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VW BEETLE. THE COCA-COLA BOTTLE. ZIPPO LIGHTERS. THE ROLEX OYSTER WATCH. TUPPERWARE. THE LONDON UNDERGROUND MAP. LEGO. THE HILLS HOIST. BARBIE. UNIVERS FONT. SONY WALKMAN.

My God! They're a sexy bunch! Just a small sample of products, designs and ideas that still swagger with the cocksure, casual glee of the rockstar. Although, some are so old that the term "Diva" might be more appropriate, they refuse to age and overdose on their own ennui. These icons, and more like them, informed and inspired us. For many, they became signposts that defined the times – best and worst – of our lives.

Fantastic Plastic

For the average schmuck, the 1950s was the time when he finally got the keys to the consumer kingdom. The Populuxe Era sailed in on a gulf stream of cheap plastics, mass production and post-war glee-club 'can-do'. For the first time the common man (with the little woman tidying up behind him) could afford time and labour saving devices. They could afford a few more of life's little luxuries. They became creatures of comfort. Gosh! They had TV!

Yep, they had TV. And television became the worm-hole to sell more product, to change the way we think about ourselves. It even sped up time so then we needed more labour saving devices – "Honey! Look at this, it's got a triple action!"

We aspired to more, we needed more. We craved the things that would indicate that we were riding the wave. Push button phones, mood rings, touch lighting. But it was more than that, these things became the hotspots on the timeline of our lives. They were unique – truly unique. A VW Kombi van wasn't just a mode of transport. It was seen as the key to a new life. It helped give countless long-haired, listless groovers the impetus they needed to defy mum and dad and hit the road.

As such, things changed in the context of the times they lived in. A safety pin became a code for punk protest. A Mont Blanc pen became a kind of Masonic handshake between the Masters (and Mistresses) of the Universe.

The Future is Now!

Design has always tried to point us to the future. Modular, globular furniture came and stayed. Silver jump suits with boingo boots didn't. It shows there is a fine line between what we are pushed towards and what we embrace on our own.

It must be frustrating for designers as they try to carry us towards their gleaming, slimline vision of a brighter tomorrow. Their brains are fanging along like a Gulfstream Jet blitzing the skies in top gear – "What if? What if?". All the time dealing with a general public whose collective bloated consciousness resembles an ocean liner only dimly aware that it is going the wrong way.

The secret to a successful product is a bit like the secret to comedy – timing. Maybe we haven't evolved enough for some products. Shoot me down in flames, but for the life of me, I just can't see the point of the internet fridge. Cooking is one of the few jobs that you can do;

- a) with a glass of red in your hand;
- b) with Iggy Pop on full bore; and
- c) whilst thinking of absolutely nothing.

The last thing I want is a neat little screen constantly reminding me of how disorganised I am. Besides, where would I put the fridge magnets, the kid's school notes and the drunken polaroids? Having said that, I think they would work well in an industrial kitchen. A perky and approachable way to stocktake and organise! Someone left the cake out in the rain? Order another one!

Show me the money!

How do people shop? What makes people buy one thing and ignore another?



Advertisers think they build brand loyalty. They really do. A catchy slogan, a funky graphic and it's; "Hello, madam! Back again!"

What brings Joe Public back again when it's time to upgrade the widget? It's when he first unpacked it, felt the weight of it, admired the machined action, and, finally, became delighted in its performance.

I have nearly wept tears of joy myself at such times as these. The first time I purchased a computer accessory that delivered true "plug & play" performance, the universe shifted. If I was at all religious, I would have lit a candle and done "puja" to the designers responsible. I say to you now that God will smile on you in the afterlife, whoever you are.

Divine design device

Meanwhile, behind the "brou-haha" of consumerism struggle the designers. Forever locked in an uneasy dance between form, function and the vagaries of the client. Always mindful that an extra bevelled edge will give THEM the edge, they finetune and tweak until they are blind and mad.

"We are searching for some kind of harmony between two intangibles: a form which we have not yet designed and a context which we cannot properly describe," wrote Christopher Alexander in Notes On The Synthesis Of Form.

The consumer is oblivious to all this. All they need to know is, "does it come in the same red as my sofa?"

Well, that's not strictly true. Most of your good work will slide off the conscious brain like Merlot off a freshly Scotchgarded® Lunar sofa bed (by B+B Italia). But the subconscious notices, and appreciates, when the shape and structure give your fingers no other option than to nestle against the appropriate buttons. Or the truly satisfying "kachunk" sound of a well engineered car door as it assumes its happy place back in the closed position. Or the self satisfied hum of a machine that exists only for the opportunity to serve you again. It just feels so right and so very, very good!

"Increase of material comforts does not in any way whatsoever conduce to moral growth." When Mahatma Gandhi said those words he obviously hadn't escaped to the Japanese countryside on a state-of-the-art Shinkansen high-speed.

Besides, in the context of the modern world, he was missing the point. Herbert Marcuse encapsulated the basic truth of the human condition when he said, "The people recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, and kitchen equipment".

