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Living design history as a tool for
better design **Sunday, April 14, 2013**
~~*21:21~~ 00:16 16. 2013

From
this
manuscript

(On de-tooling and re-tooling design
history) If design history is to
contribute to better design, it has
to be first de-tooled, and then re-
tooled again.

A tool
afternoon

exactly 20 minutes long

I trust

In this talk I'll be trying to explain why design history can
indeed ~~be not only~~ a tool for, ~~but~~ a key to, better design.
~~become~~ and perhaps even

The aim of this text is to sketch the thesis that design
history can indeed become a tool for better design,
though

however

This, ~~believe~~ can come to pass only if we design
historians ~~make~~ the world of pre-modern design ~~come~~

for recycling,

~~live~~ so that it becomes as legitimate a design option, as
the modernist visual idioms of the past hundred years.

in the same
way it has
been
legitimate
to recycle

~~have been~~ This, I submit, can happen only if we

To do that

ultimately reject the inherited modernist idea, that the
modern epoch must have a style of its own, independent
of any other previous styles, ~~and~~ that there is room for
only one modern visual aesthetics. It was this idea that

idea
in other words, the
the idea

we have first
to reject

turned the world of pre-modern aesthetics into a design historical

graveyard of dead forms. I strongly suspect that we
design historians have never really and clearly and

~~unequivocally~~ ~~and quickly~~ parted with this idea of only

if it is considered today

one style per epoch, and that we still tend to perpetuate the established division into the modernist, i.e. alive - *and therefore recyclable* - aesthetic or style, and the pre-modernist, i.e. the allegedly dead ones. In the following I ~~will~~ attempt ~~to~~ to explain why it is important to inhume that modernist idea and in what that burial might contribute to better design.
(ways)

The modernist claim that there is only one legitimately modern visual idiom – the modernist one – is the obvious reason why, during the past sixty years or so, ~~practically~~ *predominantly* professionally schooled designers and architects kept to a single design aesthetic, the one developed after the WW(1). This ornamentless, anti-historicist, nonfigurative modernist idiom was claimed to be the only legitimate one because it purportedly was the only natural, authentic expression of the modern epoch.

At the same time, *the notion* ~~this idea~~ of only one ~~genuine~~ style per epoch has been considered a very odd proposal by a very large majority of people, living their daily lives on the outside of our own world of art and design. It appears to be utterly beyond these non-art and non-design people, independently of levels of their education, to understand, why practically all professionally educated designers and architects, do only one type of aesthetics, the one that these very same designers and architects obviously like and prefer, and what is the reason that they as a rule flatly refuse to deal with the plethora of existing non-modernist preferences, that is with the fact of modern **diversity** of tastes.

perhaps
~~except~~ *except* graphic design ~~and~~ and home furnishing design

The immediate reason why contemporary professional designers and architects keep offering design solutions in the abstract modernist idiom only, is, of course, that the modernist idiom is the only idiom contemporary designers and architects are able to practice. They were provided with no knowledge of, no familiarity with, no training and ~~no~~ practice in any other kind of idioms. And this is so because design and architecture schools of the past sixty years have been modernist schools, led by modernist teachers, employing modernism-friendly historians, all embracing the modernist vision of a single style of the epoch.

The issuing dearth or downright absence of professionally trained non-modernist designers then explains the usually less than impressive aesthetic quality of the ~~non-modernist~~ types of design and architecture.

other than

While we usually think of modernists as a sort of modernity freaks, it is certainly surprising to find, that the modernist ~~vision~~ idea of a stylistically homogeneous modern epoch was strikingly concepts backward looking. Modernists namely insisted that the modern epoch should conform to the pattern of assumed stylistic unity of preceding, pre-modern ~~epochs~~ periods. The modernist vision was, in other words, built on the model of pre-capitalist, feudal periods as depicted by 19th century historians – historians of art, architecture, and culture ~~and economy~~, where the stylistic unity, to the extent it was there, was a result of very small wealthy elites having exclusive say in all things aesthetic. Modernists, embracing the historians' picture of the past, gave their novel aesthetic a rubber stamp of a historically

necessary idiom, foreordained to bring about the ~~true and~~ ~~and~~ unified expression of the modern epoch time.

Nevertheless,

~~The background of this effort was, that~~ nothing in the nature of the modern time had suggested a development towards visual homogeneity. On the contrary, perhaps the most striking feature of the modern ^{period} ~~time~~ has been a continued development towards greater and greater diversity, in taste cultures, life styles, aesthetic preferences – an evolution which had undoubtedly had to do with the incrementally growing standard of living in the Western, capitalist societies. After all, historicism of the 19th century, the *bête noir* of the modernists, can be seen as the first powerful, and in their eyes most disturbing manifestation of this growing diversity. Modernists in fact kept rejecting ~~rejected~~ the truly new and modern in the modern epoch: its growing plurality – while being visually mesmerized by all the new technical means that brought about that very diversity. Modernists never understood - or rather never wanted to understand – that the deplored stylistic pluralism of the 19th century was really a dawn of the modern age of heterogeneity, rather than a historic aberration in ~~the~~ need of rectifying.

As suggested, modernists thought of aesthetic and style, not in terms of communication, but in terms of a historical period, expression – whether an expression of ~~the epoch~~, or of production processes, or of materials, or of “functions”, or the personality of the designer. The problem with such theory was, and still is, that its explanatory value is near zero : we all express our personality, unintendedly, in

whatever we do. The same with our products: they cannot help expressing their “functions”, nature of production processes, character of materials, or its own particular time. All this happens anyway, whether we want it or not, so ~~that~~ there is really no need to single out expressing as a design objective of its own. The attraction of the expression theory of style seems to be, above all, its promotional, or perhaps self-promotional, value: it provided modernist designers and architects (in their own eyes) with a higher, much more respectable calling, than the often drab daily process of meeting preferences of fickle human clients. In conceiving of style as expression designers now conceived of themselves as grand channels for the new historical forces of the present. With this elevated idea, modernism instituted a change of rules: it made the designer, rather than the user, the hub of the design game. In other words, the idea of style as an expression of the epoch, which brings a tremendous mental boost to the world of designers and architects – was a disservice to the world of users: it squeezed them out of equation.

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So how
~~How then are we to go about~~ to make design history a tool for better design? The key, as I have suggested, is in abolishing the ~~pre-modernist~~ apartheid-like division between a retrievable because legitimate pool of stylistic idioms of the past ninety years, and the pur’portedly unretrievable because ille’gitimate pre-Bauhaus, pre-modernist stylistic past. This presupposes above all else to give up the modernist vision of only one legitimate, lawfully begotten stylistic expression for the ‘epoch, on

abolition would,

which the above apartheid-like division of design history has been predicated.

This I believe ~~should~~ bring the users back into equation.

I suggest that

As design history teachers, ~~I believe~~ we should endeavor [en'devo] to focus on the 'presentness rather than pastness of the stylistic idioms of the past, whether they belong to the modernist or the pre-modernist eras. **For things of the past do not really dwell in a past**, in the sense that they disappeared from our present, the way dead people do. Most of the objects and buildings, that we came to appreciate as historical objects of artistic value, in fact exist right now - right now, at this very moment. Subliminally, we all know this, of course, but to realize this fully has rather shocking implications: The objects of the past are fully contemporary with ourselves. We can take pictures of ourselves in front of ~~the~~ Notre Dame Cathedral, ~~or the 17th century~~ ^{of the} church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane or in front of ~~the 19th century~~ Prince Albert Monument, today. They are all as much in the now as the structures and objects made ~~a week ago~~ ^{yesterday}. Their various qualities can be experienced in the present, and as such they are a part of the present time, and of our own lifetimes. Exactly this perception of the presentness, of the nowness of objects of the past seems to be the main characteristic of the attitude of the public. It is an ability ~~that has~~ ^{that has been} apparently ~~been~~ blunted by the impact of ~~the~~ ^{in us design} modernist ideas, ~~by us design people~~ ^{people}. As design historians, we tend to perceive design objects as date-labeled captives of the past, and I am afraid we tend to ~~teach~~ ^{impart that to} our students ~~the same~~ ^{as well}. The public's incomprehension of why the pre-modernist stylistic conventions are shunned by today's professional designers seems to stem from

that has been in us design people,

the cautious historicism of the

out

the public's straightforward perception, the presentness of past objects and buildings, an attitude untainted by the ~~modernist doctrine~~ ^{view} that only the modernist stylistic idioms are alive today, because they are purportedly [p'pótidly] the only true expressions of the modern ípoch.

The idea of presentness of objects and buildings in the now, independently of how old or novel they are, opens the door to an alternative way of seeing the nature of stylistic idioms. Instead of the traditional idea of style as an expression of a bygone (or of a present) ípoch, we should start thinking of stylistic idioms, both modernist and pre-modernist, as sets of aesthetic inventions or discoveries. Conceiving of stylistic idioms as such inventions ^{and discoveries} radically changes their status and identity. They can now be treated as basically independent of the time and place of their origin, and as such they can be employed and re-employed in the now, to provide products with certain types of visual character in agreement with the commúnicative objectives of the designer.

If our aim is to make design history contribute to better design in today's world of modern 'affluent diversity, we should stop conceiving of the visual idioms of the past as a collection of dated visual expressions, dated because irrevocably chained to their particular periods, and as such aesthetically extinct with the end of their period, as if they were branded with best-before labels.

So I submit that design history can come alive, only if we design historians stop seeing the best-before labels learn to

Whenever we look at the pre-Bauhaus world,

~~everywhere we look~~. Perhaps we ^{should} ~~could~~ learn from the mentioned

inclination of the public – ~~the party pressed out of equation by the modernist theory of design and by its idea of style as expression~~ - to see objects of the past as a

natural part of the present now, i.e. of the modern epoch.

And since the somewhat forgotten raison d'être of design profession is to relate to the preferences of the public, it is imperative that designers learn to see not only the past ninety years, but the whole of design history, as

something that in fact exists right now. Seeing the design history as present rather than past, turns it into a huge pool of stylistic inventions and discoveries at hand, that

can be reemployed, redeveloped, or redesigned, by inventive and daring designers, to fit the diversity of taste and plurality of stylistic preferences among the public.

together with the modernist idiom: In ^{advancing} ~~promoting~~ that

end, we design historians, and teachers of design history and

~~theory~~, can perhaps play a decisive role.

allow me then

a term stolen from

To summarize (with the help of Kjetil Fallan's ~~term~~ from

~~the~~ title of his coming paper) If design history is to

contribute to better design, first it has to be de-tooled,

~~but then~~ re-tooled again.

though only in order to be

~~in order to be re-tooled again.~~

Now, I do not want to create an impression that I believe that the modernist orthodoxy has gone unchallenged for the past sixty years, or that the same abstract minimalism has been with us for the length of that period. I am aware of the fact that the barbed wire fence behind which the non-modernist idioms were placed throughout the existence of modernism, is by now rather rusty and with quite some holes, pierced by various earlier temporary departures from modernist aesthetic orthodoxy. Here, however, I have chosen not to focus on the rust, or the holes, but only on the fact that in spite of rust and holes the fence is still there, and that we design historians – in view of all that has been said so far – ought to aim at tearing it down completely.

free for caveats & final points