COMMENTARY ON CASE STUDIES

THE MODERNIST UTOPIAN VISION OF SOCIAL EQUALITY: THE MONOBLOC SINGLE MOULDED PLASTIC CHAIR GLOBALISED DESIGN THINKING

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ABSTRACT

The discussion in this research is about how the utopian ideology that emerged from designing ordinary products demanded by mass consumer markets triggered the plastic monobloc pandemic and influenced social reformation, both in aesthetics aspects of industrial design applications, and in equalising the global post-World-War II economy. Modernism through mass production processes provides a platform for social response by urban designers, who strive for more sustainable ways to achieve idealised utopian conditions by introducing characteristics of durability, cheapness and sturdiness, while developing mass production techniques. The ubiquitous monobloc chair is an example of social activism in design thinking, as mass manufacturing enables society to afford less costly, everyday furnishing materials such as injection-moulded plastic chairs. From the creative standpoint, many in design fields may disqualify and disclaim the value of homogenous plastic furniture as a tangible expression of social reformation. Nevertheless, monoblocs ride on the mass-consumer utility factor and is promoted from economic benefit rather than aesthetics standpoint. What should we make of this, and how does design modernism fit into the 21st-century ideals of "utopian" society today?

Keywords: *Monobloc Chair, Mass Manufacturing, Modernism, Social Equality, Utopia*

INTRODUCTION

In this commentary, we ask: Do plastic monobloc chairs qualify as a modern symbol of design, or a 21st-century standard of widely consumed cultural good? Should mass produced designs be viewed as part of active economic and social reforms tackling real issues like space practicality, increasing costs of materials, production and consumption? What is the influence of modernist design thinking in providing competitive advantages for mass manufacturing to satisfy the demands of global societies seeking cheap, convenient, easily accessible and widely available products? Indeed, can the humble plastic chair salvage society?

What Are We Sitting On?

1909 brought a fitful sense of modernity in society's continued crusade for reform through industrialisation, with the birth of the progenitor of plastics, the *bakelite* being announced at the American Chemical Society in New York (Mandarim de Lacerda, 2010). "Monobloc" is a term that describes the single injection moulding technology, arriving so fashionably as a trend during the late 50's, personified both in philosophy and product, in the form of the plastic chair. Monobloc furniture derive from synthetic materials such as industrial plastics invented by chemical engineers, with markets opening up from the 1980s, first in Europe, then America, and the rest of the world catching up rapidly (Zhuang, 2017).

Figure 1 The Cesca Chair

Single injection plastic moulding technology was the dawn of mass production methods (Freinkel, 2011). It fitted a key criterion in the challenge of producing industrial works that emphasis functional characteristic of materials through developing innovative objects for mass consumption, with performance standards exceeding traditional materials, factoring in affordability, durability, ease of transport, and lesser ecological impact compared to non-durable options such as natural timber. In this sense, designers are social reformists adapting works to prevailing technological and economic conditions. Gradually, second-generation

designers and architects of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s saw the benefits of design innovation in fostering social reform through reconstructing society (Mandarim de Lacerda, 2010).

Embracing the mantra, *functionalism + technology* enabled designers to take their places in "salvaging the future" collaboratively with experts from other disciplines such as engineering, industrialists and technological investors as the keys to sustaining a more equitable basis of socioeconomic growth (Kartell, n.d.; Saletnik and Schuldenfrei, 2009). It has been acknowledged by architectural historians that pioneer modernists, riding on the Bauhaus "modern classics" ethos of minimalism and purism, did not quite succeed in attaining their vision of innovating mass designs efficiently due to production costs and distribution difficulties, complexities in works construction, and saddled with the use of often unorthodox raw materials which hindered fabrication. The Cesca Chair (Figure 1) by Marc Breuer is an exception: an example of marketable artworks cleverly 'reinvented' for wider end user segments less interested in design authorship, in lieu of affordable functionality, modesty and anonymity (Saletnik and Schuldenfrei, 2009).

The Propaganda of Salvation

The fundamental ideology of modernism concerns itself with solving social and economic issues, and the and practical aims of design thinking methodologies and ergonomics are orientated to answer or satisfy mass social needs through low- (or lower-) cost resources, mass-produced objects, equally affordable adaptations or replications, and the benefits of global distribution efficiency of global business and trade networks (Polster et al, 2007).

Late Harvard University sociologist and urban architectural historian Professor Emeritus Nathan Glazer (2007) suggested more than a decade ago, when New York City modernist architects, housing developers and urban planners found themselves losing grounds of respectability to politicians, traditional working classes and communities who wanted "quality of life" reflected in public spaces, that grandeur in design digressed from the more modest human portrayal of survival minimalism.

Modernist concepts like well-constructed and fully functional buildings, and modern inventions and designs have equalising roles accordingly, from public housing architecture in poor neighbourhoods to pedestrian-friendly walkways downtown for office workers. They need to be designed to "save the world in crisis", and it was this philosophy which was so badly needed to counter economic imbalances and contribute through the democratisation of ownership.

As the 20th-century wore on, an eagerness to implement and adopt mass production systems enabled faster post-war economic recovery through the "savings" mentality (MacKay, 2007). These were further encouraged by the social activism of influential design communities who were disinheriting eras of European colonialism and economic prosperity enjoyed before the World Wars (MacKay, 2007).

Direct roles were played by eminent architect-teacher Adolf Loos, whose 1908 critical essay, *Ornaments and Crime*, and American architect Louis Sullivan's slogan, "Less is More" advocated functionalist aesthetics of buildings and objects, promoting social opportunities and economic progress for all. Critically, these revolutionary social philosophies fostered the convergence of traditional and contemporary design thinking methodologies, the essence of "unstylishness" (Rawsthorn, 2007; Taylor-Foster, 2016).

The Monobloc Pandemic

The Tangible modernist forms were produced to minimalist standards by architects, landscape designers, artists, graphic designers and the like. Industrial product designers like Vico Magistretti (1920-2006) is another example. What began as work to improve the lot of the homeless population and low-income apartment dwellers in post-WWII Italy was the basis of low-cost production methodology he espoused (Design Within Reach, n.d.). Vico represented the second-generation concept artisans whose legacy of social activism through design pragmatism ensures an ideological progression that embraced utopian aspects of ergonomics and equality, stylish and affordability for all social classes.

His notion of utopia is affirmed from Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian perspective; modern economic systems of production resulted in higher social good through mass consumer ecosystems, which gave birth to later systems globalisation. The Selene stackable chair (Figure 2) from 1969 was a game changer, utilising Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene (ABS) industrial plastics where fiberglass reinforced polyester is fabricated by single injection moulding (Design Within Reach, n.d.; *Object Plastic*, 2011). While not labelling monoblocs as pure designs, he preferred instead his friend Mies van Der Rohe's "Less Is More" philosophy to define his ideology of dignified

simplicity with usefulness. Vico rationalised the use of plastic as key resource to save costs and fitting furniture in the context of smaller dwelling environments and living spaces (Design Within Reach, n.d.; Heller, 2014).

Figure 2 Stackable Selene Chairs

Intuitive design is less proof of artistry than the social activist's response to solving everyday problems. Another key outtake comes from the perspective of Austrian designer Robert Stadler (2019), who deems generic plastic artefacts as a typecast to represent *the self* and from the necessity to stage social identities through technological intervention. At the same time, applied product designs serve domestic, industrial and mass consumer needs at minimal manufacturing costs and fuss for expanding businesses (Tuomo, 2008).

A Designer and Social Critique of the Monobloc Pandemic

The plastic chair crusade has seen an assortment of parodies, apologetics and critiques over the decades (Figure 3), evident of the proliferation of "love/hate" camps that either reinforce or undermine a pragmatic object as the convergence of mass production, ambiguous aesthetics, and supply-demand economics. As a hybrid of ergonomic design and art, the plastic monobloc chair is both a "mutable object" and the symbolic interface of modernism with social reconstruction, whose tangible existence point society towards spatiality and temporality, its pared form and design becoming a tool of anonymous expression, value and functional possibilities (Borka, 2014; Mandarim de Lacerda, 2010; Jensen, 2015).

Figure 3 The Ubiquitous White Plastic Chair

As Borka (2014) states, the symbolism of mass-produced chairs more than enable low- and mid-income groups to afford economical furniture and enable businesses to contribute to the local economy; it nails the designer's aim to "sell whatever to whoever in whatever way". Heavily influenced by the ideology of a social utopia, monoblocs reflect the 21st-century social pandemic to prefer designs which are emotionally appealing but utility led, through artefacts to "make everyday life more agreeable" (Polster et al, 2006). The monobloc chair pandemic is respectable because utopia was the platform. It exists collectively and ergonomically in the carriers of the ideology which birthed from the essential values of modernism embodied within its invention and its lineage.

CONCLUSION

The case study of the plastic monobloc chair and related literature demonstrate quite clearly the linearity of previous era modernist designers' vision and linkages with 21st-century's practice. As human factors and ergonomics experience designers face unprecedented environmental issues of a global scale, the review of design history and sociological problems become obscured and taken over by contemporary design thinking that emphasises imaginative design innovation for mass consumption in the "new spirit" of modern for modernity's sake (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2006). Regardless, designers must remember the intimate ties they share and cemented in the previous century's "blood-bonded" relationship to improve social conditions through redemptive economics, as well as the earlier modernist goals to shift

social perceptions to embrace *utopia*. From cultural icon such as the Selene Chair (Figure 4), to other objects of everyday use and usefulness, quality and functionality wins out in the domestic consumer landscape, whatever users' socioeconomic background (*Object Plastic*, 2011).

Figure 4 The Selene Chair

In the never-ending evolutionary quest for quality reforms in the last century, mass manufacturers must continue to pass fair standards of sturdiness, durability and practicality. Monobloc creations are exemplification of democratisation in design, descending from a vision to construct (not deconstruct) society, which, like an oracle, simultaneously pre-destined its impotence as high art, epitomising its inevitability.

The monobloc's design evolution from aesthetics to pragmatics has enabled it to transcend cultures and spread globally. While today's plastic seats may be built to satisfy more apparent ergonomic functionality than Breuer's pioneering designs, the monobloc's spread nevertheless raises worrying questions about sustainability, of the best choice of materials utilisation and pricing affordability to achieve the final effects. Arguably, neither Breuer's chairs nor monobloc chairs are designed with ergonomics in mind, and rigid standardisation of forms are unlikely to suit all body types, since each person assumes a singular way of sitting. Although finding something to sit on is no longer a problem, designers should strive to encourage consumers to evaluate what they seek and to gather such input critically before they redesign the humble chair.

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Images Credit

Figure 1: *Cesca Chair*. Retrieved from: https://www.knoll.com/product/cesca-chair-with-arms

Figure 2: *Selene Stacking Chair*. Retrieved from: http://www.objectplastic.com/2011/12/selene-stacking-chair-vico-magistretti.html

Figure 3: Olle (2014) *White Plastic Chairs* Retrieved from: https://www.flickr.com/photos/foide/14588765060/in/pool-those-white-plastic-chairs

Figure 4: deconet.com (2014) *Selene chair* Retrieved from: http://www.deconet.com/pictures/product/large/1391800.jpg