

An Introspective View on Globalization

DESIGNING ACROSS

Today, design is unequivocally influenced by the rapid progress of technology, the adoption of new materials and the globalization of markets for production and consumption. And although these factors differ in terms of scope and effect, their influence has a strong impact on our expectations of a product and on what we perceive as well designed and beautiful.

By increasing technical efficiency, using better materials and expanding the potential areas of use, product innovations can arise in a variety of ways. Most of these innovations can only be implemented by a redesign. However, it is important for a product's newness to be recognized and understood by prospective customers—this is a typical function of design. The aim, therefore, must be to give the innovative product a new, appropriate form.



By Peter Zec

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CULTURES





In 2006, the World Design Capital® pilot project was announced by Icsid and the International Design Alliance. The city of Torino, Italy, will have the honor of being the first World Design Capital, a designation that will begin in 2008. Above is Castello Square.

Timelessness

In the field of product design, as in fashion design, there is a phenomenon where design constantly returns to older movements. Somehow, everything seems to have been there already, and it is difficult to find something really “new.” This is why we often have reinterpretations of old trends.

The times of the “great waves” are over. There will be new trends but hardly anything fundamental. (Nevertheless, I believe we are still expecting a bigger movement in the field of IT products.) One of the leading challenges for the future will be the development of a modern type of universal design. For the past decade, space-like futuristic and abstract structures have been in high demand, and design appears to be acquiring a unified characteristic, which may strip away a culture’s individuality. **However, it is really difficult to concurrently design for a global market and fulfill the expectations of several different cultures.** It is, of course, much easier to design timeless products for an international market or to design with a common-sense idea of what products should be like—which can easily be con-

nected to humankind’s dream of the future by using futuristic forms or structures.

So what makes a design timeless? This would be classic, simple forms free of any “styling”—products that concentrate on their pure function and abandon any decorative or additive elements. Such products have a modern-classic approach: the iPod, for example, or the Nokia 8800, but also the LG wall-mounted projector. What these products have in common is a reduced form; they are milestones in product history because of their combination of function and design.

Good design improves our daily life. It makes it easier. When talking about good design, I do not necessarily mean “pretty design.” Good design suits four major tasks, which I call the “four beauties of design”: the beauty of function, the beauty of seduction, the beauty of use and the beauty of responsibility. Really good, successful products have to accomplish every single one of these requirements, and therefore, **well-designed products are always of great use for consumers.** Ultimately, good design stands out for being successful—it has to be able to win through in reality.

Furthermore, there are projects that institutions such as Icsid (the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) advocated and implemented that are completely noncommercial, existing simply to improve the role of design in many different aspects and thus to enhance life in the long run. The World Design Capital®, an initiative established under my direction as president of Icsid, is a primary example. Its main objective is to showcase design as a factor for sustainability in city life. Because design culture, if anchored within its region and respected by its officials, is as valuable for the life of a city as the fine arts are, design itself will attract the creative industry to settle there, invest in it, provide new jobs and point out ways to sustain the region's future.

Differentiation

One thing is certain. Design awareness varies greatly from culture to culture. For some, design is considered a vital life artery, and for others it is merely an aesthetic element. This deviation is partially due to the history of a culture and the problems the culture is facing.

The history of German design exemplifies this circumstance. For 100 years, the products manufactured in Germany have borne the declaration "Made in Germany." This designation has now risen above the status of a national trademark to become a seal of quality that is internationally reputable. The development of German design is unmistakably and inextricably intertwined with the emergence of a high technical standard within its national industrial culture. In the course of this development, the function of design was to express the high quality of German-made products at first glance. Without such a heed, the German manufacturing industry would never have been able to rise to a leading position in the world. Thus, "Made in Germany" and "German design" have always been perceived as one and the same—extremely high quality.

However, the object-related design of German products was never emphasized or placed in the foreground. Design was performed in the service of the object and of its success, not for effective self-presentation. As a result, a paradox arises: German products enjoy an exceedingly high reputation worldwide. But at the same time there is no firm idea of what German design is, even though automobiles, household appliances, furnishings and tools all marked with the label Made in Germany are spread around the globe.

In the course of globalization, more and more products developed by German companies are no longer manufactured in Germany but rather in factories across the globe—which is why those products can no longer bear the Made in Germany designation. Today, a company's only effective means of iden-

tity and image promotion is design. **Only with design is it possible to survive the ever-fiercer global competition.**

German designers and manufacturers have decided to put products on the market that express a new standard in German design with significantly warmer, more emotional features compared to its traditional, very functional cold approach. This new dynamic is in the best position to set standards. However, it only applies to the product cultures created in Germany in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A glance at the product culture of the information age is much more sobering. Here, Germany does not yet have much to offer.

Cross-Pollination

Another important trend that will further gain importance in the next years, thanks to globalization, is the interest in foreign cultures and faraway countries. While the significance of regional cultural identities increases, the diminishment of cultural barriers greatly affects the design movement. Against this background, the dialogue between Eastern and Western stylistic elements becomes increasingly significant. Asia in particular is playing an influential role, where design has deliberately turned away from the garish Asia pop of recent years and where traditional Asian arts and crafts, bamboo, and ornamental characters currently inspire the design of many living room accessories.

If you look to other "younger" industrial design fields in many Asian countries, you will determine that **tradition and modern design approaches do not necessarily have to contradict each other.** Far from it, they can cross-pollinate each other. Take, for example, the old Asian tradition of artfully applying several layers of lacquer to up-value products such as furniture. LG Electronics recently used this handcraft for the T1 Notebook and not only mesmerized the judges of the red dot award but set a precedent for other companies to follow, even with designs intended for the Western market. This approach highlights strengths with regard to product tradition but is easily translated into a modern approach—a good way to pay tribute to your cultural background while facing future markets.

Besides all the beautiful and well-functioning products, it is the sociocultural component of design I find really fascinating. This is best exemplified in design education. Particularly in developing countries, design training is mostly about the transfer of knowledge and the adaptation of existing ideas and design forms. However, the aim has to be to nurture creative, independently thinking and courageous young designers who are able to develop innovative design solutions for their own cultures, thus improving the quality of life in their countries. In the end, it is the never-ending search for new solutions that makes design so alluring for me. ■