

Rhode Island School of Design
History of Industrial Design
LAEL LE-38
Syllabus Spring, 2016
Class location: Design Center 212, Mondays 9:00 to 12:00
Design Center 212, Mondays 6:30 to 9:30
Professor: Matthew Bird Contact information: mbird@risd.edu

“The best prophet of the future is the past.” Byron, 1821

Overview:

History is a powerful tool; a basic understanding of the history of design and familiarity with important design styles, movements and designers is essential for thorough design work.

By examining the work of other designers, we are better able to identify our own interests and concerns. Using history to focus our own work is an effective method of avoiding unnecessary distractions, false starts, pitfalls, and mistakes. So much of the practice of Industrial Design is based on research, investigation, and interpretation. To duplicate these efforts instead of building on them is, at best, a wasted opportunity. Beyond these practical concerns, though, history can inspire. Finding objects, designers, and solutions that have resonance for us allows us a richer experience as designers, and lets us tailor the broad field of Industrial Design to our own interests, and stay focused on what matters to us.

Knowing how designers have solved problems in the past can inform today’s problem solving, leading to stronger, richer, and faster solutions. Focusing our eyes and brains on designs that inspire us guarantees that our own work contains excitement and passion.

Objectives:

This class will offer a chronological overview of history of Industrial Design, presented in a lecture format. Topics discussed will include major design styles and movements, significant designers, manufacturers, and design-related companies, innovations in technology and material use, and the development of sales, marketing, user-focused designing, and the history of design process. Students will explore different definitions of Industrial Design and identify historical, contemporary, and future boundaries of the profession. One objective of the class is to produce basic comprehension of the history of Industrial Design. The larger objective, though, is to afford you access to the widest possible range of information and images, to allow personal exploration and deeper knowledge where you choose. This will help you bring history to life in a way that is useful to you in studio practice and beyond. By the end of the semester, we will have looked at nearly 4,000 images.

Details:

Class time will include a combination of lectures, group discussions, and in-class student presentations. Weekly writing assignments explore the major themes presented in each lecture. Homework will consist of reading assignments, and written evaluations, with in-class quizzes to assess completion and understanding of the reading. Each student will produce an in-class presentation and a research project.

Expectations:

Prompt attendance is required. There is no set pattern to the use of class time, so tardiness will result in missing important, and unpredictable, content. There is no way to arrive late without brutally interrupting the class. Lateness will affect your grade. Attendance is also mandatory. As outlined in the Student Handbook, three unexcused absences from class is grounds for a failing grade. If you are ill or unable to attend class, you must contact me (mbird@risd.edu) or the ID office (454-6160) before class. Three excused absences will also result in a failing grade; students may then petition the Registrar to change this failing grade to a W (withdrawal from the class for medical reasons).

Inappropriate use of technology is selfish and not welcome in any group environment, but especially not in this class. Cellphones must be silenced during class, and may not be used for sending text messages. Laptops are not allowed in class. The structure for grading and attendance taking will be reviewed in class, and posted for reference. It is your responsibility to understand and honor this structure. Work (including reading assignments) must be completed on time. If you do not turn your work in, it cannot count towards your grade; it is your responsibility to turn in your work. All work submitted will be confirmed; if you do not get confirmation of your submission, it was not received.

All work completed for this class must be original, created and developed by you according to the guidelines explained in the student handbook, reviewed in class, and included here, as copied from RISD’s Academic Code of Conduct:

RISD seeks to help its students realize their fullest intellectual, artistic, and personal potential through a distinctive combination of studio and liberal arts courses. The College values the creative process and freedom of expression. The College also honors its responsibility to protect the values and standards of an academic community.

The College recognizes the need for risk-taking and experimentation in a challenging art, design, and liberal arts education. Moreover, the long history of appropriation, subversion, and other means of challenging convention in the arts may, at times, complicate attempts to definitively codify forms of acknowledgement/attribution. That said, forms of experimentation that do challenge these boundaries must at all times adhere to the fundamental value underlying academic conduct at RISD: honesty in the creation and presentation of one’s work as well as in one’s relations to others and their work. Academic writing must follow conventions of documentation and citation. Others’ ideas—whether quoted directly or paraphrased, whether taken from a book, website, or lecture—must be clearly attributed both to provide a record of the writer’s research and to avoid plagiarism, or presenting another’s ideas as one’s own. Liberal Arts faculty will often explicitly address documentation expectations, including preferred styles, in class.

In the studio culture the conventions governing the use and reference to others' work are less clearly defined than in academic writing. These conventions are often defined by particular disciplinary histories and practices and are best addressed in the context of the particular studio experience.

Given the wide variety of disciplinary histories, conventions, traditions, and practices applicable to liberal arts and studio activities, the individual faculty member defines, within reason, what constitutes academic misconduct within the context of a given course.

Forms of Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct compromises the academic integrity of the College and subverts the educational process. Primary, but not exclusive, kinds of such misconduct are:

Cheating

The use of unauthorized information, study aids or other materials, or unauthorized communication with, or copying from another student on papers, projects, tests, or other academic work. It is the responsibility of students to consult with their faculty concerning what materials and types of collaboration are permissible.

Plagiarism

The passing off of someone else's ideas, writing, or work as one's own is plagiarism. Appropriate methods and forms of attribution vary by discipline. Some courses will include instruction in appropriate conventions for citation and attribution within the field.

Students are advised to seek out relevant guidelines on their own (the RISD Writing Center offers resources and guidance), to ask faculty when in doubt about standards, and to recognize that they are ultimately responsible for proper citation.

Falsification and Fabrication

The attribution of information or material included in one's work to a false or fabricated source, or the falsification or fabrication of the information or materials themselves.

Unauthorized Reuse

The submission of substantially the same work to satisfy requirements for one course that has previously been submitted in satisfaction of the requirements for another course or that was created for another purpose, without permission of the faculty of the course for which the work is being submitted. Students are expected to create new work in specific response to each assignment, unless expressly authorized to do otherwise.

Unfair Academic Advantage

The theft, destruction, or defacement of, or other interference with, the work of other students for the purpose of gaining academic advantage; the engagement in other activities that place other students at an academic disadvantage, such as theft, concealment, or alteration of needed resources or other materials; or other manipulation of the academic system in one's favor.

Noncompliance with Course Rules

The violation of specific course rules set forth in a syllabus or otherwise provided to the student.

Grading:

Please refer to the posted grading chart, reviewed together the first day of class. It is your responsibility to retain all work returned to you, to assist in resolving any grade disputes that may occur.

Reading:

Please refer to the posted reading assignments for readings.

There are weekly reading assignments; it is your responsibility to get each section of reading done in time for any quiz.

Schedule:

The planned lectures will be introduced on the first day of class, though their content and order may be revised to better respond to the experience of taking and teaching the class. Each week, a summary of the lecture content and a list of names introduced will be posted. The proposed schedule follows:

Week 1 (February 22). Defining the landscape: How do you define Industrial Design? How will we do so for this course? We will review expectations for this class (including reading and writing assignments, in-class presentation format and schedule, attendance, grading, and behavior). Before we knew that it is called Industrial Design, we told our parents' friends that we were inventors, engineers, or tinkerers. We will look at centuries of innovation that predate our profession, and the smarts in evidence will astound you. What did the world of craft-based, make-what-you-need production, royal patronage/guild systems, and agricultural economy look like?

Week 2 (February 29). Before the Storm: The Shakers were innovators who used design to improve their world in a way that continues to surprise and inspire designers. Around them in America, systematized manufacturing and distribution was beginning to introduce design into what, for centuries, had been craft. In England, the work of Josiah Wedgwood serves as a neat introduction to the Industrial Revolution.

Week 3 (March 7). Power: How did water and steam power lead to a consumer culture and a world fueled by manufacturing? We will do a little thinking about the Arts and Crafts movement as well: where does man end and the machine begin?

Week 4 (March 14). Nature Fights Back: The Art Nouveau period is written off as a period of design confusion. But the wonderful, rich, strange objects produced at this time demonstrate designers' struggles to accept the machine and imagine mass production. Also at this party: colonialism, global commerce, advances in science and technology, an explosion of new material opportunities, the importance to design of the chemist's trade, the continued development of the Arts and Crafts movement, and the Great War.

Week 5 (March 21). Speed Freaks: Advances in transportation created a culture obsessed with speed and travel. Prohibition, jazz music, Hollywood, and the Great Depression helped create a culture obsessed with entertainment. Designers had no trouble

interpreting these themes into the Art Deco style. But they struggled to incorporate new technologies like small motors, electricity, plastics, heavier-than-air travel, and automobiles. Ultimately, these struggles led to the creation of the profession of Industrial Design.

Week 6 (April 4). Efficiency. We will look at the growing awareness of efficiency in labor. Fasten your seat belts for a drive through Henry Ford's and FW Taylor's assembly lines, the Gilbeth's pioneering time and motion studies, Christine Frederick's application of Scientific Management to the domestic landscape, Greta Schutte-Lihotzky's application of that work to invent the kitchen as a designed object, and finally the resurrection of that thinking right here at RISD with the Universal Kitchen project.

Week 7 (April 11). European Suave, American Savvy. Bauhaus designers and their European peers introduced a machine aesthetic that was too removed from popular taste and practical manufacturing practices to be afforded or accepted on a broad scale. American designers took the materials (OMG! Tubular steel!), combined them with American manufacturing methods, and produced designs that didn't have the conceptual purity of the Bauhaus, but did find their way into homes around the world, making the modern style a part of daily life.

Week 8 (April 18). Professional Practices: Contrasting Henry Dreyfuss to Raymond Loewy, and their early, enormous, successful design offices, we let us examine the long careers of these important designers. We will ALSO explore the development of design processes and techniques that are still in use by today's designers (model making techniques, rendering styles, ergonomic and human factor considerations, marketing, research methods, business practices, and inter-disciplinary teamwork).

Week 9 (April 25). Mid Century Gorgeous: Design after World War Two, especially in America, displayed a mastery (for the first time since the advent of machine manufacturing) of production methods, material use, and user-focused design. The result of this newfound confidence was an era of vibrant sculptural form combined with functional considerations long overlooked. We will examine the factors involved in this perfect storm (cultural, political, economic, material, and business).

Week 10 (May 2). Corporate Takeover: Post-War confidence in design, business, and lifestyle help fuel corporate growth. Unlike today, people believed that participating in corporate culture was a duty to help economies grow. Designers shift their focus from the home to the corporation. We will look at iconic objects that communicate this theme, as well as the arrival of anonymous designs, created to satisfy market and user surveys. Hold on to your hats, because here comes the cubicle!

Week 11 (May 9). Plastics!: A new miracle material sent designers scrambling to work with intent, leading to new, exciting, startling objects. AND a lot of crap. There were significant advances (food storage! small appliances!), but also some problems (cheap disposable toys, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch). Discussing this conflict will lead us to Buckminster Fuller and his work to create an awareness of the fragility of our planet.

Week 12 (May 16). Circuit Training: Incorporating electronics, the development of computers, and the use of computer technology as a design tool all sent design in new directions. Considering form when there is no specific function, when there are few engineering limitations or ergonomic considerations, is exciting and terrifying all at once. As a result, designers began to use metaphor, narrative, and semantics in place of all that good-old problem solving and user-focus hokum. It all led to our current period of Celebrity Obsession: How did we wind up stuck with this culture of celebrity designers? Why did Philippe Starck pose for so many pictures with his shirt off? And in one final chapter, what is happening to Industrial Design in this information age? Let's end a whole semester of looking at objects by looking at work that involves no objects at all, like interface and system design.

Liberal Arts Exam Day, May 20: Research project final version due.