

Form in Design

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“The function of art is to endow raw and undisciplined materials with meaning—to transcend materials by giving them form.” –Roger Sessions

Music without form is noise. Letters that are not formed into words and sentences are nonsense. And without form, paintings would be nothing more than brush strokes on canvas. Indeed, all arts have forms that turn their actions into artistry. So too is it with design; otherwise the products we use would be absurd.

George Nelson defines a designer as “someone who gives form to the essence of something” for the purpose of conveying truths.ⁱ It is the designer’s use of form that not only gives shape and structure to the raw materials of the world, it also provides a means to interpret those materials. In some cases, form can even provide meaning.

Kenneth Burke, speaking of literature but also applicable to design, describes form as “the arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence.”ⁱⁱ Form then, when applied to products, is the “dramatic plot that shapes human interaction.”ⁱⁱⁱ Designers create forms by deliberately shaping data into information and then into the coherent argument that is the product. This argument is, according to Richard Buchanan, its “ability...to fully engage a human being in support of a particular activity.”^{iv} It is in this argument that the three aspects of any product—ethos, pathos, and logos—are revealed.^v The chosen form determines which (if any) of these elements is dominant.

Form is not simply the physical or aesthetic properties of a product; it is all the things that make up all aspects of a product’s character, including the values of the

culture to which the product belongs. Form is the manifestation of the product's usefulness, usability, and desirability, or what John Dewey calls its intellectual, practical, and emotional characteristics.^{vi} It is form that, in the words of Philip Meggs, gives a design its "cohesive composition that gains order and clarity from the relationship between the elements."^{vii}

Form can be derived in a number of ways. It can be suggested by the subject matter being explored. It can take the shape of what Erving Goffman calls an "encounter:" initiating, maintenance, and leave-taking.^{viii} It can even be seen in the communication model devised by Shannon and Weaver as the process of coding, sending, and encoding.^{ix} For Dewey, forms are created by natural or social processes that the designer can then use for communication.^x

However forms are acquired, there is one common element between them, and that is that they do not just follow function any longer. They also need to fulfill "biological, psychophysical, and sociological requirements"^{xi} as well. In other words, a form needs to be consciously chosen for its effect on human beings. Products are now seen from the point of view of those who will use them, their "community of use,"^{xii} and their forms need to properly fit the needs of this community.

The goal of design is to affect behavior, be it through the communication of persuasive messages or through the creation of pleasurable experiences. Communication relies on form to assure that the message has been coded, sent, and decoded, as in Shannon and Weaver's model of communication.^{xiii} However, designers should take care that the forms they use or create are not too rigid, lest any self-directed learning and motivation on the part of the user are quelled. Forms also have to take into account new technologies so that tradition does not hamper the freshness of the solution.^{xiv}

Although some like Henri Bergson argue that forms are conventions that hinder our inner life^{xv}, others like Dewey feel that it is our use of forms that makes us human. As K.J. McGarry indicates, “The dominant and overriding attribute that emerges from all investigations on perception, cognition, learning and memory is the necessity of pattern.”^{xvi} In other words, humans make sense of their worlds through forms. Designers use forms so that the work they produce is not senseless.

Forms have great connections to affordances in that they provide cues as to how products should be interpreted. Form, Dewey argues, renders experience into its “most easily communicable and hence most useable.”^{xvii} Although it might address the same subject matter, a digital product displayed on a computer screen is treated differently by its community of use than an analog product would be. Forms can help make sense of the product. As Burke notes, “[Forms] enable the mind to follow processes amenable to it.”^{xviii}

But forms not only imply or foster meaning, but also they can provide meaning in and of themselves. Sometimes the form of something is so pure that it becomes the subject matter itself and admired for its own sake. Burke recognizes this when he notes that “The appeal of form...is obvious: form *is* the appeal.”^{xix} The form can be experienced, if not independent of the subject matter, then as bringing out the essential Truth of the subject matter. Then, as Dewey indicated, these forms can become the basis for new forms.^{xx}

As Roger Sessions surely knew, sometimes the beauty of a piece of music arises not from its subject matter or from how it was composed, but from its form, the expression of the “emotional intensity with which the essentials have been explored.”^{xxi} It is the same with design. A form can change the way people think about the world, and that can change everything.

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- ⁱ George Nelson, "Design as Communication" from *Problems of Design*
- ⁱⁱ Kenneth Burke, "The Nature of Forms" from *Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Buchanan, "Good Design in the Digital Age"
- ^{iv} Buchanan, *ibid*
- ^v Buchanan, "Design and the New Rhetoric: Productive Arts in the Philosophy of Culture," from *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 34, No. 3
- ^{vi} John Dewey, "Having an Experience," from *Art as Experience*
- ^{vii} Philip Meggs, "The Elements of Graphic Design," from *Type and Image: The Language of Graphic Design*
- ^{viii} Erving Goffman, "Facial Engagements"
- ^{ix} Warren Weaver, "The Mathematics of Communication"
- ^x Dewey, *ibid*
- ^{xi} L. Moholy-Nagy, "Design Potentialities," from *New Architecture and City Planning*
- ^{xii} Buchanan, *ibid*
- ^{xiii} Weaver, *ibid*
- ^{xiv} Moholy-Nagy, *ibid*
- ^{xv} Henri Bergson, "Time and Free Will"
- ^{xvi} K.J. McGarry, "To Know and To Be Informed," from *The Changing Context of Information: An Introductory Analysis*
- ^{xvii} Dewey, "Education as a Necessity of Life," from *Democracy in Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*
- ^{xviii} Burke, *ibid*
- ^{xix} Burke, *ibid*
- ^{xx} John Dewey, "Having an Experience," from *Art as Experience*
- ^{xxi} Nelson, *ibid*