

Modernity and Durability Perspectives for the Culture of Design

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Good Qualities

Subtle Innovation

To describe a design for a city, a work of architecture, or a commodity as ‘innovative’ is nowadays equivalent to paying it a compliment. The novelty of a work, whatever it happens to be, is considered a virtue, as long as the work is different from its predecessors.

This has not always been the case. Newness as a merit in and of itself is an invention of art theory in the period of Romanticism. Until the second half of the eighteenth century, the categories of judgement were harmony, completeness, balance, and perfection. The advent of Romanticism reversed the situation, replacing these categories with dissonance, incompleteness, unexpectedness, and, above all, innovation.

These values apply to all artistic forms and have remained in place almost without exception until today – even for those art forms most tied to specific requirements, such as urban design, architecture, furniture, and industrial design. Their recent historiography has inculcated in us the image of an uninterrupted sequence of experiments whose interest is directly proportional to their eye-catching appeal; as if the most startling, incredible, and weird designs were somehow automatically the worthiest of attention and applause.

Title page of *Libro primo d'architettura*, the first book of *Tutte l'opere d'architettura...*, 1584, by Sebastiano Serlio

Doubts about this sort of judgement have put orthodox art criticism and production in a state of crisis. Several historicist revivals, by and large agreeable, have ensued. But they have all been unconvincing, because they were and are underpinned by an understanding of design, in the best cases, as art, and in the worst cases, as an exercise in style.

If we look instead at design as a craft, the classes of value move to a completely different level: that of appropriateness. Craft does not require (and does not tolerate) experimentalism; it needs to construct for itself, work by work, a firm foundation of rules and accumulated knowledge. It never allows abrupt change; it requires continuity.

It does, however, allow adjustment, modification, and slight improvement. No craft is a closed entity formed by laws laid down once and for all: otherwise it would be a dead craft. Design, too, is constantly evolving. Every new work widens its disciplinary corpus, reforms its rules, and broadens its horizon.

At first sight, this may seem too little. Our eyes, accustomed by now to the rude upheavals perpetrated by the avant-gardes, have lost their capacity to recognise minimal changes and imperceptible differences. But it is on these minimal changes, these imperceptible differences, that the history of urban design, architecture, furniture, and industrial design has been built for tens, hundreds, and thousands of years. Roman architecture is profoundly different from Greek architecture, but the external, visible manifestations of these differences are very minute indeed. Renaissance design culture is quite different from that of the ancient world; yet they both use the same formal elements and rely on the same compositional grammars. The history of cities, houses, and things was, until the late eighteenth century, built upon a constantly but very delicately – almost invisibly – revised continuity. After this point in time, changes took place more rapidly and incisively until they tore disciplines apart in the tumult of the first half of the 20th century.

The process is irreversible, but I also believe it is over. All imaginable heresies have been attempted. They cannot be ignored, but they cannot be exceeded either. At most, they can be repeated. However, a whim that is indulged a second or third time will be less dazzling; a transgression that is repeated will end up as the rule. It now only remains to consider even the avant-garde as a period of history that belongs to the past. And to start looking at the present again not as an autonomous phase, detached from evolution by a revolutionary outburst, but as an integral part of a tradition to be rediscovered and reappropriated.

This, of course, does not mean taking a step backwards. As already said, the changes that take place over the course of history are irreversible. The task, rather, is to examine the situation in a given period and to represent it as accurately and impartially as possible.

Because to forgo novelty at all costs undoubtedly brings advantages to design. Free of the burden to innovate, design no longer needs to cling to the almost always short-lived support of an individual's momentary intuition, and can lean instead on the solid foundations of a collective endeavour built up and proven over time. This requires commitment. Tradition is not hereditary; it is not passed down like a title of nobility. It must be earned by study and work. But only from tradition can objects, buildings, and cities be born with the quality of durability. Only on the strength of tradition can an authentic style that goes beyond superficial formalism be crystallised. In short, only the power of tradition can take up the challenges of an epoch that is afflicted by the tedium of excessive image-consumption.

Paul Valéry, on the subject of his own work, wrote candidly: 'I consider my archaisms to be renewals that may or may not establish themselves, depending on the advantages of use and on the energy of the action and the field.' This sentiment was echoed by the poet's contemporary and friend Auguste Perret: 'he who, without betraying modern materials or programmes, produces a work that seems to have always existed and is, in a word, ordinary, may consider himself satisfied.'

Let us follow the French poet's and architect's exhortation. Let us adopt traditional forms wherever we feel they are right and appropriate. Let us try, without overlooking the programmes imposed upon us by our contemporary conditions, to produce works that look as if they have always been there. Let us avoid useless inventions and gratuitous changes. Let us not be afraid of the commonplace but sharpen our sensitivity towards its hidden elegance. And where innovation is necessary, let us opt for subtle innovation: without, of course, ever considering ourselves entirely satisfied.

Ordinariness and Ordinarity

To demand ordinariness from design is a dangerous game. Are we not already dismayed by cities, architectures, and goods that constantly offend us with their stale and boring presence? Does not such a postulate risk endorsing that offence and encourage its proliferation?