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American Design Ethic

A History of Industrial Design

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Epilogue:
From Affluence to Conscience

In the end even this most prosperous and glamorous and complicated of professions comes down to a thing that is very old and very simple: one man's integrity against another's, one man's capacity as a working artist against another's, the vision with which he establishes his standards and the courage with which he sticks by them. The rest is trimming.

George Nelson, 1949 (159)

The second world war put an end for awhile to the design of competitive products and its promises for the future. Designers either joined the armed services or went into the factories to help produce material for war. Those few who remained in practice turned their energies to designing the products demanded by a nation in peril. Only rarely did a company assign or permit industrial designers to concern themselves with products aimed at postwar markets. As a result, designers were awakened to the part that they could play in products that are beyond open competition. They were called upon to apply their analytical capability and their sensitivity to form and utility in a climate that was controlled by technologists. Before the war they had been associated with and in many cases responsible to businessmen and merchandisers; now they were directed by scientists and engineers.

In the meantime, the man in the foxhole continued to dream about the wonderful world of tomorrow that designers had been promising him. Both he and the girl he had left behind saved for his return. Within one year after the end of the hostilities, 12 million American men were demobilized. Annual new-home starts went from 200,000 in 1945 to 1,154,000 in 1950. The volume of television sets manufactured went from zero in 1945 to 7,500,000 by 1950. Annual passenger-automobile production soared from 70,000 to 6,665,000 in the same period. The postwar boom was on. Every manufactured product had to be redesigned—first to shake off all vestiges of prewar aesthetic and wartime austerity, then to introduce the magic new materials, methodologies, and products that had been developed during the war, and finally to put into purchasable form the promises that had been made.

Design in the United States expanded from a comfortable practice for a few to big business for many. Degree programs in industrial design multiplied to more than twenty in order to meet the heavy demand for young talent. Design became an attractive profession for veterans, as well as for younger men and women completing high school, because of the opportunities it offered and the fact that it was associated with the exciting postwar environment. The spectacular demand for redesigned products convinced large and small manufacturers that design should become an integral component in corporate planning. Industrial design, therefore, which before the war had been offered primarily on a consulting basis, now became a part of management charged with bringing consistency in performance and appearance to all of a company's activities—not only the products themselves, but also packaging, display, graphics, signs, and facilities.

It was during this golden age that the concept of "good design" emerged. Museums and design and marketing centers offered their services to the general public as guides to a more efficient and aesthetically pleasing environment. Model homes were built and furnished in what the sponsors considered good taste. More often than not, however, the presentations were directed toward an exclusive audience of museumgoers, artists, designers, architects, and the like.

The United States government also got into the design business again, briefly, when it sought to secure peace and its world position by sharing its design experience by exporting teams of design specialists to assist industries on matters of marketable aesthetics in the Far East, South America, and the Arc of Asia. In addition, the United States contributed to the recovery of its former enemies by dispatching experts to assist them in their recovery and by opening up its schools and factories. Teams of German specialists toured the country, scores of Japanese students studied in our schools, and Americans conceived an exhibition ("Italy at Work") encouraging Americans to buy Italian goods again. The United States Information Agency staged exhibitions from Russia to Peru with the intention of stimulating the development of trade and production in other countries.

However, with prosperity and public acclaim dulling its judgment, design began to lose its sense of balance and public responsibility. The consumer, caught in a frenzy of postwar marketing, became something to sell things to rather than someone to serve. Product obsolescence for the sake of sales found designers being asked, or even recommending, that irrelevant form manipulation and irreverent ornamentation be used to artificially stimulate the market. Conventional wisdom had it that the public must be given what it wanted and that it could be guided to what it wanted by mass-media persuasion. In 1956, Chrysler—the last bastion of rationalism in design—exclaimed "Suddenly it's 1960" and exploded in a fit of fins and extraneous embellishment. American products became caricatures of their function and, with the new architecture, reflected the carnival-like consumption of the immediate postwar period. The golden age was proving to be an orgy.

It is difficult to determine exactly when American consumers began to be disenchanted with the quality of their environment and the character and the quality of the products that were being touted by the media and thrust at them by superstores and overflowing discount houses. Was it when Volkswagens were first brought into the country? Was it when the first young family decided on a backpacking vacation rather than a stay at a motel with Olympic pool and Tudor drinking den? Did Rachel Carson set it off with *Silent Spring,* or Ralph Nader with *Unsafe At Any Speed?* When did ecology and pollution become part of everyday conversation? And when did industry and the government begin to allow that humanity was tolerated on this planet only by a fragile biosphere? Should one credit Sputnik for proving what everyone really knew already—that earth was, indeed, only a small spaceship adrift in the firmament?

The problem was first admitted publicly in 1962 when President John F. Kennedy found it necessary to call attention to the abuse of the consumer by proclaiming that his inalienable rights in a technological world also included the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard. Kennedy's recommendation that national measures be established by which the quality of the man-made environment could be monitored in the public interest is slowly being transformed into actions to serve the public welfare. This may be the first time in history when, in contrast to Emerson's warning that "things are in the saddle and ride mankind," things are being brought to account by man. As a result, by a series of slow and often painful steps a profound change has been underway in the United States. The callous impersonality of the product is being tempered by the quality of responsibility that is being mandated by public sentiment. A new morality is emerging by which the tyranny of a gross national rate of production may be displaced by the democracy of a volume and quality of production that is directly matched to the needs of the people.