planning, increased marketing research to understand how customers “live the brand.” British Petroleum’s sunflower logo, linking them to environmentalism, is an example of how design is ideological, incorporating user concerns, a case Heskett mentions but doesn’t critically evaluate. Further, Heskett’s business-speak not only strips the material of the pleasure it is intended to evoke, it also further muddies his perspective on this business of persuasion. For example, he explains that “significance, as a concept in design explains how forms assume meaning in the ways they are used or the roles being assigned to them, often being powerful symbols or icons in the patters of habit or ritual.” (p.40)

The book is most valuable in its application of design to understand the built environment, an area previously reserved for urban studies or architecture. This approach making readers aware of the “social construction” of their world, of objects, words and environments, if not the philosophy and economics shaping it. The title itself is an excellent example of Heskett’s strategic and informed approach to design. Uniting these seemingly disparate things, the toothpick and the logo, Heskett attempts to draw attention to the way that products are mediated by culture. It concisely expresses the link between everyday things like toothpicks and corporate messages like logos, as well as between material culture and print culture which Heskett examines throughout the book. I would even cite the feminist message of the personal political here, although Heskett would conclude the personal is designed. In choosing this title, he reveals the depth of his background in the field, making an unacknowledged nod to Raymond Loewy’s who used the “toothpick and logo” title in his autobiography *Never Leave Well Enough Alone* where he discusses the range of his work as a young consultant designer for Pennsylvania Railroad. Modernist design critics, Sam and Martha Cheney used similar terminology in their 1936 homage to industrial design *Art and the Machine* where they described the American pioneer consultant designer as able to work on a range of objects “from a lipstick to a steamship.” As Heskett shows, now, unlike the old days of design, the one-size fits all consumers no longer exists, even toothpicks vary culturally. The story of the Japanese toothpick with its unique design contains the gee-whiz factor present in many of the book’s case studies as well as a hopefulness that cultural diversity will remain despite the expansion of the global market and the McDonaldization of culture. Heskett does grapple with this beyond pluralism though, evident in his admission that advertising and propaganda, which both fall under the same chapter “commu-

nications” and can and have be used as powerful tools of persuasion. However, this is countered by the hope that access to technology can challenge this control.

In its scope, this book is not merely intended to make us aware of design per se. Rather Heskett’s mission is broader than this to encompass global politics. In its efforts to promote design-minded planning (in its broadest sense from the product to marketing to public relations), Heskett appeals to business leaders who might read this book on a corporate retreat weekend say, to think more strategically, look beyond quarterly report to the longer term commitment of the company to the region it serves. While public relations can improve a corporation’s reputation, a design blunder will be remembered. It is the physical interface of the corporate reputation. This new evolved global player, like his cave-man ancestor, uses research tools to predict and respect regional difference and predict or diffuse the activists who oppose it.

From this perspective, it is troubling that Heskett continues to view public and private uses of design as unrelated modes of planning, with the government in charge of the public sphere and the corporation shaping the individual, privatized consumer in their own world. This obscures the relationship of these economic and political entities and upholds a false dichotomy by placing the demand for real public values on the state alone. This is evident in the burden, which the “public” design is faced, in transportation and urban planning for instance, as the arena where design impacts daily life, rather than acknowledge the extent to which business also shapes these areas. This neat division is increasingly difficult as privatization as a large-scale business strategy drives foreign policy as well as local and national elections.

The book includes clunky images of individual objects, not contextualized in cultural or regional settings as the book advocates but cut out images that seem hastily added, even avant-garde, such as the floating singular spoon featured on the cover of the expensive, small format hardcover. This undermines the book’s important contribution to the field. Is this what business students require to give design the weight and importance that Heskett argues convincingly that it deserves? Heskett certainly needs to consider the user in this regard.