

KEN MARK MacBEAN on his DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

To my mind, the chosen design approach should not limit creative imagination. A sound approach can hardly be associated with any thing that does not include lateral thinking, which must make up the critical massing of what is “good design.”

There are those who believe, however, that good design programs will produce, systematically, good design. I feel that too much dependence on programming and realism can curtail the full expression of gifted individuals when designing. Subscription to a pre-determined program may produce, due to its nature as a guide, an element of imitation in the designer’s work, rather than creative expression and originality. Many design programs are subject to being produced generically or habitually. Such standardized thinking is often “overlaid” on every project, causing duplication of approach from one project to another.

If a design approach is simply based on information and analysis informing the design, then this would be an approach comparable to realism in art. And in mentioning realism, I do not confuse it with literalism. Literalism, unlike realism, is inclusive of emotional and visionary solutions, which – in and of themselves – are not quantifiable through scientific observation. Literalism, however, like realism, if practiced without purpose, can produce uninteresting designs.

Moreover, if one becomes too focused on detail in realism and literalism, design can be lost to efficiency constraints, because detail – by its very nature – demands a practical purpose, or there is no reason for it. However, for detail to be engaging, it must contribute to the emotional qualities of a design.

To summarize, lateral thinking is a fulcrum upon which to judge good and bad design decisions. Most would agree there is a vast difference between the practical rendering of a solution and the inspired solution.

This is why I feel design is divided into two complementary, but somewhat contradictory dogmas. One is a proponent of applied realism; the other is a proponent of applied literalism. Where they intersect, is a more difficult pathway, in which few care to tread...simply because it is easier to depend on realism or literalism than it is to fortify oneself to defend creative thoughts and solutions. Original concepts are not necessarily devoid of practicality, but they do embrace abstract and theoretical notions, which applied realists view as pure fiction.

This leads creative intellects and gifted designers in the direction of defending their work by embellishing it in ways to make it plausible to realists and convincing to literalists. It is in this way that creative professionals “sell” their concepts to the more common design camps of applied realists and literalists.

Realism should not stand in the way of creative expression, but should become an important bridge between the designer and the user. Creativeness lies in giving fact to fiction, tangibility to the intangible, and reality to things more felt than seen.

Let us agree that much of the “realistic” design approaches utilized by professionals in the field produce mediocre designs. This is not the fault of design and its principles. But it is due to the inadequacy of the designer, himself (herself).

Their failure to produce captivating work de-validates the principles of applied realism and literalism. Design does not cease to be a major force, however, simply because some individuals never learn to utilize it in the studios of our profession.

Ordinary architecture is principally produced because good design must come the “hard way” – when one is not afraid of creative expression and has the conviction to assert it.

Understanding design may come to some individuals by genetic influence or environment. However, some will struggle to comprehend the principles of design and of life. These two things are difficult to comprehend, but remain the only available instructors for learning to produce viable solutions.

Creativity in design has also been associated with individuality, as no two designers will walk away from an architectural work with the same insights. This is due to the fact that no two individuals have the same comprehension of “what is truth” and everyone differs in discerning talent.

This reality makes it difficult for architects to gain design skills by the study of other designer’s work. Although a source of inspiration, it is impossible to duplicate that designer’s performance and design savvy by a mere study of their work.

Success, as a designer, requires an interest in becoming a visionary intellect, with independent thinking, and knowledge which is assimilated from things felt, heard and seen. Without the designer’s unique individuality, design can never be considered art, but only a physical manifestation of fact. A good design is the consequence of many small

decisions which may result from trial and error, comparisons, relationships, etc., with the final acceptance of one direction over another.

Many designers search despairingly for a formula that will guide them to successful design. They are asked to program certain goals early in their attempts, when in actuality, every project and new design problem demands its own unique approach, which cannot be ascertained, even schematically, early on. Rather, each designer should experience exploratory and serendipitous discovery of their individualized approaches to the issues of the project.

This is totally different from analysis and goal-setting premised on the systematic notion that there is no way to produce good design other than to gather all the possible facts first, and then work with them as you will. What many designers are not made to realize is that their innate, intuitive understanding of the subconscious and conscious world is unlimited, while their resources for analysis are very limited.

As a designer, you may feel gifted, and you can say this because you trust your own feelings, guided by your own version of creative inspiration, examining only your version of truth, your version of beauty, and your version of life. These things together with a holistic knowledge base, are your only sources of good design. In saying this, I am trying to illustrate that design can do no more for the beginning designer than he/she is willing to do for good design.

Ken Mark MacBean
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