



Inspiration from My Three-month Stay for the Designer in Residence Program in Germany - Part 3/4

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IV. Design Inspirations from within a Train Carriage: From Five Senses to Integrated Sense

On my way from Frankfurt to the Cube Museum in the Netherlands, I transferred to an Arriva-like train after crossing the border. After I put away my baggage, took a seat and spent about five minutes catching my breath, I looked around me but found nothing different from what I saw elsewhere. There were the spacious interior, large windows, comfortable seats and foldable tray tables – similar designs can be found in German trains.

Upon a closer look, however, some design details in the train grabbed my attention. One of the things I noticed was the embroidery over the covers of courtesy seating for elderly, pregnant or disabled people. Usually we would see two emboldened words or large signs placed next to these priority seats in case anyone didn't notice it. Yet this design could achieve the same indicative effect without affecting the aesthetic integrity of the train interior. I didn't spot this the first time I looked around as I was seated diagonally opposite these seats, but it caught my eye on a second look. It is indeed a very subtle and clever design. After all, people should give their seats to those who need them knowing it is the moral thing to do, not because there is a sign asking them to. (* Fig 1 – An unobtrusive seat-cover embroidery indicating priority seating in the train (Photo courtesy: Sheng-Hung Lee))

Another detail I noticed was the trash cans in the train. I didn't find any word or picture on the trash cans but two simple geometrically-shaped holes indicating the type of trash that goes in each of them. The design is both intuitive and pleasing to the eye. (** Fig 2 – Trash cans in the train using different geometric shapes for trash sorting (Photo courtesy: Sheng-Hung Lee))

I have been taking a fair amount of train rides in Germany recently. And it was during one of these rides I noticed after some careful observation that the handrail next to the train door was not exactly aligned to the center of the door, but instead made more room for the side next to the staircase. I liked this design detail very much. Why is that the handrail is always aligned to the center of the door? In any case, the handrail should be designed to meet human needs. With a stainless handrail, the designer has split the traffic flow into two – passengers that get on and those getting off. There is also enough room for passengers with large luggage to hold onto the handrail when getting on and off the train. (*** Fig 3 – A handrail not aligned to the center of the train door (Photo courtesy: Sheng-Hung Lee))

In the picture below is a distinctly visible sign that differs from the three implicit designs mentioned above. This indicative sign design on the train's exterior is also very much to my liking. The use of thick, white lines on transparent doors makes it easy to know even from afar that this carriage is specially designed for passengers in wheelchairs or with bikes. Here the product's functionality is aptly conveyed through poignant visual impact and contrast. (**** Fig 4 – An exterior sign clearly indicating that the carriage is designed for passengers with bikes or limited physical mobility (Photo courtesy: Sheng-Hung Lee))

The design of door and light control devices near the doorframe is also clear enough. By turning the key to different positions, we can activate different functions. As long as we know what the numbers indicate beforehand, we will know how to use them correctly. (***** Fig 5 – Simply and clearly-designed control devices near the train door (Photo courtesy: Sheng-Hung Lee))

I think most designers know that design should fully utilize the five senses of human beings which include sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, in order to enhance the effect of the experience of touch point. This is a good start for designs. Here I'd like to propose a design concept: the experience of integrated sense. Not entirely a new idea, integrated sense is a comprehensive concept. It is the designer's wish to seamlessly integrate the ingenuity of the design into the existing products and services before users know it. Most designers are desperate to stand out among competitors in the market where novelty and difference are sought after. The design concept of integrated sense does not clash with craze, however, as it pursues the kind of integration that meets users' basic needs. Leaving room for form and design, it should convey an approachable feeling on the whole.

The five senses and integrated sense should coexist in many different environments. The aforementioned visual design in the train's exterior and the design of the device near the doorframe are both experiences emphasizing functions, aptly conveyed through poignant visual impact and contrast on the side of users. The designs of seats, trash cans and handrails focus all the more on the integrated sense to provide easy access to information about and use of devices for passengers without causing harm to them.

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About the author - Sheng-Hung Lee (***** Fig 6 – Author Profile)

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Sheng-Hung Lee is a designer, maker and educator. He is inspired by multiple domains of knowledge, different perspectives, and he thrives on creating new value for clients in multi-disciplinary teams. He is trained as an industrial designer and electrical engineer, and his approach to problem solving is influenced by his passion for how design and technology impact on and can be integrated into society. He has recently collaborated with the Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA) to inform their strategy, service and user experience for the Asia market, and led the effort to incorporate such work in his recent book "IDSA Blueprint in Asia". Sheng-Hung has been focusing on organization design that creates systemic impact. He was invited to be a jury for multiple international design competition including IDEA, Spark Design Award, IDA Award and A' Design Award and Competition. He is a member of respected institutions such as Taiwan Society of Technology and Sociology, Phi Tau Phi Scholastic Honor Society, and China Technical Consultants Inc.

Sheng-Hung graduated with a double Bachelor's degree (Hon.) in Industrial Design and Electrical Engineering from National Cheng Kung University (NCKU), Taiwan. His work has won prestigious awards including IDEA Gold, Braun Prize, Core77 Design Award, Red Dot (Best of the Best), Spark Design Award, European Product Design Award (Gold) and iF Award. His works have also been showcased in Dubai Design Week, Venice Design Week and the Cooper Hewitt museum. Sheng-Hung teaches product design at Fudan University Shanghai Institute of Visual Art and Detao Masters Academy as adjunct associate professor.