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The geopolitics of design

A new kind of nationalism in design

Design has now emerged as a highly tangible form of economic aggression

David Sweetman's two-part BBC 2 blockbuster *Designs on Britain* (10 and 11 September 1985) was the best television attempt yet to brief the British public about design. Despite a certain lack of structure – when will a producer bring to design the precise analytical inter-titles of *Weekend World*? – the programmes well represented where mainstream thinking about the relation between design and UK economic performance has got to. Their argument went like this.

Ever since the collapse of Triumph Meriden and the British motorcycle industry some 10 years ago, both manufacturing and government have slowly come to a belated recognition that design is important. The property of obscure left-wing ideologists in the last century (William Morris) and between the wars (the Bauhaus), design has, after 30 years of almost covert and generally unsuccessful government support (the Design Council), finally come into the open as a Good Thing by anybody's standards. Forget the architectural disasters of the 1950s and 1960s: the designer should now be hailed as one of the great minds of our time. He provides the means to turn around declining Sheffield cutlers and declining Kidderminster carpet-makers alike.

Granted, the argument continues, there are problems. Much of the current boom in design concerns environmental, interior or graphic work for the service sector, and it is debatable whether well-designed theme parks, the Butlin's holiday camps of tomorrow, are the sort of project which will really create wealth. In addition, much of Britain's indigenous talent in product design has either emigrated to Milan, city of spotlights and sofas, or now finds itself working in London for foreign companies bent on flooding us with yet more imports. Even when the product designed isn't an American Parker pen or a Yamaha motorbike but rather a Duracell torch, Duracell, a British firm, prefers to make it in Belgium. All the same, good product design has helped British lorry-makers, for instance, beat off West German and Italian competition in East European markets, and is now poised to help them take a bountiful China by storm. In fact, every kind of design discipline deserves a fair wind.

Exactly what constitutes good design is, of course, a contentious issue. When he was Minister for Industry, Norman Tebbit may have been too enthusiastic in suggesting that good design is anything that the market will bear. But whatever it is, all are agreed that the nation is sunk without it. Though there were no trade union leaders in *Designs on Britain,* barons as politically dissimilar as Frank Chapple (EETPU) and Ken Gill (AUEW-TASS) have gone on the record as favouring design for its employment-generating effects. And Margaret Thatcher? She gave a forthright interview. She uses 'good-looking, functional' yellow felt-tips to highlight passages in documents. Ever since the lights were nearly blown out in her Brighton hotel room, she has carried a slim Duracell torch in her handbag wherever she goes. She heard a lecture on lampposts in the 1950s and, as a result, 'became a design, er, addict'. She denounces British furniture as 'knobbly-kneed… not streamlined'. She denounces British silverware as outdated, apparently oblivious to the rather fuddy-duddy silver pot on a sideboard behind her at Number 10. To design cognoscenti, her television performance is no doubt embarrassing, but the commitment is certainly there. Anyway, we have Sir Terence Conran to remind us that his success as a designer and retail entrepreneur has been based more on an appreciation of French wine and garlic than on any special theory.

At first sight, all this just-a-little-too-familiar argument still seems plausible enough: indeed reports from Washington, where an international conference of no fewer than 2,000 industrial designers was held late last month, appear to reinforce impressions of design as an endeavour now relatively free of ideology and partisanship. Mrs Thatcher sent a videotape and was given an award for the Department of Industry's efforts to promote the cause: it had, the citation said, 'spurred several other governments to address the subject of design with equal seriousness'. Delegates listened to Hartmut Esslinger, of the West German industrial design consultancy Frog Design, explain how essential it is to have an office on the West Coast of the States – if only to keep abreast o trends in Tokyo. Throughout, the theme was that of the internationalisation of the design business and the dilemma, 'should

today's multinationals sell the same design into every national market, or should they vary their products according to local tastes?'. Here Christopher Lorenz, management editor of the *Financial Times* and a man who may have done more to educate captains of British industry about design than anybody else, gave a key paper. The globalisation of product designs, he argued, makes varying amounts of sense, depending on what aspect of the design-through-to-consumption process you are talking about. In every field connected with design – scientific research and technical development, materials supply, production assembly, distribution strategy and so on – the benefits and dangers of globalisation are different.

Good, neutral, technocratic stuff. But, as Lorenz would be the first to admit, there is a lot more to design than the grey schemata now emerging from the world's most prestigious business schools. Suspicions are first alerted by a glance at the literature read by designers over the past few years. Here it is a striking fact that one of the great passions of the early 1970s – the Third World – is almost completely absent from contemporary discussions of design. The Third World received little more than a mention at Washington; yet, courtesy the Kansas City university professor Victor Papanek and his environmentalist tract *Design for the real world*, it used to be *the* subject of debate among designers not so long ago.

Yes, times change. But the neglect of the underdeveloped South is actually very surprising, for it is there that the source of many of British manufacturing's problems of the past are to be found. And it is there, too, that the solution to nearly every Western country's economic problems may very well be located.

Britain's historical complacency about design has a lot to do with her fondness for unloading duff products on the Empire and subsequently the Commonwealth. Poorly crafted pushbikes for Nigeria, awful Austins for India – you name it, the Brits have got away with it in the Third World. This is why Britain received such a nasty shock when, in the 1970s, much of the British population proved willing to pay over the odds for better-quality European and Japanese alternatives to homemade goods. Moulinex food-mixers, Olivetti typewriters, Braun shavers and JVC video-recorders were the penalty paid for all those years British exporters spent lazing around the tropics.

Even today, the Third World must remain central to any consideration of design. In the late 1970s, the export 'threat' from newly industrialised countries, such as Brazil, was a major item of debate among manufacturing-conscious economists. But the 1980s have revealed a rather different picture. On the one hand, Brazil and the countries of Latin America have fallen deeply in debt to Western banks. On the other hand, the search by Western manufacturers for unsaturated product markets has uncovered the Pacific as the place to set up in or export to – witness Mrs T's own sales tour of South-East Asia earlier this year. Both these trends affect design deeply today. In the frenzied dealing rooms of major banks, the fear of a Latin American default on loans and the need to respond to such a development in double-quick time have, together, helped to make electronic money-changing consoles a new and lucrative target for industrial designers and their skills. And in the styling offices of Nissan and Toyota, attentions now turn to Seoul, Djakarta and to Bangkok.

So the internationalisation of design is a little more subtle than commentators care to admit. What is more, the Third World is but one of the arenas in which competition between the West's different national manufacturing apparatuses is becoming ever more intense. This in itself provides us with a second reason why the future of design promises to be more than a little conflict-ridden.

We live in a world in which trade in services is, by its nature, limited – but in which the nature of trade in manufactures is changing. In the 19th century, when the theory of comparative advantage had its heyday, trade was supposed to be harmonious: Brits exported Harris tweed because they were good at it, banana republics exported bananas for the same reason, and everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. For 20 years, too,

the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade ensured that when, say, Sweden's Hasselblad took on Japan's Nikon in cameras, it was shop prices, themselves reflecting factory wage rates and factory productivity, that determined the outcome.

Now, however, things are different. Britain is not content to uphold Japan's comparative advantages. It would dearly love a camera industry of its own, just as it would a motorbike industry and, more and more, a hi-fi industry. Further, the tendency is for trade to be dominated by 'non-price' factors. Instead of putting up tariff barriers to imports, as was the habit 50 years ago, today's protectionists demand that Japan pull down its non-tariff barriers to exports – that it stop the fiendish practice of barring Renaults, Peugeots, Volkswagens and Fords because their bumpers are a tenth of an inch too wide. At the same time, contra-deals, the direct, moneyless exchange of one country's products for another's, now account for about a fifth of world trade. Meanwhile, the long-standing growth of world trade has begun to slow down; and, finally industralised nations are nevertheless becoming more reliant on trade. In many of the countries of Western Europe, for example, the value of trade is now equivalent to 50 per cent of Gross Domestic Product. As a result, governments have started to prop up domestic exporters with favourable credit arrangements as never before.

What does this mean for the future of design? It is clear that industrial design now plays a key role in international trade. Trade is now a question of the qualities of a product, not just the quantitative dynamics of its production. This is the reason why America is now beginning to debate whether poor industrial design is at the root of its trade deficit with Japan. More and more, therefore, state intervention in and sponsorship of industrial design, pioneered by Britain, is being taken up by administrations in the West – as the citation accompanying Mrs Thatcher's Washington award itself confirmed. Result: industrial design has begun to be transformed into a tool for national survival against foreign trade adversaries. Far from being a topic free of partisanship, design has now emerged as a highly tangible form of economic aggression.

It is true that the national export of manufactures has, to a certain extent, given way to the export of capital by multinationals. But this fact does not contradict our thesis. Every multinational has a distinct country of origin, as US multinationals operating in Europe know very well: the State Department tells their European subsidiaries when to stop making things the Russians might put to nasty use; the Department of Commerce gives their US-headquartered boards of management all kinds of assistance. By the same token, Sony may make televisions in Wales, but when Sony sets fight Ferguson sets in the showrooms, they do so bearing the stamp of design decisions made in Japan.

Underneath the intellectual conferencing about globalisation versus special bells and whistles for the South Koreans, behind the more popular we're-all-in-this-together treatments of British broadcasting, design can be a force, not just for improving the quality of life in liberal fashion, but for gung-ho economic nationalism. By itself, this need not be too worrying. But apart from the underdeveloped world and international trade, there is a third and final variable which seems bound to politicise the traditionally apolitical design milieu: the advent of what have been termed 'grey area' technologies.

A grey area technology is one capable of both industrial and military applications. Such technologies have long existed: sticks and stones, dynamite and the power of the atom have all been used in radically different ways before now. Still, there can be no doubt that today's technologies are greyer than most – or that design, and, oddly enough, graphic design in particular, will have a profound influence on their realisation.

Information technology is a case in point. IT, we should recall, doesn't just consist of microelectronics or data processing: it is about the fusion of these two domains with telecommunications. In other words, it is about the facility to conduct computing at a distance. This facility is very critical to all levels of national defence today, from the conventional 'electronic battlefields' of the two Germanies to President Reagan's

post-nuclear Star Wars initiative. It is also one which is critical, not only to foreign exchange dealers, but, increasingly to every civilian enterprise anxious to obtain upto-the-minute news about internal operations and external circumstance.

Now, hard-edged shells, bombs and missiles remain essential to modern warfare. The existence of these weapons provides lots of employment for engineers, and, with regard to tank, cockpit and marine interiors, quite a bit for ergonomically inclined industrial designers too. But since war has become so much a matter of information, graphic design, always the best - staffed of the design professions, has a fresh and gargantuan job of work to do. Images have to be processed, animated flight-simulators made more realistic, instrument displays rationalised, on-screen data laid out as clearly as possible. Will yesterday's creators of letterheads and logos, innocuous cosmopolitans, take on such fiercely nationalistic tasks? Will they choose to man these barricades? Even though the civilian side of computer graphics is already booming, we cannot yet tell. But in graphics, as in every kind of design, the barricades are definitely going up.