THE USELESS WITHIN

johan redström

The word 'useless' tells us something is lacking. But precisely what is it that is missing, and from what? Literally, to be 'useless' is to have or be of no use. Typically we use it to express a lack of usefulness. There may seem to be little difference between saying that something is having or being of no use, and saying that it is not being useful. However, it might be worth closer examination, especially since one can suspect that there are also value statements embedded in this distinction. Unpacking such values, we might even learn something about another issue we need to understand in the light of over-consumption, the difference between the useless and to use less.

Saying that something is missing can be a neutral statement, but more often than not is it also a question of values, about expressing that something that ought to be there is missing: to be careless, thoughtless, homeless. But what if words like 'useless', as in George Orwell's Newspeak, hide more complex relations behind simplified dichotomies? That 'useless' expresses not what is there, but what we were meant to look for and did not find. We look for purpose, for usefulness, but find something that doesn't live up to our expectations and we render it useless. To revisit the notion of useless, however, we need to see not just what is missing, but also what is actually there.

Let us start with a more neutral notion of 'useless': something where use has not been defined. Here, we would not look for *a* use only to find that it is missing, but instead try to look for what is there before a specific usefulness is manifested or apprehended. This is to understand the word 'use-less' literally: simply as what has no use. As a starting point to looking for this kind of 'use-lessness', let us begin with the design movement that most explicitly argued for removing everything but the useful.

FUNCTIONALISM

While certainly more complex and diverse than a short and simplified description can account for, it is still fair to say that some of the origins to what we call 'functionalism' are to be found not only in a pursuit of functional designs, but in a critique of what lacks proper practical functionality. As in Adolf Loos' critique of the ornament [Loos 1964, p. 21f]:

> The enormous damage and devastation caused in aesthetic development by the revival of ornament would be easily made light of, for no one, not even the power of the state, can halt mankind's evolution. It can only be delayed. We can wait. But it is a crime against the national economy that it should result in a waste of labour, money, and material. Time cannot make good this damage. /.../ Since ornament is no longer a natural product of our culture, so that it is a phenomenon either of backwardness or degeneration, the work of the ornamentor is no longer adequately remunerated.

Looking towards the origins of industrial design at schools such as the Bauhaus, we clearly see an orientation towards rational functionality. Anni Albers (at the time Annelise Fleischmann) wrote in 1923 while a student at the Bauhaus [Fleischmann 1998, p. 302]:

> Economy of living must first be economy of labour. Every door-handle must require a minimum of energy to operate it. … It is obvious that a complete change is urgently required. New objects (the car, aeroplane, telephone) are designed above all for ease of use and maximum efficiency. Today they perform their function well. Other objects in use for centuries (the house, table, chair) were once good, but now no longer fully do their job.

It seems Louis Sullivan's expression "form ever follows function" indeed captures the essence of this thinking and aesthetics. But looking into what actually happened reveals a more complex story. Returning to Anni Albers, she later wrote the following about the students' early work [Albers 2001, p. 3]:

At the Bauhaus, those beginning to work in textiles at that time, for example, were fortunate not to have had the traditional training in the craft: it is no easy task to throw useless conventions overboard. /…/

But how to begin? At first they played with the material quite amateurishly. Gradually, however, something emerged which looked like the beginning of a new style. Technique was picked up as it was found to be needed and insofar as it might serve as a basis for future experimentation.

Unburdened by any considerations of practical application, this uninhibited play with materials resulted in amazing objects, striking in their newness of conception in regard to use of color and compositional elements.

Here, it seems that even the students' new, 'functionalist', designs did not come out of a strict focus on the useful, but from a reconsideration of the basic expressiveness of form, materials and techniques in an open exploration of possibilities. Rather than a study of how 'form follows function', it seems to have been an exploration of how 'function lives in the expressions of things' [ibid., p. 4]:

A most curious change took place when the idea of a practical purpose, a purpose aside from the purely artistic one, suggested itself to this group of weavers. Such a thought, ordinarily in the foreground, had not occurred to them, having been so deeply absorbed in the problems of the material itself and the discoveries of unlimited ways of handling them. This consideration of usefulness brought about a profoundly different conception. A shift took place from the free play with forms to a logical building of structures. /…/ Concentrating on a purpose had a disciplining effect, now that the range of possibilities had been freely explored.

The picture of early 'functionalist' design that emerges as we combine descriptions of the actual design practice evolving in milieus such as the Bauhaus to the programmatic statements made, both concurrently and retroactively, is indeed intriguing, not to say conflictive. The contrast between descriptions such as the one above by Anni Albers, and statements such as "the Bauhaus is seeking by systematic practical and theoretical research in the formal, technical and economic fields to derive the design of an object from its natural functions and relationship" by Walter Gropius [1964, p. 95] is striking.

What is important here, however, is that this apparent inconsistency is not a simple question of a mismatch between 'theory' and 'practice' that would eventually be overcome as the school developed. Rather, it is a matter of how the turn to the 'use-less', i.e. that which has no use, opens up for changing directions, and even for exploring the foundations of practice. Further explaining her approach to teaching, Anni Albers states elsewhere that [1968, no pagination]:

> Well, maybe it's an exaggerated term to call it "method" at all. But I tried to put my students at the point of zero. I tried to have them imagine, let's say, that they are in a desert in Peru, no clothing, no nothing, no pottery even at that time (it has been now proved that archaeologically textiles have come before pottery), and to imagine themselves at the beach with nothing. And what do you do? /…/ And how do you gradually come to realize what a textile can be? And we start at that point. And I let them use anything, grasses, and I don't know what. And let them also imagine what did they use at that point.

Even as we look towards 'functionalist' design, that which has no use – the use-less – can not be reduced to what is not useful. In these experiments, things that have no use (yet) are central. When looking for usefulness we would perhaps not find much, but trying to see what is actually there, we encounter possibilities for new directions, for reinterpreting and redefining. Contrary to what the term useless indicates – as it suggest that nothing can be done with the thing – this is very much a place where we can act, improvise and explore, be that this is in contrast to efficiently carrying out given plans. Anni Albers and others found such a space in the Bauhaus workshops. Is this something characteristic of the studio or can we also find similar phenomena elsewhere? It seems we can.

IMAGES

Investigating the relations between architecture and inhabitation, Jonathan Hill discusses the photograph's central role in architecture, or why "The major currency in contemporary architecture is the image, the photograph not the building." [Hill 1998, p. 137]. Suggesting that "Architects are primarily interested in form, a condition reinforced by the architectural photograph." [ibid., p. 150], he remarks

that "Ironically, an architect's experience of architecture is more akin to the contemplation of the art object than the occupation of a building." [ibid., p. 144]. Jonathan Hill's key argument concerns the problems this stance introduces as it creates a distance between architecture and the people living in it, but let us for a moment consider his example from a different point of view. As he turns to one of last century's most influential buildings, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, he makes the following remark [ibid., p. 139]:

> The [Barcelona] Pavilion is so open to different forms of use because it is physically specific but functionally non-specific. Consequently, rather than permanently empty, the seductive spatiality and materiality of the Pavilion is waiting to be filled /…/ The Barcelona Pavilion is not the same as its photograph. It is an icon of twentieth-century architecture for the wrong reasons, not because it is a building with a subtle and suggestive programme but precisely because it existed as a photograph and could *not* be occupied. Between 1930 and 1986, while the Pavilion did not exist, it was probably the most copied building of the twentieth century.

In the context of the above-discussed examples, and of how even functional interpretations of what something *is* can spring from its 'use-less' dimension, the expression "the seductive spatiality and materiality of the Pavilion is waiting to be filled" gains new meaning and depth. With respect to the building's influence on architectural discourse, its character seems crucial, i.e., what Hill describes as the "physically specific but functionally non-specific" character of the building. While closely related to Anni Albers's remarks about the students' workshop explorations [Albers 2001], this example differs in that it works on the basis of an image. Indeed, the properties of the photograph as such seem central to Jonathan Hill's argument on the building's use: "precisely because it existed as a photograph and could *not* be occupied." [Hill 1998, p. 139].

It may seem trivial, but since a photograph is literally use-less when it comes to more practical matters such as inhabitation, it forces upon us an abstraction over actual use. Such is the case of the architectural photograph, with its emphasis on (built) form and characteristic absence of inhabitants. We can however find similar ways of use in other kinds of images.

Above, Albers stated that "New objects (the car, aeroplane, telephone) are designed above all for ease of use and maximum efficiency. Today they perform their function well." [Fleischmann 1998, p. 302]. Consider a car magazine, brimming with images of supercars produced in very limited series, concept cars not produced at all, and drawings of what future cars might look like (not even likely to go into physical modelling). Whether these can actually be used as cars or not is beside the point. Much like the architectural photograph Jonathan Hill talks about, this is a matter of consuming the car as image, not as physical object. Not that it renders both building and vehicle useless, however.

Interestingly, even manufacturers producing the most sophisticated cars may choose to present them in digital, rather than physical form (such as in the first, and more or less completely computer-generated, commercial for the Lamborghini Aventador). And in case the actual car is not even a supercar, at least its computer-generated version used in the commercial can be made to dance like a robot – such as in the Citröen C4 commercial series, in which the car turns into a robot dancing, ice skating and such. Just think of the word 'photorealistic'; it's not enough to be real, it must be real *as a photograph*.

As a means of transportation, an image is literally useless. In the case of the concept car, it might even be that the depicted object is completely lacking in practical functionality. However, in this 'uselessness' we are meant to find something, to discover our own purpose. Notwithstanding this being a rather basic media/advertising strategy, there is still something intriguing about this relationship between objects defined by their functions and these forms of consumption centred solely on images of them. Even in situations where the real object is present, we seem inclined to push the experience towards an 'image', as when merchandise is presented behind glass in shop windows and cabinets – a strategy employed almost across the entire range of everyday things. In a society officially obsessed with 'usefulness', there is something almost subversive about this fetishising of 'functionalist' designs through literally 'useless' images.

If form does not only follow function, but function indeed resides in the expressions of things, maybe the image is precisely what we need to counter-balance all the usefulness presented to us. It's as if we need a place where things already so full of use can be made to disappear from our immediate view, to instead reappear as 'use-less' things that we can approach, interpret and make our

own use of. Although the image of an object might present to us a promise of purpose, it is still projective in character; it appears as a possible future we can project ourselves into. "If I only had this thing, then I would, I could…" The world of things presented as a travel brochure: blue skies and happiness only a ticket away. An image of the house, the car, the phone of our dreams: a place where we can get away from it all.

SILENCE

To be useless is to lack something. In ordinary language we often refer to the useless, not as that which lacks use, but as that which is not useful. But there is an important difference between the two: what has no use is not the same as what is not useful.

Some useful things are so full of use they become useless. Things so full of themselves no place remains for us. Things making promises about purposes beyond what they can actually deliver. As the things let us down in use, they turn into what we call the 'useless'.

What is use-less in the sense of not having *a* use, however, is very different from this. For sure, such things may appear useless also in the aforementioned sense, as they make few promises about future purposes. Nevertheless, the absence of prescribed use opens up a space for us to envision, improvise and interpret their use in ways not yet defined. Whereas that which lacks usefulness is what remains after usage has failed, that which has no use may refer to what is there before use has been determined. It can also refer to what can exist after use has been questioned and redefined. Just as the seemingly useful can turn into useless, the seemingly useless can become something else. You just need to remove the use it was once filled with.

In this way, 'use' is not only literally the component shared between the use-ful and the use-less. Use is also what binds them together. Through use, that which lacks use may turn into something useful, when set expressions are given new functional interpretations and new forms of use are discovered in existing things. By being

used, that which is useful might also turn into something useless. Not only by being "used up", but by having been filled with a use that does not answer to our expectations. Either way, this is not just about how the useful turns into the useless – or vice versa.

In the world of sound we do not talk about 'soundless'. We have another word; we talk about silence. Silence is not just the absence of sounds. Consider music and its interplay between sound and silence. Even if we push it to one extreme and omit all intentional sounds in a composition, as John Cage did in 4'33", we will still not be without sound. As anyone who attended a performance of this piece has experienced, what we call 'silence' is far more complex than 'an absence of sounds'.

In the world of using everyday things, we refer to that which has no use as being useless. As if our design ideal is constant sound: everything, all the time, presented to us as being full of use, of function, of promises of purpose. We do not have a word such as silence when it comes to use. What would that feel like? Would it be like when conversations gradually end and the room turns silent as we have dinner? Would it be like the silence before a stage performance is about to begin? Or would it be like when you turn off all ventilation fans, your computer, etc., suddenly realising the background noise? Maybe it would be like the feeling of relief you get as the immediate world around you turns not silent, but into a space where it is possible to discern all different sounds and their origin, as the now gone wall of sound makes way for a more subtle, yet direct experience of being here. Removing the surrounding wall of promises of purpose, how would the useless reappear?

We talk about the useless, but we do not have a word such as silence when it comes to the use of things. Perhaps we need one.

REFERENCES

Albers, A. (1968). Oral history interview with Anni Albers, 1968 July 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Albers, A. (2001). Selected writings on design. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Fleischmann, A. (1998) Economic living. In V Kolocotroni, J Goldman and O Taxidou (Eds.) Modernism; an anthology of sources and documents. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 302. Originally published in 1924.

Gropius, W. (1964). Principles of Bauhaus production [Dessau]. In U. Conrads, (Ed.) Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 95-97. Originally published in 1926.

Hill, J. (1998). An Other Architect. In J. Hill (Ed.) Occupying Architecture; Between the Architect and the User. London: Routledge, pp. 135-159.

Loos, A. (1964). Ornament and Crime. In U. Conrads (Ed.) Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 19-24. Originally published in 1908.