

Balance
Life Cycles
Function

Hywel Davies (1800664)
BSc Product Design

2410 words

Julia Lockheart

Research in practise

A short context

In this piece of writing I will be discussing 3 chosen key words within the context of my profession. These key words will be supported by a minimum of 3 key images that directly relate to the point of interest as well as a minimum of 3 artists that will provide my writing with context as well as the meaning of my key words through the artists eyes. I will provide relevant links between these artists and my 3 key words Balance, Life Cycles and Function. I will finish this piece by constructing a question that will be used as a base to further develop my research for my final dissertation next year.

Balance

Balance is a word that can be used to describe many aspects of our everyday life. Balance between work and social is a balance that almost everyone has to deal with daily, striking a good balance between the time spent working on a profession or academic and the time spent socializing is a key factor to a happy and productive life. Too much of one will unbalance the 'scales' and yet achieving this 'perfect' balance in my opinion is near impossible. Balance can also be used for time spent with family or friends. Everyone wants to spend time with their friends and family yet again finding this balance between the both is a hard decision to do.

On the other hand, I do believe that balance from a design perspective can be achieved. There are many examples of 'balance' within design that range from colour balance like making sure you have the right colour balance in your work can completely change the perspective of your work. A warmer colour balance can make your work seem more approachable, more tender to admire. Yet changing this balance to the opposite side can achieve a colder feel to the piece, a more frightening aspect to the work. Take these paintings by German artist Caspar David Friedrich which are both being displayed at the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.



As you can clearly see between these two paintings the use of colour balance, the “Riesengebirge” (Friedrich, 1835) (left) uses a warmer colour balance to create more of a spectacle of a wonderful sweeping landscape that seems to never end, while “The Monk by the Sea” (Friedrich, 1810) (right) uses a colder balance that creates an eerie and uncomfortable feeling within the painting.

Another way that balance can be used in design is the physical, mechanical form of balance. As with the temperature of the colours used within art and design, mechanical balance is less about the emotion linked to balance and more about the physical balance that is required to make a design work. A great example of mechanical balance within design is the work of Alexander Calder. Alexander Calder was an American sculptor that is most famously known for his work with wire and the creations of mobiles. Mobiles are a form of kinetic art which means the art, with help from natural air currents or a motor, moves around the observer to deliver its art. The balance featured in Calder’s work is needed to be perfect otherwise the design would not work practically, without balance the mobiles would simply not move in the necessary way.



From a purely observable standpoint this mobile looks as though this should not work, it looks as it should fall over straight away. Yet because of Calder’s attention to achieving the perfect balance within his work, this mobile flows and moves freely in the natural air currents that fill the room.

(Calder, 1937)

I also believe that the era surrounding the Bauhaus Movement can be used to represent the balance of design. As for the other examples I’ve addressed under balance I do believe the balance shown during the Bauhaus era is the most important, not only for the development and creation of excellent design during this time but the lessons taught of the balance between the crafts and design. The students at the Bauhaus school during the Dessau era were initially enrolled onto a preliminary course that taught the student about the Bauhaus design thinking and to teach the students about the studies of materials. “The study of the material must, naturally, precede the investigation of function. Therefore our studies of form begin with studies of materials.” (Bayer, 1938, p. 116). The balance that was struck here mostly came from the balance of crafts and design. After the preliminary course the students were then taught through many different courses to expand their design knowledge as well as the practical application of design within manufacture. This balance of all designers and crafters under one roof, the mix of different backgrounds and the different design thinking made the school a well-balanced mix of all design related professions.

Life cycles

With the increasing pressure on governments and the public across the world to become more eco-conscious within the way we live, should not design be the first step towards this eco-friendly future so many of us are striving towards? 'Life cycles' have been a massively important piece of design and has been taught to aspiring designers for generations. The aspect of a life cycles within the context of design is to secure the future of products through environmentally conscious decisions during the first steps of design. These environmentally aimed decisions mostly rely on the designer's choice of material and the planned obsolescence of the design. The choice of material when designing is one of the most important choices designers will make, will the material be suitable for the design? Will the material be able to be recycled? Will the materials decompose? The two latter questions are direct issues related to product life cycles and therefore the later obsolescence of the product. Product life cycles can be tied to parts of economics also by using the product life cycle graph that shows the introduction, growth, maturity and latter decline. Economists use this graph to see their business's products growth within the market and show the point of decline to when they need a new product or a rebrand. This links directly into the design perspective of life cycles as the design life cycle follows the same format of the growth of the product to its highest sales and notability to the gradual decline of the product. Yet some examples can counter this slope with great design, take the coke cola can as an example. The coke cola can is a symbol recognised across the world and yet the basic design elements of the can being the red colour and white text has remained the same for generations. There is no need for a rebrand or change of design to the logo or colour scheme, because the initial idea is a great design and therefore does not need to be changed.

The more environmental aspects of life cycles within design can be explained in a book by William McDonough and Michael Braungart called "Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things". In this book McDonough and Braungart explain the relation between the biological and technological life cycles. They explain that within nature every part of the biological life cycle is used for a different being, the waste of one system becomes a resource for another. This use of waste as a resource can also be transferred to a technological world that we currently live in. Within this design principle McDonough and Braungart set forward, we as people can use this principle in aspects of our daily lives, by reusing or fixing old technology to reduce waste and if not recycling these parts to create better and more modern technology. The principle that waste can be used as a resource is a vastly important principle to follow when designing, by following this principle alone, for a handful of mass produced products, can greatly reduce the waste currently being produced by the public and businesses. (Braungart, 2002)

A book that I plan to use plentifully in my dissertation is the collection of essays by Czech philosopher Vilem Flusser. The collection is called "The shape of things: a Philosophy of Design" and within it Flusser discusses several philosophical questions about design. One such essay that caught my eye was an essay titled "The Ethics of Industrial Design?" (Flusser, 1999, p. 66). In this essay Flusser questions on who the responsibility of design lands upon

and the morality of design. He states in his essay that years ago the question of the morality of design would not be needed to be answered as “the production of useful objects” would be at the “forefront” of the designers mind (Flusser, 1999, p. 66), yet now the question of morality and who the blame lies upon is a very important question. The essay continues with the question “Whom should one hold responsible for a robot killing somebody? The person who constructed the robot, the one who made the knife or the one who set up the computer program?” (Flusser, 1999, p. 67) and I believe that this question, with alterations, could also be asked in relation to the end of a products life cycle. If a user of a plastic bottle finishes with their use of the bottle then throws it away instead of recycling it, then who does the blame lie with. Is the designer of the bottle? The designer of the label on the bottle? Or the user of the bottle? These could all take the blame equally, the designer could design the bottle to have other uses after the bottle is empty, the designer of the label could use the space to promote the recycling of the bottle or could the user become more environmentally conscious and think before they throw the bottle away. But if placed in a circle, without one, it would cease to become a full circle, without one the others would not happen so therefore who is responsible?

Function

Function to many designers is the top priority when designing a new product. When designing a chair, it must be strong enough to hold a person up, it should be comfortable for the user, it should complete its function of being a chair. When designing a face mask, it should be able to protect the user efficiently and to a high standard. These are the functions of these products and most designers will strive to complete these functions first, yet some designers can make such products that do not fulfil these functionalities. Take the “First Chair” by Michele De Lucchi for Memphis Milano created in 1983. This is a chair that has no functionality to it, it is a chair that does not work as a chair. When being shown at design shows, members of the public would often ask how to sit in the chair. Does this show great



aesthetic design or bad functional design? Shouldn't the public know how to sit in a chair?

(Lucchi, 1983)

As spoken about in a book by Donald Norman called “The Design of Everyday Things” (Norman, 1988) great design should teach the user its function without having to read a manual or instructions. Great design of products that have taken the user into consideration first often have clues on how to use them, like a handle on a door. Norman explains

“whether it's figuring out whether to push or pull a door” (Norman, 1988, p. 10) the user shouldn't blame themselves; they should blame the designer for not making its functionality known. Bad design can often be blamed on the incompetence of the user and if problems occur it is often blamed on human error, yet bad design is usually the real culprit.

Another text that is important within the design context of function is the 1896 essay "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered." by Louis Sullivan (Sullivan, 1896). In this essay Sullivan coins the term "form ever follows function" (Sullivan, 1896, p. 5) and explains the use of the term during the early years of building skyscrapers. Within the essay Sullivan states "All things in nature have a shape, that is to say, a form, an outward semblance, that tells us what they are, that distinguishes them from ourselves and from each other" (Sullivan, 1896, p. 5) this is true for design the form of the product shows us exactly what it is and within nature "Where function does not change form does not change." (Sullivan, 1896, p. 5) Sullivan explains that the exterior form of skyscrapers should reflect what the interior of the building is being used for, the form follows function. The essay also presents the idea that some designers are too infatuated with the function of their design that they do not take the necessary time to work on the form of the design a thus disregard the fact that form and function can be the same.

Dissertation research question

After researching into the three key words I used and discovered some books and text that I feel would be useful for the dissertation question, I believe I am going to pursue my research in the direction of end of life cycles and how designers can influence the thinking of users when disposing of products. Following my reading of Donald Norman's book "The Design of Everyday Things" the reason why people do not know how to work certain products is not down to the incompetence of the user but of the bad design of the product. This realisation opens the mind to discover more of these 'badly' designed products in everyday life and how 'good' design can teach user how to work the products. The influence of 'good' design changes how users interact with the product and therefore I would like to research into how design and designers can use this influence of 'good' design to change how users dispose of their products. The Vilem Flusser book "The shape of things: a Philosophy of Design" is another useful book towards my research as it questions the ethics of design and therefore can be linked to my question through the designers ethical choice when considering the end of a product and how to dispose of products.

Dissertation question

My proposed dissertation research question is "Can design/designers influence they way users dispose of products" with sub questions such as "the materials used", "the reuse of products" and "the aesthetical influence when disposing".

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