DESIGN IN
BRITISH INDUSTRY
DESIGN IN BRITISH INDUSTRY

A MID-CENTURY SURVEY

BY

MICHAEL FARR

WITH A

FOREWORD AND POSTSCRIPT BY

NIKOLAUS PEVSNER

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AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER
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This book is the result of the kind and interested help of many people. But above all I must thank my wife for her unceasing encouragement and for her willing transcription of the text.

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M. F.

AUGUST 1954
NOTE

The text was completed in the spring of 1952, but wherever possible I have attempted to keep it up to date. Amendments and additions which could not be included appear as addenda on p. 307 to which readers are referred by an asterisk (*) in the text. M. F.

August 1954
FOREWORD

BY NIKOLAUS PEVSNER

A few words must be said on the origin of this book. In 1934 Professor Philip Sargent Florence of Birmingham University asked me to undertake an investigation into the conditions of industrial design in this country and chiefly in the Birmingham area. I carried out the work in 1934-5, and it was published by the Cambridge University Press in 1937. In 1948 the Press approached me for a second edition. I had to answer that it would be useless to attempt what could strictly speaking be called a second edition. Too much had happened in the dozen or so years. If the Press wished to see the book reappear up to date, it would have to be rewritten. My own work had shifted into different fields in the meantime and I could not do more than find an author and help him as much as possible.

The author was duly found, Mr Michael Farr, fresh from the war and an English degree at Cambridge, a pupil of Dr Leavis and a man with faith in modern design. I put at his disposal the material collected for the first edition and added what had accumulated in odd envelopes since. Armed with this he began, at first supervised, as it would be called in Cambridge, by me in exactly the way that post-graduate research is supervised. This arrangement was carried on through the earlier parts of the present book. The other parts I never saw until I received the complete typescript. Mr Farr in the course of the work had found his own level and his own standards. The book as it is, must be considered entirely his, although the improbable reader who would wish to waste his time by comparing in detail the 1937 volume and this would find occasional paragraphs and more retained—especially in the semi-historical sections of Part II. Also, the general framework remained the same, and that perhaps more than anything else makes Mr Farr’s the direct descendant of my book. That is as it should be. Readers of the survey of 1935 should be helped in preserving the feeling that they are now watching the same survey conducted again.

In looking at the two books in that way, they will notice at once numerous differences, superficial as well as essential. Mr Farr’s book is not only up to date, it is also considerably longer and better illustrated. The expansion is specially noticeable in the chapters on plastics, motor-cars, and art schools. Entirely new sections have also been added, the most important being that on the design-consultant—a profession which, when I wrote my book, did not exist in Britain and had only just come
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into being in the United States. The Cambridge University Press, recognizing the position as I have described it, decided to my great pleasure that I should be excused from a joint authorship which could not have been more than nominal, and that the book should appear as Mr Farr’s whole responsibility. Since, however, I had so much to do with its inception and growth, and since there are certain general points which are not made by Mr Farr or which appear in a different light to me and to him, or which had not found adequate attention in my own book of 1937, or which, finally, had changed their significance in my mind since, I ventured to suggest that I might add some comments and conclusions of my own. This the Press accepted, and they will be found as a postscript, beginning on p. 310.

January 1953
INTRODUCTION

'It is to be noted that when any part of this paper appears dull, there is a design in it.' Richard Steele, The Tatler, No. 38

We live in a world created by nature, but partly re-designed by man. The composition of our environment is divided between natural things and artificial things. Most of us, in our hours of work and leisure, find that we are much more intimately concerned with artificial things than with natural things. We live in man-made houses, walk on man-made roads, drive in man-made vehicles, work in man-made offices, and so on. The greater part of our immediate environment has, in all its physical aspects, been conditioned by human thought and feeling. We are responsible for the artificial things in our environment, though each of us has had different and varying shares in their design.

This book is concerned only with those things which industrial factories and workshops have made for domestic use. They constitute the largest and, inevitably, the most important part of our artificial environment. But here one hesitates. Are they inevitably the most important part of our man-made environment? The answer, I assume, would be 'yes', but on looking round for proof of this importance, doubts would soon arise in many minds. The more one looks the more depressing becomes the scene. What is the reason for this? There is no shortage of domestic articles. In terms of quantity their importance is adequately stressed. But as regards quality there are wide and seemingly illogical differences between all groups of products. By describing the quality of an article we are, in fact, referring to its utilitarian and artistic elements, in other words its design. And it is in connexion with design that the importance, which we are attempting to assess, appears to have a confusing number of different interpretations.

In order to begin the discussion I am asking the reader to agree that the articles in his home do not all conform to one standard of design. In the shops also there is no single standard expressed in the design of every article. The point can be made with irresistible force by spending a few hours at the British Industries Fair. To be aware of differences we must be able to judge designs according to our preferences. The chief of these is personal; the others, social, ethical, moral, etc., need not detain us.

1 The Architectural Forum, November 1948, quotes a recent study in the United States, which affirms 'that urban man spends 88 per cent of his day in an artificial atmosphere, suburban man 70 per cent, rural man 43 per cent'.
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Here. When we judge a design we estimate its value to us according to our likes and dislikes. We like it, we partly like it, we do not like it; we judge it to be good, indifferent, bad.

I have written this book because I do not like the designs of between 80 and 90 per cent of British domestic articles. I have also written it because I am assured that my opinion is shared by a large number of people living different lives in all parts of the country. I am convinced that dissatisfaction with the prevailing design standards is widespread. Amongst the majority of people this is not expressed, simply because sufficiently rewarding comparisons between good and bad designs cannot be made. This fact has become my central theme. While no one can tell what each individual member of the public wants, it does seem reasonable to suggest that he should be given an opportunity to make up his mind. This means that every shop should offer a choice, which in turn implies, as I shall show later, that many more good designs must be produced. Indeed, the pressing need for good design will be evident to all those with faith in the life-enhancing value of art, and in fact to everybody who believes in the value of education as a means of deepening, enriching and ennobling life.

To plead for better design standards is not new. There are many people who feel that enough has already been said. They remember the exhibitions, the lectures, the questionnaires and all the propaganda on behalf of the Modern Movement in the 1930's. Now, since the war, they are hearing less about the Movement but even more about contemporary design standards. London has always been the favoured centre for design propaganda and for witnessing its results. It is no exaggeration to say that there are more good designs in London than anywhere else in the country. So it is in London, chiefly, that one gains the impression that things are not nearly so bad as they were. This complacency is often found amongst those who were most devoted to the campaign for better design before the war. In some limited circumstances it can be amusing; but in all other respects it is a serious hindrance to the work of those who can appreciate objectively the situation as it is.

The fundamental cause of so much bad design can be briefly dealt with here. It concerns the already familiar story of the Industrial Revolution. From the latter half of the eighteenth century onwards craft-work was progressively mechanized. The intimate contact between men, materials and the market, which is essential to all creative design, was broken by the intrusion of machines. Standardization of designs led to greater production of cheaper articles. New markets were created where quantity rather than quality was valued for its profitable returns. After the defeat of

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the craftsman the artist turned and fled. In his imagination he was above the mean standards and mechanical methods of the manufacturer. But the public followed the advances of the new industries and forgot the artist, who in turn became progressively separated from the living thoughts and feelings of his time. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century the situation got steadily worse. The change in attitude which we can now detect had its origin in William Morris who showed, in some of his craftwork, how contemporary vitality could return to manufactured articles by bringing the artist back to the workshop. At a succeeding stage in this development, which took place in Germany between 1905 and 1930, the artist was persuaded to enter the factory and design articles for quantity production. In this country the Modern Movement, as it was called, began to establish itself after 1930. Its success with British manufacturers and British artists was never complete. But its underlying belief that works of art can be produced by machinery for the benefit of thousands has been proved conclusively. Today, although we have this proof, we do not sufficiently realize how pressing is the necessity to put it into practice.

This book offers a survey of the conditions and the standards of design in British industries serving the domestic market. To discover the conditions I had to interview manufacturers, designers, retailers, teachers in art schools and a number of other persons. To discuss design standards involves criticism of present methods and suggestions for practicable improvements and that is the main reason why those interviewed remain anonymous in the text. I began my research in September 1949, and continued it throughout 1950. Since then I have completed my material while attempting to keep it up to date. I have personally visited 214 firms in 27 industries; 56 retail stores; 15 art schools; and 38 designers working outside industry. Approximately 48 per cent of the interviews took place in the Midlands; 7 per cent in Scotland; 24 per cent in London; 21 per cent in the rest of the country. I did not attempt to visit or get in touch with all the firms or even all the important firms in each industry. It proved sufficient to visit a selection of characteristic factories covering as far as possible all types of production and all types of markets. However, I must admit that I was mainly concerned with design in mass-production for the general market.¹

It should be emphasized that I did not confine my inquiries to articles of exemplary design. It seems to be a flaw in most of the publications on art in industry that by dealing only with good design, regardless of price, they are compelled to leave out between 80 and 90 per cent of the national production. To plead for better design in manufactured articles will remain a futile task unless the commercial aspects of the

¹ In the year 1947, out of 20,400,000 wage-earners almost 18,000,000 earned less than £500 per year. To them must be added the several million wives and families dependent on this income group.
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problem, unpleasant as they may sometimes be, are carefully taken into account. Such considerations induced me to listen to the views of all people concerned, particularly those of the manufacturer.

With manufacturers, as a rule, the following questions were discussed: general aspects of the trade, usual conditions of design in the trade, history, growth and size of the firm, number of employees, existence of design department or drawing office, existence of head designer, his qualifications and status, firm's reaction to other designers not on the staff, payment of designers, sequence of events in the production of a new design, participation and responsibility of other persons, such as the manufacturer himself, managers, salesmen, foremen or workers, number of new designs produced each year, sales figures and prices of best-sellers, methods of market research, opinion of the manufacturer on the standard of the designs produced, his opinion on public taste, methods of distribution, influence of export markets on design standards, relation to art schools, influence of organizations for design propaganda.

In department stores, chain stores and privately owned shops I discussed general aspects of the trade, methods of presentation, available choice between good and bad designs of comparable price, market served, average rate of stock turnover, methods of payment and training for buyers and salesmen, value of special exhibitions of good designs, opinions on the design standard of stocks, opinions on public taste.

I have not carried out a similar programme of research amongst representative groups of the public. The task would be complex and difficult, and however painstakingly performed would, I believe, be of very little value. The results of interviews in peoples’ homes and the answers to questionnaires filled in at exhibitions of industrial art are liable to gross inaccuracies. When confronted with a tempting selection of designs people are apt to forget what they can afford, what they need and what their families need. On such occasions one often finds that people express a gratifying predilection for good designs, but when they are faced with paying cash they seldom feel able to confirm their first choice.

In my interviews with principals and teachers in art schools, I was concerned with these questions: the extent of their co-operation with industry, amount of machinery and equipment, connexion between design, craftwork and fine art, full-time and part-time courses for design students and apprentices, teaching methods, extent of participation in civic affairs, the demand for trained designers, other possible sources of employment. With architects, consultants, free-lance and commercial designers, working outside industry, I was mainly concerned with the design standard of their work. Points discussed were: training, experience of industrial production methods, results of work undertaken for manufacturers, fees charged.

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I have compared my material with the evidence presented in An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England by Nikolaus Pevsner which relates, in general, to the year 1935.\(^1\) I have also studied the reports compiled by institutions with aims similar to my own. Most of them were concerned with the years before the war; of chief importance are the Board of Trade Committee on Art and Industry, 1931–2 (Gorell Committee), and the Board of Trade Council for Art and Industry, 1934–9 (Pick Council). Some useful evidence is contained in the working party reports on the future of certain industries, which were published between 1945 and 1948 by the Board of Trade. In addition I have paid close attention to the work of the Design and Industries Association, the Industrial Art Committee of the Federation of British Industries, and the Council of Industrial Design.

On the whole I found that manufacturers and others were interested in my research and anxious to help. In no less than 80 per cent of the firms visited I had a private interview with the managing director. This rarely took less than one hour, and frequently lasted all the morning. With very few exceptions I was shown over each factory, retail store and art school I visited. Only 4 per cent of the firms to which I wrote refused to see me. Nevertheless, it may well be that my results in some industries are one-sided and only partly true. I was for instance seldom able to check what I was told. Manufacturers, designers, retailers and teachers may have made wrong statements, they may not have told me the exact truth or the whole truth. I need not say that in cases where I had the feeling that something of this sort was happening, I preferred not to use the evidence at all. The other shortcomings in my report are evident. But I still hope that the facts which the following chapters contain may in the end be of some use. In all cases I have attempted not to assert too much and to prove too little. So often we hear that popular taste is abysmally low, or that designers in firms are not sufficiently well paid, or that artists are inaccessible to commercial propositions, or that manufacturers are not willing to risk experiments, etc., but hardly anybody has seriously attempted to examine what objective truth there is in such contentions.

In Part I of this book I have presented the facts concerning materials, techniques, design, methods of production and distribution and training for designers. I have included historical data where relevant. Part II describes the organizations and institutions concerned with design research and propaganda. It also includes designers’ associations, exhibitions and publications. Part III is devoted to conclusions which represent an evaluation of the foregoing evidence. In Part IV I have made some suggestions for improvements, based on the conclusions.

\(^1\) On the relation of that book to mine, see the Foreword, p. xxvii.