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# What is a Designer?

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QUALIFIED INTERIOR DESIGNER

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The terms design and designer are bandied about today as part of normal conversation. But what is design and what or who is a designer? What differentiates the “designer” from the weekend renovator or are they one of the same?

The term design means many things to many people depending upon the area or context in which they are associated with. The Macquarie Dictionary and the Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999 Microsoft Corporation define design as

1. to work out or create the form or structure of something
2. to plan and make something in a skilful or artistic way
3. to intend something for a particular purpose
4. to contrive, devise, or plan something

whilst designer is defined as

1. somebody who makes and executes designs
2. used to describe something to suggest that it is trendy and popular
3. created or produced by a famous designer

The limitations of these definitions means that anyone who plans or makes something can call himself or herself a designer. This problem of a generic definition is summed up by Italian designer Giorgio Giugiaro statement “nothing is without design” (Hauffe: 1998;15)

Peel J (1988;33) sees interior design as a term that describes all of the decisions that determine how a particular object, space or building will be. No one definition will ever satisfy everyone, however what distinguishes a designer from a DIY project is an in depth understanding of what design represents and means in a philosophical sense as well as a personal one. An understanding of what constitutes all processes of design not just the end product. Good design is influenced by theory and practice.

Design of spaces whether buildings, interior spaces, furniture etc is a mirror of its society and its culture and expresses how a nation sees itself and where they are going and how one sees “themselves” in relation to the rest of society. There is a direct correlation between political and economic climate and design and reflects society’s values and mores. Good design is an everyday topic, as society becomes more design conscious as a result of affluent living, two-income families, environment issues, preservation movement and the feminist movement. Stanley Tigerman in Russell (1989; 17) encapsulates “Painting and sculpturing are initiating acts of social and political commentary; architecture and design are responsive acts to the cultural landscape.” Public awareness and acceptance of good design are well established with books, popular magazines and newspaper home design pages joining with museum exhibitions to spread information on design excellence.

Design is a cultural history of the time and provides a commentary, often providing direction to society. Knowledge of this can define a person, or a corporation shaping society’s perception of them and often their success. A successful designer is revered by society and people are proud to describe themselves as designers.

Successful design must elicit both a cerebral and emotional response – it must push the

boundaries yet be functional at the same time. Aesthetics and function go hand in hand though function alone should not dictate the final form, there still should be individuality about the design, a unique character, one, which helps to create the other. The concept of beauty differs with time and space, with purpose and context. One's life's experiences and associations will influence it.

Whether it is the designer or the design there must be sensitivity to the environment, both natural and man-made. There should be harmony with the site, climate and cultural background. As David Slovic says [as quoted by Russell B (1989; 19)] “we should establish goals for architecture that articulate not the method or style or design but the use of design as a factor necessary to the improvement of society and its environment”. We need to design culturally rich cities, create spaces that are for people that have an effect on people.

Design is how form evolves from man's concepts and imagination [Francesco Baldinuccu 1681, Russell (1989; 15)]. There is an implied responsibility for the total concept both interior and exterior form. One must acknowledge past experiences and the influence they have on your work, by being aware of these influences you can use them to expand and build upon or steer completely away from them. One must be willing to learn from the past and incorporate historical successes into contemporary design. The learning process never stops at any fixed point it is continuous.

Effective designers need to comprehend/understand new technology. Without these considerations a designer will not be addressing the needs of the society or more specifically the individual. Effective design is one, which has flexibility – serve more than one function and portrays the personality of the user.

The design process can be analysed in terms of a problem that should be defined and stated with as much clarity and precision as possible. The proposal is a solution to this problem. According to Hauffe (1998; 17) in design one can speak of three basic functions of an object:

1. its practical, technical function
2. its aesthetic function and
3. its symbolic function

These functions can often dictate final form to a certain extent though should not be the driving force in all situations. At times a practical function will outweigh the importance of aesthetic and vice versa. Different scenarios will encompass different importance of each function.

Vision is the primary sense through which the design and ideas will reach its audience and recognition of ones preferred methodology helps to define the designer. The users of space now show more awareness of design excellence and their input is not only valuable but also necessary to solve the design problem they present to the designer. A well-developed concept is essential before any design can progress to fruition if it is to become more than a DIY project copied from a current design magazine. Using variety of elements and forms will also identify the designer.

This author prefers what is known as “organic architecture” as defined by today's parameters of curved lines and open, free-flowing spaces and the definition by Burden E (1998; 145) that “Principles of Organic Architecture rely on the integration of form and function in which structure and appearance of a building is based on a unity of

forms that stresses the integration of individual parts to the whole concept, relating it to the natural environment in a deliberate way with all forms expressing the natural use of materials”. The natural curves represent freedom, they are sensuous in shape and pleasant to touch – it elicits an emotional response – sweeping curves express continuity of form.

Form of space is determined to a great degree by the natural geometry of the site and the need for privacy. Space needs to continue and flow naturally from room to room and to exterior spaces and beyond yet generally complement the immediate environment. The layout of the space must provide movement and direction to each element within. The curve is often used as a directional force. Space needs also to be altered to create different levels and emphasise either the horizontal or vertical depending on the design. A space is not a single entity fixed but a series of experiences, the indoor and outdoor environment should become as one as the Australian climate and lifestyle allow the outdoor to become another room within the space, providing a sense of shelter and protection from the elements, security.

Asymmetrical design is a dominant characteristic of this author’s methodology helping to provide an element of surprise and anticipation –what’s around the corner? Juxtaposition of elements is utilised to create interest and cause the viewer to intellectualise the function and purpose of the design and to personalise the space and create uniqueness. Harmony and composition is not achieved by relying just on the use of repetition of form to hold the space together but on informal balance, contrast and focal points to create a composition that stimulates all senses whether it be visual or intellectual.

Light is an important as it creates ambience and the sense of freedom when the natural light of the environment is an integral part of the design. The play of light can create illusions, texture and focal points, often balancing the space and adding to the harmony and final composition.

The elements of colour and texture are used to impose a statement and are considered vital in regards to their psychological impact - they help to create a space that encompasses the needs of the owner or user. Colour psychology is very important in a design of a room. It imparts an ambience to the space that should complement the function of the design. A variety of elements and objects can generate an atmosphere that is comfortable and snug; classical columns suggest historic origins of space; the colours of wood and fabrics convey warmth and comfort; incandescent light adds an additional glow of warmth and curving form suggests softness and relaxation. It should reflect the interests and personality of owner. The integration of historical characteristics so as not to compromise the integrity of the original design is also important. To achieve this, careful analysis of the elements used in the original space are extrapolated and continued in the new to harmonise the past and the present.

Various materials are preferred including poured cement for its moulding qualities as it fits easily with the “organic” style, glass because of its transparent or translucent qualities which enable the blurring of the outside with the inside and wood for its natural textures and individuality. Environmentally sustainable materials and resources should be considered in any design. Technology such as telecommunications, wiring, lighting, acoustics, ergonomics and spatial and psychological requirements of inhabitants are also taken into account. More than ever before aesthetics has been

influenced by technological development. (Haute; 1998; 166)

One's upbringing and experiences of life have an undeniable effect on a designer, whether they were negative or positive. Education is important and never ending and the recognition of this is vital if new and innovative designs are to be produced. Broadening one's experiences whether it is through travel, theatre, reading, adversity or any other gambit of areas is essential to both the developing and experienced designer. It is imperative to "keep up" with current trends, technology and society's changing values and culture. Personal interests are a constant source of inspiration and often a determining factor in developing one's philosophy to life.

Design is influenced by nature, vernacular design and technology as well as the political climate, history, religion and council regulations currently in place. For eg the introduction of legislation later in the year that all new designs for houses must reduce energy costs by 40% will have a huge impact on design of homes from placement on the site to the actual materials used and the size. One wonders if this will result in a more functional approach to maximise limited resources and infrastructures that have not keep pace with development or encourage designers in all aspects of the building industry to become more creative or will design become compromised. Modification of environmental devices will have to be developed. Will the open plan house disappear as it is expensive and difficult to heat and cool effectively or will people still demand this approach to home design?

Other factors influencing design are council regulations such as covenants and density housing ratios determined by political parties. At present the density ratio is an attempt by governments to limit urban sprawl and reduce infrastructure costs. This has seen the development of large two storey houses on tiny blocks in an attempt to achieve the same living area. The result is communities compacted together with inappropriate designs that can have a negative impact, on the surrounding area. People have not been willing to compromise on size to create a space that would be more appropriate for the site. Society at present still measures their success and standing by the size of their homes. Conversations often centre on the metrage of their homes.

No period of architecture can be analysed without studying the history of the time. Expressionist's architects designed for a utopia as a direct response to the horrors of WWI whilst Frank Lloyd Wright was directly influenced by the industrial revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Neo Classical style was founded partly on a reaction to the excesses of Baroque, and partly to archaeological discoveries of the time. Different styles of architecture provide different messages to the viewer for example the use of Neoclassical to express authority – hence its use in public buildings. An understanding of the past with an understanding and embracing the future makes outstanding design possible.

Church architecture has no longer an established style as seen by the newly completed St Patrick's Cathedral in Parramatta after the original had been destroyed by arsons in 1996. It is a radical departure from traditional church design. The Vatican II reforms of 1965 attempts to make the church more accessible and community oriented but its detractors claim that the mystery and passion of religious faith has been lost. What ever your beliefs this new church has created passionate debate about its appropriateness. It can be argued that the reforms in fact have been successful in that this church has at least resulted in people discussing religion and buildings appropriate for these aspects

of society.

Religious groups can also influence the style and types of buildings constructed in an area. The recent furore over the building of a mosque in Annangrove NSW created community disharmony, claims of racial discrimination and unrest with a large number of people questioning their beliefs and values when confronted with an issue such as this in their “own backyard”. This same council shire has also seen the construction of a hotel in the town centre prevented by a coalition of various religious groups who deemed the structure inappropriate for this area of the community.

The influx of migrants and the adoption of a multicultural ethos by the Australian society have seen an impact on the type of design seen within the community. It is only natural that people bring the best elements of designs from their homeland and repeats it in their new land.

Design is in response to the complex demands of the modern world. The increase in efficiency of communication and technology leads to more frequent change and mixing of ideas creating new designs that must react to new area and patterns of use. Speed at which things change and develop has lead to an increase in the number of buildings and designs that have resulted in heated debate on what is considered good design. The High Tech style has created objects that cannot identify their function straight away. (Haute: 1998; 166) The advent of computers has resulted in flexibility of the design process and one can argue diversity. An effective design must engage the senses, not only visually but intellectually as well. It must make a statement and stand out as being an individual. Designs that follow the current trend become passé if they do not exhibit some form of individuality.

The importance of aesthetics as well as functionalism is vital to any design is emphasised by Oscar Niemeyer who states “form follows beauty”. “When a form creates beauty, it becomes functional and thus fundamental in architecture”.  
[Underwood (1994; 92) quoting Niemeyer] S. Marc Thee believes “Excellent design represents intimacy, regardless of size or scale”.(Architectural Digest May 04;56) A balanced design is one without superfluous luxuries or extras; eliminates excess. Every element and detail is in perfect harmony. Curved flowing lines appeal for their continuous feel and direction. No finite or abrupt end, easy on the eye and the hint of a possibility of something around the corner. It is their directional quality that adds to the appeal. This is demonstrated by the later work of Harry Seidler. At the same time designs from geometric shapes such as Frank Lloyd Wrights “Fallingwater” or the “Best” building in Houston still provide beauty. The Best building ignites the cerebral senses by creating conflict within the viewer, how does the building remain standing? is it safe?, is it really a shop that is fully operational? – it defies the norm of what we consider a shop to be – the need to investigate further becomes paramount. As Charles Baudelaire states “the unexpected, the irregular, the surprise, the amazing are an essential part and characteristic of beauty”. [www.pritzkerprize.com](http://www.pritzkerprize.com) On the other hand the sheer beauty of “Fallingwater” leaves your senses breathless with awe as to how a structure could be created in such an environment. There is an urgency to explore the space, to touch and feel the surroundings. One can imagine living here and feeling content and secure – a peaceful oasis.

Any structure that blurs the distinction between inside and out is effective design if it captures ones imagination such as the Harry Seidler building overlooking Sydney

Harbour. You feel you are part of the harbour and the larger environment. Oscar Niemeyer's, Canoas House reflect this desirable element. The boundary of where the house begins and the garden starts is blurred. An effective design must demonstrate diversity and intricate movement. The space must be an exploration.

“Architecture is the reflections of the society that produces it; one must live with one’s time, using new technologies while retaining a sense of harmony; without innovation, the masterpieces of the past would not exist.” Greenhalgh’s (1990; 65) The work of Gaudi, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies de Rohe demonstrate this. Without those willing to question the status quo nothing would change, the world would become static. An excellent design must work well, serving the needs and requirements of its users, it is well made of good materials and appropriate materials and it is aesthetically successful. Great design forces us to take notice and demands our appreciation. It draws attention to itself, but deservedly. To be truly great it must “express its utility in such a way that aesthetic arguments over whether form precedes function, or vice versa, are rendered moot: form and function are perfectly integrated in a single object that is at once useful and beautiful to behold.”(Architectural Digest May 04; 48)Unless a design leaves you excited, constantly thinking about it, forever fine tuning it; it is unlikely to result in anything above the norm. Without this passion the extraordinary cannot be created. As interior designer Alec Jordan says “Great design stops you in your tracks” and this is what differentiates the DIY renovator from the designer. “It seduces you, in a perfect world we would be surrounded by nothing else” (Architectural Digest May 04:68) it is timeless.

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