

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN AND SOCIAL EQUALITY

It may perhaps seem somewhat out of place to present this general reflection at a conference on the 1888 Copenhagen Exhibition of Nordic Industry, Agriculture and Art. The topic of this reflection is, however, not as alien to the theme of our conference as it may sound. It can be seen as an extended apropos to some of the questions which kept arising in several previous papers and in successive discussions, whenever a connection between design and taste, social status, prestige or market was addressed.

The prime aim of this paper is namely to discuss viability of the idea that modern industrialized society primarily geared to achieving social equality can be expected to produce an industrial design culture not only on the same level as market-oriented societies, but even higher. It seems to me that this idea is still largely taken for granted, among designers no less than among us design historians. The vision of egalitarian society as a true safeguard of excellency in design has been a rather pronounced part of the modernist theory of design at least since William Morris' critique of capitalist society in general and of capitalist design in particular. After the Second World War, when art and design history started to be taught from the perspective of the victorious modernism, we all inbibed the idea that a society rebuilt to foster social equality would be much better at producing excellency in design than one not rebuilt for that purpose.

Let me illustrate this idea by two quotations, half a century apart. The first comes from an article written by William Morris some years after the Copenhagen Exhibition. Although the article bears no relation to the exhibition at all, the second and third point of the quotation could very well be taken as a general critique of the things exhibited there. Morris writes:

"Remember what the waste of a society of inequality is: 1st: The production of sordid makeshifts for the supply of poor folk who cannot afford the real article. 2nd: the production of luxuries for rich folk, the greater part of which even their personal folly does not make them want. And 3dly: the wealth wasted by the salesmanship of competitive commerce, to which the production of wares is but a secondary object, the first object being the production of a profit for the individual manufacturer."

And Morris concludes the paragraph by summarizing his unqualified hopes in the society of equality in the fol-

lowing words: "For I do declare that any other state of society but communism is grievous and disgraceful to all belonging to it."¹

The second quotation comes from an essay by Herbert Read, published in 1941. Here Read writes, among other things:

"...fitness for function is the inevitable result of an economy directed to use and not to profit. /.../ by establishing a system of production for use we shall inevitably secure the first of /.../ spiritual needs - beauty. /.../ the private ownership of property, rent and usury - they are anti-democratic factors, and consequently prevent the establishment of a creative civilization. /.../ Unless the present economic system is abolished, its roots eradicated and all its intricate branches lopped, the first condition for a democratic alternative to the fake culture of our present civilization are not satisfied."²

Whereas Morris' and Read's visions were linked to the philosophy of marxism and anarchism respectively, functionalism made these visions appear logical and necessary in terms of design. To repeat some basics, the central idea of functionalism was the claim that forms of products can be derived from such objective determining factors as modes of construction and production, nature of materials and, above all, from functions of buildings or products. Functionalism was, in other words, informed by a belief that forms could, and should, be produced independently of the tastes of any social class or group. It was no longer the subjective taste preferences of users, but objective factors like those mentioned above that were now seen as the *raison d'être* of design.³ Functionalists hoped that their new forms, by virtue of being objective, would be a kind of visual esperanto, equally accessible to all, without regard to the user's social or cultural background. As such, the functionalist design would advance the case of an egalitarian society. At the same time such a society was itself seen by functionalists as a precondition for accepting the new objective forms: only members of a society of equality could really be expected *en masse* to accept and truly like forms that were to be produced with no regard for status or prestige considerations. In other words, the society of equality was both the logical aim of - and the precondition for the thorough victory of - functionalistic forms. It was therefore only natural that functionalists, with their vision of

objective forms, had a deep sympathy for the idea of a society of equality.

As is well known, great hopes have in our century been put in the practical attempts to realize the idea of social equality, as well as the idea of objective forms. Attempts to put these ideas into practice started at approximately same time, in the decade between 1910 and 1920; and both of them had, some 50 years later, run into all sorts of troubles. I shall, however, leave alone the question of possible reasons for these troubles, and limit myself to discussing the impact which the practical attempts towards social equality had on the quality of industrial design.

Of the two most important endeavours aiming at social equality in this century, the kibbutz movement in Palestine and later Israel, and the building of communism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, I shall consider only the second one. The kibbutzim, although not quite without relevance for our question, are, however, mainly agrarian egalitarian communities functioning *within* the societal framework of a non-egalitarian society. By contrast, the classless society in the Soviet Union and other countries was to be built on a predominantly industrial, not agrarian, basis and the attempt at building it has in fact led to an entirely *new* societal framework pervading every aspect of social life. In addressing the question of whether the phenomenon of industrial design culture we are familiar with in the Western industrialized countries is compatible with the nature of fully socialist society, I shall therefore use the example of the fully restructured, i.e. communist, societies.

Today over one third of the earth's population lives in societies thoroughly rebuilt with the sole aim of achieving a classless society. The two largest of these, China and the Soviet Union, have now, in the 1980s, embarked upon a spectacular and unheard of re-thinking of the theoretical and practical basics of their egalitarian philosophy. We have heard, for example, the chief architect of Mr. Gorbachev's new economic policy quote approvingly, at a press conference some time ago, an old adage to the effect that there is only one place where all are truly equal – the graveyard.

This present re-thinking of many old dogmas in China, the Soviet Union, Hungary and elsewhere seems, however, to have no parallel in our own re-thinking of our own dogmas in the light of the design results of the fully socialist countries. The design practice of seventy years of building a classless society in the Soviet Union and some forty odd years of the same effort in Eastern Europe and elsewhere show – in my view conclusively so – that the idea of social equality within an industrial society, and the idea of design excellency in industrial products, are in fact mutually exclusive. I shall now try to explain why there are reasons to believe that these two ideas are very strange bed-fellows indeed.

Let me first give a short description of the new framework of an industrial society which aims at doing away with social classes. The cardinal step towards achieving this aim has always been to outlaw private ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. In other words, the right to privately start, own and run an enterprise is abolished. According to marxist-leninist theory the first human societies at the dawn of mankind lived in a state of primordial classless society; the *class* society had come into being when the originally commonly held property became "privatized" – to use a current term. Marxist-leninists believe that the historical development of human society proceeds inexorably towards a new era of common ownership – this time however on the present, technologically highly advanced level of civilization. Private ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange is considered to block the way towards a full blossoming of all creative forces in a society because it creates a society of inequality. It is believed that when this private ownership has been abolished through socialization, the class society will eventually metamorphose into a society without classes. The abolition of the legal right to private enterprise means the abolition of market mechanism at the same time; now it is no longer the market but central planning which determines what is and what is not to be produced. It is believed that the alleged wastefulness of the market economy can thereby be avoided. As already mentioned, it is expected as a matter of course that the quality of products, including the design of mass-produced goods, will not only remain on the level of the previous market economy, but somehow become even higher.

As we all know, however, this expected quality has not materialized. To put it mildly, the fully socialist countries are not noted for the quality of their consumer goods. Only rarely do these goods reach the status of first rate products on the international market.

The reason why this is so has hardly to do with an absence of inborn talents among people living in the fully socialist countries, or with a paucity of properly schooled creative designers. It is on the contrary generally acknowledged that many of the East European communist countries, not to speak about the Soviet Union, are rich in both art and craft traditions: Polish posters, Czechoslovakian glass, East European and Soviet theatre- and film traditions in general, to mention only a few of the visual media. All this should indicate that there is no dearth of talented people able to produce works of high quality.

So what can explain the notorious difficulties all fully socialist countries experience concerning quality of industrial products, if a lack of talented or trained people is not the reason? And what explains the success of the Western countries in comparison? In the case of fully socialist countries, the explanation must be sought, I believe, in the earlier mentioned thoroughgoing legal, political

and economic restructuring of societal institutions undertaken in the name of the future classless society. On the other hand the success of the Western countries must then depend on the absence of such all-embracing restructuring, despite their occasional strong egalitarian tendencies. It seems that when a country's attempt to do away with social inequality goes so far as abolishing private enterprise, and with it the market mechanism, that society's industrial capacity deteriorates in consequence – and with it declines both the functional and aesthetic side of its production. On the other hand, those industrialized societies which still at least tolerate the idea of private profit, and let private enterprise and market economy function, will tend as a result to produce both functional and visually pleasing goods. The reason for this is that the market will reward with profit those producers who meet consumer wants, while punishing with loss and threat of bankruptcy those who fail to do so. In other words, the culture of industrial design around us is not a result of altruistic attitudes of producers towards consumers; it is essentially a by-product of competition among producers for buyers' money. As the US designer Harold van Doren put it: "When a manufacturer has a field all to himself, he can dispense with good design. It is a luxury. But when the field becomes crowded, and the differences between competitive makes become increasingly difficult to detect, good appearance becomes a necessity."⁴

Why is it, however, not enough for utilitarian products to function well? Why have people always been willing – as soon as they were able to afford it – to pay extra for things with appealing form? (We can also say "beautiful" form, meaning of course what people themselves consider as beautiful.) That all of us prefer to own things with appealing forms seems to be a consequence of precisely the fact that we *own* those things. To prefer appealing forms in things we own is a sort of necessity forced upon us from without: the things we own tend to be perceived by others as a part of the owner himself. Whether we like it or not, the things we own will be seen as representing ourselves, and they will thus represent us well or badly. The fact that we own things makes us want to own things that represent us well, and this in fact is the main source of the need for attractively designed forms. Not only clothes make the man; other things people own do the same. The person who buys a utilitarian product will therefore give preference to one that he considers appealing – perhaps because he is ashamed of owning an ugly thing, or because he wants to mark positively his social identity. It is also apparent that the higher one's social status is, the greater representative pressure is one exposed to. If we use things without owning them, we tend to care much less about how they look, and this I contend is because of the perception that ugly things we do not own do not harm our reputation. Not owning things frees us from representational pressures, but a consequence of this freedom is that we tolerate far more ugliness around us. This indicates that the representational pressure we all, in dif-

fering degrees, are exposed to is of essential importance for the existence of design. Revising Louis Sullivan's words on the subject (though not his style) we can say: The pressure, we call Representation; the resultant, Design.⁵

Not only the owners of consumer goods are exposed to these pressures, however. Also the owners of the means of production must care, for commercial reasons, about the visual representativeness of their businesses. To meet competition from their rivals, they are led to give pleasing forms not only to their products but also to the means and circumstances by which these products are produced: since also these means, in a competitive situation, tend to be seen by others as representative of the owner's social standing. This necessity to make even the means of production look representative was eventually institutionalized in what in business circles is known as corporate identity programmes: everything from logotype and letterheads, through packaging to the lettering on delivery vans is given a unified form in order to create the company's visible character and through it an impression of quality. The point of the design effort expended on consumer goods, as well as on corporate design, is clearly to show that consumers are *not* equal to each other, and that neither are the producers. The rationale of design, in other words, is to make social distinctions manifest.

By way of generalization can we say that there is a basic condition for the emergence of an industrial design culture within an industrialized society: this is the freedom of the producer to decide where to invest his capital in order to make profit. There must be a legal right to start, run and own a private enterprise. Only on this condition will the customers' need for products that serve both utilitarian and representative function become the prime generator of the culture of design.

If this contention about the condition of design culture is correct, then the reason why fully socialist countries have had such problems with producing both functional and visually pleasing products should be obvious: eradication of the above condition has itself been the starting point of building a classless society.

In fully socialist societies, even the very idea of marking one's social position – which means, of course, marking one's *social distinction* – has been considered an anathema, at least in the early ideological days of the communist regimes. But even when the ideological strictures became watered down, as has been the case in most European communist countries in recent decades (with the possible exception of Albania), the economic system of these countries has remained almost completely indifferent to demands of the potential market. Nor is this any wonder, since the system had been intentionally constructed to fulfil only the demands communicated to it through the state's central planning. Production plants, being all owned by one owner only – the state with no danger of competition, are by definition in a monopoly position in their respective production branches. Conse-

quently, they have no need to resort to beautifying their products to get them sold, since production plants are rewarded not for producing products that sell, but for fulfilling a set plan. And even when a plant keeps failing to fulfil the target, there is not much to be done about such a plant, since communist governments are heavily committed to full employment. In view of all this the visual – and, as often as not, even the functional – side of production tends to be secondary concern of the plant management.

It seems that designers who saw *the* guarantee of design quality in the fully socialist society never really understood that both functional and beautiful products are born only through competition with other functional products and other beautiful products, and that quality in general arises only where independent producers have to compete for the buyer's money. Such competition is obviously possible only in a society which gives legal sanction to private enterprise.

But if it is true that competition is an essential condition of design, how are we to explain that the state of industrial design in communist countries is not as disastrous as could be expected from what has been said so far? The explanation, I believe, is that those instances of industrial design of merit that we do find in fully socialist countries are results of competition as well – this time, however, of one imposed from without: producers in the fully socialist countries are made to compete as soon as they leave the national and enter the international market. My contention, therefore, is that it is a mistake to see existing examples of well designed socialist products as something intrinsic to the fully socialist economy; rather, the existence of such products should be seen as something elicited by the presence of Western design standard, and unlikely to emerge without it. In other

words, were it not for the necessity to compete with Western goods, there would be hardly any industrial design of merit in the communist countries at all. Stanislaw Lec, a late Polish author known for his epigrammatic observations on the practice of communism, seems to have summarized this predicament in his quasi-classical aphorism which could be a subtitle to this paper: EX ORIENTE LUX – EX OCCIDENTE LUXUS.

I have pondered for such a long time over the state of industrial design culture in the fully socialist industrialized countries, because I believe that awareness of this state of affairs should become a point of departure for formulating a future non-functional theory of design. The seemingly unsurmountable difficulties experienced by these countries in their attempt to replace “production for profit” with “production of use” should be seen as powerful evidence that the designer alone, contrary to the impression created by the modernist theory of design, is not the sole guarantee of design excellence: where market mechanisms are blocked, the birth of the industrial design culture is blocked too, no matter how talented and how well prepared designers leave design schools, and no matter how many prospective buyers hunger for things functional and beautiful.

To put it all in a nut-shell: design culture thrives on the need for social distinctions. Therefore, social inequality together with market economy will promote design culture, while planned economy aiming at social equality will do the opposite. If these contentions are correct, they indicate that one essential part of the modernist theory of design, the idea that social equality is conducive to excellence in design, is radically mistaken.

REFERENCES:

1. (William Morris) *Political Writings of William Morris*, A.L. Morton, ed. (East) Berlin, Seven Seas Publishers, 1973, pp. 236, 238.
2. Herbert Read, “To Hell with Culture”, in his *To Hell With Culture and Other Essays on Art and Society*, New York, Schocken Books, 1964, pp. 18, 20, 26.
3. On the emptiness of the notion of function as a starting point of design, see my article “Form følger HVA?!? Formgivernes funksjonsbegrep som et *carte blanche*”, published in Norway in *Samtiden 2*, 1989, p. 32–38.
4. Harold van Doren, *Industrial Design: A Practical Guide to Product Design and Development*, Second edition, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1954, p. 16
5. Sullivan's original words read: “The pressure, we call Function; the resultant, Form.” See his “Kindergarten Chats”, ch. XIV; published in his *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*, New York, George Wittenborn, 1965, p. 48.