

TELLING PRACTICE THROUGH THEORY OR VICE VERSA: AN EXHIBITION REVIEW ON “THE VALUE OF GOOD DESIGN”

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Abstract

This paper examines the exhibition of “The Value of Good Design” held by The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The author analyzes the features of this exhibition through design discourses she conducted in the 2019 spring term within the “Discourses in Design” course at The New School. The object of this paper is to reveal the relation between the core texts in the theory of design and objects from this exhibition. Rather than looking at the curation, this paper aims to discuss the relationship between theory and practice of design by using this exhibition as a medium. The exhibition’s concept of good design and its historical narration has the capacity of rethinking our habitat and raising questions towards our material world.

In this paper, it is shown that interpretation of analyzing design objects can be a means of understanding design concepts by adopting inquiry-based learning as one of the pedagogical approaches. As a result, this paper discusses that design will develop as we find the context from our lives and then to apply to the process of learning design theory, or vice versa. It is presented in this paper as a proposal to display this connection in exhibitions by correlating with living spaces.

Keywords: Design Theory, Discourses in Design, Museum of Modern Arts, Theory and Practice, Design Concepts.

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Introduction

Both as a noun and a verb, the word design has come to achieve its significance throughout the world (Flusser, 2013: 17). The discipline is being invented through the exploration of instrumentalities, technologies, and certain methods that are suited to the changing circumstances of contemporary culture (Buchanan, 1995). According to Heskett (2005), the design comes from the choices of the people. It can be understood that our choices shape the design, and the design shapes our choices. Thus, design matters because we are using design objects or systems every day in many ways. The subject of the design itself has great potential for us to think and shape our habits. Yet, defining design is an ongoing debate. Theorists, academics, philosophers, and designers have different approaches to elucidate this term, and the word of design evolves along with the sociological and political conversions.

The author was a Visiting Scholar throughout the year of 2019 in The New School and had a chance to attend a course titled “Discourses in Design” which was conducted by Asst. Prof. Caroline Dionne. This course introduced the core theoretical frameworks and methodologies that have shaped and continue to develop the field of design studies. Key articles on design were examined, and different essays on design were discussed in order to unpack the meanings of the texts. This approach was one of the most effective ways of absorbing the argument because we were adopting it to our very humanistic daily practice: on a discussion. Reading those texts was not merely significant, but discussing them and revealing the context for our better comprehension was a rewarding engagement.

In parallel with this course, “The Value of Good Design” exhibition opened at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), and it was instrumental in linking the outcomes from the course mentioned above (Figure 1). The exhibition held in February 10-June 15, 2019 and organized by Juliet Kinchin, Curator, and Andrew Gardner, Curatorial Assistant from Department of Architecture and Design. Featuring objects from domestic furnishings and appliances to ceramics, glass, electronics, transport design, sporting goods, toys, and graphics, The Value of Good Design explored the democratizing potential of design, beginning with MoMA’s Good Design initiatives from the late 1930s through the 1950s, which championed well-designed, affordable contemporary products. The exhibition also raised questions about what good design might mean today, and whether values from mid-century can be translated and redefined for a 21st-century audience (MoMA, 2019a).



Figure 1. A General View From the Exhibition

Design is a produced human activity that is related to politics and ethics. The way we understand the world matters to us: we understand the good life through good design or good design through a good life. Thus, design involves an ethical dimension that is tied into the obvious question of good versus bad design, which includes morality and materiality (Latour, 2008), and the exhibition which focuses on the concept of good design and the value of it, is highly essential for the critical review.

By commenting on design theories studied during the course at The New School, this article aims to present the answers to the questions that are “what can we learn from this exhibition?” and “how can we understand the practice through theory?” The scope of this paper is to analyze the features of this exhibition through design discourses. Therefore, the reader is invited to go through with this paper as it tries to create a common thread between this exhibition and the core theories on design. The interpretation is a critical element for our capabilities to enhance our knowledge, so following the same method for this paper, an analytical approach will be obtained rather than a descriptive one. The objects that are discussed in this paper are selected not due to their contents in comparison to other objects in the exhibition. Rather, the reason for analyzing these objects is that the features for discussion related to the reading materials of the course mentioned are found in those objects. In this regard, this review is based on the objects that contain those texts in design discourse.

The pedagogical approach of inquiry-based learning is adopted in this paper to emphasize active participation in learning and the learner’s responsibility for discovering knowledge that is new to the learner (De Jong & Van Joolingen, 1998). In that sense, what is new knowledge to the learner is not new knowledge to the world and does not always involve empirical testing (Pedaste et al., 2015: 48). The inquiry-based learning framework consists of phases start with addressing a curiosity about a specific topic to an exploration of the data, which then the discussion of the findings leads to conclude the learning process (Pedaste et al., 2015: 54-58). In this paper, this method of learning is a path to raise questions from design theory and answer them by examining the features in the exhibition. The purpose of this research for adopting this method is to explicitly explain the processes of building the relationship between theory and practice where such exhibitions can be considered as an educational environment for design studies. The orientation and conceptualization process of the inquiry-based learning derives from the theory studied within the course, and the exhibition itself becomes a case study for experimentation. Finally, the argument and discussion that are considered necessary for inquiry-based learning are presented, and proposals for such exhibitions are indicated as a result in this paper.

The Exhibition

With the establishment of the industrial design department at MoMA in 1934, under the leadership of Eliot Fette Noyes, who was a student of both the Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius and architect Edgar Kaufmann Jr, MoMA played a crucial role of spreading the “good design”, a concept formed in the 1930s and continued in the decades following World War II. Together they have worked for the Americans to strengthen the phenomenon of design through exhibitions, competitions, industry-media collaborations, and various organizations. Since then, MoMA incubates the ideas evolving around good design.

Although this exhibition consisted of designs between 1930 and 1960, it was possible to make inferences for today. In particular, it can be understood that how design has been shaped in a certain period which comes after World War II -a sociological event that affects almost all of the countries in the world, and to what extent the design concept in different geographies was evolved. According to Dilnot (2008), the design has been a branch of the cultural industry. Each country plays a significant role in the creation of the image of the country; and the production process of the cultural economy (Arrigo, 2011). Cities are part of the industry as well as brands and, in turn, become brand and design platforms for the culture industries (Jansson and Power, 2010). This retrospective understanding conveys how the concept of

consumption is shaped within the design phenomenon, and it also presents how design objects and specific brands that we can now consider commoditized, affect the habits of society.

An interesting point in the exhibition is to see the reflections of the Bauhaus movement that took place in Europe and spread throughout the United States. These objects, which were part of everyday life, have gained importance as tools and items used by families who were representatives of modern life. An example artifact for this can be seen on Schlumbohm's famous Chemex coffee maker (Figure 2). After immigrating to the United States from Germany in 1935, Schlumbohm created the Chemex inspired in spirit by the Bauhaus school of design (MoMA, 2019b), which was a prestigious design school to raise designers for the needs of modern life. In the museum caption, Schlumbohm stated as "a table must be a table, a bed must be a bed, a coffeemaker must be a coffeemaker." The roots of this way of thinking behind the design objects mostly based on the idea of "form follows function." But also, the thingness of things- and the jug's character in this particular case, should be considered. According to Heidegger, the jug's jug-character consists in the gift of the pouring out; the gift of the pouring out drinks for mortals-for us (1971: 171). Only a vessel empty itself, and this emptiness holds taking and keeping manner within the act of outpouring (Heidegger, 1971: 168-170). So what are we outpouring from this vessel then? Our joyous addiction: black coffee. One of the most significant actions of daily life, "drinking" meets with "drinking coffee" and it is one of the most common activities in our modern lives. An inspiring commentary on pleasures of coffee can be found in Balzac's writing relating to this subject, which makes one think more in-depth about the idea of this addiction;

...From that moment on, everything becomes agitated. Ideas quick march into motion, like battalions of a grand army to its legendary fighting ground, and the battle rages. Memories charge in, bright flags on high; the cavalry of metaphor deploys with a magnificent gallop; the artillery of logic rushes up with clattering wagons and cartridges; on imagination's orders, sharpshooters sight and fire; forms and shapes and characters rear up; the paper is spread with ink – for the nightly labor begins and ends with torrents of this black water, as a battle opens and concludes with black powder (De Balzac, 1996: 275).



Figure 2. Chemex

After outpouring the coffee from the cup, jug, or pots, we start to be present early in the mornings; we drink coffee in the meetings to become more aware of new ideas, or even we invite people to have a coffee in our first meeting. Reading Balzac's commentary leads to think of the role of the design shaping

the coffee culture. Concerning America's love and addiction to drinking coffee, Chemex can be seen as one of the most prominent symbols of coffee making. There has been an increase of 3rd generation coffee shops in the past ten years in Turkey, and the brewing method made by Chemex is one of the most popular and chosen among consumers. The design of Chemex is useful and practical for daily use, and brewing results are tasteful. What also makes Chemex unique is that it was produced in 1941, and is still up-to-date. Then, maybe, this question arises: is good design also related to longevity? Compared with the products in the exhibition for today's designs, the cultural value in most of the designs of today is lacking. The teacups, bowls, or jugs of today's do not carry any cultural significance, nor could they go beyond other products that are countlessly diffused. In this respect, it is easy to dispose a glass and to replace it with a new one. If there is no trace in our memories with products, we, then, tend to perceive a disposable world (Manzini, 1995).

Designed objects and experiences provide tangible means for us to engage with the world on an existential level, and the potency of objects in symbolically designating our particular being cannot be overstated (Chapman, 2015: 32). Concerning our capacity to deal with increasing mass of information, forms, and services permitted by technology, the necessity to construct stable and lasting identities/artifacts that can be placed recognizably in our cultural space becomes more important (Manzini, 2017). Perhaps, this could be the reason why we examine every object with great admiration when we visit second-hand shops. Rather than being nostalgic or having a retro craze, what lead us to those shops are mostly due to the resilience of the materials, the originality of the production processes and the intimacy that the design builds with us. That intimacy may be found in Eero Saarinen's "Womb Chair" as well (Figure 3). Womb Chair was designed in 1948 on the theory that a great number of people have never really felt comfortable and secure since they left the womb. Therefore the chair is an attempt to give people comfort that they need. It is well known that when the Bauhaus movement is to be discussed, the chair designs will be among the main topics since their purpose of production and use differ from previous designs. Even today, it can be observed that these chairs still have an influence on other design products; some may be poor imitations and some may be good interpretations.



Figure 2. Womb Chair

Exploring other designs from this exhibition, Benjamin Bowden's Spacelander bicycle makes us think if good design means affordable design (Fig. 4). When Spacelander bicycle was launched in 1946 at the

“Britain Can Make It” exhibition, the bicycle could not be bought at that time due to shortages of materials and labor after World War II. This was the reason why “Britain Can’t Have It” became the show’s popular nickname. The showcase of Spacelander of that time is an event to think about the relationship with the purpose of design; if we take the “reason and existence of design,” which can be simply defined as for human usage and demand, what would be the use of design? This question reminds Boradkar’s comment on the relation between design and anthropology, suggesting that if the design dehumanized, it becomes a type of art form (2016: 339-349). If the design is for people’s sake, then who are the ones to afford a good design? This question has been conserving its importance throughout design history, yet there is an ugly truth behind when we answer it. Design mediates so much of our realities and has a tremendous impact on our lives, yet very few of us participate in design processes. Frequently the people who are most adversely affected by design decisions tend to have the least influence on those decisions and how they are made (Costanza-Chock, 2018). According to Margolin (2002), our understanding of design must be continually expanding to address issues of production, distribution, and use. Such inquiry has the potential to lead us to a more inclusive design where we can be able to discuss and challenge the decisions, production process, and the outcomes of the design objects.



Figure 4. Spacelander Bicycle

This exhibition has a thought-provoking side for designers. According to Buchanan (1995), forethought is an architectonic or master art that concerned with discovery, invention, argument, and planning, which leads to the design. He raises the question in his paper: “What is forethought in the new circumstances of twentieth-century culture?” Adopting this question for today, twenty-first-century, what is the meaning of forethought today? Concerning our fluid world, which everything becomes transient, modifiable, and experimental (Manzini, 2017), how designers can elaborate and enhance their skills to create positive possibilities for humane and sustainable future? Manzini (1995) suggests that the role of design is to propose criteria of quality that have the variety, complexity, life, and blend of beauty and utility. It is crucial to understand the current state of design and adopt a critical approach to challenge the current paradigm to embrace all the qualities which Manzini mentions. This exhibition can be a good start to look at the objects and understand their capabilities and flaws. This kind of historical exhibition can enhance certain types of information where we can rethink our environment and make critiques towards that.

Conclusion

The many decisions and selective processes at work in any exhibition's construction are difficult to discern because curatorial practices typically work to erase the hand of the curator in the exhibition's final presentation (McDonald, 2008). The selected designs here in this exhibition can be seen as a tool to understand our daily lives more deeply and make comparisons on how we live our lives with and through design objects. In this case, it is possible to think more than only encountering the designs that were presented, and interpret the exhibition from our individual experiences. This exhibition makes us realize our daily lives by looking back to the history. Through the theory, it is possible to comprehend and raise questions about the good design itself from our personal perspective.

Additionally, an exhibition in this particular way also helps to perceive issues in design theory and to see the relations in tangible form. This exhibition had a specific environment to develop new ways of thinking in order to understand how abstract thoughts can find their place in the physical dimension and how designers serve a bridge between the world of ideas and the world of objects. Therefore, such exhibitions are not only there to "look" at objects along with the historical narrations; they also have importance to conduct a trail of thought on how design shapes our perceptions and also life itself.

It is understood that doing reflections within the method of inquiry-based learning have a formative potential in educative processes in the theory of design when it finds its place in practice. It would be confusing for design students and researchers who are studying theory where inquiries and research on the material are missing. This matter may remind us of the fresco of Raphael, "The School of Athens," where Plato and Aristotle appear as in discussion. While Plato raises his finger to the sky above, indicating the "ideal" and world of ideas-theory, Aristotle's hand is parallel to the earth, which implies the importance of the physical world where experience leads to knowledge. This dichotomy in Raphael's fresco can be an analogy to see the relationship between theory and practice. It reveals the contradiction but also emphasizes that these two worlds should not be separated and considered without each other. The correlation between these two worlds -theory and practice, needs the right environment for discussion to find a space to reflect the thoughts on the subject matter. It can be said that such exhibitions also have a contribution to the intellectual world of the design studies to engage with the material world since it can create discourses among researchers in the design field. When questions of what good design means and how it has a place in our lives become a matter of concern and the right tools for the answers are hidden in such exhibitions for ourselves to unpack those questions. There is no single approach or rule to abide by to make inquiries. Our critiques and comments are important to accept or not what the world of design offers to us since it comes from our lived experiences, which continuously create the discourses in design.

Finally, the sensational differences of our encounters of design objects in such exhibitions and the objects that live with us in our own personal spaces should be examined and discussed within the exhibition displays. An approach for curating exhibitions can be to invite visitors inside our houses or personal spaces as a challenge and also to think about design itself within this scope. Pamuk (2012) argues that the future of museums is inside our own homes. By indicating this, he suggests that the artifacts, objects, and materials from our daily lives have importance within the life of experiences, individual memories, and especially where we locate them in our own space (Pamuk, 2012).

Design without context cannot understand its capabilities affecting the world, and context is important to space, places, and persons regarding design work (Dilnot, 2008). Within these reviews and Manzini's argument, we can start thinking of a habitable world through and inside in our habitats by understanding the key features, interactions, and qualities we seek in our life. Those qualities we explore will lead to good life and good design. As a result, the discussions on design will develop as we find the context from our lives and then to apply to the process of learning the design theory. Or vice versa.

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Figure References

Figure 1-4: The Value of Good Design Exhibition. Taken by the author. (14.03.2019).