

Graduate level course in History of Modern and Contemporary Design

Title: *Uncovering Background Material Influencing a Design Expression*

Apply insights from Essay “But Today We Collect Ads” (Alison and Peter Smithson, 1956) to a work from the Chicago Design Archive.

Overview: Students will read “But Today We Collect Ads” (see text below) and consider some of the insights, especially related to the idea of “background material” of cultural expressions. The student will select a work from the Archive and consider what “background material” may be uncovered as influencing or informing the design in a deep, thoughtful, and researched exploration into it. This can be done through thinking about some of the elements of the design, the time period, etc.

Project Aims and Learning Outcomes:

Today for class, we read Alison and Peter Smithson’s “But Today We Collect Ads” (1956).

They make the argument that vernacular or popular culture is part of the “unclassified background material” that the artist (designer/architect) draws from to make it visible, and to more importantly initiate a new stage of cultural production, or to break with tradition.

The authors cited the Modernists’ (Gropius, Le Corbusier, and others) fascination with reproduced images of American grain silos, factories and plants, and engineered structures as the “background material” of their investments in the idea of functionalism.

Advertising culture was the “new,” postwar (WWII) version of “background material” that simultaneously brought advertising into critical perspective and influenced a new approach to art and design. Raising advertising into something worthy of attention by cultural producers, offered a way to break with what had become the mainstream tradition, namely Modernism/functionalism/International Style. The historical background is the postwar moment in Europe: the darkness of the War and the poverty, scarcity, and rationing that followed, led to a desire for exuberance, play, entertainment, lifestyle—offered in images of advertising (especially in the U.S.A.) and Hollywood film. This is also an important aspect of the historical background that led to a rejection of the modernist ideals of seriousness, functionalism, pure geometries. Also a rejection of their allegiance to a machine, technological future that had shown itself to have a dark side during the uncovering of the atrocities of the Holocaust and the Two World Wars (WWI and WWII).

Visit the Chicagodesignarchive.org. Select a work of Chicago design from the digital collection and trace it to some “unclassified background material.”

This will involve some research. You want to **consider the material that served as a pathway to create something new**. It can be a broad category (advertisements, club culture, internet, etc.) or something more focused such as a dialogue, debate, historical event.

Example:

Herbert Bayer (designer) *Great Ideas* advertisement 1950

We see a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, broken down and arranged in a series of organic, flowing, mostly linked graphic forms or shapes [2B-44]. This was a distinct type of advertising that was not using a direct sell approach or promoting lifestyle; rather, it engages with an intellectual tradition (“Great ideas of the Western World”) as a promotional tactic.

The background or foundation or context from which such an image or advertisement emerges is that of the Cold War. Drawing on an important American thinker and writer (one of America’s great poets), and incorporating a historical photo of him with his words from his text “Civilization” of 1862.

During the 1950s, a debate emerged around what it meant to be an American. The Cold War, the threat of communism both outside and inside of the country, and a wave of immigration from Europe, inspired the drive to define the American character as one in which implied a sense of civic engagement and knowledge of history, and a movement towards equality, liberty, and freedom.

If there is a civilized nation, there is also an uncivilized nation. This was an attempt to define both. Or was it an expression of America’s own failings or lack of achievement to grant complete equality and liberty on the eve of the Civil Rights movement, i.e. a reminder of Americans’ own need to achieve its own aspirations and goals.

“The Great Ideas of Western Man,” an advertising campaign that drew on a set of ideas or thoughts that were considered to be critical in the construction of national identity and American

character during a moment when the U.S. emerged as one of the major superpowers, seeking to spread its influence globally.

This was tied to the growth of public relations or corporate identity construction and the emergence of the notion that corporate advertising should not sell lifestyle, but promote deeper values—which can then be identified with the company and its newly emerging public role in American life.

Write a two to three paragraph reflection that analyzes a work from the digital archive, Chicago Design Archive. It can be a work of graphics, object design, or installation project. Apply the lesson of the Smithsonian's document "Today We Collect Ads," to trace and reflect the "background material" that your object emerges from.

Rubric:

Goals	Excellent. 8-10 pts.	Mid. 4-7 points.	Minimal credit (1-3)
Analysis of work	In depth analysis of the work and consideration of its key features as sites for research and critique.	Sufficient analysis.	No depth of analysis
Research	In depth research that uncovers material relevant to the analysis. Analysis and research are connected.	Sufficient research.	Inability to display an ability to research threads that relate to the background of your work.
Technical	No grammatical or technical errors. Response is well written with ideas communicated in a clear and concise way.	Minimal (less than three) technical errors.	Significant technical errors and lack of engagement with project, evident in written response.

Assignments/Work steps:

1. Read “But Today We Collect Ads.” Consider the authors’ use of the term “background material.” What was the background material of the 1920s? What about the 1950s (when this essay was written)? How is “background material” distinct from influence? How does it operate in cultural expressions (graphic arts, architecture, industrial design, etc.)
2. Select a work from the CDA to research and explore possible “background material” for its formal expression. What is behind the form/image/idea?
3. Write a two to three paragraph summary and cite any research sources that you use to build your case.

The following article appeared in *Ark* magazine No. 18, November 1956, published by the Royal College of Art in London, England.

But Today We Collect Ads

by Alison and Peter Smithson

Traditionally the fine arts depend on the popular arts for their vitality, and the popular arts depend on the fine arts for the respectability. It has been said that things hardly "exist" before the fine artist has made use of them, they are simply part of the unclassified background material against which we pass our lives. The transformation from everyday object to fine art manifestation happens in many ways; the object can be discovered - *objet trouvé* or *l'art brut* - the object itself remaining the same; a literary or folk myth can arise, and again the object itself remains unchanged; or, the object can be used as a jumping-off point and is itself transformed.

Le Corbusier in Volume I of his *Oeuvre Complete* describes how the "architectural mechanism" of the Maison Citrohan (1920) evolved. Two popular art devices - the arrangement of a small zinc bar at the rear of the café with a large window to the street, and the close vertical patent-glazing of the suburban factory - were combined and transformed into a fine art aesthetic. The same architectural mechanism produced ultimately the Unité d'Habitation.

The Unité d'Habitation demonstrates the complexity of an art manifestation, for its genesis involves popular art stimuli, historic art seen as a pattern of social organization, not as a stylistic source (observed at the Chartreuse D'Ema, 1907), and ideas of social reform and technical revolution patiently worked out over forty years, during which time the social and technological set-up, partly as a result of his own activities, met le Corbusier half-way.

Why certain folk art objects, historical styles, or industrial artifacts and methods become important at a particular moment cannot easily be explained.

Gropius wrote a book on grain silos,
Le Corbusier one on aeroplanes,
And Charlotte Perriand brought a new
object to the office every morning,
But today we collect ads.

Advertising has caused a revolution in the popular art field. Advertising has become respectable in its own right and is beating the fine arts at their old game. We cannot ignore the fact that one of the traditional functions of fine art, the definition of what is fine and desirable for the ruling class, and therefore ultimately that which is desired by all society, has now been taken over by the ad-man.

To understand the advertisements which appear in the *New Yorker* or *Gentry* one must have taken a course in Dublin literature, read a *Time* popularising article on cybernetics, and have majored in Higher Chinese Philosophy and Cosmetics. Such ads are packed with information - data of a way of life and a standard of living which they are simultaneously inventing and documenting. Ads which do not try to sell you the product except as a natural accessory of a way of life. They are good "images" and their technical virtuosity is almost magical. Many have involved as much effort for one page as goes into the building of a coffee bar. And this transient thing is making a bigger contribution to our visual climate than any of the traditionally fine arts.

The fine artist is often unaware that his patron, or more often his patron's wife who leafs through the magazines, is living in a different visual world from his own. The pop art of today, the equivalent of the Dutch fruit and flower arrangement, the pictures of second rank of all Renaissance schools, and the plates that first presented to the public the Wonder of the Machine Age and the New Territories, is to be found in today's glossies bound up with the throw-away object.

As far as architecture is concerned, the influence on mass standards and mass aspirations of advertising is now infinitely stronger than the pace setting of avant-garde architects, and it is taking over the functions of social reformers and politicians. Already the mass production industries have revolutionized half the house - kitchen, bathroom, utility room, and garage - without the intervention of the architect, and the curtain wall and the modular prefabricated building are causing us to revise our attitude to the relationship between architect and industrial production.

By fine-art standards the modular prefabricated building, which of its nature can only approximate the ideal shape for which it is intended, must be a bad building. Yet, generally speaking, the schools and garages which have been built with systems or prefabrication lick the

pants off the fine-art architects operating in the same field. They are especially successful in their modesty. The ease with which they fit into the built hierarchy of a community.

By the same standards the curtain wall too cannot be successful. With this system the building is wrapped round with a screen whose dimensions are unrelated to its form and organization. But the best postwar office block in London is one which is virtually all curtain wall. As this building has no other quality apart from its curtain wall, how is it that it puts to shame other office buildings which have been elaborately worked over by respected architects and by the Royal Fine Arts Commission?

To the architects of the twenties, 'Japan ' was the Japanese house of prints and paintings, the house with its roof off the plane bound together by thin black lines. (To quote Gropius, "the whole country looks like one gigantic basic design course.") In the thirties Japan meant gardens, the garden entering the house, the tokonoma.

For us it would be the objects on the beaches, the piece of paper blowing about the street, the throw-away object and the pop-package.

For today we collect ads.

Ordinary life is receiving powerful impulses from a new source. Where thirty years ago architects found in the field of the popular arts techniques and formal stimuli, today we are being edged out of our traditional role by the new phenomenon of the popular arts advertising.

Mass-production advertising is establishing our whole pattern of life - principles, morals, aims, aspirations, and standard of living. We must somehow get the measure of this intervention if we are to match its powerful and exciting impulses with our own.

[end]