



a monthly review of contemporary design

design

Vol. 279 / September / 2001 / www.design.co.kr

● 새로운 재료를 정복한 디자이너들

디자인 디자이너 일리스트레이터 이억배

발행부도 web + digital



Who is thinking of material?

On 25th July in a small town in Kerala, in the south of India, it rained. The rain was red in color. The scientists speculate in the newspapers that a meteor may have exploded into a cloud of dust that hovered till the rain brought it down. Is a religious oracle somewhere using this as a sign that the Gods are angered? Are the environmentalists contesting the scientific interpretation, even as they await the chemical analysis of the rain, claiming it is the portent of things to come on this already polluted planet? The religious Guru, the scientist and the environmentalist each have a way of constructing knowledge. These three constructs could be seen as being formalist, rationalist and environmentalist.

I am a garbage man. As a designer and design teacher I am embroiled in the ongoing wrangle of freedom for each versus collective well being. The latter wins out in my recycling project and material for me is waste, the end, the problem and I have associates engaged in the sale of this waste material to agencies and factories which will either find secondary uses for this material or will reprocess and recycle the material. All this will happen before all material one day finds a final location as ash and air by incineration, or in transitory graveyards called landfills, or maybe in the future as projectiles to be sent into a still pollutable space beyond the earth's atmosphere. And we must not forget the traditional option exercised by the rich nations who for years have sent their wastes along with a monetary compensation to the poorer parts of this world.

Other designers look at material in different ways. Some do not see any material in their styling exercises. Some re-dose society with its wastes, albeit peripherally, in the manner of unwanted material from hairdressers finding a resting place on the heads of the vain. Students all over strive to get an expertise in the nomenclature of materials believing it to be useful for their careers. On the fringes of design, the fashionable designers resurrect material and show it not as usable but as a curiosity, worthy of publication, documentation and exhibition. The digital mainstream in design is anonymous, silent and isolated from contact with material substances.

In this context I am taking up the task of depicting the space between the designer and material, if such a construct may be considered possible at all. This space can be given form and energized. The occurrences today of the many forms of this space in the profession of design need not be simplified for the sake of this explanation. Instead I speculate that a few instances can be discussed to energize the understanding of the designer's relationship with material.

To set the tone I say that Design in the past, as in the craft and architecture traditions may have been about shaping material. It is not that any longer, unless you are working with a craft community or with your own hands producing objects for sale on high street. Those who claim design is about material are lying. It is about profits, tapping latent desires, offering new lifestyles and about selling glossy expensive design publications like this one. Publications that are based on the assumption that the anonymous majority of designers in huge manufacturing enterprises are the silent audience for the theatrical performances of the designer's who visualize curious rare collectibles. This particular form of design, mirrors media as a construct, and is also all about power of the sort enjoyed by the media personalities and their private relationships. This is power that does not look to exercise influence, at least not overtly, but can be experienced as an ability to be pervasive in media.

It wasn't this way a hundred years ago. And it still isn't this in many pockets of design practice. What happened in these past hundred years and what is going on I handle as three constructs I call Generations. A generation here is a particular way of constructing design theory, with specific terminologies and concepts. With specific sympathies and alignments. Material is located in each generation, both as presences and absences.

Generation I – The bridge between matter and spirit is matter becoming spirit.

Years ago in design school I took up a project to design a conference chair for a building designed by an architect who in his past had worked with Corbusier in Chandigarh. As I did my research on the spirit of the building and what I would infuse the design with, I wrote up a statement of meanings that could be interpreted from the building. The two pages I wrote drew upon the terminologies that construct modernism. I was liberal with the use

of words like truth, honesty and clarity in the use of material. I added to that Pevsner's condensation of the spirit into heroic, clinically precise and somehow machine like. This sufficed then and continues to do so in situations like the design of furniture, as I found I was drawn more and more into reading the texts especially the interviews where the architect spoke directly. I was to then go on to teach design in a school of architecture. The fact that this is still a framework of constructs in Italian design I see as the predominant position architect-designers have always occupied in that country.

While still in design school I also encountered the historical narrative of design. In this in the period before Bauhaus and Morris there was no distinct and separate use of the phrase Industrial Design, and history in a sense stopped here. However a loosely sketched narrative exists if you are shown that design is just a manifestation of craft, with a more industrial focus. What was made singly is now made en mass, but the spirit, the process and the role of the creator is still the same. I have often been uncomfortable with this, but have myself propagated this way of looking at history to my students. My discomfort would become especially acute when encountering a collector of objects, textiles or carpets. This collector would typically be someone who was knowledgeable, thoroughly so, about the particular object. And every kind of object on this planet has a constituency of collectors. To listen to one of them speak knowledgeably about the balance, form and craftsmanship of a serving spoon and to see them definitively compare a set of spoons is a shattering experience.

In the collector's narrative the object would contain within itself the toil: a disciplined and trained hand skillfully executing the task while engaged in the pursuit of perfection. A picture that is at once simple and refined. We are invited here to dwell upon the instant at which the potter pulls his clay to make the form, the pot. It is here that purity is located. It is here that you are shown how in the act of creation thought and action, body and clay are not separated. It is here that matter becomes spirit. It is here also that joy is located, the joy of creation and the joy of materials. Since there is no room for corrective action or rethinking only redoing, again and again, the activity rewards a particular kind of temperament. One that is peaceful, relaxed, capable of being involved totally in what she is doing, assured and decisive. This portrayal is idyllic and perfect, and thus tragic too. For this is so hard to achieve for many of us because of the way present reality is constructed.

The way out we see in so many ceramic designers becoming potters, so many textile designers becoming fabric artists and weavers, and so many product designers starting their own workshops making limited editions. I went this way too, started my workshop and kept my hands on material, for a while. Till my desire to do stuff that I considered more relevant won out and I became a narrator. To become the observer who watched to see which of my students took up the tradition to connect with material.

A week ago a sculptor I was talking to mentioned that she was going to another city, to a block of marble she had kept there for the right time. Now she felt that time had come, the block was calling her. Though she had an idea of what she would be doing with it she knew that in all such circumstances things often change, the block might make her do something entirely different. In the above narrative the connection between the creator and the material is mystical and magical. This narrative exists today in design too, though in a somewhat peripheral fashion. It survives in art, vibrantly, though for most designers art is peripheral too. It survives in some design school curricula too, but its survival and transference is linked to either the persuasion of the teacher or to the absence of self consciousness in the design student.

What is more prevalent is a switch in the narrative. The designer is spoken of as someone slightly removed from the material, the mediator is the craftsperson or her proxy the machine. On a tour of a ceramic factory in Japan I saw a conveyor line of freshly formed cups still wet from the machine. A woman standing by the belt picked up each cup in turn and distorted it just so, with her bare hands. Later in the shop at the front of the factory I saw similar cups on display, each distinct and unique in its own way. This is acceptable too though in a somewhat impure way, as the surviving from of the chance processes that can characterize the craft object.

Generation II - All that is solid melts into air

Years ago Chris Rust took me to visit a design company near Manchester. He had mentioned them as the contemporary face of design, and as an example of how to make a success of the commercial practice of Industrial Design. I saw a project there of a small hand held gadget for a South Korean company. From design to prototype the project was accomplished in 21 days, without meeting the client even once! The brief was electronically conveyed, the LC was opened in the bank and money transferred, concepts were done directly on the computer, the file was sent electronically to New Jersey for stereolithography and on day four the samples were being examined for refinement in the studio. On the 21st day the file was being read by a CNC machine in a tool room in Seoul. End of project.

And the material? ABS and naturally so. You ask not about the chemical identity but about the shared narrative of material, the historical construct, the tactile sensory experience. Its gone. In its place is the offset, of the CAD program. The cavity, the void, is a space that is to be injected and left to solidify. The texture is printed onto the surface of the cavity. The object will have a feel to it. A matte.

The preoccupation of the designer here is with the fitness to purpose. As functionalism it is articulated as the principles of good design. This functionalism attains the center by pushing material to the periphery. This is a process of substitution, rather than a decisive fracture, and design theory in most places begins to look like a menu of options. If there is to be a language of this design theory the terminologies have to be selected from a pool of words shared by management, engineering and design. Any talk of purity and material is embarrassing, and antagonizes the relationships in what is seen as a cooperative venture to realize a new project. The object is a project. Here the status of the Italian designer, as a maestro, insulates her from the need to share too close a relationship with the other partners in the process.

Even the discourse on form breaks away and from being treated as inherent it becomes functional too. Psychology, semantics and semiotics support the explanatory framework. What was once a simple activity has become loaded with text; briefs, strategy, presentations and justifications. Transient publications that will be shredded or filed away in secrecy once the product is done. This situation needs a breed of designer who is a team player, one who surrenders possession of the project and hence the material to documentation. He is to be comfortable with the fact that he may never see the first product rolling out.

This is tragic too. So the peripheral existence of the unique object is resurrected. Supported by the knowledgeable elite who are a new breed of collectors the product for high street grows vibrant. As expensive and exclusive for the discerning only this comes as a reaction to the utilitarian. This is also a reaction to the displacement of material and the pervasive power of the functional to render worthless the sensory joy of the material. Crude and rough, often one off, these sorts of creations can be seen in the cast aluminum picture frames. Exposed unpainted metal.

And so it goes. The claims by the designers in the glossy design press can all be added up and in the historical narrative it can be constructed as a political discourse. The fight against anonymity imposed by the mega multinational work situation. The need to keep alive marginal discourses is supported by the pervasive desire for the consumption of the culture of the minorities. This mirrors movements elsewhere, like the spirited reaction to the loss of power perceived in the process of globalization. Thus it is all air, the tangible melts into air.

Generation III – Material is a threat

As I write this it is midnight here in Kuala Lumpur. There are many of us from the Asia-Pacific region meeting here to discuss how to get the world to consume less. One of the shared beliefs that brought the participants together is that materials are a threat and are essentially hazardous. Material is now a problem.

The shared narrative here looks with concern at the whole life cycle of a particular material; its extraction, processing, shaping into products, the use of the products and the final resting place of discarded products. Material is either seen to be the direct cause of an impact upon the environment or is seen to cause it in collusion

with a set of other materials that come together as a product to use resources like water and electricity. Sanyo has announced their new machine will wash clothes without using detergents.

Elsewhere the focus of this view, liberally called green design, has been on the discarded product, the waste. This was seen as big loss of useful material. The consequences were that design would enable the dis-assembly and recycling of the product by the original product manufacturer. Referred to as closing the loop this did not always look at the whole life cycle of the product, which the generic framework of ecodesign then incorporated. In the project this mainly changed the stages before the brief was developed and not after. The process of problem identification became more disciplined and rigorous. Supported by software the environmental advantages built into a new concept could now be quantified. When this too was not enough the focus shifted to a product less and material less world.

The first stage in the path to a material less world is when products are combined with services so that their overall quantities are reduced. The objective is being articulated as the reduction of the ecological footprint of an economic activity. Material being the necessary ingredient for most economic activity is classified and graded from the most harmful to the least harmful. Copper is bad and its use must be phased out because it is a scarce material. Plastics are bad because they are from non-renewable sources, finite and because cheap extremely susceptible to misuse, disposal and contain the potential to support a throwaway culture. This behaviour of plastic to litter and festoon the trees in the developing world drives the anti plastic movements. Today many towns in India have a ban on the use of plastic carry bags.

The emerging discourse towards a less product heavy world is articulated as sustainable consumption, use less resources. With these paradigms seeping into the media and common usage many people the world over can make intelligent green choices in their buying habits. In a way the shopper looks at products in the supermarket as hazardous, the packaging will be waste instantaneously, the detergent inside will pollute the waters of the planet. In this the designer is offered the option to move away and practice design in a less harmful way. Designing products to be made from waste is seen as a tithe to be paid to society. Proposing an alternative aesthetic and promoting the classic style in an object that can be treated as a collectible are other ways to cut out the discomforts creeping into design theory.

What can I do is the refrain that replaces the assurance of what I would like to do of Generation I. Good design is given a bad name for the new good is the human one. Labeled social accountability the emerging theories of responsible citizenship permeate into the design discourse. Designers need not work visualizing new forms of putting together the material, they need to be problem solvers where the better solutions are offered as dematerialized alternatives to what exists.

Conclusion

The three concerns I have articulated are depictions of the concerns of designers. Though it looks temporal and linear, it is not meant to be so. All the generations exist simultaneously and are supported by society and academia. The staccato tone of the constructs, the generations, was meant to open up the smooth narratives and definitive histories of design to alternative interpretations.

After you finish reading this do put off the lights as you leave the room.

—

Article for the COVER article for a special issue on material, of Design Monthly, Korea, by G.V. Soumitri, New Delhi, India. August 2001