

DESIGNING BRITAIN 1945 – 1975

From solving problems to selling product: the changing role of designers in post-war Britain

Gordon Russell, 'What is Good Design?', *Design* 1, (pp. 2-6), Design Council, London, 1949

Many people speak of good quality as if it were made up of good workmanship and good materials alone: but without good design it is impossible to make the most of these qualities. *Good design, indeed, is an essential part of a standard of quality.* Without it, the manufacturer cannot give the best service, through his products, to the consumer – to the community of which he is himself a part and from which he derives his livelihood.

What does the consumer demand in a manufactured article? He demands something which is well made of good and suitable materials, which does its job efficiently and gives him pleasure, at a price he can afford to pay. So the first design question is "Does it work?" you have all seen clocks with hour and minute hands so similar that it is not easy to tell the time, teapots which do not pour well, kettles which burn your hand, handles which pinch your fingers. These are all examples of bad design, and there are many others.

Though "Does it work?" is a good approach to design, it will not take us all the way. Even where science can virtually define shapes, as in the case of the aeroplane, one of our most famous aircraft designers has said: "I like a thing to *look* right. If it doesn't, although I may not be able to prove scientifically that it is wrong, I have often found out later that it is." Here is a practical application of aesthetics which may seem strange, yet I can think of many others: dark and dirty factories, ugly dull-coloured machinery, unpleasant lettering, inefficient packaging, disregard of shape and texture and colour – all forms of bad design – will be taken more seriously in the future, because they are deterrents of production and sales.

Good design always takes into account the technique of production, the material to be used, and the purpose for which the object is wanted. You cannot get satisfactory results by designing for hand production and then turning over the same design to the machine. Nor can you design for one material and then make the object in another. The wax candle was the best form of illuminant in its day, but as a prototype for electric light it leaves much to be desired. The development of the railway-carriage was arrested for several generations because it was thought of as a series of stage-coaches; not until the new idea of inter-communication was grasped did the corridor make possible improvements in design (larger windows, less draughty compartments, restaurant cars, lavatories).

The materials to be used for any product should be chosen with care, not only to be economical from a manufacturing point of view, but to wear well in use. In plastics, for instance, it is no good making a tea-strainer of cellulose acetate, which will not stand up to hot water.

In places where easy cleaning is essential, a smooth surface must be used, but a thoughtful use of rougher textures can often give variety and interest elsewhere. Here nature is a great teacher.

Then we come to the question of ornament. Today, much of the beauty we associate with the machine springs from intense preoccupation with the best way of achieving a given result by sparing use of suitable materials rather than by added decoration. But from earliest times, men have loved to decorate the things they made with simple geometrical patterns, pictures of animals, trees and so on; and the evolution of a contemporary decorative style is a problem we have yet to solve. Many articles in plastics try to give an impression of having been carved by hand, whereas they are moulded in a press; the so-called carving is lifeless. Refrigerators, which remain stationary, are streamlined as if they were aeroplanes or ships. And how many objects have had three zigs up and three zags down plastered on them? These design *clichés* are not the right answer to a human need. We in Britain cannot afford to be left behind in this aspect of industrial design. It is bad business if our customers think of us as being uninterested in the *look* of our goods, but I could give you many instances where they have that impression today.

To any design problem there are many possible solutions; there is no one perfect solution, and sometimes, as in the design of a flower-vase, there are hundreds or even thousands of shapes which would do the job. The designer is a person who, among other things, is always studying shapes and so is able to evolve or select one which not only works well but means something. This applies equally to form and colour: the designer is able to give shape to aspirations which all of us possess, but which we have not the training to create for ourselves.

We can learn something of the meaning of good design by considering what it is NOT. To clear away one elementary misconception, let me say that *good design is not precious, arty or highfalutin'*.

Again, it is not a luxury that enters into the more expensive end of a trade only. It is true that new styles not infrequently start in luxury markets; indeed I believe that luxury trades perform an indispensable function by enabling experiments of all sorts to be tried-out in a small way. But mass production so spreads the cost that there is no reason why well-designed things should not be available for everyone to buy. The idea that only wealthy people like well-designed things is as false as that they are the only people to get pleasure from looking at flowers, listening to music, or reading Shaw. Equally false is the notion that because a thing is low in price it cannot be of good quality.

Good design is not something that can be added to a product at a late stage in its planning or manufacture. It is fundamental. Before starting on a job, any designer worth his salt makes a complete survey of the problem. The manufacturer who is not prepared to place all the relevant information at his disposal cannot expect to get the best results. A clear statement of the problem is essential to its satisfactory solution. In what market is it proposed to sell the product? At what price? Against what competition? How will it be

marketed? How packaged? What materials are to be used? What machines? A detailed survey at the outset will save much trouble later.

There used to be many people who thought that an architect was employed to ensure that the elevation of a building should be in a given style, but in fact a good elevation grows out of a good plan: the architect's true function is to grasp the needs of a client - needs which he may not be able to state precisely – and crystallise them into a workable plan that is economic to build and pleasant to live, work or play in. The industrial designer is, as it were, another kind of architect – the co-ordinator in a team of specialists. He must, by the nature of his job, work as one of a group of technicians. At every stage of the work he must be closely in touch with other specialists, saying to one, "Is this the best way to machine this job, or shall we cut the corner?", to another, "What material shall we use here?", to a third, "Is this likely to give trouble in the packing department?", to a fourth, "Could you sell this for sixteen pounds ten?" – and so on. A designer calls on the experience of a great number of people in the firm for which he is working – works manager, sales staff, foremen, advertising and costing men, research staff and so on.

Research into design is a part of industrial research which in the past has been sadly neglected. Like research as a whole, it can only be tackled by adopting a policy which goes steadily ahead over a period of years; you cannot expect each year's results to pay for themselves. There are no short cuts. A firm cannot pack up bad design on Friday night and start churning out good design on Monday morning. It is not so easy as that; it is necessary to change the point of view of a number of people in the organisation. However, it is *not* necessary to start in a big way and perhaps throw up assured profits in the hope of securing others which may not mature. The design department that starts in a small way today is likely to grow until it becomes the mainstay of tomorrow. Good design does not sell itself but it can be made a strong selling point. Its prestige value is great – and growing: the standard of public taste is rising.

An approach to design through horse-sense enables any intelligent person to appreciate what the designer's problem is – and that is what we need. We don't expect everyone to become expert designers; that is neither possible nor desirable. We cannot all become accountants, but we can learn enough to read a balance sheet. We cannot all become conductors but we can learn to appreciate music – and remember, no conductor could give his best to an audience of deaf mutes; there must be collaboration. It is the same with design: a public which possesses critical standards is essential if design is to be as good as it might be.

Sometimes we hear it said that there is no such thing as good or bad design, that there are no real standards by which design can be assessed, that it is just a matter of personal taste; or that because an article sells in great quantities it *must* be well-designed. Sometimes, too, we are told that the subject is not a very important one; that hard-headed business men cannot be expected to waste their time on what they think is purely a question of aesthetics, and so on.

I have heard such criticisms on many occasions in the past; they are becoming rarer today. More and more people are realising that the question of industrial design is important to industry, and indeed to every citizen. In 1944 the Coalition Government, with all the preoccupations of the closing months of the war pressing on it, found time to set up the Council of Industrial Design, largely because it was felt that design was vital in our post-war export trade.

In 1951 the Festival of Britain will provide an opportunity to show that this country, which once led the world in design, is ready to assume leadership again. It is the Council's task to select a variety of products to be shown in the Festival: it is industry's responsibility to ensure that a first-rate range of goods is available. A permanent grading-up of standards, as distinct from a short-lived attempt to produce "stunt" designs, can do much to ensure the future prosperity of our country. "British made" ought always to mean well made of sound materials to a good design.