_____

# The design of prosperity: beauty, happiness and hope

## Joe Friggieri

It is possible, in my view, to draw an analogy between the desirable future of design and the desirable future of humanity. It is possible, in other words, to read the title of this conference, "the design of the future", in the two senses of the genitive, to mean both the future of design and the project of designing the future. In the first use the subject of the discussion would be design and its future; in the second it would be the future of humanity, or of the world, and the possibility or otherwise of planning or designing it. In the same way one can use the phrase "the gift of love" to mean either the object being offered as a demonstration of one's love (as when one gives a rose or a precious stone as a gift), or that love itself is being offered as a gift.

The claim I'd like to make is that the qualities that characterize the best design are the same as those that mark what we should think of as a desirable future for humanity and the world. The qualities of good design, which I will soon mention, are those same qualities we'd like to associate with the kind of world we'd like to live in, if at all possible. The dream-design is the dream-world. Or that's what we would like to believe.

Starting with design, let us try to isolate or identify its ideal characteristics. Let us assume that, like Jasper Morrison, we intensely dislike the idea of "marketing people taking over industry and flooding the world with useless articles that nobody needs, which can only be bought as gifts for others." Let us also assume that we all subscribe to the admittedly vague principle that the primary goal of design is to make people's lives better. We still need to ask ourselves: in what ways can that goal be reached? How exactly can design improve the quality of people's lives?

Three types of answer have been suggested by contemporary designers reflecting on their work. The first type highlights the positive psychological effects that well-designed products can have (or are supposed to have) on their users. Let's call this the "happiness" effect. The second highlights their aesthetic qualities. These are the qualities that appeal to the senses, especially the senses of sight and touch. Philosophers from Plato to Augustine, from Aristotle to Aquinas, have stressed this aspect of the beautiful. *Pulchrum est quod visum placet*. The beautiful is what gives pleasure when seen - a definition subscribed to by Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, who also accepts Aquinas's characterization of the beautiful in terms of

the qualities of harmony, proportion and clarity of form. The third type of answer places greater emphasis on the social ends or aims that can be served by design. Let us call this the ethical use or function of design. All these qualities - the psychological, the aesthetic and the ethical - combine to make the object a good product, and therefore one to be desired.

Let me mention a few examples of each of these three approaches, starting with the psychological. My aim is to show that the three types of approach are not - or need not be - mutually exclusive. On the contrary, good design succeeds in combining the benefits identified by each one of them.


So here, to begin with, is a clear statement of the positive psychological impact that good design is said to bring about, or is supposed to have, or ought to have, on consumers or users. Charlotte and Peter Fiell, editors of the anthology *Designing the 21st Century,* write in their introduction: "There is today a general consensus that products need to go beyond considerations of form and function if they are to become 'objects of desire' in an increasingly competitive marketplace. To achieve this, products must make pleasurable emotional connections with their end-users through the joy of their use and the beauty of their form. Emotional involvement is considered by many [contemporary] designers not only as a powerful and essential way of facilitating better and more meaningful connections between products and their users, but [also] as an effective means of differentiating their solutions from those of their competitors... Aware of the fact that the emotional content of a design can determine its ultimate success, the general view among the majority of [contemporary] designers is that it is now as important to fulfil the consumer's desire for 'tools for loving' as that for 'tools for living'." [1]

The range of top-quality designers who mention some kind of psychological gratification as their primary aim is so wide that it is hard to choose its representatives. "I try to break the usual codes in order to pursue new emotions," says Jean-Marc Gady, design experiment teacher at L'Ecole Bleue and winner of the Special Award at the Homo Domus exhibition. For Christophe Pillet, 1995 French Designer of the Year, "design must offer people an alternative way of living - it must satisfy the aspirations of people in terms of well-being and happiness"; while for Mitsuru Inaba, head of the Sony Corporation Design Centre, the aim of design is "to create forms that go beyond functional beauty in order to produce heart-touching objects that fascinate our instincts the minute they are held or seen."

One could give further examples of the psychological appeal of well-designed objects, buildings and services, but the point has been made. Nor does one need to linger long on the aesthetic function of design, since it is clear, even from the examples quoted, that there is a strong connection between the psychological and the aesthetic. One could actually say that the former is a function of the latter, in the sense that the psychologically uplifting effects of well-designed objects are almost always the result of their aesthetic

---

[1] Charlotte and Peter Fiell, (eds), *Designing the 21st Century*, Taschen, Cologne, 2001, introduction.
Except where otherwise stated, quotations in the text are taken from this anthology.

qualities. We feel emotionally and psychologically gratified by objects because we find them aesthetically appealing.

This point is clearly and eloquently made by Martha Sansoni, winner of the *Square with a Monument* at the Keihanna Interaction Plaza Design Competition at Osaka, and of the *Porta per Venezia* competition at the Venice Biennale, as well as creator of the *Evasioni* and *Evoluzioni* masterpieces for Pampaloni Argenterie – the Florentine silversmiths. Sansoni refers to the therapeutic qualities of objects, apart from the conventional combination of aesthetics, function and production. By therapeutic qualities Sansoni means the capacity of objects for reassuring, protecting and generating a feeling of well-being and peacefulness, saying that she would like "to design objects that are suitable not only for use but also for playing with, objects that one would like to caress; things to be embraced, things to be put on an altar in a secluded, precious and quiet domestic shrine, the very last place of individual freedom; objects that are capable of evoking emotions and feelings that are provocative. Increasingly," she adds, combining the psychological and aesthetic aspects of good design, "emotional needs have to be satisfied as much as practical ones; in this context aesthetic research can play a crucial role in protecting human spiritual integrity." She sees her designer's role as that of "helping to create those conditions that are essential to well-being, happiness and emotional stability, through a spiritual conceptualization of places to live in and of objects to live with."

The interface between the aesthetic and the psychological also inspires the work of the Cairo-born Canadian national Karim Rashid, who believes that "objects should not be obstacles but raptures of experience", 'de-stressers', as he calls them, objects that bring enjoyment and simplify tasks while increasing our level of engagement with and appreciation of beauty. "Our lives", Rashid adds, "are elevated when we experience beauty, comfort, luxury, performance and utility, acting seamlessly together." Beauty, he says, "is not a question of taste, or personal likes and dislikes, but a learned appreciation, an experiential process, a deep, inseparable relationship between the inner and the outer, where the visual effect and the concept are one."

"Products," say Benjamin Hopf and Constantin Wortmann, founders of *büro für form*, "need more than perfect function and ergonomics; they need some poetry in order to be able to satisfy the need for dreams and emotion"; while Julian Brown claims that "the difference between good design and bad design is like the difference between a good story and a bad joke: one is worth hearing again and again; the other, preferably not!"

The relation between the function of design and the project of designing the future is strikingly brought out by the Bergamese architect and designer Riccardo Blumer. In Blumer's words, "It is fascinating to think of design as a field of advanced research on the future of man. Looking ahead in an attempt to address man's functional problems means not only being able to sit down better, illuminate better, or optimize the relationship between necessity and practice, but also discovering the underlying sentiments of the present time. Functionality is no longer merely the simplification of use, but also implies all the plans we make in life, first and foremost on the spiritual level.

This is why we can now speak freely about the functionality of the spirit. The beauty of the object provokes a feeling that constructs our life."

The Dutch designer Marcel Wanders expresses the same thought succinctly in this way. "We are here," he says "to create an environment of love, in which we can live with passion and make our most exciting dreams come true."

This brings me to the ethical implications of design. Ethical questions arise when we ask ourselves: what is this object for? Why are we making it? What is its use? Now it is possible to avoid raising such questions in an ethically relevant sense. An arms production company knows full well that its products - cluster bombs, fighter-jets and guided missiles - are destined to be used to bring about suffering and destruction in countries whose populations are in dire need of products of a totally different kind, like medicine and food. The arms producers would say: we know all that but it doesn't bother us in the least. The only thing that concerns us is profit and we are constantly putting in a great deal of effort, and investing huge amounts of money in research, to make our products more accurate, more efficient, more lethal, perhaps more streamlined, and therefore more aesthetically appealing, 'better' in all those ways. I once heard a hawk telling a dove at an exhibition of medieval instruments of torture used by the Spanish Inquisition that he found the exhibits 'astonishingly beautiful'. And there is no doubt that there is a sense in which a Mafia boss can be a good boss – in the sense that he can become richer and more powerful by ruthlessly and quite efficiently eliminating his rivals.

I strongly believe, however, that 'designing for prosperity' cannot ignore the ethical dimension. It is not just issues like avoiding waste and making products that are environment-friendly and more durable that are important here. It is the whole philosophy governing production and design that is at issue. Different designers have radically contrasting philosophies, with some of which it is not easy to agree. Stefano Giovannoni, for example, wonders whether we need new products. "Everybody in a developed society," he says, "is in possession of the objects that answer to every functional need. But to create wealth, companies have to produce in larger and larger quantities. On the one hand," Giovannoni continues, "we have no need for new products, but on the other hand we have to develop a new virtual system in order to anticipate the new and increasingly sophisticated fictional architecture of our desires. Products belonging to this kind of virtual reality are further and further removed from real function. Our reality is built step by step by annexing new virtual landscapes which extend the borders of our wonderland."

Among the products no-one really needs, but which still need to be produced in order to keep production companies happy, presumably one would have to include such 'virtual reality objects' as Giovannoni's Big Bubbles Soap Dish, the Big Switch lamp, the Magicbunny toothpick holder, the Molly weighing-scale, the Magò broom, the Alibaba vacuum jug, the Bombo chair, the Big Clip photo frame, the Bruce table-lighter, the Rimini cutlery drainer, the Rigatoni spaghetti storage jar, and the Johnny the Diver toilet-

plunger - all of which, through their 'warm sensorial appeal,' would form part of our imaginary world as we move towards what Giovannoni calls 'an emotional supermarket.'

Giovannoni's philosophy raises a host of ethical problems that need to be addressed. If, as he claims, 'everybody in a developed society is in possession of the objects that answer to every  need,' and if this creates a problem for the creation of wealth, then will the problem be solved by the production of the kind of non-functional 'virtual reality objects' Giovannoni thinks would cater for the 'fictional architecture of our desires' and extend 'the borders of our wonderland'? The problem becomes more acute, from an ethical point of view, if one places it in the context of scarcity and the abject poverty that still afflicts whole populations in the less prosperous parts of the world. An ethically sound 'design of prosperity' cannot fail to keep the less prosperous in mind and consider their needs.

Philippe Starck describes the situation starkly in this way:  "Today, the problem is not to produce more so that you can sell more.  The fundamental question is that of the product's right to exist.  And it is the designer's right and duty, in the first place, to question the legitimacy of the product, and that is how he too comes to exist.  Depending on what answer he or she comes up with, one of the most positive things a designer can do is to refuse to do anything.  This isn't always easy. Nevertheless, the designer should refuse when the object already exists and functions perfectly well.  Simply to repeat it would be a venal act, and one  which has serious consequences, impoverishing the wealth of the Earth and dulling the minds of people."  Rejecting the notion of 'inbuilt obsolescence', Starck claims that objects must be long-lived. "A good product", he says, "is a product which lasts."

Still, between the two extremes of producing objects no-one really needs and refusing to produce anything, one may consider a more challenging alternative.

Jane Atfield, the London-based architect and furniture designer, founder of Made of Waste, whose clients include Beams, Björl, Body Shop, Conran, Formica, Habitat, IKEA, Katherine Hamnett and Oreka, lays great stress on the social and communicative aspects of design and production.  "In the coming years," she says, "people will reject the dominance of consumerism and grow disillusioned with branding and materialism…  The reduced demand for choice and possessions will be replaced with an emphasis on social experiences and better-designed systems and networks of communication.  Product designers will be increasingly motivated by meeting real needs and solving problems connected with children, the aged, the disabled, single people and families that find themselves in difficulty.  An interactive process will develop, with the designers acting as enablers and facilitators for the ideas and requirements of these and other social groups.  Moral and political factors," Atfield adds, "will be important in determining what is developed and where, with localised solutions and low-tech resources becoming more important.  Environmental concerns will increase in value over profit margins with, for example, materials, buildings and objects being routinely recycled."

Avoiding waste, addressing environmental issues and meeting the real needs of people, Atfield thinks, will feature high on the list of priorities of designers and producers alike. This is a far cry from the kind of 'virtual reality' scenario envisaged by Giovannoni and promoted by video games, soap operas and fake reality shows.

The ideal combination of the psychological, aesthetic and ethical dimensions of design philosophy is, once again, admirably expressed in the mission statement of the four independent Australian design groups that make up Sydney 612, who sum up their vision in this way: "We are concerned with expressing regional difference rather than the sameness of globalization. We are all committed to a future design that enhances rather than degrades our environment, and adds to the cultural well-being of society. Our aim is to create beautiful objects, which have quality and integrity and inspire others to incorporate design into their daily lives. The design direction that we follow inspires, educates and gives people a feeling of happiness."

Allow me to illustrate this point by referring to a short story from my collection of *Tales for Our Times*. It's the story of a man who, in a sense, combines the virtues we would all like to associate with the ideal designer/producer/trader – namely, intelligence, foresight, ingenuity and skill; whose product becomes a true object of desire for reasons that go beyond the traditional requirements of function and form; and who finds himself in circumstances where he can exploit his talents and the object's good qualities to the best advantage. The man is a lantern-maker in a village that lacks electricity. People flock to his tiny shop to buy lanterns, not only for their ordinary, daily use, but also because of the rumour, originated or allowed to spread by the lantern-maker himself, that one of the lanterns would one day contain a precious stone. No-one knows where the stone will be hidden, whether at the core of the candle, or the end of the wick, or beneath a false bottom, but all believe it will be placed somewhere and hope they will be the lucky ones. That is why the man sells many more lanterns than he would have done had there not been this widespread belief. But the rumour turns out to be just that, and the hope of finding the precious stone a false hope.

It need not be like that. Reflecting on the ideal qualities of design allows us to envisage alternative scenarios to the ones to which we are constantly being exposed. In my room at the university I have a stack of newspapers I haven't read – recent issues of the Sunday Times of London, the main section of the paper together with all the supplements, including sport, business, appointments, travel, property, fashion and the arts. What strikes me is the stark contrast between the news section and the rest. The headlines on the front page all speak of war, sleaze, political intrigue, violence and death: 'The laughing 9/11 bombers', 'Stolen body parts implanted in NHS patients', 'Security meltdown at airports', 'Terror in the skies', 'Drug victims told to expect early death', 'New migrant wave fuels crime fears', 'Judges named and shamed', and so on. The supplements, on the contrary, offer glamour, job opportunities, nights at the opera, dinners by candlelight, country retreats and holidays in the sun.

The contrast couldn't be more pronounced. It is as if we were being invited to live in two diametrically opposite worlds – the world of violence, famine, deceit and political

corruption on the one hand, and the world of glamour, luxury and prosperity on the other. Caught in the tug-of-war between Eros and Thanatos, Love and Death, Reality and Illusion, the Ideal World of Forms and the world of everyday life and experience, we are forced to live schizophrenically. The world as it appears on the front page resembles quite closely the kind of situation described by Hobbes in Book 13 of *Leviathan*. It is the man-wolf-to-man situation, the *bellum omnium contra omnes*, the war of every man against everyone. The other world is meant to provide an escape, an illusion, a promise and a dream. Can we close the gap? Can we heal the wound?

In the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Marx wrote: 'Human beings make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.' He ends that paragraph by stating, memorably, that 'The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.'[2]

From the fact that no civilisation has survived the ravages of war, that there has hardly been a decade in the history of humanity that has not been marked by destruction and violent death on a large scale, one may be forgiven for thinking that this is a situation that cannot be helped, that it is just part of human nature, the dark side of the human condition, the curse of the gods on the human race. Faced by such terrible man-made catastrophes as Hiroshima and Ruanda, Darfur and Iraq, one can understand ethnologists like Konrad Lorenz who claim that violence and aggression are just part of the structural make-up of human beings, that there is an innate violent streak in all of us that must come out, that cannot be controlled, that must sooner or later produce Arthur Koestler's Darkness at Noon. There is a long string of myths that convey this message and represent it symbolically, from the story of Cain killing his brother Abel in Genesis to the murder of Piggy by his schoolmates in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies.*

Fortunately, this is not the only picture of the human condition that has left a mark on our collective imagination. There are alternative stories that leave room for hope. In the last play of Aeschylus' trilogy, Orestes is pursued by the Furies because he has killed his mother in revenge for her killing his father Agamemnon. The Furies demand his death, but he is absolved from his blood guilt by a jury of citizens set up by Athena, the goddess of the city. The Furies protest that their privileges have been usurped. Athena replies: 'We are in a new world now; we can no longer appeal to the raw strength of the warrior, relying on might for right and revenge for justice. In our new world people must be civilised, and resolve problems by co-operation and agreement.'

When Pandora opened her notorious box, she let out all the evils except one: hope. Apparently the Greeks considered hope as a threat, but without it humanity lives in despair. In the story, hope is represented as leaving the box weakly and reluctantly, but in effect it is much stronger than any of the evils that affect us.

---

2   The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Marx Engels Works, 8:115, trans. A. Wood.

Leaving room for hope means sharing an awareness that there are challenges we have to face in designing our future and the future of the planet – challenges that have to do with the use of new technologies, the generation and distribution of wealth, population growth, fair trade, social justice, global warming, communication networks and the resolution of conflict.  It also means believing that these challenges can be met if we make the right decisions, and that we have enough indications *in the present* of the way we have to go if we want to make best use of our resources.  For that hope to be kept alive, the design of prosperity must include not just those of us who live in affluent societies, but also those who, so far, have not had the opportunity to prosper.

---