Dialectics of design: how ideas of 'good design' change

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This paper advances a first-pass theory of change in the styling of objects of domestic utility. It is based on the idea that the expressive potential of design for the maker, the user and the designer exists in tension with other desirable properties of the designed artefact. Respectively these are mass availability, conformity to professionally-defined ideas of good taste, and the demands of function and marketability. The theory is illustrated by reference to the emergence and subsequent dilution of three design movements; Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau and certain versions of Modernism.

Introduction

In the writings of design educators and representatives of such institutions of design professionalism as the UK Design Council, it is still common to read confident statements about the importance of good design, as if what is meant by this is stable and well understood (Cooper and Press, 1995; Design Council, 2009). It is argued here that this is an illusion. A recurring theme in the history of design is that new conceptions of good design arise from a rejection of those immediately preceding, a pattern which implies that the parameters which define good design also change. What appear to be design fundamentals at a given point in design history, we contend, are actually temporary points of stasis in a long term oscillation between relatively stable but opposed conceptions of virtue-in-design.

At one pole there are the virtues of design as an expression of creative individuality, whether that of its maker, its user or its designer. At the other pole there are *desiderata* which are tendentially incompatible with these interests. Thus, the mass availability of 'good design' through standardized, mechanized or otherwise routinized production is incompatible with self-expression by its maker. Similarly, the promulgation of professional notions of 'good taste' is incompatible with self-expression by the user – apart, that is, from the limited and (it could be argued) romanticized sense implied by notions of active consumption (De Certeau, 1984). Self-expression by the designer, finally, necessarily stops short at 'add-on' stylistics where production regimes are dominated by market research or engineering functionality. Revealingly, this last state of affairs is described as one of the earlier stages of 'design maturity' by the Design Management Group at Cambridge University (Centre for Technology Management, 2009). Thus, the balance of virtues embodied in a conception of 'good design' which prevails at a particular time can be seen as an unstable compromise between the various interests in self-expression on the one hand and, on the other, the *desiderata* of mass

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availability, the promulgation of professionally-defined notions of good taste, and the effective marketing of functionally efficient products.

Any particular conception of 'good design', it follows, tends to privilege certain virtues whilst neglecting or suppressing others. Because design can never satisfy all of its stakeholders, there is always the potential for a 'revolution' in which the virtues prioritized by an existing order are rejected in favour of those currently suppressed. Using this framework, our paper argues that three successive design movements, Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau and Modernism (principally that of the Bauhaus and De Stijl), all involved the rejection of the virtues which dominated a prevailing idea of 'good design' in favour of their suppressed opposites. The cases also suggest that the maturation of design movements often involves a drift away from the poles of expressiveness, partly through the process of dissemination through which innovation is reduced to cliché, and partly through an exhaustion of the possibilities of a given idiom. The consequence is that there is always the potential for a new movement to be attached to the expressive interests frustrated by this drift.

Arts and crafts

Taking his stance against the industrialized production regimes of Victorian England, John Ruskin declared that all truly human labour, and hence all truly human artefacts, embodied a unity of imagination and practice in the person of the artist-craftsman. His analysis in these terms of the virtues of Gothic architecture, is one of the most consequential texts on design ever written (Ruskin, 1907). He asks his readers to contrast the freely-contrived ornamentation of the Gothic cathedral with the precision-made objects in 'this English room of yours'. Despite their pleasing finish, the true meaning of these domestic artefacts, he argues, is the subjugation of the labour through which they are produced: 'If you will have that precision out of [the workmen], and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanise them' (Ruskin, 1907, p. 147). To Ruskin, the evil was not simply machine production, but the division of labour in which the design of a product was divorced from the act of making it:

> … we want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always working, and we call one a gentleman, and the other an operative; whereas the workman ought often to be thinking, and the thinker often to be working, and both should be gentlemen in the best sense. (Ruskin, 1907, pp. 154–55)

For some, the moral issues raised by machine production were compounded by an inauthenticity of the product itself. In early Victorian England, mechanization had made possible the mass marketing of imitation hand-crafted styles which had formerly been the prerogative of elites. Pressed glass had the semblance of cut-glass patterns moulded into its surface. Profile-cutting lathes and stencilled painting gave mass-produced furniture the look of hand carving. 'For the members of an expanding middle class, the historically coded look of wealth was coming within their means' (Ewen, 1988, pp. 32–33). To the pioneers of the Arts and Crafts movement, this look was a fraud, both as a simulacrum of opulence and also as a representation of the labour which it embodied.

Inspired by thinkers such as Ruskin but also by the Pre-Raphaelite belief that artists ought to involve themselves in the 'lesser' arts (Naylor, 1971, p. 98), William Morris, together with six associates founded 'The Firm', a partnership dedicated to the

ideal of re-integrating the arts and crafts and restoring honesty to the production of objects of domestic utility so that 'millions of those who now sit in darkness will be enlightened by an Art made by the people and for the people, a joy to the maker and the user' (quoted in Naylor, 1971, p. 108).

Like all social movements, Arts and Crafts contained its differences of emphasis, disagreements and contradictions. In both the UK and in Germany, there were debates on the degree to which machinery should be considered acceptable as a means of reducing drudgery and achieving an affordable product, debates which, in Germany, extended into the formative years of the Bauhaus. Whilst excoriating machinery at the level of rhetoric, Morris himself designed wallpapers and carpets for machine production with the proviso that the craft input was maintained. In a similar compromise, the American furniture maker, Gustav Stickley, used factory methods to produce basic components which his craftsmen would then finish and assemble. Generally speaking, the idea of Arts and Crafts was imported into the United States with more emphasis on the aesthetics of consumption than on the morality of production (Anscombe, 1978), a circumstantial adaptation, perhaps, to the scarcity of skilled labour which prevailed in that country at the time.

In the UK, meanwhile, the internal contradictions of the quasi-socialist ideal of the artist-craftsman producing for an enlightened mass public were becoming apparent. In late Victorian and Edwardian England, there *was* no mass market at the prices needed to support Morris' artist-craftsmen. Arts and Crafts, in consequence, became associated with exquisitely made and decorated pieces that could be afforded only by the very wealthy. The disillusionment was eloquently summarized in C.R. Ashbee's sorrowful memoir: 'We have made of a great social movement, a narrow and tiresome little aristocracy working with great skill for the very rich' (Naylor, 1971, p. 9). 'By 1930', comments Naylor, in an obituary of her own, 'the Arts and Crafts movement, instead of promoting its ultimate goal of reconciling art and technique, had spawned a progeny of cranks and eccentrics, the "arty crafty" with their aura of the homespun and the country dance' (Naylor, 1971, p. 191).

For the purposes of this paper, we wish to extract two points from this complex history. First, the programme of Arts and Crafts in its English variant amounted to a re-positioning of the ideal of good design on a continuum between two diametrically opposed conceptions of design virtue: the object as an individual expression of its maker on the one hand, and mass availability through machine production on the other. As has been typical of design movements, this re-positioning was argued through a disparagement of machine production as the rejected pole. In this particular instance, the rejection was argued on moral grounds, though that, too, has not been untypical. Secondly, Arts and Crafts as a movement was also animated by a revulsion against the cheaply-produced ornamentation favoured by early Victorian manufacturers, the products of what the architect and designer Augustus Pugin called 'those inexhaustible mines of bad taste, Birmingham and Sheffield' (Naylor, 1971, p. 14). In their place, a public was to be created for the products of the expressive freedom of the 'artist and picture lover', as Morris styled himself (Naylor, 1971, p. 106). In this manner, an early version of design professionalism was stirred into the basic project of emancipating the maker.

In terms of the first row of the schema set out in Table 1, Arts and Crafts sought to shift the idea of good design towards a prioritization of self-expression for the maker and, notwithstanding its rhetoric of social reform, away from mass availability insofar as this depended on machine production. It sought to do so largely by

Table 1.   Good design

Virtue of self-expression by:	Opposed virtues
The maker	Adaptation to the machine age
(Hand-crafted production)	Design for mass use
The owner/user	Fits conventional ideas of good taste
(Flexibility of use or display)	Stylistic coherence
	Design adapted to assumed ergonomic function
The designer	Design driven by ergonomic function and properties of materials
(Individual expression of designer)	Aesthetics adapted to markets/clients

persuading the public, Ruskin-fashion, to see the machine as the agent of spiritual impoverishment. In terms of the third row, the movement confirmed its programme by producing artefacts consonant with its own ideas of good design, supplemented by an extensive programme of writings and public lectures intended to persuade the public of the validity and virtue of what they were about.

Art Nouveau

Also tracing its ancestry to the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, Art Nouveau was a younger sibling of Arts and Crafts, albeit one in which the heritage of aestheticism much overshadowed that of workmanship (Aslin, 1969). For that reason, many of the leading figures in Arts and Crafts were dismissive of the 'strange decorative disease', even as they produced work which appeared to lie squarely within its idiom (Naylor, 1971, pp. 115, 168).[1] But in terms of the design ethic behind the two movements, they had a point. Whereas unity of concept and practice within the *production* of design was fundamental to Arts and Crafts, the Art Nouveau ideal, in its full-blown form at least, was a unified aesthetic lifestyle in the sphere of *consumption* (Denvir, 1986, p. 18). Accordingly, for all its penchant for organic motifs, its reaction was not against the machine, but against the proliferating ornament and eclectic clutter of the Victorian interior (Gloag, 1962, pp. 136–37). As Duncan (1998, p. 60) puts it:

> The Art Nouveau solution, exemplified for the public in the modern ensembles displayed at the turn-of-the-century by department stores and at the annual Salons in the French capital, was to synchronize every element of a room, from its general colour scheme to the smallest detailing of its smallest objects, such as the key escutcheons and hinges on its furniture.

Oscar Wilde's letter to William Godwin on the decoration of his own house, put it more elegantly:

> We find that a rose petal can be laid on the ivory table without scratching it – at least a white one can. (Quoted in Amaya, 1966, p. 36)

The lengths to which the more impressionable clients would go in order to integrate themselves into the dandified lifestyle envisaged by their designers is illustrated by Schmutzler (1964, p. 274):

A number of ladies who had no intention of appearing on the stage studied 'eurhythmic' movements with Isadora Duncan or with Daloroze at Hellerau, in order that the synaesthesia of rhythm and ornamentation, the homogeneous synthesis of their Art Nouveau homes, should not be disrupted by the all-too-human behavior of not yet fully stylized inhabitants.

Most of Art Nouveau, of course, fell far short of these extremes, but they do make its priorities clear. Accordingly, we suggest that Art Nouveau as a movement proposed a rightward shift of the idea of good design in row 2 of Table 1. Against the virtues of flexibility and self-expression for the user, it counterpoised those of stylistic coherence and conformity to a particular notion of good taste. It sought to achieve this movement of the idea of good design, moreover, through a rhetoric of distaste, one which contrasted the glamour of the aesthetic lifestyle with the squalor of undesigned everyday existence. There was more to Art Nouveau, of course, than stylistic coherence. Perhaps because so many of its practitioners were also artists, they thought of design first and foremost as a medium of self-expression:

More than any previous style, Art Nouveau was consciously charged with the subjective desires of the designers themselves … Indeed the subjective vision of the designer often seemed to transcend the design process and become part of the subject matter. (Greenhalgh, 2002, p. 52)

Greenhalgh tells us the movement's revolt was against a 'moribund classicism', a standardized and therefore marketable idea of good taste which had, by the same token, become exhausted as an idiom within which personal statements could be made. New themes were discovered in a 'darker side' of antiquity, and in a subversion of classical notions of proportion, composition and language (Greenhalgh, 2002, p. 37). Again, we have the theme of rejection, but this time it is a rejection of the formulaic guarantee of conventional good taste in row 3 of Table 1, creating space for self-expression for the designer. As the case demonstrates, new ideas of what constitutes good design may involve more than one dimension of Table 1.

Modernism: from revolution to reaction

By 1910, however, according to Duncan (1986, p. 107), Art Nouveau was dead. Some of its designers, however, refused to lie down. They reacted by importing fresh motifs, creating in the process, an eclectic, and often sumptuous hand-crafted style which was (much) later categorized as early Art Deco (Greenhalgh, 2002, pp. 41–43). The episode reminds us that designers are not completely defined by the schools to which commentators like to assign them – and assign them retrospectively at that.

If Art Nouveau died, it did so only in the sense that the corpse of the mother octopus feeds its young. Rennie Mackintosh's geometrical version of the style was developed by the Vienna Secessionists into a visual language which was taken up for very different purposes by designers associated with the German Werkbund, an association of artists, industrialists and technicians dedicated to the improvement of German design (Hutter, 1967, p. 12; Whitford, 1984, p. 19). Just how different these purposes were was emphasized in a devastating satire of the Secessionist interior by the pioneer Modernist architect, Adolf Loos. 'Poor little rich man' (1900, reprinted in Loos, 1982) is the story of a wealthy man who engages an architect to transform his home into a total work of Art. At first the client is overjoyed:

> Wherever he cast his glance was Art … He grasped Art when he took hold of a door handle; he sat on Art when he settled into an armchair; he buried his head in Art when, tired, he lay down on a pillow …

Soon, however, the client finds he must replace every casually used item exactly in accordance with the architect's drawings if the overall effect is not to be ruined. Loos concludes:

> For him, there would be no more painters, no more artists, no more craftsmen. He was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He thought, this is what it means to learn to go about life with one's own corpse. Yes indeed. He is finished. *He is complete.*

In Loos' satire, the Secessionist virtue of total design is represented as an entombment of the living user, so that Modernist functionalism, by way of contrast, appears as a liberation (a leftwards move of 'good design' in row 2 of Table 1). There is logic in the argument: if the form of an artefact derives from its function, that form must be appropriate whatever the context of use. The object becomes a little black dress, so to speak, which can be worn anywhere. So runs the theory.

Twenty years after the publication of 'Poor little rich man', however, it was *Modernist* life which imitated Loos' art. Gerrit Reitveld, one of the leading architect/ designers of De Stijl, prevented his client from hanging a painting in the surgery which had been designed for him. Promising to 'do something' himself, Reitveld painted a large red circle on the upper part of the wall, supposedly harmonizing with the planes of grey, white and black which defined the walls, floor and ceiling (Overy, 1991, p. 96). Modernism might have promised to liberate the user from the tyranny of stylistic coherence, but it quite soon imposed one of its own (right-hand pole in row 2 of Table 1). In the case of De Stijl, this reversal of the flow of influence from use to aesthetics followed from the movement's programme. Its coupling of functionalism with a vision of design as an instrument of social reform (Overy, 1991, p. 7) logically implies a practice in which form follows function; not as it is, but as it ought to be. In Reitveld's red–blue chair, an icon of De Stijl, the seated human figure seems to have been re-imagined so as to conform to its unyielding Mondrian-influenced planes (Overy, 1991, p. 83).

Tendencies of this kind lurked within the functionalist programme from the start. Frank Lloyd Wright himself said: 'I have been black and blue in some spot, somewhere, almost all my life from too intimate a contact with my own furniture' (quoted in Pulos, 1983, p. 215). True to this tradition, some of the designs produced by De Stijl were just as much a Procrustean bed as anything produced by the aesthetes of Art Nouveau (Duncan, 1998, p. 140). Amongst many instances, J.J.P. Oud's temporary housing for the poor featured kitchens which were made deliberately small and narrow so as to prevent their doubling-up as living rooms, a practice which the authorities considered retrograde, unhygienic and anti-social (Overy, 1991, p. 128).

Liberation of the user from imposed style was not the only element in the Modernist programme. Unlikely as it seems from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it was also in some respects a revolt against the machine, specifically against mass-produced kitsch imitations of sumptuous hand-crafted styles (Ewen, 1988, pp. 209–17). The most familiar aspect of the Modernist reaction against mass-produced imitations of hand-crafted luxury goods was a purge on decoration. Loos' objection was aesthetic. His 1908 polemic 'Ornament and crime' (reprinted in Loos,

1997) had equated the Secessionist taste for ornamentation with a supposed tendency on the part of 'primitives', criminals and children to decorate their own bodies. It was in the thinking of the architect Hermann Muthesius that the undecorated style made the connection with machine production: 'What we expect from machine products is smooth form reduced to its essential function' (quoted in Whitford, 1984, p. 20). It was an idea which rapidly diffused through the networks of German design. In 1907, Muthesius and Peter Behrens helped to found the Werkbund. In the same year, Behrens became chief designer for the German electrical company AEG, where he produced a series of domestic electrical appliances which broke with the tradition of decoration and in their clean lines and 'strictly regulated geometry', became landmarks of early Modernist design (Ewen, 1988, p. 43).

As for self-expression by the designer (row 3 of Table 1), Modernism in the short run offered the thrill of iconoclasm, of cutting through layers of decorative tradition to the utilitarian essentials. In the longer run, the dictates of function and machine production, coupled with the prohibition against ornament, implied a convergence of design on a single appropriate form for each artefact (Sparke, 1991, p. 150). The issue surfaced as early as the 1914 annual meeting of the Werkbund, in a debate on standardization. Arguing in favour was Hermann Muthesius: 'Architecture, together with all the activities of the Werkbund, is moving towards standardization; only by means of standardization can it achieve the universality characteristic of all ages of harmonious culture'. Opposed was Henry Van de Velde (he of the early Arts and Crafts influence on the Bauhaus):

> So long as there are artists within the Werkbund, and so long as they are able to influence its fate, they will protest against the imposition of orders and standardization. The artist is, in essence, a total individualist, a free spontaneous creator: he will never, of his own accord, submit to a discipline which imposes on him a canon or a type. (Naylor, 1971, p. 187)

Standardization, of course, was the victor. By the time of the New York exhibition of the International Style in 1932, Hitchcock and Johnson were sufficiently confident that the Modernist aesthetic had stabilized to issue a formula. Good design, they declared, should emphasize volume, not mass. It should draw the attention to the surfacing materials (which should take the form of a continuous even coating). It should be geometrically regular and there should be no applied decoration (Sparke, 1991, p. 150).

For those of a fundamentalist cast of mind, the erasure of the designer's individuality was a positive virtue. By the late 1920s, Van Doesburg believed that modern design should be characterized by an absence of style (Overy, 1991, p. 12). Overy comments: 'What the Germans found so exciting about De Stijl was its achievements in creating a collaborative, not to say collectivist, style in which variations introduced by individuals were reduced to a minimum' (Overy, 1991, p. 143). Gropius, too, spoke of the need to suppress 'the designer's personal mark' (Ewen, 1988, p. 212). In terms of our table, then, by the late 1920s the Modernist conception of good design had come to occupy positions to the right on all three dimensions of design virtue. It valued mass availability over the individually-designed and crafted object, and its forms expressed function and a unified machine aesthetic rather than the individuality of either the user or the designer.

As our table illustrates, any idea of 'good design' involves 'choices' on three dimensions of design virtue. These are not the only dimensions of course, but in this paper we concentrate on the *loci* of self-expression. Because Modernism has tended

to circumscribe the possibilities of self-expression for makers, users and designers, it has been questioned, in the name of all three, throughout almost its entire history.

The maker in modernism

The paradoxes surrounding the position of the artist-craftsman in Modernism are well-exemplified in one of its iconic objects. Mies Van der Rohe's Barcelona chair, despite its mass-produced appearance, depended on expert craftsmanship for its manufacture. The cushions, for example, were made from 20 separate pieces of leather sewn together with welting, biscuit-tufted and buttoned. Van der Rohe's chair cost more than a Chippendale reproduction (Amaya, 1966, p. 29). Even so, because the crafts-manship was not that of the designer, and because it was employed to achieve a machine-like precision, the chair doubly fails the John Ruskin test of authenticity – that the work should show traces of the hand and imagination of its creator. Designs which depend on skilled craftsmanship to achieve the look of machine manufacture (Ewen, 1988, p. 210) might be regarded as a form of (in)conspicuous consumption, a demonstration that the expenditure of skilled labour is of so little account that it need not be advertised in the external form of the artefact. Displays of this kind are the very antithesis of functionalism as the term is ordinarily understood.

   If what has been handed down to us is any guide, many of the significant artist-craftsmen of the early Modernist period tended to work outside the constrictions of Modernism rather than confront them. Some of them found space for self-expression in the more permissive idiom we now call Art Deco, a promiscuous *carnivale* in which off-duty machine aesthetics consorted with elements of cubism, the Ballets Russes and various exotic and semi-imaginary cultures. Art Deco functioned as a kind of aesthetic red light district to the puritan theocracy of Modernism, tacitly ignored, for the most part, by the design police.[2] A recent and more decorous counterpart is the 'Slow Movement' hailed by the journalist Helen Kirwan-Taylor (2002):

> One of the stars of the [Decorex International 2002] show was Victoria Bain, whose appliqué soft furnishings and hand-embroidered curtains were selected by interior designer Olga Polizzi for the RF Hotel Amogo in Brussels. Polizzi makes slow design the focus for all the hotels she decorates; 'The limit of mass production is very clear, however exciting it may have seemed in the past 30 years. Today we understand better the value of an individual treatment for each challenge. It takes time but it's well worth it … Every cushion for example, is painstakingly hand-sewn … [inspired by] 17th and 18th century costumes'.

The user

It is in the name of the user that the interrogation of Modernism has been at its most insistent. It is now almost a cliché that much of the design produced in the name of functionalism has not actually been all that functional. Rybczynski (1988) has pointed out that the Barcelona Chair forced people into an unsupported slump, so that they found themselves slipping down the seat. From experiences of this kind, it is a short step to the revelation that functionalism is sometimes no more than a 'look' (Lynes, 1959, p. 338; Whitford, 1984, p. 200; Meades, 2002), and thence to Peter Reyner Banham's observation that some practitioners of the machine aesthetic actually under-stood very little about machinery (Banham, 1958). Whilst this unravelling of the authority of the Modernist credo does not automatically invalidate any of the designs

produced in its name, it has encouraged a more critical response (e.g. Wolfe, 1999) and a resurgent confidence on the part of the user, that he or she too has views on functionality and has sensibilities to express.

Broadly speaking, this assertion has taken two related forms, both of which amount to a leftward shift in the notion of good design in row 2. The first is a demand that design should allow for personally significant clutter and other forms of customization. As long ago as 1939, Osbert Lancaster observed that:

> … the open-plan, the mass produced steel and plywood furniture … are all in theory perfectly logical, but in the home logic has always been at a discount. The vast majority … crave their knick knacks … and are perfectly willing to pay the price in prolonged activities with broom and duster. (Quoted in Collins and Papadakis, 1989, p. 16)

Similarly, and much more recently, Modernist architect Mark Guard has argued that 'a modernist home should be as moulded by the owner's personality as anything more traditional … a house has to be eclectic and have a bit of history … you have to bring meaning to ownership' (Friedman, 2002).

That the notion of functionality might extend beyond ergonomics to include personal expression for the user has been most forcefully argued by Peter Reyner Banham. In 'Vehicles of desire' (Banham, 1955), Banham pointed out the utter irrelevance of the Modernist credo to the 1950s idiom of motor vehicle design:

> The repertoire of hooded headlamps, bumper-bombs, sporty nave-plates, ventilators, intakes, incipient tail-fins, speed streaks and chromium spears, protruding exhaust-pipes, cineramic wind-screens – these give tone and social connotation to the body envelope …

User self-expression is reduced here to the act of purchase, still more than is allowed for in the uniformities of 'understated good design'.

The designer

As we have already pointed out, protests that standardization would limit the scope for self-expression by designers date back beyond the foundation of the Bauhaus. As time went on, the protests against the creative restrictions imposed in the name of a depersonalized 'International Style' gathered momentum. Against Mies van der Rohe's 1930s *pronunicamento*, 'less is more' the postmodern architect Robert Venturi counterposed 'less is a bore', arguing for an architecture that promoted richness and ambiguity over unity and clarity, contradiction and redundancy over harmony and simplicity. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Modernism was seen as stale, outworn and inexpressive by a new generation of individualistically inclined architects and designers (Whitford, 1984, p. 200; Collins and Papadakis, 1989, p. 22). Although Modernism has survived this designer-led *putsch* for expressive freedom, from the 1960s onwards it has had to co-exist with styles which play on the vocabularies of street culture and commerce (Garner, 1996). From the point of view of self-expression for the designer (row 3 of our table), the result has been an extended period of pluralism – or perhaps an interregnum – in which there has been no single dominant idea of 'good design'. Symptomatic of this confusion, contemporary style magazines praise designs in terms taken from quite different vocabularies of appreciation; 'clean' and 'understated' on the one hand, 'witty' and 'whimsical' on the other.

Conclusions

It is perhaps inevitable that design of the past should be viewed through the eyes of the present. The result, however, is that the story of design change becomes entangled with aesthetic criticism from a particular standpoint. What this means in practice is that we are offered a narrative in which virtue, in the shape of some present notion of 'good design', is in continual conflict with the forces of decadence, cynical commercialism or downright incompetence. It sometimes appears as if whole eras and whole schools set out to produce bad design – either deliberately or because they knew no better. The early Victorian era is a particular recipient of judgments of this kind. Even an authority on the period, such as Gloag (1962), can write that, 'ornament appeased the anxious appetite of the new rich and the prosperous middle classes for visible evidence of their social status and gave many people innocent pleasure …' and contradict himself in the next paragraph with 'the *purposeless* pursuit of ornamental effect' (p. 128, italics added).

Generally speaking, the standards of 'good design' in this story are those of Modernism, broadly defined. Although it has been increasingly questioned in recent decades, Modernism retains sufficient of its hegemony, particularly amongst those who talk and write about design, to ensure that the phrase 'good design' still tends to convey an essentially Modernist meaning. The result is that shifts in taste and design practice, which may have had quite different meanings at the time, tend to be thought of today as movements towards, or away from, a Modernist aesthetic.

Against this, we propose here that 'good design' can partly be understood as a set of compromise positions on three dimensions of self-expression: self-expression for the maker of the designed object, for its user and for its designer. These are compromises because extreme positions on these dimensions respectively sacrifice the opposed virtues of mass availability, conformity to prevailing standards of good taste, and marketability/functionality. Each era, each school of design, takes up a particular position on these compromises, and that position forms part of its idea of good design. Any position towards the extremes, however, involves a neglect, and sometimes an outright suppression, of the opposite pole of the compromise. Amongst those heavily involved in the production and consumption of design, the result is a simmering discontent with existing 'good design', which possesses the potential to explode in a dramatic change in taste and design practice, driven by manifesto in the name of the hitherto suppressed dimension of design virtue. Thus, the framework we propose implies an oscillation in which a particular idea of 'good design' which crystallizes the priorities of school or era itself creates the discontents which eventually undermine it.

Notes

1. In discussing design at the level of movements, it needs to be borne in mind that designers are individuals and that the assignment of their work to movements is very often a *post hoc* operation.
2. Not always ignored. According to Duncan (1998, p. 207), French Modernist designers of the 1930s criticized, 'Art Deco designers who catered to select clients in the creation of elaborately crafted *pièces uniques*. The new age required nothing less than excellent design for everyone; quality and mass production were not mutually exclusive. The future of the decorative arts did not rest with the rich and even less with their aesthetic preferences. An object's greatest beauty lay, conversely, in its perfect adaptation to its usage. Each object must create a decorative vocabulary in its own image to meet its specific needs, and in the 1920s this aim was best realized by the machine'.

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