Chapter 24
The Value of Storytelling in Product Design

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary product designers are increasingly attempting to utilize the latent potential of the product narrative and the impact it can have on the end-user and their relationship with products. Storytelling in product design allows a dialogue and conceptual exchange to be established between products and end-users. This chapter will consider the end-user’s relationship with products and the designer’s role in this emotional and conceptual exchange of storytelling in product design. This will be outlined through a framework defined by the authors as Narrative; Manufacture; History; and Interaction and will consider the work of contemporary designers Philippe Starke, Hella Jongerius, Dick Van Hoff, Ron Arad, Tokujin Yoshioka, Peter Jago and Frank Tjepkema. The paper will be supported by a main case study of the work of Bernabei Freeman, the award winning industrial design practice of the authors.

INTRODUCTION

Why do you need stories?
Everyone needs stories
Adults watch the telly
When children go to bed
And fathers read the papers
And everyone likes movies
And mothers buy the magazines

To see what people said
-The Land where Stories End, David Foster

This whimsical quotation focuses upon fulfilling a desire for stories from the printed word and flicking screen image- instant story gratification obtainable from mass media. Yet stories need not just be found in ephemera or as expressions of mass culture. Products themselves can be designed to encourage reminiscence to occur and allow stories to be attached to them over time by
end-users. Products are well suited to this collection of stories - they are tangible, alterable by the effects of time and are silent witnesses to the life of end-users. “Past memories, present experiences, and future dreams of each person are inextricably linked to the objects that comprise his or her environment” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. ix). Or similarly as Marcus Kwint (1999) explains, within Western cultures objects may “furnish recollection…stimulate remembering…form records: analogues to living memory (p. 2).”

Contemporary product designers are increasingly utilising the latent potential of the product narrative recognising, as highlighted by Donald Norman, that emotional responses to products are as valid as other reactive responses (Zachry, 2005). For as Norman has said, “People understand things that have a personal connection, which is where stories play a very important role in human behaviour. In some sense, that is what you want a good design to do--which is to guide you through the story” (Norman in Zachry, 2005).

The response generated by a product is contextually and culturally influenced. Adam Richardson (1993) has suggested in The Death of the Designer that “how users and cultures respond to the products which designers help create is not well understood” (p. 34). Responses triggered may tap into the reservoir of memory and design knowledge of the end-user. Jonathan Chapman (2005) suggests that product meaning is actually comprised of three elements: polysemy (the multivalent nature of objects), contextual sensitivity, and consensus (the need to share information about the product in order to successfully communicate with others about it) (pp. 39-40). Product designers must consider this trinity and its impact upon the product narrative. A successful product designer or storyteller may embed triggers in the hope that these will act as a catalyst for end-users to initiate a story. The triggers are as literary techniques of metaphor, simile, and personification: poetic and rhythmic. The design elements or triggers at the disposal of the designer are such aspects as form, material, finish, colour, repetition, scale, manufacture methods and design reference.

To assess how end-users respond to their possessions and environments, an extensive series of interviews were conducted by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi that formed the basis for the text The Meaning of Things: Domestic symbols and the self and an associated article. Csikszentmihalyi (1981) explains in the text that the objects cited as being special to end-users “often lacked any discernable esthetic value, but they were charged with meanings that conveyed a sense of integrity and purpose to the lives of the owners” (p. 27). Similarly in the article The Gift, author Clive Dilnot discusses how products are infused with much more than their immediately perceivable purpose. Dilnot considers the gift-object and the exchange that takes place when a gift is proffered. He highlights that in the exchange of gifts more than just the product is exchanged. It is for such a reason that a product may then be recognized as special by an end-user because of significant memories associated with it. In particular it is domestic products that Csikszentmihalyi (1981) argues as being the most special because “household objects are chosen and could be freely discarded if they produced too much conflict within the self” (p. 17). Csikszentmihalyi (1981) suggests that products within the domestic interior “represent, at least potentially, the endogenous being of the owner” (p. 17).

How the product narrative reveals itself in the work of contemporary designers Philippe Starke, Hella Jongerius, Dick Van Hoff, Ron Arad, Tokujin Yoshioka, Peter Jagt and Frank Tjepkema will be considered in respect to 4 categories: Narrative; Manufacture; History and Interaction. These four storytelling categories have been identified by product designers’ Bernabeifreeman in both their work and that of other designers.

It is the Narrative and Manufacture methods of storytelling over which the product designer has the most control. Narratives are the stories or historical references the designer seeks to refer;