

The Designer and his Society

The design and development of consumer goods is a complex process, particularly as far as first stage marketing. However knowing the systematic processes that designed products go through becomes almost inessential when social, moral and even political consequences of designing itself, are considered. It is found that designers are responsible not only to their employers in enabling them to make a profit but to all members of society. Their efforts can change the external environment of the consumer; for example the use of the motor car affects not only the owner of the vehicle but the pedestrian, and indeed nature itself, since it will be transformed to fit motorways. Internally, that is within the immediate environment of the consumer there is also change; for example television has changed the nature of entertainment. However this is not to say that the process of the development of a product is totally unimportant.

There are two major ways in which the designing of a new product can occur. Obviously, invention is the first of these two. Invention produces a 'new concept', a new principle that can be applied to old problems or create a completely new product. And design is the process of applying that principle. However the inventor need not necessarily design the product or even put it into marketable form. For example Kenwood, during World War Two, identified the basic principles from which have emerged the food processors, but others now design and market them, basing them on Kenwood's concepts.

The second method is the modification of existing products. Generally this occurs at the request of the manufacturer to keep in step with technological development. New technology usually improves a product thus making it preferable to its earlier form and this obviously results in competition. Normally most manufacturers will keep up-to-date, because otherwise their product will inevitably fall in the sales ratings. There are various other reasons for modification such as that, materials formerly used may have become too expensive or just unobtainable. Furthermore, a product may not sell as well as may have been originally expected and modification is required. Indeed during research it may mean trying wrong ways first, and failures are designed (not deliberately of course) simply because it is not possible to make totally accurate and reliable predictions about consumer responses.

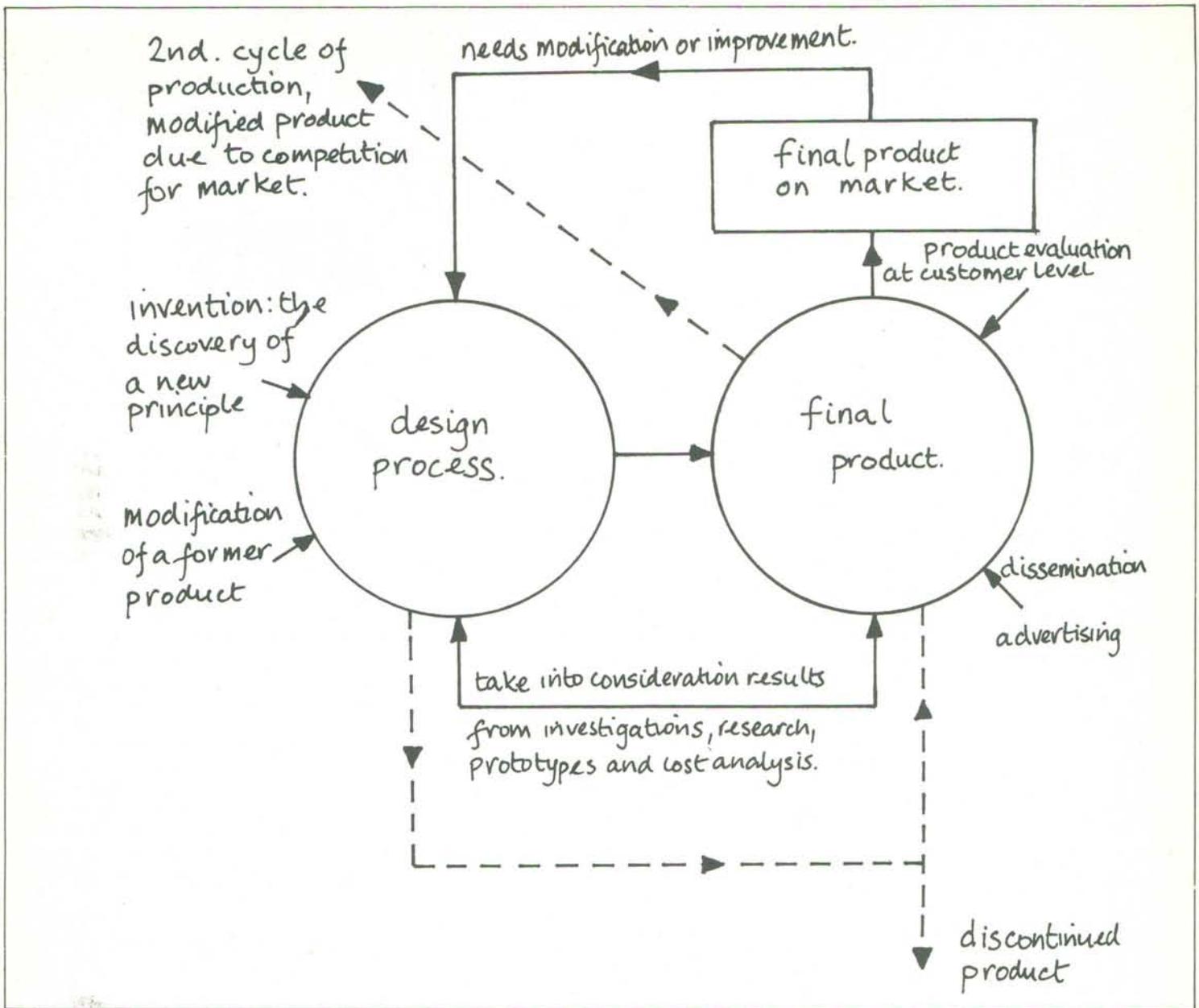
Therefore, as with most things in life, designers must make some concessions to fit the 'desires' of the public, whether that means changing the shape of a product or giving it a different shade of colour. Besides, salesmen want unsatisfied customers, so that they can sell the latest development of the original product. This is almost a suggestion that 'happiness is round the corner' with just one more improvement. Yet surely 'newness' for the sake of it is an aspect of modern society that need not necessarily be for the better. For does not this mean that the industrially advanced societies are using even more materials than are actually needed,

except perhaps to satisfy the vanity of the consumer – to impress the Jones's down the road – and therefore inevitably depriving the underdeveloped nations of the world, of not perhaps the same products but rather the essential items necessary for survival? Surely each individual has some moral responsibility to the much neglected and deprived areas of the world?

However let me continue with the development of a product. Before the final product reaches the market, the results from investigations and research, prototypes, cost analyses and consumer research have to be analytically assessed. By far, the most important test of a product must surely come during product dissemination and advertising, for it can either sell it or make it flop, especially small consumer goods. It is almost possible to say that good advertising can even sell a bad product, particularly with the accepted importance of advertisements in the selling of consumer goods. However if the product does not sell, especially as well as expected, it often means the designer must modify and improve the product – that is, go back to the drawing board. At this stage a simple diagram enables us to have a better understanding of this process. (see following page).

The designer is not really free to produce any type of product in any way he thinks best. Indeed in many respects he is extremely restricted, especially since he has to design the product as economically as he can in order for the manufacturer to make a reasonable profit. In modern society the aspects of mass marketing are an important element. The designer is creating something to be sold, probably to large numbers of people whom he has never met. Thus it means he must accept as his guidelines, and work upon, the preconceived characteristics of an average person of the population. Furthermore, besides using economical materials, he has to make the production of the item fit existing machinery, for buying new equipment for each new or modified product could prove too expensive. However the manufacturer is committed to the investors for they have put capital into a project that may prove to be a fatal risk and thus undoubtedly all sides suffer anxiety when new products are developed and put onto the market. But the fact that a low retail price overrides virtually every other consideration, simply because it will make a larger profit for the manufacturers and investors, seems rather unjust, particularly when goods are made only just strong enough to produce the results intended without the danger of failure, especially during the guarantee period. Often designers have to settle for cheaper alternatives, for example washing machines cost less to produce when they do not contain rust proof parts.

Designers are also limited by the 'function' that the item is supposed to perform. The purposes of things are the purposes of men and thus change according to who utilizes the objects. Often consumers buy goods because their appearance is appealing to the eye and this is another important



aspect for designers to consider, although it may really be basically an artistic one. For example, consumers generally take for granted such things as neat fittings, smoothness and good curves. It may have cost extra effort for the designer, more time and labour and probably more money yet such little features are often selling points and often also functional. Other things such as accessibility are important, although often overlooked by consumers; for example, cassette tapes must fit into the cassette easily; connecting plugs and wires must be placed at appropriate places; and generally items have to be designed to allow the user to maintain them and use them comfortably and efficiently. However this is not to say that all things must serve purposes, for consumers also buy 'useless' that is 'functionless' ornaments, such as jewellery, simply because they are pleasurable to look at or wear.

Design evolves as society evolves and is obviously affected by economic and social factors as well as technological developments. Yet designed productions can often scar the environment because most large scale designs such as nuclear power stations outlast human beings. So what are the moral obligations of designers? Where do their loyalties lie? Should they just perform their job adequately or should they consider the consequences of their designs for society? For example, as with the nuclear power station the designers have participated in the creation of a potential hazard to life and nature and are therefore leaving the

future with problems instead of benefits. Yet these questions do not just apply to designers but to 'Everyman'. For the preservation of the scarcity of natural life and indeed humanity is being greatly underestimated by modern man. Is it not the responsibility of each one of us to leave the future generation with the same sensation of beauty that we have enjoyed in the few remaining 'natural' areas of the country? Furthermore why should not we be able to stand in the middle of a busy town and still see beauty? Why have we deprived ourselves and simply continued to allow ourselves only to see concrete and glass spotted with specks of 'green'? Indeed just by 'being here' man has changed and will continue to change the environment and 'design' is this process of change.

Furthermore, on the general consumer level, the future poses tremendous problems, for the richer societies of the world cannot continue to consume selfishly and as rapidly as they do. It is necessary to form a more adequate consciousness of the declining resources of the world; not that these declining resources are a new problem but, the vast difference between the living standards of the 'rich world' and the 'poor world' and the unnecessary concepts of relative poverty that exist, have to change in order to gain improvement in the use of the world's resources and to give a more equal share to the developing poorer nations, for the designers to truly design for the 'real needs' and not the 'relative needs' of communities.