

Designers and Consumers of Design 2

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Man As Designer

Design is everywhere. It can be seen in the marching rhythms of a redwood forest, a leopard's spotted pelt, the hexagonal pattern of a honeycomb, the dimpled surface of a pool pelted by raindrops, and in the flickering patterns of light and dark as sunlight is reflected on moving leaves.

People can effortlessly enjoy design in nature, where it appears so abundantly. In a grocery store, however, marketing purposes come into play. Fruits and vegetables are arranged for sale in orderly displays. Produce is collected and organized to fill an allotted space. For further enhancement it may be polished or sprayed with a mist, packaged in cellophane, or displayed in colorful cartons. Appeal is made not only to taste, but also to

vision. The grocer makes a deliberate attempt to stimulate our vision—to increase or heighten our desire for an object. This selecting and organizing of materials to achieve a desired effect is *designing*. It is the process of structuring by using the basic elements of the visual arts—line, form, space, light, color, transparency, motion, and texture—to compose a unified whole in order to satisfy a particular purpose. It is giving visual form to the essence of something. As such, design is part of every person's daily activities. Everyone is a designer, whether he consciously wills to be one or not. The expectant mother awaits her baby with a plan, a layette; in design terms, a layout. Garments are selected and arranged with a consistent relationship to the needs of an infant. A mother does not necessarily think of design, but the singleness and definition of her purpose results in an organization of related materials.

From the time that we first rise and select our clothing to project a particular visual image to ourselves, our families, or the public, to the time that we dispose of these articles of dress in the evening, we are designing. Tidying the glove compartment of a car, arranging (or disarranging) the papers on the top of one's desk, combing one's hair, tying one's shoelaces, altering the tilt of one's hat—all these are design activities. They involve selecting, arranging, and ordering. They move from a state of randomness or indifference to a higher state of organization in order to create a desired impression.

Man himself is constantly moving in rhythms of walking, sitting, or dancing, which he can structure at will for the occasion. He designs with his body and with the dress and adornment he selects. All dance—from rock and roll to ballet—is design through selected physical manipulation. Man constantly designs and redesigns his personal and immediate environment, whether it be his house, his furnishings, or his garden. As an interior designer or architect he may design the environment of others or of the public as well. Only death takes away his design faculty—but mortuary services assure him that he will go to his final rest in a neat and tidy state of design.

This design activity of every man is not a casual and simple process. On the highest level, designing is a conscious and knowledgeable manipulation of the art elements to produce an expressive statement. It is purposeful creation in which emotion, knowledge, imagination, and intellect are all operative. It involves the cerebral and psychological processes necessary for decision-making. If man can define his problem and have some awareness of the effect he wishes to achieve, the act of design is facilitated. But designing is not a comfortable process. The ancients believed that the world began when a divine being created order out of chaos. Design begins when perceptive man views his world and does not like what he sees; hence he must affect or modify it. Design begins with dissatisfaction, not lethargy.

As an example, Art Nouveau, a period of design toward the latter part of the nineteenth century in which nature's forms were taken as a unifying theme, had its origin in some designers' dissatisfaction with what seemed to them the excessive ornateness of the Victorian period. The eclectic composite of forms and patterns common to design in the late nineteenth century seemed to them too undisciplined and too dependent upon historical antecedents to be able to affirm man's living in the present. Visually disturbed, promoters of the Art Nouveau movement attempted to make design contemporary by insisting that objects have relatedness with the botanical and biological patterns of nature. The best of design during that period showed man in control of the use of nature's motifs, ordering them in such a way as to reinforce or become one with the structure of an object. Eventually excesses developed that paralleled the lack of restraint in design common to the Victorian era, which the movement's originators had so abhorred. Elements from nature were allowed to flourish in profusion over the surface of objects. Dissatisfaction with this excessive decorativeness led, once again, to the development of new expressions and forms of organization. The right angle of the Bauhaus, a German school of design, displaced the sensuous botanical curve of Art Nouveau and ushered in the simplified style of the twentieth century.

This dissatisfaction, man's apparent need to constantly alter the appearance of his environment and impress his mark upon it, is indicative of the creative urge. One person's need to change the arrangement of his living-room furniture periodically and another's decision to design an arch symbolic of a nation's westward expansion (Eero Saarinen's sculptural arch at St. Louis, Missouri, is shown in Figure 2-1) are merely different expressions of man's desire to impress himself upon his environment—to organize and shape it in ways meaningful to him.

Creativity is reflecting oneself in relationship to the environment and the objects that compose it in an individual and personal way. This human need ensures

that design will always be changing, because man does not remain content with static images. As the world changes and will continue to change, he will devise new symbolic systems to reflect changes in his perception and experience of life. Recent art forms—optical art, pop art, hard-edge art, constructions, happenings, poster art, and process art and sculpture—are some of the means by which man integrates and binds himself visually and physically to his daily environment. The only certainty about the future of design is that as events, responses, and attitudes change, new expressions will be developed.

Man As Observer of Natural Design

Man not only daily engages in designing, but he also observes the manifold designs of nature. Infinite generations of men have observed the orderly process of the sun's rising and setting, the rotation of the seasons, and a seed's germination to its flowering and production of multiple seeds, which in turn are eventually scattered to the winds. The budding of leaves in springtime, the darkness of approaching thunder clouds against a serene blue sky, the design of plump, ripe blackberries, and the spilling patterns made by rivulets of rainwater bulging from the opposing tensions of liquid against solid have been observed by men through time in many places. We still respond to these unless in our frustrations from meeting the demands of contemporary living we are, as T. S. Eliot phrased it, "distracted from distraction by distraction," so that we no longer see the sunrise, and the sunset is only the cue for beginning an evening's scheduled activities. Living the repetitive rhythm of a routine, a man may lose his sensuous wonder and his enjoyment of the colors, forms, and textures of nature. He may come to respond like an automaton, without animation.



2-1 Eero Saarinen. The Gateway Arch to the West, of stainless steel, was constructed in commemoration of man's westward progress. The shape of the arch is equilateral, the distance from the outside northerly leg to the southerly being 630 feet and its maximum height also 630 feet, making it the nation's tallest monument. Transportation to the top and an observation room are contained within the structure. Photograph by Art Wiltman—Black Star.

One who has maintained his sensitivity to design will get a constant recharging of his human battery from the patterns and designs of nature. He will enjoy not only those that seem to suggest order—the balance of veins on a leaf, the uniformity of the hexagons on a turtle's shell, the rhythmic lines of sand dunes, the radial pattern of blossoms—but also nature's disorders: driftwood and flotsam randomly swept upon the shore, old cars piled high in junk heaps with grass struggling for growth among upturned wheels, tumbleweed trapped by sagebrush. Nature does not always present a perfectly fin-



2-2 *Earth's cycle. Photogram by Helen M. Evans.*

ished design. There are random as well as ordered patterns to be found. For the man who seeks surcease from a highly structured world and requires variety in his experiences, there are times when he will appreciate "nonform for the sake of unrest" as well as "form for the sake of rest." It has been observed that men who keep alive, or better still, develop their appreciation of nature seem more responsive to life as a whole, find it more exciting, and enjoy and invite its daily surprises more than those who do not see because they are not aware.

Man As Consumer of Man-made Design

Man also consumes his own man-made objects visually. In this respect we can speak of degrees of visual literacy. How do we "read" an object? There are those who pay little heed to the artifacts of their daily life. Spoons, cups, cars, chairs, vacuum cleaners—these are functional objects that fulfill needs for eating, transporting, sitting, and cleaning. Some people ask only that an object be a least common denominator, that it work in some way to fulfill a human need. They see it merely as function. They may make a few qualitative differentiations—some cars are less noisy; some cups are heavier and don't break as easily; some vacuum cleaners pick up dirt better than others. Generally speaking, such people constitute the part of the population that is not disturbed by the stereotypes and dulling duplication of housing designs in tract developments, by the ride through depressing streets when making the transition from air terminal to city hotel, or by billboards and telephone wires that make it difficult to take photographs of scenes in resort centers renowned for their natural beauty.

Those who see and demand more—who are more literate visually—are disturbed when their environment displeases them. They ask that objects be more than merely functional; they want them to provide the senses with a feeling of satisfaction or elevation and stimulation. It is not enough for an object just to work; it must express some quality valued by the viewer beyond merely serving a function, for function is the lowest ceiling that must exist if an object is to have any worth. It is not in the nature of a sentient and critical man who is engaging all his faculties to accept levels of value that he associates with the "vegetative" minimum. An object that will be seen and used daily must become an extension of the self. As such, it must reflect, express, and project the individual.

Selective man thus requires that his material world contribute to or reinforce his identity. When one is continually living and working in groups, objects of daily use are instrumental in asserting oneself. An object is not only required to be efficient in operation—it must also communicate to some extent one's personality. It must say "me," and when seen in the intimate environment of the owner, the members of the group must think: "This is just like him"; "How well it expresses him"; or "I didn't know him like this before." Possessions reveal values, tastes, and even the deeper internal self, which one may not dare express otherwise. As such, they become personal emissaries and help establish communication and understanding between men.

This is beyond function. It is establishing a difference by what one owns. Objects can reflect a person's values, personality, education, social status, economic viability, provincialism or cosmopolitanism, philosophy, sensuousness, ethnology—and they may tell how confused or literate he is visually. Man's life is in constant relationship to objects.

Man may also manipulate natural materials to produce new media and expressions. Taking the natural elements, he can combine them into novel, workable relationships such as pewter, composed of tin and copper, and plastics in which various amounts of water, air, coal, petroleum, salt, and natural gasses are combined. Thus he extends his world both functionally and aesthetically. Because he cannot be disassociated from his materials, it is valuable for him to understand and appreciate them as affecting and enlarging the human experience. Only when he becomes avid to accumulate objects for their own sake or lives in an economic era when survival depends upon sustaining life minimally are materials per se, in all their expressiveness, not fully appreciated.

Objects perform other functions beyond serviceability, defining man, and helping establish his identity. They can also provide him with human associations by evoking memories. Robert Browning wrote a verse commemorating a friend:

*Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead.
Sit and watch by her side an hour.
This is her book-shelf, this her bed;
She plucked that piece of geranium flower.*

Conrad Aiken in his poem *Music I Heard* also remembered a loved one through objects:

*Music I heard with you was more than
music,
And bread I broke with you was
more than bread
Now that I am without you, all is
desolate,
All that was once so beautiful is dead.
.....
Your hands once touched this table and
this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold
this glass.
These things do not remember you, beloved,
And yet your touch upon them will
not pass.*

Objects can create enjoyable sensations in man and as they become familiar and old, provide feelings of security, longevity, and continuity. They can become friends, create feelings of familiarity, and provide emotional support, just as people do. Antique objects may arouse feelings of kinship with ancestors who faced the same kinds of human problems we do and found resolutions to them. Newly designed objects suggest oneness with our own day and adventure into the future. Possessing some of the old and the new may provide some of the sensations of the role of two-faced Janus, the Roman god who could look simultaneously eastward to the rising sun and westward to its setting. Thus our cherished possessions can elevate our spirits by creating feelings of continuity between us and the past or of greater relatedness to our present. Through them is preserved the life of the human spirit.

They also preserve the traces of man's social history.



2-3 Queen Anne armchair of walnut and tapestry c. 1710. This chair is a statement of the 18th-century in England. Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Gertrude Thomas has expressed this view exceptionally well about a single object—the chair:

A chair, in any period, has combined within its contours volumes of history—social, economic, and political. It stands as a symbol of its time. By its very existence it bespeaks authority, since for centuries the chair was only for the master or his guest, while women, children, and retainers sat upon stools or benches. By its very size and shape, a chair subtly indicates the degree of authority it confers. As for the rest, every turn or carving of its members suggests an anecdote, real or fanciful, of people or events important in its time.¹

As a consumer of design, man also has an opportunity to develop his visual literacy, a lifelong process in itself. Visual literacy is seeing perceptively, emotionally, and with insight and intelligence. Visually literate people see the world intimately and intensely; they are aware of omnipresent design, both in nature and man-made objects. A falling leaf is an event; so likewise may be the rusting of a nail or the gleaming of the sun on a silver spoon. Those who are aesthetically sensitive attach values to an object that go beyond mere appre-

¹Gertrude Z. Thomas, *Richer Than Spices* (New York: Knopf, 1965), p. 59.

ciation of its service. They can evaluate its design for the expressive qualities it gains from the designer's use of line, form, space, color, and texture, all of which serve to heighten a person's encounter with it. Appreciating the designer as both practical man and artist, both craftsman and poet, such people may try to enter into his motivation and purposes in order not only to understand his approach to the design problem, but to establish empathy with him as a man. They are, of course, rationally aware of qualitative differences between objects, based upon design principles; however, they also value the emotional responses, ranging from joy and delight to distaste and revulsion, that objects can evoke. They are liberal in their responses, enjoying art that exists for its own sake as well as the art that serves a utilitarian function.

Visual literacy means substituting visual involvement, for visual indifference. It means working the eye to make it a selective receptor. It is seeing with awareness, appreciation, insight, and knowledge. People who are visually literate create more aesthetic daily environments. Such milieus increase our enjoyment of, and capacity for, living. We are all enriched by feeling more intensely and deeply in all aspects of our lives. As design contributes to these feelings, it extends our humanity.