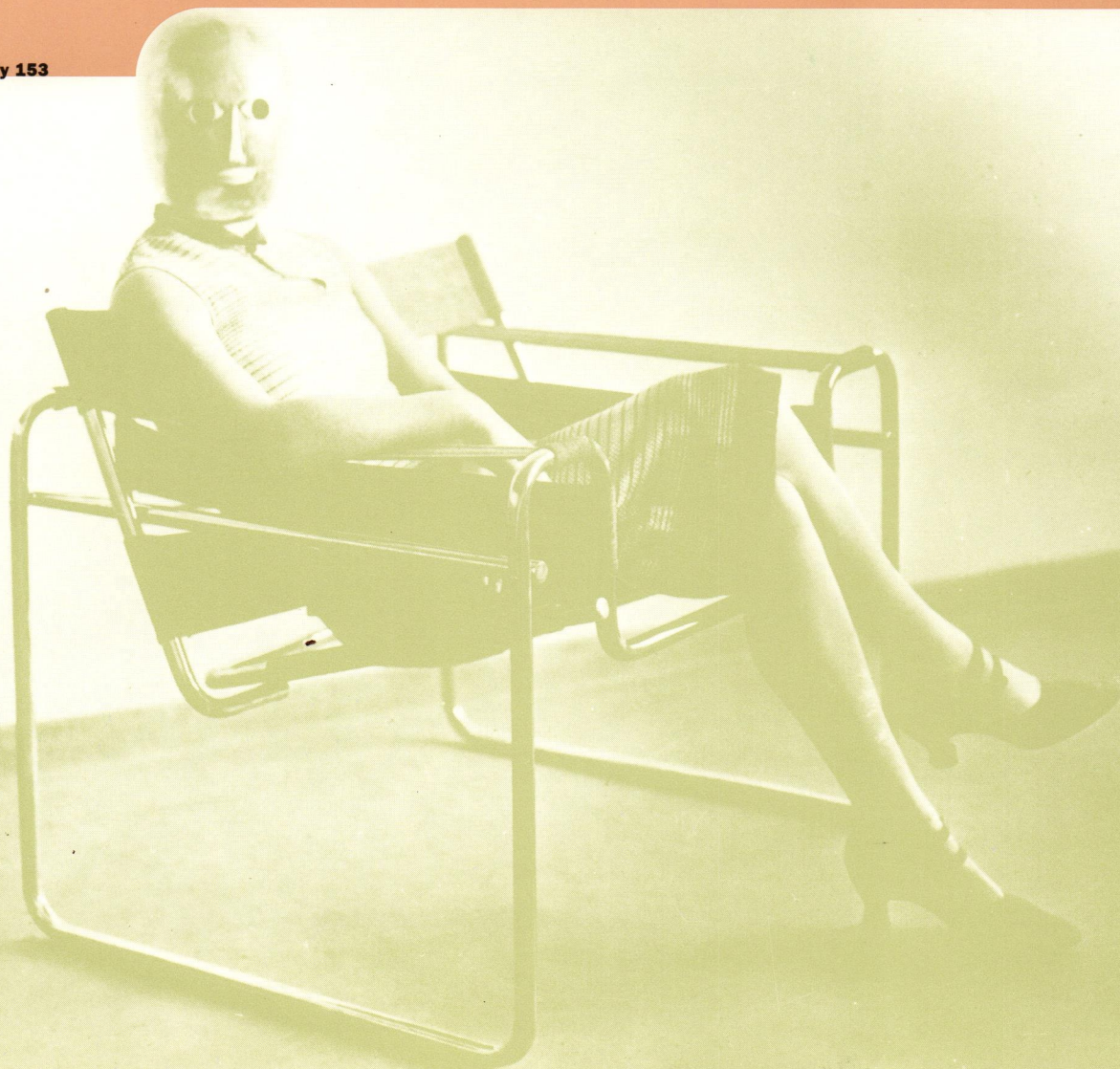


Beyond Style

The Designer and Society

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Beyond Style:

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The essays presented here are based on a series of six lectures given at the Walker Art Center in February and March of 1991.

Entitled *Beyond Style: The Designer and Society*, the series explored ways in which design projects respond—and fail to respond—to living-style changes and to a reawakened environmental concern. Many in the general public have criticized design for being trivial, if not socially irresponsible, and this series provided an opportunity to raise that charge with some leading critics and authors. Each talk was followed by questions from the audience; in addition to presenting essays based on the *Beyond Style* lectures here, we include excerpts from two of the question-and-answer periods that were especially pertinent and compelling.

For the past decade, it has been argued, designers have conformed only too willingly to the norms of market-driven investment, production, and consumption; style has become less a form of personal expression and increasingly an official idiom of the marketplace. For example, in New York City a new kind of architecture, called the signature or “trophy” style, has emerged in which an architect is chosen solely for his star quality; the resulting building is marketed accordingly, like a brand-name product. This commodity-oriented use of architects has reached the consumer-goods field itself—as seen in architect-designed bird cages, wristwatches, coffeepots, and dinner plates. Needless to say, these constant stylistic changes in products and buildings cannot necessarily be called social improvements. On the contrary, as the critic John Thackara writes, “the prefix ‘designer’ has become in some cases a byword for unsympathetic, artificial, and overly controlled environments, or a marketing device used to sell poorly conceived, over-priced goods.”

Is the designer today in any position to move “beyond style”? How effective, in fact, can the designer be in making social issues part of the design agenda? Is not the cumulative decline in environmental and social quality too great a problem for a single profession to address?

Designers actually can be very effective, the authors here argue, but only if they redefine their role. **Robert Campbell** introduces the topic by outlining—through examples—some basic, commonly held concepts underlying a more ethically driven architecture. At the same time, he reminds us that architecture as an art form cannot survive without maintaining both ethical and playful perspectives. His connotation of *playful*, however, is only at a superficial glance the opposite of *ethical*. In fact, a spirit of playfulness and self-irony in design is essential at a time when those qualities have been banished from the workaday world. Above all, Campbell insists that architects take part in the politics of zoning and urban development, rather than bemoaning the fact that they are systematically prevented from creating “good architecture.”

Jane Holtz Kay also points to a larger political framework. She argues that designers themselves have allowed their environmental contributions to be trivialized by refusing to join in an alliance with the environmental movement. In this way, for instance, both groups have largely forfeited the opportunity to moderate a culture whose devotion to the automobile has become

the single most destructive force to act upon our climate, our air, and the quality of our communities. Change is possible but, once again, only through an old-fashioned kind of activism. In particular, landscape architects—while they do not have the unbridled freedom to transform whole districts that their 19th-century predecessors did—should nonetheless be working more aggressively with the fragmented, highly bureaucratized governing bodies that oversee regions today.

Robert Fishman calls attention to a very obvious social contribution that designers could make but have sidestepped by focusing all their vision on the central cities. Designers generally neither understand nor care about places such as Mt. Laurel, New Jersey, a Philadelphia suburb off Interstate Highway 295 around which one of the fastest-growing settlements in the region has sprung up. Only by grasping the historical forces that underlie Mt. Laurel, Fishman writes, can they distinguish between what can be altered and what cannot. Instead of snubbing Mt. Laurel-like phenomena, he adds, designers could use their skills to help shape suburbs for the next century; in so doing, they could have more impact than through almost any other type of project they might undertake.

Ralph Caplan turns to another group of design professionals, product designers, who, like architects and landscape architects, have been accused of being heedlessly self-indulgent in recent years. But they, too, may be led to take another tack in the 1990s. Certainly, new constraints and advances—such as nontoxic inks and finishes, recyclable materials, and less gratuitous packaging—have the potential to alter design. For Caplan, “beyond style” means that the designer must do more than simply deal with the exterior aspects of the trade and should indeed bear some responsibility for the essential character of products she or he designs.

William Stumpf also takes up the topic of product design—and delivers a ringing indictment. It is hard to justify the designer’s complaint that no one understands the importance of design, he says, when so many products make so little difference in people’s lives. “Everyone says America is a change-oriented country,” Stumpf comments, and yet, in his opinion, we move too slowly in dealing with the entrenched problems of affordable housing and waste management, among others.

Adrian Forty brings the series of essays to a close by proposing a reckoning with early 20th-century modernism—a theme that is sounded implicitly in each of the other essays. On the one hand, modernist design can be seen as the root of design alienation today; as a style, it emphasized standardization and grew to be calloused to local culture. On the other hand, many critics laud the early modernists for their social convictions; they are seen by some as artist-heroes who dared to imagine a future made better and more abundant by design. Translating their concept of social responsibility into real-world practice, however, is an extremely knotty business. Forty suggests some concrete ways to evaluate the social gains made possible by design.

These six authors have proposed an outline of how the design profession could begin changing. Only with such a larger vision of the designer’s role can specific projects attain a cumulative significance. It remains for design schools, journals, and organizations to fulfill the possibilities with concrete examples.

From Playful to Ethical: Architecture of the 1990s

One way of looking at changes in architecture is based on a notion I have borrowed from Northrop Frye, the great literary critic. He proposed that literature can be looked at in two really different ways: as **playful** or as **ethical**. This pair of terms, playful and ethical, may be applied to architecture as well. One of the mistakes we make is to settle for one or the other and then sneer at the one we have not chosen. Architects who are very serious about the social purpose of their architecture tend to be offended by other architects who compare architecture to fashions in clothing, and who want to create a new look every year. Yet architecture cannot survive without both perspectives.

Robert Campbell

The author Mary Catherine Bateson, writing about the views of her mother, Margaret Mead, says “Human beings do not eat nutrients. They eat food. Food with symbolic meanings, flavors, colors and smells. Food in the form of traditional dishes, that fit the days of feast and fast and speak of the relationships of husband and wife, parent and child.” Food, in other words, is not simply so many grams of fat and protein but expresses all the rituals of society and those of the family, a connection with history and with traditions of ethnicity. So, too, with architecture. If we strip away all the fun, pleasure, and cultural reference, all the redundancy and all the resemblances, leaving something scientific and functional, architecture just disappears.

Every few decades, it seems, we swing back and forth between these two poles of playful and ethical. There was a period of great playfulness in the late Victorian age, with its thickly layered ornamental flourishes and cultural references. This caused a reaction in favor of something very serious and idealistic, an era we call the early modern movement. The modern movement was in turn succeeded by the postmodern era, which began in the 1960s and culminated in the 1980s. We see the change in architects such as Philip Johnson, who argue explicitly that architecture has no ethical value, that it is just play, irony, and free invention—a visual text commenting on other texts, without a basis in ethical reality.

But people have become tired of postmodern conceits, enjoyable as they are, and I think we are moving now toward the ethical pole. I hope that, as we do that, we will not start stripping away the playful side again. The question I want to ask is this: Is it possible to construct an ethic for architecture? In other words, is Philip Johnson wrong? It seems to me that,