Paul Rand: Good Design is Good Will

Yale University   School of Art
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1) Giorgio Vasari, Vol. 3,
*Lives of the Most Eminent Painters,
Sculptors and Architects,* 1568,
p. 1868.

Michelangelo, responding to the demands of Pope Julius II about the completion of the Sistine ceiling, replied, *"It will be finished when I shall have satisfied myself in the matter of art." "But it is our pleasure,"* retorted the Pope, *"that you should satisfy us in our desire to have it done quickly."*[1] And it wasn't until he was threatened with being thrown from the scaffolding that Michelangelo agreed to be more expeditious. On the whole, though, the relationship between Michelangelo and the Pope was reciprocal. Mutual respect, apologies, and ducats were the means of mediation.

Today, the relationship between designer (painter, writer, composer) and management has certain similarities with those of our distinguished protagonists. What has always kept the designer and businessman at odds is the same thing that has kept them in accord. For the former, design was a means of problem solving, for the latter, a means of achieving economic, political, and social ends. But not all businessmen are aware of these phenomena.

2) Philip Kotler and G.A. Rath, Design:
A Powerful But Neglected Strategy Tool,
The Journal of Business Strategy,
Fall 1984, p. 12.

"Design is a potent strategy tool that companies can use to gain a sustainable competitive advantage. Yet most companies neglect design as a strategy tool. What they don't realize is that design can enhance products, environments, communications, and corporate identity,"[2] said a marketing professor at Northwestern University.

The expression *good design* came into usage circa 1940, when the Museum of Modern Art sponsored the exhibit: *Useful Objects of American Design Under Ten Dollars.* Good design was intended to signify not just good, but best. By definition, this would represent that which only the most skillful designer could realize. Over the years designers of both products and graphics, have created an impressive collection of distinguished designs. Yet one is painfully aware of the abundance of poor design and the paucity of good designers. This has always been a question of talent – a comparatively rare commodity in the arts, as it is in other professions.

Even if it requires no extensive schooling, design is one of the most perplexing pursuits in which to excel. Besides the need for a God-given talent, the designer must contend with

encyclopedic amounts of information, with a seemingly end-
less stream of opinions, and with the day-to-day problem of
finding "new" ideas (popularly called creativity). Yet it
is a profession relatively easy to break into. Unlike those of
architecture and engineering, it requires no accreditation (not
that accreditation is always meaningful in the arts). It entails no
authorization from official institutions as do the legal and
medical professions. This is equally true of other areas of the
business world, for example, marketing and market research.
There's no set body of knowledge that must be mastered
by the practitioners. What the designer and businessman have
in common is a license to practice without a license.

Many designers, schooled or self-taught, are interested primarily
in things that look good and work well; they see their mission
realized only when aesthetics and practical needs coalesce.
What a designer does is not limited to any particular idea or
form. Graphic design embraces every kind of problem of visual
communication, from birth announcements to billboards.
It embodies visual ideas, from the typography of a Shakespeare
sonnet to the design and typography of a box of Kellogg's
Corn Flakes. The only thing that might entitle these items to
the good design accolade is their practicability and their beauty,
both of which are embodied in the idea of quality.

Design is a personal activity and springs from the creative*
impulse of an individual. In contrast to group designing
or design by committee which, although occasionally useful,
deprives the designer of the distinct pleasure of personal
accomplishment and self-realization. It may even hinder his
thought processes, because work is not practiced under natural,
tension-free conditions. Ideas have neither time to develop nor
even the opportunity to occur. The tensions encountered
in original work are different from those caused by discomfort
or nervousness.

* *Creative* is a term of praise much affected by the critics. It is presumably intended
to mean original, or something like that, but is preferred because it is more vague and
less usual (cf. *seminal*). It has been aptly called a 'luscious, round, meaningless word',
and said to be 'so much in honour that it is the clinching term of approval from the
schoolroom to the advertiser's studio'. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*

The relationship that exists between the designer and
management is dichotomous. On the one hand, the designer is
fiercely independent; on the other, he is very much depen-
dent on management for support against bureaucracy and the
caprice of the marketplace. He believes that design quality
is proportionately related to the distance that exists between
the designer and management *at the top*.

He also recognizes management's prerogative to accept or
reject his ideas; but feels that if rejections are made out of hand,
merely for personal likes or dislikes, he would consider this
poor judgment and a disservice to all participants, a condition
ethically necessary to question.

Design is less a business than a calling. Many a designer's
work-day, in or out of the corporate environment, is not governed
by a time sheet. His ideas, which are his raison d'être, are not
produced by whim nor on the spur of the moment. Ideas are the
lifeblood of any form of meaningful communication. But
good ideas are obstinate and have a way of materializing only
when and where they choose – in the shower, or subway,
in the morning, or middle of the night. As if this weren't enough,
an infinite number of people, with or without political
motives, must scrutinize and pass on his ideas. Most of these
people, management or otherwise, have no design background.
They are nonprofessionals who may, or may not, have the
authority to approve or disapprove the work of the professional
designer. There are, of course, exceptions – lay people who
have an instinctive sense for design, but these are extremely
rare. And yet, it is these very exceptions who let the experts
do it.

If asked to pinpoint the reasons for the proliferation of
poor design, one would probably have to conclude, all things
being equal, that the difficulties lie with :
           1. management's unawareness or indifference;
           2. market researchers' vested interests;
           3. designers' lack of authority or competence.

Real competence in the field of visual communication is
something that only dedication, experience, and performance
can validate. The roots of good design are in aesthetics : in

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painting, drawing, and architecture, while those of business and market research are in demographics and statistics – disciplines traditionally incompatible with each other. The value judgments of the designer and the businessman are often at odds. Advertising executives and managers have their sights set on different goals : on costs and profits. *"They are trained,"* says Kotler, quoting a personnel executive, *"in business schools to be numbers-oriented, to minimize risks, and to use analytical detached plans – not insights gained from hands-on experience. They are devoted to short-term returns and cost reduction, rather than developing long-term technological competitiveness. They prefer servicing existing markets rather than taking risks and developing new ones."*[3]

3) Ibid., R. S. Siegal, p. 18.

Some executives who spend their time in a modern office at least eight hours a day, may very often live in a house in which the latest hi-fi system is hidden behind the doors of a Chippendale cabinet, their modern surroundings are synonymous with work, but not with relaxation. Their preference is for the traditional setting. (Most people are conditioned to prefer the fancy to the plain.) They see design merely as decoration – a legacy of the past. Quality and status are very often equated with traditional values, with costliness, with luxury. And in the comparatively rare instance that the business executive exhibits a preference for a modern home environment, it is usually the super modern, the lavish, and the extremely expensive – with emphasis on exclusivity and snobbery – that is sought. Design values, for the pseudo-traditionalist or super-modernist, are measured in extremes. For the former it is how old, for the latter how new. Good design is not based on nostalgia or trendiness, on whether it is "postmodern", "new wave", or whatever happens to be capriciously "in"; nor does it depend on whether one belongs to the Salamagundi Club or the Museum of Modern Art. Intrinsic quality is the only real measure of good design.

In some circles, art and design was, and still is, considered effeminate, something *"removed from the common affairs of men."* Others saw all artists *"performing no useful function they could understand."*[4] At one time, design was even considered a woman's job. *"Let men construct and women decorate,"*[5] said Benn Pitman, the man who brought new ideas about the arts from England to the U.S., in the 1850's.

4) William Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure,* New York, 1967, p. 8.

5) Robert B. Stein, The Aesthetic Craze, *Art News,* December 1986, p. 105.

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To the businessman, whose mind-set is only the bottom line, any reference to art or design is often an embarrassment. It implies waste and frivolity, having nothing to do with the serious business of business. To him art, if it belongs anywhere, belongs in the home or museum. Art is painting, sculpture, etching; design is wallpaper, carpeting and upholstery patterns. There are those who see graphic designers and typography in the same way they see vendors of the so-called graphic arts: printers and typesetters.

"Art," says Henry James, *"in our protestant communities, where so many things have got so strangely twisted about, is supposed in certain circles, to have some vaguely injurious effect on those who make it an important consideration…It is assumed to be opposed in some mysterious manner to morality, to amusement, to instruction."*[6]

6) Henry James, The Art of Fiction, *The House of Fiction,* New York, 1941, p. 27.

To many designers, art/design is a cultural mission, in which life and work are inseparable. Clean surfaces, simple materials, and economy of means are the designer's articles of faith. Asceticism, rather than "the good life," motivates good designers – in keeping with the ideals of the modern painters, architects and designers of the early part of this century, and with the beliefs, as expressed later by the Museum of Modern Art: good design is a *"thorough merging of form and function and an awareness of human values, expressed in relations to industrial production for a democratic society."*[7]

7) E. Kaufman, *What is Modern Design?,* MOMA, New York, 1950, p. 9.

Not just good design, but the implication of its modernity needs to be stressed. Le Corbusier, the great and influential architect and theorist commented : *"To be modern is not a fashion, it is a state. It is necessary to understand history, and he who understands history, knows how to find continuity between that which was, that which is, and that which will be."*[8]

8) William J. R. Curtis, *Le Corbusier Ideas and Forms,* New York, 1986, p. 224.

The market researcher, on the other hand, whose concern is primarily financial, has less lofty ideals. He is interested in facts and opinions – even if some of those facts may not be so factual, and some of those opinions may even be irrelevant. Ironically, he is really a professional who uses nonprofessionals for advice. *"Many managers,"* says the author of *The Design Dimension,* "are heavily oversold on what market research

9) Christopher Lorenz,
The Design Dimension, London, 1986,
p. 32.

can do…they use it as a decision substitute, instead of for decision support…. The predictive abilities of market research are innately limited, because it can only probe attitudes which are often a surprisingly poor guide to actual behavior…. Even if the research is well and objectively constructed – and there are plenty of horror stories of loaded questions, poor sampling techniques and other methodological errors – market research can probe the human psyche to only a limited degree of reliability."[9]

In a survey made by an Italian department store, La Rinascente, results of consumer polls were surprising. A group of potential customers were asked to choose which, among an array of different colored glasses, they preferred. With few exceptions, they all chose red. Dozens of red glasses were quickly put up for sale. Not a single glass was sold. To put it bluntly, this survey does cast some doubt on the role of consumer testing, or on the manner in which tests are conducted.

How reliable, then, are market research polls? Sometimes they are merely interesting, but when opinions are vastly different from each other, they can be bewilderingly confusing. In *The House of Fiction*, the editor speaks about such phenomena: *"The observers might watch the same show, but what they saw was never the same; one would see more, while the other saw less; one would see black, while the other saw white; one would see big, while the other saw small; and, not least, one would see coarse, while the other saw fine."[10]*

10) Henry James, The Art of Fiction,
*The House of Fiction*, New York,
1941, p. 12

This may sound like a plea to end all such investigations. In terms of providing visual clues – that a marketer may or may not find significant – it could be quite useful. However, designers almost always do their own "research." They never work in a vacuum. Even if they rant and rave about the inadequacies of market research, they may be conducting their own private inquiries by personal interview or consulting their own memories. They may ask questions, or talk directly to users or mere passersby, getting their ideas and studying their surroundings. To be sure, it is easier to elicit information about functional problems than about those dealing almost exclusively with matters of form or taste. Industrial designers, to which the first part of this statement applies, would

more likely find research useful than would graphic designers. *"Does it work?"* is easier to respond to than *"How do you like the typeface?"* But there are occasions when graphic designers can find research quite helpful. Holding up a sketch of the familiar United Parcel Service logo, I asked my seven-year-old daughter, *"What's this, Cath?"* to which she quickly responded, *"That's a present, Daddy."* More formal research could hardly have been more useful or more educational.

When should market research be used? In the area of corporate identity for example, the need for research, even if responses may merely satisfy one's curiosity, is questionable. What, for example, might the IBM logo have looked like had it been subject to market polling – like this?

I'm sure, had this been the outcome, it would surely have earned a fair number of votes. But what could a researcher have asked about the existing logo?
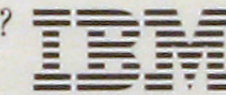
What do you think of this design? Does it say anything about computers? What kind of business does it suggest? The professional can concoct more suitable queries, I'm sure. But what possible responses could one have expected? "I like it. I don't like it. It's too simple. It's too complicated. It reminds me of a candy cane, a barber pole, a prisoner's suit, a zebra, etc." What possible use could such information have been to anyone? I like it or I don't like it, from public opinion polls, is very often enough to put an end to any argument. Commenting on this phenomenon, Henry James writes, *"Nothing, of course, will ever take the place of 'liking' a work of art or not liking it: the most improved criticism will not abolish that primitive, that ultimate test."[11]*

11) Ibid., p. 37.

When novelty, uniqueness, and originality are indispensable ingredients, marketing information can be less than inspirational.

That there are as many opinions as there are people is no revelation; but how does one reconcile the many different points of view that research polls generate? Predictability and dependability, so useful in helping to make judgments, are

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possible only when there is certainty, but not when there is
a mere babble of opinions. Little wonder, then, that researchers,
I am told, consider themselves lucky if they succeed about
50 percent of the time in accomplishing their objectives.

Often the problem with research data is that the data itself
is seen as creativity, as evidence, and not as a possible clue for
conceptualization. If, for example, research reveals that
type size or color is a factor in product recognition, as often as
not, raucous color schemes and offensive letter forms are
chosen simply out of expedience or ignorance. If taste plays any
role in choosing, it is often the taste of the investigator, or
his wife, or his secretary that is decisive. The problem, I believe,
does not lie in collecting data, but in interpreting and syn-
thesizing that data.

I once asked an advertising executive his opinion of an
advertisement that had only recently been market tested.
"I'm not the target audience; I cannot get emotionally involved,"
was his quick response. This was another way of saying,
"Sorry; it's not our policy to comment on that." Why? "It would
be inappropriate." (The bureaucrat's all-purpose excuse
for not doing anything.)[12] On further questioning, the adver-
tising man replied, *"But the ads scored very well,"* about
which one could only speculate: how much better they might
have scored had they been well designed.

12) William Safire, On Language,
New York Times, February 15, 1987

13) A.N. Whitehead, Freedom & Discipline,
The Aims of Education, New York,
1956, p. 51.

"Our aesthetic emotions provide us with vivid apprehensions of
value,"[13] is what Whitehead had to say about the importance
of the emotions in making judgments.

One wonders how do so many poorly designed advertise-
ments ever reach the point of being tested? Does this say some-
thing about the effectiveness of market testing, or about
the sensitivity of pollsters and their advertising agencies, their
taste, and their appreciation of good design? The fact that
so many poorly designed advertisements, packages and products
exist, points to those who are unmindful of the place and
value of good design.

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14) A.N. Whitehead,
Universities and Their Function,
The Aims of Education, New York,
1952, p. 97.

15) Henry James, The Art of Fiction,
The House of Fiction, New York,
1941, p. 32

16) G.B. Shaw, *Man and Superman*

17) Christopher Lorenz, p. 147

The fusion of marketing research opinions with relevant
aesthetic considerations is best accomplished by those profes-
sionals whose business it is to be imaginative. *"Imagination is*
not to be divorced from the facts. It is a way of illuminating
the facts."[14] The imagination takes the slightest hints and turns
them into revelations. *"The power to guess the unseen from*
the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece
from the pattern."[15]

It is the professionals' job to distinguish between *"moods*
and facts, enthusiasm and thoughtfulness,"[16] between things
symbolic and things real. The mere manipulation of opinions
by marketers cannot replace imaginative interpretation.
Things look as they do because the right or wrong people are
making decisions. The marketer who understands and
is sympathetic to the design process can help to make the
right decisions.

It is the place of marketing to supply information, and it
is the place of the designer, with the marketer's cooperation, to
interpret that information. Literal interpretation produces
stereotypes; creative interpretation produces surprises – that
competitive distinctiveness that business seeks. In his book,
The Design Dimension, the author comments, *"Though*
industrial designers frequently can and do substitute for the
absence of marketing imagination, in more companies the most
potent force for imaginative marketing and product strategy
is a real partnership between marketing and design."[17]

Blind acceptance of the results of market research and opinions
based exclusively on conditions of the past can be destructive
in many ways. It tends largely to discourage initiative and
exploration by the designer. It may even be regressive in that it
pins future strategy on the opinions of the past. *"You cannot*
measure the future on the basis of the past," said the British
philosopher, Karl Popper, *"the past is only an indication, not an*
explanation." It can therefore never be really original.
It steps backward, not forward. Its conclusions are determined
not on the opinions of professionals but on those of the
public whose attitudes, even if predictable, are usually vague
and often more emotional than reasonable. Further, the
public is more familiar with seeing bad design than good

design. Being unsophisticated, it bases its judgment on what it has seen. It is, in effect, conditioned to prefer bad design, because that is what it lives with. The new becomes threatening, the old reassuring.

"Good design is good business," said Tom Watson. But it is equally true that design, or even bad design, can be good business. In a New York Times article, dated October 25, 1986, titled *"Designer Packages Sell,"* the writer describes how a package for cheese was redesigned in order to improve product identity. Some of the criticism of the original package seemed valid – like insufficient emphasis on the maker's name. The designer went to a lot of trouble *"using various designs and colors. Each alternative went through a testing process…visibility from different angles, and under different lighting conditions…"* Other than creating a false sense of security, there seems to have been little reason for all this elaborate testing, especially when it yielded a package that was essentially less interesting than the one it replaced. Not only were all the good features of the previous design abandoned, such as an old horse and carriage mark and an elegant type face, but type designs of many different weights, sizes, and colors, undistinguished both in style and arrangement were substituted. Two bands of color, which can only be described as familiar clichés, were also added.

No doubt this new design is an improvement in visibility and shelf prominence, but is it an improvement in design? If this new design means more sales, how much might a more distinctive design, one in which fine typography and imaginative ideas, and not just visibility and sales, were a criterion? To have missed the chance of designing a package that could possibly have been distinguished as well as visible is regrettable. That it could have been competitively advantageous, and have also provided a moment's delight, is equally regrettable.

All this said and done, to deny the usefulness of market research is simply to deny the usefulness of facts. Even if these "facts" seem trivial, they may still, in the absence of other inspiration, provide design clues. Market research can be useful

in gauging needs, practical requirements, such as shelf visibility, competitive activities, legibility of nomenclature, etc. In product design, such information dealing with ergonomics is even indispensable. On the whole, market research is without value, unless judiciously applied. The designer is not always right. The researcher is not always wrong. Profit is not always the motive; but market research, whatever its outcome, should never be used as a good excuse for a bad design – in the same sense that good design should never be used to promote a bad product.

Design is an ethical problem because it entails questions of good and bad. A badly designed product that works is no less unethical than is a beautiful product that doesn't. The former trivializes the consumer, the latter deceives him. Design which lacks ideas and which depends entirely on form for its realization, may possess a certain kind of mysterious charm at the same time that it may be uncommunicative. Design, on the other hand, which depends entirely on content, will most likely be so tiresome that it will not compel viewing. *"Idea and the form,"* says James, *"are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of thread without the needle or the needle without the thread."*[18] Good design satisfies both idea and form, the needle and the thread.

18) Henry James, The Art of Fiction, *The House of Fiction*, New York, 1941, p. 40.

A company's reputation is very much affected by how it looks and how its products work. A beautiful object that doesn't work is a reflection on the company's integrity. In the long run, it may lose not only its customers but its good will. Good design will no longer function as the harbinger of good business but as the herald of hypocrisy. Beauty is a by-product of needs and functions. The Barcalounger is extremely comfortable but it is an example of beauty gone astray. A consumer survey that would find such furniture comfortable might, most likely, find it to be beautiful as well merely because it is easy to conclude that if something works, it must also be beautiful, and vice versa. Ugliness is not a product of market research but of bad taste, of misreading opinions for analysis, and information for ideas.

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19) *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore,* New York, 1986, p. 592.

20) A.N. Whitehead

21) Joan Campbell, The Founding of the Werkbund, *The German Werkbund,* New Jersey, 1978, p. 14.

Work of distinction and beauty is a product of creative invention. It is usually self-generated without ulterior motives other than the love of work. *"Endless curiosity; observation, research, and a great amount of joy in the thing,"*[19] is how George Grosz expressed it. Whitehead speaks of this phenomenon another way, *"We are surrounded by possibilities that are infinite ... the possibility of novel and untried combinations, the happy turns of experiment, the endless horizons opening out."*[20] It is those untried combinations to which the author refers that make the competitive advantage in the world of business possible.

In 1907, the German Werkbund, an organization whose purpose it was to forge the links between designer and manufacturer was formed. It was intended to make the public aware of the folly of snobbery and of the *'old ideals of simplicity; purity and quality.'* Its aims were also to make producers aware of *"a new sense of cultural responsibility; based on the recognition that men are molded by the objects that surround them."*[21]

From little buckslips to big buildings, the visual design problems of a large corporation are, virtually, without end. It is in the very solution of these problems – well designed advertisements, packaging, products, and buildings that a corporation is able to help shape its environment – to reach and to influence the taste of vast audiences. It is in a singularly strategic position to heighten public awareness. Unlike routine philanthropic programs, this kind of contribution is a day-to-day activity, which turns business strategy into social opportunity, and good design into good will.