



ASIA DESIGNER
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Design and Design Literacy in Everyday Life

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I. Design Literacy in Everyday Life

During a business trip to Foshan, Guangzhou, I saw dozens of blue sprinklers in a small garden by the road. They stood out against layers of green plants and instantly caught my eye. I took a closer look and found that these sprinklers had a simple design featuring a combination of metal tubes for water transmission and a nozzle for watering. Then I began wondering whether there could be any other designs to meet the same need. The answer should be yes. The details of these sprinklers could be optimized to create a sense of pragmatism and symbolism, not just a visually harmonious and pleasing relationship with the plants. To develop design literacy in everyday life, a product may first need a purpose of design, then meet people's everyday demands, and ultimately maintain and convey a complete awareness of design to all.



Figure 1 – Sprinklers in the garden

(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

Here is another example. The gym I usually go to has few visitors early in the morning. It has two cleaners, one man and one woman, on standby to clean unoccupied fitness equipment using dusters soaked with alcohol for disinfection. The goal is to make fitness

equipment as clean as possible by ensuring the optimal use of the cleaners' efforts and time. This is a fair and reasonable business model from the standpoint of gym operation. At first, I thought this was a good human-centered design. But I changed my mind later.

One morning when I was working out on a treadmill, a cleaner showed up and began cleaning the unoccupied equipment around me. Immediately, a strong smell of disinfectant rushed into my nose. The smell became even worse due to the powerful air-conditioning in the gym. I didn't give much thought to my experience until I took a photo of the cleaner wiping a treadmill. I looked at the photo and asked myself, "If I were the cleaner, would I smell the odor of disinfectant? Whether I cared about the experience of the gym users or just wanted to complete my task effectively and without making any fault? Would the gym consider the olfactory experience of the customers? Is making profit more important than anything else?" You may not have the same experience with me only by looking at the photo. This may be that kind of poor experience that we take for granted and rarely notice and complain about. But such experience shows exactly the difference between design and design literacy that I would like to talk about.



Figure 2 – A cleaner working in the gym
(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

II. The Concept of Design Literacy

The pragmatism and decorativeness of a design and whether it is good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, can be basically reflected by the specific and tangible changes brought about by its physical features, such as functions, appearance, shape, and materials. This view is based on concreteness, sense perception and linear logic. But the design literacy for an object should focus on the abstract and intangible changes it brings to users' mind, such as educational, spiritual, emotional, and experiential changes. Users can feel these changes if you work wholeheartedly on your design. Most designers including me often put too much attention on the appearance and usability of designs without even noticing that. This is quite common among designers and most people get their first impression of a design from these two features.

For example, when we buy Dyson cleaners, we may notice a good many innovations in appearance and engineering, such as the cool and high-tech looking and high performance. But we may ignore their design literacy – the creative intention of their bagless design that aims to reduce carbon footprint. The product that we want to buy and own actually features not only a good physical design but also design literacy with positive creative intentions.

The sprinklers I mentioned above are an example of a lack of design literacy. Indeed, they can water the garden and are easy to clean and their locations in the garden were decided after careful calculation. But the designer and garden planner failed to take into account the overall visual experience of the visitors, whether the appearance of the sprinklers could blend into the surrounding environment, and whether their noise could damage their harmony with the garden. We may consider these problems as marginal and turn a blind eye to them. This means our design and aesthetic literacy have yet to reach the level of caring about the soft power of design. Therefore, design literacy represents a kind of soft power and aesthetic literacy. To develop design literacy requires us to enhance our observation of everyday life and our sensitivity.

In Foshan, my colleagues and I once went to a porridge store for supper. When the store was about to close and we were still enjoying our meal, a waiter came in, put on a serious face and said, “It’s half past nine now and I need to do some cleaning. So I can serve you no more.” Then he went out straight away, leaving us surprised and embarrassed. At that moment a strong feeling came over me. Such poor service could not match the store’s reputation. As consumers, we go to restaurants to enjoy food and chat and relax with our friends or family members. To meet every single consumer need, a restaurant should first meet the most basic requirement of providing healthy and delicious food. Then it should move to the next level and focus on designing and offering intangible experience. Waiters are one of the touch points between restaurants and consumers.

Take Starbucks’ coffee masters for example. In Starbucks Reserve stores, coffee masters and experts wearing black aprons not only make coffee for customers but also have the passion to share their knowledge and offer coffee-related training courses. Behind these seemingly simple services is a complicated design. Starbucks has created a new and open platform, where coffee masters and experts are motivated to share their knowledge, and an environment that stimulates curiosity and creativity and enables customers to enjoy coffee and eventually appreciate coffee, not just drink coffee. As our society and technology develop, consumers are becoming more and more sophisticated and are continuously improving themselves. Instead of just satisfying shopping demands or seeking lower prices, consumers want to enjoy a seamless service experience throughout the shopping process and gain the full value that a product can provide.



Figure 3 – Coffee master sharing her knowledge

(Source: Starbucks)

III. Design Literacy Shows Understanding of Humanity

Last year, I was given the privilege to become a senior member of the Asia Designer Communication Platform (ADP). I'm also a member of many other design organizations including the World Design Organization (WDO), International Design Society of America (IDSA), and China Industrial Design Association (CIDA). Therefore, I never take most of these organizations' membership systems too seriously. To put it simply, a membership system is designed to create a community of people who share interests and goals and are bound together by shared rules or systems. They learn from each other and get inspired by participating in online and offline activities.

Most membership systems ought to satisfy all these basic needs and ADP is no exception. Not long ago I received a pack of cards from ADP. The cards are made of paper with fine textures. My name is subtly printed on the front and you can see a gilded logo of ADP on the back. The cards can be viewed as a promotional material featuring a well-designed layout, a gilded logo and raised words, which can help to promote ADP among its members. But ADP has embedded design literacy into the cards in a smart way – once combined with the names of its members, the cards immediately become personal business cards. The members can easily sense ADP's creative intention of offering them a feeling of participation. And the cards are no longer about ADP but its members.

I still remember that many members couldn't wait to show on social media the cards they received, sharing their happiness and the feeling of participation delivered by ADP. The reason I think highly of these cards is that based on its understanding of humanity, ADP has quietly enhanced the impact of the intangible and abstract design literacy on society or certain communities by using the design of business cards in a clever way.



Figure 4 – Personal business cards from ADP to its members

(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

Other examples include the messages on Saigon Mama meal boxes and the friendly reminders from sellers on express packages. One handwritten message on a meal box reads:

You can go as far as your mind lets you

Be a warm person

Smile and sing gently and walk firmly

Enjoy your meal!

Saigon Mama



Figure 5 – Message on a Saigon Mama meal box
(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

When I saw the message for the first time, my heart was filled with warmth. I could learn that there was a warm restaurant brand behind such a warm meal box design even without opening the box to enjoy my meal. Creating happiness is one of the ultimate goals of design literacy. The source of happiness could be a simple but warm message on a meal box, a feeling of participation and trust delivered by personal business cards, a genuine smile from a restaurant waiter, and of course some small improvements that simply fall into the category of product design and enable sprinklers to naturally blend into the surrounding environment.

So next time, when talking about the pros and cons of a product design, whether a service design is successful or unsuccessful, or whether an experience design is good or bad, we should remember to think over what design literacy is embedded in these different kinds of designs.



Figure 6 – Friendly reminder on an express passage
(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)



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