

Consumption and Design

Thinking on Design Ecology

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Abstract—In recent years, concepts of ecological design, humanized design and people-oriented design are proposed to design for long-term interests and people. However, in the bustling consumer society, fierce competition for interests, acceleration of pace of life and rapid information dissemination make the so-called ecological design not ecological and lead to varied problems about design ecology. This paper explains the concept of ecological design and design ecology as well as elaborates the influence of consumer culture on design ecology and discusses problems about design ecology as well as proposes thoughts on design ecology.

Keywords—*ecological design; design ecology; rationality; people-oriented; design ethics*

I. INTRODUCTION

What is design? People haven't reached consensus. No matter what's the definition, design is an activity that can improve existing things and change people's life style. People cannot do without design. Especially in this consumption age, design exists everywhere and closely relates to people. Tremendous "designers" make contributions for social development through designing. In recent years, ecological design, humanized design and people-oriented design are constantly proposed to seek long-term interests and serve people. Paying attention to the good and suitable interaction between people and designed things better promotes sound development of the society. However, in the bustling consumer society, fierce competition for interests, acceleration of pace of life and rapid information dissemination make the so-called ecological design not ecological and lead to varied problems about design ecology.

II. ECOLOGICAL DESIGN AND DESIGN ECOLOGY

Ecology is the living state of all living creatures. The concept of ecology refers to the basis to regulate and guide the relationships between man and nature, between human and things and between humans. Early in 1866, German physicist Ernst Haeckel first proposed the concept of Ecology, which consists of Greek *oikos* (means place of residence and family) and *logos* (means research or discussion). He proposes ecology is the science to research the relation between biological organism and surroundings. The two has relation of action and reaction, unity of

opposites and mutual dependence and restriction. Environment provides survival conditions for living creatures meanwhile influences their continuous evolution and growth. [1] The balanced relation is also the coordinated relation between natural environment, human society, cultural environment and organism respectively, producing natural ecology, human ecology, social ecology and cultural ecology.

In the 1980s, the design industry developed rapidly and the design circle paid attention to the ecology of design, so the concept of design ecology appeared. It became research emphasis and hot issue of modern design in the 1990s. From the perspective of ecology, ecological design is to solve the problem of design and design environment. Environmental factors are considered in design links to reach harmony and coexistence between design and environment, finally leading to a production and consumption system with sustainable development. In recent years, more attentions are paid to ecological design, even becoming a national design trend. However, with the fierce design competition and the expansion of people's consumption needs and wants, the design becomes not ecological frequently. Therefore, ecological design is not equivalent to design ecology. Design ecology researches problems of design and embodies people's dependence on society culture and design. The ecology of design refers to the balanced, shipshape and reasonable design with sustainable development. Design ecology takes ecological civilization as the premise and takes ecology as value orientation.

III. INFLUENCE OF CONSUMPTION ON DESIGN ECOLOGY

Design is to create good living ways for people. The proposition of ecological view coincides with it. Good design should run through ecology. In today's consumption age, ecology, design and consumption are parts of human society, in order to create a harmonious living space. Design serves consumption, ecology serves design and creates good environment for consumption. From the perspective of anthropology, ecology, consumption and design are parts of human culture and play important roles in the development of society and human culture. At the meantime, they influence and promote each other. Consumption is the destination of design. Design promotes consumption and brings problems of design ecology.

In today's society, design is inseparable from consumption. As a behavioral pattern, consumption influences people's thoughts and behaviors in social life. At this time, it has cultural significance and forms consumption culture. From the perspective of material culture, design is to produce articles. From the perspective of consumer culture, it caters to people's demands. Design can promote consumption. This is the biggest difference between design and art. Unlike art that artists freely act according to their emotions, design is restricted by many factors, such as consumer group, consumption environment and consumer psychology, designers' aesthetic appreciation, educational status and comprehension of design.

Design is inseparable from commercial activities, "dance with shackle" in it. In today's consumer culture, design is imbalanced, which can be called problems of design ecology, including: First is the absence of cultural identity. In China, design is regarded as new thing introduced from the west, so we should worship and learn from it. The wrong understanding leads to westernization of design. We blindly imitate western style and lose characteristics and cultural identity. The disharmony between design that lacks cultural and national identity and humanistic environment in China is problem of design ecology. Second is the extravagance. Modern consumers think the good is equal to the expensive, so the design irrespective of cost appears. For example, in the design of mooncake gift box for mid-autumn festival, the aesthetics of design is greatly exaggerated and the design cost is ignored, leading to resource consumption and excessive rubbishes, which cause environmental pollution. It is problem of design ecology. Third is high commercialization. Under the background of consumer culture, design creates consumption. Meanwhile, advertisers attract consumption and scramble for commercial opportunities through design. "German aesthetic theorist Wolfgang Haug proposes in the book of *Criticism on Commodity Aesthetics* that, under this background, feeling has become the tool with economic function and the attractive subject and object that have economic function. People who control product appearance can control the public through appealing to feelings of them." [2] Therefore, varied design furthest controls feelings of consumers in commercialization. However, things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme. In commercialization, people's environment is highly commercialized, and commercial atmosphere is imposed on their aesthetics. Fourth is the will of leading officials. People's psychology and behavior closely relate to the environment. People influence each other's psychology and behavior through words, expressions and behaviors in social interaction. The influence of a leader often embodies in the environment. Here, design represents power and serves as a medium, becoming nonprofessional and chaotic without aesthetics. Fifth is extreme utilitarianism. Under the background of consumer culture, in order to rapidly get economic interests, some designers lack long-term consideration, leading to the absence of ecology. The above are problems in design ecology in today's society.

In a word, design aims at consumption, which promotes and influences design. But under the background of consumer culture, we must follow design rules and seek design ecology, in order to create a sound and benign development environment for design.

IV. CREATION AND REALIZATION OF DESIGN ECOLOGY

Design ecology must be achieved to create living environment with balance and harmony of people and nature, continuously promote the improvement of living ways for all living creatures, optimize human's living space and make it harmonious, balanced and shipshape. We can review purpose and nature of design from the perspective of design theory under consumer culture.

A. Reasonability of Design

Design is to create reasonable living ways and the core of design is innovation. Professor Zhang Fuye from college of fine arts of Tsinghua University addresses, "The soul of design is reasonable innovation". In *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, reasonability means the appearance is logical and makes sense. Reasonability exists in different fields, such as scientific reasonability, social reasonability and policy reasonability. Reasonability in design field refers to the adaptation of designed articles to human and environment. Reasonability in design means basing on consumers' demands, ensuring products start well and end well from production to consumption and become scientific, economic, beautiful and marketable. Therefore, the primary condition of good design is reasonability. If designers only pursue innovation and ignore reasonability, they will lead to garish and chaotic design with poor quality.

B. Design with "People Orientation" and "Living Creature Orientation"

In the *Dictionary of Ethics*, "people orientation" regards people as the nature of society, the core of value, treats people's survival and development as supreme value goal and believes everything serves people. [3] The concept of people orientation was first proposed in Renaissance. In the mid-19th century, it proposed in British Arts and Crafts Movement that the center of design is not the machine but people. The democratic design idea is carried forward by Deutscher Werkbund, Bauhaus and Ulm Institute of Design and has become the subject of modern design. "People orientation" in design surrounds people and lets design satisfy people's highest appeal to embody the maximum value of design. However, the society consists of not only people but other living creatures. The relation between human and nature, between human and other living creatures must be considered to achieve sustainable development of the society. We should understand the relation between human and nature from the perspective of ecological ethics. Ecological ethics makes a stand against people-oriented codes of ethics, advocates equal rights of human and nature, as well as respects balance of ecosystem and advocates the establishment of ecological ethics. It advocates the respect of all life. Mountains, rivers, plants and animals all have rights to survive. People should respect the right. [4] Hence, design

must solve the relation between human and product, between human and society, as well as the relation between human and nature. "Today's society is materialistic consumer society pursuing extravagance, also the information society with rapid development of science and technology. Except for well-being, the modern transformation also leads to numerous realistic problems, such as people's aloneness, insignificant design forms and deterioration of natural ecological environment." [5] Therefore, design ecology must be "people orientation" and "living creature orientation", emphasizing the system involving "nature, design, people and society".

C. Design Aims at Optimizing Life

Design has utility function and aesthetic function. When meet people's basic material needs, it beautifies people's life. Under the background of modern consumer culture, the beautification of life is only the primary stage of design. The purpose of design is to optimize people's life. Design is a double-edged sword that brings well-being and harms. For example, in cold winter, people enjoy the warmth brought by air-conditioner, which pollutes the natural world. Urban planning and design are historical and long-term. In transformation design of old city, "how to combine reconstruction of old area with transformation, to make new buildings coordinated with original buildings, instead of letting people feel the new is newer and higher, and the old is more dilapidated and lower". [6] Design ecology solves the problem related to balance and harmony between them, in order to optimize human life.

D. Fairness and Ethics of Design

Early in the period of Bauhaus, people had proposed design is for the mass, which is the basic characteristic of modern design, and one of the differences between modern design and traditional design. Traditional design is elite design for a few people. Modern design should serve the public, including healthy people, unsound people, powerful group and vulnerable group. "International Year of the Disabled" in 1981 advocated "a society will become the most vulnerable if it rejects weakling and the disabled". Mass design should fairly solve problems about the powerful and the vulnerable, the minority and the most. When considering the design for healthy people, the design for unsound people must be considered at the same time to let them fully enjoy design values, in order to make the society and human more harmonious. American design theorist Victor Papanek first proposed design ethics in *Design for the Real Work* published at the close of 1960s. He proposes design must consider problems related to human, environment and resources in the long run, look at long-term benefits and carry forward the true, the good and the beautiful in personality, to achieve balance and coordination among human, environment and resources.

Many designs are people-oriented but ignore design ethics. For instance, although design and functions of disposable tableware, disposable chopsticks and disposable cups bring convenience for human and meet our needs, but finally it will destroy the environment and waste resources.

Design ethics requires modern design to solve problems between design and multiple aspects. In general sense, ethical value refers to the value of morality and the good, including humanistic care, ecology care, designers' moral consciousness and sense of social responsibility. Therefore, the fairness and ethics of design also embody design ecology.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, design ecology is to realize ecologization of design and make design "harmonious, balanced and shipshape". Under the background of modern consumption culture and commercial interests and popularization of design, design ecology appears to be particularly important. Only design ecology can truly embody the value of design and turn it into ecological design.

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