



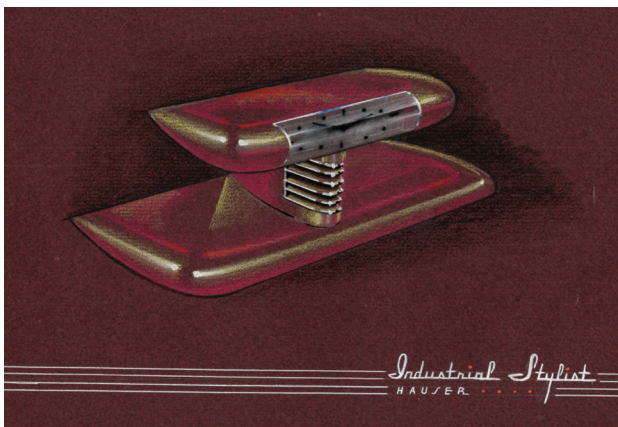
ODD BUSINESS, THIS INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

“The industrial designer, once just a cosmetician to industry, now offers a ‘total service.’ This can include anything from the redesign of a product to redesign of the corporation that produces it.”

—Seymour Freedgood, “Odd Business, This Industrial Design,” *Fortune*, February 1959

Today’s industrial designers advise clients who face global complexities and intense competition in a digital world that requires fewer physical artifacts. At the same time, designers try to balance as the ground shifts under their feet in their own operating environment: teens launch products and companies, business schools embed design thinking and established design firms are acquired by giant management consultant agencies. As experiences replace three-dimensional products, designers, trained to be form shapers, might ponder, “This isn’t what I signed up for.”

How did designers get on this path? Looking back at the road traveled uncovers some signs missed along the way. The industrial design profession is nearly 100 years old. The first practitioners emerged after World War I and coined the term “industrial design” by the late 1920s for their talent in improving the appearance of machine-made goods to entice purchasers and build sales. World War II changed culture and business, and designers evolved from stylists to strategists. During the late 1940s and ’50s, designers explored possible alternative futures for their work.



Designers as Stylists and Salesmen

Peace provided a golden opportunity for designers as industry returned to production to propel an expanding consumer economy unseen since 1929. A few years after two nuclear bombs ended the war in 1945, designer and author George Nelson, FIDSA, explained the value of design to business under these new conditions. He had introduced the flamboyant founders of the profession (and no doubt inspired many young men to enter the field in hopes of earning those quoted fabulous fees!) with his February 1934 article, “Both Fish and Fowl,” in *Fortune* magazine. In July 1949, to this same readership, he suggested a more fruitful partnership for design and business in his article “Business and the Industrial Designer”:

It has been the glib assumption of most manufacturers and designers that the prime function of industrial design is the creation of added sales appeal. Actually this is a temporary and superficial aspect of the designer’s activity, far less important in a long-term sense than his part in the job of reintegrating a society shattered by the explosive pressure of a new technology on institutions unable to cope with it.

... It is entirely possible for a man with the ability and the integrity to establish a position as a member of a company’s policy-making group, with freedom to make his influence felt not only on product design but on all matters of general policy that affect design. It is at this level that the topflight designer can really earn his fee, for his design activity can then be integrated with the long-term, consistent policy he has helped to make. If the designer is to exert a genuinely

Left: Futuristic Desk Clock, c. 1944, by Jon W. Hauser, FIDSA, an industrial stylist. In 1937, when he was 19, Hauser was the youngest designer hired by GM. He came to Chicago in 1943 to work at Sears. This chalk and ink drawing likely dates from the wartime years when many designers, who considered themselves stylists, imagined exciting products for the future. He joined Barnes & Reinecke in 1945. Author’s collection.



Class Led by Alexander Kostellow, Pratt Institute, c. 1949. MaryEllen Green (foreground) came from California to enter Pratt Institute in 1948. When Harley Earl phoned Professor Kostellow to ask for “a girl,” the only female student had a job waiting at GM before she graduated in 1950. She left GM in 1952 to work at Sundberg-Ferar, where she was on staff till 1957 and continued there as a freelancer for another five years. Courtesy of MaryEllen Dohrs.

constructive influence he has to occupy a position in which he can operate over a broad range, but the manufacturer is not going to ask him to do so (there is no reason why he should), nor will the designer make the necessary moves until he sees himself and his profession in the light of this tradition and its enormous social potential.

...the designer will not fulfill his complete function unless he sees these trends in advance of the manufacturer and assists his client in the formulation of policies that will take them into account. This is why industrial design belongs in the research and development of a manufacturing enterprise (as some of the leading designers have pointed out) instead of being tied completely to sales.

In barely two decades industrial design has shifted from a series of accidental moves by a handful of alert and intelligent people to a stable profession that is numerically rather small, but with an influence on industry and consumer tastes that is entirely without precedent. ... Today's designer is more likely to be a group of collaborators than an individual.

In 1951, Walter Dorwin Teague, FIDSA, with Dave Chapman, FIDSA, and Harold Van Doren, FIDSA, participating, moderated a panel discussion on “The Relation of Industrial Design to Other Fields” held by the Society of Industrial Designers. In addition to educators, panelists represented engineering, advertising, retail merchandising and manufacturing management—professions that suspected the intrusion of industrial designers. Teague stated that the conversation would address the “confusion in the minds of many people concerning the scope and function of industrial design. This is the prize understatement of the century. That confusion isn’t any worse in the public mind than it is in the minds of industrial designers. We no sooner think we have our field mapped and know what it encompasses, then someone comes to us with a new problem and we find ourselves invading a new field.”

The Greatest Generation: Organization Men

Unlike today’s high school graduates with the freedom (and the anxiety) to pursue many directions, most midcentury males shared the common experience of military service. Until the mid-1970s, a young man’s draft status determined his job prospects. For the male-dominated field of industrial design, these experiences shaped character and provided valuable skills and leadership opportunities. During World War II, young designers from small towns saw Japan and Europe (and discovered minimalist design there). And during the Korean War and Cold War years, they created navigational devices and instruction manuals or worked as cartographers and draftsmen far from home. In the late 1940s, battle-worn veterans supported by the GI Bill flooded universities to sit beside fresh-faced 18-year old classmates. Veterans were serious about their studies and had no time for college hijinks—many had families to support and needed a paycheck. The demographic mix of the design world was still primarily males of European heritage, but Asian faces began to appear in design offices as Japanese-Americans were released from internment camps, and women became more evident in design schools.

Most importantly, military service and home-front employment for military needs engaged industrial designers in large organizations and their systems. After their service, designers changed out of camouflage uniforms to don suits and white shirts and marched into the business world. Procurement and operation managers did the same, and the number of management consultants grew rapidly in the 1950s. The budding fields of motivational research and consumer behavior studies, as well as advances in human engineering analyses that built upon wartime research, informed business decisions. Government spending on infrastructure, scientific instrumentation for the space race and international market research also provided challenging assignments for industrial designers.



US Army Publications and Training Aids Unit, Fort Bliss, Texas, 1957. Ray Malek (at left center table) was hired by the Montgomery Ward design department in 1956, but was drafted a few months later. He enjoyed creating signs and instructional materials for the NIKE missile programs and made lifelong friendships. He returned to Ward two years later and designed many consumer products sold by the nation's No. 2 power retailer. Courtesy of Ray Malek.

Mass Production and Mass Markets

After two decades of turmoil through the Depression and war, Americans yearned for security and comfort. By the mid-1950s, most economic indicators—population, productivity, disposable income and housing starts—charted steep trajectories. Economists now view this postwar era as an unrepeatable period for US growth. As scarcity motivates today's activities, the '50s were propelled by abundance. The US economy led the world in most fields of manufacturing with little international competition, and US design inspired Europe and Japan. Some designers expressed ethical concerns about planned obsolescence of annual model changes (blame Detroit) while others considered how to discover new needs.

In an address to the Institute of Appliance Manufacturers in 1955, Chapman challenged designers to consider the purpose of their work as some practitioners began to question the value of annual product surface changes: "Now there are two choices: New markets can be made by creating 'synthetic obsolescence' by giving your old products new faces (which is 'styling') or completely fresh, untouched markets with new products to serve new functions (which is in large part 'design') can be created. ... In our industrial blueprint for the long-range period ahead, we must plan for a way of life, not for a way of production. ... Design as a major factor in industrial planning must answer the need for new products that make living in America a more pleasant emotional and physical experience."

Connecting Design with Business

Two designers' organizations, the Society of Industrial Designers (SID), formed in 1944, and the Industrial Designers Institute (IDI), established in 1940 from earlier groups, spurred their members into a flurry of promotional activity in the 1950s. Although small in number (each group had

about 100 members), designers organized many exhibitions of their current work, participated in awards programs, delivered speeches at conferences of industrialists, published numerous books and countless articles in business magazines, appeared on TV and created educational exhibits for international trade fair exchanges. These events not only presented designers to potential clients but provided platforms for designers to discuss their expanding roles.

In 1950, Chicagoan Walter Paepcke, chairman of the Container Corporation of America, established The Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies in a former Colorado mining town. Aiming to join business and cultural leaders in intellectual conversations, the Aspen conferences became the TED events of the era with a dash of Davos. The first three conferences, held in 1951–53, were entitled *Design as a Function of Management*. Between fishing, horseback riding and swimming over six days (!), the 1952 participants learned from speakers such as Buckminster Fuller and discussed design management topics with leading designers and publishers along with executives from major corporations (General Electric, Coca-Cola, International Harvester, Sears, Pullman-Standard). In 1954, this conclave was reformatted to become the International Design Conference at Aspen.

The year 1954 also saw the appearance of two key publications: the book *Industrial Design in America 1954*, published by the Society of Industrial Designers (SID), and Charles Whitney's new magazine, *Industrial Design*. Compiled by the SID's 153 members, with editorial content by industry leaders, the book presented products and their development back stories to show how designers successfully collaborated with clients in a cross-section of US industry. *Industrial Design*, which grew from a section in Whitney's *Interiors* magazine, presented design as a business to serve business. It included articles about the latest

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technical developments, announced RFPs from corporate and governmental agencies seeking designers, and served as a classified job search tool. Case histories along with calendars of design events and business conferences informed corporate executives and gave designers a place to show their best work.

Designers: Men Who Sell Change

By the end of the decade, industrial design had gained attention to such a degree that the April 12, 1958, issue of *BusinessWeek* featured a nine-page cover story on the current state of the profession's activities. The colorful cover announced "Industry's New Look at Industrial Design: Once it bought frosting, now it buys a cake" and featured images of projects by Raymond Loewy, FIDSA, Henry Dreyfuss, FIDSA, Teague and Sundberg-Ferar. Inside, the story headlined "Designers: Men Who Sell Change" featured photos of 10 designers from across the country and quoted many others. Stating, "Once limited to fashioning better-looking wares, industrial designers are fast approaching an

acceptance like that of ad men," the article noted that "the 'airbrush boys' of 20 years ago are now up to their ears in long-term planning for their clients. They search for new materials for basic suppliers. They develop products for companies that know only that they want to get into new fields. Merchandising, retailing, public relations all come within their province. The designer is beginning to take on the importance as a management prop that advertising and public relations agencies have held."

The article frankly also presented some controversies within the ranks and differences of opinion on practices and aims. The discussion closed with a thought that resonates today: "In the 30s, everything needed design; today, almost every product has it. ... Has the designer had it? What more can he do? Designers have two answers: One is that technology brings new design requirements every day. William Snaith [of Raymond Loewy's office] sums up the other: 'Our prerogative is the shape of the bottle. We'll keep that prerogative because our consumer market has one magnificent asset: it changes.'"



Stowe Myers, FIDSA, interviewed by TV host Dorsey Connors for the Chicago NBC affiliate at a 1956 exhibition of Chicago-area industrial designers at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Exhibition organizer Stowe Myers taught at IIT's Institute of Design and maintained a busy practice in Chicago.

Courtesy of University Archives & Special Collections, Paul V. Galvin Library, Illinois Institute of Technology



The Grand Merit Award recipient at the 14th Annual Exhibit and Conference of the Reinforced Plastics Division of the Society of the Plastics Industry, Chicago, February 1959. Judges pinned the award on the all-plastic truck cab molded by the Molded Fiber Glass Body Co. for the White Truck Co. The reinforced plastic cab weighed 200 pounds less than a conventional steel cab. From left, Dave Chapman, ASID Chicago chapter president; John Sherrer, Reinecke & Associates; and Jon Hauser, executive vice president and general manager of Raymond Loewy's Chicago office. Author's collection.

An Odd Business Plans Its Future

At the close of the decade, across six large-format pages, *Fortune* presented a thought-provoking discussion that sounds remarkably like today's conversations. Illustrated with witty cartoons, Seymour Freedgood's article entitled "Odd Business, This Industrial Design" outlined the usual methods designers use to understand and advise their clients and offered a candid explanation of fee structures. A chart of the 20 biggest industrial design firms listed the years they were established and major and secondary sources of income and stated, "In personnel they range from over 200 to under 20; in billings they range from over \$2 million to less than \$400,000."

The February 1959 article provided a clue to the future. Jay Doblin, FIDSA, a Chicago designer and director of IIT's Institute of Design, remarked, "This business is changing drastically from a service into a consulting business." The reporter, interviewing corporate executives, noted: "The great peril is that many big manufacturers (as the same executive puts it) 'are chicken about innovation'... proposals for genuine design improvements can be vetoed by production men concerned about retooling costs, or by sales departments which tend to feel that the safest design strategy is to copy the competition."

The article closes by describing the work of another Chicagoan, Richard Latham, FIDSA, which foretold something of current designers' role as innovation leaders:

Latham is admired by his fellow practitioners for his get-up-and-go. But where he could be leading the industry is something many of them are not so sure they like. In the four years since he and two other ex-Loewyites formed Latham, Tyler, Jensen, the Latham group has devoted much of its efforts to helping manufacturers do forward product planning—a situation that ideally requires clients to maintain an internal staff to do routine design work...and set up their own design departments, which Latham will help select and organize. When this is done, Latham and his partners

Right: Educators and practitioners meet at a student awards event, c. 1970. At left, Jay Doblin, FIDSA, director of IIT Institute of Design and one of the creators of Unimark; Richard Latham, FIDSA, Latham-Tyler-Jensen; and Ed Zagorski, FIDSA, professor of industrial design, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Courtesy of Ed Zagorski

concentrate on sitting in with the planning committee and helping it envision, usually with elaborate mock-ups and other visual aids, the nature and shape of the firm's future products.

To most independent designers, who privately condemn the development of the internal staff as a "threat to creative design," the Latham doctrine is rank heresy—an understandable position since they want to do all the work themselves. For better or worse, a flamboyant era will come to an end if Latham's doctrine becomes the new orthodoxy: after starting out a single generation ago as an entrepreneur, the industrial designer will finally have become just a part of corporate structure.

"Just" part of the structure? Since the 1930s some designers, such as Teague with Eastman Kodak and Dreyfuss with Bell Telephone, had guided their clients' internal staffs in product direction and design. When this article appeared, Eliot Noyes, FIDSA, was already working with IBM; in just a few years, multinational firms such as Unimark would position themselves as corporate designers.

Today's designers and business leaders grapple with disruption; in the 1950s, they sought stability. Little could they predict the massive changes soon ahead in technology, society, culture and business practices. The gentlemen's club profession now draws from a diverse global talent market and includes women whose voices are integral to the conversations about managing change in design and business.

In 1949, George Nelson, FIDSA, challenged designers to recognize their power to integrate society with technology. Your professional ancestors struggled with similar questions and might have forecasted the paths you are traveling today.

—Vicki Matranga, H/FIDSA, Design Programs Coordinator, International Housewares Association; VMatranga@housewares.org

