Not For Trade – The Discourse of Design in British Industry

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Abstract
In replying to criticism of the British contribution to the Paris International Exhibition of 1937 one of the leading members of the Council For Art and Industry (a precursor of the British Design Council), head of a leading chain of Department stores and later a Government Minister claimed that the critics had misunderstood the purpose of the British contribution – it was ‘not for trade – that would be quite the wrong idea”. Characteristic of a sector of the British haute bourgeoisie the author revealed the deep distrust of commerce (or, even worse ‘trade’) which formed part of the collective self-identity of this social grouping. In its own right that would be of historical or sociological interest only but it deeply affected both the practice and the expectation, as well as the subsequent historiography, of British design. Viewed more as a branch of art than industry this version of British design, and many aspects of British design education, would celebrate the individualist ethos, the individual designer and the individual, rather than ‘industrial’ product. Dominant in British design reform circles, and in the majority of state-sponsored initiatives, this ideology would be a recipoe for constant conflict with industrial and commercial organisations and their representatives and, frequently, ensure a marginalisation of the design function within production. This paper, drawing on a wide range of unpublished sources, will examine these tensions and their impact upon British design and British industry.

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Locating design practice and ideology in British industry is an historically fraught exercise. Much of the historiography of British design has been both highly partisan, premised on advocacy of ‘good design’, and highly amateurish, re-cycling myths or explicitly propagandist offerings without historical questioning. Equally much of the history of British design, in its post First World manifestations, at least has been coloured both by the location of many leading British designers as not only outside industry but anti-industrial in many of their cultural assumptions, itself often reflective of the quasi-ruralist pretensions of the class from which they sprang or to which they attempted to pander, and by the concerns of many leading British designers, and design organisations, to raise the status (and remuneration) of designers. In the British context, at least until relatively recently when some of the ideological imperatives were inverted, that meant distancing the practice (and the person) from overtly commercial connotations (as in the assumed differences between commercial artists and ‘real’ artists – something of a problem when dealing with industrial and business imperatives. Whilst genteel forays into the upper echelons of British retailing might be considered acceptable, or even desirable in some aspects of British Arts and Crafts production, direct association with industry was largely to be avoided other than on a directive or consultancy basis. At the same time, the peculiar, historically determined, structure of much of British industry, often dominated by small-scale, under-capitalised producers catering for a plethora of minuscule,
highly specialised markets, frequently dominated by imperial preferences (in all senses of the term) made constructive dialogue at best difficult and at worst impossible. The fraught, antagonistic relationships between manufacturers’ organisations and designers’ organisations would be deeply corrosive of any systematic design strategy, let alone ethic or aesthetic, being adopted. To that extent if there was a discourse of design, it was a shouting match and if the world had been left to the provenance of (most) British designers of the period it would have been a distinctly non (if not anti) industrial world populated by the artefacts and aspirations of a particular echelon of British society.

If that were not a difficult enough set of relationships for the aspiring designer, individually or collectively, to navigate it would be further complicated by the role of Britain in Geo-political as well as economic terms. For much of the period under review Britain’s role (real, imagined or aspirational) as an historic world and imperial power, increasingly beset by the collapse of the twin planks of its nineteenth century dominance territory and manufacturing, would dominate British government considerations of the image(s) of Britain it wished to construct and maintain overseas and within that dense cultural, political and ideological matrix British design and British products would be heavily influenced and accented by government sponsorship and imperatives.

That is to say that constructing a history of design cannot be simply a history of designers or of individual designs or artefacts, however illuminating such might be, but is meaningful only in terms of the totality of experiences and factors impacting upon the practice and discourse at differing moments. This paper seeks to look, therefore, at some of the tensions which have been historically significant in shaping both the realities of the location of British design and perceptions of those realities.

The title of the paper is taken from a remark made by Thomas Barlow, head of a leading textile company (including amongst its operations Helios), who as a member of the Council of Art and Industry, a government sponsored body and precursor of the Design Council (of which Barlow would be the first chairman), observed of a critical report on the British contribution to the 1937 Paris International Exhibition that

‘exhibitions are not for trade, that is quite the wrong objective. The proper function is to show English life at its best and what we stand for. Manufacturers must be educated to the honour of being allowed to take part in such a display, and we should make a clean cut of all catalogues, sales and such commercial matters.’ (1)

For someone who had taken a leading role in producing a official report, Design And The Designer In Industry (published by the Council of Art and Industry as an official Government Report in 1937 which inter alia stressed ‘Design has commercial value….All the people-including the buyer who holds a key position should be educated to understand and value good design’ (2)

This might seem an odd stance. Nor was it that Barlow was entirely otherworldly. Though springing from a privileged background (his father had been Queen Victoria’s physician and his brother was one-time Secretary to the then British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald) Barlow was also aware of commercial realities. Something of a state aparatchik as well as a businessman and financier, he also served as the Head of the Lancashire Industrial Development Council and President of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, positions which ensured he was well aware of the grim realities of the struggle for commercial survival, and the desperate necessity of regaining export competitiveness, in one of the more economically embattled regions of 1930s Britain. Here Barlow’s commercial instincts were over-ridden by his cultural conditioning. Much of the recent work on British national identity such as Colley’s Brittons, Cannadine’s McKibbin’s Classes And Cultures and Coll’s Identity Of England has demonstrated both the pre (and sometimes anti) industrial constituents of that collective persona and its stress on relatively exclusive cultural forms and imagery. (3)
Nor was such historical schizophrenia confined to the self-consciously educated (at Marlborough a leading English public school and Trinity, an exclusive Cambridge college) and cultured (a collector of fine ceramics and patron/member of the Arts Council) individuals of whom Barlow was a paradigm. When the Federation of British Industries (the then major commercial arm of British employers’ associations and large-scale companies) complained to the government they were told by the responsible Minister that

‘The exhibit was designed for the cultured and it would not be appreciated by the mass of ordinary people, though it was to be hoped and expected that many of the high quality articles shown in the Pavilion which would not interest the average person today would be appreciated and purchased by him in a few years’ time’. (4)

In fact the federation was well aware of the limited commercial possibilities afforded. Most manufacturers exhibiting were unable to quote prices for items displayed, given the complexity and volatility of French import tariffs, and when it was suggested that the Exhibition might be renewed it was explicitly for political purposes, that the French ‘should not be offended’ – this was, after all the moment when symbolically the Soviet and National Socialist regimes confronted each other and the embattled Spanish Republic pressed ahead with its own displays including Guernica. The Federation, which had a sub-committee dedicated to promoting and enhancing what it termed “Industrial Art”, as it frequently had done before and would do again, recognised that such political considerations would have to be accepted and the best that might be hoped for was an improvement in the layout, content and functioning of the British Pavilion. (5)

Consideration of the internal disputes over a, from the British perspective, relatively unimportant Exhibition might seem to be, at the very least, overstretching the historical case. However, the historical moment is significant in two, related ways. In the first instance this was the first major international event in which a state-endorsed body claiming to represent the interests of designers (however elliptical or tangential that representation might have been) had a major and determining role in selecting, and thereby partially defining British contemporary design in an overtly national context. The tensions between such bodies, which tended to be self-selected and self-referential in constitution, claiming to promote design interests and manufacturers claiming to represent, or at least deal with, design and market realities would become deeply entrenched and deeply destructive of almost all government initiatives in the field. Secondly the ‘historical schizophrenia’ of Barlow and his associates would be deeply characteristic of a dualism in national, as well as sectional, policy with respect to design promotion, particularly, but not exclusively, overseas promotions. That dualism, the assumed function of design as both commercial facilitator/enhancer and cultural signifier would continue to dog national definitions of the role of design. At its most obvious it could lead to bitter disputes between rival government departments or national organisations as to which of these functions took precedence. The conflict was rarely as clearly expressed as in an exchange between the British Council (charged by the government with promoting British cultural activities overseas) and the Council of Industrial Design (later Design Council, charged with promoting British exports through improving design standards)

‘If an exhibition was devoted to objects selected primarily for the high quality of their design it introduced an aesthetic element and it was important that selection should be by a panel of experts whose judgement would be accepted by industry and by overseas spectators as authoritative. The British Council possessed machinery for affecting this sort of selection.’ (6)

The authentic de haute en bas tenor of such exchanges also deeply influenced much of the response of British industry to centralised, “improving” initiatives. Manufacturers deeply concerned with commercial viability in an increasingly competitive international (and national) arena were frequently dismissive and antagonistic. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders for example flatly refused to allow the Council of Industrial Design to determine which members could exhibit at the Festival of Britain whilst a representative of the ceramics industry captured the deep distrust felt by many manufacturers after a visit to Stoke by Misha black on behalf of the Council proclaiming that they were “appalled by ‘the ideas of theorists in London. (7)
Equally the assumed division between commerce and culture, between selling goods and selling ways of life or ideologies, would run through almost all the attempts to promote British goods abroad. As a still major power, albeit a signally declining one, with historically inherited assumptions about global policing, militarily over-committed and economically under-performing, the British government, and its representatives, was frequently caught in a dilemma. Much of the overseas display and promotion within which it felt obliged, for political reasons, to engage was clearly not commercially attractive. Even at perceived major events, which clearly could be thought of as having potential for commercial promotion, however the dualism ran deep. Frequently the division was between cultural and trade fairs. Clearly the latter were important vehicles for product promotion and sales and numerous industries and companies exhibited nationally and internationally at both general and specialist trade fairs (frequently with the kind of products vitriically disparaged by the design conscious aficionados of cultural events). In itself that presented few problems, particularly as such occasions made no discernible demands on the public purse. The problems arose when potential signifiers over-lapped and competed. Thus a member of the Council of Industrial Design, at a moment when the British economy was in tatters, particularly with respect to its balance of payments, could believe that the first major post-war exhibition should avoid the taint of commercial exploitation. That should be left to the (largely trade-financed) British industries Fair which was the particular bete noir of British design reformers and commentators.

'I have been very much against saying too much about the trade, and particularly the overseas trade possibilities of the “Britain Can Make It” exhibition. I feel that the Exhibition has been a cultural one for the purposes of educating ourselves, not for the purpose of effecting sales. That buyers have in fact come is incidental and not the primary motive...The British Industries fair is the “selling” Fair, our exhibition should not be.' (8)

No facilities for prospective buyers had been considered necessary in the planning of the exhibition. The author of the letter was the managing director of Warners, the high-class wallpaper and soft-furnishings, arts and crafts derivative, manufacturer and retailer.

Such attitudes were not confined to major national or international promotions. After a Trade fair in Barcelona in the 1960s, where it seemed most British products could not be priced in local currency, officials congratulated themselves that although commercial enquiries “were not numerous, the display had undoubted prestige value”. The most popular element was reported to have been a “Scottish Tavern”, offering some fifty varieties of whisky, and it was hoped that there would be “opportunities for high class luxury goods in the Spanish market.” (9) The same story could be told elsewhere. In Stockholm, an exhibition intended to show “Britain’s latest advances in capital equipment, featured “traditionally costumed British figures” and military pipe bands. (10) In Florence it was the “customary and characteristic elements which are thoroughly appreciated by the Italian public” – pubs, buses, policemen and ‘most important of all the military and pipe bands. All of which were to support displays fine China, woollen goods, British books and paintings from Sothebys, henry Moore sculpture and the achievements of the UK Atomic Energy Authority the London auction house. (11) In Lyons it was again pubs and military bands, beefeaters and bagpipers and a Conan Doyle display which supported the alleged achievements of British industry and British design. (12) The disjunction between intention and achievement could lead to some quite bizarre results. One of the leading figures in the federation of British Industry complained bitterly after a visit to Stockholm of the manifest absurdity of displaying the new mini —a triumph of innovative contemporary engineering design for the British motor industry (and one much trumpeted both at the time and by later historians of design), if not of cost accounting for its manufacturers – in a mock Tudor edifice which most visitors assumed to be a pub and spent most of their time within vainly seeking alcoholic beverages. (13) Perhaps unsurprisingly a government-sponsored review of such promotion concluded that “No important long term [beneficial sales] effects are discernible”, though it rejected the criticism of “too many Beefeaters and London buses” as marginal. (14)
It was not only in the self-consciously historically referential, and politically charged, sphere of national projection that a particularly constructed version of “British” impacted. The quasi-historical, stylistically dichotomous, visual language of British trade and international exhibitions, the celebration of an imagined past in preference to a fraught present, could not have been sustained without it being deeply embedded in British industry as well as in British politics. Two, frequently inter-related, structural characteristics of that industrial matrix inclined British manufacturers’ weltanshun in the same direction, however critical they might be of individual aspects of the “official” projection or of the state’s agents charged with implementing it and however suspicious many would necessarily be of the overtly anti-commercial rhetoric of many of the aparatchiks who held positions of power and influence. Fundamentally manufacturers, outside a few individual (usually large-scale) companies were deeply suspicious of both the aesthetic formulations favoured by would-be British design reformers and of their, at best, apparent ignorance of industrial and commercial imperatives. Indeed the avowed aim of “improving the status” or “professionalising” (in the British sense of establishing a self-regulating, incorporated, qualifying body, ideally, but not necessarily, legally recognised) could run counter to concerns over an increasingly uncompetitive unit cost structure.

For many manufacturers this version of design bore little resemblance to their perceived selling strategies or customer requirements. As indicated earlier, most of British manufacturing industry, was characterised by a large number of highly specialised producers catering for relatively minuscule, highly specialised markets. In a sense, the longevity of much of British industry ensured that it was trading as much on its pre-existing intellectual capital as on its pre-existing financial capital. In the mid 1960s, for example, whilst most of Britain’s European competitors were achieving high rates of growth catering for the essentially dynamic, expanding, culturally sophisticated, relatively culturally homogeneous and newly integrated markets of the European Common Market (and the British sponsored rival, the European Free Trade Association, largely Scandinavian based, paled into insignificance in demographic and industrial terms) Britain’s fourth largest market was provided by South Africa. Whatever else might have been said of South Africa in the 1960s being sophisticated, forward looking or modern were not attributes usually attributed. Moreover some 30% of those exports were engineering products, “individual rather than mass-produced”. (15) Nor was it only ex-Empire markets which inclined manufacturers towards pre-existing designs in their marketing which, from a simplistic commercial viewpoint had the added benefit of not incurring new overheads, royalties or other costs for what would now be termed intellectual property, let alone face the costs of re-tooling or re-jigging production or re-training an increasingly under-educated labour force. In an article headed “The Challenge Of Design” a representative of the pottery industry claimed that the proponents of modern design were not merely ignorant of commercial imperatives but positively erroneous in their advocacy:

“The export markets where we have been so notably successful seem to have an insatiable appetite for traditional patterns and shapes. It would seem that the Americans prefer, certainly with regard to pottery, to think of England as a charming old-fashioned rustic country… the pottery industry would go bankrupt if it produced only the type of design that might receive the approval of the Council of industrial design…the great difficulty with modern design is that you are involved in quite rapid fashion cycles… a modern shape is likely to become dated in five or six years. A traditional shape on the other hand may last almost indefinitely…the manufacturer is in business for profit and if he can be successful under the status quo sees no need to change things.” (16)

Closely related to this perception was the historical, and capital, structure of many British commercial enterprises. Outside capital and technological sectors like chemicals, plastics and the defence industries, and it should be recalled that the British aircraft industry – which often seemed to specialise in the production of prototypes which never made it to the production stage – absorbed around 30% of all British research and development
expenditure for much of the post war period, British industry was massively under-capitalised and technologically deficient. Combined with market specialisation this often meant that production was almost craft-based. As the Financial Times reported
Of the crucial metal working industries of the Midlands, the centre of the motor vehicle and engineering industries

“Fabricating metal is work that is susceptible to anything from the most highly skilled craft methods to the most advanced mass-production techniques… in the Midlands… craft techniques applied to individual orders is overwhelmingly the norm… Making ‘one offs’ has become a deeply ingrained habit among Midland engineers.” (17)

In cotton textiles it was claimed “Lancashire had tried to meet every customers’ requirements” with the result that standardisation was virtually non-existent and constant, expensive re-setting of equipment to produce short runs the norm. (18) In pottery ‘most units have usually been too small to afford the services of good designers”. (19)

In strict economic terms, therefore, externally produced designs, bought in from professional design consultants on what was (largely erroneously) taken to be the American model of industrial design were, with the exception of individually branded high-class, non-price sensitive items, not a commercially viable option – the arithmetic of production costs on low production runs rendered them too expensive. Most individual companies, therefore, relied on in-house designs, produced from stock by staff trained (perhaps a rather exaggerated term for the educational activities and attitudes of most British companies) in house and promoted “off the tools” (that is from the production floor), or on customer determined specifications. Moreover, the increasingly antiquated nature of much British industrial equipment, which reflected and determined production strategies, ensured that individual companies wanted designers, or production engineers, who were intimately aware of the strengths and limitations of their equipment and/or labour force. This was very different from the aspirations of the would-be design professionals. As an internal report on the Pottery industry noted:

“There is extreme conservatism in the industry about the employment of free-lance designers… The reluctance to employ free lance designers is based on the feeling in the industry that only a designer who knows the problems of production and in particular the problems of his own firm can be relied on… designs in British pottery tend to be behind the introduction of new designs by the industries in, for example, the Scandinavian countries…” (20)

Similar stories could be told of many other sectors. In textiles, for example, it was complained that the industry “tends to be slow in accepting designers”. (21) That reluctance would be compounded by a deep distrust of British design education which many manufacturers felt bore little relationship to industrial practice and owed more to a bastardised crafts-based ethic and a preoccupation with modern (for which they often, not entirely without justification, read metropolitan) art. A chief examiner in Birmingham, for example, allegedly told students he “had little use for the trade” and criticised work he felt “showed too much the influence of machine production”. (22)

In this scenario manufacturers, and others, fell back on assumptions of innate superiority. It was frequently claimed that

“…there is no general complaint about quality [but] there is in certain instances strong criticism of design. The British manufacturer often relies on the ultra-conservative features of his goods and is loath to take advantage of any special local preference in design… although agents for British exporters point out that a certain type of design or colour would find a ready market there have been complaints by agents that manufacturers do not pay sufficient attention to their reports.” (23)
from this perspective British goods might lack a certain distinctiveness in design but they more than compensated for it in terms of quality. As a representative of the cotton textile industry put it, whilst the Japanese might be able to under-cut the price of British goods “We are able to offer what the Japanese cannot – exclusive styles.” (24) Whether it be Japanese motor cycles or Italian washing machines, the assumption was the same. The self-image was that British manufacturers eschewed the temporary frivolities of fashion and style and concentrated on “offering lines of quality and durability”. (25) Foreigners could not match the quality of British goods, refined into “classical styles” by generations of skilled craftsmen. Their goods might be cheaper, they were certainly more visually attractive and consciously styled but in terms of quality there could be no comparison. A little like with the English football team (where continental sides were supposedly more intricate but less effective in their play) the shock of defeat at home would reverberate through the decades. Even in the immediate post-war period there were warning voices that such assumptions were ill-founded but they were deep rooted and bred from at least a century of little-disputed imperial hegemony. The almost quirky or idiosyncratic nature of some representatives of British industry could be staggering, but the assumed premium of “Britishness” was unmistakable:

“…it was too sweeping to recommend that products should always be given labels and packs in the language of the country. Some products like boot polish would sell better abroad with an English label… although one should ensure that the design was suitable for the market, in some cases it was better to keep the typically British design”. (26)

Even the self-conscious, government-funded apostles of design reform believed that “a slavish imitation of foreign styles will not do our export trade any good”. (27)

The collapse of British manufacturing industry is well documented. It was, of course, not only in terms of design that many sectors could be considered deficient. The erosion of protected imperial markets, the problematical pattern of industrial relations, the chronic under-investment and “amateur” ethic, the deeply unbalanced pattern of research and development, the chronic balance of payments problems and many other factors played their part. In terms of design, however, the conflict between “modern” and “traditional”, between an educated elite and a largely under-educated managerial and technical coterie, between a metropolitan culture and a provincial (in the disparaging English sense of the term) ensured that any discourse on design was more a Tower of Babel than a structured dialogue.
Notes:
(1) Board of Trade (BT) 57/60 CAI (35) 11/11/37
(2) Design And The Designer In Industry, HMSO, London, 1937
(4) BT 60/4/96, Minutes of Meeting 14/10/37
(5) Federation Of British Industries, Overseas Committee Minutes, 16/11/37
(6) Cabinet Papers (CAB) 130/72 GEN 386/6 29/7/53
(7) CAB 130/72 Gen 386/6 29/7/53 and
(8) Council Of Industrial Design (COID) 976/14 9/1/47
(9) Board of Trade, Journal, 6/7/62
(10) Board of Trade, Journal, 11/5/62
(11) Board of Trade, Journal, 5/8/66, 14/10/66 and 21/10/66
(12) Board of trade, Journal, 28/10/66
(13) Federation of British Industries, Tennant to Kipping 7/6/62
(14) Economic Research Unit Report, July 1967, BT 333/172
(15) CAB 129/127 C(66) 173 25/11/66
(16) Times, 19/10/66
(17) Financial Times, 8/10/64
(18) BT 258/7900 Report by Dr D W Hill Principal of the Shirley Institute (the research centre for the cotton textiles industry) 1958
(19) COID360/17 Evidence to Pottery Working Party
(20) BT 64/5217
(21) Guardian, 3/1/64. The commentator was the Vice Principal of the Manchester College of Art And Design, who went on to claim that the industry “has been ignoring some very obvious talent in this field”. By the 1980s it would become something of a commonplace cliché that British designers were trained in Britain and employed abroad, particularly in areas like textiles with a strong fashion element in their design and marketing structure.
(22) COID/ID/C667/13/195
(23) CAB 130/90 GEN 441/25. First Report On Competitiveness April 1954
(26) COID 387/2/12, Export Trade Working Party, 23/9/58
(27) COID 387/2/12, Draft Paper Export Trade Promotion, September 1958

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