Anomy in Design:

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's admonition to "democratic" society

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Abstract

In the eyes of Nikolaus Pevsner, twentieth-century design appeared to be in a state which could be described as "anomy in design," where any act of design could be justified as long as it followed the taste of the majority. Thus he had come to admonish the world of design and the public, on various occasions, of the potential dangers of liberty that they were enjoying in post-World War II "democratic" society. For Pevsner, who believed art and design had roles to play in reforming post-World War II society, what could not be ignored was the fact that artists, designers and architects were pandering to a majority who so often accepted uncritically the taste of a powerful few who sought to control public opinion rather than cultivate and refine the aesthetic faculties of common people

Keywords

Nikolaus Pevsner, democracy, design history, designer, liberty

Pevsner's concerns about majority rule

This biographical study of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983), a giant in the field of the history of art and design, intends specifically to draw attention to his role as a social reformer in the post-World War II "democratic" west.

Just before and during World War II, Pevsner had seen the democratically-elected government of his homeland, Germany, erect trite, seemingly immutable buildings solely to impress the masses, who were yearning for monuments which fulfilled their longing for national pride. The terrifyingly inhumane, anti-democratic, fascist regime of National Socialism realized that art and design could be used as propaganda to induce the largely naïve population into taking inordinate pride in their nation, race, and national achievement, and thus manipulate them for their own ends.

The overthrow of the fascist regimes and the end of World War II did not end Pevsner's concern that, even under Western "democracy," most people still did not seem to realize the dangers of design and architecture which sought to appease those in power and gain mass appeal, but lacked integrity and neglected moral responsibility.

Whether under a repressive dictatorship or a democratically elected leadership, majority rule is still necessary for the control of the masses, and a democratically elected government which seeks to achieve its ends through unscrupulous appeals to public opinion is no better than a totalitarian regime which wishes to control the public through immoral propaganda.

In July 1947, just a few years after the end of World War II, Pevsner discussed artistic manifestations of democracy in "The architecture of Washington" (Pevsner, 2003, pp. 11-16), a talk on the radio which raised the question of whether the most stunning, seemingly immutable public buildings in Washington D.C. actually embodied the aspirations and industry of a society glorying in its democracy.

The magnificence of these government buildings in the capital city of the most powerful country in the Western world is markedly different from that of architectural monuments executed by an authoritarian regime, for it was not intended to incite chauvinism or ethnic pride. Yet Pevsner had his doubts about the ways in which the ideal of democracy was expressed through these monuments with their towering columns, for these designs were in fact meant to instill patriotism and win over public opinion, and could therefore potentially lead to negative effects such as those prompted by the meretricious monuments of totalitarian society.

Appealing to majority taste is not necessarily detrimental in an enlightened and morally respon-

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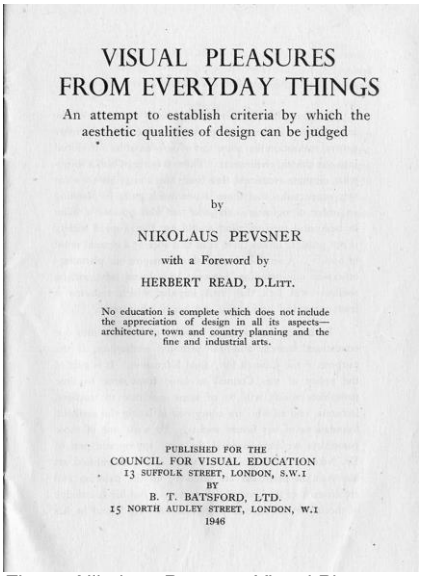
sible society in which individuality is encouraged and respected. If this is not the case, however, the danger of "simply following the taste of the majority" or "satisfying the preference of the majority" can lead artists and designers to wholly accommodate themselves to popular taste which has become an end in itself. Having witnessed and experienced the tragic end of populism in the very last years of the Weimar Republic, which led to the rise of the National Socialist government, Pevsner was well aware that majority rule is not necessarily right, and indeed can be utterly wrong, and that artistic creativity can become a tool employed for insidious purposes.

The notion of the architect, the artist, the designer, as a person whose role is merely to satisfy the will of the majority of people, both artistically and functionally, becomes stronger than ever when the architect, the artist, the designer is forced to vie with her or his peers for popularity and mass appeal. The architect, the artist, the designer then comes to believe that, as long as her or his work is popular, anything is permissible; and this ultimately leads to the germination of the state of artistic creativity which can be termed "anomy in design," *viz.*, lacking any ethical standards and driven by worldly desire for fame and wealth.

The absolute reliance of society on majority rule in turn drove the world of design into an anomic state. The designer was blind to the danger of seeing popularity as the ultimate standard by which to judge a work of art/design, regardless of ethics or functional validity, in a society dominated by majority rule at the expense of morality. People were not awake to the danger of believing that the architect and designer are supposed to dedicate their work to the proper authorities and that one shows social responsibility by following what the majority wants. Thus the key to resolving anomy in the world of design was to free those in art/design professions and their public from the dangers of majority rule. Pevsner felt that not enough educational opportunities were provided, not only to artists and designers, but also to the masses, for refining their aesthetic faculty and their moral judgment. His admonition of the danger of "anomy in design" was, therefore, intended both for artists/designers and the general public, which also needed to improve and refine its aesthetic faculties and its moral judgment, not accepting works of art uncritically merely because their leaders or trendsetters promoted or promulgated those works.



VISUAL PLEASURES
FROM EVERYDAY THINGS

An attempt to establish criteria by which the aesthetic qualities of design can be judged

by

NIKOLAUS PEVSNER

with a Foreword by

HERBERT READ, D.Litt.

No education is complete which does not include the appreciation of design in all its aspects—architecture, town and country planning and the fine and industrial arts.

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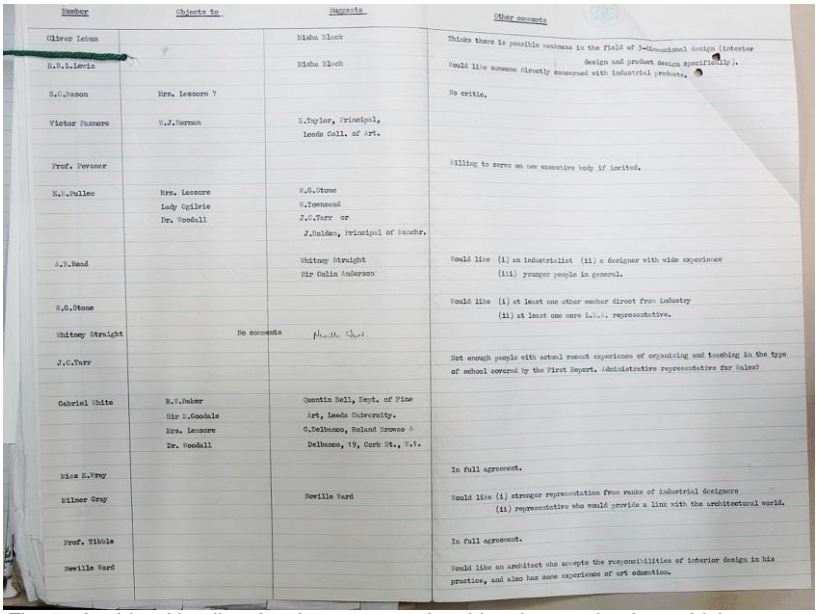
Fig. 1: Nikolaus Pevsner, Visual Pleasures from Everyday Things: An Attempt to Establish Criteria by which the Aesthetic Qualities of Design can be Judged (1946)



Member	Objects to	Suggests	Other comments
Oliver Lelus		Misha Black	Thinks there is possible weakness in the field of 3-dimensional design (interior design and product design specifically).
H.S.L.Levis		Misha Black	Would like someone directly concerned with industrial products.
H.C.Jason	Mrs. Lessore ?		No critic.
Victor Pasmore	W.J.Herman	R.Taylor, Principal, Leeds Coll. of Art.	
Prof. Pevsner			Willing to serve on new executive body if invited.
H.H.Pullee	Mrs. Lessore Lady Cgilvie Dr. Woodall	H.G.Stone H.Townsend J.C.Tarr or J.Holden, Principal of Manchr.	
A.H.Read		Whitney Straight Sir Colin Anderson	Would like (i) an industrialist (ii) a designer with wide experience (iii) younger people in general.
H.G.Stone			Would like (i) at least one other member direct from industry (ii) at least one more L.E.A. representative.
Whitney Straight	No comments	[illegible]	
J.C.Tarr			Not enough people with actual recent experience of organising and teaching in the type of school covered by the First Report. Administrative representative for Wales?
Gabriel White	H.S.Baker Sir H.Goodale Mrs. Lessore Dr. Woodall	Quentin Bell, Dept. of Fine Art, Leeds University. G.Delbanco, Roland Browse & Delbanco, 19, Cork St., W.1.	
Miss H.Frey			In full agreement.
Milner Gray		Neville Ward	Would like (i) stronger representation from ranks of industrial designers (ii) representative who would provide a link with the architectural world.
Prof. Tibble			In full agreement.
Neville Ward			Would like an architect who accepts the responsibilities of interior design in his practice, and also has some experience of art education.

Fig. 2: A table with a list of various names of art historians and artists, which was apparently prepared at one point in 1960 for the selection of members of the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design

Pevsner on a "democratic" society's social responsibility to help people develop their aesthetic faculties

Having witnessed in his homeland the rise of an ultra-nationalistic authoritarian regime through the accepted "democratic" system of elections decided by majority vote, Pevsner came to have reservations about the wisdom and effectiveness of majority rule. The essence of democracy, for Pevsner, lies not just in the "majority rule-based process" of decision-making, but also in the personal development of mental, spiritual and aesthetic faculties needed to participate in the democratic process.

Pevsner defines "democracy" as the "public duty of helping people on [sic] to develop their fac-

ulties — mental and spiritual and also aesthetic" (Pevsner, 2003, p. 16), and, as an art historian, emphasizes the personal duty, and social responsibility, of artists and designers to guide the public in artistic values.

Pevsner, who started to engage academically with the modern movement of design in the early 1930s, discusses how this duty and social responsibility could be carried out on a number of occasions throughout his life. For example, in *Visual Pleasures from Everyday Things: An Attempt to Establish Criteria by which the Aesthetic Qualities of Design can be Judged* (Figure 1), published by the Council of Visual Education in 1946, Pevsner asserts the importance of visual education "for the sake of a fuller life" in "an age in which visual beauty has grown so rare":

> For the sake of a fuller life it should be asked, in an age in which visual beauty has grown so rare — with nature miles removed from the place of most people's daily work, with architectural beauty confined to odd scattered fragments amidst tens of thousands of ugly, ill-designed and ostentatious shops, and with beauty driven right out of ninety-eight per cent. of the furnishings which surround us and the tools which we use. (Pevsner, 1946, p. 5)

Taking into account the twentieth-century reality of the lives of ordinary people in industrial society, Pevsner's promotion of visual education for working people was eminently practical. In this essay, he introduces the fact that collections of various works of art in public institutions are all available for visual education of the labouring class; and, if no original works are available to be studied, Pevsner suggests that photographs and lantern slides of these works and printed publications with "sufficient illustrations" be substituted for the original works. Pevsner's bracingly practical stance is well expressed in the following words:

> The Victoria and Albert Museum has a Circulation Department containing some 70,000 works of art (not only of design), many thousand photographs and about 75,000 lantern slides. These can be borrowed by local museums, art schools, training centres and secondary schools.... Photographs may also be obtained by communicating with such organizations as the Design and Industries Association and The Housing Centre…
>
> The Council for Visual Education, which advocates the teaching of the appreciation of design in all Schools, is arranging a special series of small exhibitions of good illustrations of architecture, town planning and design for circulation in schools and use at conferences, etc., which should also be valuable, as little of this material is available at present in suitable form.
>
> Of publications with sufficient illustrations to take the place of photographic exhibitions, there are unfortunately very few. By far the best was the Christmas 1935 number of *The Architectural Review* with 371 pictures.... *The Architectural Review* is at present including a monthly feature called *Design Review*. (Pevsner, 1946, pp. 6-9)

Pevsner's interest in developing the aesthetic faculties of the public is also revealed in his contributions to and/or his editorial policy for *The Architectural Review*, of which he was the chief editor from 1943 to 1945 and a member of the editorial board until 1970: for, either under his name or his editorial leadership, *The Architectural Review* continued to actively run various articles taking up and examining all sorts of works of art and theories of art, from, for example, the eighteenth-century theory of the Picturesque and examples of Picturesque gardens all the way to twentieth-century large-scaled council estates, public housing complexes, designed works related to public transportation, and the ideas behind these contemporary designs.

Prior to his appointment as the acting editor of *The Architectural Review*, Pevsner wrote an article in 1942 for the magazine on Frank Pick (1878-1941), a personal friend of his, who had worked as a Traffic Development Officer of Underground Electric railways and later as the first Chief Executive of the London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB) (Pevsner, 1942, pp. 31-48). This article shows clearly how seriously Pevsner was concerned about the education of the labouring class and the development of its aesthetic faculties, even in wartime. Pick knew the significant roles that art and design should play in the daily lives of working people; and Pevsner knew well the significance of the role Pick actually played in nurturing the aesthetic education of the general public in twentieth-century Britain. As part of his effort, Pick commissioned leading or rising graphic designers to design posters for the London Underground, thus presenting to the public aesthetic achievements that enabled people who rarely went to museums a chance to develop their aesthetic faculties. For Pevsner, Pick's astute leadership of the LPTB was "the most efficacious centre of visual education in England" (Pevsner, 1982, p. 191), and he wrote of the posters designed in the 1930s for the Board that "it can safely be said" that "no exhibition of modern painting, no lecturing, no school teaching can have had anything like so wide an effect on the educatable masses as the unceasing production and display of L.P.T.B. posters over the years 1930–1940" (Pevsner, 1982, p. 193).

Come to think of it, Pevsner, a man with a great variety of academic interests and diverse research achievements, remained from first to last an educator of the general public. His *Englishness of English Art* (1956) provoked a wide interest in the national character of a nation's art. *Pioneers of Modern Movement* (1936) and *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1949) broadened the definition of art by valuing for the first time the art-historical merits of mass-produced works of modern design. His forty-six volume series of *Buildings of England* (1951-1974) and his radio talks, covering wide-ranging and complex topics, contributed enormously to the visual education of post-World War II generations. All of this work was the fruit of many years' endeavour by Pevsner to develop the aesthetic faculties of the public.

For Pevsner, the development of the aesthetic faculties of the "educatable masses" was indispensable in combatting "anomy in design" in "democratic" society based on majority rule. In supporting this development, Pevsner endeavoured to raise educational standards of art colleges in Britain. When the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design (NCDAD) was instituted in 1961 with the aim of "scrutinis[ing] all the applications from art colleges wishing to offer the new diploma [in art and design]" (Harries, 2011, p. 617) and to ensure that the substance of the new courses satisfied the standards, Pevsner accepted an offer to chair one of five panels set up by the Council, the "Art History and Liberal Studies" panel. It has been said that Pevsner was offered the chairmanship because of his publication of *Academies of Art* in 1940. This may well be true, but, more importantly, Pevsner was obviously the most suitable candidate for the chairmanship due to his well-known advocacy of the extension of visual education in Britain.

The collection of the NCDAD-related papers, produced between 1960 and 1966 and now held in the National Archives in Kew, includes a table with a list of various names of art historians and artists (Figure 2) which was apparently prepared at one point in the autumn of 1960 by civil servants responsible at that time for the selection of members of the National Council (National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design [NCDAD], 1960-1966). The column of comment on Pevsner in this table makes clear that Pevsner was eager to accept any appointment by which he could participate in the task of furthering the extension of art and design education, since it is stated that he was "willing to serve on new executive body if invited" (NCDAD, 1960-1966).

Pevsner as social reformer

In 1952, Pevsner gave a radio talk, "Reflections on not teaching art history" (Pevsner, 2003, pp. 155-162), which drew his listeners' attention to the fact that "[e]verywhere the History of Art is established as an academic subject; only in Britain it isn't" (p. 156). In this radio talk, Pevsner claimed that there seemed to be some feeling, at that time, that the teaching and research of the history of art as an academic subject was "sufficiently well looked after" by two institutions in London: the Courtauld and the Warburg. He then went on to admit that he agreed with this viewpoint.

> There seems to be some feeling that that [academic teaching and research of "the history of art in its own right"] is sufficiently well looked after by the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes in London. Whether these two are enough and whether they provide for all needs [although Pevsner says, in this talk, it is not for him to discuss these issues] — I am inclined myself to think they do.... (Pevsner, 2003, p. 162)

Rather than firmly establishing the history of art as an academic subject in British higher education, Pevsner found it more significant, more crucial, to concentrate on developing the aesthetic faculties of the general public. This aim, for him, was of primary importance, and necessarily entailed that artists, academics, and the public should all be alerted to how important this aim was and is, and why it is essential for the sustaining of a truly "democratic" society. This vision of education of Pevsner's reminds one of the leading Christian Socialist of Victorian Britain, Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872), whose conception of the Working Men's College saw improvement of the aesthetic faculties of the labouring class as an indispensable element of social reformation.

As we think of Pevsner's life as a social reformer and advocate of the necessity for the public to develop its aesthetic faculties, we should see him not only as the "Herr-Professor-Doktor" (Crossley, 2004, p. 21; Harries, 2011, p. 768; Mowl, 2000, p. 6), a high-profile "academic" art historian, who once yearned to hold a personal chair at Edinburgh and later enjoyed the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at both Cambridge and Oxford, but also be aware of another side of Pevsner, the side that has not been sufficiently looked into as his design-architectural historiography has faced merciless criticism in the latter half of the 20th century (e.g., Watkin, 1977). Pevsner was a believer in the power of the Modern Movement in design to reform the anomic state of artistic creativity in post-World War II, majority rule-based "democratic" society. He was a man who loved modern poster design for being instrumental in developing the aesthetic faculties of the public, keen to expand opportunities for ordinary people to be able to appreciate and study art and design on a daily basis. After all, where he had taught for over twenty-five years and

held a personal chair in the history of art was not at one of the ancient universities, but at Birkbeck College, London, an institute well-known for having been, and being, instrumental in contributing to the higher education of working people in Britain.

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Biographical note

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