

BOOK REVIEW

“An Introduction to Design and Culture: from 1900 to the present” by Penny Sparke, Third Edition, 2013.

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Central Arguments

In the 2013 and third edition of her book, “An Introduction to Design and Culture: from 1900 to the present,” distinguished design history writer and professor, Penny Sparke, continues to ably trace the development and the role of Western design and designers as she has done in her two previous editions in 1986 and 2004. In this, her latest and updated version, Sparke efficiently weaves in the global and influential role design holds in shaping identities of the world’s cultures and lifestyles through the first decade of the 21st century. In doing so, she firmly situates today’s design practice and profession as one of leadership and prime mover in 2013. At the same time and where applicable, she intelligently updates chapters in the previous edition of her 2004 book to reflect more current attitudes of the social, technological and economic forces pervasive on design today. She accomplishes this task by tracing the role of Western design and designers in their relationship to global consumer culture and drawing from theories found in post-modern academic disciplines such as social history, visual culture, and media studies. Additionally, she includes current and fast changing technological trends such as design’s engagement in social media, virtual reality, and immersive environments. Next Sparke concludes her book with the rise of ‘glo-cal’ism’ i.e. the integration of global and local design sensibilities in the first decade of the 21st century.

Lastly Sparke has ably documented the design enterprise from the periphery of being a decorator of commerce at the turn of the 20th century, towards part of the inner circle during Modernism at the mid-century, later becoming a business partner of corporate globalism, and then entrepreneur in ‘glo-calism.’ In the final analysis, Sparke summarizes the profession and practice as being highly able to flex and adapt to the forces and contexts of culture and commerce.

Critique

The issues in Sparke’s 2013 and third edition of this book are minor when compared to the depth of her research and wide-ranging scholarship to which she devoted in this, her latest rendition. She touches on design areas and artifacts as diverse as product, fashion, automotive, interior, graphic design, mass marketing, as well as consumer culture. However, for a book expanding on the history of design “from 1900 to the present,” the illustrations are sparse. This omission could be due to the high costs of printing, or the expense involved in copyright clearances, neither being the domain of the author. Another point of contention could be perceived in Sparke’s use of her title, “An Introduction to Design and Culture: from 1900 to the present.” This title does not reflect its almost exclusive emphasis on Western design and cultural history. Underlying and perhaps imperceptible to the author, this oversight might be due to her being an English design history writer and professor for nearly 40 years (since 1975) in the United Kingdom. In addition, Sparke’s 30 years of research and writing has primarily focused on the Western Modernist design movement, as evidenced in her 15 books and abundant articles that she has published. Understandably, she has primarily used Euro-American design examples and references for her research and writings in this book. However, she does touch upon Japanese and Italian design, as well as refer to recently emergent countries- China, Indian and Brazil- within the context of design’s involvement in mega-corporation’s globalization. Happily, her book is primarily about the development of contemporary design and its role within a consumer culture; it is not a parade of the usual suspects of individual designers, as many other design history books attempt to carry out. Rather Sparke’s book demonstrates a profound depth, as well as a wide understanding, of design’s significance within Western historical, social, economic and technical contexts. This becomes even more apparent as one examines her well-documented glossary, notes, biography, and index information. In conclusion “An Introduction to Design and Culture: from 1900 to the present” would be an invaluable resource for any reader wanting to know more about Western design’s development in the 20th into 21st century; indeed this book should be required reading for any student of design.

Profile of book

Professor Sparke has written her historical design volume in chronological order, and dividing the book into two main parts. The first half of the book, 1900-1939, covers the rise of

Modernism and design's role moving from the periphery into the center of culture and commerce. She demonstrates throughout the first half of the 20th century how the English and American Industrial Revolutions began to impact the practice of designing in the West. In the beginning of the 20th century designers served as decorators, primarily adding embellishments onto machine-made objects in an effort to make manufactured goods more aesthetically appealing. Their task was to create desirable items, so the consumer would be enticed to replace and purchase the new industrial merchandise. An alternative for a common household item, such as a wooden broom, would be replaced by a fancifully decorated vacuum cleaner as an object of pride. Sparke contends these decorative designers were not central to the creation of mass produced items during this initial phase of the Industrial Revolution. In fact manufacturers saw their role as one of "added value", creating market appeal for their prospective customers.

Later on as manufacturing, marketing, and distribution further mechanized its production of merchandise, as well as becoming the dominant means of creating goods for the customer, design became integral in pre-planning how items could be best mass produced. The creation of objects was no longer in the hands of individual artisan, who worked directly on their carefully crafted objects one at a time, but rather products became commodities and manufactured through machines that mechanically streamlined the repetitive tasks of assembly and production of goods (1915-1939). As a result, designers became essential to working within this new system of manufacturing products for the masses. They designed how the assembly and production of items would keep pace with the speed and mechanization of the factory line. Thereafter the design enterprise became contributing and active members in the infrastructure of manufacturers and engineers that now drove public and privately run ventures into the next era of the Industrial Revolution.

The second half of Sparke's book, which covers the periods after World War II through the 21st century (1949- 2013), traces the formation of Post Modernism and design's reaction to Modernism earlier utopian doctrine. She follows design's rise to even higher prominence as a primary innovator in the latter 20th century's insatiable consumer culture system. After the infusion of the Bauhaus' (1919-1933), whose principles and standards became the foremost design standard in the mid-20th century, their Modernist idealistic doctrine had a profound influence on designers. The Bauhaus' quest for machine made forms and architecture adhere to their "form follows function" axiom laid the foundation which would challenge designers until the 1960s. Thus the Modernist designers sought to create a high standard of aesthetically refined objects that could be readily manufactured, and provide affordable designs to meet the needs of the everyday person. These Modernist designers saw their works as setting the ideal aesthetics for which the Industrial Age consumer and commerce should strive to attain. In fact, the Bauhaus influence in the classical works- such as Walter Gropius' international style architecture, the Breuer chair, as well as El Lissitzky's typography and graphic art- remain iconic symbols in design history and ironically in the 21st century they have become expensive, coveted collectors' items.

Beginning in the 1960s, design sought to expand their influence into wider areas of commerce and culture. They ventured into broader visual and material style-setting worlds such as fashion, environmental spaces, virtual and interactive designs. As Sparke states in her 2004 and second edition of her book, the position of design and designers became instrumental in setting publicly acceptable visual, material, and spatial standards for the world's social, cultural, and economic environments. Consequently, the profession was no longer working to meet broader societal needs and desires, but became an enterprise instrumental in creating peoples' aesthetic desires within major centers of production, commerce, and consumption. Thus the designers' activities became complicit and the means of bridging the gap between the consumers and the corporate manufacturers. The business of design developed into a highly refined venture that was responsive and technologically nimble to lead various areas of the late 20th century's faster-paced global economy and culture. Moreover, designers' endeavors became social phenomena, entering into the international realm of creating meanings for everyday living and people. Design adapted materially and visually to create multiple meanings, thus allowing the vocation to become embedded with diverse referencing and cultural meanings as well as broadening its worldwide appeal. As examples of change in design's cultural role are the pervasive branding and adaptability of international companies such as Coca-Cola, the manufactured desire of Apple products, or the Nike identity of sports wear. Name designers and global companies essentially manufactured individuals' identities by branding their names and logos on such basic items as jeans, T-shirts, shoes, bags, hats, underwear, etc. As a result, design created a hierarchy of economy and culture for those individuals who desired to separate themselves out from those who wore anonymous

goods. Specifically branded and logo-driven goods reflected levels of prestige associated with famous designers or prestigious companies. Around the globe, consumers began to wear designed items, which immediately signaled to strangers or fellow world travelers that they were subscribers of an internationally recognized brand of good taste. They belonged to a specific group, essentially wearing their tribal costumes with pride.

In her latest and third edition, a decade into the 21st century, Sparke points out another major shift of design and designers' standing within the larger global culture and economy. In her view, design has reached the status of being benefactors i.e. more actively involved in issues confronting today's societies, livelihoods, and the ecology of the planet. No longer the decorator, innovator or costumer of the 20th century, the designer of today has the confidence and wherewithal to display and participate in a shared consciousness, with the self-knowledge of her role as powerful and contributing citizen of the world. Design has begun to work on concepts, not just creating more consumer products or formulating multiple identities. As the planet's people acknowledge how vulnerable the earth on which we live is, as well as the role we could play in its sustainability, design has seen the need to participate in bettering both. Thus, it has become involved in ecological issues, such creating clear information graphics to show how and what to recycle our daily garbage. Sparke claims the field focuses on society's needs, thus making its visual communications more interactive, inclusive, as well as extending its virtual reach through contemporary technology and virtual enterprises. The profession also now ranges across different media and is interdisciplinary in its practices, works in diverse groups on projects, participates in computer-generated social interaction, and involves itself with various virtual reality enterprises. Moreover, design continues to transform the worldwide consumer and commercial landscape with its constant infusion of unique design creations, innovations, cross-cultural connections, plus international interactions. All this action in Western countries has expanded to include such emerging countries such as Brazil, India, Singapore, and China. Sparke argues upon entering the global marketplace, designers are shifting the world's economic balance and consumer commerce exchange. Furthermore, ethnic design groups are developing their own cultural aesthetics, which is reflected in their successes within the larger global marketplaces. As a result of combining local and global aesthetics, with an international market in mind, has evolved into the creation of hybrid designs, or 'glo-cal' works. Speculating further, Sparke believes these emergent countries' designers and their role in design will eventually gain influence and power, much like the way the United Kingdom and the United States designers did in the 20th century.

Conclusion

In Sparke's closing arguments of her latest and third 2013 edition, she maintains 21st century design has become an "agent of change," serving a "formative function" that personifies and transmits multifaceted belief systems, messages and values. Consequently, design activity now embodies and transmits socio-cultural content. The vocation is a major working component and player in the vibrant process of constructing today's way of life and our surroundings. What is more, in the historian's view, not only does design effectively mediate between multinational corporations and international consumption patterns on the planet, but is earning worldwide design recognition as a major humanitarian at the beginning decade of the 21st century.

Bio Data:

Penny Sparke has published over fifteen books on 20th century design. She is the Pro Vice-Chancellor of Research and Enterprise at Kingston University and has been a design professor there since 1999. Sparke earned her PhD at Brighton Polytechnic in 1975. Previously Professor Sparke was awarded a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (1972). Sparke is also a Fellow of the Society of Arts, as well as an Honorary Senior Fellow of the Royal College of Art.

Catherine Jo Ishino has published a number of papers on East Asian design and creates video oral histories of designers. She is a Course Director in the Design Department at York University in Toronto, Canada. She has been a TV news video designer and art director in New York City for 14 years. Ishino has had stints at

CNN, ABC and NBC news operations. Her last position was as the Art Director of PBS' The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour and Creative Director of GlobalVision.

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