



Think, Define, Design: Design in Everyday Life

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Abstract

Everyone designs. Design occurs anytime we deliberately change an environment to make things better. When we decide what seat to take in an auditorium we're designing our experience. When we rearrange the furniture in a room or draft an email, we're designing.

This paper is aimed at making us recognize the role of design in today's world, and to start making better design decisions in our own life. It is intended to be enjoyable and informative for anyone curious about design: everyday people, technical people, designers, and non-designers alike.

Keywords: Design, Experience, People, Designers, Everyday

1. Introduction

"If you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful."—William Morris ^[1]

"Why are you showing us this?" A visitor asked in an irritated voice as she strolled through the exhibition room of Archivo Diseño y Arquitectura (Archive Design and Architecture). She was confronted by a simple paper cone cup made in Mexico. The visitor was viewing *Happiness is a Cold or Hot Sponge*, an exhibition curated by Guillermo Santamarina, a well-established contemporary art curator. Apart from selecting specific objects, at the same time, Archivo shared why these "simple" pieces are considered extraordinary, hidden behind the veil of their universality, usefulness, and permanence in production lines. "Every day we are in contact with objects designed with such genius that we forget they even exist, and it is only when they are exhibited in a museum or written about in a book that we realize the transcendence good design has in our lives ^[2]," writes art historian María García Holley.

2. The Hidden Frustrations of Everyday Things

"We are surrounded by large numbers of manufactured items, most intended to make our lives easier and more pleasant... All these wonderful devices are supposed to help us save time and produce faster, superior results. But, wait a minute - if these new devices are so wonderful, why do we need special dedicated staff members to make them work - 'power users' or 'key operators'? Why do we need manuals or special instructions to use the typical business telephone? Why do so many features go unused? And why do these devices add to the stresses of life, rather than reduce them? ...Business and industry have learned that their products ought to be aesthetically pleasing. A large community of designers exists to help improve appearances. But appearances are only part of the story: usability and understand ability are more important, for if a product can't be used easily and safely, how valuable is its attractiveness? ...Over the years, I have fumbled my way through life, walking into doors, failing to figure out water faucets, incompetent at working the simple things of everyday

life... My difficulties were mirrored by the problems of others. And, we all seemed to blame ourselves. Could the whole world be mechanically incompetent? ...Humans do not always err. But they do when the things they use are badly conceived and designed. Nonetheless, we still see human error blamed for all that befalls society.... While we all blame ourselves, the real culprit - faulty design - goes undetected. And millions of people feel themselves to be mechanically inept. It is time for a change ^[3]." This paper is intended to make you aware of the problems of design and interested in improving things. Design has changed many people's lives, making them more sensitive to the problems of life and to the needs of people ^[4].

3. Why is design important?

This question is meant to be simple and not "why is the process of design important", or "why are designers important" - but *why is design important?* No indication as to where it might be important or what the scope is. Just simply, why? Before answering this, let us find out do we really understand the word 'design'.

4. What is Design?

Do we really "get" design? Despite its growing importance in today's world, design continues to be misunderstood. When we hear the word "design", many of us still think about the shape and colour of objects, or flashy aesthetics, or items of luxury. But this view diminishes the importance of design and is just plain wrong. True, *style* is the most recognizable part of a design, with the *substance* of it often hidden away as a more intangible asset. But it's really only a matter of perception.

Aesthetics are just the surface of a much layered process; they are the visible synthesis of a complex study that includes: research, vision, planning, problem solving, ergonomics, lifestyle, culture, technology, psychology, and sometimes, even sociology.

The point is: Design has a higher purpose that goes well beyond creating something that is pretty to look at. When it comes to interiors, for example, design is about adapting the environment to our functional, emotional, psychological, and

social needs. It is what contributes to making our living spaces more enjoyable, to creating atmospheres that give us energy and make us feel good while simplifying our lives, even if we can't quite figure out why and how. Design can help us come together; as a family, as a group, as a community, as a society. In doing so, it enhances the *significance* of a place, or even an object [5].

5. Can 'I' Design?

At its highest level, design seems to be something that can only be practiced by few, with the rest of us left to experience and enjoy it, but not contribute to it. Yet, at its core, design is something that any of us can do because, when stripped to its essence, design is about adopting a *holistic mentality* and applying it to our lives. It's about figuring out how disparate things can be brought together in new ways; it's the ability to think about creative, unexpected solutions to our problems, in order to continue improving the *quality* of our lives, in every aspect. When we look at it this way, says Frank Nuovo, one of the world's leading industrial designers, "Design is something that everyone does every day" [6].

So, if we want to make our lives better, we should look to design for inspiration and believe we can all be problem-solvers and agents of change by using a design approach to everyday matters.

6. Design: One of the Most Powerful Forces in Our Lives

"Do you ring a doorbell with a finger or a thumb?" That's the kind of question Alice Rawsthorn, design critic for *The International New York Times*, asks when she thinks about design—all design—and the major role designers have in altering our lives.

Her answer, however, reveals a lot about how she thinks of design's evolution. "The older you are, the likelier you will be to press it with a finger, probably your index finger, if you are younger, you may well use a thumb, because it will have been exercised so thoroughly by typing text messages and gunning down digital assailants on game consoles that it is likely to be stronger and nimbler than any of your fingers [7]." Every day we use dozens of objects automatically, without special recognition of their existence, that's mainly because they work so well — that's what makes them the modest masterpieces of thought and design.

We rarely think about the design of the objects we use every day. We don't usually catch ourselves pondering the origin of our ballpoint pen or coffee maker when we're trying to write a paper or wake up after a night out. The fact is we're not supposed to; these everyday objects have been meticulously designed to work so well that we never have to notice them - that's what good design is all about. These everyday objects could arguably be the best examples of successful design: they have stood the test of time, they were easily adopted by a vast majority of the population, and, as objects, and they are so user-friendly that they disappear into our daily routine.

Design can also be inspiring, empowering and enlightening. 16th-century Welsh mathematician Robert Recorde for example, "invented" the common equals sign when he had tired of writing the words "is equal to" and sought a less onerous way of conveying their meaning. Choosing a pair of parallel lines of equal length was an inspired solution, and a brilliant example of (graphic) design's power to solve a practical problem. There are countless other examples of

adroitly designed symbols, not all of which were designed from scratch. The digital incarnations of the hashtag and @ symbol are equally successful examples of design appropriation, rather than invention.

7. The Designers

That design affects society is hardly news to designers. Many take the implications of their work seriously and indeed, design philosophies vary in important ways across political systems. In Western cultures, design has reflected the capitalistic importance of the marketplace so we are surrounded with objects of desire, not objects of use. Everyday tasks are not difficult because of their inherent complexity. They are difficult only because they require learning arbitrary relationships and arbitrary mappings, and because they sometimes require precision in their execution. The difficulties can be avoided through design that makes obvious what actions are necessary. Good design exploits constraints, so that the user feels as if there is only one possible thing to do - the right thing, of course. The designer has to understand and exploit natural constraints of all kinds. Errors are an unavoidable part of everyday life. Proper design can help decrease the incidence and severity of errors by eliminating the causes of some, minimizing the possibility of others, and helping to make errors discoverable, once they have been made. Such design exploits the power of constraints, and makes use of forcing functions and visible outcomes of actions. We do not have to experience confusion, or suffer from undiscovered errors. Proper design can make a difference [8]."

In a nutshell, design should:

- Make it easy to determine what actions are possible at any moment (make use of constraints).
- Make things visible, including the conceptual model of the system, the alternative actions, and the results of actions.
- Make it easy to evaluate the current state of the system.
- Follow natural mappings between intentions and the required actions; between actions and the resulting effect; and between the information that is visible and the interpretation of the system state.

In other words, make sure that (1) the user can figure out what to do, and (2) the user can tell what is going on. Design should make use of the natural properties of people and of the world: it should exploit natural relationships and natural constraints. As much as possible, it should operate without instructions or labels. Any necessary instruction or training should be needed only once; with each explanation the person should be able to say, 'Of course,' or 'Yes, I see.' A simple explanation should suffice if there is reason to the design, if everything has its place and its function, and if the outcomes of actions are visible. If the explanation leads the person to think or say, 'How am I going to remember that?' the design has failed.

The principles of design are straightforward.

1. Use both knowledge in the world and knowledge in the head.
2. Simplify the structure of tasks.
3. Make things visible: bridge the gulfs of Execution and Evaluation.
4. Exploit the nature of constraints, both natural and artificial.
5. Design for Error.

6. When all else fails, standardize ^[9].”

8. Conclusion

From the time we wake up to the time we go to sleep, design plays a role in your everyday life. Design makes ideas tangible, translating them into physical form. Someone is responsible for designing the things we consume, use, and interact with every day, be they objects, spaces, landscapes, or communications and transportation systems. Every moment, we encounter a set of solutions to a problem that has been considered by someone. Everything is designed, one way or another. So, let's all of us be more informed, better consumers. Let's understand as well as demand better design of everyday things.

9. References

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