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HIGHLIGHTS

The discovery of a matrix of genuinely radical individuals at the core of the Design Council’s earliest activities was among the most important findings of the project. The breadth of the Council’s social and economic agenda, its state funding, and its conceptualisation as a body that could engage with distinct, and potentially competing constituencies of interest, (industry, education, general public and retail) in the furtherance of its aims, was audacious and apposite in the closing moments of the Second World War.

The promotional, educational, and propagandising tools initially deployed by the body represented best practice at the leading edge, judged by both government and industry standards of the time. Early Council initiatives were genuinely popular, attracting large audiences. Plans were laid for the formation of separate devoted design centres with remits to serve the 4 distribution, 20 display, and 3 domestic goods industries. Had these plans been allowed to reach fruition, a beacon marking government recognition of consumer needs would have been lit, and the electoral consequences of austerity for the Labour administration of 1945 might have been different.

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MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Austerity presented a considerable challenge to the Council’s mission in the immediate post-war years. But the Council survived and has continued to adapt to changing circumstances. Through its DOTT initiative, the tool of design has the capacity to (re)capture the public imagination. Conditions of austerity continue to determine levels of consumption in vast areas of the world. Perceived conditions of austerity and a sense of deprivation drive unsustainable levels of consumption ever upward. If ‘balanced consumption’ is to be achieved in global terms, the experience of bodies like the Council will have something to contribute to the debate.

Since issues surrounding literacy and labelling retain their topicality, information design in particular presents itself as a focus for concerted action, both within Britain and globally. The task of embodying in a visual language that is both accessible and acceptable to the widest possible public is an immense and daunting one. But it is equally one that has almost unparalleled scope to engage, inform and empower practising designers, manufacturers, distributors and consumers of a vast range of goods (and services). To succeed, the process would need to draw upon cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural inputs. Such a move towards enabling stronger identification of product benefits and disbenefits would promote greater transparency in purchasing choices, with potential net gains at individual, local, regional, national and global levels.

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Institution was marked by strain. However, the Council’s practice of evaluating and labelling well-designed products was an important component of the drive towards increasing consumer awareness of quality issues. Its work with retail interests continued unabated until the emergence of retail-specific training agencies and the tendency toward ever-greater conglomeration in the retail sector (with concomitant cost-cutting and remote management structures) diminished demand for the Council’s services.

Defining the practice of design, the scope of design’s ambitions, and the meanings inherent in its outcomes, is as challenging now as it was when the Council was founded. There is a general ‘slipperiness’ in the language used in design discourses that has constituted an obstruction to its absorption into the mainstream – except in its most reduced and impoverished sense of design as fashion. The Design Council’s recent inauguration of its award-winning ‘Red’ unit, and the ‘DOTT’ ten-year programme of regional activities, beginning in the north east in 2007 (see www.designcouncil.org.uk) mark a return to the kinds of highly visible, direct public engagements

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Investigations into the drivers of personal consumption must be prioritised.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY
Towards a Participatory Consumer Democracy: Britain, 1937–1987 was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme (RES-143-25-0037) and ran from April 2003 to September 2005. Lesley Whitworth (University of Brighton) was the principal investigator. She was visiting research fellow at the Business History Unit, London School of Economics, in association with the project. Dr Terry Gourvish, director of the unit, was the project co-applicant.

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HIGHLIGHTS
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