

ARTS

What defies defining, but exists everywhere?

By ALICE RAWSTHORN AUG. 18, 2008

LONDON — What is design? It's a seemingly simple question, that's very hard to answer. Think about it, and you'll realize why.

The word itself has several uses. It's a verb and a noun, which can mean design as in the practice of design, but also the process of doing it, as well as the end-result. Confused? No wonder. A sentence coined by the American design historian John Heskett may help to make things clearer: "Design is to produce a design to design a design." He might have added the fourth use of design as a noun, the 17th-century definition of "a design" as a dastardly plan.

Then there are all of the areas where design is deployed. Architecture. Engineering. Products. Transport. Fashion. Graphics. Multimedia. Information technology. Social services. Disaster relief, and so on. How can it be expected to have a coherent meaning across all of them? Or when it means different things in different countries? It can't, which is why design has become such an ambiguous term, complex and often contradictory with a range of meanings that change over time. So what does it mean now?

1. Design and things.

Ambiguous though it is, design has held on to one meaning for centuries: the

9

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but since the Industrial Revolution, it has become the province of designers, who conceive, but don't necessarily make, whatever they design.

Among the pioneers was the British sculptor John Flaxman, who designed vases, plates and other ceramic pieces for Wedgwood in the late 1700s. A century later, another Briton, Christopher Dresser, pioneered the role of the professional designer by developing products for different manufacturers. The mid-20th century gave us such exemplars as Dieter Rams, the German designer of gorgeous electronic products for Braun, and Ladislav Sutnar, the Czech graphic designer whose information design projects are the precursors of computer icons and Web navigation systems in use today.

This traditional meaning of design is now perpetuated by Vitra with its beautifully engineered furniture, but new interpretations are emerging. One is to use design to reduce the number of objects in our lives, rather than to create new ones. As the environmental crisis deepens, it makes sense to save materials and energy by combining the functions of several products into one, so we can dispense with the rest. Take Apple's iPhone or the BlackBerry Bold, which play the multiple roles of a phone, watch, alarm clock, diary, barometer, Internet browser and atlas.

2. Design and formulas.

What do a BlackBerry, an 18th-century Wedgwood vase and Sutnar's instruction manuals have in common? They were all designed in the expectation that they'd always take exactly the same form. But designers are now also working more flexibly by developing formulas to produce things that can be interpreted differently by different people, rather than finished objects.

An early example is the geodesic dome, the emergency shelter designed in 1948 by the American inventor Richard Buckminster Fuller. Rather than envisioning it as a completed structure, he prescribed instructions to build it anywhere in the world, using whatever materials might be available. Hundreds of thousands of geodesic domes have since been constructed using everything from plastic sheeting and old clothes, to scraps of wood and metal.

Humanitarian designers of today are following suit. The Mahlangu, a hand-washing device conceived by the Dutch designer Irene van Peer when working in South Africa, is a method of converting disused plastic water bottles into defenses against disease. Similarly the U.S. nonprofit network Potters for Peace is distributing an inexpensive Ceramic Water Purifier to areas of Africa and Latin America with limited access to safe water. Rather than delivering ready-made products, the network teaches local people how to manufacture them.

3. Design and behavior.

One of the most powerful, and often unsung roles of design is regulating behavior. Think of how traffic signs influence our driving, or maps guide us to our destinations. This element of design is becoming increasingly important, not least in helping us to use digital devices, like cellphones. As their form gives few clues as to their function, the quality of the user interface design (the software that determines whether or not they can be operated easily and intuitively) is as important in determining if we'll enjoy using them as how they look.

Equally important is design's potential to regulate our behavior as a means of addressing acute human concerns, such as health care, or how we look after the elderly. Social design - or service design, as it's also called - combines designers' expertise in analyzing social problems and inventing solutions through lateral thinking, with their practical skills as communicators.

The British firm Participle has assembled a multidisciplinary team, led by designers but including anthropologists, economists and social scientists, to design a new approach to caring for seniors in Southwark, a poor area of London. It is creating "circles" of local seniors to operate as part co-op, part concierge service and part self-help group. The circles enable the seniors to meet, share skills and benefit from collective discounts on energy bills to dinner at a local café. It isn't a design project in the conventional sense, but design was crucial in shaping the program by helping to identify the problems and solutions, and persuading the seniors to participate.

4. Meaningless design.

The contemporary equivalent of design's 17th-century guise as a "dastardly plan" is the use of the word "design" as a marketing ploy. Think of all the shoddily designed cars with "design" emblazoned on their tailgates, and even shoddier furniture stores that include the word in their advertising slogans. Such promotional stunts confused design with styling, design purists used to complain, but these days the situation is worse. The word has been so drained of meaning, that whatever is billed as "design" will almost certainly be badly designed, just as self-styled "icons" and "classics" are anything but.

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