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December 13, 2011

UNIFORMLY UNIQUE

Every city has at least one of these special stores. They're not very big, usually with white walls, wood or concrete floors, minimalist shelving displays, and small cards that list prices (no gummy pricetag stickers). They don't just sell bottle openers; they sell the best brass bottle openers handmade in Japan. They don't just sell pens, they sell pens from a company who has been in business for 150 years. You won't find any plastic children's toys, these places deal strictly in wood blocks. Entering one of these stores (which I will call a "design shop") feels like stepping into a home where every aspect (every object) is cohesively in "good taste". To be amongst this perfect collection of goods is a rare treat, and one might hope to leave with a memento of the experience, hope to bring some element of this modern, unique, world into their own. At each of these design shops around the world, customers are walking out with purchases that they are convinced are unusual, rare, and better-than-the-rest, and they are (consciously or not) becoming more and more common with their fellow "tasteful" counterparts. "The belief that unusual or unique possessions bestow individuality upon their owners is an illusion that has been indulged in for a long time" despite the fact that most of these possessions are manufactured in large quantities (Forty 87). The retail experience of "design shops" emphasize the value of seemingly unique and designed objects while offering a means for belonging to a group of people that is increasingly uniform.

Design shops are most commonly found in major cities, usually in neighborhoods in

close proximity to some sort of cultural production (artist studios, design/architecture firms, museums, academic institutions). As Pierre Bourdieu has argued that “a work of art has meaning or interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded”, design shops require customers who are trained to look at functional objects in a aestheticized manner (Bourdieu 2). The space of the store acts as a sort of package or frame for the goods on display, surrounding visitors with a consistent message, and providing a concrete location for goods that span a range of origins and functions (More 19). By manipulating the space of the store or the arrangement of goods, the shopkeeper can draw out connections between disparate objects and emphasize the “hand-selected” quality of the products. Usually these shops are owned by an individual who serves as an artistic director of the store’s aesthetic and product offerings. These individuals are often present, offering their judgment to customers who are looking to them to confirm what is truly a “good” purchase. In this way the store is a social space where the interactions with the shopkeeper and other customers allows are each to “assess one’s own status as well as calibrate one’s aspiration” (Hines 43). In particular, the information provided by the shopkeeper (such as stories about an object’s production) often serves to mark the product’s authenticity, supporting and easing the customer’s discovery of an appealing object. Yet often the appearance of a unique selection of goods has more to do with the presentation of the goods rather than the goods themselves: to look specifically at two design shops - OK in Los Angeles and Canoe in Portland - these shops share many of the same products and brands (and both have charismatic, personable, and opinionated proprietors). Another important aspect of product offerings of these stores is that the goods are primarily domestic. Offering the means to alter lifestyle in the personal space of the

home is powerful because “the home is both a factory of private illusions and a catalogue of ready-made taste, values, and ideas” (Forty 119). Customers are drawn to these kind of domestic objects because they have the power to differentiate the most inner, personal space of their lives.

As for the people who enter these shops (leaving with goods or not), their shopping behavior displays a “willingness and desire to imagine their lives differently” (Hines 65). The holistic experience of the space and contents of these shops ease the customer’s ability to picture this more ideal life. Because the selection of goods is not just restricted to one category, there is no corner of everyday life that the retail experience does not reach (from toenail scrubbing brushes to wastepaper baskets to wedding rings to mushroom hunting knives). The appearance of a “complete” and consistent lifestyle image appeals to customers, many of whom may feel some sense of insecurity about the sophistication of their own lifestyle image. The spectrum of goods specifically targets customer’s insecurities about “not progressing enough” (Hines 89); as if the acquisition of belongings is about rising up the scale towards more and more flawlessly designed objects (and by default, lifestyle). Essentially these stores offer “upgrades” to many simple and functional objects that most people already own - for instance, someone might have a pasta strainer from their college days, but he or she will discard that strainer after buying the Sori Yanagi (very gorgeous) strainer. In this way, the person who buys the “better” strainer is making a distinction between what is good and bad (visually, functionally), and that distinction actually reflects back and distinguishes him or herself as part of the group that idealizes modern Japanese design and looks down on kitchenware from Target. In short, “taste classifies, and classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu 10), allowing consumers to mark themselves as different (better?)

than everyone else while also signifying membership to a larger group of different/better people. The hallowed space of the shop and its selection of goods becomes the pattern for which customers can register and confirm that their “own” taste aligns well enough with the other members of this elite group.

Thomas Hines points out that shopping can be seen under two different lights, as a way to “exercise freedom of choice and self-definition, or as compulsive compensation for a meaningless life” (Hines 89). To look at the bright side, design shops emphasize the act of choosing the “right” one, because the objects for sale are meant to be kept, rather than disposable. The connection between the buyer and the object is stronger because the object was chosen “carefully” out a wide variety, rather than bought without consideration, and the effects of this connection could certainly help our throw-away culture. These objects also come to physically represent the values of their owners: differentiation allows customers to choose which values they want to express (Forty 62). It also shows how an object’s visual appeal has the power to create visions of a better life, lives that are better not only visually but behaviorally. These objects can help people define themselves in more positive ways. It is also redeeming that many of the goods offered at design shops are produced using traditional or ethical methods, emphasizing honesty of materials and the legacy of certain cultures’ heritage.

But to call any of the goods sold in design shops “better” points out how taste is used to legitimize social difference. These objects become subtle markers of class, even though most of them do not have the typical visual trappings of luxury goods. Those who shop at design shops have taken an “elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world”, in that the purchases are not really rooted in necessity but rather the aesthetic form. They are interested in the mode of representation (elegant, brass, Japanese)

rather than what is represented (bottle opener). This distinction is easily veiled in the design shop because the objects are primarily “functional”: it doesn’t sound frivolous to buy a wastepaper basket, but if you already have one and you want a new one that is more minimal, it might be a bit frivolous (Bourdieu 14).

Another illusion in the design shops is that of individuality. The glorifying presentation of these objects, and the rarified experience of visiting the store obscure the truth about the pedigree of these objects: many of which are still produced in factory conditions, in very large quantities, and in very modern times. Because of the concrete nature of these stores (and their small size), it is tempting as a visitor to think that if you don’t purchase the special thing here and now, you might never see it again (though you’ll probably find it online). And it is just as tempting to think you’ll be more of an individual once you own the special thing (though you’ll simply just belong the group of thousands of “individuals”). Nostalgia also makes some of these objects more appealing, even if it is nostalgia for something that is outside of the viewer’s experience. It is hard to see how a Los Angeles resident in 2011 might be nostalgic about bent-wood baskets from the backwoods of Vermont, yet the atmosphere of authenticity found in the design shop can take a person there. The illusion of scarcity - which is the hallmark of “fashion” - hides a world of industrial abundance, which is only revealed when it becomes apparent how similar the offerings are at each of these shops (Hines 89). And while the store functions as a local enterprise, seeing the same exotic or foreign objects in each and every design shop is some ways disconnects the objects from their origin completely.

While from one perspective it is unfortunate that these design shops are strikingly uniform, their consistency serves the customer who can more easily recognize the “kind” of taste of the store, and serves the shopkeeper by bolstering the “good taste” and

authenticity of their selection of goods (since a Canoe customer might remark, “Oh, they sell those at OK, too”). Yet as this specific set of aesthetic preferences becomes more and more solidified, the need for these individual stores decreases. It is not hard to imagine how we might become more comfortable with purchasing these goods online when it is more apparent that the objects are not as scarce as we are made to believe. Some shops are combating this by focusing their attention on locally-made goods. In this way, the perception that “I might not find this object anywhere else” begins to ring true, and the shop becomes invested in local production and community, which appeals to customers who seek to make “responsible” purchases. As more geographically and culturally specific goods are presented in design shops, there is hope that true diversity and material scarcity might become more apparent and appreciated by those who already appreciate “good design”.

Works Cited

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