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Shopping in the Design Museum: curating, collecting and shopping for design

This paper examines the relationship between the design museum, its curatorial remit and the choice of designed objects for sale in a typical design museum shop. As we know the museum, the shop, the visitor and their aspirations are all tightly interlinked. However, the museum that concentrates on the presentation of design and the designed object faces quite specific issues somewhat different from certain other museums where the offering is of quality *reproductions* of the objects on display. In the design museum some of the designed objects available in the museum shop are the same as those exhibited in the museum gallery. So where does the museum gallery end and the shop begin?

Museums today have long since accepted the role of the shop as a necessary revenue stream, and have developed its role in their institutions as an additional education instrument. But their collaborative efforts with the design suppliers lacks the verve and impact of their mid 20th century counterparts. Today the relationship with the stores and producers may not be so obvious but it is still there. This example from the Design Museum in London is fairly typical:

“We believe in the value of *good design*; our suppliers and partners share this belief and support us in offering a design-led approach to our product development and selection. *This collaboration ensures our retail offer is relevant to our collection, exhibitions and installations*, features classic and surprising brands whilst enabling us to both innovate and introduce new designers to the market.” (my italics)¹

In the many museums that exhibit design, the distinction made between the shop and the exhibition space is very clearly defined. This is to distinguish the remit of the design museum and to signify the value in the collections they hold. In addition some leading museums, especially those with a long standing commitment to exhibiting designed objects such as the Museum of Modern Art

¹ <http://designmuseumshop.com/pages/about-us>

(MoMA) in New York, go one stage further and extend the curatorial remit to their retail offer:

“As an *extension of the Museum’s educational mission*, the MoMA Design Store exemplifies good design with a well-edited selection of products highlighting the latest in materials, production, and design concepts from around the world. All of the products you’ll find at the MoMA Stores *are reviewed and approved by MoMA’s curators*, some are represented in the Museum’s design collection, and many are MoMA exclusives.” (my italics)²

This is an interesting reworking of the relationship that MoMA and other American museums had with exhibiting and retailing design in the 1940s and 1950s. This model of the museum/retail relationship is a shadow of the mid century conception. The once realistic and imaginative commercial impulse in museums has now mostly been replaced by the seemingly ubiquitous merchandise and display presentation of the generic Museum Shop.

In the 1940s and 1950s New York MoMA, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Detroit Institute of Arts all proposed a direct relationship with producers and retailers that was clearly presented as such without recourse to separate realms. Indeed the relationships were so strong that:

Through the cooperation of sponsoring department stores and manufacturers, the Museum has been able to eliminate the lag time between theory and application, a condition heretofore tending to discourage public interest in good design. ³

The engagement with *design in everyday life* in both retail and museum environments has been used historically to develop within the individual an appreciation of the value of design, of taste distinctions and ultimately of an aesthetic position in relation to their own physical environment. The direct

² <https://www.momastore.org/museum/moma/MoMAAboutUsView?storeId=10001&catalogId=10451>

³ MoMA press release, September 26 1941

relationship with the retail sector during this period made the transition from museum visit to shopping environment a smooth path.

In each of the exhibitions at the MoMA New York, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Detroit Institute of Arts they shared a hybrid form – part shopping trip, part aspirational experience and part aesthetic education. Publications produced by the Walker Art Center and by the MoMA New York to accompany exhibitions also went about explaining and exposing contemporary design products:

There is today a growing wave of exhibitions and educational activities in the Everyday Arts - the design of everyday things - throughout the country. It is probably true that, except among a limited group of people, there is no greater awareness of contemporary design than there was in the time of Cellini and Chippendale. It is significant, however, that our museums, the by-products of the collecting urge, have finally acted upon the old adage that today's everyday object may be tomorrow's work of fine art.⁴

The Walker Art Center published 28 issues of the *Everyday Art Quarterly* between 1946 and 1953, a magazine that concentrated on new products and innovative art and design. The annual *Useful Gifts* Christmas exhibition begun in 1946, and the *Well-Designed Articles from Minneapolis Stores* exhibition in 1948, both held at the Walker Art Center, gave opportunities *to shop from the display directly*, as did *An Exhibition For Modern Living* at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1949. Why has this style of exhibition seemingly fallen out of favour in the contemporary design museum?

⁴ *Where to see Everyday Art*, *Everyday Art Quarterly*, No 13 (Winter, 1949-50), pp.1-11

Once a year the Walker Art Center combs the Minneapolis stores for well-designed objects of everyday use. The results of this survey are shown in the annual pre-Christmas exhibition USEFUL GIFTS. The 1948 exhibition brought together objects selected from twenty-one different stores: a restaurant supply house, a dealer in laboratory ware, stationery, hardware, and toy shops, and an outlet for articles made by the blind were included in addition to the regular department and specialty stores.

Presented in this issue of EVERYDAY ART QUARTERLY are a few of the objects from the exhibition; all are available nationally. Names and addresses of manufacturers, and of participating stores, are listed on page 16.

Fig.1. Everyday Art Quarterly, 1948

The *Good Design* joint exhibitions held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Merchandise Mart in Chicago from 1950, displayed contemporary design objects with an overt commercial imperative embedded in their curatorial mission. MOMA produced its own guides to everyday design and there were price lists in its exhibitions:

The 1950 Good Design Exhibition, a project sponsored jointly by the Museum and The Merchandise Mart, is the first of a series of annual home furnishings shows to be exhibited at The Mart throughout the year and at the Museum each November. More than 250 items ranging from a 15cent glass to a \$500 sofa will be shown in a colorful setting especially designed by Ray and Charles Eames. The exhibition, directed by Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., will be on view in the first floor galleries from November 22 through January 28. For the convenience of visitors a small catalog will be sold for 15 cents listing New York retail stores where the objects in the exhibition can be bought and giving approximate retail prices.⁵

There were different approaches to this mission in the UK and something very definitely got lost in translation. The somewhat patrician approach in the UK produced rather proscriptive room displays oriented around social class such as those in the *Britain Can Make It* exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum

⁵ Press Release for the first showing of the *Good Design* exhibition at The Merchandise Mart in Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1950

in London in 1946, and the 'good taste' led *Register Your Choice* exhibition in 1953, held in Charing Cross tube station in London.

In addition these exhibitions, as in the case of *Britain Can Make It*, unlike their US counterparts never lived up to their goals of making everyday objects available to audiences. Production was never strong enough in post war Britain to bring products into the shops at the same time as the exhibition. The dissatisfaction of those visitor's who lined up to view new and previously unavailable commodities at the *Britain Can Make It* exhibition, when they discovered that these would not be available for some time in British retail outlets, simply reinforced an already jaundiced view of manufacturing and distribution. The exhibition had served as an overseas trade vehicle. With so much of the consumer goods produced destined to be sent abroad, the exhibition had considerable propaganda value and might have been even more useful in promoting productivity, as this exchange from the debate demonstrates:

Major Tufton Beamish:

Is the Right Hon. and learned Gentleman aware that this Exhibition is described as the "Britain Can't Get It" Exhibition, and that much greater incentive to production would be provided if he would make more goods available to the home market?

Sir Stafford Cripps:

I think it is only so described by the very ignorant.⁶

The *Britain Can Make It* exhibition very quickly earned the title of the *Britain Can't Have It* exhibition.

We might ask finally how does all this affect our attitudes to objects in the museum, everyday objects in the home and the construction of retail environments? The museum mission to expose us to the best of design can only be amplified by the direction to purchase the goods on display. But so often those goods available in the museum shop lack any of the same aesthetic values

⁶ 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition, HC Deb 28 October 1946 vol 428 cc262-4 262

of those on display in the exhibits. No one would propose that design museums have IKEA sized warehouses attached to them where all goods on display could be bought, although that's not a bad idea. Indeed the Vitra Museum shop gets closest to this idea. However, providing more information on suppliers and prices would not be out of place.

The museum shop has become a purveyor of knickknacks rather than a serious retail enterprise devoted to providing a clear steer towards what is good in everyday objects. In doing so it has fallen short of the mission of the more sophisticated retail environments, who have learnt much of what they use to construct shopping experiences from museums and curatorial principles. They have also lost touch with consumption and consumer motivations and missed the most important opportunity that the design museum has to offer, that of developing a taste for design.