

ROUTLEDGE

Critical Introductions to Urbanism and the City

Paul L. Knox

Cities and Design



Cities and Design

Cities, initially a product of the manufacturing era, have been thoroughly remade in the image of consumer society. Competitive spending among affluent households has intensified the importance of style and design at every scale and design professions have grown in size and importance, reflecting distinctive geographies and locating disproportionately in cities most intimately connected with global systems of key business services. Meanwhile, many observers still believe good design can make positive contributions to people's lives.

Cities and Design explores the complex relationships between design and urban environments. It traces the intellectual roots of urban design, presents a critical appraisal of the imprint and effectiveness of design professions in shaping urban environments, examines the role of design in the material culture of contemporary cities, and explores the complex linkages among designers, producers and distributors in contemporary cities: for example fashion and graphic design in New York; architecture, fashion and publishing in London; furniture, industrial design, interior design and fashion in Milan; haute couture in Paris; and so on.

This book offers a distinctive social science perspective on the economic and cultural context of design in contemporary cities, presenting cities themselves as settings for design, design services and the 'affect' associated with design.

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Cities and Design

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PART I

Introduction

Part I provides an introduction to understanding and interpreting design in the context of the political economy of cities. Design plays a central role in the circulation and accumulation of capital. It also has to be understood in the context of the cultural and ideological changes associated with the shift from modernization to modernity and Modernism. Urban form, meanwhile, has to be interpreted in the context of the relationships among these changes. Cities and design also have to be understood in the context of the shift from mass production and mass consumption to the competitive consumption and the aestheticization of everyday life associated with ‘romantic capitalism’, the ‘dream economy’, and the ‘society of the spectacle’. Professional design cultures and design movements are introduced within the framework of these economic, cultural and urban changes, together with the role of cities as crucibles of creativity and design innovation.

1 Cities, design and urban life

This chapter introduces design as an important aspect of urban life, in terms of the contributions of design not only to the functionality and aesthetic appeal of things but also to the broader sweep of economic, social and cultural change. Design can challenge, modify or reinforce these changes. Because of the dominance of consumerism in contemporary societies, design is critical to the successful marketing of all sorts of products. Through design, people feel that they can construct their own identities and their class distinction through their environment and their patterns of consumption. Cities are crucial settings for both the production and consumption of design. This chapter introduces concepts associated with the rise of consumerism, the aestheticization of everyday life, and the semiotics of things, and describes the roles of design in relation to modernization, modernity and Modernism.

Design has become a central aspect of contemporary urban life. Design can make things not only more attractive but also more efficient and more profitable. It is deployed not only in the development and redevelopment of neighbourhoods, buildings and interior spaces but also in the production of every component of material culture. Indeed, the claims that can be made on behalf of design extend to every aspect of urban life. Design can make urban environments more legible and can assist people in wayfinding (Gibson 2009). It can help people with physical disabilities through codified ‘universal’ design (Herwig 2008). It can promote and ensure public health (Moudon 2005) and bring order and stability to otherwise complex, chaotic and volatile settings (Greed and Roberts 1998). It can make transportation and land use more efficient (Wright *et al.* 1997; Levy 2008). It can be deployed for the benefit of women (Rothschild 1999), children (Gleeson and Sipe 2006), elderly people and those with disabilities (Burton and Mitchell 2006), minority populations (Rishbeth 2001) and social diversity (Talen 2008). It can prevent crime, protect built heritage, foster a sense of place, engender community,

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encourage conviviality, contribute to sustainability and combat climate change. It can signal social status and lifestyle, reflect taste and spearhead cultural change. It can make places more appealing, buildings more striking, clothes more stylish and objects more efficient.

But other important aspects of design concern its wider economic and symbolic value and its roles in supporting and sustaining the political economy of urbanized capitalism (Knox 1984, 1987; Cuthbert 2006). Because design can make places and things more efficient, safer, more functional, more attractive and more desirable, it is a vital dimension of the exchange value of things and a key determinant of their marketability – whether a building, a subdivision, a dress or a lemon squeezer. Because design can embody ideals and signal values, it is potentially a potent element of the dynamics of the political economy of places and nations. Together, these wider economic and symbolic issues are arguably the most significant aspects of design in relation to cities and urban life; they will be the dominant themes of this book.

Design in economic and social context

‘In order to make sense of design’, observes Adrian Forty, ‘we must recognise that its disguising, concealing and transforming powers have been essential to the progress of modern industrial societies’ (Forty 2005: 13). Design has an unambiguous role in facilitating the circulation and accumulation of capital, helping to stimulate consumption through product differentiation aimed at particular market segments. ‘Designer’ as an adjective has come to connote prestige and desirability, while ‘designer’ as a noun has to connote celebrity. Because of the prestige and mystique socially accorded to creativity, design adds exchange value to products, conferring a presumption of quality even though, like the emperor’s clothes, this quality may not be apparent to every observer. Design also plays key roles in social reproduction, in the legitimation of authority, in the creation and maintenance of national identity, and in the absorption and deflection of ideas and movements that are potentially antithetical to dominant values and interests.

Most design historians recognize design as a specialist activity that emerged with the industrial revolution, mass production manufacture and consumer society. Yet, as John Walker observes, ‘There appears to be a deeply-entrenched conservatism among design historians, an unwillingness to confront the relationship between design and politics, design and social injustice’ (Walker 1989). Nevertheless, it is clear that,

since design’s beginning, when it was conceived as an art of giving form to products for mass production, it has been firmly embedded in consumer culture.

Design's first promoters in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Henry Cole in England and Herman Muthesius in Germany, for example, saw it exclusively in relation to the manufacture of products for the market.

(Margolin 1998: 83)

Kenneth Stowell, editor of *Architectural Forum* in the 1930s, acknowledged that 'architects . . . remain ultimately the highly paid employees of realtors and builders or are themselves small businessmen with a stake in the common exploitation' (quoted in F. Scott 2002: 47).

In the 1950s, the internationally respected designer George Nelson acknowledged that, by giving products a fashionable appearance, designers were virtually guaranteeing that they would seem obsolescent to consumers in a few years, thus continually stimulating demand and avoiding the market saturation. 'What we need', he added approvingly, 'is more obsolescence, not less' (Nelson 1956: 88). Since the 1950s, the underlying premise of design practice of all kinds – architecture, urban design and planning, interior design, product design, furniture design, fashion, photography, graphic design – has been that success ultimately depends on designers' sensitivity to the currents of trends and tastes within culture and on their ability to lend traction to capital accumulation by articulating these values and tastes to the promotion of ideas and events, services and products, buildings and cities.

Design, then, is a key instrument in the commodification and formatting of culture; it is fundamentally about styling, coding and effective communication with an audience of consumers. As William Saunders, editor of the *Harvard Design Magazine*, puts it with reference to architecture:

along with every other cultural production (including music, photography, book publishing, the fine arts, and even education), the design of the built environment has been increasingly engulfed in and made subservient to the goals of the capitalist economy, more specifically the luring of consumers for the purpose of gaining their money.

(Saunders 2005: vii)

Few are as unabashed about these roles as Kevin Kelley, whose architectural practice is advertised to clients as providing 'perception design'. His firm, he says, helps to

prompt customers to buy through environmental 'signalling' that influences their perceptions. In a sense, we are designing the consumers themselves. Brand cueing takes place in the built elements but also the menu, uniforms, logo, aromas, and music plus sensations, and, most importantly, emotions. . . . We changed the firm's name to Shook with the tag line 'It's All Consuming'. We thus tell people that we eagerly embrace consumerism.

(Kelley 2005: 53)

From a more general perspective, design can be seen as reflecting the *zeitgeist* of the prevailing political economy while serving, like other components of the system, as one of the means through which the necessary conditions for the continuation of the system are reproduced. Designers' roles as arbiters, creators and manipulators of aesthetics can be interpreted as part of the process whereby changing relationships within society at large become expressed in the 'super-structure' of ideas, institutions and objects. This allows us to see major shifts in design styles as dialectical responses to the evolving dynamics of urban-industrial society: part of a series of broad intellectual and artistic reactions to economic, social and cultural change. It also allows us to see design as a key instrument in the creation of national and metropolitan identities and the creation of class fractions and lifestyle groupings.

Another key role of design within the broader political economy is that of legitimization. Nineteenth-century businesses, for example, drew legitimacy from classical art, which had become closely associated with aristocratic and religious institutions. Hence department stores masqueraded as museums of art, banks were fitted out as ducal palaces, and factories were built to imitate castles. Today there is less imitation; instead, businesses acquire the originals – palazzi, stately homes and works of art – or sponsor museum spectacles. A major theme in the literature on critical architectural history is the way that architecture has repeatedly veiled and obscured the realities of economic and social relations (Tafuri 1979). The physical arrangement and appearance of the built environment can help to suggest stability amid change (or vice versa), to create order amid uncertainty, and to make the social order appear natural and permanent. Thus there is a 'silent complicity' (Dovey 2000; Jones 2010) that exists between architects and the agendas of the politically and economically powerful.

Part of this effect is achieved through what political scientist Harold Lasswell (1979) called the 'signature of power'. It is manifest in two ways: through majestic displays of power in the scenography of urban design, and through a 'strategy of admiration', aimed at diverting the audience with spectacular and dramatic architecture. It must be recognized, however, that it may not always be desirable to flaunt power. Legitimation may, therefore, require modest or low-profile design. Conversely, it is by no means only 'high' design that legitimizes the prevailing order. The everyday settings of home, workplace and neighbourhood also help to naturalize class and gender relations. Thus another important function of design is in social reproduction, creating settings and images that structure and channel the values and world-views of different class fractions and that contribute to 'moral geographies' that express particular value systems in material form.

Design can also function to commodify critical or antithetical movements, thereby acting as an ‘internal survival mechanism’ of consumer capitalism and allowing the dominant social order to protect itself from opposing ideological forces. Through design, the energy of oppositional movements is diverted into commercialism, so that the movements themselves, having forfeited their raw power, pass quietly away. Think of the student and labour unrest of the late 1960s, for example, that challenged corporate capitalism and flirted with communal lifestyles, anarchism and revolution, only to be ‘smothered beneath a cloying mass of Easy Rider posters and Love-and-Peace sew-on patches’ (Knox and Cullen 1981: 184; see also Hebdige 1979; Frank 1998). Or think of the oppositional energy of the aggressive punk culture that sprang from dole queues and public housing estates in England in the late 1970s and early 1980s, only to be drained away as designers for boutiques, high street retailers and hair salons co-opted punk fashion, and as the strident and rebellious music of pioneer punk groups was drowned out by the catchier and more harmonious sounds of commercial post-punk bands.

More recently, the subversive and transgressive subcultures of rap and hip-hop have quickly been converted into mass markets for giant-sized T-shirts, low-slung baggy jeans and ostentatious jewellery. More substantially, as we shall see in Chapter 3, the radical oppositional impulses of nineteenth-century communitarian social reform movements were translated into professionalized urban design and planning that was charged with the management of urban settings as efficient places for business as well as healthy places for productive workers. And, to take just one more example – to be elaborated in Chapter 4 – the aesthetic of the seminal Modernism of the Bauhaus, originally tied closely to socialist ideals, was quickly co-opted by corporate capital when its leading practitioners crossed the Atlantic.

Design in contemporary society

Today, it seems, everything is designed, and a ‘designer’ aesthetic permeates almost every aspect of urban life:

Few of the experiences we value at home, at leisure, in the city or the mall are free of its alchemical touch. We have absorbed design so deeply into ourselves that we no longer recognise the myriad ways in which it prompts, cajoles, disturbs an excites us. It’s completely natural. It’s just the way things are.

(Poynor 2007: 136)

The reason, of course, is that Western economies have been based for decades on a culture of materialism that has incrementally ramped up the importance of style, fashionability and cool. Economic historians point to the 1920s as the moment when consumers’ purchasing power began to match their aspirations, the mass

production and mass consumption logic of Fordism unleashing a new socio-cultural phenomenon: competitive consumption. This was also the moment when the idea of the home as a privileged consumer durable became established, with private homes as the stage for materialistic lifestyles and the containers for an extended range of material possessions. In the economic boom after the Second World War, material consumption took on a more expansive form as discretionary spending by the middle classes reached unprecedented levels.

Harvard economist James Duesenberry (1949) identified the trend at an early stage, contrasting it with the nineteenth-century version of conspicuous consumption that had been documented by Thorstein Veblen (1899). Instead of being driven by an elite 'leisure class', postwar consumption was a middle-class suburban phenomenon, driven by neighbours: the eponymous 'Joneses'. Historian Lizabeth Cohen (2003) writes of the emergence in the 1950s of a 'consumers' republic' in the United States, based on the mass consumption of motor cars, houses and manufactured household goods, all celebrated by the new medium of television. Western Europe, recovering from the Second World War, lagged a decade or so behind.

Sociologist Colin Campbell (1987) writes of a 'spirit of modern consumerism' that had its origins at this time as people's lives became infused with illusions, daydreams and fantasies about consumer objects. Under the spirit of modern consumerism, people have come to constantly seek pleasure, enchanted by a succession of objects and ideas, always believing that the next one would be more gratifying than the previous one. This is the basis of what Campbell (1987) calls 'romantic capitalism', driven by the 'self-illusory hedonism' of dreams, fantasies and competitive consumption. Romantic capitalism was soon boosted by the widespread availability of credit cards. By the late 1960s, Guy Debord (1967: 42) had identified the emergence in Western culture of a *Society of the Spectacle*, defined as the 'moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life'. Jean Baudrillard (1968: 24) wrote of 'the need to need, the desire to desire'. Baby boomers were coming of age and transforming the norms of consumption as well as politics and popular culture.

The formative experience of the baby boomers was the postwar economic boom. Growing up in affluent sitcom suburbs, they initially rebelled against the apparent complacency of what J.K. Galbraith (1976) had dubbed the 'Affluent Society', channelling their energies into countercultural movements, many of them with a vaguely collectivist approach to the exploration of freedom and self-realization. But in 1973 the quadrupling of crude oil prices by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries caused a global economic system-shock that sobered the boomers into a more materialistic and self-oriented world-view. Yet

the economic circumstances of the 1970s did not permit a smooth transition to materialism.

The result was that people began to save less, borrow more, defer parenthood, comfort themselves with the luxuries that were marketed as symbols of style and distinctiveness, and generally surrender to the hedonism of lives infused with extravagant details: designer accessories, designer clothes, designer decor, designer fittings and furniture, and, for those who could afford it, fancy cars and designer homes in landscaped neighbourhoods. In the United States, the cultural hearth of hedonistic and competitive consumption, it added up to what conservative commentator David Brooks (2004) calls a ‘Paradise Spell’ of relentless individual aspiration and restless consumption, ‘the controlling ideology of American life’.

The aestheticization of everyday life

By the 1980s, traditional identity groups based on class, ethnicity and age had begun to blur as people found themselves increasingly free to construct their identities and lifestyles through their patterns of consumption. In addition to the traditional business of positional consumption, members of new class fractions and affective ‘neotribal’ groupings sought to establish their distinctiveness through individualized patterns of consumption (Featherstone 1991; Bocoock 1993; Maffesoli 1996). Thanks to the successes of Fordism, consumers’ dreams could be fulfilled more quickly and more easily. Enchantment initially sprang from the affordability and choice resulting from rationalization and mass production. But this led inevitably and dialectically to disenchantment as novelty, exclusivity, distinction and the romantic appeal of goods were undermined by mass consumption. To counter this tendency, product design and niche marketing, along with the ‘poetics’ of branding, have become central to the enchantment and re-enchantment of things (Paterson 2006; Donald *et al.* 2009).

As sociologist George Ritzer (2005) has pointed out, enchantment also came to be ensured through a variety of specialized urban settings – ‘cathedrals of consumption’ – geared to the propagation and facilitation of consumption: shopping malls, chain stores, franchises and fast food restaurants, casinos and themed restaurants. Meanwhile, as mass markets became saturated, the mid-1980s marked the emergence of specialized consumer market segments, identified through market research by way of psychographics. Advertisements, playing to the sensibilities and dispositions of the Paradise Spell, consequently shifted away from the simple iconology of mid-twentieth century campaigns (presenting products as embodiments of effectiveness and quality) to exploit narcissism (portraying products as instruments of self-awareness and self-actualization), totemism (portraying

products as emblems of group status and stylishness) and covetousness (baldly presenting products as emblems of exclusivity and sheer wealth).

The result was the aestheticization of everyday life, with design implicated in production and consumption at every level. The design of the built environment has become intimately involved with many aspects of consumption, especially those involving an explicit design premium, such as fashion and luxury products (Patton *et al.* 2004). Endorsement by association, observes Martin Pawley (2000),

is one of the things that architecture does best, and also one of the things that fashion, the industry, needs most – the new car parked outside the manor house, the classical revival office building, the corporate headquarters campus, the view from the castle, the minimalist interior . . . All of them can be borrowed . . . to make or remake a reputation.

(Pawley 2000: 7)

In other words, fashion and architecture use one another, not simply as backdrops or as ecologies for celebrity-laden events, but as guarantees of cultural acceptability. The spa designed by Peter Zumthor in Vals, Switzerland, for example (Figure 1.1), has been used as a backdrop for fashion shoots, music videos and advertising in order to create a rarefied atmosphere and at the same time to appeal to a certain target group with architectural knowledge. High-end architecture and high-end fashion also have an affinity for one another because both require great precision in fabrication and construction, high levels of finish quality and carefully controlled lighting. Commodified, the relationship has produced a distinctive luxominimalism in interior design, with celebrity architects like Massimiliano Fuksas, Rem Koolhaas and John Pawson furnishing minimalist backgrounds for contemporary fashion brands like Armani, Boss, Jigsaw, Calvin Klein, Mango, Issey Miyake, Prada and Louis Vuitton. A good illustration of the way that luxury goods producers seek to create a ‘brand universe’ for consumers through art and architecture is the luxurious coffee-table book *Louis Vuitton: Art, Fashion and Architecture* (Gasparina *et al.* 2009) that features the firm’s collaborations with, among others, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Hans Hemmert, Anouska Hempel, Peter Marino and Richard Prince.

This is part of the emergence of a new interdependence among fashion, retail and architecture that has been prompted in part by the acquisition of elite couture houses by retail conglomerates, which quickly realized architecture’s marketing and branding potential. ‘Name’ architects have been drawn increasingly into product lines – Michael Graves’ kitchenware design for Target stores, Aldo Rossi’s kitchen and table ware for Alessi, Mario Botta’s Caran D’Ache fountain pen (retail: \$2,100), Norman Foster’s desk accessories for Helit, and so on – while couture houses have exploited their brand identity to sell everything from jeans and



Figure 1.1 The baths at Vals, Switzerland. Designed by Peter Zumthor and built between 1993 and 1996, the thermal baths have become a ‘canonized commodity’ after numerous media features in association with fashion and popular culture. The July 1997 issue of *Vogue*, for example, contained a ten-page swimwear feature called ‘Body Building’, each page consisting of a single photograph showing a model inside the building. Also in 1997, the video for Janet Jackson’s song ‘Every Time’ from her album ‘The Velvet Rope’ was filmed in the baths. (Photo: A.J. Davis)

underwear to sunglasses and watches. In larger metropolitan centres, fashion retailing has also developed a synergy with commercial art galleries and public museums and galleries, emulating museum and gallery design in their stores (and sometimes even incorporating mini-exhibitions in their stores) and shadowing their geographical location in the city. As Lees (2001) notes:

In exploring how architectural spaces are inhabited and consumed, geographers of architecture might take a page from developments in the new consumption literature. Geographers now argue that consumption should be seen as a productive activity through which social relations and identities are forged. Such a perspective on consumption as an active, embodied and productive *practice* dispels the sharp production/consumption distinction, and with it those tired debates about resistance to versus domination by the inauthentic consumerism of more or less duped consumers. The new geography of consumption recognizes ‘the creativity of “ordinary consumers” in actively shaping the meanings of the goods they consume in various local settings’, while insisting also that the commodities themselves, the processes of their production and the identities of their consumers cannot be thought of as fixed and essential but instead must be theorized as what Harvey calls ‘structured coherences’, or what Latour calls ‘actants’ that emerge as such through networks of inter-related practices.

(Lees 2001: 55)

The trend has been spread and intensified as internet shopping has prompted retailers to offer something different: not convenience or cost savings but a special experience. For the people who can afford it, *performing* consumption now plays a key role in the construction of distinct and fashionable identities. ‘As the trend for shopping online increases, so the power of three-dimensional space in the form of a retail outlet created as a sensory experience for the shopper increases in importance for the powerhouse brands’ (Mackereth 2000: 61).

In mass markets, meanwhile, the ‘corporate Cool Machine’ (Frank 1998) closely monitors incipient consumer trends, youth cultures and countercultures, and commissions designers to generate and form products to profit from the trends. Consultants employ teams of young professionals to go undercover, monitor their peers and discover what’s cool. The London ‘guerrilla advertising’ outfit Cake, for example, maintains a list of what it believes to be the 1,000 coolest people and companies. They mail their clients’ new products to early adopters and ask them to fill in a questionnaire: are the products cool or not? Rick Poyner (2007: 75) suggests that ‘cool’ has become the dominant sensibility of advanced consumer capitalism: ‘Cool wards off social embarrassment and offers a new (ironic) form of certainty. If you own cool things, then you too must be cool, since you are what you buy.’ Cool, of course, is beyond words, like many other aspects of taste and aesthetic judgement. If you get it, no explanation is necessary; if you don’t, no explanation is possible.

The semiotics of things

This points to the central importance of design in contemporary culture, facilitating the ways in which we are able to establish shared meanings and read off people’s values, lifestyle and status from their possessions, the clothes they wear, and the landscapes they inhabit. Patterns of consumption are epigrammatic, able to carry sophisticated symbolic meaning. They mould people’s consciousness of place and of each other, and help people to connect the realms of nature, social relations and individual identity. ‘Surrounded by our things’, writes McCracken (1988: 124), ‘we are constantly instructed in who we are and what we aspire to’. Yet signification bears no straightforward relationship to the material world. Signs and symbols ‘reflect and refract another reality. Social life is impregnated with signs which make it classifiable, intelligible, and meaningful’ (Eyles 1987: 95). Each signifier, whether it is a house or a watch, a car or a pair of shoes, can be ascribed not only a denotative, surface-level meaning but also one or more second-level, connotative meanings. Within particular socio-cultural settings, certain signifiers are transformed – ‘cooked’, in the terminology of Lévi-Strauss (1970) – to form the basis of a socially constructed ‘reality’: a particular way of seeing the world.

Design alters the way people see commodities and geographic settings and establishes them as ‘semiotic goods’ whose economic value is based in part on the meanings people give them rather than their functionality. Such is the power of ‘design’ for its own sake that some goods can be successful in the marketplace in spite of having very little functionality at all. An oft-quoted example is the *Juicy Salif* lemon squeezer, designed for Alessi in 1990 by Philippe Starck and still selling, twenty years later, for more than \$80 each. For reflexive consumers (i.e. those who continuously re-examine, reappraise and reconsider their consumption practices) who seek to build their identities through design objects, fashion and art, the fact that the *Juicy Salif* is practically unusable is offset by its cool looks and by the power of the combined brand identities of Alessi and Starck. Of course, if you’ve never heard of Alessi or Starck, the thing may just look strange. But, once you have acquired a certain amount of design knowledge, it is impossible to revert to a position of semiotic not-knowing.

Today, even modestly affluent households are sophisticated and reflexive, highly adept at the art of positional consumption. But the symbolism and meaning of material goods and the built environment is under constant construction and reconstruction, interpretation and reinterpretation by everyone, individually and collectively. New products, new designs and shifts in taste and style have the tendency to exclude those who may not be ‘in the know’ or do not have the means to make ‘necessary’ changes to their ensemble of possessions and patterns of activities.

At the level of the individual household, it is important to maintain a consistent aesthetic as new objects are incorporated and the old discarded. In marketing terms this is known as brand coherence. Its significance was recognized long ago by the French philosopher Denis Diderot, and it is sometimes referred to as the ‘Diderot effect’. Diderot had been working quite happily in his crowded, chaotic and rather shabby study until he received a fancy velvet smoking jacket as a gift. He liked his new jacket but soon noticed that its quality made his surroundings seem threadbare. His desk, rug and chairs looked scruffy by comparison. So, one by one, he found himself replacing his furnishings with new ones that matched the jacket’s elegant tone. He realized (though he later regretted it) that he had felt the need for a sense of coherence, a sense that nothing was out of place.

Consumers’ design knowledge

Today’s consumers, attentive both to brand coherence and to the subtle (and sometimes sudden) shifts in the semiotics of things, select houses and purchase products, services and experiences that give shape, substance and character to their particular

identities and lifestyles. Consumers' design knowledge comes from a variety of sources: advertisements, product placement in movies, television makeover programmes, print media, blogs and word-of-mouth, along with a great deal of tacit understanding that comes from social cues and people's reflexive awareness. The raw origins of much of this knowledge and understanding can be found in specialized, design-oriented print media of one sort or another: books, professional magazines, trade journals and niche-oriented lifestyle magazines. Books on design are overwhelmingly dominated by large-format coffee-table books and by monographs from publishers like Birkhäuser, Phaidon, Princeton Architectural Press, Rizzoli and Taschen that maintain specialized lists in architecture and design with a carefully cultivated sensitivity to the book-as-object. Design bookstores also stock the products of smaller specialized and vanity presses that publish the glossy body-of-work volumes with which architects and designers hope to impress both colleagues and future clients.

For the most part, the understanding of design derived from these books is decidedly narrow and usually framed around the persona of a particular designer, the products of a particular technology or technique, or the aesthetics of a particular category of objects. Coffee-table books, by definition, exempt the reader from intellectual effort; while the more specialized design literature, as Adrian Forty (2005: 6) observes, suffers 'from a form of cultural lobotomy which has left design connected only to the eye, and severed its connections to the brain and to the pocket'. The same fixation with aesthetics and personalities – design and designers, art and art directors, illustration and illustrators, photography and photographers – is evident in professional magazines, especially the so-called 'showcase' or 'portfolio' magazines such as *Abitare*, *Communication Arts*, *Domus*, *Graphis*, *I.D.* and *Print*, all of which are high-gloss productions that use sumptuous photography and printing techniques to show off the latest architecture, interior design, furniture design, graphic design, product design and packaging.

While this literature encompasses much of the formal, professionalized understanding of design, a much wider readership is attuned to what Sharon Zukin (1991, 2004) has described as the 'critical infrastructure' of consumption: consumer guides, the Sunday supplements, lifestyle magazines like *Architectural Digest*, *Elle Décor*, *Living*, *Metropolis*, *Metropolitan Home*, *Wallpaper**, *World of Interiors* and even 'magalogs' (hybridized, part magazine and part brand catalogue) like *Sony Style* and *A&F* [Abercrombie & Fitch] *Quarterly*. In these media, key cultural intermediaries – celebrities, editors, directors and copy writers – increasingly define what's cool and what's not. The layouts of lifestyle magazines make it perfectly clear that it is only in the combining of places – home, workplace, shop and recreation space – and in the juxtaposing of things – house, car, bicycle, shoes, bag, watch – that we fully articulate what we think we are. Discussions of furniture

are blended with articles on clothing, architecture, industrial design and travel. As Deborah Leslie and Suzanne Reimer (2003b: 304) note, *Wallpaper**, a what-you-should-buy-next manual of what the editors present as ‘urban modernism’, has been the most prominent magazine within this genre. In *Wallpaper**, every item is captioned and priced. Its most striking innovation is the use of agency models to ‘wear’ the interiors and give them a normalized, ‘lived in’ look. ‘The models become role models . . . showing us what we as occupants of these interiors should look like and how we should behave and dress’ (Poynor 2007: 46–47).

Cities themselves receive similar treatment in the lifestyle magazines that are specific to particular metro regions. The modern city magazine movement was born in the United States in the 1960s, when most major metropolitan regions spawned publications bearing their name. Today there are more than 100 such publications in the United States. They have become part of the local critical infrastructure of consumption, vehicles for ‘urban imagineers’ who do not simply propagate a city ‘brand’ but also help to construct and impose sanitized and commodified urban identities. Miriam Greenberg (2000) points out that while many of these city magazines started out with a broad coverage of local themes and issues, shifts in global, national and local dynamics base have forced cities to market themselves internationally in search of new sources of revenue:

Through branding their city, these groups seek to forge emotional linkages between a commodified city and its increasingly footloose middle- and upper-class consumers (i.e., new potential residents, investors, corporate partners, tourists, and so on) in such a way that the name of the city alone will conjure up a whole series of images and emotions and with them an impression of value.

(Greenberg 2000: 230)

The corporate publishers of these magazines have developed a common formula: toned down and reduced editorial content, increased advertising (commonly more than 60 per cent of content), coverage of consumption opportunities – restaurants, luxe malls and renovated waterfronts (rather than the city’s people or natural or built environment) – as the brand identity of the city, and exhaustive high-end listings sections at the back.

Cities, modernity and design

Cities are engines of economic development and centres of cultural innovation, social transformation and political change. In the broadest of terms, we can identify four principal functions of cities in contemporary societies. First is the *mobilizing* function of cities. Urban settings, with their physical infrastructure and their large

and diverse populations, are places where entrepreneurs can get things done. Cities provide efficient and effective environments for organizing labour, capital and raw materials, and for distributing finished products. Cities, in other words, are places where the classic economic advantages of centrality, agglomeration and what Alfred Marshall (1890) called ‘industrial atmosphere’ accrue to capitalist enterprise.

Second is the *decision-making* capacity of urban settings. Because cities bring together the decision-making machinery of public and private institutions and organizations, they come to be concentrations of political and economic power. Big cities, especially, are nodal command centres in the ‘space of flows’ that constitute contemporary space-economies.

Third are the *generative* functions of cities. The concentration of people in urban settings makes for much greater interaction and competition, which facilitates the generation of innovation, knowledge and information. Cities become, as Allen Scott (2001) puts it, ‘creative fields’.

Finally there is the *transformative* capacity of cities. The size, density and variety of urban populations tends, as noted by nineteenth-century sociologists like Georg Simmel (1971) and Ferdinand Tönnies (1979), to have a liberating effect on people, allowing them to escape the rigidities of traditional, rural society and to participate in a variety of lifestyles and behaviours. More recently, Jane Jacobs (1969) pointed to the economic advantages enjoyed by cities as a result of their transformative and liberating capacity, arguing that high densities and socio-cultural diversity facilitates haphazard, serendipitous contact among people that, in turn, promotes creativity and innovation.

Design plays multiple roles in all of these dimensions of urbanization and urban life. It is central to the product differentiation at the heart of the consumer economy, implicated in the efficiency of urban settings as sites of production and consumption, subject to agglomeration (and therefore key to the nodality of some cities) and pivotal to many aspects of urban life at the intersection of economic, technological, social and cultural change. It is, in short, both a characteristic and a driver of contemporary urban life. Design is a crucial component of modernization, a product and a carrier of modernity, and a central tenet of Modernism.

Modernization and modernity

This, of course, requires some elaboration. All three – modernization, modernity and Modernism – have their roots in the seventeenth-century Enlightenment project that sought to advance reason, rationality and science over tradition, myth, superstition and religious absolutes. But they were fully unleashed by the twin revolutions of the late eighteenth century (the French Revolution) and early nineteenth century (the industrial revolution).

- *Modernization* refers to the processes of scientific, technological, industrial, economic and political innovation triggered by these revolutions and that also become urban, social and artistic in their impact (Berman 1983: 16–17).
- *Modernity* refers to the way that modernization infiltrates everyday life and permeates its sensibilities; the way that, as Baudelaire (1986) observed, urban life is characterized by the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent; and by speed, mobility, novelty and mutability.
- *Modernism*, meanwhile, refers to a wave of avant-garde artistic movements that, from the early twentieth century onwards, has responded in various ways to these changes in sensibility and experience.

Modernization had an immediate and direct effect on the significance of design. Specifically, the development of machine production made design very much more valuable to manufacturers. Adrian Forty (2005) gives this example:

Maximizing the sales from each design had not been so crucial in handicraft industries, where, although profit might depend on the volume of production, there was not necessarily any advantage in using a single design rather than a variety of different ones. In the hand printing of calico, for example, additional output required more tables, more printers, and more blocks, but since each additional block had to be cut by hand, it made little difference if it was made to a new design or duplicated an existing one. The great advantage of machinery was its potential to manufacture a single design endlessly; the successful design became a very much more valuable possession, for *it was what released the machine's capacity to make a profit.*

(Forty 2005: 58; emphasis added)

The discontinuities triggered by modernization – the unprecedented pace and scope of change, the way that time and space became abstract entities, the speed and power of new technologies, and the complexity of new social and institutional formations – meant that ambiguity, change and contradiction quickly became characteristic of modernity. Meanwhile, all aspects of life have become institutionalized, bureaucratized and commodified. Above all, modernity is dynamic, driven by two processes conceptualized by Anthony Giddens (1991) as disembedding and reflexivity. With modernity, traditional ways of doing things are disembedded

and replaced by new ways in a process of continual change; while reflexivity means that there is a continual reappraisal and reconsideration of our lives in every sphere as we scrutinize guidebooks and magazines and consult experts and advisers. But, far from resulting in certainty, this leads to continually changing practices, trends and fashions. Experiment replaces tradition and popular culture develops a thirst for novelty. Progress is continually sought, yet constantly questioned and undermined. More paradoxically still, the seemingly unstoppable forward trajectory of modernization results in nostalgia – if not an overt longing for the past, then a formless regret and a melancholy feeling that something of the world has been lost. And this, in turn, feeds in to changing aesthetics and conceptions of beauty.

Professionalized design became an integral component of mass production and mass communication as a result of economic and technological modernization and the growth of middle- and working-class purchasing power. This shift was linked, as Guy Julier (2006) notes, to a ‘visual turn’ in Western society as the proliferation of images became commonplace and a key aspect of modernity:

From a design point of view, commodities and services needed to be made more self-consciously visual in order to advertise and market them to a wide, anonymous audience. The Victorians saw the growth of the department store, catalogue shopping, mass tourism, and entertainment as spectacle – all of which hinge on the mediation of visual experience. And, of course, this also was the period of new visual technologies such as film, animation, and photography.

(Julier 2006: 65)

As Robert Hughes points out in *The Shock of the New* (1980), the dislocations and new experiences introduced by modernization resulted in new ways of seeing and new ways of representing things. The places where all this was played out with the greatest intensity were the major cities of Europe. In London, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of painters, poets and critics set out to reform art, seeking to replace the reactionary classicism of the Victorian age. In Vienna, secessionists met in cafés in a ferment of new ideas about art, design, psychiatry and politics. In Zurich, Dadaists organized public gatherings and demonstrations, and established literary journals in the cause of anti-war politics and the destabilization of the prevailing standards in Western (high) culture; while in Milan, Futurists propagated the idea that the past was a corrupting influence on society, celebrating speed, technology and youth as the keys to the triumph of humanity over nature. But it was Paris that has come to be considered the capital of modernity, with its dramatic changes to the fabric of the city and to patterns of comportment and consumption (see Case Study 1.1).

Case Study 1.1 **Paris, capital of modernity**

Something very dramatic happened in Europe in general, and in Paris in particular, in 1848. . . . Before, there was an urban vision that at best could only tinker with the problems of a medieval urban infrastructure; then came Haussmann, who bludgeoned the city into modernity. Before, there were classicists, like Ingres and Davis, and the colorists, like Delacroix; and after, there were Courbet's realism and Manet's impressionism. Before, there were the Romantic poets and novelists (Lamartine, Hugo, Musset, and George Sand); and after came the taut, sparse, and fine-honed prose and poetry of Flaubert and Baudelaire. Before, there were dispersed manufacturing industries organized along artisanal lines; much of that then gave way to machinery and modern industry. Before, there were small stores along narrow, winding streets or in the arcades; and after came the vast sprawling department stores that spilled out onto the boulevards. Before, there was utopianism and romanticism; and after there was hard-headed managerialism and scientific socialism. Before, water-carrier was a major occupation; but by 1870 it had almost disappeared as piped water became available. In all of these respects – and more – 1848 seemed to be a decisive moment in which much that was new crystallized out of the old.

(Harvey 2003: 3)

Within a year of the Paris riots that led to political revolution in 1848, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (later declared Emperor Napoléon III) set about implementing much-discussed plans for urban renewal. A few years later, when Georges-Eugène Haussmann was assigned as prefect of the Seine département, the modernization of Paris gathered pace. He created wide boulevards, installed a new water supply system, a gigantic system of sewers and street (gas) lighting; built new bridges, a new opera house and other public buildings; laid out the enormous parkland of the Bois de Boulogne and made extensive improvements in smaller urban parks that turned them into places of sociality and leisure. Within this new framework, modernized industry flourished, along with significant new artistic and cultural movements, mass cultural entertainments and new spaces of consumption. It was no coincidence that the broad new roads meanwhile allowed for fast troop movement and crowd control. Haussmann had torn through the medieval urban fabric and carved up the city, peripheralizing the working class while offering vast opportunities to speculators.

Amid the turmoil of modernization Paris developed, as Harvey (2003: 223) puts it, a 'culture of governance and pacification by spectacle', and hosted a series of



Figure 1.2 Paris 1900. Specially built pavilions and a giant globe surround the Eiffel Tower during the international Paris Exhibition of 1900. (Photo: Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis)

world expositions (1855, 1867, 1889 and 1900: see Figure 1.2). Amid the revolutionary ferment of ideas, Paris attracted and developed an unrivalled artistic and cultural scene that included, at various times, the artists Jean-Baptiste Corot, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Gustave Courbet, Camille Pissarro, Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, Paul Cézanne, Vincent Van Gogh, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse; the sculptor Auguste Rodin, philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and writers Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, Honoré de Balzac and Emile Zola. A radically reformed system of finance helped the government to put in place a modernized infrastructure, while new building technologies and new materials allowed for a spectacular increase in the scale of public and commercial buildings, none more so than the Palais de l'Industrie, built for the Universal Exposition of 1855.

The *passages couverts*, or arcades, of Paris were harbingers of the commodification and dazzling seduction of modern city life for those with the means to enjoy it. The first *passages* were built in Paris in the late eighteenth century by landlords who wanted to augment their income by exploiting the space within the blocks they owned. With its compact arrangement of diverse retail establishments, the *passage* was a new way to display and sell the mass-produced merchandise increasingly available in an age of industrialization. Protected from the weather by glass roofs, window shoppers were attracted by a variety of merchants, specialty stores and exhibitions (see Case Study 3.2). Glowing and magical at night with gaslight, the atmosphere in many *passages* changed, with the covered spaces offering shelter to strolling prostitutes and their customers.

Through the second half of the nineteenth century and into the first decade of the twentieth century, Paris also acquired a great modern market hall, Les Halles, of iron girders and skylight roofs; enormous new railway stations like the Gare du Nord and the Gare de Lyon; flamboyant new architecture and new landmarks like the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève and St Augustin church; a mass transit system with Hector Guimard's famous wrought-iron Métro entrances; a proliferation of monuments, statuary, fountains and neatly tended parks; avenues of trees; new shops, department stores, restaurants and cafés; and the stupendous Eiffel Tower (completed 1889). The cityscape was eventually remade as a global object of desire and consumption, its aura enhanced by the exciting artistic and cultural life of the city.

Although Haussmann is widely credited with framing the setting for these manifestations of modernity by creating unity out of the chaotic pre-modern city in a radical break with the past, David Harvey (2003) makes it clear that in Paris, as elsewhere, modernity was created by a slow process of modernization. The demolition of working-class quarters, the construction of elegant boulevards, the installation of streetlamps, the ordered uniformity of bourgeois apartment buildings, and the expansion of the city into the suburbs were only the material manifestations of a profound restructuring of economic and social relations prefigured by earlier changes in consumer culture, institutional frameworks and finance capital.

Key readings

David Harvey (2003) *Paris, Capital of Modernity*. London: Routledge.

Colin Jones (2005) *Paris: The Biography of a City*. New York: Viking.

Anthony Sutcliffe (1993) *Paris: An Architectural History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

The emergence of a new middle class and the growth of disposable income in the wake of the industrial revolution prompted German-born statistician Ernst Engel (1821–1896) to formulate what became known as Engel's Law: that as income levels rise, so households tend to spend proportionately more money on non-essential indulgences. Thorstein Veblen (1899) famously wrote about the conspicuous consumption of the *nouveau riche*. More recently, Peter Dormer (1990) has identified the emergence of 'high design' for its own sake. He divides the concept into two categories: 'heavenly goods', combining high performance with exclusivity, that are designed for the rich to buy, and 'tokens', designed to be bought by the wish-they-were-rich.

Meanwhile, Georg Simmel (1971) had drawn attention to the role of fashion as an instrument of class differentiation within the relatively open and fast-changing society that had succeeded the old order. Fashion, like conspicuous consumption and high design, needs an audience, and here we should note the importance of the early antecedents of *Wallpaper**, *Metropolitan Home* and the like. Modern magazines began to emerge in the mid-nineteenth century, and by the end of the century a large number of mass-circulation titles had been established, covering art and architecture, interior design, fashion and women's consumer issues, along with trade journals for the building and furniture industries. These magazines were brought about by changing print and publishing technologies, and were made available on a national and international scale (Aynsley and Berry 2005).

Stimulated by mass communications, fashion has come to reflect and extend the thirst for novelty, innovation and the constant reinvention of the self that is so characteristic of modernity. Writing at the peak of the postwar Fordist boom in the late 1960s, sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) acknowledged that fashion is a market-driven cycle of consumer desire and demand that operates as a means of class differentiation but argued that fashion is, at root, simply a response to people's desire to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes that are emerging in a changing world. A direct reflection, in other words, of the impulses and sensibility of modernity. Blumer's argument can be extended from dress to almost every object of consumption, especially now that many manufacturers seek profit not through mass markets (now close to saturation, thanks to the successes of Fordist mass production) but through niche markets, with products carefully designed to appeal to a particular lifestyle group or class fraction.

More recently, Elizabeth Wilson (2003) has explored the linkages between fashion and modernity in detail:

In the modern city the new and different sounds the dissonance of reaction to what went before . . . The colliding dynamism, the thirst for change and the