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Design History and the History of Design

JOHN A. WALKER

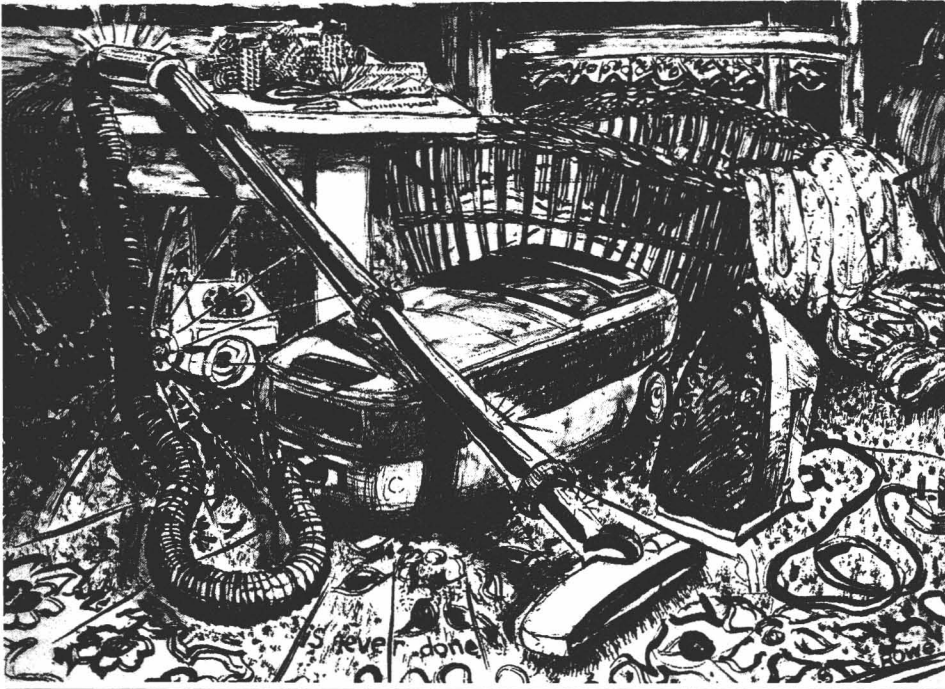
The Meanings of Modern Design

PETER DORMER

The history of design is not a new subject. It has been the theme of two well-known if not always well-loved pillars of the historical literature, Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936) and Sigfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948). In contrast, design history is a relatively new discipline, well established in Britain but still forming in this country. The time is right, then, for a book like *Design History and the History of Design*, in which John A. Walker surveys the landscape of this field for its students.

Walker's previous works include a *Glossary of Art, Architecture and Design Since 1945* (1973), *Art Since Pop* (1978), and *Art in the Age of the Mass Media* (1983). Such a background might seem to qualify him more as an art critic than a design historian, but the experience of writing a dictionary seems to have given him a permanent appetite for the encyclopedic, and his latest work provides a methodological introduction suitable for the novice historian in several disciplines.

As an introduction, Walker's book is comparable to Hazel Conway's *Design History* (1987), an anthology of essays written by specialists in various subject areas of design history—dress and textiles, ceramics, furniture, interiors, graphics, industrial, and environmental design. Walker takes a very different tack in his book. He pretty much ignores professional divisions, and treats the history of design as the subject of a single discipline, which he calls design history. De-



The monstrous aspect of the routines of modern domestic life; drawing by Stephanie Rowe. (From *The Meanings of Modern Design*.)

sign history is a relatively new discipline, when compared to related fields that study art or architecture. In fact, Walker can date the establishment of design history as a discipline very precisely to 1977, when British design historians, previously meeting as a subsection of the Association of Art Historians, founded their own professional organization, the Design History Society. Not surprisingly, the discipline has been dominated by British historians.

Every discipline has to stake its own territory, and so Walker begins his book appropriately, by proposing a definition:

Design history, it is proposed, shall be the name of a comparatively new intellectual discipline, the purpose of which is to explain design as a social and historical phenomenon.

But what is "design"? That is not a simple question to answer, given the variety of people we have seen involved, and the ambiguity of the term "design" itself. In chapter two, "Defining the Object of Study," Walker addresses the problem of defining this fundamental concept:

Design historians agree that their object of study is the history of design, but there is not yet a consensus concerning the meaning and scope of the term/concept design. For example, does design include architecture? Is architecture part of the object of design history or art history or is architectural history an independent discipline in its own right? Similar uncertainties arise in respect of the crafts, the minor or decorative arts and the mass media.

In the course of the chapter, Walker considers the strengths and weaknesses of several definitions. Although he doesn't commit himself to any single definition, he notes that most design historians accept "design as a specialist activity associated with the industrial revolution, mass production manufacture, the modern movement in architecture, and the consumer society." This is broad enough to include all the previously discussed fields, with the possible exception of the crafts, which receives separate attention in chapter three. It also locates design firmly within the modern period.

Given the youth of the discipline, and the contentious task of defining its most essential concept, Walker expresses sur-

prise that design historians have reached such an easy consensus about what they should study: "New research on design usually focuses upon an extremely narrow range of topics: consumer goods, public transport, advertising, the home, etc." He scolds his fellow historians for taking refuge in such "safe" topics, rather than stretching their imaginations, as well as the boundaries of their field, to include new or troublesome subjects, and the political and moral implications of what designers do:

Why are design historians so unimaginative? Why are they so reluctant to consider military space vehicles, engineering machines, computer hardware and software, the role of the state in promoting design, the relation of design to pollution, profit and exploitation, as topics worthy of analysis? 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 claims to be a materialist, but he talks like a social historian. In chapter four, he argues that it is not enough for scholars to tell the story of individual designers and their creations. Design is a process enmeshed in social relations, explains Walker, and it is the historian's job to unravel these connections.

This discussion of the theoretical basis of design history reaches its culmination in chapter five. Complaining that too much of the literature consists of narrowly focused studies—"books on designers, products, styles, design education, etc."—Walker unveils a four-part "Pro-duction-consumption Model" that tries to account for the entire design process, and by extension the entire range of subjects available to the design historian. This model, which illustrates the workings of a modern industrial system, diagrammatically relates the production of a design to the production, distribution, and consumption of designed goods. The chapter is unfortunately very short—only six pages—and thus the model, while interesting and comprehensive, does not receive sufficient application.

If the first part of the book can be considered an introduction to the theory of design history, Walker's last four chapters survey the methods of this field. These are not in any way limited by disciplinary boundaries. As Walker points out at the beginning of chapter six, "design historians encounter in their practice the same basic methodological and theoretical problems as do all historians." Much of the work he presents belongs to scholars working outside the discipline.

In chapter seven, one of the longest and meatiest chapters in the book, Walker surveys the various methods, their literature and their significance for the design historian—the materials/techniques approach, the comparative method, content analysis, typology, national histories, anthropology, social history, structuralism, and semiotics. Chapter eight considers the problem of style in all its various aspects, and nine explores the complicated and topical relationship between design and consumerism.

With a few brief exceptions, references to feminism are conspicuously absent from Walker's theoretical and methodological survey. Walker explains his omission by asserting that the feminist approach is not merely another ingredient that can be thrown into the methodological pot. As he says, "it is a politics rather than a method," which calls into question many of the basic (male-serving) assumptions of design and design history.

Walker leaves the task of introducing a feminist perspective to Judy Attfield, who contributes a final essay entitled "FORM/female FOLLOWS FUNCTION/male." Attfield maintains that the statement, "form follows function," normalizes a situation in which men hold the real design power, while women are relegated to the subservient roles of consumers and ornamentalists.

This is how she deconstructs the meaning of this basic and widely shared assumption:

It assigns men to the determining, functional areas of design—science, technology, industrial production—and women to the private, domestic realm and to the "soft" decorative fields of design. It places form in the feminine realm where its role is to reflect the imperatives of the "real."

Like Walker, Attfield downplays the importance of the designer and the designed object as historical subjects, and she argues that scholars should adopt an approach that is more deeply involved with the social, economic, cultural, and technological contexts of design. On these grounds, she considers the merits of *A Woman's Touch*, Isabelle Anscombe's well-known history of women in design (1984).

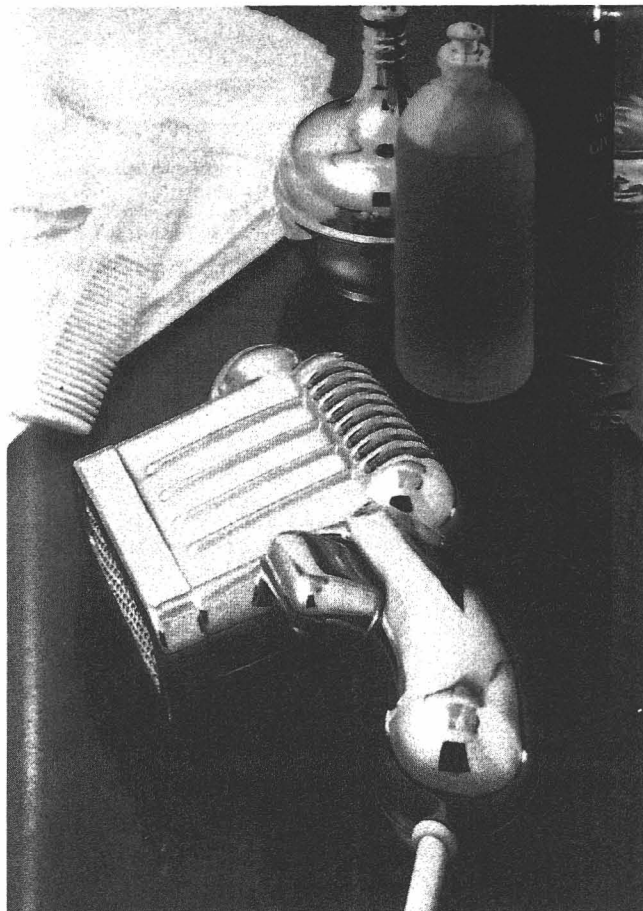
Attfield admires the book for shedding

some light on the work of female designers, but she fears that Anscombe's "women-designers approach" actually serves to perpetuate anti-feminist attitudes. These include the traditional view that women are better suited to "soft" pursuits such as the decorative arts, textiles, interior design and fashion, as well as an equally traditional, art-historical focus on the work of "great" designers, a category that has usually excluded women.

Having laid out the advantages of a feminist approach, Attfield considers how feminist historians have looked at the relationship between the physical organization of the built environment and the social organization of labor. She also examines feminist approaches to everyday objects, consumerism, the Arts and Crafts movement, and the concept of gender.

Attfield's essay is comprehensive and concise, if not especially eloquent (neither she nor Walker can be accused of harboring belletristic tendencies). The fact that her essay follows Walker's own conclusion means that her ideas are not at all knitted into the fabric of the book. In the simplest terms, these condense to a plea for reconsidering the history of design from a woman's standpoint—a point of view that should be within the conceptual reach of male historians, who are learning to tell the story of people not of their own, well-educated class. In spite of this still timely message, one wishes that Walker had reserved for himself the privilege of having the last word, that he had been somehow able to work her contribution into his own concluding remarks. As it is, Attfield's essay comes as a kind of feminist postscript—not unappreciated, but an afterthought.

I'll leave my own last words for an underwhelming book of criticism by Peter Dormer. This



Hairdryer for men by Atlantic Design. (From *The Meanings of Modern Design*.)

English writer is previously responsible for several well-illustrated catalogues, which form a "new" series surveying different areas of design. These include *New Jewelry* (1985), *New Ceramics* (with Ralph Turner, 1986), and *New Furniture* (1987). Dormer was also a contributor to *New British Design* (1986).

Dormer's latest effort, *The Meanings of Modern Design: Towards the Twenty-First Century*, is a very different kind of book. Its seven essays attempt to survey, not the discipline of design history, but the state of current design practice; he even has something to say about its future. As outlined in the preface, the book examines three categories of designed objects: consumer durables such as vacuum cleaners, cameras, and blow dryers; craft objects; and status-loaded, high-design artifacts—"heavenly goods" created for the truly rich or "tokens" fabricated for status-conscious yuppies. The book also explores four broad themes: the economic context of design (capitalism); the influence of new technology; the relationship between making, consuming, and individual satisfaction (consumerism); and the effect of larger social values on the design process.

One of the most interesting points in the book comes right at the beginning of the first chapter, where Dormer makes an important distinction between "above the line" and "below the line" design. The line in question is the boundary between public and private; between what's evident about an object and what's concealed from view. Styling is above the line, in these terms; engineering is below.

This is a critical distinction, according to John Walker, that design historians have ignored in the past. What a shame, then, that Dormer has so very little to say about "below the line" design, important as it is. He is only interested in what designers do, and even that is restricted to a fairly narrow range: "In this book the emphasis is upon the designer as stylist—as a broker of ideas and values, a middle personage between the manufacturers, engineers and applied scientists on the

one hand, and the consumer on the other."

As is evident from such a statement, Dormer has some very large claims to make for the significance of the designer as stylist. (By "designer," of course, he means the industrial variety.) Ultimately, he has to admit that this kind of work has an increasingly limited significance, in spite of what designers like to think about themselves, when compared to areas of our culture that are really bubbling. In a very sad and unexpected conclusion to a chapter on "Valuing the Handmade," he announces the dulling of design's cutting edge:

The heart of the contemporary *avant garde* in the West is not craft or art or the modernism versus post-modernist debate—the heart is theoretical physics and applied technology. How many of us are able to enter the conceptual landscape of the new physics or are at home in the craft of computer software construction?

It seems that stylists are now condemned to the margins.

DESIGN HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF DESIGN, John A. Walker, Pluto Press, 1989, 243 pp., illus., \$44.95 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

THE MEANINGS OF MODERN DESIGN: TOWARDS THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, Peter Dormer, Thames and Hudson, 1990, 192 pp., illus., \$24.95.