

TRENDS BRANDS FUTURES INTELLIGENCE IDEAS

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#II

Blur

*The Impact Of
Speed On Connected
Culture*



PACIFIC OCEAN 1 BY NADAV KANDER

ThePetShopBuys

‘Touch me, stroke me, take me home’ - in a world of instant gratification and fashion conscious faddishness, designers are creating ‘personality’ filled products that remind us of our pets...

SUMMARY: TO INCREASE SALES, PRODUCT DESIGNERS ARE CREATING A NEW GENERATION OF TACTILE 'PET-LIKE' OBJECTS DESIGNED TO CATER FOR CONSUMERS DESPERATE FOR NOVELTY AND INNOVATION. SEASONALITY HAS ALSO BECOME DESIGN'S LATEST MANIA WITH KEY PLAYERS LOOKING TO FASHION FOR INSPIRATION. COLOUR, TEXTURE, SHAPE AND RETRO STYLES HAVE ALL BEEN BROUGHT INTO PLAY. LIKEWISE THE NOTION OF THE SPRING/ SUMMER AND AUTUMN/WINTER VERSIONS OF THE SAME OBJECT. BUT AS WITH FASHION SOME DESIGNERS ARE BEGINNING TO QUESTION THE WISDOM OF THIS. THEY ARGUE THAT IT IS MAKING PRODUCTS TOO DISPOSABLE, DAMAGING THE ENVIRONMENT, AND MAKING DESIGNERS THEMSELVES MARKETING ADJUNCTS, AS OPPOSED TO ARTISANS OR ARTISTS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT. 'DESIGN ESSENTIALISM' IS THE NEW PHRASE THEY ARE USING TO DESCRIBE THIS MOOD AND MOVEMENT. IT IS AGAINST BEING 'FAST' FOR FAST'S SAKE. IT IS ALSO AGAINST THE IDEA OF UPDATING A PRODUCT FOR FASHION RATHER THAN FUNCTIONAL REASONS. BUT ALSO IT IS AGAINST PRODUCT DISPOSABILITY, ENCOURAGING INSTEAD THE IDEA THAT PRODUCTS SHOULD OR AT LEAST COULD BE MENDED, OR DESIGNED RATHER LIKE THE VOLVO OR BMW, TO BE EQUALLY SUCCESSFUL ON THE SECOND-HAND, OR VINTAGE GOODS MARKET. SUCH AN APPROACH NEEDS MANUFACTURERS TO RE-THINK THEIR MANUFACTURING PROCESSES, FOR DESIGNERS TO RE-EXAMINE THE NATURE OF FUNCTION, TO RE-EMBRACE THE NOTION THAT PLANNED OR AESTHETIC OBSOLESCENCE IS WRONG, BUT ALSO TO WORK TOWARDS NEW LEVELS OF ARTISANSHIP AND CRAFTSMANSHIP. ONES THAT BLUR ART WITH COMMERCE TO NEW AND GREATER EFFECT.

TEXT: LAKSHMI BASHRAKAN

It's 7am. You get up, fill the Alessi 9093 with water, grab an OJ from the limited edition pink Smeg and pop a slice of bread into your retro Dualit. You rinse your Muji Green Teapot, leaving it to dry on the Newson Dish Doctor, pop a load of washing into the Dyson Two Drum and whiz around the living room with the Dyson Root8 Cyclone. A quick shower courtesy of Philippe Starck before flying out the door to the tune of your iPod, then off to the office, proudly clutching a Titanium Powerbook, ready to start the day. It is now 9am. The phrase 'seasonal designs' used to be synonymous with the expensive and exclusive world of fashion. Twice yearly luxuries available to the elite few; fashion conjures up images of the hours spent creating, moulding and perfecting the ultimate designer product. More expensive, yes, but also worth every penny. Fast forward to the naughty noughts and we find that more and more objects - functional, household and everyday- have been made over in much the same way, as consumers increasingly demand more than mere functionality from their products.

'People have become more sophisticated and their needs go beyond the functional, particularly for us in the wealthy, 'fat cat' [occidental] lands where all are basic needs are satisfied,' says Josephine Green, Director of Trends and Strategy at Philips Design in Holland.

Given the choice between the greyness of an old PC and the sheer personality of even an old iMac, there will only ever be one winner, but at what point does good, effective design blur into superficial, novelty value? 'It is true that the so-called 'market' has become too fast moving' says Italy's Alberto Alessi, 'and that incites some designers to be too fast-but not the good ones. In my opinion, objects have always been built for the way they generate emotions: functionalism is too reductive a way of understanding the statute of objects, especially in our society.'

For Paola Antonelli, Curator of Architecture and Design at New York's Museum of Modern Art, to affiliate design to the cyclical nature of the fashion industry is a misleading tactic however. 'Some design companies do behave like fashion companies and the fashion marketing model of seasonal collections and must-have introductions of new ranges, has taught companies a lot,' she points out. 'But the non-specialised media are treating design like fashion because they have not yet found the right and most comfortable approach, but good design is 'seasonal' by definition, not because it is forced to be so. It is based on innovation and innovation is one step beyond the current Zeitgeist.'

This may be true, but on the surface what we are seeing suggests that product design has reached a level of transience more aligned to the fashion industry, creating seasonal products with limited stylistic durability. White goods are no longer white. While Dyson's foray into the world of washing machines can be appreciated as much more than merely a stylistic intrusion, the launch of Smeg's limited edition Pink fridge or Dualit's equally Pantone-perfect, pink four-slice cannot. Both have inextricably linked themselves not only to the fashion industry, but to the very fashions and colour ranges being proffered by that industry. What is even more puzzling is why these two products - both renowned and respected for their 'classic' status - should suddenly feel the need to 'get with it'.

'The fact is that the fashion houses are dipping their toes in the design scene', observes Tom Dixon, director of design for Habitat, UK. 'And conversely designers are paying much more attention to fashion and fashionability.'

As creator of the Dixon for Domus Design Factory, Dixon not only happily acknowledges the need for instant product gratification but has also experimented

with its viability. Using a plastic extrusion machine (usually fed coloured pellets to test various combinations) Dixon saw the potential to design and create instant and fashion aware products by moulding the coloured strings of thermo-formable styrene secreted from the machine into products before they become brittle. Dixon even took part in a live e window display at London's Selfridges department store creating products that were immediately available for sale in-store.

'The fantasy of modern manufacturing is a future of endless customisation to the customer's choice, but it is almost impossible to manage until manufacturing technology catches up,' he says. 'The reality is that it's not a very practical, cost-effective way of manufacturing, but in terms of plastic production and having something that was unique to you it was extremely fast. It also came close to the instant gratification that I think people desire. There is a natural urge to do something and complete it in a day.'

Josephine Green acknowledges the current acceleration within the industry, but is also keeping an eye on the future. 'The macro trend is that the industry's business is speeding up and development cycles are getting shorter, but I think that for design as a community it is a dangerous direction to be taking,' she says. 'Youth likes novelty but, particularly in European countries, we are moving towards an ageing population, and they will start asking some serious questions.'

One of the major factors currently fuelling the blur versus bespoke debate is product durability. Twenty years ago, having your toaster repaired was as normal as throwing it out today. 'It is true that we are living in a disposable society where goods are replaced, rather than serviced or repaired', says Lynda Relph-Knight, Editor of the UK's prestigious Design Week magazine. 'And fashion has a part to play, but this isn't new. Design for

obsolescence was a major part of post-war product design in the US and the motivation for 'contemporary' styling.'

While functional obsolescence has almost become a necessary part of our technological evolution, stylistic obsolescence has no such moral alibi.

'The obsolescence of desirability that operates through changes in the appearance of products and fashion is linked with taste, which is a very fickle thing,' says Peter Fiell, co-author of *Designing the 21st Century*. 'Maybe it was acceptable several years ago as an essential part of our developing economy, but when you factor in the environmental argument, it becomes totally unacceptable.'

Although Fiell does not see limited durability as compromising the actual design process, 'it does compromise the moral onus on designers to produce objects of quality and real value, rather than short-lived stylistically obsolescent products.'

We are now at a point Fiell and the others believe where the very definition of design is being called into question. With a lot of styling masquerading as design, Tom Dixon sees it as a highly misused word. Consumers may still be witnessing the 'excessive styling of the past few years, but the design industry and particularly the designers themselves, he believes, are already moving towards a notion of sustainable design that goes beyond the growth paradigm - value and meaning rather than experience and novelty.

And contrary to general opinion, producing sustainable design does not necessarily equal profit-loss. Volvo, a company renowned for the longevity of its products annually sells more used cars than new cars. By building on brand and consumer loyalty, the company's secondary market for replacement parts is now more profitable than new car sales. When Dyson launched its first dual cyclone cleaner it was a lot more expensive than anything else on the market, yet it became an instant best-seller. 'People are prepared to pay a

premium price for what they perceive as superior quality goods,' says Fiell. 'And product durability is massively in the consumers interest. You get better value for money because all the effort and innovation has gone into the quality so that it lasts twice as long.' Although improved, more cost-effective technology has its positive side there is also the potential for manufacturers to create even more choice in a move towards mass customisation. Josephine Green echoes the feeling of most in warning that this is not the direction to be taking. 'We would just be squeezing the margins to the point where they will become unsustainable, socially, environmentally, and economically.'

As a society whose basic needs are fulfilled, we suddenly find ourselves faced with a choice. To indulge in a no-need society perpetuated by an ever-distracting novelty cycle or to accept the challenge of discovering how to enrich people's lives in terms of the sensorial, the experimental and the emotional without compromising on the bigger picture.'

As responsive sentient beings, we need stimulation, not only from the physical, but also the emotional. While smart technology is, in many ways, still in its infancy, it is nonetheless a very real part of our future. The levels of multi-modality will be both varied and various, but, as Green points out, what were once inanimate will take on a whole new meaning.

'That whole relationship we are going to develop when objects become smart will change how we relate to them. Would you throw away something that you are having a relationship with?'

Contact Details

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