

THE FUNCTIONAL RIDDLE

Modern design - that is, the design of practically every useful object in the modern world - had its birth more than a century ago when some prophets first recognized, in the awful excesses of early machine-made ornament, the visual horror that lay ahead.

They devised a revolutionary artistic concept to fit the on-coming age of industry. It was that everything made by man for his use should be shaped according to its function - to the job it had to do - with no concessions to tradition, no false overcoating to give a 'better' appearance, no extra frills or ornamentation of any sort. Everything was to be cruelly honest, completely naked and unashamed; and have no fear, the prophets said, the results will not be ugly but as beautiful as nature. "In nakedness I behold the majesty of the essential instead of the trappings of pretension", wrote Horatio Greenough of America in 1853.

This concept was of course called Functionalism, and its supporters could gather corroborative evidence from many quarters. Without question, complete visual satisfaction - in a word, beauty - could be found in many objects traditionally shaped for use only, without any pretensions or visual aspirations. They pointed to many humble tools and utensils (think of the superb sculptural shape of a scythe). As for architecture, a functional tradition was strongly rooted in charming unadorned farmhouses, forts, wharves and numerous other utilitarian buildings.

As the 19th turned into the 20th century the Functionalist ethic gained a lot of ground. Architecture sometimes deliberately followed the lead of primitive buildings and finished up as a whitewashed box. Simplicity was prized highly in the progressive quarters of most of the visual arts. And every now and then some spectacular proof of the concept appears, some vindication of the most extreme theories of Functionalism. Imagine the joy of the early Functionalists when they beheld an aeroplane. Here was an instance of an unquestionably 20th century product that had to be made scientifically and honestly, that had to ban ornamentation and false nostalgic effects or it would never have got off the ground. If ever the time came when all things were made as honestly and as plainly as an aeroplane, then - thought the Functionalists - we would have Utopia. For many years they fought against the majority of people who had no theoretical, moralistic desire for design to be honest and who much preferred a bit of charming nostalgia like the Gothic and the Georgian. The fight kept on through the 1930's and 1940's and 1950's. Most architects and professional designers then saw the Functionalist ethic as a brilliant guiding light. They imagined a battle between themselves and popular taste. (I say imagined because although it was real enough on the architects' side, the man in the street was quite oblivious to it most of the time.) The architects, however, pictured the battle as

a stirring conflict between right (represented by the clean, strong lines of Functionalism) and wrong (represented by all pretty vulgarisms).

That was the clear picture up to the middle of this century and a little beyond. Then it began to grow confused and complicated.

And now let us consider what is the situation. Imagine a typical busy progressive area of the mid-1960's. Consider the look of our technological society. For instance, the drive out from Melbourne down the Bay. We start in the inner suburbs with the new buildings, generally speaking the work of modern architects, and we penetrate into the outer suburbs; the land of the spec builder, the small shop advertiser, and the municipal maintenance man: the stronghold of popular choice.

And is it a passage from the architects' austere, honest Functionalism to the frilly nostalgic vulgarities of popular taste? Not at all. Some architects' new work is quite frequently marked by arcades and gilded columns and all sorts of other quite unaustere and unfunctional visual effects. It seems clear that some architects have become bored by the discipline of Functionalism. Yet other architects are still bashing, hammer and tongs, in the same old way at public taste. Recently those of Sydney - the N.S.W. Chapter of the R.A.I.A. - published a book about public taste, or the almost complete lack of it, called Australian Outrage. It contained pages and pages of photographs of the sort of scene that assaults our eyes the moment we leave the polite inner suburbs and start off down the Bay: tangles of wires overhead straining at leaning electricity poles; jigsaw puzzles of incomprehensible posters, hoardings, cutouts; trees hacked back to gnarled stumps, and all the rest of it. The architects saw this book as a broadside against popular non-taste and hoped that it would open people's eyes to the terrible ugliness all around them.

Yet wasn't there a strange reversal of roles here? Some of the once-Functionalist architects who now indulged in arches and gilding and many other ingratiating devices were now complaining about the very thing they once prized so highly. For what could be more functional than the electric light pole system? It is exactly in line with what the early Functionalists demanded. It is free of any ornament and it is as honest as the daylight: at a glance you can see how the wires are being held up on the arms bracketted out from the tree-trunk poles. It is doing an essential modern job unpretentiously, economically and efficiently. According to the early Functionalist rules it should be beautiful.

The same reasoning applies to the spec-built un-architected 3-storey blocks of flats, with their yellow brick walls and eavesless roofs, that line the busier streets of the second ring of inner suburbs. Perhaps a piece of wrought iron at the entrance or a wall of broken-

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Harlem 7
U.S. 8

L.A. 9

Flats 10

face bricks relieves the austerity, but in general terms these flats are built scrupulously to the rules which early Functionalist architects would have applauded heartily.

Motel 11 — They are three or four storeys high because that is the economical optimum for brick construction without a lift. Every material is selected for being the cheapest and hardiest of its kind. What could be more functional? The same reasoning applied again and again through practically every element of the hideous modern suburban scene. & country
The stanchions that hold up the festoons of electric train and tram wires, the clutter of boxes and fences and posts that mark the presence of various public services, the advertising hoardings, the signs behind which a sweet shop or a newsagency disappears - all these are ruled by a desire to eliminate everything unnecessary to the serving of some plain function: the most common function being the making of money.

So here is a strange aesthetic anomaly. The century-old theory of Functionalism, which promised a clean, valid beauty to the industrial, technological world, appears to have finished up in an ugly mess, or at best a sad, dull, distasteful artistic slum like so many motels & such.
What can the solution be?

Was the theory wrong? If so, how do you explain the functional beauty of the aeroplane - merely as an exception? That doesn't seem convincing.

Tree 12 Then is the new vulgarity of posts and wires, advertisements and mutilated trees really not ugly, but a new kind of beauty? Max Harris, in a memorable review of the Australian Outrage book in The Australian pretended to argue this way. "Vulgarism is the very life force and dynamic of an affluent urban free enterprise society", he said. "How magnificently in the mood of modern sculptured form is the mutilated great tree beside the telephone box. An ordinary tree is just a tree - but this image is man's veritable dream of death." And he went on, "the mass of signs turns out to be compositionally magnificent...we have to incorporate outrage into our aesthetic. We can't stem the irresistible cultural tide, but we can change our aesthetic. It has happened before ... it is certainly happening now. In fact there are as many people who would be as delighted with the visual excitement of Australian Outrage as would be horrified." Is Max Harris, his tongue half in his cheek as always, right? Like Max Harris, a few of the early Functionalists around the turn of the century were truly anti-aesthetic and argued that honesty to the function was all that mattered; if ugliness resulted - too bad, but why worry? Can it be that the modern suburban world of service stations, giant ice-cream cones, Coca-cola ads and used car lots is really beautiful while a parkland, a landscape and a peasant farmhouse are really ugly things; the only trouble being that most of us have not yet switched over our aesthetic awareness in tune with modern times?

LIGHTS

No, that's not the answer either. If you need proof, just consider the aeroplane again. It is just as up to date as the telephone pole and the service station but it belongs to the old aesthetic and recognizable artistic rules.

If you can't see immediately the answer to this aesthetic or artistic riddle, please don't despair; because at some time it has worried every living philosopher of design. Yet the answer is simple enough.

It is, in brief, this :

Functionalism is not wrong, as a principle. It is a genuine guiding light. However, the practice of true Functionalism is a very different thing from crude expediency and mean economy. The true Functionalist philosophy presupposes that a sense of responsibility, of order, of creativity, of artistry, comes into the picture somewhere. Where it comes in is all important. It should not come in at the end - adding 'art' to something already designed is just like adding sugar icing or cosmetics. It must come in at the beginning, in translating the function into terms of design.

An aeroplane and an electric light pole are both functional objects. But so different. In the design of a modern aeroplane so many functions have to be considered - stresses on materials, aeronautics, engine power, weights, as well as economy, comfort and other practical things - so many functions that the designer begins to achieve an all-encompassing comprehension of the problem. He must, or his machine won't get off the ground. You see what happens; he is beginning--in some crude human way -- to act as Nature does, as God does, if you like, when designing anything : with total understanding.

That is why an aeroplane flies and that is why it is beautiful too; and that is super-Functionalism. The designer has drawn from all the problems set to him - often conflicting problems - a single theme, a single order. He has extracted the essential or characteristic function of the thing from a deep knowledge of all its necessary functions. The designer of any useful object, the architect of any building can aspire to such all-encompassing understanding of the problem before him. He can only rarely achieve it, but in the search he is likely to discover all the interest in form and space that he needs to make his building a living design. He will discover that there is no need for any building to revert to nostalgic effects or to add gilding in order to achieve visual interest and to escape from the box of the early naive Functionalists.

The use of cosmetics and disguises is only helpful to a poor or lazy designer who lacks the capacity to find the super-Functionalist order in a constructional problem.

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The 'designer' of an electric wiring system, as practised in the suburbs (to take a safely uncontroversial example away from architecture) solves each functional problem as it comes to him. A post may be a tree trunk or a concrete pipe. The wires have to be kept apart so a few cross bars are added. ⁵⁴ These have to be stopped from wobbling - so let's shove in a few brackets at 45 degrees ... and so on.

Smifer's 36

And so on, also, in the design of blocks of the yellowy flats): each element - walls, roof, windows, entrance - being solved separately. Each is a functional solution, but there is no order, no sense of wholeness, to hold them together. Thus they start a mess, and remain a mess, cluttering our lives in the technological age with an ever increasing avalanche of ugliness, prettified at intervals - and this is really worse - by pathetically ignorant attempts to beautify by plastic flowers and rock-faced Besser blocks *and blatantly shallow appeals to nostalgia and sentiment.*

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I have intended to prove just one thing: that every object made by man has its own integrity; that it should be an honest thing, made with an insight into function and a sense of order. To learn how to do it is the over-riding duty and problem of professional designers; but this is a social problem too. To learn to appreciate it when it appears is part of the essential cultural education of everybody. When most objects are truly functional, this technological age, which is just beginning, will be truly civilized and as beautiful in its own way as classical Greece.