

Design of identity product and differential

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Media often talk that products are subject to dominant fashion and we often even let ourselves go and buy products we would not have bought in other times. In industrial product design, creating any object or product is a challenge regarding the needs of the future user, which in some cases change with time. With the product, the company intends to create benefits, so the designer is faced with two big challenges: user satisfaction and profitability for the company. To reach both, problems of different kind need to be solved creatively by means of several studies. Such problems are technical, market, use-related, ergonomic, functional, aesthetic and formal, and they change according to the different periods in time.



It seems obvious that function is not the only criterion to determine the shape of an object anymore, so other approaches are needed. Once it started declining, the functionalist approach gave way to semiologic science that formulated a more complete Function Theory based on the well-known semiotic triangle. Interpretation as a support of the formal structure offers the following relations:

- Pragmatic aspects, related with practical, technical and use functions.
- Syntactic aspects, related with aesthetic and formal functions.
- Semantic aspects, referring to symbolic values and visualisation of the function.

Following this scheme, professionals work on pragmatic aspects and provide solutions for functional, technical, ergonomic and use problems of the given product, but designers, like architects, need to try and seduce the user with their product. More or less imaginative solutions in pragmatic aspects will match the syntactic and semantic ones in order to reach a specific target group. So based on a defined target audience, designers need to cover syntactic and semantic aspects based on formal seduction and in other cases also perceptive and sensorial factors. Filters used can be called codes to be followed, models to be imitated or types. In design, the term type leads us to the essence, the synthesis of something, abstraction and concepts reaching the target user by means of a mimesis or analogy process. It is in this essence where the designer is able to convey the precise contents for the target audience of the object.

It is the syntactic and semantic aspects where the designer comes closest to the audience. Trends regarding style and an own marketing language set the pattern. Styles are set with time. Style trends, like minimalism, hi-tech, pop, postmodernism or deconstructivism, together with conveyance of different characters like youth, sportiveness, security, relax or environmentalism, all of which translated into tridimensional geometry, has the designer offer products with a very specific formal language and

follow the rules of form in which the aim of attracting the future buyer materialises in a need that shall bring them back to an allegedly happier world.

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Also, when talking of big companies manufacturing standard products, we often find that the product being made stands next to another with the same features. In most cases they compete with each other in cost (offering the product at the best price) and sales reps have a difficult task in convincing the customer that their product is better. In the company, it is indispensable that management believes in the philosophy of change. In such a dynamic society, if there is no progress through adequate decision-taking (hence the importance of the design phase) the company can be out of the market very easily. In a changing society like ours, it is important that small and medium-sized companies are able to adapt to constant change.

Treatment and language of forms in industrial products are related with the challenges posed by globalisation. The economy of identity concept is currently dealt with as a reinforcement of items related with singularity and own identity of each territory and its society. As an added value, identity is a concept that has commonly been controversial in design and industrial products. We are living in times of interdependence and globalisation and observe two positions regarding the new challenges posed to us: on the one hand, projection of the own identity, understood as the differential items allowing the product to be competitive regarding differentiation, thus generating benefits for the company; on the other, advocates

of cultural unification, leaving aside territorial models and going for unifying criteria.

The design phase shall allow differentiation of our product to provide a great differential in benefit and strengthen us. A change or modification in the product after different departments including design have made their job means that the whole company needs to be open to change. Of course, this new way of doing can bring about big change, with improved efficiency and cost reduction. This is done with intensive and constant learning and readiness to take risk to meet targets, without presetting methodologies, traditional forms or ways of doing or taking them for granted. They shall just be a reference.

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If we look at the term *identity* from an etymological point of view, we observe that its meaning is 'equality'. So we should ask if, when talking of identity design, we are also referring to global design.

Another point to consider is the idea of the product as a differentiating factor, that is, products that based on their properties, either technical, functional, use-related or aesthetic, provide an added value as to differentiation. Most products complying with these requirements are considered innovative. When designers are confronted with the idea of identity, they can do it along two lines: either territory-based or rather global.

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niches allowing us to materialise this differential against competition. Any product in which design is related with identity will first need to be studied regarding references having existed in the past, seeking codes or types, either technical or merely formal, that yield the required result for a process of analogy or mimesis.

Products often act as symbols and signs, and in most cases formal treatment conveys this relation, adapting to fashion and style items. Products have now stopped being mere material possessions and became a new reality that makes us feel proud of the purchasing moment in a deceitful relation of immediacy, purchase-satisfaction-happiness, which in some case fills our lives with meaning.

In formal treatment of the product, the designer is in the need of satisfying this relation. This is why the design process includes items of philosophy typical of humanistic behaviour. Formal treatment goes along these lines, trying to analyse the target audience, offering those signs, symbols and values it intends to see in the product, either as signs of identity or differentiation. It is here where the designer needs to decipher codes or types based on which the required feelings are generated for each object. With these types, abstraction and the purest essence of each code, the designer generates by means of a **mimesis** or analogy process concepts reaching out to the target. These codes are applied to tridimensional items and their internal form or hidden face are present in our visual conception.

In differentiation of forms lies the value of attraction. Values of association and previous experience (psychological, social and cultural aspects) are projected through the form as well.

When talking of generating products with an own identity that will set the differential degree against other products, we are referring to specific properties aside the typical concepts of globalisation. At the University of Girona we have been spending years analysing with our students what codes or types can cause a product to be seen as having an own identity, e.g. as a Catalan product.

Studies done point towards two ways: an own one, i.e. Catalan design made for Catalans, and another in which Catalan design is thought for the rest of the population. We have been working mainly in this latter case, that is, design of industrial products interpreted outside Catalonia as an own brand (e.g. the Barcelona brand has a growing reputation), i.e. territorial identity and thus differentiation against the other products.

The most relevant codes for our students were Gaudí, Olympics, Dalí, Barça, modernism, light, colour and Mediterranean. Hence it could be presumed that in designing products with differential identity some of these codes should appear at formal level. The enlargement project for the Camp Nou stadium submitted by British architect **Norman Foster** is known, in which apparent codes for Catalans are clearly shown, such as the FC Barcelona club colours and the Catalan flag as well as subtler items like outer treatment reminding of the broken tiles of Gaudí's Parc Güell.

Other aspects to consider are those related with quality, environment or sustainability, but the question needs to be asked: Do these codes remain mere formal resources? Or do they really represent a part of sociocultural reality of a nation? Does any German, Italian, French, etc. design exist today? Or in the case of a car, is there a distinctive German, Italian, French, etc. design? Or regarding a telephone, is there a distinctive Korean or Swedish design? Most companies manufacturing these products have designers from different nationalities and differentiating points are usually of very subtle character in those products in which use and function are very important, while they are more evident when products have a decorative or representation character.

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The need of creating a product within a company involves external and internal customers (emplo-

yees), who can participate actively in the creation process by means of techniques like improvement groups, collaborative design and enquiries, which help focusing on identity design differentiated from the rest. All this change eventually means investment in research and development of new products in which innovation and design play a key role. All this will need to show in return of this investment and final benefit.

The company needs to be able to adapt to, test and analyse the market constantly. New products launched to the market can be reformulated immediately by competition, so differentiation may disappear within short time. After two years or even less, competition may have reformulated the product.

Change is not only determined by external points or facts but there may be also internal ones helping improve effectiveness at the company. There are further tools that can be used in introducing change, new methods for customer search, change of environment, learning by doing and the risk that needs to be taken in some cases. What is important is that mistakes and risks taken are known. The problem comes up when it is not known what went wrong... and it is the customer who detects it.

Creativity helps us differentiate. In fact, with brainstorming, a **scamper** or *morphological analysis* it is often possible to find solutions easy to implement. *Doing research in terms of customer knowledge will also be helpful. A differentiated product, e.g. one having its environmentally friendly origin as a property, can allow us to enter the market successfully and reach a bigger market share.*

One goal of companies has to be investment in research and design to finally obtain considerable benefit. Also, more diversity and creativity will have many employees working along the same direction. The marketing and design departments must not try and have a nice slogan but need to be the company's spearhead. They have to know the customer needs and they need to understand them to have a product satisfying their needs and, if possible, having them feel identified with it.

To summarise, the company goal needs to be to create quality products to earn a place in the future offering useful products to society with a differentiating character, products satisfying customer needs and expectations and creating trust in quality, regularity and service.

Companies need to be profitable, competitive and efficient optimising human and material resources. They need to be environmentally friendly, socially responsible and concerned with health and safety. They need to be dynamic, able to adapt to change and have a constant attitude of improvement at all organisation levels. They need to be participatory, use teamwork to solve problems and have all employees be and feel the collaborators of a common project.

We are currently experiencing a new stage in product design in which the meaning of product design and innovation concepts need to be revisited, not just as a technological fact, which is by the way logical in an industrial setting, but as a

necessary thought regarding such important points like conveyance of feelings directly related with as rare items in technical language as perceptive, psychological, cultural, social and emotional issues. Products need to be projected out of their semantic component, using the formal language typical of the properties of each type. Considering all these items and relating them with the own identity is the probable action line within innovation and design, implementing the own formal language at every point.

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