consuming identity

furniture, identity and mass customisation

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A text might have one author, but there are many people involved in the process.

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Consuming identity: Furniture, identity and mass customisation

As a designer, I am constantly aware of my surroundings. Every detail of our life is designed, from the alarm sound that wakes me, the slippers I put on when I get out of bed, the cup I drink my coffee from or the bike I ride to school with. Even the route I ride my bike to school.

Everything.

And as I am aware of all this, I try to understand how and why things are the way they are. It seems too easy that I simply choose out of a selection of, let's say, 15 different styles of bike handles. If I find one that pleases my aesthetic sense, seems to be in perfect working condition, do I accept it the way it looks like when I unpack it? If I take matters into my own hand and saw of the front part of the handle, eliminating the part I never touch, the function stays intact, so does the aesthetic value.

Preface

With the process of making a conscious evaluation of the form and the decision to cut of an unnecessary (to me) part, I instantly change the message my bike sends to the outside world. From ordinary racing bike to hipster single speed, through some simple adjustments.

What interests me is this process of evaluating the objects I surround myself with. They are clearly a reflection of my taste, values and wealth - or lack thereof. Even in my absence, they reveal part of who or how I am.

But even as someone who is working in the field of design, it would be too time consuming to design everything I own myself. So I adapt existing objects to my needs; physical needs, emotional needs, everything can be taken into consideration and be modified. In doing so, I actively engage with the object, modify it, and subsequently modify my identity as well.

In my thesis I try to understand why things are the way they are in the most private space every person has: the home. Everything written below applies to the home as well, but it is the one place I have the most control of, in the way it looks as well as the way it functions.

Introduction

'Same Same but different.' A sentence everyone who has ever travelled to Thailand will be familiar with (and even if one has never visited the country, one might still recognise the phrase). It is often used by street vendors as a reply regarding the authenticity of an object they have for sale, meaning that the object seems similar to an existing one, but is different in (unspecified) instances.

Interpreting the message of this phrase a bit more loosely, it also makes for an interesting observation regarding people. Although every human being is born different, compared to any other, there seems to be a comfort or even need to express one's individuality by portraying a certain style. A combination of clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms and other visual factors help to generate and support one's identity. Beyond simply expressing myself, I have the opportunity to design myself, alter my body in any way imaginable, and thus control the image I portray to the outside world. But the self-designing process does not stop with my bodily appearance, it stretches into every medium that reflects my identity and can be crafted/designed to portray myself in the way that I want to be perceived.

As a designer I can't help but notice the way that industrially mass-produced goods are used to portray identity. In doing so, the consumer automatically evaluates the product by his or her own standards based on ingrained values and dictated styles. The fact that clothing and other measures concerning the body are used to portray identity is evident to everyone, but those are certainly not the only products that we employ to show the world who we are, and who we want to be. My visual appearance is exposed to the evaluation of everyone I cross paths with, but what I find much more intriguing is the role a person's home plays in the process of creating and forming identity.

How and why am I choosing what I furnish my house with? Can objects really be a representation of the owner, particularly as the world around us is changing at an increasing speed? And can mass-produced goods adapt to me? Or is it me who is adapting to them?
Craftsmen used to produce goods specifically tailored to fit the client's requirements. Since the industrial revolution made goods much easier affordable for a bigger audience, however, having something tailor-made to one's requirements has been overshadowed by the possibility of owning multiple items. These items may not be exactly as needed but are usually very close to, and at a significantly cheaper price

point. This enables the general public to give a complete impression of aesthetic choices, values and social status through a consciously curated home.

Initially not visible to everyone, a home was more private than one's public appearance. Given this shift, is the "connected world" changing the way we portray our home, and subsequently the way we see ourselves, as well as the way we look physically? And with the rising consciousness of "self", how can design adapt to the increasing interest in and desire for "personalised" objects?

In the design industry, buzzwords like 'personalisation' and 'customisation' are frequently used to portray the endless possibility of adopting and adapting an object. Being able to choose from an array of styles, shapes, finishes and structural compositions gives the consumer the impression of being in charge of their self-design. Swedish furniture retailer IKEA uses this idea of mass-customised individuality through standardised objects very prominently in its German slogan, "Wohnst du noch, oder lebst du schon?" which could be translated as "Are you just living, or are you alive?" In other words, is your identity and individuality worthy of expressing – through our products – or are you just like everyone else? On closer inspection though, is this focus on representation, at every level of our existence, really there more to benefit the spectator? Or are we hiding behind our possessions rather than using them to express who we are? Are objects storytellers of who we want to be; selling a better version of ourselves?

What would it take to design an object based on the identity of the consumer, rather than having it dictate who he or she is?

Home:
a playground for identity

Emily Henderson, Introducing my new living room

> "I can't tell you how nice it finally is to have a pulled together living room; long time coming. It's happy and colorful and bright, with enough leather and wood to make Brian happy, and enough crazy to make me happy. Somedays I long to be someone more sophisticated with really refined taste, and then I find a Victorian baby rocker on the side of the street and decide that its perfect for my baby. So there's that…… Is it too crazy? Or just me?"[1]

1 Henderson, Emily. "Introducing my living room". Styled by Emily Henderson, posted June 7, 2013. Web – blog entry.

This final paragraph of a blog entry by interior stylist Emily Henderson is a perfect example of how people treat their living space as an extension of their persona; it even includes a very straightforward view on gender specific tastes in material (enough leather for Brian, her husband, so he still has a piece of furniture that he can connect to as being manly). She also makes it very clear that the current look of her living room is not a permanent state. When she feels like changing her identity, she will very likely change the set up of her living room accordingly.

In order to better understand how certain standards concerning the home came to be, the following paragraphs are a summarised investigation of the history of the home in the western culture, and its link to identity. The historical facts are extracted from the book "Objects of Desire" by Adrian Forty[2].

2 Adrian Forty. *Objects of desire: design and society since 1750.* London: Thames & Hudson: 1986. p.101-119.

The history of the home

The history of the home as a reflection of identity dates back to the Industrial Revolution. Prior to that, most production and commerce was carried out from home. The home was understood to be both work and living space and the duality in purpose was reflected in the way it was outfitted. With production moved to factories, workers were placed in an environment that was beyond their control.

Being physically removed from home, workers found themselves in oppressive conditions, due to the way factories and offices were set up and operated. This made them develop a clear distinction between their place of work and their home. Wearing different clothes at home and at work was a simple but clear manifestation of this division. As a result of this, people began to see their home as a haven, a space to furnish entirely according to their taste and understanding it as a counterpart to their place of work. They viewed their home as a kind of "ground zero", disconnected from everything good in the public world and everything bad in the domestic world. "It was to turn the home into a place of unreality, a place where illusions flourished."[3]

For those in higher positions the distinction between home and work came from a different perspective. Initially living close to the factory, over time they felt the need to remove themselves from their workplace as "they found it increasingly brutal and deceitful".[4]
With both the working class and the upper class experiencing a shift in what "home" stood for, and the intention to make home resemble work as little as possible, a clear distinction arose in the types of furniture designed for both. Up to the 20th century workspaces were utilitarian and austerely furnished, an environment countered at

3
Forty 1986 (see footnote 2) p. 101.

4
Houghton, W.E. "The Victorian frame of mind", New Haven, 1957, p. 341. in Forty 1986.

home with plush, colourful and soft-looking furniture.

The idea that domestic décor expressed personal character came out of a general 19th century fascination with appearances. The more reserved people were in public, the more they had to scan each other for clues in their appearance and possessions to get a feel for their true character.

A then-popular field of pseudo science called "physiognomy"[5] was partly responsible for this, and although its popularity faded, part of it is still known today, like the (imagined) resemblance between humans and their pets.

By the late 19th century, it was primarily the woman's character that was revealed in the furnishing of the house. The two were linked to such an extent that a woman who failed to express her personality through her house was seen to lack femininity. The house as a symbol for women and furthermore the house representing the woman who decorated it, is not a phenomenon exclusive to modern times. The symbolic link between a woman and the womb (a house of sorts) has been present through all cultures and times.

As the domestic environment became a showcase of the occupant's identity, they went to great lengths to present the "right" image of themselves. The market for home furnishing advice books and magazines grew, advocating the notion that furniture represented identity. Manufacturers took advantage of the fact that people bought what was furthering their public image. To this day, people are still driven to catalogues of furniture in the quest to find a persona.

5 Physiognomy: (from the Gk. physis meaning "nature" and gnomon meaning "judge" or "interpreter") is the assessment of a person's character or personality from his or her outer appearance, especially the face. The term can also refer to the general appearance of a person,object, or terrain, without reference to its implied characteristics, as in the physiognomy of a plant community.

"There is not a single object in all that room - common, modern, vulgar… but it becomes tragical, if rightly read. That furniture so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood - is there nothing to be learnt from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever become part of a home?".[6]

6
John Ruskin.
Letter to The Times,
25th of May 1854.

In a letter to The Times in 1854, art critic John Ruskin seemed troubled by the new style of furniture that had evolved with the Industrial Revolution. As everything became readily available, people didn't consider buying furniture for life anymore. Hence, everything looked as new as it was. Furniture, previously handed down to the younger generations as heirlooms, lost its emotional connection. Instead of resting on the chaise longue that their great-grandparents had had custom made for them, younger family members now rested on an industrially produced couch; devoid of history in both emotional value and signs of use.

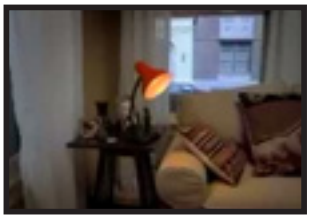
In my opinion, this is a phenomenon that consumers are yet to recover from. The open encouragement of a disposable attitude to commercial goods and furniture is wonderfully depicted in an IKEA television commercial from 2007. Hollywood director Spike Jonze was hired to direct the one-minute long spot. It shows a working desk lamp get picked up from the side table it sat on and put outside on the curb next to a trash bag. The lamp sits on the curb the whole day, the light outside goes dim, and through a window you see the woman who threw out the lamp sitting down on the sofa and switching on her new lamp. The camera points back at the old lamp , which is now sitting outside in the rain. A man walks past, stops, looks at the camera and says:

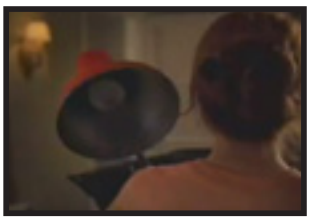
> "Any of you feel bad for this lamp? That is because you are crazy. It has no feelings, and the new one is much better!"

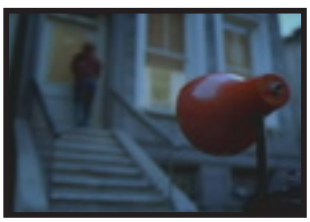
The lamp is still in perfect working condition; the function is still provided. But the stylistic satisfaction, or the excitement about the lamp, is no longer present. Does this translate to seeing furniture, beyond its usability, as a means of entertainment for the senses? Has the need for distraction and enjoyment evolved to such heights that even furniture must perform in this way? Has the home moved from being a sanctuary to being a theme park?

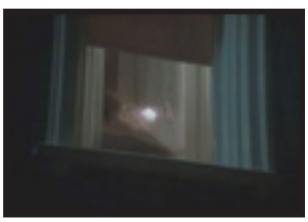
The notion of a disposable culture is not a recent development. Alfred Loos pointed out the awareness of furniture makers of the negative effect the longevity of a piece of furniture could have on their business over 100 years ago. "We prefer a consumer who has a set of furniture that becomes intolerable to him after ten years, and who is consequently forced to refurbish every ten years, to one who only buys an object when the old one is worn out. Industry demands this. Millions are employed as a result of the quick change."[8]

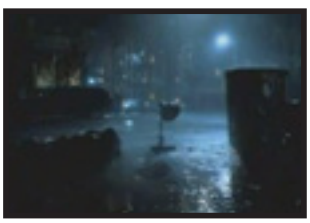
8
Adolf Loos.
Ornament and Crime,
Vienna: lecture on
Jan. 21, 1910.
Paris: Cahiers
d'aujourd'hui 5/1913.











It is a vicious circle. In the end, it is the worker who is the consumer, and if the speed of consumption is halted or slowed down, the workers will experience the same. If the goods manufactured by them were not bought, they would simply lose their jobs. This is a badly kept secret, if one at all, but the consequences of this cycle are tragic nevertheless. Over time it has led to the built-in obsolescence of products in the manufacturer's pursuit of commercial viability; a practice that is at once disturbing yet necessary in order to keep mass production going.

The 20th century saw much development in the area of furniture and home design. The Constructivist, de Stijl, and Bauhaus groups treated the interior as a vector rather than setting. They used it as an adaptable typology, disregarding of long-served conventions. The mouldings, upholstery, organic forms and soft furnishings were replaced by hard edges and abstract patterning. But most of their influence on the way homes looked remained in a conceptual, propositional phase, adopted by a few but not reaching the masses. In general, however, designers began to question the need for ornamentation, believing that the aesthetics of a product should stem from its structural integrity. Instead of objects defining the taste and identity of individual consumers, they were seen as holding possibilities as a general, all-appealing object. And with the mastering of production achieved, there was a shift to the mastering of the consumer.

What I find particularly interesting is the fact that with the eradication of ornamentation came the unification of consumers. Instead of appealing to a person with a specific taste and thus adopting a specific product, the goal of identity was no longer to separate but to unify them. And with the thought in mind that someone's identity becomes visible through the products they consume, and especially connected to the way these products function in the context of a home, perhaps ornamentation is the factor that differentiates identities from one another. And not only the ornamentation of each and every object, but

the ornamental character that is produced by them as a composition.

The basic orientation of housing hasn't changed since the separation of home and work. But due to the stylistic developments in the 20th century, the home cannot simply be seen as a visual opposite to the place of work anymore. The borders between home and work have been further blurred. The "home office" is nowadays a common phenomenon, thanks to computers and technological advances. Nevertheless, the underlying idea of the home as a safe, comfortable place of privacy is still intact.

To what extent is identity of a home an illusion, given the fact that there are standards of taste (which are also limited by the availability of goods on the market)? As a result, can identity be seen as a limitation by the market?

As I see it, the home is both a private playground of illusions and a physical catalogue of ready-made tastes, communicating values and ideas that make all designs for the home very revealing about the conditions of modern life. If we are content with the illusion of having our own identity and, furthermore, displaying it through our home, why does it rarely manifest in extreme differences? Most of the homes I have seen, both physically and virtually, look the same: a couch, side table, bed, wardrobe, dining table, chairs, and so forth. But would it be more original to sleep in a hammock? Or would that be imitating the life of sailors from the 17th century?

When all basic needs are met, the main motivation for consumption, consciously or not, is the establishment of social status. The objects I buy become means of sustaining personal identity and ensuring membership to a social group. Every object comes with a code that can be read and interpreted by the outside world as an indicator of my lifestyle.

This principle also applies to the home. As much as the home communicates about the occupant's identity, it also is a primary factor in their aligning to a particular social class. The indicators of "lifestyle", certain objects that were previously unattainable to the working class, drastically changed with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

With mass production came the democratisation of design, and so to say, an equality of consumption. Most things

The home and social class

became affordable to the majority, and objects with a higher price point, due to complicated or time-consuming production methods or materials, were replaced by their machine made equivalent. With furniture becoming affordable to a point where it eliminated the need to keep a set of dining chairs for a whole lifetime, objects were specifically chosen over other objects for their ability to portray certain values.
A very clear cut example of the desire to show the belonging to a certain social class through one's home can be observed in the documentary Queen of Versailles. It shows the highs and lows of billionaire David Siegel, who set out to build the largest family home in the United States of America. In the documentary he and his wife Jacqueline discuss the way that they will furnish their new home, and consequently are acting as curators thereof.

"The house will be filled with Louis the XIV type antique furniture."[9]

9
Quote by David Siegel. The Queen of Versailles, Dir. Lauren Greenfield, 2012. 09:44 min.

> "I picked out so much stuff over the years, it's like been 10 years in progress. The majority of it is probably French, to go with the theme of Versailles. These things over here, its all from the genie bottle, from the Aladdin hotel. Right here….What do you call it, the eggs from Russia? Faberge eggs, but look, I've got the giant ones."[10]

These statements offer an interesting insight into the minds of a couple furnishing their house. Clearly, their budget is exceeds the financial means of most other people, but their reasons for picking the items they talk about are purely to showcase their wealth and (imagined) taste, reinforcing their belonging to the upper class. This is reminiscent of the middle class of the Victorian, who wanted to copy the style of the aristocracy. When Jacqueline Siegel talks about their Faberge eggs, their authenticity is irrelevant, what matters is that the ones she owns, "are the big ones." The Faberge egg as an archetype of distinguished taste and wealth seems to me as artificial as their version of Versailles. Furthermore, they do not even serve a function within the home, but are pure decoration. It is the decoration in this case that seems to be what communicates their status.

10
Quote by Jacqueline Siegel. The Queen of Versailles. see footnote 9

Researchers at Harvard Business School conducted a survey regarding the perception of the wealth and status of shoppers at high-end clothing stores. With the help of sales assistants of luxury-clothing stores in Milan, Italy, they found that a woman in a tracksuit and a Swatch watch is more likely to be viewed as rich and able to buy something in the store than someone who is dressed up and wearing a Rolex. One sales assistant attributed it thus: "Wealthy people sometimes dress very badly to demonstrate superiority. If you dare enter these boutiques so underdressed, you are definitely going to buy something."[11]

11
Adam Jones. "Luxury boutiques adjust to stealth wealth". Financial Times, Business Blog. posted Nov. 13, 2013. Web - blog entry.

In another survey in this study, college students at a prestigious university considered a bearded professor in a T-shirt to be more respected by his students than his shaven, suit-clad counterpart. In comparison, students at a public university considered formally dressed professors to have higher status. Hence, the message of "I don't care about conformity" and the act of consciously choosing the opposite, seemingly only works in an environment that asks for people to conform.

Although the aforementioned research is not directly connected to the home nor furniture, it nevertheless shows the power of projected identity and aesthetic responsibility, and the importance of the environment that this act takes place in.

The importance of environment as visual support for the spectator, or in this case, the consumer, is something that IKEA and other furniture companies have learned to use to their advantage.

Entering an IKEA store leaves the shopper without even the smallest need to activate the creative part of their brain, as the whole assortment of products is conveniently displayed in "living scenarios". Each and every room of a typical living situation has more than one showcase, presenting as many of their products as possible. In its totality, the room forms a perfect harmony within all the products for sale and visually makes perfect sense. Cleverly enough, the Swedish furniture company caters not only to one specific audience regarding the taste of their interior, but offers different ranges of furnishings, from minimalist, mid-century retro to country house style, satisfying a wide array of people. The creation of these sub-identities enables them to target a wider audience, while seemingly making it possible for the customer to find exactly what fits one's own individual taste, and therefore one's identity.

At the same time, the clear distinction of their product range in "sub-identities" makes it easier for the customer to identify with a particular style; they do not need to decode every item by itself, but the presentation as a whole gives them a clear image of what the object communicates.

In 2009, IKEA Netherlands ran an advertising campaign titled "Design your own life". At the core of the campaign was an online platform for IKEA customers to upload pictures of their IKEA furnishings in their own home, creating an online catalogue consisting solely of user generated content. These online catalogues cross the borders between exhibitionism and voyeurism. Customers took pride in belonging to the followers of IKEA, which can be seen as a social identity group of its own, and sharing with like-minded people how one's own aesthetical choices within the finite pool of IKEA reflects their own identity.[12]

12
IKEA:
Design your own life.
www.designyourownlife.nl

The home as the ultimate retreat, and counterpart to the place of work as it was conceived as in the Victorian age, has further evolved over time. Inviting someone into your home once meant sharing the inner sanctum, communicating who you are through the way you live and the things you surround yourself with. The choice of furnishings and other objects can be purely utilitarian, decorative, playful or (seemingly) unconsidered. But through the process of choosing the chair on which I am going to sit during meals, at what table I sit at and which plates I eat from, I am reflecting my persona in the choices I make, representing aspects of my personality in the process. Looking at the interior of a living space as a whole, it can be seen as a collection of curated items for living. Generally, it is an organically grown collection, developed over time and in a constant state of flux. It is not inconceivable, then, to see the inhabitant of a space as a curator.

Design your own life

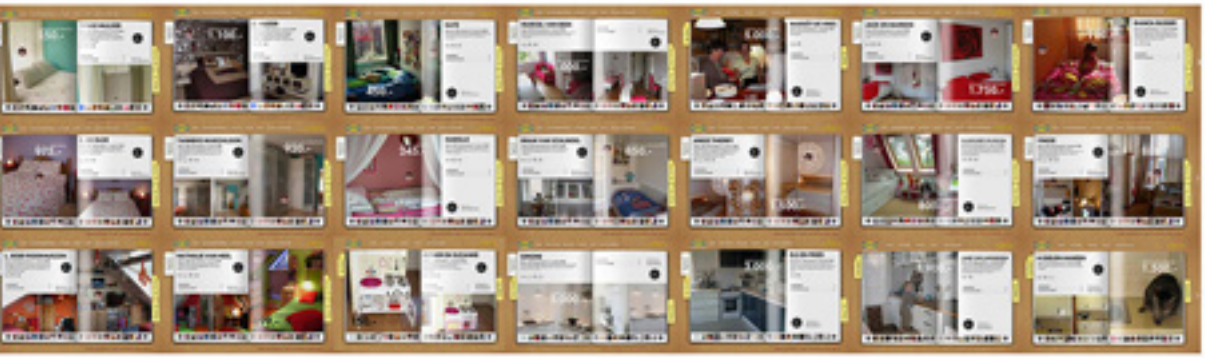
To build a long-term platform within IKEA's theme 'Design your own life' we let proud IKEA customers do the advertising in an user generated IKEA catalogue. The catalogue provides a stage where they can show and share their own IKEA creations.

With more than 500.000 u
uploaded bedrooms and
biggest IKEA showroom o
each room in the house.

Over 4700 uploaded bedrooms and kitchens

website visits in total and over 4700
kitchens the catalogue has become the
nline and will soon have chapters for

IKEA
Design your own life



Furniture: the visual impact

In Immanuel Kant's Critique of Judgment, he examines the distinction between modern art and design, and respectively artist and designers, and viewers and users, describing them as separate from each other. Considering furniture from the viewpoint of spectator, and therefore creating a clear division between the user and the viewer of an object, can be linked to this idea.

Kant elevates form over function by connecting judgments of taste, and beauty itself, to a disinterested form of contemplation. A representation, as he describes it, must be free of all interest, usefulness and purpose in order to be worthy of a pure judgment of taste and able to be judged "beautiful". In his view, objects like furniture, clothing and tapestry are to be disregarded as "agreeable". Only the ornamentation found on these objects can be deemed "beautiful". He describes the division between form and function (seeing and using) as follows:

> "Under painting in the wide sense I would reckon the decoration of rooms by the aid of tapestry, bric-a-brac, and all beautiful furniture which is merely available to be looked at; and the same may be said of the art of tasteful dressing (with rings, snuff-boxes, etc.). For a bed of various flowers, a room filled with various ornaments (including under this head even ladies' finery), make at a fête a kind of picture; which, like pictures properly so-called (that are not intended to teach either history or natural science), has in view merely the entertainment of the Imagination in free play with Ideas, and the occupation of the aesthetical judgment without any definite purpose. The detailed work in all this decoration may be quite distinct in the different cases and may require very different artists; but the judgment of taste upon whatever is beautiful in these various arts is always determined in the same way: viz. it only judges the forms (without any reference to a purpose) as they present themselves to the eye either singly or in combination, according to the effect they produce upon the Imagination".[13]

13
Immanuel Kant. The Critique of Judgment. Ed. Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 197-198

Many designers have attempted to counter Kant's notion of the disconnection between form and function of an object, creating and designing objects that are both aesthetically pleasing and utilitarian. As a popular example of this, Apple's iPod and other electronic devices come to mind. They are praised for the utilitarian, intuitive handling as well as the sleek and modern design.[14]

14
Dieter Rams. Video Interview. "Our Interview With Dieter Rams, The Greatest Designer Alive". Fast Company, Web. Jan. 25, 2012.

In Kant's statement about the living environment (including furniture) seen as a picture, I see an interesting relation to the way environments in printed and social media are used to portray a mood or setting for one's projected identity. There is a whole range of furniture and interior design magazines catering to every level of taste and budget.

As previously stated, the market for home furnishing advice, in the form of books and magazines isn't particular to our time. Although these publications may seem to cater to a very wide array of tastes, they narrow down and categorise the different identities a room can have or express. Claiming to serve as inspirational guides rather than a shopping list, they depict a very clear message for the readers, presenting them with a showcase of what is socially accepted and considered "good design" and good taste at any given point in time. Therefore I see them more as a messenger for contemporary aesthetic standards than a creative source for furniture and design inspiration.

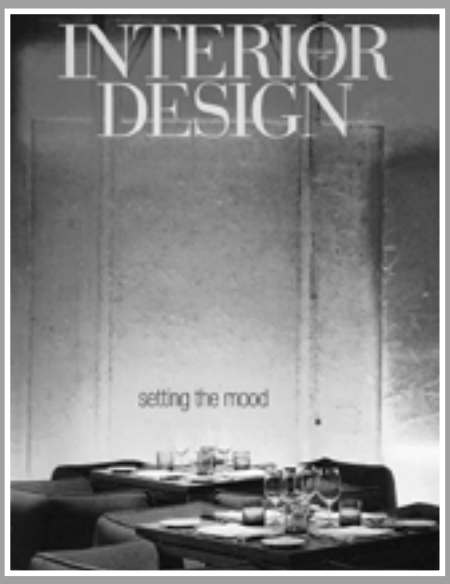
I used to work as a set stylist for interior magazines myself and I was astonished to discover how literally people take what they see in a magazine. From time to time I would receive an email from an annoyed reader who could not find the item used in a picture for purchase anymore, and blamed me for showing something that was actually unavailable to him or her. I myself always saw these pictures as an inspirational source for the readers of the magazine, and in no way intended them to be recreated piece by piece. But perhaps this is not uncommon in the business of selling "lifestyle". In order to correctly portray the desired lifestyle, the aesthetical and visual codes

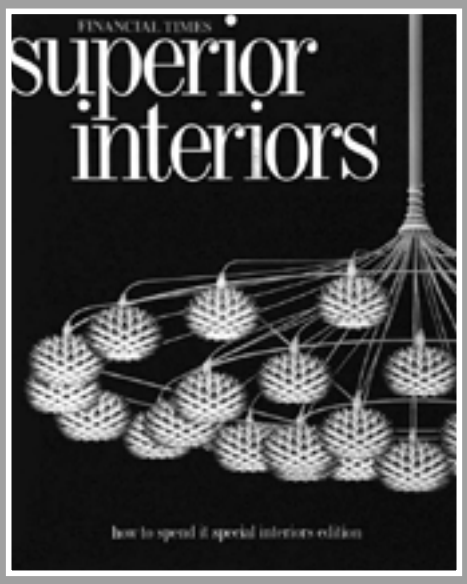

ELLE DECOR
what's hot now!
THE NEW CLASSIC COOL
ARTFUL ROOMS
OBJECTS OF DESIRE


METRO
home
entertaining
FRESH AND CLASSIC
PARTY SPECIAL


EMIRATES
INSIDE! 2010 NEW STORE GUIDE
home
LOVE YOUR PLACE
WHY COMFORT IS BETTER THAN PERFECTION
54 TOP TIPS
EASY ENTERTAINING
AN EASTER MENU TO SHARE WITH FRIENDS


est
GLOBAL LIVING WITH AN AUSTRALIAN TWIST
Nordic
DESIGN INSPIRATION
SCANDINAVIAN SOJOURN


INTERIOR DESIGN
setting the mood


FINANCIAL TIMES
superior interiors
how to spend it special interiors edition


east coast
LIVING
modern farmhouse


House Beautiful
EXPRESS YOURSELF!
putting the personal in your style


VOGUE
LIVING
COLLECTOR'S EDITION
Ilse Crawford
being human
CITY GUIDES


BRUTUS
10
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コレクターの居住空
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INTERIOR DESIGN
new york in living color

attached to it need to be known and recognised as such. And the easiest way of visualising these codes is of course by replicating the exact image.

If furniture and design in general becomes reduced to its visual impact, depicted in a static image, what, and how, does that communicate about its usability and function? Is form to be chosen over function? And if so, are such objects further occupying space in our homes only as props, mere décor?

In my opinion, one of the most important aspects about the aesthetics of furniture and designed objects in general is the ability of the shape and material to communicate its function. Seeing and understanding the possibilities in use, judged on its design, can elevate an object above its pure aesthetic impact, which would reduce it to act singularly as a decorative element.

This notion of the correlation of material and shape as an important factor of an object might not be the most original, but I see a direct link between the visual language, more precisely the material, and artifice.

Objects have always been used to show or portray the wealth and related value or status of the owner. With the artificial reproduction of expensive textures and materials came the possibility for people with less financial means to imitate and adopt the messages within them.

In the context of reproduction of expensive materials, or further a luxury item that has become a signal of social class, is the Louis Vuitton handbag. The design of original LV handbags is often disregarded, but the iconic monogram logo of the brand and the particular colour scheme they use is code enough to make the connection to what it should portray. Far from leather, most imitations are made out of cheap plastic or PVC.

Ironically, LV adapted one of their designs and made a bag out of PVC with their logo stamped on it. And of course, imitations of that bag were available shortly after. But materials are not the only being reproduced; there is a whole industrial sector that deals with the reproduction of famous and expensive furniture. These reproductions serve as messengers for accepted “good” taste, as only highly coveted pieces are ripped off.

The designs of Ray and Charles Eames have become so popular that the demand for their work far exceeds supply. This exclusivity raises the prices for the originals into realms that are unattainable for most, and therefore replicas are in high demand. There is now a myriad of replica Eames designs in the marketplace, which themselves are relatively expensive.

I am surprised to find that, as a designer, I find nothing wrong with replicated furniture. Yes, the question of ownership of your design and the monetary loss caused by replication is not to be overlooked but in general replicas deal with an antiquated social class differentiation, making costly design affordable to people who appreciate elements of those that deviate from the ones available at an accessible price point. The downside of these replicas and "inspired by" furniture and design objects is what makes them cheaper: the materials used and the quality of production, which in some cases suffer extremely. This is ultimately what I find problematic about this type of furniture. Most pieces are iconic designs, which carry a message of taste and wealth, which is undoubtedly another motivation for buying a piece of replicated design furniture. The image of the object becomes more important than its function and the quality of its production.

Another manifestation of reproduction, the simulacrum[15], is a method often found in postmodernist design. Through the elevation of visual representation over the physicality of the object, Dutch fashion label Claudia Sträter adopted such a postmodern approach in the window displays showing their Spring/Summer 2013 collection. They used images of iconic Dutch furniture designs as a backdrop. By exclusively using the work of Dutch design studios, they simultaneously reinforced their own cultural identity as a Dutch brand and linked it to the visual identity of the designs. What I find most interesting is that rather than displaying the actual piece of furniture, such as the shelf

15
Simulacrum: The simulacrum is not a fake or a copy of the original, but a self-standing image of an image that becomes truth in its own right: the hyperreal.

designed by Studio Mieke Meijer, they used the designs as a 2 dimensional image, devoid of any spatial references or function, essentially becoming only a big picture and backdrop for their clothing.

This approach to the perception of furniture design is very interesting to me. Postmodernism is a generally hard to grasp stream, as the definition of what a postmodern object is or looks like differs greatly from one contributor to the genre to the next. Some of the general, shared ideas, such as cultural flattening[16], fragmentation[17] and hyper

reality are, in my opinion, very relevant tools for designers today. The generalisation of consumers in modernist design is something I am very opposed to, especially in the context of identity, as it willingly tries to eradicate an object's potential for identity and the portrayal of identity through an object.

16
Cultural leveling: an act of leveling high and low culture.

The "flattening" of furniture that I saw in the Sträter window displays is something I also see happening in real life. With furniture pieces becoming so well known to the general public as to be of "good taste" or "design classics", I feel that these items are flattened by their own message. They are often pictured and positioned in such a way that they become almost devoid of their original function and only serve to deliver the values attached to them and subsequently become useless as furniture with a function.

17
Fragmentation: acknowledging the plurality of views opposed to universal ideas.

What happens to furniture if it simply ends up acting as decoration, visual identity of its function, instead of functioning? Interested in seeing how other people live and furnish their homes, I often visit blogs that are dedicated to showing private homes[18]. Granted, these blogs depict a one-dimensional picture; if I knew my home was to be photographed and published online, I also would invest time in making it look presentable. But there are some items that I come across in many of these homes, resulting in some kind of unified code of objects. In my view they are considered to portray knowledge of design, becoming archetypes of good taste.

18
Backyard Bill, Dos Family, Freunde von Freunden, The Design Files, The Selby;

These blogs also highlight the globalisation or westernisation of design, as there are many similarities between the homes depicted, although they are from all over the world. Therefore the cultural identity previously identifiable solely through furniture, Finnish folk art illustration, Dutch delft tiles, etc., seems to get reduced to artifacts of the past.

How is the furniture industry reacting to the fact that their goods will be available worldwide, catering to a unified global market that has specific tastes?

Design:
Identity as a tool

Considering the link between cultural identity and design, and the impact globalisation has on this, it is interesting to see how companies take advantage of the awareness of the importance of identity.

IKEA, having risen to a global player in the furniture industry, cleverly plays on and uses the notion of social and cultural identity. The founder of IKEA, Ingvar Kamprad, penned a manifesto titled "The testament of a furniture dealer". In it he lays out the company's guidelines and specifies the brand identity they are building and maintaining.

> "The main emphasis must always be on our basic range – on the part that is "typically IKEA". [...] In Scandinavia, people should perceive our basic range as typically IKEA. Elsewhere, they should perceive it as typically Swedish. Alongside the basic product range, we may have a smaller range in a more traditional style that appeals to most people and which may be combined with our basic range. This part of the range must be strictly limited outside Scandinavia."[19]

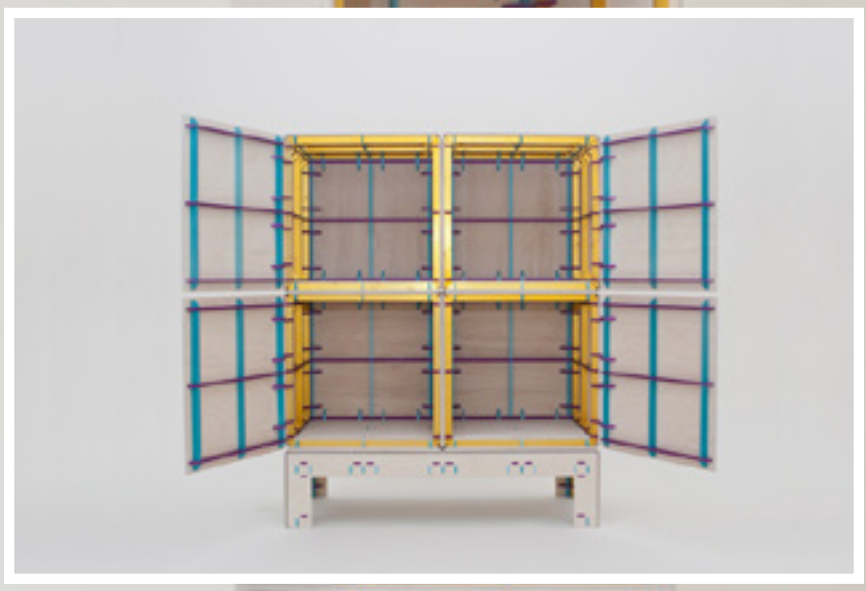
19 Ingvar Kamprad. "The Testament of a furniture dealer." Stockholm: Inter IKEA Systems B.V; 1976. p. 4

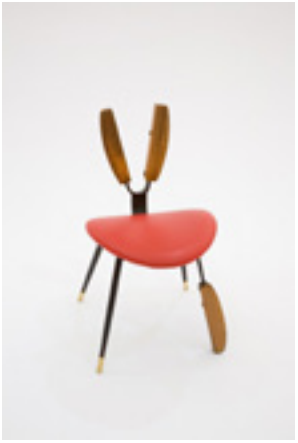
This gives an interesting insight into cultural (design) identity. His view on all things perceived as "typically Swedish" for all countries outside of Scandinavia implies a rather cliché and gimmicky perception of the Swedish cultural (design) identity. But the idea of using a national, cultural identity to transport a design message, or be recognised as design stemming from a particular country, is an interesting one in the age of global mass production. Every country has (had) its distinctive formal language when it comes to furniture design. Most of it can be seen as "traditional" in the sense of heritage of forms and visual language. But since the globalisation of consumer goods, and respectively design goods, these traditional or heritage pieces have become regarded as a sort of a nostalgic testament to the past. This is even more so with the phenomenon of the "star designer" and their own visual design language.

The handwriting/form language of a single designer has replaced the form language that was previously applied and created by craftspeople. But with that in mind, can something that is perceived as "typically Swedish" still be a product of our time? And further, if I perceive a product as such, how can I identify with it? Only if I identify with the values transported by something that is perceived as "typically Swedish", or succumb to the attraction of the exotic, can I as a non-Swede be drawn to that object.

Perhaps it would be possible, instead of having cultural identities based on geographical borders, to have cultural (design) identities as a reflection of new techniques. Taking the "wrong colour furniture system" by Dutch design studio Minale Maeda as an example, can the pattern that is a result of the connection system evolve into a new kind of CADCAM identity in furniture?

The method of construction and mounting, using a colour coded pattern, gives the completed piece of furniture an ornamental treatment resulting from the way it is put together. Honestly showing the connections rather than hiding them, combined with the colour applied to the various parts creates a visual language that is a direct result of the production technique used to manufacture the furniture. It is not the craftsman applying the cultural identity through crafting a typical shape, but the shapes resulting from the process, which speak for themselves.





The investigation into the identity of an object and its form language are seen in Martino Gamper's project 100 chairs in 100 Days. Gamper collected chairs, found and gifted to him by friends, with the goal of creating a chair every day for 100 days. He took these chairs apart and rearranged and assembled the harvested components. This resulted in unusual combinations – chair parts of totally different formal languages, or identities, made into new, hybrid chairs. The results are sometimes comical, sometimes strange, others beautiful, but they often hold an interesting combination of mixed form language, and thereby create a new visual identity of what a chair can look like, and how different each chair can look from another.

Although his chairs do not come with a do-it-yourself building guide, Gamper's is still a very democratic design approach. The fact that no instructions are given in no way hinders anyone interested in doing this himself. Gamper didn't infuse the reassembled chairs with parts designed by himself and thus make them into author designed objects, but rather used the existing and already designed parts. The history of the found chairs was not negated and modernised, simply evaluated by their shape and design. This does not mean he stuck to the hierarchy of functional use for each part as it was intended; a seat shell became the legs of the chair, while the backrest previously was the legs. In repurposing the different parts he created a hyper-reality of each chair, a picture of what could have been, or maybe, what is now.

This practice is reminiscent of "furniture hacking", a term that came to be popular in the middle of the 1990s, as a result of dissatisfaction with mass-produced furniture and the disposable culture. By altering the design of mass-produced goods, new or improved pieces were created.
I see this as an important step in the process of the emancipation of the consumer[21]. Not being content with readily available solutions, they took matters into their own hands.

But if mass-produced design, in the spirit of modernism, focuses on the means for the seduction of the spectator, what would be its counterpart in the current field of design?

21
Alvin Toffler coined the term "prosumer" in his book "The Third Wave". A combination of the words "proactive" and "consumer", the prosumer is a formerly common consumer who became active to personally improve or design the goods and services of the market.

Anti-design or critical design reflects upon design and sees in it more than superficially "pretty" objects. It wants to engage the spectator in a more intricate way. Rather than focusing on the shape of the object first, the initial focus is on the subject to be designed. By leaving room for interpretations and discoveries by the spectator, a more meaningful design can emerge.

Designers operating in this field do not aim to reach the mass-market, but are showcasing ideas that derive from their observations of society, culture and the way that furniture and space impacts our life. This is a somewhat more extreme or radical approach towards the topic of design, stretching the knowledge of what design can be or look like, to simply encourage the spectator's mind to question or rethink the norm.

As anti-design is more investigative in regards to the necessity and use of objects, as well as their influence on society above an interest in market-share, the idea of an individuals identity in combination with objects is a very present topic in this field.

Anti-design: a different point of focus

Jerszy Seymour, a Berlin-based Canadian designer, focuses on the relationship between objects and user. He demonstrates that with design as a tool for creating life situations, experiencing, prototyping and producing projects in order to make products, there is no paradox, neither mistranslation but a vision of what could be life[21]. He openly calls for "amateurism"; the users (visitors of his installations) take advantage of the fact that they can mould and influence the objects and are actively engaged in the process of shaping their surroundings. In his collection, Living Systems, Seymour uses a bio resin derived from potato starch mixed with milk and food coloring to create chairs, daybeds and other pieces of furniture. Stemming from the question if and how people nowadays

21 Jerszy in Hyeres. Design Parade – Festival International de Design – Villa Noailles.

can lead an autonomous life, the result is a kind of design autonomy, erasing the need for the production process of a factory, re-creatable in any kitchen, with very basic tools and materials.

I see this project as a very successful approach to closing the gap between consumer and product. With the recipe for the bio resin available for free on his homepage, along with examples of the pieces he created, Seymour leaves the rest to the user. By actively engaging the user he offers one possibility of breaking the cycle of consumption. In my opinion this process could create a new type of consumer, the consumateur. A hybrid of consumer and amateur, he would be equipped with the awareness and analytical thinking of an amateur merged with the buying decisions of a consumer.

In another project, Workshop Chair, he uses the very simple combination of wooden lathes and resin to create a chair in which the wooden construction is held together with blobs of resin instead of nailed or wooden joints. This again challenges the notion of action on the side of the user or "amateur". With very simple actions, a commercially produced object can be replaced or made redundant with a self-made one, the focus on being active and taking design into one's own hands.

Shopping for furniture, and consuming in general, is in itself a passive process. The integration of the consumer doesn't evolve beyond selecting an object from a finite choice of other similar objects and then paying for it. The only truly active part here being the payment process, as well as some customisation in reference to the user's body. But with the integration of the user in the process of giving a shape to a design, the question of its use is automatically considered. And within that process, an active approach towards building one's own furniture and therefore also constructing the identity it portrays could be more effective than the passive consumer's approach.

I see Seymour's method of encouraging the user to actively take part in the creation of an object as a simple but slightly utopian approach to building awareness, as action can only take place if the need for it is clear to the user. Assuming everyone has the interest and time to do so would be far fetched, but the idea of an emotional connection to an object, in this instance achieved by taking action and investing time and thought into making it happen, is nevertheless a very strong idea. The Workshop Chair, if recreated, could become something that will be passed on to someone else as an heirloom or, at best, be dismantled and returned to its material value, and reconstructed into something else.

London-based design duo Fiona Raby and Anthony Dunne, of Dunne&Raby, take a different approach in triggering the user to think about the objects they are surrounded with every day.. With their project Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times, they designed objects dealing with phobias from nuclear annihilation to alien abduction. Although perhaps irrational fears, they treated them as though they would approach any other object to be designed, helping the user to overcome the fear.

By creating futuristic scenarios that are removed from the goal to sell goods, they purely focus on what might happen to design, or what design might make happen for

the user. This practice can potentially open the spectators mind about the industry's narrow and stereotypical view of consumers.

The downside of working in this field of design is, in my view, that only people who are already interested in design on a level that goes above choosing according to their taste get to see such projects, as they are generally exhibited in museums and galleries. But of course the effect can trickle down, and like the relationship between haute couture and high street fashion, it can still reach ground and find a manifestation that reaches the masses over time.

Both anti-design and critical design offer an interesting approach to design, as the user as a human being is approached in a very different way than is usual. With the interest from the users side, a lot can be done to improve the integration of the user in the process, and to sharpen their sense for objects in general. Realistically it lives on the border between design and art, or on the border of "practical design" and "theoretical design". Mainly because of the way that it is presented to the public is in the context of a museum or gallery. The institution acts as an intellectual breeding ground of sorts, for communicating with design as a tool, as well as a critical approach on the impact of design on the relationship of the user and the object.

The Consumer: Objects for self identity

> "Like everyone else, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. "Yes. I'd like to order the Erika Pekkari slipcovers. If I saw something clever like a coffee table in the shape of a yin and yang, I had to have it. Like the Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. Or the Rislampa wire lamps of environmentally friendly unbleached paper. Even the Vild hall clock of galvanised steel, resting on the Klipsk shelving unit. I would flip through catalogues and wonder, "What kind of dining set defines me as a person?"
> We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow Collection.
> No, I don't want Cobalt. Oh, that sounds nice. Apricot.
> I had it all. Even the glass dishes with tiny bubbles and imperfections, proof they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working indigenous peoples of wherever."

In the 1999 film adaption of Chuck Palahniuk's book Fight Club, Edward Norton's character delivers a monologue about his obsession with IKEA furniture. His cynical self-reflection regarding his need to buy into the IKEA lifestyle is in opposition to the critical undertone when he poses the question "what kind of dining set defines me as a person?"

Aesthetic evaluation happens constantly, to everyone. And because of that, and the awareness of that process, everyone is required to take aesthetic responsibility for his or her appearance in the world, or so to say, for the way I design myself. This extends to my virtual representation on the Internet, via my Facebook page, as well as in the real world, where I am again responsible for the image I represent to the analytical eyes of others. Though not everyone is a designer, everyone is constantly designing their identity to communicate it to others.

The construction of identity in social media can be related to the styling of objects. With the possibility of reaching a

far bigger audience than ever before, the responsibility to make conscious aesthetic decisions is also growing. As it is the image on the web that supports the identity of the person, it is easy to reduce identity to the surface, which simultaneously hides everything underneath it. The same principle can be applied to a designed object. The need for the surface to communicate, or the fact that the surface is regarded as the primary factor of communication, automatically raises questions of the underlying structure that supports the outer shell, resulting in suspicion about the ugliness of the "inner life" of an object.

The omnipresence of connectedness via the Internet through various devices from smartphones to laptops seems to have created a bigger platform for the portrayal of identity, or more precisely, the need to do so. Creating a public (brand) identity was previously reserved to celebrities, politicians and other people featured in the mass media. With social media the potential for everyone to build a (brand) identity has grown.

My self-identity and social identity are merging into one and the same, through selectively showing and sharing my self-identity through social media. Social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow for a controlled way of connecting to other people all over the globe. This connection is mediated by some kind of construction of "identity" which is meant to represent the real person behind it. This construction of identity is also known as an "avatar". The term stems from ancient Indian mythology and describes the "deliberate descent of a deity to earth"[22]. In social networking platforms such avatars are created through the use of pictures and text, which depict the author, objects and situations in to communicating this avatar.

22 Christopher H. Partridge. Introduction to World Religions. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2011. p. 14.

This leads back to the question posed by Edward Norton's character in Fight Club, "What kind of dining set defines me as a person?" A possible answer: If I can figure that out, it would make for the perfect avatar.

This dilemma has a long tradition and the idioms describing it are plenty, from "never judge a book by its cover", or "beauty is only skin deep", to "fair without, foul within" and "chrome don't get you home" (the latter being biker language referring to the styling of a motorbike meaning that the pure visual impact of the chromed body doesn't make it a well-working motorbike that will get the driver safely home).

The focus on the surface or shell of an object was a phenomenon in industrial design that began with the streamlining of products in the 1940s in the United States. Industrial designers were consulted in order to counter stagnating sales, and the aerodynamic style was applied to help sell everything, from kitchen tools to cars. For most products it simply meant that the surface was designed to give them an aerodynamic look, which was associated with power and speed. The interior mechanisms stayed the same. The term "styling" therefore applies, as the object itself wasn't redesigned to evolve with the newly introduced form language.

Observed in all fields dealing with design, the focus on the surface of an object to communicate something about its owner sometimes reaches comical heights, like in this picture of an icon of mid-century modern design by Arne Jacobsen. The Egg Chair, gets a topical make-over, adorned with metal spikes. Does it add anything to the function of the chair? Definitely not. It is obviously a matter of taste and aesthetic values of the eye of the spectator, but in regards to the identity of the consumer, it is of importance! Even if the act of ornamentation seems out of place and unnecessary to me, it is nevertheless a factor in the process of portraying identity.

Architect Adolf Loos started the discussion about the necessity of ornamentation in design over 100 years ago. In his essay, Ornament and Crime, he criticised the thoughtless use of ornamentation in architecture and design as being socially incorrect. He pleaded against ornamentation being considered an aesthetic form factor because it added cost in production, as well as hindered progress in cultural evolution.[23]

23
Adolf Loos. Ornament and Crime, Vienna: lecture on Jan. 21, 1910. Paris: Cahiers d'aujourd'hui 5/1913.

There are many written manifestos regarding design, from theorists long dead as well as contemporary, but the field of design is not as linear as to follow one idealistic view at a time. It is of course possible to change the view of consumers on what "design" or even "good design" should look like. Ultimately it is the designer who gives shapes to objects, but it is the consumer who dictates what sells and what does not. I think the consumer should not be regarded as a unified mass with the goal to make one object as appealing as possible to everyone.

The industry tries to use this to its advantage by offering customisable objects. It would seem that design is at a stage in which the needs of the individual and his or her identity are the main concern, but are we really at a point where this development is delivering what it claims to?

Mass Customisation: customised consumers, or customised goods?

To what extent is it possible for the consumer to take matters into their own hands, when thinking about furniture for the home? Are companies analysing consumers and their tastes to such a level that makes it possible to present customised goods to everyone? And how much handiwork is enough to give the consumer a feeling of participating in the process and further creating an emotional connection to the object?

In order to gain a better understanding of the current state of customisable goods, which are still mass-produced in big quantities, and to try and answer the questions raised during this process, one needs to start by looking at how the evolution of mass produced goods came to be.

Standardisation

With the possibilities of mass manufacturing arrived the standardisation of design. Furnishings were no longer custom made by a carpenter and therefore couldn't be adjusted to personal needs. The mechanisation of craftsmanship made it possible to own a piece of furniture that looked like it was made by a craftsman, but was in fact entirely a product of a mechanised procedure.

Initially, mass-produced goods tended to mimic existing items, formerly made in a time of intensive handcraft processes. Objects like a hammered and engraved silver serving tray could be reproduced by the thousands by a machine in a very short amount of time.

Mass customisation

With the Industrial Revolution, the whole economy shifted into a mode of masses, from mass-production to mass-distribution, mass marketing and mass media. Due to innovations in technology and information, it is possible to mass-customise goods that were and still are mass-produced, but are adaptable in a much faster fashion and can respond to consumer's wishes at mass-production prices.

The term "mass customisation" was used by writer Stan Davis in his book "Future Perfect" as well as writer Joe Pine in his book "Mass customisation: The new frontier in business competition".
Mass customisation is possible through different methods with a variety of implications, depending on the stage that the consumer becomes involved with the design process. It may be at the stage of designing, fabrication, assembly or at post-production. This involvement can be seen as a dialogue between the producer and the customer, where the customer seemingly replaces the designer and takes on that role himself.

The wide range of meanings implied in the word "customisation" can easily lead to confusion in the field of design. For a designer it can mean the transformation into a designer-maker, responding to the process of customising the product he designed himself. With the help of computer-aided manufacturing techniques and some knowledge of the fabrication process of the materials needed, it is possible to produce a satisfying outcome.

Some designers now question whether their profession might become obsolete if computer-aided manufacturing and the consumer seemingly replace the previous collaboration between designer and manufacturer. But as relevant it is to question the purpose of being a designer and the contribution they can make with their products, I believe that customers will always need designers, albeit in a different capacity than what we are used to.

Some companies integrate the consumer at an early stage, giving access to the design of the core product, therefore tailoring the product before it is manufactured. Other products can be tailored to fit the customer's needs at the store from where it is purchased. This is not to forget the category of "adaptive customisation" where the product adapts to the user during the phase of use, such as cars that adapt to your style of driving.

Nike's service Nike ID allows customers to choose from a selection of fashion sneakers and sports shoes and to customise the materials and colour combinations of the various elements. This type of customisation deals purely with topical finishes. This is not to say it is not a valid form of customisation, but it feels to me more like a marketing-driven decision than an actual measure to incorporate the consumer into the design process. The functional aspect of the product does not change, only the message that the object communicates, which in turn serves the visual identity of the user.

But even the visual identity inherent to a customised Nike ID shoe does not actually separate one consumer from the next, as the same choice can be made by an endless number of happy shoppers. Their intention to differentiate themselves from others is the driving force behind the customisation process, not the adaption of the actual product to their needs. Furthermore, as I see it, the company gains an aspiring designer with every custom designed shoe. I do not doubt that all the data from every sold customised shoes is collected and analysed, in order to gain insight into colour preferences to help them with their own future products.

Companies' analysis of their customer's shopping behaviour isn't a recent development, but it has come a long way from voluntarily filling out questionnaires to help researchers and companies gain an insight into the shopper's mind. Internet shopping and the data that is sent back and forth between the customer and the shop has changed the way research into shopping behaviour is conducted. Not only does the company collect data on what you bought, they also see when you made the purchase, where you are when you do so, the preferred method of payment, marital status, whether you have children, how long it takes you to drive to their next store, your estimated salary and even what other websites you visit.

This is called Behavioural Design and is all about the online psychology behind pushing the consumer's choice towards a preferred outcome. It looks at the science behind the decision-making process, and gains an understanding of what makes it possible to influence decisions online and offline. Using this data, companies can create a digital store that caters exactly to your taste, or what the data shows to be your taste.

An extreme example of the power of analytical data collections is the pregnancy detection algorithm developed by American retailer Target. Their researchers found that they can predict possible pregnancies through certain combinations of products women buy when they are pregnant. If the online shopping baskets holds an order of supplements like calcium, magnesium and zinc, scent-free soap and extra-big bags of cotton balls, in addition to hand sanitisers and washcloths, it signals they could be getting close to their delivery date. The sense of smell becomes more sensitive in the last trimester of a pregnancy, so a sudden switch from your regular shampoo and shower gel to another, unscented product and a bag big enough to hold nappies, can be enough indicators to assign you to the "pregnant customer" list. And the only reason this list exists is to target parents-to-be in a specific way, sending them coupons for baby related items, carefully disguised in a mix of other offers. It is necessary for the company to hide their true intention of targeting you as a parent, because if it is too obvious, we would become suspicious. Although within legal limits, we don't like the idea that we are constantly being analysed with every click.

A family in America experienced what this looks like in real life. An angry father stormed into a Target store after his teenage daughter received coupons for baby related items via mail. He wanted the manager to explain and apologise, which happened. A few days later the father was the one to apologise to the manager, after his daughter had taken a pregnancy test and found out she actually was

expecting a baby. The algorithm had correctly detected her pregnancy before she did so herself.[24]

24
Charles Duhigg.
"How Companies Learn Your Secrets",
The New York Times,
February 16, 2012.

This scenario is an interesting forecast in how the power of collected personal shopping data can actually change the way we are exposed to products. Imagine going online to buy a customisable bookshelf from a furniture retailer. You carefully measured the room it is going to be in, so that the new piece you are customising will perfectly fit into the room. Not only will the company know the size of your living room but by looking at the finish you chose for the shelf they can make assumptions about what the rest of the room looks like. The colour of the other pieces of furniture, if you are more into modern clean lines because you opted for a metal finish with an industrial look, or if your home might more look like a French country house, based on the choice of white floral decor you made for the shelf. And after analysing all of this, and including previous purchases you made with other shops online, they could actually send you a personalised design, tailored to your taste and showcasing your "identity" in a way that you might not even know that you would like.

Until they created it for you.


YOU MAY ALSO LIKE...

When instant cake mixes came on the market in America in the 1950s, with the aim of making the housewife's life more efficient, the product initially wasn't received well. This was traced back to the fact that their work was considered "too easy"; the housewives felt that their labour and knowledge wasn't valued highly enough. To overcome this, and sell their mixes, the companies changed the perception of the consumer by altering the recipe. Now requiring the housewife to add an egg to the store bought mix, the perception changed, and the product became a commercial success.

25
Michael I. Norton and Daniel Mochon. The "IKEA Effect": When Labour leads to Love.Harvard: Harvard Business School, 2011, p. 2.

Customisation with a Do-it-Yourself approach - The Ikea Effect

Researchers from the Harvard School of Business studied the perception of consumers who assembled furniture bought at IKEA – a ready-made object but calling for self-assembly – and simple origami projects completely made from scratch. The goal was to analyse the impact of the consumer actively engaging with the product and the possibility of enhancing their perception of it through doing so.

"We demonstrate and investigate the boundary conditions for what we term the "The "IKEA effect", the increase in valuation of self-made products. Participants saw their amateurish creations – of both utilitarian and hedonic products – as similar in value to the creations of

experts, and expected others to share their opinions. Our account suggests that labor leads to increased valuation only when labor results in successful completion of tasks; thus when participants built and then destroyed their creations, or failed to complete them, the IKEA effect dissipated. Finally, we show that labor increases valuation of completed products not just for consumers who profess an interest in "do-it- yourself" projects, but even for those who are relatively uninterested."[25]

They later point out that the active engagement of the consumer with a do-it-yourself product is not always preferable for consumers. When they asked students if they would be willing to pay more for a product involving DIY to a product that is pre-assembled, 92% stated they would opt for the pre-assembled product.
As I see it, the incorporation of the consumer in the assembly process can have an impact on the value he or she attaches to the product, having the same effect as the emotional value inherent to a family heirloom. But the assumption that the general public would be interested in such products would be prematurely

drawn. I think it requires a consumer who is actively interested in design, and/or does not want to conform to the restrictions of the mass-market.

It is also possible that the assembly process adds something to the value of the product, besides the handwork aspect. If during the process decisions were still possible, for example by removing or adding certain details that could potentially change the way the object looks when fully assembled, it might spark an interest from the consumer's side.

Craft shops offer clever ideas to increase creativity in consumers. Easily dismissed as leisure hang-outs for people with a lot of time on their hands, these seemingly banal stores actively engage the consumer, who successively leaves his role as a passive shopper and becomes more. Besides painting already existing mugs, there are often a myriad of different ways for the hobby creator to find a creative outlet in such a store. And it is exactly this willingness to participate in the process of designing or making something that could help furniture design to become a more integrative field than it is today.

Do-it-yourself aside, there are multiple ways of achieving a customised piece of furniture, or at least the illusion of such. A very simple form of customisation incorporating a do-it-yourself act can be observed with little children: stickers. Putting a sticker onto something is a straightforward method of ornamentation, or as Adolf Loos would see it, a crime. A sticker has a shape, colour and pattern and is a pure form of ornamentation, chosen for no other reason but the enjoyment of the spectator.

Through the act of putting a sticker on something comes the marking of territory and the customisation of an object that is likely available to everyone else. The child who puts a sticker on his lunchbox grows into a teenager who marks his territory by putting a sticker on his or her locker, who is going to put a sticker on his or her laptop to set it apart from all the other laptops flooding a classroom, to ultimately putting a sticker in their IKEA cupboard, because

they were trained that stickers are a valid form of customising a mass produced product. Again the concentration is on the surface. The superficial concern with the surface seems to me like a big issue in design.

As stickers are commercial products like any other, there is money to be made in selling stickers that customise furniture, as done by a company called MYKEA.

MYKEA sells a range of stickers that are designed especially for furniture sold at IKEA, therefore solely marketed to the customers of IKEA, creating a sub-identity in the social identity of IKEA customers. The message they are portray is perplexing though:

> "Don't we all just love and hate IKEA at the same time?! We love the well-designed furniture. But we don't like the fact that we see the same IKEA interior everywhere around us. We came up with the idea to make your Ikea furniture more beautiful, unique and personal…"[26]

26
MYKEA, This is our story, www.thisismykea.com

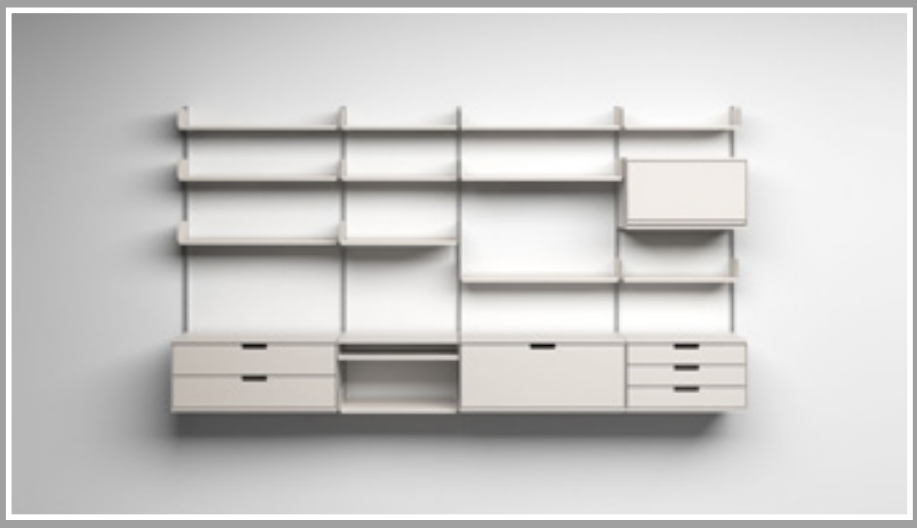
Clearly pointing out their love for IKEA furniture, they appeal to their customers by pointing out the loss of uniqueness; I would see it as a loss of identity, due to the fact that IKEA furniture is everywhere. Their product is meant to make every piece of IKEA furniture "more beautiful, unique and personal…", by choosing from a (finite) array of stickers and decals designed by them and cut to size in order to fit certain models sold by the Swedish power seller. I don't see this as successful, as they are communicating that a mass-produced product will become more personal by ornamenting it with another mass-produced sticker. There could be a third company, selling special markers that apply a glow-in-the-dark effect to the stickers sold by MYKEA, followed by a company who offers refills for those markers, but filled with silicone, to make a 3D ornamentation on the ornamentation on the piece of furniture. It will never become more unique or more personal than when it is unpacked and assembled. It will simply be hidden under layers of different surfaces.

The Australian furniture company Evolvex (imagining the etymological origin of the company's name coming from a wordplay on 'evolve' (the design of your furniture) and '-ex', which can be interpreted as 'expression' or 'express'), offers standardised parts that the customer can reconfigure to meet the personal requirements of the shopper and the space they live in. They are one of many contemporary furniture companies offering personalisation of their products, the Dutch company Kewlox, for example, specialises in customisable storage solutions.

An early contender in the production of mass-produced but customisable furniture is the Dutch company Pastoe. Starting out as UMS (Utrechtsche Machinale Stoel- en Meubelfabriek) and producing furniture, they rebranded themselves after the Second World War. Starting anew, they created the name PasToe, an abbreviation of the French 'passe partout' (all purpose). Offering furniture that is calm and restrained in appearance, they developed the Oak series (1948) and the Birch series (1950), which were described as the following: "[The cabinets are] based on geometric cabinet elements which the consumer could link together to create a cabinet of any desired size."[27] In 1955 they presented an ever-more refined, customisable storage system called Made-to-Measure Furniture. Based on an angled frame, the customer could fit shelves and other components themselves and if necessary, expand the cabinet later on.

27
Pastoe, Dutch Furniture Company, About Pastoe - History, www.pastoe.com

There is a myriad of customisable furniture that was produced as early as the 1960s; some still in production, some even came to cult status, like the 606 Universal Shelving System designed by Dieter Rams for Vitsœ. All of these solutions relied on the principle of an expandable system, in which the consumer could pick the fitting options for his or her need.



With the Internet gaining momentum and arriving in every household, a new platform, perfectly suited to present customisable products, Kickstarter[28], was made possible.

28
Kickstarter:
an online platform for creatives to present their projects to a large audience. Visitors can invest money in it if they want to see the project realized. Upon sucessful funding, depending on the amount of money they invested in the project, they are rewarded by previously set parameters.

Hero design used online platform Kickstarter to fund their Voronoi Bookshelf project. An app running on Android and IOS based systems allows the users to create a bookshelf following a special algorithm that divides the planes and connections. Hero Design sees the design process as a collaboration between the designer and the customer, and in their case, the designer of the software which takes on the role of the designer, and the customer. The outcome, a construction reminiscent of a distorted hexagonal structure, may be customised in its shape as decided by the user. But the actual finished shelf does not evoke the feeling of being custom made and, interestingly enough, the creator reveals in a Q&A section that his goal was more focused on solving the technical aspect of the project.

"My primary goals in this project were more technical than creative. My intent was to encounter and overcome as many of the technical problems involved with a project like this as possible".
That is statement enough for me to admire the initial idea of the project, but viewing the outcome to be of less importance. It is not enough to simply consider one aspect of a project, and let the other one slide, especially when it comes to design. I see the resulting form of an object to be as important as the concept or idea behind it.

Another Kickstarter project with the underlying idea of customisation and an integrated do-it-yourself part on the consumer's end is String Stool by studio not-tom. Made from 3 identical steel parts, the base is held together by a criss-cross of cord, resulting in the connection between the base and the seating part. The string, which becomes the seating part, can be tied up in whatever way with whatever string, cord or rope that fits. Their project was not funded. Perhaps the choice of object, a stool, was not convincing in the end, or the aesthetic effect not alluring enough.

Either way, it shows that the integration of the consumer to assemble the product and further forming a connection between them does not work as a universal rule.

Another example is the Do-Lo-Rez couch by Ron Arad for Moroso. The couch is made up of blocks of foam, varying in height, that are fixed to a plate via steel pins. The illusion they create is one of customisation of layout and colour choices of the different foam blocks. However, when consulting the specification sheet provided on the homepage of Moroso, I discovered that the collection consists of only 6 different elements that can be pieced together, and the fabric selection offers 26 fabrics to choose from. This leaves me with the impression that the customisation aspect is more used as a selling point, than actually focusing on applying the principle of customisation to the couch.

What do all the projects mentioned above have in common, and how does the idea of customisation in furniture relate back to its shape?

The visual language of customisation

One visual connection that seems to be consistent in most of the products sold as customised furniture is the fact that they are composed of rectangular planes and following the rules of box-geometrics. The resulting piece of furniture is a modular system. Its appearance avoids any visual identity that could clash with other items in one's home, due to ornamentation-free surfaces and a box-like, non-descript shape.

This modular system of customisation seems like a logical solution to both the manufacturer/designer as well as the consumer. The variations achieved through the configuration of modules results in a product that offers individual solutions, within the borders of the system. But as it is the case with every system, as clever it might be, it is limited to its own set of rules. And with the idea of customisation in mind, only partly lives up to the promise to be able to do so.

The full potential of customisation on a mass-produced level is still to be explored.

Conclusion

> "The eyes of other people are the eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine clothes, fine houses, nor fine furniture."[29]

With these two sentences, Benjamin Franklin sums up the issues attached to identity. The intrinsic link of identity and material goods and therefor to design in general sparked my interest into investigating the importance of furniture as a means for a person's identity. I looked at how the home in the western culture came to be the narrator of one's identity and what values and meanings are attached to objects. Furthermore, how identity in its ambiguity of sameness and the urge to show individuality at the same time, is used by consumers and designers alike.
And the connection between identity and customisation of an object, with its impact on the way mass produced design can be refined to more specific wishes of the consumer related to the his or her identity.

29 Benjamin Franklin. "On Luxury, Idleness, and Industry", in Benjamin Franklin. Essays on General, Politics, Commerce, and Political Economy, 1836, New York: A.M.Kelley, 1971.

I cannot help but disagree with Loos' idea of ornamentation being a crime, when thinking in terms of identity. Ornamentation seems to be an important part of the portrayal of identity, even if it serves no structural purpose in an object. Actually not having ornamentation on the objects I own comes down to the same effect as having ornate pieces around me. This also applies to the styling or overall collection of objects in a home. Through the combination and curating of objects, the identity of the inhabitant can be made more accentuated.

With the awareness of the impact the aesthetic representation has on a person's identity, arises the necessity for the consumer to be actively integrated in all aspects of aesthetic representations. Moving from a state of passivity into activity, engaging not only with the image of his or her self, but with their surroundings as well. The fact that identity is not a lifelong rigid structure anymore, but allows for a flexible construct with possible changes in perception, underlines the importance of actively taking part in shaping one's identity.

The industry's realisation of the importance of identity can be credited for the option of customised furniture, within all the limitations of the structure of manufacturing.
But contrary to a modernist approach of the consumers as a unified mass, mass-customisation allows for part of the process to be opened up to the consumers. This not only gives them an opportunity to actively take a stand and define parts of the objects of daily life, it also results in a different relationship between the designer, manufacturer and consumer.

The factory on demand: An (inter)active approach of consuming identity

The possibilities for the active integration of the consumer into the design process of an object are already present. Computers and other electronic devices that allow for virtual modelling of any desired product are widely available to the general public. Apps like "1,2,3D Catch" turn a smartphone into a 3D scanner, and furthermore allow the user to alter the scanned object according to their imagination and other criteria. And sending a virtual model to be manufactured is no more complicated than sending a text message. Massive factories all over the world are already producing everything that is consumed, and modern methods of manufacture make it possible to produce small quantities or even one-offs of an object for the same cost as a mass-produced one. With that, customisation could become an act of self-designing, which could make the individual's identity more pronounced than ever.

The way objects and furniture can be used by and interact with the user can be improved by looking at the user's functional needs. That, in combination with their preferences in

form, can potentially lead to many new visual languages of furniture, and further, a much more distinct representation of the owner's identity. The amount of self-design is to be chosen freely by everyone but through the act of creating awareness of the possibility to do so, it might also create awareness about the personal requirements for an object.

The role of the designer might change slightly, from dictating what the final object should look like to guiding the consumer to what the final object could look like. Although the designer's decision to let go of controlling the whole process might seem to be purely in favor of the consumer, ultimately the consumer will gain developing their critical eye. As the passive consumer can easily judge and look for other options, the active amateur grows with his responsibility. And this could ultimately lead to a constructive consumateur.

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