



Arguing that aesthetics in design are more important than it is fashionable to admit, Virginia Postrel's voice has not yet carried as far as the UK. But given the waves she is making Stateside with her book *The Substance of Style*, it won't be long before it does.

Camille Paglia described her as one of the smartest women in America. In an article in *Vanity Fair* about young female libertarians (or 'right wing Charlie's Angels', as one critic put it) Sam Tanenhaus wrote that Postrel is 'a master DJ who sequences the latest riffs from the hard sciences, the social sciences, business, and technology, to name only a few sources'.

Postrel is certainly in a position to influence. Former editor of *Reason* magazine, she now writes the economic scene column for *The New York Times*, while her articles have also appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

In her new book, *The Substance of Style*, Postrel's position on design has set the creative cliques in New York chattering. Postrel, who lives in Texas, champions style and aesthetics in design, arguing that we live in an age where consumers enjoy more choice and are spoilt for quality and functionality in our products and services, Postrel posits that the way something looks and feels is increasingly important, and therefore something business can no longer afford to ignore.

*The Substance of Style* is yet to be released in the UK but copies of the US edition can be ordered from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

*Henrietta Thompson*

When James Dyson resigned from the board of the Design Museum in London last year, he created what the pedagogy experts call a 'teachable moment'. If one purpose of the Design Museum is to get people thinking about design – what it is, and why it matters – then the recent brouhaha has done more than any single exhibit could to accomplish that goal.

The museum's specific mix and mission are primarily questions of organisational governance, but for those of us on the outside, the controversy presents a well-timed opportunity to consider the value of design. Designers like to say their profession solves problems, but so does every occupation, from plumbing to accounting. The real question is: what kind of problems do designers solve? Where does the economic and cultural value of design come from?

Unfortunately, much of the recent discussion has been little more than the exchange of clichés and false dichotomies. Defining design has been treated as a series of all-or-nothing choices: form or function, substance or style, masculine or feminine, classic or fashionable, engineers or stylists, invention or hype, ugly but efficient or beautiful but dysfunctional, dull but important or popular but frivolous.

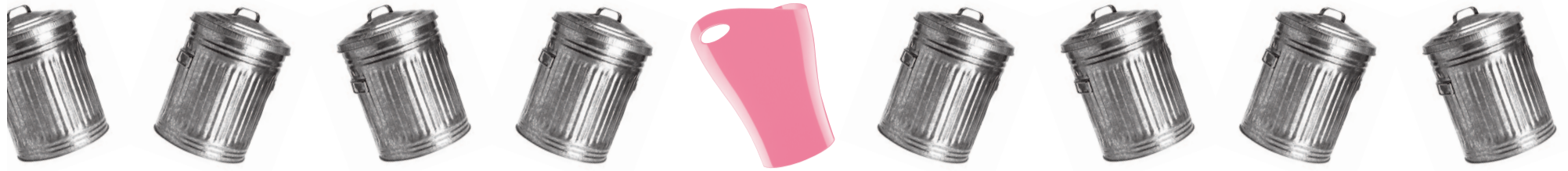
Much of the debate seems fuelled by anxiety over legitimacy and prestige. Dyson fears that Cool Britannia demeans functional innovation and the industrial processes that produce and apply it. He worries that the country is turning its back on a great heritage of invention and product-oriented entrepreneurship. He doesn't want the cool kids treating industrial innovators as boring social outcasts.

Yet he can be every bit as snobbish and dismissive as the worst fashionista, scorning any concern with how products look and feel. 'If someone says to me that my product is pig-ugly but they will buy it, that is fine with me,' he says. 'At no point in our engineering process do we think, how can the product look good? That just evolves.' Style is not even an afterthought, or so he maintains, because it's just not that

# THE FUNCTION OF FASHION

Business innovators are increasingly finding that the aesthetic value of a product is as important as its cost and performance. American author **Virginia Postrel** argues that the look and feel of objects are now intrinsic elements of all our lives





important. 'You can easily fall out of love with a styled object that underperforms,' he says, 'but you come to love an unstyled object that works well.'

Buried in Dyson's statement is perhaps a critical assumption: that people will buy the pig-ugly product. But what if they have a choice between it and an equally functional, attractively styled product? Or between it and an only slightly less functional but beautiful alternative? In today's intensely competitive business environment, these are not theoretical questions.

Styling and performance can – and these days more often than not do – coexist. Karim Rashid's famous Garbino dustbin is a triumph of function, for instance. It can be manufactured efficiently, it has built-in handles, and it lacks the seams around the bottom that can trap grime. But people have bought millions of Garbinos because the dustbin's curves are beautiful and it comes in lots of pretty colours. Its function is not just to hold trash – a cardboard box or leftover grocery bag can do that – but to give pleasure.

Nor, when we do have to make trade-offs, is more performance always preferable to improved looks. Consider computers. They're so capable these days that most users simply don't need the absolutely fastest chip. To people who don't plan to tax their machine's processing speed, a beautiful case may be worth more than cutting-edge technology. At a given price, adding style may well be more valuable than adding power.

Design in fact creates three sources of value: function, of course, but also pleasure and meaning. Pleasure (including the pleasure of novelty that drives fashion) is ultimately based in our biology, while meaning arises from experience and culture. The styles we choose, consciously or unconsciously, associate us with some groups and dissociate us from others. Style allows us to say something about who we are by simultaneously standing out and fitting in.

Pleasure and meaning are the aesthetic values of design, the substance of style. Design not only helps us get things done. It lets us say 'I like that' and 'I'm like that'. Design's aesthetic values appeal to the universal human drive for what art theorist and anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake calls 'making special' – behaviour that is 'sensorily and emotionally gratifying and more than strictly necessary'.

Having spent a century or more focused primarily on other goals – solving manufacturing problems, lowering costs, making goods and services widely available, increasing convenience, saving energy – business innovators are increasingly finding that aesthetics are an essential competitive tool. The touchstone company of our new age of aesthetics is not a manufacturer but a service company: Starbucks. The chain's enormous economic value emerges

from its strategy of providing not just gourmet coffee but a multisensory aesthetic experience that, in turn, encourages customers to create a social space. Starbucks provides the pleasure, while its customers provide the meaning.

The shift toward aesthetic value emphatically does not mean that function is no longer important but, rather, that function has become so reliably good in so many areas that we can now take quality, traditionally defined, for granted. Today's aesthetic emphasis is itself made possible by the extraordinary success of functional innovations over the past few decades: manufacturing quality improvements, new materials, more efficient distribution systems, cheap and ubiquitous information technology – even Starbucks depends on, among other innovations, the improved durability of upholstery fabrics. Anyone who shuns engineering excellence in favour of surface flash is missing half the story.

These advances have simultaneously brought many products to the same functional level, reduced the cost of aesthetic improvements, and made possible more variety. By putting function on a computer chip, for example, the microprocessor revolution has separated form and function in many products. 'Get the function right and the form follows naturally,' says Sir Terence Conran. But that's simply not true of an MP3 player, a cell phone, or a videogame console. Their function is embedded in chips and software. Any number of forms, suited to different tastes and personalities, can surround them.

Nor is this principle limited to the world of microprocessors. Table settings, toilet bowl brush caddies, desk lamps, cabinet knobs, and running shoes are all manufactured objects. But within some very general design parameters, they can take many forms. The distinct value of a particular lamp, knob, or shoe lies in the pleasure and meaning it provides – the design values that engineers too often denigrate.

'We are by nature – by deep, biological nature – visual, tactile creatures,' says David Brown, the former president of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, and a long-time observer of the design world. That is a quintessential turn-of-our-century statement, a simultaneous affirmation of biological humanity and aesthetic power. Our sensory side is as valid a part of our nature as the capacity to speak or reason, and it is essential to both. Artefacts do not need some other justification for pleasing our visual, tactile, emotional natures.

*Virginia Postrel is the author of The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness, published by HarperCollins. Her website is at [www.dynamist.com](http://www.dynamist.com)*

