

The pyramid of value: A MODEL FOR IMPROVED PROJECT EVALUATION IN DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION

Life is not easily understood in terms of black and white. That is, most of the daily choices that we make are conditioned by many factors; some are personal, others are cultural, but only a few are universal. Wines are good example. There are most likely thousands of different kinds of wines, differentiated by the kind of grapes used, the country that produced them, and the vineyards that bottled them. Despite the almost infinite variety of wines and vintages, experts have developed some very specific standards by which to judge wines. Awards are even given to outstanding wines. In some ways good design is not unlike good wines.

From this perspective it is clear that, unlike the pure sciences, design does not follow finite rules. Its rules are a reflection or a mirror of contextual values or, as some cultural anthropologists call them, belief systems. Yet by their very nature, belief systems are subject to a myriad of interpretations.

SINTESIS: La vida no se entiende fácilmente en términos de blanco y negro. Es decir, la mayoría de las decisiones que tenemos que hacer diariamente están condicionadas por muchos factores; algunos personales, otros culturales y muy pocos universales. Los vinos son un buen ejemplo. Existe una inmensa variedad de vinos que se diferencian por el tipo de uva empleado, el país que lo produce y por los viñedos que los envasan. A pesar de la casi infinita variedad de vinos, los expertos han desarrollado algunos parámetros muy específicos para juzgarlos y evaluarlos. Incluso se llega a premiar a los mejores vinos. De alguna manera el buen diseño se asemeja al buen vino.

Desde esta perspectiva es claro que, a diferencia de las ciencias puras, el diseño no sigue reglas finitas. Sus reglas son el reflejo de valores del contexto o, como lo llamarían algunos antropólogos culturales, reflejo del sistema de creencias. Sin embargo, por su misma naturaleza, el sistema de creencias está sujeto a innumerables interpretaciones. Por esta razón, este artículo se enfocará al entendimiento general del sistema de creencias, abordando algunos de los términos encontrados en el área de la crítica del diseño y evaluación de proyectos, terminando con la propuesta de un modelo que incorpora aspectos de la crítica del diseño tales como correcto/incorrecto, bien/mal, y me gusta/no me gusta empleados de una forma sistemática en la evaluación de proyectos.

This article will focus on the general understanding of belief systems, some of the lexicon found in the area of design criticism

and project evaluation, and will end by proposing a model that incorporates aspects of design criticism such as right/wrong, good/bad, and likes/dislikes used in a systematic way.

SOME ASPECTS OF DESIGN CRITICISM

Many professions, such as engineering, whose fields of endeavor involve tangible things, seem to have an advantage over professions such as design where we are forever dealing with intangibles. Our colleagues in engineering have the enviable luxury of being able to rely on numerical or quantifiable factors to objectively describe their work. This creates a commonality for both themselves and their audience. For instance, when a number is uttered, all parties readily understand what the quantity is. If you ask for ten pencils, you will invariably get ten units of something generically known as a pencil.

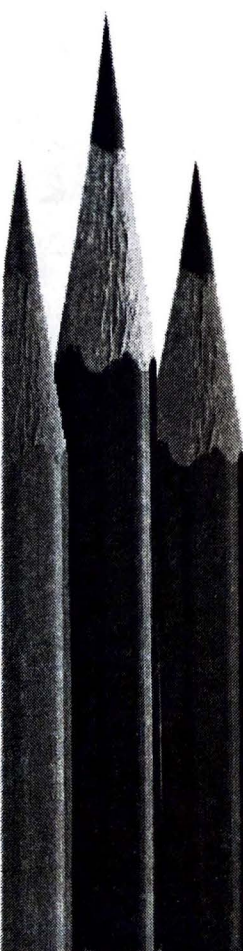
The exact quantity is never in doubt. However, the quality of the pencil is not a given. For some people, a simple yellow, wooden pencil will suffice; for others, anything less than a Lamy mechanical pencil would be unworthy of the name pencil.

EVALUATION AND DESCRIPTION

As glib as the above example may first appear to be, it illustrates some of the confusion that exists between the inherently more subjective process of evaluation, on one hand, and the more objective process of description, on the other. But be warned: even our everyday usage of the words evaluation and description can lead us astray. We often use these words interchangeably, as if they were synonyms. They are anything but synonyms!

Evaluation has its root in the concept of *value*, a word fraught with subjective overtones. The value we place on almost anything depends on non-objective factors; 'value' ends up covering a gamut of meanings, from the market value of stocks and bonds on Wall Street to the sentimental value of a moth-eaten family heirloom.

For its part, description is the process of objective reporting in the most neutral manner possible. Description deals exclusively with the rendition of facts, independent of the reporting process and the



reporter. It is possible to achieve some degree of objectivity, including design evaluation. Widespread acceptance of certain codes can eventually become international standards. To cite an example from the real world, countries that use the metric system have established and accepted a well-defined length for the meter. This and other standards remain constant and are explicitly understood. But so is the code for Gothic architecture or good wines.

In the end, if the *raison d'être* of design criticism is to gain a better understanding of the subject matter in question, rather than of the belief systems that govern the designer and the users, then clearly objective description must override subjective evaluation. This conclusion is more than a little unsettling for many designers who feel that such objectivity stands in the way of the intuitive, creative process that is, after all, what design is about. Generally speaking, designers who are part of this school of thought are idealists who believe in art for art's sake and design for design's sake.¹

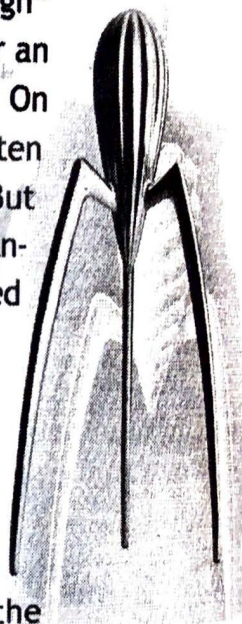
Fortunately, most designers agree that no matter how important subjectivity may be design cannot exist without some elements of objective description. In the absence of at least a modicum of objectivity, it would

be all too easy to fall into the trap of unbridled subjectivity in which our only reference points are ego-centric and result in phrases such as "good design" or a "bad product" or an "ugly environment". On such occasions one often hears the phrase: "But it's all a matter of semantics". However, it need not be so.

THE PITFALLS OF SEMANTICS IN EVALUATION

By its very nature, the spoken and written language is not as sterile as the cold perfection found in numbers; on the contrary, the nuances and ambiguities inherent in language are what make it valuable. In fact, it is because of this diversity and, at times, contradictory use of words that an area of study known as 'semantics' has spawned.

The subjectivity and ambiguity that are part-



¹ The definitions of subjective and objective are those of Mortimer J. Adler as found in his book *Six Great Ideas*. Quoting Adler, "...the subjective is that which differs for you, for me, and everyone else. In contrast, the objective is that which is the same for you, for me, and everyone else".

and-parcel of the study of semantics should in no way deter us from trying to come to grips with some of the more commonly misused terms in design criticism. All too often, design reviews are cluttered with emotive words such as 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', and 'likes' and 'dislikes'. These words are useful and necessary but must be used consistently. Otherwise, confusion and chaos can ensue.

As a professor of design, I often feel that there is little regard in design education for clarity of thinking, much less, clarity of expression. What is 'right' for one person may be 'wrong' for another; what is 'bad' for one market is 'good' for another, and so on. At the end of these academic exercises, we don't

seem to be any further ahead.

In fact, many of our review se-

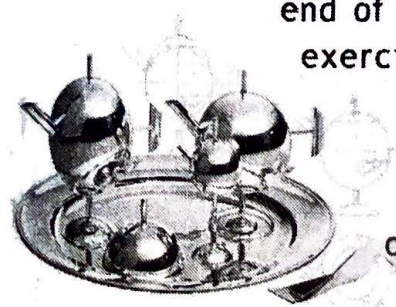
ssions (or crits) conclude with some lame statement or other to the effect that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. End of conversation.

RIGHT AND WRONG

When dealing with words such as *right* and *wrong*, *good* and *bad*, and *likes* and *dislikes*, we must begin by stating the obvious: *there are no universally acceptable meanings for any of these terms*. This is because languages are conditioned by context and no context is universal except, perhaps, one: nature. The laws of nature are the same for everyone living on this planet, regardless of location. Other than that, all codes or standards are regional, local or personal. They reflect everything from the physical geography of a particular environment, to the social behavioral patterns of a specific culture, to the psychological make-up of an individual.

Early in our lives, we become culturally and thereby subjectively conditioned to perceive our world in a particular way. This process of socialization leads us to assume that our world is universal, logical, and right, and that the world of others is, of course, idiosyncratic, illogical, and wrong.

As suggested above, the laws of nature are excluded from our culturally-biased filter and contextually-dependent evaluation.



For example, the law of gravity is the law of gravity here and everywhere else on this planet. Admittedly, each culture may deal with gravity in its own particular way; however, the universality of this law of nature remains intact.

Furthermore, the Laws of Nature form the basis for the pure sciences, and take on a binary quality: they are either right or wrong, and are not dependent upon the subjectivity of evaluation or the evaluator. A design concept that does not integrate gravity is doomed to inevitable failure. As a design, it would be wrong, not because a particular design critic has deemed it to be so, but because it does not respect the indisputable laws of nature.

The laws of nature are not, however, the only right/wrong factors that need to be considered. Certain laws of society are similar, at least in principle, to the laws of nature, e.g., building codes or UL standards. Regardless of the design, these standards must be met or the end product could be considered illegal. There is, however, a significant difference between laws of nature and laws of society. Whereas laws of nature are universal, laws of society are local. Building codes, for example, can vary from region to region and thereby have a more localized quality. For its part, the metric system previously

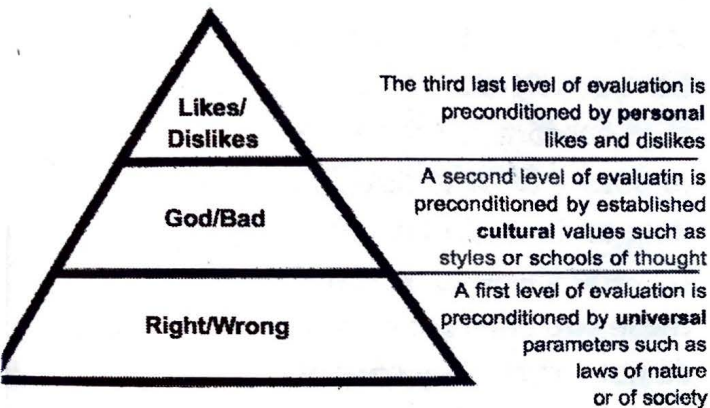
mentioned is also an artificial code, which, over time, has become almost universal.

To summarize, any design can be either right or wrong, according to the laws of nature, and, in some cases, according to the laws of society. Every other qualifier-good, bad, ugly, beautiful-falls outside the purview of this objective category. These value-laden adjectives go hand-in-hand with a more subjective evaluation of a particular design project.

Therefore, when commenting upon the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a certain visual element, such as color, the matter can never be resolved in terms of right or wrong, except when the choice of color either adheres to or violates a specific law of nature or society. Blue is no more right than green is wrong. As measurable wavelengths, colors be-



long to the objective parameters of science, but as a phenomenon of psychological perception, they belong to the subjectivity of the arts. (Figure 1. Pyramid of Value).



GOOD AND BAD

Unlike the category of right/wrong, the categories of good/bad and, for that matter, likes/dislikes, are quite different. As opposite poles in a continuum, they create a kind of gray zone and are prone to various degrees of subjectivity.

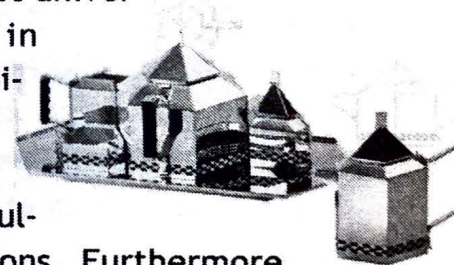
Design qualities of a good/bad nature are normally those where acceptability has been established by either time or history, or

by some other deciding factor such as legal precedence. In all cases, these factors go well beyond the particular beliefs and tastes of an individual person. Although these factors are never quantifiable in the true sense of the word, they are nevertheless acknowledged as standards or codes.

For example, Modernism in design has been visually described in ways that allow for the recognition of its basic design elements. This permits us to discuss and evaluate the various examples of Modernism that exist. But as universally accepted as the description may be, the evaluations are not univer-

sal. Modernism in design typifies uniquely Western values in both spiritual thought and cul-

tural manifestations. Furthermore, this particular style is no more right than Art Nouveau is wrong. Furthermore there is no consensus on which is the finest example of Modernism even if design historians are in general agreement as to what visually constitutes Modernism. Some scholars will claim that it is Mies' Barcelona chair whereas others will state that it is the Eames chair. Regardless of their agreement of a code, the selection of the finest example depends too much on the members of the jury and their personal likes and dislikes.



LIKES AND DISLIKES

Likes and dislikes are much more a reflection of personal values.



person.

Whereas good/bad qualities were somewhat subjective but encompassed broader values of a society, likes and dislikes are normally determined by the views of one

This, in itself, need not be a problem in design criticism. The important thing here is that we must be able to differentiate between good/bad and likes/dislikes. One set of values need not necessarily impinge upon the other. In other words, we should be able to make a statement such as "The Barcelona chair is a good example of Modernist design, but I do not particularly like it".

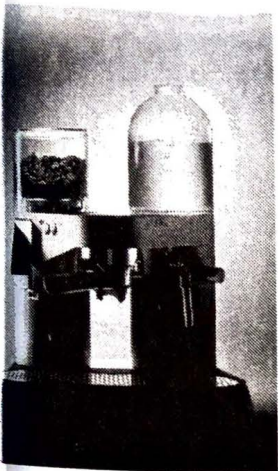
This statement may appear to be contradictory but it is not. The first part refers to the Barcelona chair's conformity to the code of Modernism; the second part expresses a highly personal and subjective point of view. In a similar vein, we could legitimately say that Ron Arad's latest 'One Off' chair in stainless steel is a bad Modernist design, but that we like it. As a critic, you do not necessarily have to like something for it to be good, and viceversa.

Aspects of right and wrong never enter into the evaluation picture and have nothing to do with likes or dislikes. The rightness or wrongness of either the Barcelona chair or Ron Arad's latest stainless-steel chair can only be quantified in terms that conform to the laws of nature or of society. As long as they do not contravene these laws –and these two chairs certainly do not– then they cannot be considered 'wrong'.

Likes and dislikes are totally personal and cannot be explained in terms other than those relating to the particular whims and fancies of the individual. This does not invalidate these judgments, but it does mean that they have to be understood in the context of the other levels of criticism.

Good/bad and likes/dislikes, unlike the amoral laws of nature, are the

mirrors of human evolution; they are not genetically inherited but culturally learned. The British art critic Eric Newton stated this interdependency of liking and learning quite succinctly when he wrote that an individual does not know what he likes, but that he likes what he knows.²



THE PYRAMID OF VALUE'S APPLICATION TO STUDENT PROJECT EVALUATION

Clearly, the principles that underpin the Pyramid of Value apply to the evaluation of student design projects. It is quite obvious that student design projects should conform to the laws of nature and the laws of society. Equally obvious is the fact that the student design projects should adhere to what is considered good or bad, something that occurs in direct proportion to how the design project meets described objectives. As for likes and dislikes, they should never enter the discussion except in a peripheral manner.

REFERENCE

- Adler, Mortimer J., *Six Great Ideas*, New York, Macmillan Publishing, 1981.
Newton, Eric, *The Meaning of Beauty*, Middlesex, UK, Penguin Books, 1967.

² Newton, Eric,
*The Meaning of
Beauty.*