

A Good Argument

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The 20th-century definition of “good design” was driven primarily by form. Today the stakes are too high, and the world too complex, for a superficial response.

What is good design? Some 54 years after the Museum of Modern Art abandoned its Good Design exhibition program, the question lingers in the air like the smell of last night’s dinner. It’s bandied about in the media and lurks behind the scenes of every product-design competition, from Germany’s Red Dot and Japan’s G-Mark to the IDSA’s International Design Excellence Awards. The question goes further than designers’ personal need for recognition and reveals a much deeper cultural anxiety about consumerism. But is it a useful question?

One problem with “good design” is its connotation of moral authority. Whose “good” are we talking about? MoMA’s idea of good, like the 1950s British and European equivalents, implied “good for all” but tended to translate into a Modernist aesthetic rampage against ornament and historicist styles. Victor Papanek, ever reliable scourge of the design establishment, dismissed museum exhibits of “well-designed objects” as parades of well-worn genres. “[T]he objects are -usually the same,” he wrote in his 1971 book *Design for the Real World*, “a few chairs, some automobiles, cutlery, lamps, ashtrays and maybe a photograph of the ever present DC-3 airplane. Innovation of new objects seems to go more and more toward the development of tawdry junk for the annual Christmas gift market.”

The link between “good” and “sellable” was deep in the veins of the Good Design program. Its founder, Edgar Kaufmann Jr., was the son of the owner of Kaufmann’s department store in Pittsburgh, and was unabashed about the importance of “eye appeal” in the jurors’ selection of objects for the orange-and-brown Good Design tag. The exhibit was held in January and June at the Merchandise Mart of Chicago’s semiannual home--furnishings shows, with a carefully timed pre-Christmas finale at MoMA. Goods were arranged with a department-store -taxonomy—furniture, tableware, accessories, and so on. If Good Design is remembered today for helping bring to the American public’s attention the designs of Arne Jacobsen, Finn Juhl, Charles and Ray Eames, Harry Bertoia, and Venini, among others, it also directed a fair share of tawdry junk to the Modern, from shrimp cleaners to pancake flippers. Kaufmann used no grand aesthetic theory: he simply charged his jurors with the task of finding high-quality, widely available, reasonably priced wares that were new to the U.S. market since the previous show. This established, as Terence Riley and Edward Eigen put it in an essay about the program, “an equivalence between the good and the new—a concept that became a characteristic of the optimism of the postwar years.” It also cemented the importance of the image as the means by which product design is judged, prefacing Guy Debord’s sardonic prophesy: “that which appears is good, that which is good appears.”

Current concepts of good design have a hard time shaking off this legacy, this Cold War mission to stimulate consumption with images of products and rid the world of ornament, pastiche, and, implicitly, Communism. (After launching the program, Kaufmann put together *Design for Use, USA*, an international exhibition of exemplary work, sponsored by the State Department, to promote the American dream overseas.) But without a

comparable value system, do we descend into a relativist morass, in which good and bad are simply matters of taste, culturally constructed terms serving different agendas? In the 21st century, surely, we need to move beyond the impasse of cultural relativism, but without resorting to 1950s dogma and agendas hidden under the guise of good.

This is easier said than done. It's tempting, for example, to simply replace "good" with "useful." In these uncertain times, with rampant consumerism taking a breather, it might even make sense to revive the framework of MoMA's 1942 show *Useful Objects Under \$10*. No doubt Papanek's ghost would be delighted by needs-based criteria supplanting "eye appeal." We could imagine MoMA festooned with *Make* magazine-style creations, with perhaps a historical exhibit or two on "vernacular" design. But the problem with usefulness as a standard is that it doesn't allow for useless objects, which are actually quite an important part of design practice. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby's nervous robots, for example, are polemical objects that cannot be purchased, let alone used. Some important icons of product-design history are similarly useless: Raymond Loewy's streamlined pencil sharpener (which never went into production, or needed to), Philippe Starck's famously dysfunctional Juicy Salif lemon squeezer, or Ettore Sottsass's Carlton bookcase (you could put books on it, but that wasn't the point).

One could argue that this useless stuff isn't design. But the above examples were created by designers and belong to an ongoing conversation about design. Sottsass's bookcase was a provocation to remind us to see form not as an end in itself but as the beginning of an interaction. Dunne and Raby's robots sprang from the idea that design can serve as a medium for discussion about the cultural and ethical implications of technology, an alternative to the "Hollywood" genre of corporate design, which tends to glorify technology.

Many objects are designed not to be useful but to make an argument. And my contention is that every object is an argument of some sort, and its strength or weakness as an argument is a good guide to its value. The theorist Richard Buchanan once identified three rhetorical characteristics of a product's design: Its logos, or technological reasoning, is the clarity of its function—the way in which, say, a spoon is an argument for getting food from the plate to the mouth, or a clamshell shape suggests that the cell phone needs to be opened to be used. Its ethos, or character, is how it reflects its maker; a Dieter Rams-designed Braun product conveys an unobtrusive, efficient quality. Its pathos, or emotion, is how it persuades its potential users that it is desirable and useful to them—its sexiness, if you like.

But the most valuable effect of considering an object as an argument is that it allows us to look under the rhetorical hood and consider it not as an inevitable or neutral invention but as something that embodies a point of view. The iPod may seem like an innocuous music-playing device, but in fact it is an argument about how we should navigate, purchase, download, and listen to sound. It's an argument based on premises negotiated among the various stakeholders (Apple, the music industry, acoustic engineers). Similarly, the Ford Model-T was an argument for personal transportation using fossil fuels. Frequently, designers are not given to thinking about the premises on which their arguments are based, but in a world where every decision is connected to a sprawling set of decisions and consequences, they should be.

Viewing designs as arguments frees us from the art world's tendency to evaluate on aesthetic criteria alone. It insists on contextual evaluation: design is not just about how a thing looks or how it works; it is also about the assumptions on which it rests. The new One Laptop per Child XO computer, the MIT Media Lab's \$100 machine for children in developing countries, lacks the sleek eye appeal of a Macintosh and has been criticized for pioneering a non-Windows user interface based on a theory rather than user testing. But a full appraisal would note that it is an argument for closing the digital divide based on the theory of "learning by making," which assumes that children learn by creative experimentation and making social objects. A polished-aluminum case and a user interface rooted in files, folders, and wastebasket metaphors would be irrelevant in rural India.

Seeing good design as an argument has one more point in its favor. "Good Design" was a stamp of approval that bestowed a suggestion of timelessness. As such, it depended on a rather fixed notion of problems and solutions, an old-fashioned model that still persists in everyday design language. But in reality, problems are too big and slippery to stamp or fix. Who would have known in 1950 that we'd be recycling plastic, eliminating chrome plating, and singing the praises of urban density? I'm sure there are designers at Boeing and General Motors who have seen the parameters of a project changed beyond recognition by recent events. The great design thinker Horst Rittel once wrote that "a design problem keeps changing while it is treated, because the understanding of what ought to be accomplished, and how it might be accomplished is continually shifting. Learning what the problem is IS the problem."

The current issue of *Metropolis* makes a case for ten criteria for evaluating design arguments today, in the troubled economic, ecological, and political climate of the early 21st century. Arguably, these criteria provide an ethical framework for evaluating design so that the long-established yardsticks—design that is functional, beautiful, enduring, well made—are offset by values like affordability, accessibility, ergonomic strength, social benefit and necessity, and emotional resonance. No argument could meet all these criteria, but it might satisfy a few. More to the point, a loose framework gets us beyond the problem of labeling design as good or bad, or seeing problems as solvable. There are no solutions to design problems. There are only responses in the form of arguments.