

# Teaching design through social and historical contexts

**Terry Liddament**  
Goldsmiths' College London

The history of design is in large part the history of the everyday artefacts which surround us in our daily lives. To understand these artefacts properly students should see them in their social and historical context. Our teaching needs at some stage to introduce students to the main elements shaping this context: influences from the past, material resources, manufacturing techniques, changing needs, marketing, advertising, as well as the growth of urbanisation, the visual environment, transport, industry, and leisure each play an important part in helping provide this context.

In becoming more aware of such influences, students should not only be able to take greater pleasure in studying artefacts both past and present, but will also be better able to make informed choices, both as consumers, and as citizens.

## □ The Past

Gaining some understanding of the past can help students come to a better understanding of the present; this applies to artefacts as much as to other historical constructs. One way of bringing this out is to get students to think about their personal past; telling someone about the things that have happened to them, what they have done and so on, can help to explain what kind of person they are. It would, of course, not be possible to do this without one's personal memories of the past; without memory, one would have no such knowledge, and a society with no 'memory' of its past might be in a rather similar position. Society needs some knowledge of its past in order to make some sense of the present!

This can help students to understand that we can learn a lot about the reasons for the presence, appearance, purpose, and function of everyday artefacts by making some systematic study of the ways in which their earlier counterparts have changed and developed through time. We can also learn a lot about the way people lived by studying the artefacts they used. Studying the appearance of those artefacts, and the changes in them can help students not only to a greater appreciation of the past, but also to a greater appreciation of present-day design.

There are of course, a great variety of artefacts which can serve as a basis for this kind of study. Many can be found in local museums and other places of interest; but local buildings, clothes, domestic items, family photograph albums etc. are also a rich resource, and much can be learned from studying these.<sup>1</sup>

Many older local buildings may have undergone a change of use; an old school may have become a library or community centre, or a workhouse may have been converted into a block of flats and maisonettes. However, there will doubtless be a good many clues to their earlier use surviving in their present-day appearance. Students can be encouraged to study older buildings in their locality, looking out for such clues, and thus become more sensitive to the past, and to change in their environment.

Again, many buildings may have been 'dressed up' in earlier styles — the Victorians for example, were fond of Medieval Gothic, and many of their public buildings clearly reflect this. Such examples can help students to appreciate that designers frequently 'borrow' from the more distant past because it



represents a much admired period in history; and it also helps show what an important ingredient nostalgia can be as a design factor — a factor much evidenced, for instance, by the frequent ‘Tudor’ and ‘Georgian’ revivals in contemporary house building.

## □ New Invention

Students can also be brought to a better understanding of how new inventions can present designers with challenges, by studying the earlier forms of present-day artefacts. For example, the first motor cars looked rather like the horse-drawn carriages they were seeking to replace; again, early electric cookers relied heavily for their form and appearance, on older traditional solid-fuel stoves. Students can learn to appreciate via such examples, that designers may find it difficult to break away from established ideas about the way things should look, or that sticking to familiar forms may be a way of reassuring the public. Again, students can come to an understanding of the difficulties facing designers if they lack the materials and techniques that would make it possible to create new designs. Early motor cars for example, relied heavily on traditional carriage-making skills for their construction — and this is clearly reflected in their appearance — while early electrical appliances such as cookers were tied to traditional materials processing techniques such as casting in iron.

## □ The Evolution of Form

Students can be encouraged to study the changing appearance of artefacts in order to attain a greater appreciation of the many ways in which developments in manufacturing techniques, new materials, and the changing ideas about the way artefacts should look, can each have some influence on design. Ordinary everyday artefacts such as clothes, domestic appliances, or radios can tell stories about their evolution, and this can be revealed in the changes they undergo through time — stories written in terms of evolving materials and manufacturing methods as well as changes in the needs of the users, and also their attitudes and values. Artefacts express not only the technology of the day, but also the significance and value that people attach to them; the form of a radio can express the power and glamour of a technology which can bring the world ‘out there’ directly to them;<sup>2</sup> the form of a motor car can express the excitement of speed; and domestic appliances can express notions such as hygiene, or efficiency through their appearance.<sup>3</sup> Much can be done to sensitise students to such issues through the study of the evolving forms of familiar artefacts.

## □ Mass Production and Consumerism

Students also need some understanding of the ways in which production and marketing methods help shape the context of design; the marketing of many everyday products is only possible with production systems which control and carry out the various stages in the manufacture, and packaging of the product. Foodstuffs provide clear examples of this; the marketing, for instance, of canned drinks involves the production of millions of cans per week, and students can be introduced to the constraints and opportunities faced by

designers and manufacturers by studying production systems such as these.

Again, packaging design — and the environmental issues raised by this — can be studied via the consideration of this kind of production system. The evolution of packaging systems can be traced back to the development of products such as Coca-Cola at the turn of the century, and this in turn can lead to a consideration by students, of the ways in which design serves to establish product ‘image’ — an important factor in building up the large volume of sales which sophisticated production techniques need in order to pay back the often heavy development and manufacturing costs involved.

Staying with product ‘image’ for a moment, students of design can very profitably study the evolution of advertising design; early manufacturers’ catalogues, and advertising posters can be an effective way of doing this. From these, students can learn not only about the techniques and methods of early advertising design, but also learn to unpack the often subtle social and cultural ‘messages’ encapsulated by them.<sup>4</sup> This kind of activity can help students to develop a more critical awareness of the impact that contemporary advertising (much of it often aimed at them anyway) may have on consumers.

Another approach to the cultivation of critical awareness among students of design, is through a study of the work of organisations such as the Advertising Standards Authority, the Consumers Association (publishing ‘Which’ magazine), or again the part that government legislation plays through, for example, the Consumer Protection Act (1986).

## □ Economics and Demography

Aside from the technology of mass production, economics and population make-up form vital parameters in the context of contemporary product design; students can be introduced to these factors via the study of a wide variety of products. Change through time is a vital ingredient, and by looking at population growth, and other population-related factors such as the changing sizes of population sub-groups together with the growth (or decline) in their income, students can link such information with trends in sales of many products, and thus gain insight into some of the large-scale factors tending to govern developments in product design.

Much of the basic information for this kind of study can be collected from market research reports, magazines, and newspapers; and publications such as ‘Social Trends’<sup>5</sup> also provide a very useful summary. Working from such data, students can begin to understand which population groups offer the best markets for goods; what kinds of goods are likely to sell in large quantities (and to whom); how changes in income affect sales, and how longer-term population trends can affect the development of new products and services.

Particularly relevant (for our students) is the way in which teenage culture has been both ‘created’ by designers, manufacturers, and advertisers, and has also evolved its own responses via the pressures that younger consumers bring to bear on a huge variety of products, many of which can serve as an absorbing vehicle for design studies.



Thus students can learn that designers and manufacturers may sometimes be largely responsible for creating fashions (e.g. such as denims, mini-skirts, or platform shoes); and on the other hand may be responding to cultural changes (such as the emergence of reggae, or heavy metal music).

## □ The Environment

Environmental issues are of considerable topical interest; from the point of view of design studies, it is intriguing and enlightening, both to disentangle the design issues from those of a more general environmental kind, and also to point up the many ways in which design relates to the environment.

In general environmental terms, there is currently a growing awareness of the danger from pollution, and the destruction of natural resources, and students can profitably study many of these issues in relation to design. Here, the work of environmental scientists, the waste management industry, and government legislation can form a useful background upon which students can draw in their design studies. Design decisions about the environment involve many people, including architects, planners, civil engineers, local councils, and central government, and students can study the ways in which the work of such specialist groups and organisations relates to design in the environment. Public enquiries often reflect the controversial nature of proposals relating to environmental issues; these controversies frequently offer intriguing insights into attitudes of the day as they impinge on environmental design issues (e.g. motorways, power stations, major urban building projects etc.).

The growth of public consciousness about our 'heritage', reflected in the rise of open air museums such as Coalbrookdale (Shropshire) or Beamish (Yorkshire), or in the desire to preserve buildings from the even quite recent past (e.g. Art deco cinemas), can serve as a focal point for studies not only in environmental design, but also of society's changing attitudes to what is of value, or what is important and thus worth preserving in terms of the environment.<sup>6</sup>

From such considerations, students can learn that architects, planners, and others concerned with environmental design often have to strive to create a balance between different, and often conflicting needs; that it can be difficult to create a harmony between, say, older buildings and new ones, or to pay adequate attention to the needs not only of different groups such as children, the elderly, pedestrians, and motorists, but also of people needing access to shops, stores, banks, medical centres, and so on.

Advertising and public information signs clearly have a high environmental profile, and students can gain much from a study of these. Shops need to advertise their presence, and advertisers need to get peoples' attention in order to get their message across; students can approach such issues by working on ways of doing this without creating an environmental mess — national chainstores can retain their identity without ruining the character of local architecture, and utilities such as banks, building societies, and underground stations can be styled to relate to their surroundings, as well as conveying essential information to the public. Design studies in this kind of context can do much

to improve 'visual literacy' as well as raising students' awareness of such issues.

Industrial pollution has of course, been an issue, one way or another, since early in the 19th Century,<sup>7</sup> and in studying the historical background to this, students can gain informative insight into more recent government legislation such as the Clean Air Act (1956) or the Control of Pollution Act (1974).

Factories today are usually sited on industrial estates away from residential areas; studying maps, particularly of Post-WW2 new towns such as Milton Keynes or Basildon, and comparing them with earlier maps (e.g., of Manchester in the 19th Century) can be an illuminating way of noting the development of ideas in urban planning to accommodate a mix of industrial commercial, residential, and leisure facilities.

Most people are today aware of 'recycling' as an environmental issue; some authorities (e.g. Camden in London) are actively involved in the development of collection facilities for an increasingly large range of recyclable materials. This perhaps, is not surprising, given that some 15 million drink cans, 35 million food cans, 14 million glass containers, and 5,500 tons of newspapers are discarded every day! This kind of information can form a starting point for many kinds of design study, ranging from the development of local (or even school-based) recycling programmes, through to the design (or re-design) of packaging. Here, students can learn that packaging is not just about the carrying of brand images (discussed above), but also concerns issues such as the safe transportation of products from manufacturers to the point-of-sale, their safe storage, and also their maintenance in good condition. Packaging can be expensive (sometimes more expensive than the product it contains); but effectively deployed, it serves as vital link between manufacturer and customer, and students can study the advantages as well as the disadvantages.

## □ The Challenge of Designing

Some of our students may well be interested, not only in learning about design in its social and historical context, but in design as a possible future career; indeed, the kind of study advocated here may well stimulate such an interest. Students can learn, both by studying design issues in the kinds of real-world context offered here, and through school-based design projects, that design today is often (if not usually) teamwork involving a number of different specialisms. Some designers may work on products, while others may be responsible for the manufacturing systems which produce them. Again, some specialists will be concerned with the design of packaging, and the packaging systems, while others will specialise in the design of advertising or retail outlets. Design activity today covers a wide field of professional expertise, and we can introduce students to some of the main aspects through a broad and balanced design study course.

Of course, with their professional expertise, comes power, and designers are increasingly going to be concerned with the responsible exercise of this power. This raises a number of issues which are relevant to our students on design courses: designers must share some of the responsibility for the



problems which consumerist societies in the western world have generated. Many of the products they design are made from natural materials which may be difficult or impossible to replace; the products themselves (e.g. motor cars) may burn fuel contributing to air pollution and also to the 'greenhouse effect'; packaging, the spin-off from advertising and marketing design, can also waste precious natural resources, and create environmental hazards. Students can usefully learn that such problems are avoidable with careful and thoughtful design.<sup>8</sup> Designers can use their influence in many ways to overcome threats to the environment and the waste of resources — together with manufacturers they can:

- Avoid the wasteful use of natural materials;
- Use synthetic substitutes such as plastics, where this causes less damage;
- Use recycled (and recyclable) materials where possible;
- Design products to last longer;
- Design for greater energy efficiency;
- Develop designs (e.g. for vehicles, power generators etc. to utilise; natural or renewable energy sources.

Studying design issues such as these can help to give students some idea of the many possible ways in which designers can use their skills to reduce waste of materials and energy, and reduce the threat to the environment.

## □ Design and Values

I have avoided explicit reference to major design movement (e.g. Arts & Crafts or Modernism etc.) at least partly because of the shelf-miles of books already written on such topics, but also because the study of such movements, although illuminating, is probably not the best way to introduce students to many of the issues raised in this discussion. Writers on design often subtly (unwittingly perhaps) infuse their own values into the work of those they study, and this can be confusing for the beginner; yet the works (primary sources) of designers may themselves be difficult for beginners to grapple with. Nevertheless, we need to encourage students to deepen their understanding of how society values (and evaluates) design. Much of what society does value, is of course immanent in the artefacts we have been discussing here; it is, for example, natural to slip into discussing (say) furniture design in terms of suitability of materials, soundness of construction, fitness for purpose etc. In a sense these are values which are infused into our talk about furniture (although not everyone will espouse such values, and not all furniture reflects them). Nevertheless, students can learn much about what is meant by 'values' in this context, by studying furniture and learning to look for such qualities. Later, they may learn that these values found particularly succinct expression in the work of designers belonging to the Arts & Crafts movement: but they will have discovered them through their own investigations rather than 'second-hand', and this can be a valuable aspect of students' learning through design studies.

Students need to study 'values' in design through different contexts; many artefacts have won *permanent affection*

through a special charm which has grown out of popular acclaim. Examples might be the Volkswagen Beetle, or the Coca-Cola bottle. On the other hand the world of fashion emphasises *style, image, and constant change*, with a continuous search for the new and original. Differing contexts 'value' design in different ways. People have different needs and interests; society changes through time to produce new ideas and generate new attitudes. Students need to learn that these differences and changes are bound to be reflected in a great variety of design values. This, in the end, is perhaps one of the best reasons for introducing historical and social contexts into design teaching.

## □ References

1. There are major collections of artefacts in the Science Museum (London) and the Victoria & Albert Museum (London), and also the recently opened Design Museum (Butlers Wharf, London).
2. For a unique collection spanning the (pre-transistor) history of radio, contact the Vintage Wireless Museum, Rosedale Road, Dulwich.
3. For a fascinating account of the development of domestic technology, see Bose, Bereano & Malloy: *Household Technology & the Social Construction of Housework in Technology & Choice* (Ed. M.C. Lafollette & J.K. Stine) Chicago Press (1991).
4. Organisations such as the Electricity Council, and the Gas Council have good collections of early posters, as also does the London Transport Museum, and the Victoria & Albert Museum.
5. Published annually by HMSO and available in most major public libraries, this contains a useful digest of relevant statistical information on many consumerist issues relating to design & manufacture.
6. The growth of the 'Heritage Industry' has generated some debate among industrial archaeologists and design historians; it would be cynical to dismiss this growth as mere commercial exploitation however. Students can learn much from such sources.
7. For an interesting account of the political, social, and economic issues regarding air pollution in 19th Century Britain, see C. Flick: *the Movement for Smoke Abatement in 19th Century Britain in Technology & Choice* (ibid.).
8. Current packaging technology offers not only the biodegradable pack, but also the edible pack! see *The Guardian* September 13th 1991.