

Blobs and cupcakes: learning about design

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In my previous life as a graduate architect, and later as a design educator, I was closeted in a world where the design of something and its function are intrinsically related to each other. Even if the form of the object was designed in direct opposition to its function or meaning, this would be done on purpose — to make us take notice or ask questions, to shock us, or maybe to amuse us. (For an example of using design form to question or amuse, see the instagram feed of calligrapher [Seb Lester](#))

EVERYONE IS A DESIGNER

At kindergarten and primary school, if I wanted to share my work with people, I had to show them my exercise book. A particularly noteworthy piece might be pinned on the classroom wall, or, if I really aced it, next to the school reception area. At Intermediate, I could give people photocopies. I didn't really scan my work until 7th Form (Year 13). And if I did, I could only email it to people on my parents' email list. So, for most of my education, sharing my work with people was limited by my social reach and how many copies I could physically produce.

Today, using the Internet, social media, and blogs, anyone, of practically any age, has the potential to share their ideas with a giant audience with a few clicks. In a world of big data and [3 million blog posts a day](#), we are increasingly turning to visuals to give us an overview of the wealth of information we are creating.

Our society is becoming more and more visually literate, and our kids more and more digitally savvy. And thanks to an ever-increasing array of digital apps and programmes, the ability to make things to a professional standard is now widely available — images, posters, books, videos, music, laser cutting, 3D printing ... everyone can be a designer/maker.

But, for our ideas to be seen and considered, they need to be noticed. Understanding and using principles of design can help everyone become more effective visual communicators. Through the act of thinking about how the internal message and/or function of the work relates to the visual form it is presented in, the work takes on a life of its own, and has more chance of being noticed and used by its intended audience.

DESIGN IS A GAME OF TWISTER

The term 'design' encompasses a lot of ideas, and coming up with a definition can be a provoking exercise. The UK Design Council, who hopefully are experts in this matter, state

that design “could be viewed as an activity that translates an idea into a blueprint for something useful, whether it's a car, a building, a graphic, a service, or a process.” [1](#)

I like to imagine the concept of design like a particularly good game of [Twister](#): Design is twisted around Function with her arm over Users, while having one foot squarely planted on Aesthetics and the other knee on Emotion, and everyone is precariously balanced next to Trend.



Giant Twister at 2013 Glastonbury Festival, UK. Photo taken by [Chris Perriman](#), [CC license](#)

It's this dance of elements that can make both studying and teaching Design both deeply rewarding and frustrating:

- Why is one piece of design aesthetically pleasing and the other not?
- Why does one design work well functionally, but is missing a 'certain something'?
- How can one person love your design and their neighbour hate it?
- When is a design 'too trendy'?
- And how do you communicate that almost visceral reaction as useful feedback for budding designers?

FORM AND FUNCTION

Design principles act as doorways into this large and subjective subject, a place to start from and come back to when the going gets tough. A principle that was drilled into my soul as an architecture student is the aesthetics and form of your work should be intrinsically related to its meaning or function; that 'form follows function'.

First penned by Chicago architect [Louis Sullivan in 1896](#), 'Form follows function' developed into the battle cry of Modernist architecture and design. (Sullivan designed some of the first skyscrapers, and was a mentor to the young Frank Lloyd Wright.) I'm crudely paraphrasing history here, but for a decent chunk of the mid-20th century, any fiddly decoration for its own sake was considered at least mildly suspect, if not outrightly distasteful.



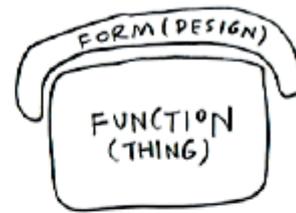
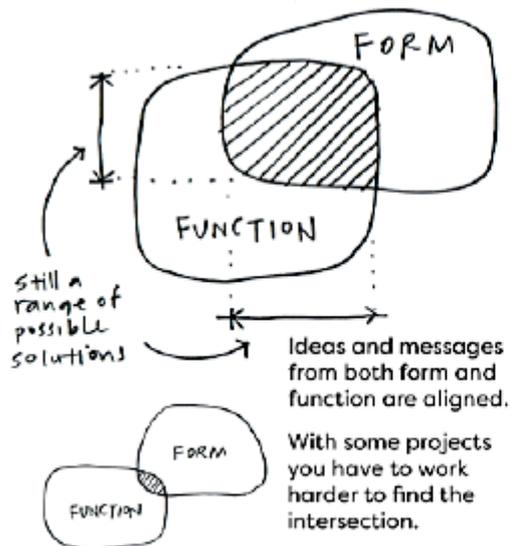
Spot your -isms in Architecture:

Left: Seagram Building by Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, 1958. Photo by [Noroton, English Wikimedia](#), CC license. Modernism. Simplicity and honesty of form, construction and materials, focus on light and lightness.

Right: Portland Building by Michael Graves, 1982. Photo by [Steve Morgan](#), CC BY-SA 3.0 license. Postmodernism. Classical references return (with a twist) unabashedly solid, imposing, not afraid of colour or pattern.

Then, as these things often go, we rebounded with Postmodernism, embracing many of the things that were previously out of bounds. Although we are now firmly planted in the 21st century, 'Form follows function' is still a fundamental touchstone for all design education; one to align yourself with or to break.

BLOBS OR CUPCAKES: RELATIONSHIPS OF FORM AND FUNCTION



Here the form (design) is weakly related to its function or purpose - design is applied to the thing rather than being an integral part.



The intersection of form and function

If we think of form and function as blobs on a Venn diagram, the area where they overlap is a zone of potential design solutions. Designers use the [elements](#) and [principles](#) of design to create these solutions. The key is that the ideas and messages of the form and the function are aligned — they are ‘talking with’ each other, not at cross-purposes. Things to consider include:

- the audience or users
- the big ideas or driving force behind the design
- intended use or ways of using
- what it will be made out of
- how light or heavy it needs to be
- longevity of the item – temporary or long lived
- cost and quality level sought
- one off or to be reproduced

When form and function is like a cupcake

When you apply a certain group of aesthetics like icing on a cupcake, regardless of the function of your work, you are creating a weak relationship between form and function. Unless you identify how the form or appearance aligns with its function, then your work can end up feeling strangely hollow.



How many spoofs of this poster have you seen in advertising and product design over the last 2 years? (And all are rather banal compared to the [issue the poster was designed for](#)) [Wikimedia](#) CC

The current proliferation of infographics is another good place to explore form and function with students. An infographic is supposed to expose relationships between data and help us to grasp complex ideas quickly, yet, how many have you seen that are confusing, hard to read or visually chaotic? If the visual form gets in the way of helping us understand the content, then the infographic is not fulfilling its function. Yet, many makers of infographics miss this important consideration. Testing their infographic on people to see if it is really understandable is one way to make sure they are fulfilling the function.

TAKEAWAYS

Keeping in mind that young people have been raised in a design-conscious environment through websites and social media, actively exploring the facets of design woven throughout the curriculum will help students identify the embedded messages they are receiving within their cultural and social environment. Some suggestions:

- Explore design with your students. What does the word mean to them? Discuss its use and place. Talk about how it can be used in the things they themselves create. For example, you could discuss layout in Google Docs — how can they use the way they lay out their documents to help structure their arguments? [Dieter Ram's 10 Principles of Good Design](#) could be another great starting point for a conversation with school age children.
- Although aimed at Startups, this [overview of design and what it means](#) is useful for a much wider audience.
- Teens might really enjoy [Ellen Lupton's excellent free course](#) on Poster Design on Skillshare.
- Making great learning resources takes time. These lessons from [Hack Design](#) have collated many web resources and games into a well-designed resource for different design topics, from typography to User Interface design, and are a useful source of inspiration.

¹ The Design Council (n.d) What is design? pg.1. Retrieved from http://www.mech.hku.hk/bse/interdisciplinary/what_is_design.pdf