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"THE TASTE MANIPULATORS"

AN INQUIRY INTO TASTE AND

ITS RELATIONSHIP TO DESIGN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Henryk Reizes

"THE TASTE MANIPULATORS"
AN INQUIRY INTO TASTE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO DESIGN EDUCATION

In order to answer the question "DOES THE PUBLIC TASTE IMPOSE ITSELF ON DESIGNERS, MANUFACTURERS AND DEVELOPERS, OR IS IT THE OTHER WAY AROUND?", the following persons were asked to participate in a discussion: psychologist and educator; consumer and public relations executive and writer; product designer; architect, planner and educator; housewife and student. A brief and a questionnaire were supplied to the participants before the meeting. Their viewpoints were presented and the issues discussed during a three and a half hour conference which was tape recorded. (The tape was submitted with the thesis).

Two main points emerged:

1. Man's basic needs were not being satisfied but were being manipulated, and this resulted in a separation between needs and taste;

2. Many structures in society were responsible for the creation and perpetuation of false needs.

The conclusions drawn from the meeting implied a need for enlarging the design curricula to include economics, psychology and sociology.

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INTRODUCTION

This investigation was designed to ask the question "DOES THE PUBLIC TASTE IMPOSE ITSELF ON DESIGNERS, MANUFACTURERS, AND DEVELOPERS, OR IS IT THE OTHER WAY AROUND?" I am exploring this frustrating matter to consider the cultural, social, economic, and psychological factors and their implications for design education.

I have encountered many spontaneous conversations concerning the subject, not one of which came to any valuable conclusion. In order to explore this question further I invited the following persons to participate in a discussion:

1. Psychologist and educator
2. Consumer and public relations executive and writer
3. Product designer
4. Architect, planner and educator
5. Housewife and student.

These individuals were chosen for their expertise and experience in their own field, genuine interest in this question, and their ability to articulate and communicate their ideas.

The following brief and questionnaire was given to the participants several days prior to the meeting.

BRIEF FOR THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE DISCUSSION
OF "THE TASTE MANIPULATORS"

In order to discuss public taste, first it is necessary to define it, and at the same time to establish the difference between "taste", "fashion", and "style".

Here are the definitions:

Taste is a characteristic both innate and acquired which denotes likes and preferences

Fashion is the current and prevailing style, fad and practice

Style is the manner in which things are done.

I sincerely hope that you accept these for the purpose of this discussion. We should keep in mind that general taste, rather than individual preference, is being discussed.

I am inviting the following participants:

1. Psychologist and educator
2. Consumer and public relations executive and writer
3. Product designer
4. Architect, planner and educator
5. Housewife and student.

My question is: "Does the public taste impose itself on designers, manufacturers, and developers, or, is it the other way around?" I have called my inquiry "The Taste Manipulators". Do they exist and if so, who are they? If the public taste imposes itself, what are the cultural, social, economic, and psychological factors which govern it? Are they valid and are they related to real, human needs?

As I hope to develop implications for design education from your opinions the meeting will be taped.

In addition I am asking you to answer briefly in writing the following questions before the meeting. Please bring the answers with you.

DO "TASTE MANIPULATORS" EXIST?

IF SO, WHO ARE THEY?

WHY DO THEY EXIST?

DO YOU FEEL THAT THERE ARE OTHER FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE THE PUBLIC TASTE AND IF SO WHAT ARE THEY?

DISCUSSION

On February the eighteenth, nineteen hundred and seventy-
five, a continuous three and a half hour discussion was held in the
Centre for Instructional Technology conference room in the Hall build-
ing of Concordia University's Sir George Williams Campus. The follow-
ing are the summaries and reproduction, in full or in part, of the
statements, opinions or viewpoints of the participants:

Psychologist and Educator - summary of his response to questionnaire
and his verbal introduction.

Taste has its origins in the deep need of the individual and
the organism. If left to develop, taste should be a conscious repre-
sentation of an organismic and existential need. Our basic needs such
as food and water are still with us and cannot be undone by condition-
ing, socializing, marketing, etc. Man's survival has been a history
of intelligent selection and taste leading to appropriate choices.
Taste manipulators are the components of the socializing process and
they include parents, educators, mass media, social groups and cultu-
ral environments. The reason for the taste manipulators existence
depends on the demands for the needs they can supply. For example,
industry owes its existence to the demand for its products and in
stimulating this demand it often loses sight of the basic need it
was supposed to supply and further provokes a demand for products

that have lost their value and efficiency. It is not just a feature of
a capitalistic society, since it can be found in all groups such as the
church, art school, or university. Manipulators could aim for a
different behaviour but still they are trying to "sell", "teach", or
"convert".

    The manipulators intensify the demand in order to survive and
contribute to establish an equation between needs and certain objects
that become reinforced to the extent of becoming internalized by the
individual as his taste. Man is basically a social animal who manipu-
lates his needs and is often enslaved into making systems perpetuate
themselves and making industries and various products survive. These
systems and industries become the sole perpetuators of production which
has resulted in a separation between needs and taste.

    Public taste, while slow and erratic in its course, does
evolve toward a more meaningful behaviour. Environment, trial and
error, reality testing, all contribute to help form the public taste
along with personality and motivational factors. Taste, being a
behaviour, is potentially a significant indicator of what is best for
the organism to undertake.

<u>Consumer and Public Relations Executive and Writer</u> - summary of his
                                                       argument.

    If the term "manipulator" is used in the strict sense, which
implies the possibility and element of control, then taste manipulators
do not exist. Only taste influencens have a real effect upon the

formation of public taste as well as on fashion and styles.

Taste influencers include producers, writers, directors, and designers in motion pictures and for television, product designers, artists, musicians, architects, urban planners and developers, people in the news media, business executives in marketing and particularly in retailing - all the people involved in shaping popular culture. More indirectly, novelists and non-fiction writers, even philosophers and religious leaders, affect public taste through their influence upon the values of society. These values are also affected by politicians, including those involved in activist and "pressure" groups -e.g., conservationists and environmentalists. Often the fact that these people have an influence on public taste is an effect, rather than a deliberate intention. Very few people set out with the objective of "changing public taste". All the taste influencers form a part of the inevitable dynamic of social change and evolution - and are themselves caught up in it, as the influenced as well as the influencers.

Many factors influence public taste: shifts in the ethnic composition, shifts in locational balance of population, and economic cycles.

Market researchers categorize people and name their needs and wishes. If manufacturers produce to meet these needs, they will be successful. A cycle exists wherein the manufacturers are being governed by public taste which in turn is being discovered by the

market researchers.

Product Designer - his introductory statement in full:

"Taste Manipulators" obviously exist, otherwise the design professions would not exist.

Taste manipulation is part of some professions, and part of some industrial and commercial activity. Who are the "Taste Manipulators"? They are the decision makers involved with the details of production. They are combined in the whole complex of industrial/commercial hierarchical relationships, reflecting the influences on them by their backgrounds and by their environment.

Company President: the "final" word. "Satisfy him, and get it through!" Personal preferences affect his decisions, as do the ideas of his wife, his intimate friends, the needs of his status and his aggressive/ resistive attitudes.

Vice-president (in charge of anything): A less secure, generally more cautious (conservative) acceptance and influence pattern. Impelled by the "must show success" pressures.

Product Manager: Generally associated with the purchasing department where money is paramount, demanding lowest total cost and maximum performance per dollar.

Product Buyer for re-sale areas: Generally bases his purchase decisions on recent sales success patterns, on style trends as related in trade journals, and on word of mouth among his peers. Favors a taste status

quo, therefore a backward attitude.

Designer: By definition, an individual sensitive to socio-technological trends, who pushes the upper limits of taste acceptability ...if luck grants him acceptable clients, and he is honest.

3rd Level Executives: The draftsman, the foreman, the shop manager, the tooling department, the house painter, the upholsterers, the cabinet makers, even the handy-man.

Outside Influencers: The retail sales force ("Which do you recommend?"). The media...with all their capable and deadline-pressured critics, analysts and advisors. The "standards" industry, with its "Ten Best" lists. The censors.

The Home: The family developed taste norm.

The Revolution: Anything but that! or the constant resistor! or the genius and his coterie!

Architect, Planner and Educator - summary of his statement:
Taste manipulators exist on two levels.

Basic: Everyone is a taste manipulator and in addition to influencing his own tastes and preferences and by virtue of daily interaction with other people, tends to make statements, declarations and express opinions and preferences which affect other people's tastes. In the same category there is some taste manipulation which is part of the basic value system that exists in various social groups. These groups tend to influence other groups, or provide a stimulus to which other groups aspire, deriving from a long tradition of the class structure.

Education forms part of this process. Everyone involved in education knows that it is impossible not to express opinions and make statements which refer to your own taste and in turn influence young people to develop certain tastes, preferences and so on. A feedback process exists when social and specific groups tend to manipulate people and get them to conform (perhaps unconsciously).

Organized: This area of taste is unrelated to basic needs and is organized and directed for profit and gain. It deals with false needs, consciously created, supported and manipulated and formulated in such a way as to become part of people's taste. Quality standards which emanate from the design profession and government-agencies are often artificial and have no basis in terms of basic needs. Lifestyle images are consciously created and projected and have a tremendous and probably the most profound influence on taste generally. Conformity is created and used by the manipulators. Categories are invented into which the manipulators conveniently put people. This produces the situation where a certain degree of predictability exists as to what these people will or will not accept. Once certain products become associated with a group, the group then perpetuates the demand.

The taste manipulators are mainly those who gain from the provision of goods and services:

Developers - who stand to gain by developing certain tastes

Promoters - of building styles and fashions

Institutions - who set standards and project images

Governments - who set codes, standards (politicians e.g., Mayor Drapeau)

Designers

Public Relations and Advertising groups

Media and Cinema

Manufacturers

Financiers - mortgage companies influence what is to be put on the market

Heroes - are taste makers who are used in advertising and promotion and
influence taste through their own projection.

The basic reason for the existence of organized taste manipulation is
the mass consumer society we live in and all that it implies. The
anonymous consumer has been made into a specialist in his own field
and relies on others to guide him. The reason there is so much taste
manipulation is because there is so little direct involvement by the
individual in the various processes and the lack of opportunity to be-
come involved. Another reason for the existence of taste manipulators
is the professional mystique that has been built around the design
profession which is seldom questioned.

Factors influencing public taste are current issues, e.g., the women's
liberation movement, rapid changes in the economy, education, travel,
and contextural changes.

Canadians no longer have any kind of indigenous taste, having relied
for so long on foreign products. Therefore our taste is totally import-
ed and in many cases, tragically unsuited.

Housewife and Student - complete statement:

DO "TASTE MANIPULATORS" EXIST? Yes, but he must not always be assumed bad, because without our pushers of gilted kleenex box covers or plastic crazy paving in hallways, our shops could be filled with Bauhaus functionalism, Museum of Modern Art pure formalism or Dallegret's delights such as his metal beads undulating under plastic. So they do exist, and will continue to do so until people stop showing a large variety of preferences.

IF SO, WHO ARE THEY? Designers, good, bad, indifferent; business, scientist and government. All of these people have looked at the human psychic process and laid bare our subconscious on the market place, predictors of needs we did not know we had, and already catered to at various income levels. An insidious process, since it would deprive spontaneity or creativity. They are rabid exploiters on one hand, and gentle persuaders on the other, and various pressure groups for common good are often lost in between.

WHY DO THEY EXIST?

(a) By careful manipulation, the manipulator has eliminated the individual from the design process, the customer has not been considered as the user of the commodity, he is just expected to buy, and he does.

(b) The serious artist does not play a very important role in contemporary life.

(c) The individual has lost control of his environment, and therefore has become emotionally detached from it. He is the victim of

monotony, repetition, tedium and over-stimulation by the urban environment; and has become emotionally fractured making him dependant on the manipulators. Taste and good design are the discovery of harmonies between our own inner states and our environment.

(d) Affluence; when people have money, they spend it on food, shelter, pleasure then luxury. Affluence creates a demanding society and having established manipulation, all it has to do is supply.

DO YOU FEEL THAT THERE ARE OTHER FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE THE PUBLIC TASTE AND IF SO WHAT ARE THEY?

(a) Life cycle changes: one's real needs differ from childhood, through adulthood, marriage and retirement.

(b) International disasters such as war or famine.

(c) Discovery of new technologies: instant communications, reduced travel time from one side of the world to another. Depletion of vital resources such as oil, clean air and water.

(d) Re-evaluation of life styles, and social mores, which could realize itself by the awareness of the manipulation process and the rejection of it.

SUMMATION

The conference proved to be a creative and at times an emotional experience for the particpants. During the discussion that followed the opening statements, the main themes stressing the nature of man and the structures of society emerged. There was general agreement that man's organismic and existential needs were not being satisfied. These needs should be the primary determinants of his "taste" for certain goals and objects or behaviour because "taste" is the foremost indicator of what is best for the organism. The psychologist's presentation was based on this idea. While acknowledging the existence of taste manipulators as the components of the socializing process, he forcefully condemned the self-perpetuating systems whioh enslave and manipulate man's basic needs for gain and profit. This results in a separation between needs and taste. Not everyone was in full agreement. The architect and the housewife supported this view and the architect's presentation in particular elaborated these ideas. He clarified the vast systems of organized taste manipulation and showed the relationship between the false needs and the manipulators and the reasons why they exist. The discussion evolved around the organizations of society and the satisfaction of their needs rather than those of the individual.

The public relations man said that the institutions are becoming aware of the dissatisfaction of the consumer with the goods and

services which have lost their value and efficiency. His presentation
included a study for which he was responsible showing the changing
values of society to illustrate the concern of the corporations and
their need to adjust in order to survive. This study is included
because of its relevance to the factors which govern public taste.

DECREASING VALUES	EMERGING VALUE SYSTEMS
Conformism to accepted modes of thought, custom and behaviour	Individualism, pluralism, situational modes of thought, custom and behaviour
General trust in institutions	Skepticism, eroded credibility of institutions
Caveat emptor	Caveat vendor
Movement from extended family to "nuclear" family	Movement from nuclear family to new styles of intentional extended families
Movement from manual task to increased mechanization	Alienation caused by depersonalization effects of mechanization, and resultant demand for people-oriented automation
General acceptance of things as they are	Relative dissatisfaction
From community to fragmentation	To individualism within developing new styles of intentional community
Man determining nature	Man in balance with nature

Production/consumption ethic	Human cost/benefit ethic
From meaningful human relationships to superficial human relationships	From tolerance of superficial relationships to demand for meaningful human relationships.
From craftsman's hall-mark to manufactured "image"	From tolerance of manufactured image to demand for performance based communication
Generalist orientation to reliance on specialization	From over-reliance on specialization to informed generalization (i.e., multi-disciplinary analysis and synthesis)
Relatively stable society, change manageable, individuals and groups could easily adapt stability highly valued	Dynamic society, accelerated change, change viewed as desirable, adaptability difficult, therefore premium placed on flexibility and human basis for selection of alternatives.
More emphasis on reasoned ideas and concepts, less recognition of the role of feelings in people's wants and needs	More recognition that feelings are important parts of total human being, and play an important role in the wants, desires and actions of his life
Emphasis on ethic of work for work's sake, security results in savings orientation, postponed gratification	Emphasis on rewarding and involving work rather than hard work, desire for immediate gratification, credit use orientation (inflationary psychology)

The product designer saw the designer as a taste manipulator in a positive way. He felt that the designer's sensitivity in aesthetic matters and his professional training enabled him, to guide public taste. Other participants, stressing that there was a professional mystique, emphasized the value of the individual's taste.

The concern about the nature of man and the structures of society were the dominant themes of the meeting.. The reason why the attempts to answer the question "DOES THE PUBLIC TASTE IMPOSE ITSELF ON DESIGNERS, MANUFACTURERS, AND DEVELOPERS, OR IS IT THE OTHER WAY AROUND?" were so frustrating, may be that previous discussions failed to recognize that the relationship between taste and need has been lost. This discussion suggests that in contemporary society, there exists a cycle within which the organizations promote services and products to satisfy their own needs. These needs are presented to the public as their own by many means e.g., education, media, etc. and the individuals within the society become conditioned.

Although there was some pessimism about the present structures and their effect on society, the participants expressed optimism about the future. In the psychologist's view, change should occur because taste has its basis in organismic and existential needs, and it follows that a more "meaningful behaviour" should evolve. The architect felt that many educators and designers are becoming involved in planning towards participation by the individual in the design process, and are

developing ideas and systems which will give individuals greater choices in decision-making regarding the environment. The housewife saw hope in the current re-evaluation of life-styles and social mores which will result in the awareness of the manipulation process and the rejection of it.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN EDUCATION

The preceding investigation demonstrates an awareness of human needs and changing values in our society. This implies a need for a particular emphasis in design education. In order to educate designers to effectively identify and solve the problems of the community, many of the existing (and inadequate) programmes should be revised. Curricula must include comprehensive studies of basic human needs, values, and environment, in addition to functional and aesthetic considerations and effects. The inclusion of economics, psychology, and sociology in design studies may produce designers whose work would be more relevant to the individual and the community.

Economics

The conference confirmed that ours is a consumer society where the process of manipulation is used to assure the survival of industry through the promotion and sales of products which are sometimes of questionable value and efficiency. Tremendous sums of money are being spent to develop products which have to command high prices in order to recover the development and promotional costs and realize a profit in their relatively short life on the market place. The designer must also become familiar with the role of the financial institutions in the production of goods and services.

Other recent developments of utmost importance to the designer are inflation, decrease in affluence, and imminent changes in our society

due to increased costs of energy and depletion of natural resources.
On March the eighth, nineteen hundred and seventy-five, The Montreal
Star published the following statement in a front page article called
"ENERGY COSTS AFFECT DESIGN" by Dusty Vineberg-Solomon:

> For the first time on this continent, the escalating
> cost of energy is dictating many architectural and
> engineering features of some of the country's biggest
> new buildings.
>
> Once influenced primarily by aesthetic and architec-
> tural considerations, a building's shape, siting and
> orientation to the sun may now be determined by the
> energy crisis -- as well as its windows, walls, roofs,
> insulation and construction materials, to say nothing
> of its lighting, heating and air-conditioning systems.
>
> These are among the most important features affecting
> the amount of energy needed to cool a building in
> summer and heat it in winter, and have thus become
> important factors in its use of energy and its opera-
> ting costs.

As these problems demand solutions, design educators must concern
themselves with the urgent need for teaching economics so that
designers may learn to solve the problems which confront us.

Psychology

The field of psychology is all encompassing in its implica-
tions and its popularization has led to superficial and manipulative
uses of it. A genuine study of psychology could give the designer an
awareness of basic human and personal needs. Our man-made environment,
having been designed in ignorance of many of these needs, has become a
subject of intensive studies by psychologists and a body of knowledge
dealing with "environmental psychology" is being accumulated and should

be made available to students.

Psychologist Robert Sommer, author of <u>Design Awareness</u> and <u>Tight Spaces</u>, whose work is outstanding in this field, writes in his book <u>Personal Space</u>:[1]

> All people are builders, creators, molders, and
> shapers of the environment; we are the environment.
> The specialized design fields see themselves help-
> less in the face of massive problems on every side.
> The day when society can call upon the architect-
> priest or the scientist-priest or the psychoanalyst-
> priest to solve its major ills has past. Society
> needs the talents of the gamut of specialized and
> unspecialized professions centered around human
> survival and welfare. Within these groups there
> is an intense realization that overspecialization
> in a changing world is a sure prescription for
> failure. Across the nation schools of architec-.
> ture and design are becoming institutes of environ-
> mental planning, environmental science, design
> science, and environmental engineering. At the
> moment the change is more evident on paper than
> in curriculum, but it is coming.

Sociology

Since the discussion clearly demonstrated that social structures were used to perpetuate false needs, studies in sociology are important in design education. Urban problems and urban renewal, social and political structures, problems of poverty, influences of mass media are all relevant to the design profession. Such knowledge could lead students to a true understanding of the nature and development of the structures within society and community life. The professional would

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[1] Robert Sommer, <u>Personal Space</u> (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969), pp. 7-8.

then be able to offer the community positive alternatives to the false categories promoted by the manipulators. For example, students might consider ideas such as the following:[2]

> The collective outlook on life of the people of
> every age, their opinions, beliefs and attitudes,
> produce the atmosphere in which their environment
> is created. This collective outlook influences
> the production of each man-made object, and gives
> the many different objects made in any one age an
> underlying unity. Every age has its own character.

It is not meant by these suggested inclusions in design curricula that design students acquire a thorough education in economics, psychology and sociology but rather that they gain an understanding and basic knowledge in these fields as they relate to design problems. The education of the designer should prepare him to be concerned with the total environment and the individual who lives within it. In order to work with and draw upon the resources available, he must have an awareness and an understanding of these fields. The existing studio courses, work-shops, art history and professional practice courses need not be neglected or minimized but rather the programmes should be enriched.

It became apparent during the discussion that it is impossible for teachers to be truly objective. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to express their own values and tastes without necessarily imposing them so that students can be exposed to many personal views.

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[2] Kurt Rowland, Looking and Seeing (London: Ginn & Co., 1965),
p. 3.

In this way the student's own personal taste and values can be formulated and developed.

These recommendations will hopefully find their way into future programmes, thus insuring a meaningful contribution to the design profession and, ultimately, to the community.

APPENDIX

consists of tapes of a three

and one half hour discussion upon

which this thesis is based