



THE BUSINESS OF DESIRE

Upon my arrival in California as a young and eager design student, I did what everybody does when they first get here: bought a car. With a very small budget to spend, yet big design ambitions to fulfill, I settled for a vintage VW Karmann Ghia that had equal amounts of rust and faded yellow paint. I quickly learned two important lessons: First, don't buy a car in a hot climate with an engine that needs to be air-cooled by actually driving it (not ideal while being stuck in LA traffic); it will eventually overheat and force you to stop on the side of the road. Second, and more importantly, children absolutely love this car.

The Ghia Phenomenon

Due to my frequent moments of immobility, I had plenty of time to notice a small phenomenon: Children would often point at my Ghia, calling it to their parents' attention, almost as if they were trying to say, "Mom, I want this one to play with!" What was happening? Why were they, with all the millions of cars they were undoubtedly exposed to, point out this one? My car was certainly not a shiny object anymore, and it was definitely too large to fit into their sandbox. Did something trigger their impulses?

The Ghia, for all intents and purposes, is a car whose shape and proportion can be defined as cute and beautiful. Its forms are round and soft, its stance is well balanced, and its front face looks as if it is smiling at you. And that is exactly why kids like that car so much—it is a happy design. Well-documented research in psychology has long proven that children and babies react positively to a smile, even when it is merely drawn on a piece of cardboard and held in front of them. Although we are born with a virtually unformatted

hard drive, we are still intuitively able to distinguish pretty from ugly, gentle from harsh, even if we have not learned how to go to the bathroom yet.

This ability continues throughout all stages of life; think of a pretty face, for example. We are hardwired to instinctively recognize beauty. Designers have focused on perfecting lines and proportions, thus evoking desire. Like plastic surgeons, we chip away at the unwanted fat and trim and slim our designs to have a perfectly sleek form. But is this really what we want? In other words, do we not long for beauty that is more than skin deep, a beauty that goes beyond a brief flash of built-in impulse? We need to go beyond the unexpected to avoid designs that become a boring commodity. This thinking has led me to stop my students from using the iPhone as an inspiration for their designs.

If we were to approach form with a formula that always works, we would get stuck in a design world that would resemble the movie *Being John Malkovich*, specifically the scene where every face he sees is his own—we would go





Photo: Julia Kopelson

A sustainable sketchbook that uses napkins (from bars and restaurants) as the writing/drawing material, all made out of one piece without waste, glue or water usage.



By Fridolin T. Beisert

fridolin@beisert.com

Fridolin Beisert is an associate professor at Art Center College of Design, where he teaches industrial design methodologies.

insane. Creating products that are recognized by everyone as being “pretty” might be desirable in order to fill our empty designer wallets (and designer egos), but it would hardly satisfy our need to produce true originality. **True beauty means going beyond plastic surgery, beyond design by committee; it means creating a design with a real vision and character.** If successful, the result will be a design that is appealing forever, a design with authenticity and longevity.

As Malcom Gladwell suggests in his book *Blink*, we have the capability to instinctively distinguish authentic from fake, or as he calls it, “to think without thinking.” I believe that this idea can be applied to the entire design process for products and its resulting effect on consumers. People can smell the authentic vision of the designer just by looking at the product. If it has beauty inside and out, that instant emotional tie will become even stronger over time. It will make us connect with the product on a human level (and even cherish its scratches and dents). It is what feeds the success of European flea markets as recycling machines of timeless designs.

But how do we achieve this effect of longevity in design? I imagine that it would be difficult to present a concept to a client by saying, “We are envisioning that this one is going to make it to the flea market in a few years.” Instead, we need to have an original concept and vision that follows through the entire design process like a red thread (aka common thread). The danger that we subconsciously face is to repeat ourselves or, even worse, to copy others. I explain this trap to my students as drawing the “shape of fear,” which describes a form that will sneak into their designs every time they are close to losing the genuine idea they started with.

Design Instincts

In today's global design business there are few leaders and many followers. Design responds to trend forecasting and user observation instead of creating new points of view. More than ever, consumers are fed useless designs meant for impulse buying. Once these products break, we throw them away and replace them with another clone made in China. What happened to the emotional connection that made us buy these products in the first place?

A well-designed product should not only stimulate the consumer, it should also embody the designer's heart and soul, something with inner beauty that lasts well beyond the time the surface gets scratched. An instinct

can develop into the backbone of a story, that will connect with users beyond their initial visceral reaction. Doing so requires a leap of faith and the courage to go forward with a design concept despite the fear of failure. Easier said than done?

Consider the story of designer James Dyson. While partially being supported by his wife's salary, he spent five years developing 5,127 prototypes to create the now-famous Dyson vacuum cleaner. Despite its current success outselling every other US vacuum cleaner by volume, it was an uphill battle all along as no manufacturer wanted to produce the design. Dyson eventually had to set up his own manufacturing facility. The story is a prime example of what happens when designers follow their instincts.

As for myself, I could not resist the impulse to purchase the Dyson—purely for research purposes, of course. Happily, I am now able to “research” every Sunday afternoon. The design fulfills all that it promises and more, creating an entirely new culture rather than following old paradigms. It makes me smile. But how can we as designers nurture our own instincts, learning when to trust them? How can we invest in our design future so that we develop an intuitive compass that will lead us through the process?

To get inspired as designers we need to constantly refuel our ability to discover new sources of cultural and design significance. In other words, we need to keep learning how to see. Besides the conscious effort to look beyond our natural fences, it is important to visit places (whether physical or spiritual) that disrupt and question our normal way of conceiving products. It is equally important to study line, proportion, color and materials as it is to study cultural heritage and innovative viewpoints on how a given design problem can be solved.

In my own process, I look to unexpected sources during an investigative research phase, trying to uncover visuals (for aesthetics) or concepts (for ideas) to which I have a direct emotional response. I use my own initial reactions as a measuring tool to determine what I want my design to “feel” like. This does not stop at the first sign of having found a solution; instead I use a lateral approach of discovering as much material as possible, which helps in visualizing and formulating the essence that I am after.

Then, in sketch and later, 3D format, I employ the concentrated matter of the research, reducing all unnecessary features that do not support the concept and refining all the details that do until an intermediate design presents itself.

And that is when I leave it alone for a while. I call this phase “marination.” Am I going to be excited to work on this again tomorrow? Am I restless to look at the model once more before I leave? If so, I may have found an emotional connection to the design.

Business of Desire

Only the visionaries of tomorrow will create authentic products that lead cultural developments instead of merely following short-lived trends. They will make heads turn. The business of desire goes beyond just looking at the surface; it also needs to add a heart and soul in order to be successful. **A timeless design will connect users on a human level, whether it is in a store or at a flea market. But it can only do so if it has a genuine intent, a unique viewpoint and an original story.**

How do we measure if we have succeeded? Compare it to the release of a new movie: Everyone has been talking about it, people are camping outside the theater to get tickets, and when the movie finally starts the crowd is ecstatic. And the next day we are unable to tell our colleagues what the picture was about. True success is more like the movie we heard about from friends, the one that is an insider tip and always out of stock at the rental place. We wait for it, we keep on checking for it, and once we have it, we will enjoy it like a treasure.

Great design has the same effect on us: We treasure it like something special, not just as a commodity that can be easily thrown away. It has been recently said that the design business is changing. Actually, that was being said even when I applied for design school many years ago, and probably for decades prior to that as well. But with authenticity and emotional connections in mind, what kind of designs and forms can we expect from the future?

Form will always follow function—it is just our perception of what the function is that changes over time. Expect designs that fall within three categories. First, the heartless quick-impulse buys that follow trends but will ultimately end up in landfills soon—nothing new here. Second, the timeless, deeply inspired designs that we will try to cherish forever and pass on to our children. Finally, there will be a new breed of designs that will have an entirely new approach to form: They are the sustainable ones.

Designed with their inevitable end in mind, this new breed of designs will soon dominate the market and appeal to consumers like no other products have done in the past. They will have form, color and material innovation with more research, development and story behind them than ever before. These products will follow the principles of cradle-to-cradle design as described by green-design pioneers William McDonough and Michael Braungart, and they will revolutionize the way we look at form. They will follow an evolutionary path and be more authentic than ever. Are we ready for this? We have to be, as the market is just beginning to pull for it. We can expect the business of desire to change dramatically—for real this time. ■

Photo: Jeremiah Webster



A sustainable bamboo brush that lets you grow your own (assuming genetically modified bamboo genes).