Stephen Hayward

‘Good design is largely a matter of common sense’: Questioning the Meaning and Ownership of a Twentieth-Century Orthodoxy

This article has two main objectives: the methodological enrichment of Design History, and the application of these perspectives to a central issue within the history of design—the ‘good design’ discourse.

In response to the ‘Post-Modern dilemma’—what to study?—Part One considers how in particular circumstances objects may be regarded as forms of cultural discourse. It is a perspective well established in material culture studies and museology where Foucault’s idea that discursive artefacts operate as knowledge and involve the exercise of power has been highly influential. In contrast much recent work on the history and theory of consumption has emphasized the positive aspects of cultural discourse—its ability to empower the individual and to facilitate self-representation. In reconciling these positions I introduce Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ or taste culture, an idea that allows a consideration of subjectivity in terms of the appropriation and modification of knowledge in accordance with distinctive circumstances.

Part Two focuses on the ‘good design’ discourse. I define this as a collection of axioms that were especially prominent in the 1930s and the post-war period. In the field of public rhetoric it presented itself as ‘common sense’. However, I argue that it was a partial and elitist form of knowledge in so far as it positioned itself in opposition to an idea of ‘mass’ culture. When introduced to the market-place, ‘good design’ became ‘good taste’, taking on associations that were generic to particular commodity types. I base my analysis on Heal’s inter-war marketing strategy. In order to reconstruct a consumer perspective on this commodified knowledge I examine the Mass Observation Report on the ‘Britain Can Make It’ exhibition of 1946.

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Introduction

In the introduction to The New Cultural History (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989) Lynn Hunt identifies an important aspect of what might be called the ‘post-modern historians’ dilemma’. That is the difficulty of deciding ‘what to study’ in an intellectual climate that has come to question structuralism as over-determined, and to regard such orthodoxies as Marxism as misguided teleological. In the ‘new’ cultural history the master narrative has given way to a greater sense of relativism and specificity in the interpretation of events. The parallels with an ongoing debate in the History of Design are obvious. A special edition of Design Issues published in 1995 characterized the problem as the search for an appropriate and distinctive field of study. After Modernism, what are we to study, and how are we to study it?

In the opening section of this article I consider one solution based on a Foucault inspired approach to ‘reading material culture’ as knowledge. My reasoning is as follows. If we accept that the use and appropriation of objects and images can reproduce cultural norms, and that some of these beliefs or knowledges exercise more authority than others, then one way of organizing...
the plurality of material culture may be to focus on objects in terms of cultural ‘potency’. We might undertake a study of objects based on their contribution to cultural discourse. This is scarcely an original suggestion, merely the identification of a trend that is taking place across a wide range of analogous disciplines. The eclecticism of the ‘dis-cursive turn’ is illustrated by Annie Coombes’ Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994). In the broadest terms this study of a notion of racial difference begins in the world of late Victorian anthropology, and proceeds through scientific photography to private collections of artefacts, museum displays, popular spectacle, souvenirs and advertisements. This is not to suggest that ethnographic representations had precisely the same meaning in every context, merely that it is possible to discern a socially normative meaning that characterized a particular historical epoch.

In Foucault’s historiography the particularity of meaning proves relatively unproblematic in so far as he concentrates on public institutions, utilitarian objects and buildings with discrete regimes and clear divisions of power. This is less the case when considering meaning in less ritualistic situations, the domestic sphere, or the relationship of objects to personal identity. Here I find it necessary to part company with Foucault in order to consider the way in which discursive meanings are mediated, appropriated and modified. In doing this I will be considering Bourdieu’s theory of ‘habitus’ or taste cultures in relation to recent work on the history and theory of consumption.

In Part Two of this paper I apply these theoretical insights to a discourse that has had a major impact on the development of Design History, that is the ‘good design’ discourse. Several historians have recounted this ‘tradition of art worry’ from Henry Cole to the Design Council, at the same time as being influenced by its qualitative judgements in deciding what to study when confronted by a potentially limitless world of goods. I have been wary of such partiality and have attempted to broaden our understanding of the good design phenomenon by considering its currency and reception in a range of cultural spaces: in advertising, in everyday speech, as well as in the context of exhibitions and official publications. This ‘hermeneutic’ approach demonstrates how a body of knowledge absorbs local meaning. In establishing a chronological dimension for this study I have concentrated on the repeated use of a distinctive rhetoric: the aphorisms associated with the DIA (Design and Industries Association) and the Modern Movement. This gives rise to the idea that the ‘good design’ discourse enjoyed a ‘heyday’ corresponding with the 1930s and the post-Second World War era of reconstruction. This is the focus for my detailed consideration of some of the contradictions within the discourse: the way in which it advocated an idea of national efficiency and egalitarianism, while adopting the tone of an elitist taste culture.

Part One

The Discursive Turn

The idea of discourse has become highly topical in recent historiography. Rather confusingly it has been used in at least two senses: one to refer to the texts that make up the historical oeuvre, that is books on shelves; the other to sequences of ideas and activities as they took place in the past. Both are contained in the idea of the ‘good design discourse’, for, as we shall see, this was a set of beliefs and practices that regularly constructed its own myths and histories. In clarifying the two senses of discourse it will be necessary to over-draw distinctions.

The first sense of the historical text as discourse is associated with the American writer Hayden White. In the 1970s he applied literary analysis to the works of historians and discovered regular modes of emplotment and recurrent tropes. In a sense this is obvious, historians have a style, and to a greater or lesser extent exist in their work. We have only to think of the ambiguous status of Pevsner’s work: is Pioneers of the Modern Movement (to be considered later) history, polemic or autobiography? What is more controversial, though, is the idea that history is ‘merely’ a literary artefact, and nothing more or less than a specialized form of representation with no particular claim on the
'truth'. This is the position outlined by the American philosopher Richard Rorty and taken up by Keith Jenkins in his presentation of a 'post-modern' historiography. From this relativist standpoint 'textuality is the only game in town' and history (for the traditionalist) may appear a depressingly circular affair; successive generations of scholars being endlessly engaged in the interpretation of interpretations. More positively though, the recognition of the literary, autobiographical quality of history encourages the writer to recognize the relationship of his or her work to the present, and thus to develop a sense of accountability. This is the point made by Shanks and Tilley in their attempt to 'reconstruct' archaeology in the wake of post-structuralism: 'the true histories of the past uncover the hidden potentialities of the present.'

The second use of the term 'discourse' has become part of the intellectual apparatus of the cultural historian. It is predicated on an anthropological understanding of society in terms of regular and discrete clusters of ideas, practices and representations, a way of seeing the past in terms of 'programs . . . that provide a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes', to quote the influential American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. French scholars have pioneered this history of mentalities. The oeuvre ranges from the structuralism of F. Braudel's three-volume total history of Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century (Harper & Row, New York, 1985) to the specificity of Roger Darnton's work on the visual culture and value systems brought into focus by the Great Cat Massacre recorded in Paris in 1762.

Material culture plays a supporting role in this history of cultural meaning, being just one among many forms of 'representation'—the iconographic, the documentary and the statistical to paraphrase Roger Chartier. In the scholarship devoted to the early American experience, artefacts enjoy far more prominence, as well as representing concepts they determine behaviour. They bring about those forms of conduct deemed traditional, as in the vernacular form of dwellings and implements, while expressing commonly shared beliefs, as in the recurrent use of iconographic decoration. In James Deetz's In Small

Foucauldian Discourse

This introduces the idea that discourse may be seen as divisive, that it privileges one notion of truth above another, and in its implementation involves the exercise of power. This is very much the Foucauldian perspective as presented in his historical studies of those systems of thought that mark a transition from the classical to the modern periods. In Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason (Vintage, New York, 1967), for example, Foucault presents an emerging idea of insanity as cultivated in post-medieval medical practice. In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (Allen Lane, London, 1977) it is the panopticon that governed hegemonic concerns with the surveillance and organization of the young, the criminal and the poor.

Buildings, artefacts, uniforms, spatial dispositions and rituals of behaviour are 'discursive' in that they reproduce and represent these classifications. The dynamic simultaneity of this process is important, for Foucault rejects the idea of immutable structures and periodizations; his objects of discourse generate their own 'grids of specification'. Historical research then becomes a form of 'archaeology', a maverick empiricism that seeks out regularity and accumulation across a range of disciplines. As he explains:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an
order, correlations, positions and functionings, transforma-
tions) we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation.\(^{17}\)

In terms of material culture studies it is institutional buildings and museum collections that have lent themselves most readily to the Foucauldian approach. In *Buildings and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Early Modern Building Types* (Routledge, London, 1993), for example, the architectural historian Tom Markus has described how the spatial organization of the early nineteenth-century workhouse, school, factory and asylum precipitated the inequalities of power that made possible the efficient operation of modern capitalism. Similarly the museologist Eileen Hooper-Greenhill and the sociologist Tony Bennett have described the role of the nineteenth-century museum and art gallery in the cultivation of a middle-class notion of rational recreation among the urban poor.\(^{18}\)

**Discourse and Subjectivity**

With their hierarchical planning and didactic taxonomies institutional buildings serve as social metaphors. They embody discrete forms of knowledge and bring into being stereotypical subjects: the psychiatrist, the prisoner, the orphan, etc. As such they bear out the Foucauldian paradigm. But is this the case in other historical situations and locales? For example, is it possible to reconcile Foucault’s notion of the ‘docile’ culturally constructed body with a more recent stereotype—‘homo edens’; man (or woman) the consumer?\(^{19}\)

On the one hand, identity is conferred upon the individual and consciousness is predetermined to the extent that it is framed by discourse. On the other, an identity is ‘chosen’ by appropriating symbols from a world of goods and fashioning a distinctive identity centred on the home. In the following section I will explore the relationship between the idea of discourse and the notion of subjectivity as developed in recent work on the history and theory of consumption.

Among recent commentators it is Marshall Berman perhaps who has most vociferously rejected what he calls the ‘sadistic’, ‘bleak’ quality of Foucault’s work.\(^{20}\) In contrast Berman offers a version of modernity based on a variety of cultural responses to urban life. It is a paradoxical discourse that combines negative feelings of oppression and anonymity, as in some of the quotations he draws from Marx, with a more positive appreciation of the drama and self-realization that is possible in the city, as in the selections from Baudelaire. For our purposes it brings into focus some of the underlying assumptions in a growing body of work that examines the history of consumption in terms of self-representation. *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* is characteristic of this oeuvre in the way that it traces the beginnings of consumer ‘empowerment’ to late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe. As Victoria de Grazia explains in the introduction: ‘The shaking of the Old Regime transformed goods from being relatively static symbols around which social hierarchies were ordered to being more fluid and directly constitutive of social status.’\(^{21}\)

De Grazia is referring to a chronological shift between two models of society. One, predominantly rural and pre-industrial, in which social identities are relatively stable and subject to custom or even formal regulation, as with sumptuary laws. The other distinctively urban and ‘modern’, where an increasing range of mass-produced commodities enabled a physically and socially more mobile ‘consumer citizenry’ to cultivate fashionable identities. In sociological discourse it parallels F. Tonnies’ long-established notion of social development from relationships based on community to those of association, that is the move from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*.\(^{22}\)

In terms of the history of consumption it is a discourse that can draw on a limited but growing body of empirical work. For example: Fairchild’s study of populuxe commodities in eighteenth-century Paris, the relatively inexpensive umbrellas and fans that enabled a popular market to emulate its fashionable betters;\(^{23}\) Borsay’s analysis of the English Urban Renaissance and the increasing number of public spaces that facilitated the display of ‘polite behaviour’ among the middling sort, the coffee houses, paved streets, assembly rooms, and race courses that appeared in county towns and spas;\(^{24}\) the work of Williams, Richards and Loeb on the increasingly sophisticated mechanisms and language of

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late nineteenth-century commodity culture, those exhibitions, department stores and lifestyle advertisements that constituted 'dream worlds' of spectacle and display.25

Accepting these developments in the nature and extent of commodity culture, is it possible to argue that the stereotypical bourgeois consumer enjoyed more 'freedom of choice' than his or her pre-modern counterpart? For Foucault undoubtedly not; for while the rhetoric of 'consumer freedom' has become increasingly pervasive in the modern period, it is ultimately a discourse like any other, and therefore the result of cultural determinism. There can be no freedom of choice in any absolute sense. This is a point developed by Baudrillard in the context of late twentieth-century post-Fordist consumerism:

Our freedom to choose causes us to participate in a cultural system willy-nilly. It follows that the choice in question is a spurious one: to experience it as freedom is simply to be less sensible to the fact that is it imposed upon us as such, and that through it society as a whole is likewise imposed upon us. Choosing one car over another may perhaps personalise your choice, but the most important thing about the fact of choosing is that it assigns you a place in the overall economic order.26

While the Baudrillard of 1968 is relatively dismissive of 'personalization', in so far as it (merely) reproduces the discourse of modernity, more recent commentary (including his own) has seen it as an important area of investigation, being an aspect of the 'creativity' that is possible within consumer culture. The idea of the consumer as 'bricoleur' is central to Dick Hebdige’s analysis of subcultures, where transgressive identities are continually refashioned from a growing catalogue of collective representations.27 Hebdige’s analysis operates at the level of types, while Daniel Miller has been more interested in the relationship between subjectivity and material culture. There are certain similarities with the Foucauldian position, in so far as the individual is inducted into social norms by his or her exposure to objects and spaces. This is a continuous process, though most significant in childhood. However, Miller’s subject progressively develops understanding and self-awareness, and is thus able symbolically to manipulate his or her environment, and move from a state of 'being' to one of 'becoming'.28

The idea of self-realization through consumption has been an important motif in a late nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography devoted to the meaning of objects in the home. In an American context, for example, Karen Halttunen has shown how a mid-Victorian concept of the middle-class interior, characterized by notions of propriety, moral rectitude and 'character' gave way to a more 'progressive' rhetoric of individuality, informality and 'personality' in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The transformation was signified by the replacement of the term 'parlor' with 'living room' in contemporary etiquette guides, journals, and novels.29 In a British context, there are parallels with the 'Art at Home' phenomenon of the 1870s and 1880s. This was a series of initiatives on the part of publishers and retailers that brought into wider circulation avant-garde concerns with practicality, hygiene and self-expression.30 While the aesthetic realization of these ideals has been subject to cyclical rejection and reappraisal—witness the changing fortunes of the William Morris style—they gave rise to a way of conceiving the home that has continued to influence late twentieth-century discourse. It is 'expected' that the domestic interior should symbolize the self, as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton reveal in their empirical analysis of The Meaning of Things.31

Though the rhetoric of twentieth-century commodity culture is suffused with an idea of individuality, it is a qualified 'freedom' in so far as consumer choices exhibit patterned regularities. These so-called fashions or styles are of considerable importance in the context of this paper, particularly when they are related to other preferences and dispositions. For as 'taste cultures' they suggest a way of reconciling Foucault's 'disembodied' concept of discourse with the mediated subjectivity described by Miller. Put simply, a taste culture demonstrates the operation of 'power over', i.e. group conformity, alongside 'power to', i.e. the exercise of choice.32 The phenomenon of taste cultures or 'habitus' has been most rigorously explored by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in Distinction: A Social Critique of the
Judgement of Taste (1979; Routledge, London edition, 1986). On the basis of 1200 or so questionnaires completed at two moments in the 1960s, he studied the cultural orientations and trajectory of a representative sample of metropolitan and provincial French society. Preferences in furnishing, diet, entertainment, political affiliation, etc. reinforced a three-tiered model of the French nation based on educational attainment, social origins and wealth.

In some respects Distinction is unsurprising inasmuch as it confirms the anecdotal prejudices of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators on taste. For example, Veblen’s concept of social emulation is borne out by the allegiance of Bourdieu’s petit bourgeois to iconic cultural markers: the Blue Danube and reproduction furniture. Similarly the kudos that Veblen associated with ‘quasi scholarly’ or ‘quasi artistic’ accomplishments translates readily into Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, i.e. the ability to distinguish Picasso from Braque. The intriguing aspect of Bourdieu’s findings is the complexity of the system, particularly within the most culturally dynamic sector of society, the metropolitan bourgeoisie. Here a stereotypically fashion-conscious, left-bank Bohemia is continually distancing itself from a conservative-minded right bank. As cultural symbols inexorably flow from left to right, the avant-garde moves on. It is a model of ‘symbolic struggle’ that will find parallels in my empirical discussion of the good design discourse in Britain. Moreover, Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural identity in terms of varying levels of competency, based on social, economic and cultural capital, helps to explain the mediated nature of consumption. The interpretation of symbols and rhetorics is an interactive process. In Bourdieu’s words: ‘the consumer helps to produce the products he consumes, by a labour of identification and decoding.’

**Part Two**

The Good Design Discourse in Britain

How does the concept of discourse and consumption as elaborated in Part One of this paper help us to understand the cultural significance of ‘good design’ in Britain from the 1930s to the present day? To begin with, it enables us to conceive of the phenomenon in the broadest of terms, as a body of knowledge that has been associated with a fluid rather than a closed set of objects or styles, a ‘grid of specification’ generated by government initiatives and professional practice, writings about objects, and objects on display. From this Foucauldian perspective it is possible to regard good design in terms of the exercise of power, concomitant with a hegemonic idea of progress or modernity, and the antithesis to a contrary world of ‘bad’ or ‘uncultivated’ design. In terms of Bourdieu’s understanding of consumption we are reminded of the specificity of cultural meaning, the way in which a subjective habitus may selectively appropriate and modify meaning. This helps to explain why in the context of commodity culture the egalitarian aspirations of good design have been overshadowed by its aesthetic aspects—it has been consumed as cultural capital.

As a historical phenomenon the ‘good design’ discourse has shadowed the development of commodity culture. From the appearance of Charles Eastlake’s Hints on Household Taste in the mid-1860s to the present day it has presented itself as the moral conscience of the consumer, advocating a particular way of perceiving objects. It is a sensibility that encourages consumers vicariously to re-enact an idealized version of the design process as a means of differentiating good from bad ‘solutions’. Accordingly it is more readily defined in terms of a rhetoric than a particular collection of styles or objects. For with the notable exception of a few museum-bound ‘classics’, for example the Bauhaus pieces exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art New York since 1932, the majority of artefacts enjoy the status of ‘good design’ for only a brief period in their existence. The separation of sensibility from object has meant that nineteenth-century advocates of good design were able to find exemplars in the pre-industrial period, and speak of Nature as the ‘fountain-head’ of design. A series of questions encapsulate the core beliefs within the ‘good design’ discourse. They are taken from the Design Quiz that accompanied the ‘Britain Can Make It’ exhibition of 1946 and the BBC Design Awards of 1987.
1946
Does it do its job well?
Then is it well made?
Finally does it look well?

1987
Does it do its job well?
Is it attractive?
Has the designer used his materials effectively?
Is the price of the final product right?

It is an accessible, non-technical language that
draws its authority from everyday experience.
The efficiency, sound construction and attractiveness
of commodities have been part of the value
system promoted by consumer culture since at
least the end of the nineteenth century, and it is
probable that these characteristics were intuitively
recognized far earlier. As a consequence Noel
Carrington’s comments on Design in the Home
(1933) appear uncontroversial: ‘Good design is
largely a matter of common sense.’

In practice it was, and is a very particular kind
of ‘common sense’. It is predicated on the idea
that meanings and aesthetic standards are
common and universal at any one time; this is
regardless of the mediating role of subjectivity or
habitus, and the complexity of the value systems
that operate within commodity culture. In the
world of twentieth-century advertising, for ex-
ample, ‘good design’ criteria have been used to
market specific types of commodity, though
seldom in isolation from what reformers have
termed ‘meretricious’ or ‘dishonest’ qualities. The
language reflects another aspect of the parti-
ality of the good design discourse. It has appro-
priated the rhetoric of an élitist taste culture. Not
withstanding the ongoing attempts at demo-
cratization via government agencies and the
acknowledgement of a steady improvement in
the general standard of taste particularly since
the 1950s, ‘good design’ has maintained a dialec-
tical relationship with ‘bad design’. The latter
variously constructed as bogus historicism in the
1930s, or Borax vulgarity and ‘Repro-Contem-
porary’ in the 1950s. This tension between mass and
élite cultures has reinforced the stylistic moment-
um of good design; for in spite of its professed
adherence to immutable values, good design as a
commodity has been subject to visual obsoles-
cence and the fashion cycle. By the early 1950s,
inter-war functionalism was pronounced ‘square,
spare and bare’ in that bastion of ‘common sense’
notions—Design magazine.

My analysis concentrates on the ‘good design’
discourse in its heyday, that is from 1930s to the
immediate aftermath of the Second World War. It
was then that the idea of rational design achieved
an unprecedented level of public exposure as it
became allied to a notion of national efficiency
and post-war reconstruction. Government agen-
cies, exhibitions, journals and radio broadcasts
ascribed an almost fetishistic significance to the
well-designed everyday object. As Gordon Rus-
sell declared in 1935 without apparent irony: ‘Is it
too much to hope that in learning to design our
cups and gas fires, our chairs and lamp posts we
may in the end learn to design our lives?’

A Teleological View of History
The ‘good design’ discourse came of age in the
1930s, when it gained a sense of its own historical
identity. It was a carefully constructed version of
the past that lent authority to its message, demon-
strated the inevitability of its cause, and held the
promise of a triumphant future. The most com-
prehensive version of this narrative was probably
Pevsner’s Pioneers of the Modern Movement, first
published in 1936, although, as Julian Holder has
explained, there were important precedents in the
historical sensibility of the Design and Industries
Association in the 1920s and in the books and
articles on contemporary European developments
published by Studio and the Architectural Press.

The ‘English’ contribution to this view of the
past owed something to the legacy of the Arts and
Crafts Movement. While W. R. Lethaby and the
DIA had come to regard William Morris’s unequi-
vocal rejection of the machine sentimental and
overstated, his critique of middle-class philistin-
ism and aversion to the contemporary city exer-
cised a continuing influence on perceptions of the
Victorian period. Among avant-garde architects
of the 1930s like Maxwell Fry or Ralph Tubbs, the
failings, or absence of Victorian planning would
justify the scientific reorganization of cities along
the lines proposed by Le Corbusier in his uncom-
promising Ville Contemporaine (1922). This was
the background to the MARS group’s plan for
London (1942) launched at the height of the Second World War as a blueprint for redevelopment. Victorian commodities were equally flawed. In 1947 John Gloag, an ally of the DIA declared in Morrisian vein: 'The industrial revolution accelerated the debasement of design; the eyes of the English died some time between 1830 and 1880.'

Prior to 1830 was the 'Golden Age of English Design', an era of authentic craftsmanship in the countryside and villages, and aristocratic good taste and native genius in the classicism of the towns and country houses. In this formulation, the Georgian terrace became an exemplar of well-mannered, civic-minded architecture—a valuable precedent for the simplicity, order and standardization exhibited in avant-garde contemporary design. Hence a favourite visual trope in the design press of the 1930s was the juxtaposition of the Georgian terrace with the Modern Movement dwelling.

Pevsner strengthened the polemical aspect of the narrative by introducing an overt sense of teleology and the art historical concept of the Zeitgeist. Quoting the moral axioms of Victorian cultural critics, most notably Pugin, Morris and Ruskin, he explained how this theoretical tradition, once decoupled from a debilitating historicism, led inexorably to the realization of an international Modern Movement in the opening decades of the century. It was a sensibility that had taken on distinctive visual characteristics for it was the authentic realization of the spirit of the age: the lightness and transparency of Gropius' architecture, an expression of science and technology; or the purity of form and sobriety of Behrens' AEG work, a response to twentieth-century anonymity and standardization.

The 'Problem' of the Consumer: 'Good Design' as Good Taste

The 'good design' discourse's view of the past promised a future based on rational design principles. What prevented its realization was the very different sensibility of the market-place. As Pevsner declared at the start of An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England: '90% of British Industrial art is devoid of any aesthetic merit.' Putting to one side the peculiarities of Pevsner's sampling technique—his omission of 'artistic design', for example—it was an impression that served to justify the moral fervour of the good design discourse. The 'lamentable' state of contemporary taste demanded educational reform. The sensibility of the mass market was seen as a continuation of Victorian philistinism. Increased affluence had merely broadened the demand for the aspirational and escapist. The great bugbear of the reformers was the historicism of contemporary housing. The archetypical Mr Smith of 'Osocosy' was shamed for his 'infantile' attachment to the reassuring and pretentious imagery of suburbia. Little had changed since the days of Eastlake's Hints on Household Taste. This was Anthony Bertram's argument in Design, the Pelican special based on his BBC broadcasts of 1937. The mixture of condescension, hyperbole and irony was characteristic of the design lobbyists:

The average bungalow of to-day wavers in appearance between bijou baronial and the Tudoristic, that is to say it makes an exceedingly bad shot at looking like a stone castle built for the wicked uncle in the pantomime or like a primitive timber and daub dwelling built for a mediaeval agriculturalist. If the owner were logical he would wear cheap tin armour or hodden grey.

Bertram's Mr Smith was a latter day Mr Pooter, an endearing but absurd lower middle-class philistine. It is a revealing stereotype in that it demonstrates a tendency among design reformers in Britain, if not the Continent, to appropriate the cultural high ground, to draw on a quasi-eighteenth-century notion of 'good taste' in promoting the cause of good design in the face of what the Architectural Review called 'genteelisms'. This was most clearly demonstrated at the Burlington House 'British Art in Industry' exhibition of 1935. Here was a representation of modern design at its most chic, luxurious and well connected. The accompanying collection of essays carried the patrician title The Conquest of Ugliness and was introduced by the fashion-conscious royal, HRH Edward Prince of Wales, the year before his abdication. More ascetically minded modernists were unimpressed. Pevsner felt that the costliness of the exhibits undermined the democratic pretensions of the good design movement.
The much maligned suburban semi was just part of the material culture of popular escapism. The 'bogus' historicism of the electric candlestick and the Magicoal fire (first launched in 1930) was mirrored by the 'bogus' modernity of cubist-inspired carpets and wallpapers and jazz modern clocks with angular faces. Yet in certain situations modern imagery was appropriate. Bertram spoke of the 'justified' streamlining of the locomotive, and Pevsner praised the progressive styling of bakelite radio cabinets and modern motor cars. In such cases self-consciously modern forms did not interfere with function; rather they symbolized purpose or had emerged legitimately from the properties of a new material or production technique. Furthermore their popularity with consumers suggested that in certain situations the market-place could appreciate good design. It was a sensibility that Pevsner detected in other product categories—wrist-watches, banded pottery, sports goods, hand tools, luggage—areas where function took precedence over the 'Hollywood' element. It was the job of the good design lobby to foster this rational way of seeing.

**Good Design Equals Good Business**

Why was this the case? Why was good design thought to be necessary? One answer was nominally commercial, the idea that an educated consumer might compel the manufacturer to raise standards and thereby improve the competitiveness of British industry, to paraphrase Pevsner. It was an argument with precedents in the nineteenth century—the exhibitions organized by the Royal Society of Arts from the 1840s and the establishment of the South Kensington Museum by the Department of Arts and Sciences as part of its mission to raise public taste. The difficulty with the argument was verification, how to prove that any rise in sales was attributable to 'good design' as opposed to other motivational factors, such as comfort, acquisitiveness, ornamentation, imitation, cleanliness, constructiveness, or harmony to cite just those instincts that pertained to house furnishing, according to contemporary advertising theory. The difficulty of evaluating good design may account for the lacklustre support of the Treasury for the British Institute of Industrial Art during the 1920s. Over the longer term it may explain why the 'good design' lobby has had to continually re-present its case to successive governments. For in practice the evidence that 'good design meant good business' appears inconclusive and far from disinterested. In the 1930s the appointment of a Council for Art and Industry by the Board of Trade represented a victory for the DIA. In a series of Reports chaired by Frank Pick, a prime mover in the DIA since its foundation in 1915, the Council argued for the central importance of good design in an age of mass consumerism. The 1937 *Report on Design and the Designer in Industry* opens with 'a brief summary of the main problem':

Modern developments of popular education, and the rapid changes, here and abroad, in fashions and in the habits of people, are making good design a matter of ever-increasing importance. In order that British industry may profit to the full from these changing conditions, and that Great Britain may be secured her rightful place as a creator of taste and fashion thinking, high in international trade, every possible step should be taken to improve the artistic quality of British products and the standard of the staffs employed in British studios and design departments.

**'Good Design' and 'National Efficiency'**

This was more than just a commercial vision. The Council for Art and Industry saw good design as a means of social engineering. Its 1937 *Report on the Working Class Home* considered the moral implications of rational furnishing: the relationship between cleanliness, simplicity and a respect for property, and an idea of good citizenship. Again there were resonances with the nineteenth century—the belief in environmental determinism that had given rise to model dwellings for the working classes, model factories, and progressively designed elementary schools for the inculcation of good citizenship and the 'Protestant work ethic'. Yet in the inter-war period the hegemonic understanding of progress, the spirit of modernity was subtly different. Modern historians have outlined the development of a 'new Liberalism' from the turn of the century; that is the way in which the nineteenth-century philosophy of self-help was combined with a growing...
commitment to collectivity and state provision, a trend accelerated by the ‘command economy’ of the First World War. In 1933 Sir Stephen Tallents of the Empire Marketing Board described how ‘well-designed’ public buildings and government publicity might stimulate ‘national efficiency’. He was endorsing the example of London Transport—with its innovative and distinctive underground stations—the effectiveness of Shell advertising, and the didactic Reithian mission of the BBC. This was a version of modernity that was in tune with the notion of economic progress and the status quo. More open to controversy were the ‘functionalist’ housing schemes, health centres and lidos commissioned by municipal authorities. As Tim Benton has explained, a conservative-minded architectural establishment associated such schemes with the imposition of a revolutionary ‘Bolshevik’ collectivism. In response advocates of Modernism like J. M. Richards, addressing the ‘man in the street’ in *An Introduction to Modern Architecture*, took pains to distance English Modernism from what he called cranks, foreigners and revolutionaries. It was a question of demonstrating the value of modern design in ‘everyday’ terms. In the text that accompanies the illustrations to Bertram’s *Design*, for example, it is ‘efficiency’ that unifies a plethora of product types. The term denotes performance, hygiene, durability, ease of maintenance and value for money. The stereotypically functionalist bedroom represents ‘simplicity combined with efficiency. Money is spent on adequate lighting and good bedding rather than ornamentation.’

The Aestheticization of the Object

Elsewhere in Bertram’s *Design* this combination of values is represented by the single isolated object—the kettle, the light fitting, the chair. The lack of visual distraction encourages an aesthetic formal gaze. The mass-produced commodity is elevated to the status of a platonic archetype. It was a characteristic presentation technique in progressive inter war publications and exhibitions that enabled the ‘everyday thing’ to assume a fetishistic importance. The 1933 exhibition of British Industrial Art at Dorland Hall, for example, opened with a back-lit display of hand-tools and garden implements. The ‘power’ of these artefacts was threefold: in keeping with an idea of ‘mechanical selection’, they carried an evolutionary cultural memory; as logical expressions of function they demanded a particular mode of operation; and finally, in terms of form and colour, they possessed a universal, intrinsic beauty.

Within the orthodoxy of the good design lobby there was a spectrum of opinion about the relationship of these characteristics. In its publications of the 1920s the DIA stressed the interdependence of form, function and beauty. In the *Yearbook* for 1922, for example, they came together in images of the motor car and aeroplane—representations of a cumulative process of technological development inspired by functional need rather than ‘picturesque’ intent. The analogy between human technology and biological evolution had been pioneered in late nineteenth-century anthropological discourse and was a central tenet in Le Corbusier and Ozenfant’s artistic theory of the 1920s. In Purism the geometric simplicity of functionally determined type forms was the basis for an impersonal and unassailable beauty. For the DIA this was axiomatic. As their collection of essays devoted to *Design in Everyday Life and Things* (1927) explained:

When a thing is persistently used for a particular purpose, especially if it is used in the hand, that thing is likely to become, in time, very simple in form. It is noticeable that such things assume a certain beauty of their own. A pencil, a hammer, a scythe, a bricklayer’s trowel—there is a certain austere comeliness about all of them... So noticeable is this tendency that something like a principle has been evolved from it and has become the slogan of the DIA-fitness for purpose.

Herbert Read’s influential analysis of *Art and Industry* (Faber & Faber, London, 1934) brought an art-historical perspective to the idea of ‘austere comeliness’. In the pre-Victorian decorative arts he identified an intuitive ‘abstract’ sensibility recognizable by its use of geometric form, classical proportions and stylized ornament. In the nadir of nineteenth-century taste ornamentalists had ignored this tradition, though it was unconsciously to re-emerge with the advent of mass-production techniques based on standardization. So far Read was in agreement with the
DIA. His analysis then moved towards Pevsner's *Pioneers* by associating this 'abstract' sense of form with contemporary avant-garde art and the *Zeitgeist*. The argument relies on the analogy between a bewildering range of modern industrial forms. A bridge in Switzerland is juxtaposed with a Rolls Royce motor car, a printing works in Finland with an amplifier bay in Broadcasting House. At this stage form is disengaged from function; visual characteristics are separated from considerations of performance, technology, scale and context in the realization of a modern 'style'.

**The Consumption of the 'Good Design' Discourse**

This aestheticized version of modernity is a clue to the significance of good design in the marketplace. In the retail strategy of Heal's, one of the leading proponents of the new style during the inter-war period, the rhetoric of good design lost its Utopian pretensions and acquired associations that were generic to house furnishing. It became a taste culture that offered a paradoxical mixture of 'tradition and modernity', aesthetic exclusivity underpinned by craftsmanship. Under the chairmanship of Ambrose Heal (appointed in 1913), a founder member of the DIA, the company played a prominent part in the progressive design exhibitions of the 1930s, and in its Mansard Gallery demonstrated the interrelationship of 'Art and Industry' with shows devoted to 'Modern Tendencies' in furnishing and avant-garde painting. In the late 1920s a number of advertising campaigns reproduced DIA principles verbatim. Yet it was a socially exclusive form of modernity overlain with associations that had been part of the generic language of house furnishing since the late nineteenth century, for example considerations of social ambition, comfort and individuality.

This cluster of values is brought together in a *Daily Telegraph* advertisement of 21 June 1933. Addressed to the 'professional or upper middle class' consumers whom Heal's identified as its core market, it was mindful of the new climate of austerity brought on by the Wall Street Crash of 1929. It is entitled 'The Price of Good Taste':

*Good design is largely a matter of common sense*

Efficiency Plus

Something more than stark efficiency is wanted of furniture if it is to have character and an air of friendliness. The eye demands well-balanced proportions and a feeling for the right use of materials in design. Use and comfort call for sound craftsmanship—a touch of elegance should be conceded. Heal's furniture gives consideration to these points, as well as to the all important element of cost.

While the reference to craftsmanship, good proportions and truth to materials cultivates the mythology of the immutable object, the idea of character and elegance acknowledges the importance of fashion in the market-place. Inevitably this would mean that the well-designed commodities of 1933—tubular steel seating and weathered oak cabinetwork—would lose their cultural cachet as mass-market competitors popularized the Heal's style. The minutes book for November 1931 refers to the 'real threat to the lesser end of the Company's business' represented by 'a very inexpensive range of furniture of good appearance recently issued by "Messers Gooch's".'

In a bid to preserve its distinctiveness Heal's would continually redefine the modern. Stylistic change was presented in terms of the shifting *Zeitgeist*: as with the 1934 range 'Better Furniture for Better Times'; the product of the 'vigorous creativity' of the Modern Movement, as in the 1936 'Seven Architects' exhibition at the Mansard Gallery; or as a consequence of technological innovation, for example the presentation of the Isokon range of plywood furniture in 1937. Yet the modernity of Heal's was never merely fashionable or 'blatant', to quote an advertisement of 1934. It was underpinned by time-honoured principles of good taste and craftsmanship. This explains the recurrence of invented traditions: the use of an eighteenth-century four-poster bed as the logo for a company established in 1810; the description of Ambrose Heal as a latter day Thomas Chippendale in an exhibition of 1930; and, during the Second World War when production concentrated on parachute-making, a series of advertisements devoted to the historical crafts.
Heal’s skilful manipulation of moral and aesthetic principles for the purpose of forging a brand identity questions whether an ‘unadulterated’ version of the good design discourse could ever have played a significant role in commodity culture. A purely rational approach to consumption is only imaginable in a command economy without social distinctions. Britain may have come closest to this ideal in the course of the Second World War when a shortage of raw materials demanded the standardization of design in accordance with the Board of Trade’s Utility Scheme of 1941. It was an experiment in ‘aesthetic engineering’, to quote Jonathan Woodham, that enhanced the credibility of the ‘good design’ discourse and led to the establishment of the Council of Industrial Design in 1945. Good design would become synonymous with a post-war export drive and a programme to realize the ‘New Britain’, an egalitarian vision conceived amidst the privations of wartime. The modernist discourse with its rejection of historicism, its concern with efficiency, and its adherence to a concept of beauty that purported to be universal was seen as the metaphorical expression of this democratic Utopia. As Alan Jarvis declared in the first of a series of Council of Industrial Design guides: ‘Consider how intelligent design, the full exploitation of machine technics and a gracious appreciation of human needs, can give us houses, the things to put in them, and an environment, all suited to the needs of a democratic society.’

The idealism of the Council of Industrial Design came up against the sensibility of the marketplace at the ‘Britain Can Make It’ exhibition in 1946. Thanks to the existence of a Mass Observation Report it is possible to reconstruct a lay perspective. As Lucy Bullivant has explained in a retrospective collection of essays devoted to the exhibition, there was an obvious tension between the aesthetic preferences of the organizers—a metropolitan élite, and the taste of the public. As a general comment on more than 2500 interviews and 1000 ‘overheard’ comments, Mass Observation explained that visitors looked on the exhibition more as an opportunity for window shopping than as a chance for educational enlightenment: ‘The items that most people want to see in the Exhibition tally fairly closely with what they most want to buy.’

Intriguingly the organization sought to document the rhetorics employed by these visitor-consumers. There is a note of exasperation, presumably in sympathy with the clients, the Council of Industrial Design, as they recall the ‘loose’ and ‘inconsistent’ nature of the public’s phraseology. The comments centred around binary oppositions common to everyday speech; for example, nice/horrible, irritating/lovely, common/beautiful, modern/old-fashioned. In so far as the exhibition surroundings can be said to have encouraged a heightened sensibility, as evidenced in the currency of the word ‘design’, for example, visitors employed the term in the non-professional sense of style or appearance. As the Report explains:

Despite this loose phraseology, the use of the word ‘design’ is of interest. Normally, it is not a word that is used by the general public, but in the Exhibition it appears perhaps in one in three comments:

‘I liked the china. We loved the designs.’ (Housewife).
‘I think they’ve definitely progressed in house design and interior design.’ (Post Office Worker).
‘I liked the design of the cooker of the future.’ (Green-grocer’s Wife).

A few people, however, use design almost as a term of criticism:

‘I didn’t like the furniture. I rather thought the whole exhibition was over-designed.’ (Man of 25).

The identification of each subject by occupation or age group was part of the broader method of classification employed by Mass Observation. Individuals were selected for interview on the basis of socio-economic class. Interestingly, taste cultures were sufficiently defined in 1946 for the observers to make their initial decision to approach a subject based on clothing and demeanour. This can be inferred from a photographic record of ‘visitor types’ undertaken at the entrance to the exhibition. Of nearly 1.5 million visitors Mass Observation noted that the most widely represented group was the ‘artisan working class’. Their reactions to the Design Quiz are significant in that they suggest the specificity with which particular product types are regarded. Utilitarian
criteria were applied to objects with an obvious primary use; namely heating appliances, cooking utensils, lighting and seating. Aesthetic considerations determined the choice of more decorative or prestigious objects: for example, crockery, glass, wireless sets and clocks. Meanwhile the kind of ‘functionalist’ perspectives cultivated by the good design discourse—for example ‘the idea of the item looking like what it is meant to be’, to quote the Report—were conspicuously absent.

The duality of responses to the Design Quiz was reflected elsewhere in the ‘Britain Can Make It’ exhibition. The modernity of the model kitchens, the most popular feature in the exhibition, was regarded approvingly. In the sitting rooms the contemporary ‘arty’-style furniture was seen as insubstantial and impersonal, particularly among older visitors.

The reactions might have been predicted given the evidence of Pevsner’s Enquiry or the different sets of values that were associated with commodity types during the inter-war period. Domestic appliances, for example, were promoted in terms of labour-saving efficiency, hygiene and the magical transformational powers of technology. The names of vacuum cleaners are indicative: the Goblin ‘Wizard’ launched in 1929, the Airway Sanitary Suction manufactured from around 1930, the Vactrix Silent Q presented at the 1934 Ideal Home Exhibition, or the Eureka Special produced throughout the 1930s. In contrast, the new affordable luxuries of the inter-war period—‘fur coats, gramophones, lipstick, chocolates or silk stockings’, to quote George Orwell—connoted glamour and fantasy.

There is a danger of overstating these distinctions, of course, as many products drew freely on a wide range of associations as designers and copywriters were continually engaged in the business of stimulating consumer demand by reinventing a sense of novelty and significance. The meaning of the inter-war wireless set was particularly fluid; as Adrian Forty has explained, it moved between the poles of household furniture and scientific apparatus. Similarly in realizing the archetypical ‘ideal home’, the suburban semi, inter-war consumers might synthesize a spectrum of values: the individuality of a house name, the nationalism of a Tudorbethan façade, the modernity of a labour-saving kitchen, and the conventional attitudes towards gender that would prescribe different furnishing treatments for dining rooms and living rooms.

Nevertheless within this composite domestic habitus, particular categories of object were less liable to redefinition than others. There are remarkable similarities between the value system propagated in Heal’s marketing strategy of the inter-war period and the attitudes of non-elite consumers to household furnishing in the 1940s and 1950s. Christine Morley’s analysis of a ‘working-class’ taste culture based on the oral reminiscences of Londoners illustrates a continuing concern with tradition and modernity. Furniture was valued in terms of comfort and practicality, combined with the opportunities it allowed for the expression of personal achievement—the acquisition of the new, and pride in ownership, the ability to clean and maintain the object. It was a paradoxical combination of expectations that gave rise to objects that were stylistically unfamiliar, yet manufactured from familiar and ‘proper’-looking materials. The COID would condemn such work as ‘Repro-Contempo’, ignoring the fact that what might appear a stylistic solecism was new to its market and answered distinctive symbolic needs.

Epilogue

Forty years after the ‘Britain Can Make It’ exhibition, at the time of the BBC Design Awards it was remarkable that the Design Council (the COID as redesignated in 1972) was continuing to suggest that good design might be expressed in terms of universal criteria. Press commentators were bemused by the attempt to compare such disparate objects as an excavator and a microlight aircraft, a television commercial and a postage stamp. Reyner Banham had accused the Council of aesthetic partiality in 1961, questioning the preoccupation of ‘H.M. Fashion House’ with ‘elegance’ at the expense of performance and objective measurable standards. Towards the end of the decade Paul Reilly, COID Director, was forced to acknowledge the relativity of taste. This was the
subject of his seminal article ‘The Challenge of Pop’. The Modern Movement is described as an ossified taste culture overtaken by the ‘kinky flamboyance of this permissive, precocious, commercially successful popular culture’. The ‘challenge’ was on several levels: firstly, ever more commodities were falling under the influence of the fashion cycle, disposable paper furniture representing a particularly pernicious threat to DIA values. Secondly, some of the most characteristic examples of Pop culture functioned as representations rather than artefacts. Questions of utility, materials and technology seemed irrelevant to the Kings Road boutique or the Golden Egg restaurant. Finally, the market-place was becoming increasingly fragmented. A youth culture founded on ‘gaudy’ colours and eclecticism demonstrated that the Zeitgeist would no longer assume a uniform aesthetic standard. As Reilly explained: ‘We are shifting perhaps from an attachment to permanent, universal values to an acceptance that a design may be valid at a given time for a given purpose to a given group of people in a given set of circumstances, but outside these limits it may not be valid at all.’

Taken to its logical conclusion, the specificity of design would have undermined the hegemony of the profession and questioned the very existence of a national Council of Industrial Design. In response Reilly and Corin Hughes-Stanton in a related article for Design magazine formulated a Post-Modern or Pop rationale. The notion of function was liberalized to include human factors like ergonomics and psychology, while the image of the designer was reinvented. The scientific positivist of the post-war Utopia became the designer as artist: creative, flamboyant and individualistic. For Reilly the job of the COID then became to separate the talented from the charlatan, to evaluate conviction, honesty and sincerity.

At the time of the ‘Britain Can Make It’ retrospective in 1986, a number of contributors to the book of essays bemoaned the loss of social purpose in design, sensing a fetishization of the well-designed object as its primary purpose became the representation of cultural capital. There is something of this in Terence Conran’s most recent pronouncements where Modern Movement ‘classics’ and aphorisms endorse a distinctive ‘quality of life’.

Yet to a certain extent criticism of the ‘designer decade’ and nostalgia for a post-war era of social responsibility ignore the continuities between the 1930s and the present day. While the ‘good design’ discourse was undoubtedly linked to an idea of national regeneration and economic progress, it also operated as an elitist taste culture. In terms of the theoretical position outlined in Part One of this paper it demonstrated how knowledges take on different meanings in different contexts. Michael Farr recognized this in his survey in Design in British Industry. By the mid-1950s modern design was measurably more popular than it had been in the inter-war period, but was this for the ‘right’ reasons? His conclusion foreshadows Bourdieu: ‘So it remains doubtful how much the desire for better design which we have noticed and which is evidently growing is based on genuine appreciation of beauty, and how much on a craving for visible social distinction.’

STEPHEN HAYWARD
London

Notes
4 On the hermeneutic method applied to cultural representation, see Ch. 6 of J. B. Thompson, Ideology and Modern Culture, Polity, Cambridge, 1990.
8 Ibid., p. 32.
9 M. Shanks & C. Tilley, Reconstructing Archaeology:
'Good design is largely a matter of common sense'

Pevsner, op. cit., p. 11.


*Architectural Review*, vol. 74, July 1933.


Bertram, op. cit., transport illustration between pp. 64 and 65; Pevsner, op. cit., pp. 106-7, 36-7.

Ibid., p. 11.


Bertram, op. cit., plate 45.


Entry 4 November 1931. AAD Consulted prior to cataloguing.

E. Maxwell Fry, foreword to *Seven Architects*, exhibition catalogue, Heal’s Mansard Gallery, 1937.


Design Council Archive, University of Brighton.


Ibid., p. 16.

Ibid., p. 12.

Ibid., p. 13.


Section C.


Ibid., pp. 10, 14.


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91 Carrington, op.cit.
94 Ibid., p. 256.
98 Farr, op. cit., p. 214.

‘Good design is largely a matter of common sense’