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DESIGN IN CONTEXTS OF TWENTIETH CENTURY DESIGN DIVERSITY

„Design is everywhere.”
Hauffe, T., 1996

Introduction to the field of design is one of the most complicated tasks, resulting from ambiguous base of the word itself. The theoreticians, scientists and experts keep trying to define the term “design”, to make the related terminology more precise and clear, and finally bring order into this confusion; however, the results are various. There are numerous definitions and meanings of the word, but none is unambiguous; nor is the subsequent specified terminology acknowledged by all involved. This chaos in terminology, resulting in contradictions and disagreements results from many reasons. One of them is the origin of the term itself, and its later new denotations.

Design, as a word, origins from Latin verb “*DESIGNO, DESIGNARE*”, which means: to denote, to illustrate, to elect for next session, to bring to order, to rage. The English language took over the word from Latin, where it has the following meanings: form, construction, plan, or composition, sketch, draft, project, as well as goal, notion, vision or aim.

Miscellaneous explanations and translations of the word, i.e. numerous meanings of a single term, are the basic obstacle in exact definition of the term “design”.

Design as a term has appeared for the first time in Oxford English Dictionary in the year 1588, where is displayed as:

1. *Plan or scheme created by man, for implementation (produce).*
2. *First sketch of art product or of the craft object, which is binding for the implementation (production).*

This interpretation from the 16th century is the first, but far not the only one, to confirm numerous definitions in many interpretation dictionaries and scientific or popular literature, not only from the past centuries.

In the past, the first definitions of design were obviously attempts to distinguish the

term from arts on one hand and handwork and craft on the other.

In the times of industrialization the term began to hint its connection to mass production. The chief determinant in defining design became industrial manufacturing of products, since it was the industrialization that brought an essential requirement for independent design, and thus also for profession of a designer.

At present, the problem of exact definition of the term design endures, and even increases, since the technical development and new aesthetical ideals have erased the boundaries among art, craft, industry and design. Various definitions of the word “design” are in relation with constant widening of design fields or design scopes. Many branches of design (styling, redesign, global design, total design, pre-design), its diverse tendencies and trends, reflect limitless possibilities of its use. Variety of design fields (industrial, interior, graphics design, environment design, etc.) defines also variety of applications. Increase in number of fields connected with design and problem of perception and subjectivity of the assessor makes it impossible to unambiguously set up the definition of the term design. Varied methodological approaches, different viewpoints at the matter of design and its various interpretations are reasons why the problem of defining the term remains unresolved.

Despite how often the word design is used today, to most its meaning remains unclear. Non-existence of an unambiguous definition causes that at present the word “design” appears in almost all areas of life. The media, the advertising industry, and the field of marketing all use the term for completely different purposes, which often refer to totally different aspects of a constantly growing range of meanings. Recently, the term could not avoid its

unscrupulous abuse bordering with prostitution of the word itself. Omnipresence of design leads to inflation of the term, which is closely connected mainly with advertising and marketing boom. From the 80's onwards, it has been uncritically imprinted as a hallmark of quality to all products, because it increases their sale potential. Today, terms like nail-design, food-design, body-design, drug-design have nothing to do with the original meaning of the word design. Usage of these nonsensical, and often extreme word compositions brings about serious and profound discussions on the meaning of the term design.

How does one usually define the term? Normally, one presents its essential contents and important characteristics, and separates, distinguishes them from related terms. At present, the term design is most frequently used as a general expression for an idea and a result of a forming process of a product. Since design is influenced both by theory and practice, as well as varying factors and their endless mutual variations, it is impossible to set up a simple and sole definition of the term. Despite that, or therefore, to try to at least outline the area of design is very important. However, in this chaos the fact remains that design is really omnipresent, regardless to what it means.

Diversity of the approaches to history of design

Although history of design is considered one of the most recent areas of study, it belongs to the most intricate ones. In research of history of design it is important to bear in mind the complexity of the field, as well as the issue of various approaches to its study that result from it. History of design synthesizes outcomes from several scientific, technical and, of course, art disciplines. The basic condition for approach to the given topic is avoidance of absolutizing of any of the disciplines. That is how complexity of history of design study is conditioned. A closer look at the history of design suggests that this field of history faces not only similar methodological problems as the general history, but has also its own, specific complications. The main specific feature determining this branch of

history is its eclectic character /Kolesár, Z., 1998/. Various interpretations of design itself, and thus also diverse possibilities of defining the subject of research come directly from the eclectic character of design. Multifarious methodological conceptions conditioned by ongoing problem of unambiguousness of research subject are secondary consequences of the eclecticism of design. Attempts for objective and comprehensive history of design fail for these specific reasons.

Vagueness of both the subject and methodology of research, which is an essential and significant feature of this field, makes the study of history of design more complicated. The problem in history of design methodology is diversity of approaches and viewpoints. Besides numerous approaches to viewing the history of design, which bear in mind various contexts – societal, social, political, or economical – or approaches related to the country of design origin, or even the author, there are many approaches that synthesize scientific, technical and artistic aspects of design.

For contemporary scientific research of history of design it is crucial to study the diverse approaches in original works on design. They appear in early historical works, which today are considered the starting points of design history as science, despite the fact that authors of each of them set up the given approaches as more or less absolute. In the past, the field of history of design was deemed a discipline purely scientific, technical or artistic. In historical reflexions on design there prevail works, which judge design in connection with fine art and supported interconnection of history of art and history of design.

The first work to partially synthesize the approaches and viewpoints defines design modernistically, in connection with industrial revolution, mass production and modernistic movement in architecture /Read, H., 1934/. Another theory assigns design to architecture and puts emphasis on engineering creation /Pevsner, N., 1936/, while others put emphasis on either economical relevance of design /Pulos, A. J., 1983/, its connection to social context and

human behaviour /Woodham, J. M., 1997/. Parallel to these, there arose an analysis of history of design artefacts in connection with transformation of handicraft production to mechanized manufacture /Giedion, S., 1948/. So far, the most comprehensive survey of design history is the work by E. Castelnuovo. It is a summary of various texts on particular phases of design evolution where interconnection gives way to attempts to seize the eclecticism of design /Castelnuovo, E., 1990/.

From historic works and the described indications of the complicated structure of design there arises the most important of any scientific researches in this identifying the subject of the research. It is an accurate definition of the research subject that conditions the choice of appropriate methodological approaches and sets limits for choice of artefacts. In every chosen alternative of design history research, it is absolutely necessary to bear in mind the fact that it is impossible to fully comprehend any object of design without observing its connection to social, political, economical, cultural and technological context, since it was the contexts that gave rise to all concepts and realizations. In history generally, but mainly in design history, the cardinal rule is the fact, that nothing is self-acting and that everything is connected with everything.

Chair as a twentieth century icon

Exact specification of the research topic, helps to select the main object of my research, namely the chair. Chair as a prodigy design phenomenon in the twentieth century. It is an approach that is based on examination of artefacts (in this case chairs) in context of their time period. That offers a possibility to limit and specify the field of research. Closer access to history of design through exact research object, i.e. chair, and narrowing the time period of design history to the twentieth century, enables more profound and detailed penetration to the complicated issue of modern design history. Material and shape variations clearly indicate the connection between design and the time of its origin. This can best be perceived in designs that originated during the times of

industrial, science and technical revolution. Therefore, the development of chair and its design provide the best possibility of alternative research of modern design history in connection with transformations of technology in the era of technological progress.

As George Nelson pointed out in 1953, „every truly original idea - every innovation in design, every new application of materials, every technical invention for furniture - seems to find its most important expression in a chair“. /Nelson, G., 1953/ In our times, this is nowhere more apparent than in the development of better performed and more ergonomically refined chairs.

Modern chair is basically an industrial product, the appearance of which dates back to the end of the nineteenth century when the first attempts were made to shift chair from the field of crafted objects to that of designed product.

Industrial production as a new method was the first condition for birth of a new independent discipline. The requirement of professional approach to planning was conditioned and caused by transformation of production from handicraft to industrial one. This requirement was best met by architects, who had knowledge of engineering. They were best qualified for development and design of new furniture products, which were to combine functional and aesthetical conditions within limits of the modern industrial technology. The fact that furniture design, and especially chair design, was getting independent was welcomed by all architects, since furniture design gave them an opportunity to express their philosophies in three dimensions easier than architecture /Fiell, Ch., P., 1993/.

New technologies and materials enabled chair to be produced in quantity, while systemized methods of manufacture demanded simplification of form and structure. Through this necessary reduction, the architects could, via chair design, demonstrate some important objectives, such as revealed construction, truth of materials, and a trend towards lightness, which was a breakpoint in history of modern design. These tendencies were welcomed by later designers, the pioneers of the Modern

Movement in particular. Modernism is not a style but a philosophical movement presenting classical and humanizing ideology that can be applied to furniture design. Its rational principles are: unification of the physical and the spiritual, harmonization of functionalism and aesthetics, internationalism achieved through abstraction for greater universality of appeal, innovation, social morality, truth of materials, revealed construction and responsible use of technology.

Since the birth of an independent design discipline, chairs exist as declarations of attitudes, ideas and values of their creators. The fact that designers could present their viewpoints in the given times through chairs is of a priceless significance in research of design development. Chairs from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century have a comprehensive rhetoric, and therefore become unique material for research in the field of modern design history.

The chair: analysis of the nature of connections

Discovery of diverse connections in transformation of chair design provides valuable information and shows evolutionary trends in contexts of the twentieth century. What is important in returns to the past is the analysis of chair and connections it creates in today's world. It is suitable to specify the types and kinds of these connections, appraise the acquired knowledge, apply them, and through analogies in presence to try to reveal the history.

„The connections, connections. It will in the end be these details that give the product its life.“ /Eames, Ch., 1961a /

„Eventually everything connects - people, ideas, objects, etc., ... the quality of the connections is the key to quality per se.“ /Eames, Ch., 1961b/

Nowadays, as well as, in the past, the concept of connections is inherent to design, and nowhere is it more obvious than in design of chairs. No other piece of furniture offers so many possibilities of creation or enables connections in the same way or to the same extent. Because of this, many designers put more effort, endeavour, wit and inventiveness to creation of chairs than

any other type of furniture over long period of time.

In 1873, Dr. Christopher Dresser wrote: „A chair is a stool with a back-rest, and a stool is a board elevated from the ground by supports“. /Dresser, Ch., 1873/

This resolution on chair seems absurdly simplistic today. This generally trimmed definition of chair, shifted towards simple and straight description of an object, may be true in its principle, but is not eloquent. It does not include the multilevel meaning of this unique typological sort of furniture.

Uniqueness of a particular chair has always depended on the quality and range of connections it makes while addressing a specific need. In analyses of these connection levels, several primary connections can be defined, e.g. functional and structural, as well as related secondary connections, such as symbolic, i.e. of a meaning, etc. Most of these connections are coherent. At the functional level a chair, or rather the act of its use, i.e. the sitting on it, creates physical and psychological connections through its form and the used materials. The basic construction relations and connections arise between construction elements included in its design.

A chair, at the same time, can embody meanings and values, which connect the chair with its user at an intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, cultural, and even spiritual level. From all types of furniture it is specifically chairs that provide support, elevation of ego, and demonstrate taste, and thus reveal social and political standpoints of its owner and his/her real or required social and economic status. Chairs are designed, as well as acquired from reasons not only aesthetical and fashionable, but also from symbolic content one. Chair as a symbolic object creates for its perceiver various levels of significance, e.g. in form of a throne or an electrical chair it effectively and convincingly expresses power and authority.

Apart from connections, which a chair creates whether on itself or with its user, one can recognize also connection with its surroundings. A chair can also connect visually and functionally with the context in which it is used and which includes other objects and styles. The oldest relationship

for study of connections in transformation of its design is between a chair and its designer, its manufacturer and society. Analyses of these connections have an essential and notable meaning in orientation in history of design. Through revealing of connections in chair design in the past, it is possible to distinguish historical lines of the whole society development. Since the beginning of civilization people felt the need to have something to sit on, and as society developed, so did the chair. During the last hundred and fifty years, chair has undergone revolutionary development transformations. The development of chair has paralleled developments in architecture and technology and has been connected with discoveries of new materials and their use. Chair reflects the changing needs and interests of a society to such an extent that it can be considered a mirror of the history of design. More than any other type of furniture, the chair can be seen as a barometer of social changes, because it reflects the social and economic contexts within which design has evolved in the twentieth century more accurately. For example, in times of economic crises rationally and plainly designed chairs necessarily prevail on the market, while in periods of relative prosperity there is a general tendency towards anti-rationalism, ornamentation and exaggerated forms.

Chair design is also particularly susceptible to delicate changes in trends, and particularly to fickle, evanescent influences of consume society's taste, since it best expresses the essence of specific decorative styles. Chair design is directly connected to various ideologies, to ways of its production and economic theories. As needs and interests of society change, so do designers' and manufacturers' responses to them. Through study of chair design transformations and their causes resulting from various contexts, it is at least partially possible to elucidate the history of design development.

Prologue

From historical point of view, chair design can be seen as a debate between conflicting opinions on answers to numerous issues, such as: the role of technology and industrial process, significance of new methods, needs and interests of majority versus minority, whether "less is more" or "less is boring", and the importance of function and aesthetics in practical objects for use. Searching for and finding of answers to these questions, reflecting in chair design, provides vast space for research of historical development of design. Decoding, deciphering of historical chairs' message can lead to understanding of the times of their origin, creation, and of thinking of their designers. However, today's assessment of cultural significance and aesthetic values of historical chairs is conditioned by numerous factors. These include contemporary deviations and transformations of taste and changes in its perceiving, as well as different understanding of historical values and meanings. Therefore, it is difficult to achieve objectivity in study of historical chairs regardless social, economic, political and technological contexts that explain their look, their appearance. During the past 150 years there has arisen multiple interpretations of chair, which provide extensive material for study. Functional, aesthetical and structural values of chair, variety and number of connections created by chair, and transformation and development of chair design in the twentieth century predestine chair as a subject of research, since it provides limitless potential for research in the field of modern design history.

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