A paper presented by Dr. David Gebhard at the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado.

AMERICAN INDUSTRIAL DESIGN -- 1890-1969

To American industry the packaging of the object is of far more importance than the function of the object.

I would like to begin by considering the relationship between the verbalizing process and that of design. Perhaps the best way to do this would be to look into one of the important historical concepts of 19th century architecture which has been continually cited as a conditioning factor for the 20th century. In his influential book, *Space, Time and Architecture*, Sigfried Giedion brings up the oft-repeated view that American design in the 19th century and to a certain extent even in the early 20th century was characterized as being "something that was expressive of simplicity, was technically correct and had a sureness of shape." I'd like to pose the question—was Giedion and others who have repeated this myth really talking about a quality peculiar to American design, or was he in fact speaking about the predominant provincialism of America in the 19th century?

I would like to suggest to you that he was talking not directly about design, but about provincialism and the vernacular. Only here we must note that the American vernacular of the past century and a half has not been the vernacular of European peasant art, but that of the commercial world. Nineteenth and 20th century American design, then, was not a peasant art, nor, in a sense design, or what have you; it was simply a creative art derived from commercial considerations.

Now, what sort of historical comments may one make about the relationship of design and production to the social and political scene in America? Unquestionably, the major difference between the United States and Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries is that the American has approached the problem of the relationship between the political and social order, and production and design, through indirection. Thus, the unwritten belief seems to have been that as soon as you solve the problem of mass production and mass distribution of objects (primarily in a quantitative rather than a qualitative sense), you will in the process have solved the major social and political problems by creating a universal middle class. Therefore, as a designer, producer or manufacturer you would not have to be directly concerned with the social or political implication of what you're doing because you would be solving these problems by simply producing more objects, making them available to a larger and larger segment of an expanding middle class.

Eventually the millennium would be reached and we would have created a single-class society, a class which can purchase and obtain all the necessities plus anything else it desires. Obviously, what is being said here is that if you pursue this course of indirection, you will eliminate the problem of an under-privileged class.

Over the years Europeans have almost universally criticized America for its lack of planning, whether social, political or environmental. Here again, it seems to me, the American approach, particularly to environmental planning, has entailed something which has often been missing from the European planning of the 19th and 20th centuries. I suspect, at least unconsciously, that most Americans who have been involved with design, with production and what have you, have expressed an intuitive realization of the need and significance of the non-rational—that is the non-planned, the accidental, the element of chance.

Now, what this has meant is that in the United States the concern has been to solve specific material problems, rather than broad social problems. In other words, instead of worrying about why we have automobiles, what are their social and political implications, the concern has been with the individual problems which have arisen in the production of the automobile, not just in the direct sense, but indirectly as with the problem of roads, with the problem of air-contamination, and so forth. The important thing to note here is that such an approach has of necessity been a fragmented one.

It has also meant that those involved with design and production have concentrated their attention almost exclusively on material and technical problems to the exclusion of social or political problems. One other significant consideration follows from this—that is the belief in the necessity of change. One "betters himself" primarily through continually acquiring material possessions. But in an affluent middle-class society, these possessions are not fundamentally acquired because of pressing physical needs; rather, they are acquired for their symbolic value. Thus, I think the intense involvement with change in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries has existed primarily on a symbolic level, not primarily on a functional level.

I'm sure there will be many of you who will disagree with me on this point. What I'm really saying here is that the symbolism of change has become the thing of prime importance, not the fact of functional change. If this view of the object as a symbol is correct, then much of what has happened and is happening in American design can be readily understood. For example, this would both explain and justify why objects produced in America were meant to be experienced only in a momentary sense. In other words, the visual experience of an object was generally not meant to be long-lasting. If the object was correctly designed, it should not, as a symbol or a fact, last for a long period of time. One should experience the object as one might experience a rare marachino cherry placed on the frosting of a cake. Enjoy it for the moment and then go on to the next dessert or the next feast.

What this means, then, is that the predilection of the United States designers has been to create momentary visual forms. Now, of course, this has been one of the major objections which has been continually voiced by European critics to American design. They have violently objected to what they felt was the arbitrary changing of style in automobiles, packaging and what have you. Such antipathy to change reveals that the European critics have failed to understand that the American involvement with change has been fundamentally symbolic, not factual. Thus, instead of being concerned with, say, an electric razor, with saving and finally buying the object, with maintaining and keeping it for a long period of time, with relishing it, with opening the cabinet and looking in at it, one realizes instead that you keep it for a few years, then you "chuck it" and get a new one. The new one need not necessarily function better. If it does, that's perfectly fine, but it should above all look different and it should give you a different visual feel, a little visual bang for a period of time and then you throw it out.

If you really look into the way you and I do respond to objects, we generally have a tremendous thrill when we finally acquire the object, particularly a visual thrill, plus I'm sure all sorts of other hidden thrills. But these thrills really last for only a brief period of time. After a while, it becomes a sedate object which we no longer experience in a visual sense. Thus, if one is visually sensitive, it's best to get rid of it and to have a new jag, a new experience, which will continually intensify one's visual perception.

Now, what I would like to do is to historically illustrate these general observations which I have so far made by looking at two or three movements which have occurred from 1890 to the present. The first of these, which was very important, was the American version of the English Arts and Crafts movement. The high point of this movement occurred between 1890 and 1914. Its first major proponent was that successful soap salesman, Elbert Hubbard, the author of the famous *Letter to Garcia.* It is not by chance that the first great proponent of the Arts and Crafts in the United States was fundamentally a salesman. Not that Hubbard was insentitive to design, for his Roycroftors produced handsomely designed fumed oak furniture and books — but his real interest was in selling an idea. I'm sure that you have at one time or another seen the little books he published on the lives of great men and on other subjects. They're terribly embarrassing and at times sardonic; their real quality was their beautiful packaging, and this is the quality we usually remember about them. You can just forget the text. These little books are marvelous things to collect and just spread out on a table. The craftsmanship of their packaging is, then, the titillating experience, not their content.

In the early 1900's Hubbard was followed by a second proponent, who once again was concerned with the salesmanship of his product rather than the product itself. This was Gustav Stickley who founded the United Craftsmen Organization in New York in 1901. From 1901 to 1917 he published *The Craftsman* magazine, which became *the* spokesman for the Arts and Crafts movement in the United States.

The first issue of *The Craftsman* contained the usual statement of principles, aims and objectives of the new organization. Here Stickley spoke of the need to go back to the simple, the need to utilize the machine in arts and crafts production and the need to couple this with a mild brand of socialism. But in striking contrast to similar movements in Europe, Stickley quickly discarded his socialism. By the end of the first decade the United Craftsman had become a broad and at least momentarily successful diversified "corporation" which produced not only books and furniture but even houses. It was Stickley, more than any other man, who propagandized and made successful that first great mass-produced American house, the California bungalow. It was he also who encouraged the rage for Mission furniture.

The real importance of the American Arts and Crafts movement is that it was able to realize one of the major ideals of the English Arts and Crafts movement — that of making objects of "good de-

sign" available inexpensively. A person of very modest income could indeed go out and buy a fumed oak table, a Morris chair or a settee for phenomenally little money. Hubbard, Stickley and their followers and imitators really made these objects available even to the lower segment of America's middle class; something that never took place on the continent or in England.

Historically, the second movement which illustrates my opening generalizations was that of the "modern" or "moderne" which clothed America of the twenties in angular, zigzag motifs, and then in the thirties and early forties there occurred the aero-dynamic, streamlined world of Buck Rogers. The most important point that we can draw from the history of the "moderne" in the United States from 1925 to 1942 is that it aptly demonstrates that a concern for function, a concern for materials and how materials are put together really had little to do with the design of a product. The "moderne" was simply another style. It illustrates that by 1930 there was no pressing need for a designer to primarily concern himself with functional requirements. The need was to symbolically express new ideals. The reason which the "moderne," particularly in its streamlined phase of the 1930's, was so successful was that its utopian futurism helped to relieve the dismal reality of the depression years. This was a period of the radio as a veneered refrigerator, the streamlined iron, the Chrysler air-flow automobile, the streamlined excursion boats that might go seven or eight knots an hour, etc. Here, as a symbolic expression in designed objects, was the world of Buck Rogers. It is not by accident that such comic strips as Buck Rogers, Batman, Superman, and Captain Marvel were introduced and became extremely popular in the 1930's. Going back even further in time one could equally argue that *Amazing Stories*, which was introduced in 1912, enjoyed a similar relationship with the design world of the 1920's. This was the period, too, as far as futurism is concerned (a Buck Rogers futurism, certainly not the futurism of an Italian of 1910-1914), which produced Orson Wells' *War of the Worlds* in 1938. Perhaps, the passionate involvement we have with flying saucers today is sort of a carryover from the world of the 1930's. The attachment to streamlined forms in the 1930's and its continuation in automotive designs through the early 1950's, illustrates that American design at least has been conditioned almost solely by the commercial vernacular. The "moderne" existed, but not because it had any relationship to functional requirements in and of themselves, but because of its impact as a symbol.

Now, what changes have we experienced since the end of the second World War? I would describe the visual ideas that have dominated the post 1945 years as a sort of rough-and-tumble visual form perhaps based upon the design of the wartime jeep. The interest in angularity, in thin spindly forms which came to characterize designs of the 1950's was a direct outcome of the approach to design of the war years. It is true that most automotive designs of the late forties and early fifties did not reflect these new visual ideals for a decade or so. This new concern for angularity, of course, had no more directly to do with the expression of function than the earlier "moderne." A new package had been created which was symbolically relevant for the fifties and sixties.

There is one other element which is highly significant about post-WWII design in the United States and that is even though design firms might spend hours, months, years designing a Hallicrafter radio or other electronic gear, the demand was that they should appear as non-designed objects.

This is quite a reversal from the symbolism of streamlining where one felt in almost an oppressive way the presence of the designer. In the decades since 1945, there was a feeling that a "well-designed" object should express the feeling of not being designed at all.

One other point should be made about post-WWII production, a point often missed by European observers and critics: that is that production in a highly industrialized society need not, perhaps should not, lead to repetition. The mass production of objects and above all of components can express variety as well.

The period from 1890 to 1969 then, illustrates that a fundamental concern of American industry, and I think quite rightly so, has been its concern for the packaging of the objects. In essence, the packaging of the object is of far more importance in the final analysis than the function of the object. The reason for this is simple, namely, that the concern of the designer both of yesterday and of today should not be, in fact, with function but it should be with the symbolic content of the object he creates.

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