

What do we mean by 'Good Design':

Dinner 2: Friday, September 4th

NOTES

The theme of the evening was to explore good design, using dinner as a catalyst to steer the discussion through examples of good and bad design. The project co-ordinators Joseph Coveney and Suzanne O'Connell wish to explore the particular dynamic generated by a group discussion rather, rather than between individuals (or lecture style discussion from one person to many people).

Suzanne introduced the evening explaining that there are four dinners planned plus a previous pilot dinner on the theme of love and marriage that took place immediately prior to the Marriage Equality Referendum. The spirit of the whole project is collecting people's experiences around design.

They want to look at the meaning of good design, for example, is it design that is more ethical, uses fair trade, or more economically sustainable, cheaper to make?

Joseph is particularly interested in the theatre of design or the emotional side, which he described as 'almost something fantastical'.

The evening was structured around a cold buffet meal; guests were able to select what they wanted to eat and when, a format that the co-ordinators felt would better facilitate discussion.

Joseph had previously circulated text that prompted the invitees to consider the criteria that we use to judge good design...what does it absolutely have to have?

Guests were invited to introduce themselves:

1. Joe – co-host of the evening, Masters in Product Design
2. Acky – Design Goat, industrial design
3. Rachel works in motion graphic design for live events
4. Gill is involved in web design/start up incubators
5. Moira works with an online college designing courses
6. Ashling is based in France and is involved in the skiing and biking industry

7. John – background in art and has recently completed a degree in animation
8. Lian – design for performance/dance and theatre, and arts manager for festivals
9. Paul – renewable energies
10. Vanessa – off shore wind – design is an important element of this
11. Ray – service design eg dementia patients, teaching, research, procurement systems
12. Eldon – primary school teacher and ‘lapsed environmentalist’. Interested in design from the point of view of pollution, packaging and energy input
13. Cian – design work with Acky in Design Goat
14. Suzanne – co-host of the evening, landscape architect and works on public spaces
15. Neil – currently finishing a PhD in the drama dept of Trinity, work concerned with audio visual for live performances, background in graphic design
16. Emer – note taker for the evening

Discussion:

Is good design a verb? From a designer’s point of view, design is not just about the finished object but also about developing multiple solutions to a problem. The duration of use is an important feature.

There are plenty of examples of bad design. With good design, you don’t even think about it. Bad design ‘jars’ but with good design you often don’t notice it.

Good design is purposeful. Like lego, it is a thing in itself. It is no more than it needs to be. It has potentiality.

An example of bad design is Irish Water. The whole system has been badly designed , described as a ‘monumental disaster’. But the logo is a genius design because it creates the illusion of a single entity. Irish Water is actually the 30 local authorities.

Design is always political in some shape or form. There isn’t even one Irish Water bill, since local authorities issue their own with the common logo on it. Good design in this case is ambiguous.

Joe asked whether good design can have a more sinister aspect, eg pretending something is a luxury item. There is a commercial aspect to it.

Suzanne – design is part of the creative industry. All humans are creative. Design is intuitive. She attended a talk called ‘harmony and balance’ that linked quantum physics to the idea of aesthetics. Aesthetics has an important role in design because that is our intuitive response.

Steven Jobs – Apple focused on the aesthetic. People get attached to the product. This is the concept of ‘designing a desire’; The object becomes less attractive once you have obtained it, once it is used. But this is only true for some products, while others, like a leather chair, can bear the marks of ownership and still retain their beauty and desirability.

An iPhone is not meant to have wear and tear. Some things have longevity and some don't. Sometimes the allure of getting the product is the drive behind the design.

Vanessa – technology becomes obsolete within a year. It pushes you into buying the next model.

John – everyone loves the new operating system, the lure of the graphics.

Ryanair – ‘dark patterns’ tricking you into buying insurance

Ray – Apple makes phones go slower for a few weeks before the release of a new model.

Designing desire rather than the experience of using it.

Ashling gave an example of this from the snowboarding industry – some snowboards with graphics cost €700 but need to be replaced annually. The more fashionable product is in higher demand than a cheaper model that lasts longer.

Joe – aesthetics, subtle changes are made like rounding or square corners

Digital products are not designed to get worn. If you design and make a crib for your child or a leather chair, it is designed to be kept to become an heirloom.

The iWatch was not a great success.

Joe asked the guests to consider what their ‘non-negotiable fact’ for good design is.

Ray – utility is really important. A kalashnikov lampstand is not his cup of tea. The thing should be in the world and of the world.

The thing uses as much as it needs to use and no more.

It only consumes as much resources as it needs to do the job that it does.

Irish design is said to be about story telling

Joe – the story that the material uses

Acky – sometimes the story is applied after the thing is made

Sometimes the thing is just made in the simplest and most beautiful way it can be

Suzanne asked why designers are you drawn towards certain materials. Colour, cost. Example of using American oak – easier to source it and it will do the job you need it to do.

Another example of chocolate packaging – it's all down to having a good product

There is a need to achieve a balance between business as a dirty word and making design sustainable.

Design Goat developed as a business through social contacts initiated during a college project. There was an organic development of contacts and business links.

So much work in Ireland is word of mouth. It's like a currency, if someone trusts you enough to recommend you, then you start out with the new client with that trust.

Ashling – this is a central idea in Irish culture, passing on stories.

Suzanne described how her business started up when they developed a pop up restaurant in a market for three weeks. They managed to meet a thousand people in three weeks. The project was innovative in how they brought people together. There was a two storey structure and the table was raised and lowered on pulleys between courses. Everyone who came to the dinner had to engage with the market traders in some way, eg buying an item from the shopping list;

Ray spoke about integrity of design.

Lian works in a luxury situation in that she is designing stuff which is not for sale. She doesn't have to make a profit. Working with dance and theatre companies, she comes up with her ideas in response to a story. It's hard to dissect the design out of it. Set design is about how it works on stage, how people navigate their way through it.

For her it has to practically work. The design cannot overpower what else is happening on the stage. It should match and help tell the same story and give something the performance can go against.

The best design is that which you don't see and you don't need to understand.

The best business is one that naturally flows, where there is no plan, there is no ulterior motive.

Good design is the simplest, easiest way to do it.

Acky offered a quote: "A chair should be invisible when someone is using it and beautiful when no one is sitting on it."

Vanessa – decor looks great but has no function.

Design is useful.

Ashling asked her younger sister about good design and her response focused on digital media, Instagram, Pinterest etc, while her father spoke about buildings. Physical space versus virtual space.

Even when people are in an amazing building they are taking pictures with their phone.

Thousands of people had input to the i-Phone. Design is a good social glue to bring lots of different disciplines together.

Lian – spoke about a Dutch project where a set of instructions, materials and hard hats are delivered to a town centre. The local community must work together to figure out how to construct the project, which turns out to be a performance space. It is left in the town square for people to use, before being dismantled again. The random nature of diverse people working together to come up with a creative solution is an incredible social glue

Neil – that's how communities used to operate, for example working together to make a town hall.

Suzanne – there is a mass movement of self organising, everyone is doing it for themselves because things have become very top down, very businesslike

Bringing it back to basics

Everyone has autonomy and a role to play within that space, because we live in an industrialised world

Eldon – farmers now lead a solitary existence because of the mechanisation of farming. Places that were once vibrant communities have been devastated by machinery. Farmers cannot afford to hire help because they are in debt to the bank. An example was given of a dairy milking machine. On the one hand people are liberated from mundane tasks, but on the other they are beholden to banks. Also cows are designed to produce high volumes of milk, dairy freesian are prevalent types. Books called 'Cowspiracy' was cited. Some cows are not compatible with the milking machines, hence computers will start to determine what species of cow survives.

Ray – design is the handmaiden of industry. It was born out of the industrial revolution, not out of art.

Capitalism promotes winners and losers. Positive checks are cancer and terrorism (war and disease) – they get rid of people

We are trying to create a more human day to day interaction

Eldon – Masters in Environmental Science – don't trust science. You can read data in so many ways. If you want 'sexy' results and you can bend statistics to your own will.

It's about attitude and perception – if you perceive things to be positive, then they are positive generally.

Joseph Campbell – writer on archetypal struggles, who promoted the idea of 'follow your bliss'. Realise that we have to be the hero of our own quest.

Suzanne – the world is disgusting but also beautiful. We can make it a little more beautiful and a little less disgusting.

We have a duty to follow the news and know what's going on elsewhere, even if we cannot do anything about it. We should be aware of it.

Ashling gave an example of a photographer who photographed many disasters and consequently became depressed. He now photographs natural beauty. The work is still very real but it has become more positive in manner.

Lian – designing the future for something. She loves designing for a group of people and imagines how a fantasy person will use the designed object.

Cian – If we pull back from that, design is about the space, the room, the texture and the interaction.

Paul – Communication isn't what people say, it's what people understand. It's likewise with design.

Themes:

Design as a collaborative process

Design as an ethical process – using resources sparingly

Utility and purposeful in nature

Designing desire, versus longevity in product design

Design and social change within communities

The story behind the design and the materials

Aesthetics and the intuitive response