

Towards a Participatory Consumer Democracy: Britain, 1937–1987

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The idea that ‘modern markets’ need ‘confident consumers’ has been at the heart of New Labour policy. But this is not the new discovery it is often presumed to be. The Council of Industrial Design set up in 1944 embodied just such a recognition, and gave primacy to the role of consumers in driving up standards in the sphere of product design.



Domestic iron bearing the Council's label indicating approved design, 1958

Photo: Design Archives, University of Brighton (<http://www.brighton.ac.uk/designarchives>)

KEY FINDINGS

- 1 State sponsorship of the Council marked a radical new departure for government and embodied a vision of an empowered, critical and visually literate post-war population.
- 1 The ‘consumer’, ‘quality of life’ considerations, accessibility of goods, and product standards were (all) clearly identified targets at the very outset.
- 1 The model of the Council was widely emulated around the world.
- 1 ‘Design’ has nevertheless remained a commonly misunderstood category of activity. The constituent features of the ‘well-designed’ product have shifted over time, and the language used to discuss such features has not achieved popular currency.
- 1 Heightened contemporary concerns about the ethical, environmental and ideological parameters of consumption raise the possibility that the social project of design may gain renewed impetus and vigour.
- 1 The design of a globally acceptable system of symbols, providing product information of a kind that is responsive to such concerns, presents exceptional challenges,

but it would constitute a significant contribution to the future management of global and individual resources.

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.

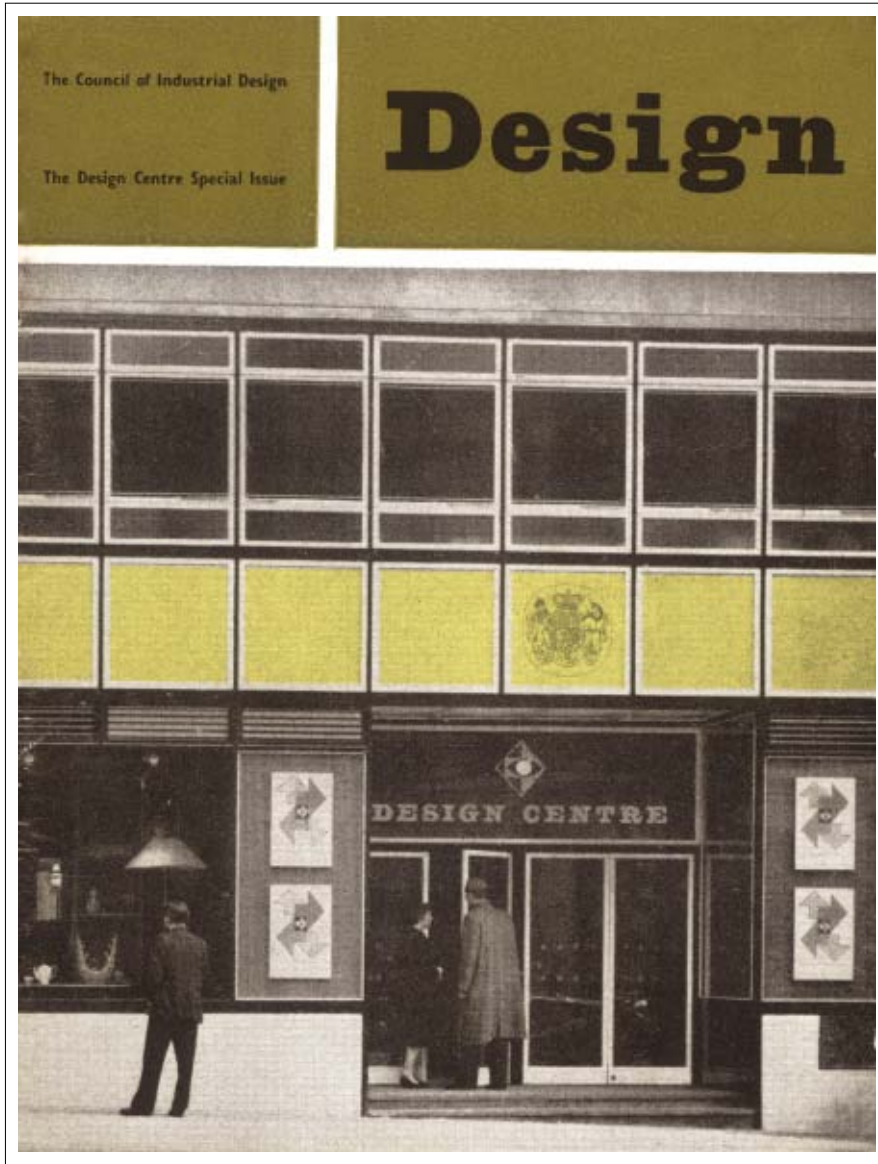
The promotional, educational, and propagandizing tools initially deployed by the body represented best practice at the leading edge, judged by both government and industry standards of the time. Early Council initiatives were genuinely popular, attracting large audiences. Plans were laid for the formation of separate devolved design centres with remits to serve the 1) distribution, 2) 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.

The diversion of Council energies away from direct public engagement towards the administration of large scale, governmentally conceived exhibition projects such as Britain Can Make It (1946) and the Festival of Britain (1951) was unhelpful to the organic development of longer-term projects. The increasingly industrial orientation of its work, especially after reconfiguration as the Design Council in 1972, led to a reduction in the ambit of its educational work. The loss of key individuals at a critical juncture deprived the Council of a more vigorous role in the development of national product standards. Its relationship thereafter with the British Standards

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Cover of special issue of *Design* showing newly opened Design Centre, 1956

Photo: Design Archives, University of Brighton (<http://www.brighton.ac.uk/designarchives>)



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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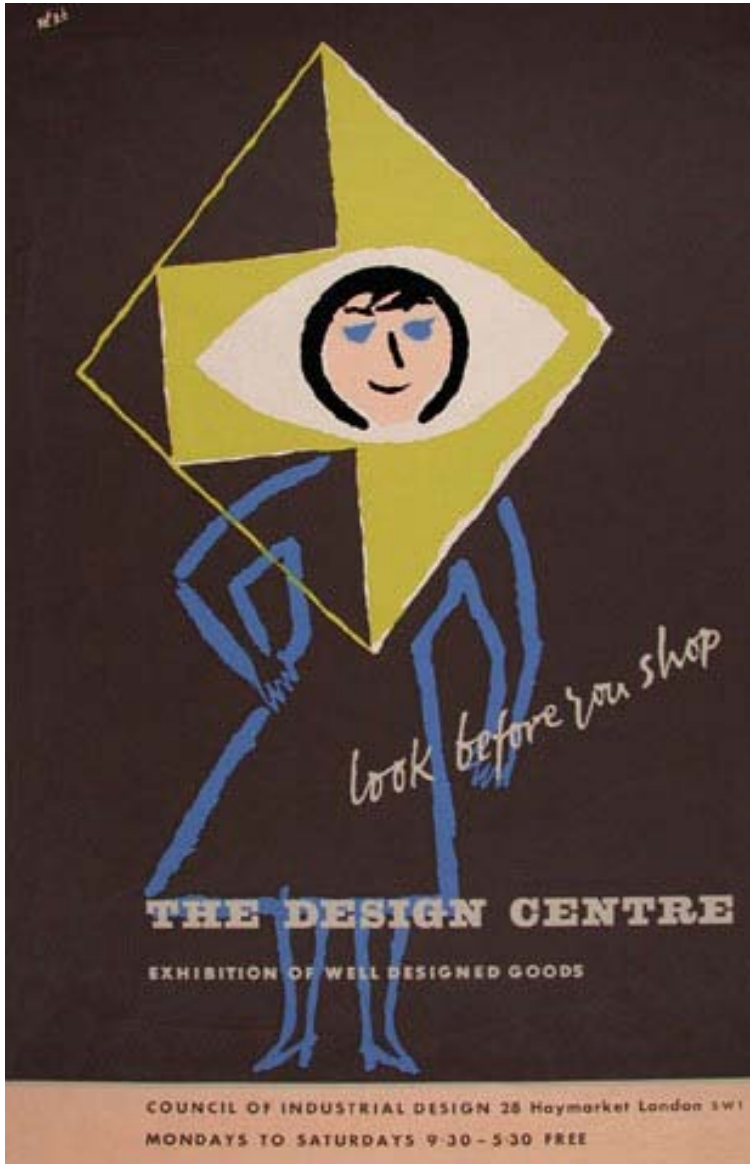
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Poster design by Hans Schleger (Zéro) for the Council of Industrial Design, 1956

Photo: Design Archives, University of Brighton (<http://www.brighton.ac.uk/designarchives>)



that characterised its earliest initiatives. A recent Red project seeking to re-design and improve encounters between the state and its citizens is of special interest in the context of considering ‘consumer democracy’. Such undertakings hold out the hope of stabilising and refining the meanings inherent in design, and engendering a more intuitive and widespread understanding of design’s problem-solving potential.

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 DOT 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 system of symbols the increasingly sophisticated sets of standards to which goods may be manufactured, 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.

The National Consumer Council has recently concluded that whilst a national strategy for consumer education should be evolved, ‘there is a limit to how far consumer education can empower consumers’ (ncc, Coppack, 2005).

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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.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Whitworth L., 'Anticipating Affluence: Skill, Judgement and the Problems of Aesthetic Tutelage', in Black L. and Pemberton H. (eds), *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-War 'Golden Age' Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

Whitworth L., 'Inscribing Design on the Nation: The Creators of the British Council of Industrial Design', *Business and Economic History On-Line*, Vol. 3, 2005 (<http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2005/>

[whitworth.pdf](#)).

Whitworth L., 'The Housewives Committee of the Council of Industrial Design: A Short-lived Experiment in Domestic Reconnoitring', in Darling E. and Whitworth L. (eds), *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870–1940* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- 1 to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- 1 to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- 1 to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- 1 to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- 1 to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- 1 to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

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