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American Design Ethic

A History of Industrial Design

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Preface

Design is the indispensable leavening of the American way of life. It emerged with the need of the colonists to transform the wilderness into a secure haven and expanded as a natural component of the industrial revolution in the New World. The United States was in all likelihood the first nation to be designed—to come into being as a deliberate consequence of the actions of men who recognized a problem and resolved it with the greatest benefit to the whole. America did not just happen; it was designed.

Whatever their national origins, the first settlers showed the courage, the energy, and the ingenuity that would enable America to transcend aristocratic and theocratic rule. These emigrants to the New World were more firmly held together by a concept than those who remained behind were united by religion and monarchy. Their passion for freedom of individual opportunity allowed enterprise and industry to flourish in the service of an expanding common market.

Despite the immediacy of the need to secure a new life on a strange continent, these transplanted Europeans were unable to escape the bittersweet memory of their national origins. And each succeeding band of immigrants carried along its native expression, stirring it into the common cauldron, so that even today the American culture is a roiling brew of transplanted elegance and folk ethic. However, with the mass production that followed the industrial revolution, the Americans have been able to generate a unique cultural contribution. Products designed for industry and commerce, vehicles and vessels for transportation, and mechanical and electronic appliances for the home reveal an American passion for energy-conserving devices that are at times exquisitely suited to their purposes. At first the forms of these products were determined primarily by technological factors and mechanical functions. However, as the virtuosity of productive means has been refined, the manufacturers of machine-made products have discovered a conscience that is now putting increasing emphasis on the primacy of the human operator. The products of tomorrow will make it possible for Americans to move into a

postmaterialistic society in which products will serve humbly as elements of closed-loop environmental systems.

American design is constructed from the building blocks of the puritan ethic and sheathed by liberal mercantilism. It is erected upon an economy of means and a respect for natural forces, and it is illuminated with the spirit of self-reliance. It displays a faith in empirical discovery capped with theory. It presumes that there is an inescapable correlation between the perfection of a solution to a problem and the elegance of the form it takes. There is no principle of American design so powerful as that an object acquires beauty as it approaches the ideal typeform of its species.

History will prove that, if a humane democracy is to be this country's legacy to mankind, its unique contribution to world culture may well be the democracy of its manufactured products. Despite their transitory value, they are the true artifacts of the United States because in them civilizations to come will find an expressive crystallization of our life energy and our daily existence.

