iPhone: “Gute Form” - Bad Design?

Philipp Oswalt

The iPhone is bought for its good design (“Gute Form”) and easy handling, both of which distinguish the Apple design from other brand devices. The resignation in 1930 of the second Bauhaus director, Hannes Meyer, who criticised Gropius’s “good designs” and even then called for the formulation of an “ecological design”, this paper discusses Apple’s updating of post-war German design. The fetishised iPhone is, moreover, a crude product of an exploitation of global wage differences that fails to leave a progressive ecological footprint in Asia. Today we have the significance, in terms of ecology and communication policy, of this obvious discrepancy between good design in consumption terms and the poor design of the manifestly non-sustainable production of electronic devices.

“An object is defined by its essence”, wrote Walter Gropius in 1925. “In order to design it so that it functions as it should – a vessel, a chair, a house – its essence must first be investigated because it must completely serve its purpose, that is, practically fulfil its function, be durable, inexpensive and ‘aesthetic’” (Gropius 1925, 6).

At the Bauhaus, “Funktionalismus” applied first and foremost to the functional object: the well designed lamp, the well designed chair, etc. This was often misunderstood. The Bauhaus’ designers thought that geometrically simple forms were easy to manufacture and at the same time practical and “good”. The famous Wagenfeld table lamp of 1924 is a notable example of this. Everything rests on variations of the circle: the light fixture, the shaft, the base. Glass and steel also give the whole a technical-industrial manifestation. But the more popular this object is, the more complex and expensive (and less industrial) it is to manufacture, the less suitable it is for illumination. But objects lead their own lives and the lack of functionality was no obstacle to enthusiasm. The Wagenfeld table lamp became a fetish and contributed significantly to the creation of the “Bauhaus style”.

The second director of the Bauhaus, Hannes Meyer, wanted to resolve this issue once and for all. He was convinced that, if functionality was to be taken seriously, then the fixation on the object had to be abandoned. Consequently, the goal of design cannot be the development and production of objects. For Hannes Meyer, design was the “organisation of life processes” (Meyer 1928, 12), in which objects had a purely service character. And if all objects were no longer necessary, all the better. Hannes Meyer found an ally among others in Naum Gabo, who in 1928 in the bauhaus magazine attacked the Bauhaus style and proclaimed: “Man must prevail over the utilitarian object, he must be superior to it. The object should only be there for him when he needs it. It should drop out of sight, or at least be as inconspicuous as possible, when he no longer needs it” (Gabo 1928, 6). For lighting, this meant that the organisation of light was the goal – and not the lighting device in any of its forms. Under Hannes Meyer the Bauhaus’ designers began to work with the lighting engineers of the company Kandem Leuchten GmbH. And they began to design the light first, and only then the light device necessary for its generation.

Hannes Meyer himself explained in bauhaus what this kind of approach to design meant for architecture. He thereby deliberately avoided the object-orientated term of “Architektur” (architecture) and used instead the process-orientated “Bauen” (building): “we investigate the everyday life processes of every resident, and this reveals the functional diagram for father, mother, child, infant and fellow human beings.

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we analyse the relationships between the house, its inhabitants and outsiders: postman, passer-by, visitor, neighbour, burglar, chimney sweep, washerwoman, policeman, doctor, charwoman, playmate, gas money collector, handiman, carer, delivery boy. we explore the relationships between humans, animals and the garden and the interaction between humans, pets and insects in the home. we identify the seasonal variations in ground temperature”. To summarise, “building is just organisation: social, technical, economical and physical organisation” (Meyer 1928, 13).

With Hannes Meyer, the goal of design is no longer the production of objects, but the generation of situations, the organisation of processes, the shaping of relationships – between people, between the human being and the environment. The objects are a means to an end; they are tools. They should not take on a life of their own, but play a subservient role. This design concept of Meyer’s also shows itself in his drawings and plans: the depiction of the material form of objects in horizontal and vertical section is replaced by diagrams and situational illustrations: the route to work, the view from the window, the distribution of light in the room. They show the interplay of human being(s), object world, architecture and environment.

Hannes Meyer thought about his buildings from a completely different perspective from most of his contemporaries and thereby arrived at solutions that revoked a classical avant-garde rhetoric: for him, it was not about the heroic object, or the presentation of the new. This is perhaps why he turned to the traditional building material, the brick, because it was inexpensive and available locally. Meyer was also serious about this concept of building in another quite different respect: on his building sites, he respected trade union demands and even supported striking workers – which ultimately led to his dismissal as Bauhaus director.

Hannes Meyer’s understanding of design had a great influence after 1945 on the evolution of the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, which embraced the development of environmental and system design concepts. A good decade after the closure of the school, one of its former lecturers, the sociologist Lucius Burckhardt, developed this idea further: “One may regard the world as a world of objects, which may be categorised, for example, houses, roads, traffic lights, kiosks; coffee makers, sinks, crockery, table linen. This categorisation has consequences: it leads namely to an understanding of design that segregates a particular appliance, acknowledges its ambient conditions and sets for itself the goal of constructing a better or more aesthetic coffee maker, to create therefore what was described in the 1950s as “good design” (Burckhardt 1981). This is where Burckhardt’s criticism comes into play: he pleads instead for a focus on the relationships between objects – and therefore also on the intangible. He explains this using a road junction as an example: “The kiosk lives from the fact that my bus does not arrive and I buy a newspaper, and the bus stops here because several routes intersect and people changing routes can get their connections. The street corner is just the visible manifestation of the phenomenon; beyond that it includes aspects of organisational systems: bus routes, timetables, the sale of newspapers, phases dictated by traffic lights, etc. This arrangement of the environment also generates a design impulse. But this integrates the invisible parts of the system” (Burckhardt 1981).

The difficulty with such an approach is of course that the power to influence all these things seldom lies in one individual’s hands. There are the transport systems, the kiosk owner, the municipal road administration authorities, the newspaper publishers, etc. There are of course larger environments, which are managed by a single source, – airports, entertainment parks, grand hotels and shopping centres, for example, – in which such an integrated understanding of design can be successfully realised. But that is the exception (and also not what Lucius Burckhardt had in mind). All the same: the design of a single object too can be derived mainly from inter-relationships and situations, leading to the discovery of different, intriguing solutions. Notable examples of this are, for example, guerrilla and viral marketing strategies, which are based on the infiltration of existing situations.

But much more effective conclusions have long since been drawn from such considerations. Objects exist not only in a local context, but have diverse, so-called translocal relationships, ones to remote locations.
It is no coincidence that the term “end point” has become an established part of speech. Many objects are just the tip of an iceberg, the visible interface of the complex systems that lie behind them. This is by no means restricted to the virtual world of the new communication media and information technologies – the trade of contemporary car manufacturers such as BMW is less and less limited to the manufacture of cars and meanwhile embraces a whole range of services – up to the point where the product “car” is taken over by the service “mobility”.

A few years ago the design theorist John Maeda, who names the Bauhaus as one of his most important intellectual reference points referred, in making a case for a new simplicity, to the strategic potential of such a way of thinking: “Why not just use the software on a distant computer, rather than maintain a desktop computer with a stack of CDs or network downloads? Just think of Google’s capacity. With the simple input line in the web browser we gain access to Google’s huge network of computers and databases. In order to make a query via Google, we do not need our own, huge computer set-up. More appears to be less, if it is relegated far, far into the distance. An experience is therefore simpler when the answer arrives on the spot, while the actual work is done FAR AWAY” (Maeda 2007). Such as understanding of simplicity may be seen as an updating of the “good form” for an increasingly complex society with the help of modern technologies. Moreover, Maeda also redeems a central theory of Naum Gabo’s, who had postulated that an object should only be present if and when it was required. The consumer is happy when the efforts that are necessary for the satisfaction of his needs remain hidden and unseen. Thus a design that conceals complexity and appears to be plain and simple enjoys great popularity. With this, the myth of modern design being so straightforward that what you see is what you get is taken care of.

Outsourcing is the dominating principle of our age. This however not only embraces intangible information and services, as qualified by John Maeda, but also the tangible manufacture and disposal of contemporary products. The essential processes happen elsewhere and we see only the desired outcome. One could think that modern design has therefore arrived from whence it once departed: in the bourgeois home of the 19th century. There, the “front room” dominated as the representative show room, while the necessary backstage area – from the kitchen to the maid’s room – remained hidden in the background. In a world of globalized relationships the backstage area has shifted to distant shores, to Asia, Africa and South America. The service corridors have become longer. Instead of a few metres, they are now thousands of kilometres long. Nevertheless, the basic principle has not changed much: out of sight, out of mind.

The principle of outsourcing celebrated by John Maeda and so successful nowadays can have cynical repercussions. As functional as it may seem in the information and communications technology sector, it can be particularly exploitative in respect of physical production. I cannot see from the objects themselves how and under what conditions they are made, or disposed of. iPhones are not sticky with the blood of the child-soldiers of the Congo, who had to fight for the essential raw material, tantalum. Neither are they damp with the sweat of the Foxconn workers, who have assembled the device in 15-hour working days in inhuman conditions. And mobile phones are inextricably linked with the poisonous evaporations of the rubbish tips in Lagos or Nairobi, where the electronic waste of the industrial nations is dumped. As long as all this happens outside our field of vision, it does not bother us. In this respect, the one and the same issue distinguishes itself only by how far away from us it is happening.
Imagine a thought experiment, like the one Johannes Fiedler once proposed (Fiedler/Tornquist 2005, 630ff.): a special economic zone in East Germany, where object are manufactured and disposed of under conditions similar to those in China. Our society would not for a moment tolerate such conditions in this country. And still, nearly every day we are completely uninhibited in our acquisition of products, which are produced under precisely these conditions and in complete contempt of our local social and ecological standards – and can only be produced in this way. Distance plays a role. There is a reason why we speak of what is “brought home” to us, why the Bible refers to “neighbours” and to “love thy neighbour”. If nothing else, this is a question of perception, of aisthesis. But the object per se does not exist. Every object generates multiple situations, processes and relation beyond the immediate façade. A design, which aims to update the legacy of modernism and thereby its emancipatory and egalitarian ideas for the future, must start from this point and must not be allowed to regress to the object fixation of the early Bauhaus. The situation has become far more complex than it was in the 1920s; such a demand is therefore that much harder to meet, but at the same time all the more relevant for that.

And what does this have to do with design? It is not enough (any more) to consider the design of objects solely from the consumer’s perspective and to optimise it to this end. Objects also have a connection with the people who make, maintain and dispose of them, and with their environment. The design discourse and the consumer society largely dismiss these essential aspects: the dictates of the consumer hold sway. Yet an object’s function includes not only its consumption, but also the entire process, from inception to destruction.

Figure 1
iPhone: “Gute Form” – bad design?
(Source: Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau)
Bibliography