

Judy Attfield, ed. *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999. 268 pp., 53 b/w ills., index.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

The British Utility Scheme, which was in effect in Great Britain between 1942 and 1952, has been a subject of debate among design historians. In its largest sense, it has been seen as an example of the modernist impulse to legislate taste and enforce tenets of a concept elusively called “good design.” In a more specific sense, it has been regarded as a case-study of British government intervention into the design process which has raised questions about how government design policy is formulated and whether a state agency should manage a process that, outside of wartime, might better be left to market forces.

The decade during which the Utility Scheme was in force, can be divided into two periods, that of wartime stringency and its aftermath until 1948, when the rationing of materials and the direction of their use for practical ends meant remanding control of the design process to a government body—in this case, the Board of Trade—and the subsequent “freedom of design” period, “when a new range of prescribed designs were introduced while a degree of regulation was still in force” (203). What is controversial about the latter period is the desire of a group of advisors on the Design Panel of the Board of Trade’s Furniture Working Party to maintain some measure of government control over design standards even though postwar conditions no longer justified it.

Utility Assessed originated in a small scholarly seminar that Judy Attfield, the book’s editor, organized in 1994. It consists of sixteen papers that were either presented at the seminar or developed from its call for papers. Most of the authors are British, although several are from the United States and Scandinavia. Not all the papers focus on a reassessment of the British Utility Scheme. In fact, only the papers in the book’s middle section do, while those in the two other sections address questions of defining utility design more broadly and theorizing its ethics. This organization derives from the editor’s conviction that reconsidering the history of the Utility Scheme “will offer a new take on the role of ethics and downgrade the importance of aesthetics in the pursuit of a practice of design appropriate to today’s world” (xv). In order to explore the issues raised by this approach, Judy Attfield adopts a two-fold definition of utility design, one focused on the British Utility Scheme as a case study and the other on a much larger definition of what she calls “useful” design.

The papers in the middle case-study section provide accounts of the Utility Scheme’s impact on a number of different industries, notably transportation, furniture, fashion, textiles, and

pottery. Bringing together these case studies shows first of all how widespread the ambitions of the Board of Trade were as far as establishing guidelines and regulations for design in wartime Britain. Government activities in the various fields of household goods are fairly well known in the design history literature but the government's attempt to produce a private car based on utility principles is less familiar. Jonathan Bell presents a detailed case study of a proposal made in 1942 for a modest post-war private car called the National Motor Vehicle or NMV. The car, designed by engineer Leslie Hounsfield, was to be built according to standardized designs approved by the Ministry of Transport. Its primary virtue was to be its low cost and it was aimed specifically at the middle and lower classes. As Hounsfield noted, it was for the "non-motorist" who used an automobile in an occasional way. What is particularly interesting is Hounsfield's expectation that the NMV, by reducing the cost of driving as well as the distinctions between the classes, would serve an idealistic socialist agenda. Ultimately, the NMV did not attract the support of the British automobile industry or the engineering profession and it did not come to fruition. The reasons for this are well-explained by Bell whose account of the project helps to explore a running theme of this section, the conflict between the wartime government's attempt to align austerity production with an elitist notion of "good taste" and the public's desire for more pluralistic options.

Writing about Utility furniture, a subject widely addressed in earlier literature such as the Geffrye Museum's 1974 catalogue for its exhibition on utility furniture and fashion and Harriet Dover's book, *Home-Front Furniture: British Utility Design, 1941-1951* (Hants: Scholar Press, 1991), Matthew Denney seeks to counter the myth that Utility furniture was the result of a singular design ideology. He argues instead that its design and production resulted from a more complex situation that has been treated too reductively in the design history literature. This literature, states Denny, has concentrated more on style than on the larger picture of how design gets produced. He notes that prior readings of Utility furniture as innovative stem from a period when 'good design' was equated with the tenets of modernism. Instead, Denny asserts that the two furniture trade designers who were responsible for the designs, Edwin Clinch and Herbert Cutler, claimed that their work was an exercise in 'plain common sense,' rather than an attempt to foist a new modern style on the British public. In making this argument, Denny seeks to refute prior claims that Utility furniture originated either in the Arts and Crafts tradition or conversely that it was a later form of Modernism. Suggesting that Utility furniture was neither popular with the British public nor with the furniture trade, Denny critiques the ambitions of the Utility Scheme's design reformers and, like several other authors in this volume, he also seeks

to de-emphasize the great influence attributed in the past to Gordon Russell, who is sometimes seen to have been fully responsible for the Utility forms.

The tension between the British government's design policies and the public's responses to them is continued by Pat Kirkham in an essay which addresses the wartime response of women to the call for austerity in dress and the use of make-up. She notes that women were reluctant to give up items such as "silk stockings, lingerie, lipstick and nail varnish" (145). Recognizing this, the government consequently continued to set aside scarce materials in order to produce corsets, hats, and other items that were deeply embedded in women's culture. However, as Kirkham claims, the government's concession to women's beauty needs had other motives than keeping women satisfied. "The focus on femininity," she writes, "also helped to relieve fears (real and imaginary) about the 'masculinisation' of women entering the male world at an unprecedented rate and in unprecedented ways, and worked towards a successful re-establishment of pre-war gender relations after the cessation of hostilities" (146).

Further tension between the Board of Trade's design policies and women's culture is described by Helen Reynolds in her essay on the Utility Clothing Scheme, whose primary aim was to produce new clothing with as little labor, power, and material as possible. According to Reynolds, government control over the clothing industry during the war, which included an extreme number of regulations, was unique in British history. The Board of Trade's encouragement of mass production countered the pre-war practice whereby much of Britain's clothing was produced by small tailors and dressmakers. Because of the government's mass production policy, the number of small firms was considerably reduced after the war. The Board of Trade also instituted a Couturier Scheme to provide innovative fashion designs but, although the government succeeded in dressing the British public at a low price, the result in the postwar period was the expansion of mass manufactured clothing rather than a legacy of new simple designs. In fact, many manufacturers in the lower end of the fashion market, reverted to the "fussy design" of the prewar period.

In his article on Utility ceramics, Graham McLaren questions why ceramics have generally been neglected in discussions of the Utility Scheme and he suggests two answers: first, the misunderstanding that Gordon Russell, whose influence was on Utility furniture, was the creator of the overall Utility aesthetic and second that the simple forms of Utility ceramics reduced them to a bare functional appearance that has offered researchers "very few aesthetic or critical footholds." Thus, McLaren faced a different situation from furniture historians for whom Utility furniture is already well known. He therefore seeks to document and explain the government's production of Utility ceramics and to explain why their simplicity did not satisfy

postwar consumers who were much more interested in the “bright colours and soft, organic shapes” coming from Italy and Scandinavia.

All the essays but one in the case-study section recount the histories of Utility design in entire industries. The exception is Cynthia Weaver’s discussion of Enid Marx’s textile designs for the Board of Trade’s Furniture Design Advisory Panel. Instead of being hampered by the government’s wartime constraints, Marx turned them to her advantage as she found ways to use the intrinsic properties of the two yarns that were available. This led her to design a range of sample cloths for upholstery fabrics that displayed a wide range of textures. Marx moved from designs for floral patterns, prompted by public opinions, to doing “small-scale geometric patterns.” The positive results she obtained lead Weaver to conclude that Marx’s inclination to move in this direction ultimately pointed the way for postwar upholstery design. Weaver’s assessment of Enid Marx’s design choices addresses more favorably the postwar consequences of Utility design than other authors in this section do. Generally they are skeptical of attempts by officials of the Utility Scheme to impose an idea of “good taste” on the British public, particularly one that derived from notions of simplicity and fitness for purpose. As several authors suggest, advocating the mass adoption of simplicity in design also suited a broad socialist agenda that was based on a responsible use of materials and a more equal distribution of material goods than had been the case in the past.

Whereas the essays in the case-study section form a coherent group that together contribute to a powerful revisionist view of Utility design, those in the opening section address a variety of situations that the editor intended to help define a broader definition of utility. Linda Coleing describes a little-known venture of John Ruskin’s—St. George’s Mill in Laxey, Isle of Man. In her account of the mill, which produced homespun fabrics that were used for dresses and men’s suits, she presents it as an example of ethical design. Ruskin is portrayed as an early environmentalist who hoped to run his enterprises without steam power and who planned to establish a wage scale based on production, although he is shown by the author to have had a condescending attitude towards the working classes.

Other essays in this section include Jonathan Woodham’s on the Council of Industrial Design’s relation to the Co-operative Wholesale Society, Marjo Wiberg’s on how the concept of utility was used in Finnish design discourse in the early part of the twentieth century, David Crowley’s on Polish state management of design in the 1950s, and Susie McKellar’s on the early days of the Consumer’s Union in the United States. While each of the essays is excellent in its own right, together they do not serve to define utility design in its broadest sense as Judy Attfield was striving to do. Whereas the notion of ethics in Linda Coleing’s essay is based on a

case study that represents an aspect of the Arts and Crafts movement with its focus on community, craftsmanship, and natural material, the mission of the Council of Industrial Design, which came into existence after World War II and attempted to carry on the modernist design reform that was identified with the Utility Scheme, was focused more on issues of taste than on working conditions, energy use, or the nature of materials. In his skepticism of the Council's attempt to legislate public taste, Jonathan Woodham is in general accord with the authors writing about the Utility Scheme as he also is with David Crowley who, for different reasons, documents the failure of the Polish state-managed BNEP (Office for the Supervision of Production Aesthetics) to put a sufficient number of designs into production and to actually get products into the homes of Polish consumers. By contrast to both Woodham's and Crowley's essays, Susie McKellar describes the work of an independent American organization, the Consumer's Union, which launched a polemical attack on selected industries in the 1930s for poorly designed products and unacceptable labor conditions related to their manufacture.

In the third and last section on theorizing the ethics of utility design, several of the essays such as Judy Attfield's on the freedom of design phase of the Utility Scheme and a second by her on the dangers of 'good design,' Paddy McGuire's on the Labor government's attitude towards consumption in the 1950s, and Jonathan Woodham's summary essay on design and the state, continue themes and issues raised in the prior case-study section. The only other essay in the final section, Nigel Whiteley's on utility and the ethical tradition, returns to Ruskin as a point of origin for tracing a lineage of ethical practice in British design. Actually Whiteley's definition of the aesthetic underlying Utility as "an Arts and Crafts aesthetic funneled through Modernism," is at odds with Matthew Denney's revisionist refutation of this connection. In this case, I find Denney's argument, based on a close reading of various period documents, to be the more persuasive.

Moving in the other direction from precedents for the Utility Scheme to policies and practices that followed it, Whiteley brings Utility design into relation with Victor Papanek's social design theories of the early 1970s and with Green Design of the late 1980s and 1990s. He notes similarities and differences between Utility design and Green design. A major distinction is the Utility concern for aesthetic ideals which, Whiteley says, are "Platonic and formalist," in contrast to the emphasis by Green designers on simplicity and economy as ecological values.

Whiteley's reference to Green design in the last section circles back to Linda Coleing's characterization of Ruskin as a forerunner of the ecological movement in the book's opening essay. But in doing so, it enfolds the case studies of the Utility Scheme in a moral narrative that to some extent undermines their acute revisionism. What is most powerful in these studies is

the depth of scholarship on the Utility Scheme that seeks to remedy Matthew Denney's assertion that

Much of the literature which considers Utility furniture in more detail characterises it in an over-simplified manner... (113).

In fact, the assemblage of case studies is one of the few instances in design history scholarship where we see a body of work on a particular topic that demonstrates the complexities of how design gets produced. There is also a strong continuity between essays in this section and some from the prior and subsequent essays that address issues of British government design intervention with comparable complexity. These include the work of Jonathan Woodham, Judy Attfield, and Paddy McGuire.

As opposed to a history of ethical design, the narrative line in *Utility Reassessed* that strikes this reviewer as strongest is that which explores the reasons for and consequences of state involvement in British design, beginning with the DIA and continuing up to the present. Jonathan Woodham, for example, has been progressively mining the Design Council archives at Brighton University for a few years now and his findings, presented in this volume, dovetail nicely with the issues of the Utility period.

By contrast, Judy Attfield's ambition to produce a definition of utility design that links a number of disparate situations together is problematic. The ethical issues would more persuasively emerge from the accretion of solid scholarship that forms a solid narrative flow than from an attempt to impose external principles on an aggregate of different studies.

However, the narrative problems in this volume are more than countered by the uniformly high level of scholarship. The essays are mature in their accounts of the sociopolitical contexts in which design policies and practices are formulated and go a long way towards countering any lingering notions that style is still a central concern for design historians.

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