

Reading Sight, Meaningful Design

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ABSTRACT---- *In recent years, both spectacular outlook and the general strive for visual perfection have become standards in the field of common industrial design. If one looked around the product world of the 2010's, one would say that nothing is as competent on this market as a new smart phone, a notebook, or basically anything with a fresh, "trendy" look – especially with a familiar logo and a hefty price tag on it. On the other hand, there is a new, slightly different methodology over the horizon – the class of things with specific meaning and message attached to them.*

Keywords--- Meaning, Form, Function, Design, Society

1. FORM AND FUNCTION

”What is the meaning of design today? On what cultural expectations is the cultural identity of this discipline still trying to define itself with adequate conviction, based? These questions, in themselves legitimate, have by this time become unavoidable if no for no other reason than the increasing importance design is assuming in our society.” (Vitta, 1989. 31.)

Making an object appealing for the audience is by no means a simple task, but giving a meaningful reason to such an abstract expression as design is undoubtedly just as big of a challenge.

Anyone who is vaguely familiar with the evolution of industrial design knows the classic rule – if one wants to experiment with art design, it is only (or, at least, mostly) possible over the expense of functionality and everyday usefulness. The golden examples should be on one hand the stellar Juicy Salif citrus press by Philippe Starck (see Figure 1.), and a Diesel mining engine on the other. The citrus press a beautiful piece of art, but it becomes especially annoying when one actually wants to use it. So on a scale of “Form / Function”, this product could be placed near to the higher extremity of the form axis – at least when it comes to industrial design (Rawsthorn, 2013). At this point we should also mention that this is a kind of product which inevitably makes the viewer/observer think about (and perhaps appreciate) this particular item almost on an unconscious level. The observer – as he/she embraces the physicality and aesthetic value of the citrus press – gets challenged immediately, and even though he/she might not even realizes it, the experience leaves a firm footprint of itself in him/her. This analogue on the other hand does not apply in the case of the mining engine. No matter if the observer is an engineer or a person with deep knowledge in the field of machinery, an item of such materialistic value will not interact with the observer's subconscious on any level.



Figure 1: Juicy Salif citrus press by Philippe Starck Source: <http://www.hivemodern.com>

2. ADDING MEANING

The example above should serve as a general introduction to show the difference between form- and function-related approaches, both widely used by designers and engineers all over the globe. But at this point we should highlight the fact that

giving meaning to a particular design does not end with generating impulses and emotions in the observer.

This statement is pretty straight forward – an entity with intriguing appearance (may it be good or bad) does not necessarily has a defined meaning. As for example, take any piece of the so called “art design” category: these are the items which simply do not have any function, other than their appealing look. As a result, giving meaning to design is a methodology which is extremely hard to define with a set of rules (Carlson, 2012).

But what exactly does “meaning” mean in the case of design? Well, this is a sort of indefinite question with plenty of answers and approaches available. As Soren Petersen of Huffington Post summarizes: honesty is the best approach and when you boil meaning down to its essence, you are left with love, courage and accomplishments. When design teams focus their design efforts on the overlap in meaning between users and themselves, the design results become a win-win.¹ Using honest design language to make product stories real is the visual result of good design. By visualizing meaning though the selection of proportion, details, texture, color and symbols designers can effectively communicate meaning to their users. The meaning needs to be memorable and clear so that users can easily relay the story to family and friends and the effect of corporate communication though design is dwarfed by the interactions that spread the story in social networks.²

BMW designers, for instance, take advantage of the passion for courage and accomplishment with their users and Toyota designers leverage the shared love and respect for the environment that they have with their users (see Figure 2.). By methodically including meanings such as these into business plans and design briefs, the creation of emotionally engaging products is promoted.



Figure 2: BMW M3 E30, as an example of clearly stated passion for the ultimate driving experience (even at the expense of classical beauty)

Source: <http://flickr.com>

This academic way of thinking brings up an interesting question. Is it possible to reverse this procedure by communicating design through a message, rather than the usual way of stating the message through design? From my

¹Soren Petersen: Design for Meaning

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/soren-petersen/design-for-meaning_b_958426.html

²The Verge Design & Tech

<http://www.theverge.com/2014/4/16/5619814/samsung-launches-website-highlighting-meaningful-design>

personal point of view, this way of thinking requires a highly intuitive mind set not just because it seems irreversible, but we have been also heavily influenced over the years starting from the day we were born. If one would be asked to think of the shape of the fastest machine mankind has ever built, it would not be possible for another to guess one's answer to that question. On a range from a Formula-1 car to the SR-71 aircraft, there are endless ways the outcome could be, but it is almost undeniable that the shape of the Voyager-1 satellite would hardly come to anyone's mind. This is partially due to our limited way of thinking, and also to the large number of messages companies are trying to "sell" us every day. But the fact that we are simply overloaded is not a problem in any case; it is just an example of how much we are dependent on these subtle messages and hidden meanings in our lives.

3. THE DOWNSIDE OF BEING MEANINGFUL

Nowadays there has been a subtle trend for every major company to get inspired by the concept of responsibility and sociocultural awareness in their design – in other words, giving deeper meaning to their work. Perspectives like "our product is 100% carbon neutral and environmentally friendly" or "we care for the disabled" are getting more and more usage as taglines for electronic companies, automotive firms and so on even though it would have been strange for them to speak out like so a few years ago.

The truth is that these philosophies do hardly apply truly to the actual design viewpoints of those companies. A message like the high importance environment protection will not leave a direct impact on a design of the housing structure of a washing machine, for instance. One will not find any aesthetic marks of this message, nor in the material usage of the product, and so on. In most cases, only elements strictly used for marketing purposes represent these values rather than the actual physical entity of the product. And this is the point where the observer should be fully aware.

A great example for the usage of "forced meaning" in design could be the case of the famous electric firm Samsung Electronics Ltd. After the big announcement of Apple's ground-breaking iPhone in 2007, Samsung was the fastest company to react and follow Apple's lead into the world of touch screen smart phones. The story is pretty well-known even within non-technical circles: the first flagship smart phones Samsung produced were almost identical in design to the ones of Apple, although their technical specification and most importantly their price tag differed greatly. Samsung brilliantly exploited the potential in price reduction, making premium products available to the general public for significantly less money. No wonder their efforts played out well; Samsung quickly became the main contender in the rivalry for smart phone market which until that point was massively dominated by Apple. The American hardware giant realised the imminent threat Samsung meant for their business and turned to legal ways to fight its Korean rival in 2011 (see Figure 3.).

(Not so) surprisingly, the middle of 2011 saw a radical change in Samsung's design philosophy – the turn to meaningful design and social responsibility.³

³Design Story – Samsung's meaningful design

<http://global.samsungtomorrow.com/design-story-samsungs-meaningful-design-promises-accessibility-for-all/>

GALAXY S III AND NOTE: FIRST MOBILE HANDSETS TO ACHIEVE PRODUCT CARBON FOOTPRINT CERTIFICATION



Figure 3: Samsung's way of defining a concerning message through its latest product in 2011.

Source: <http://clivegoodwin.co/>

From that moment on, social awareness and responsibility became the leading taglines of the firm, at least in their communication. However, the implementation of this philosophy into their design vocabulary left a lot of people unsatisfied and in doubt. The new products which came out stating this message of responsibility bore little differences in their aesthetic qualities compared to the older models. For many, this new statement from Samsung meant only a trick to ease the pressure of Apple's legal offense by consciously declaring a very different design purpose. Eventually the legal battle settled and a considerable fall in sale figures forced Samsung to come up with a truly innovative design philosophy in 2015, but the era of overstated environmental care still applies as a shining example of how not to force meaning into product designs.

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