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The Language of Objects

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The Language of Objects

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The Macintosh's shape, it is true, is easily distinguishable from that of other personal computers. It is distinctive, but still purposefully neutral enough to make it appropriate to almost any setting. But in practical terms, it is not primarily the profile of the keyboard or the angle of the screen that make a computer easy to use. And in the case of the Macintosh, it is not the design of its hardware, but the accessibility of the metaphor on which its software is based which has made it such a success.

Desktop metaphor

The team that developed the Macintosh system of icons and pull-down menus demonstrated an astute understanding of the workings of the modern-day human mind. The metaphor of a desktop on which the software is based exploits an assumed familiarity with traditional ways of working with paper – for example, sorting and filing – to allow the unskilled user to enter the Macintosh world on familiar terms. But it is not just a question of graphics, for the Macintosh also allows the user to make mistakes and to learn from them rather than learning to operate it by rote.

The design of the Macintosh software is drawn from an understanding of the way that even the simplest everyday tasks are organised. Chopping wood or setting a table, for example, both involve distinguishable steps and sub-routines, their pace dictated by interaction with material objects. And in this, the Macintosh, consciously or unconsciously, is a piece of design which depends on the concept of product semantics.

It is symbolic features, the signs of what something can do, that characterise our material artefacts. Objects

Klaus Krippendorff and Seppo Vakeva make a plea for product semantics, not a graphic gimmick or a buzz word, but a design tool.
Illustration by Lawrence Zeegan

THE LANGUAGE OF OBJECTS

tell us a lot about their owners, their appropriate place and their use. While the image-based media industry calls for the production of ever more impressive shapes and colours to feed its fragmented version of reality, within product semantics, we believe that design must make sense of things rather than create a confusion of images, forms and materials for the sole purpose of selling more products. There is no lasting interest in a handsome object if it does not fulfil its purpose or requires an advanced engineering degree to make it work. Product semantics seeks to apply to the design of objects what human interface research brought into the computer industry. But despite this serious intention, product semantics is often dismissed as just another buzz word.

Symbolic role

When product semantics first surfaced, some thought it was a new name for the old-fashioned art of styling.

Others took it as a licence, after years of austerity, to be more playful with form. And still others saw it as an invitation to apply graphics willy-nilly to the surface of objects. But to design an object with an understanding of semantics is not to decorate it, but to make its means of use manifest.

People use objects as they understand them. And to apply an understanding of product semantics to design implies that designers should let forms arise not only from what objects do, but also from the meanings they acquire within society. In other words, functionalism is not the only criterion for an object's form: objects clearly have a symbolic role as well. The aim of product semantics is thus the construction of meaningful interfaces between artefacts and the world of phenomena in which their users live. And to make an object intelligible depends on knowledge of a language that consumers, designers and manufacturers all share.

The Detroit tail-fins of the 1950s were designed to increase sales, and succeeded in doing so. But the tail-fin form was the result of imitating aircraft streamlining and in fact camouflaged the car, revealing nothing of its use. In some cases, fins even reduced aerodynamic efficiency and impaired safety, in extreme examples making it difficult to tell the front of the car from the back. So in this case, user satisfaction was limited to pride of ownership, for once the car was purchased, the sales advantage sought from tacking on fins was no longer relevant. Product semantics is concerned with the symbolic aspects of the whole design process, which of course must include commercial considerations. But the superficial, surface-oriented and short-sighted aims of styling are not part of the discipline.

Linguistic verbiage

Unfortunately, impenetrable linguistic verbiage – the traditional concepts of semiology and linguistic semantics included – may stand in the way of making the notion of product semantics more accessible to visually educated people. But carefully studied and responsibly applied, product semantics has the capacity to become as essential a part of the design process as ergonomics. We must not let the linguistic analogies distort our concept of communication through product form. The shape of a product can convey information about its purpose and place in society, just as well as or better than the writings and drawings in the users' instruction manual. And furthermore, it is our belief that visual appeal lies in the qualities that come from the actual use of an object, not in conjuring with make-believe imagery.