

THE ROLE OF MINIMALIST AESTHETICS IN INFLUENCING CONSUMER PREFERENCES FOR FURNITURE DESIGN

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Abstract. This paper discusses how minimalist design aesthetics affects consumer furniture preference. Through a case study analysis of the sociocultural and historical significance of Bauhaus furniture, the appeal of minimalist forms aims to illuminate the current status of trends and market preferences in furniture design, based on appearance attributes. To understand the association between sociocultural factors and consumer preferences, two notable case studies of Bauhaus period furniture, the Barcelona chair and Brno chair designed by Mies van der Rohe, will be studied. The role of appearance as an intertextual attribute of quality perception, social distinction and personal taste is explored, including the tensions between preserving industrial design craftsmanship and mass-manufacturing processes. Research shows there are many challenges in sustaining product value for mass-market furniture. A credible argument can be made for the combined strategies of innovation in mass-manufactured furniture production, cultural aesthetics and better market awareness and acceptance of minimalist design aesthetics.

Keywords: *Bauhaus, aesthetic, interior design, furniture, appearance.*

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1. Introduction

Bauhaus design has flourished since the 1920's, since the advent of volatile cultural determinism in post-World War I Europe (Dean, 2008). Today's living spaces that encapsulate modernity can be seen as landscapes of "everyday art", where the values of modernity are fitted, curated and submitted for diverse interpretations. Amongst today's global societies, consumers and audiences, it is that broad context of cultural exposure and acceptability within which the history of Bauhaus modernism in art and design has been further reinvented and greater appreciated.

The search for some definitive answers about the core impacts left by the Bauhaus movement, and the social changes in attitudes towards interior design and lifestyle trends in this era has produced a tendency to makes valuation of functionality more crucial in satisfying valuation of modern living pragmatics, with spatial and budgetary limitations. Consequently, minimalism's endurance as an appearance-centred design only inasmuch that it eliminates unnecessary ornamentation, saving material costs and suited for living spaces that bespeak taste, elegance and timelessness. This *total architecture* concept defined a movement that rationalised mass artistic designs and productions (Dean, 2008, p.25).

Aestheticism and functionalism are correlated dualities, albeit with divergent goals. Research from multi-disciplinary fields provide further examples from Nordic architecture and a range of Scandinavian product design: divergent concepts of well-built, utilitarian, unembellished, energy-efficient, environment-friendly, and poetic designs, fusing to make life better and more organised, a harmonisation of senses and the environment (Eyþórsdóttir, 2011; Hansson, 2005). These notions were the premise of research questions for this paper: *What makes Bauhaus a classic choice? How far is the preference for Bauhaus concept determined by aesthetics? What other factors motivate furnishing taste and consumption?* The next section reviews literature in two areas: the overall historical development of large-scale manufacturing and production of furniture in the pre- and post-war period, and the historical antecedents of two classical Bauhaus chair designs.

2. Review of literature

The earlier decades of the 20th-century started a reactive movement among American merchandisers against the leader-dominant manufacturing sectors. Dirk Jan De Pree, son-in-law of the founder of pioneering Michigan-based furniture company Herman Miller, inspired by serendipitous events to engage cosmopolitan designers, began shifting greater ownership of ideas to his designers, the “givers of creativity” (Adams, 2012, p.5).

Against the strident organisational culture of the scientific management era in the 1930s, Gilbert Rohde, ex-political cartoonist, interior draper for upscale New York retailers and merchandising stores, joined Herman Miller and in his capacity as its principle designer and advisor, urged the company to mechanise and innovate modernist furniture through mass-manufacturing techniques, including the much-lauded Charles Eames molded plywood chair, and other upholstery designs that emphasise elegance and classical built styles (Adams, 2012).

Sparke, Martin and Keeble (2006) in their essay anthology that spans the evolution of classical period rooms from late-19th-century to mid-20th-century, devote ample discussion space to a range of perspectives from art principles to architectural reflection of social histories, and the issues surrounding interior design curatorship. As a scholarly treatise, the essay critically examines modern home and decor objects as representational devices of social history. The conclusive view of the authors is that Bauhaus is a product of the conflicting sociocultural contexts, in the tensions between the artistic emblems of physical materiality such as furniture, carpet or lighting, the artist strives to project within its precise style, a snapshot of the purer, more authentic taste signification of the device as works of art:

[We aim to] ... demonstrate, with regards the modern period room [that] ‘the individual’ could be construed in many and various ways: as architect, homemaker, artist, connoisseur, family, curator or visitor. [...] By considering the dynamic role of the individual within space, we [may] understand how the modern period room acts as a historical document today (p.5).

Design commercialisation arose in the last century since Rohde’s tentative applications of modern manufacturing technologies in furniture production. From the foregoing argument, clearly modern industrial craftsmanship originated from the “anxieties about the soullessness” of large-scale manufacturing that have gradually

pervaded modernity, whereby such skills have always been perceived as lower in the hierarchy of cultural importance compared to fine arts, sculpture and painting (*Art Story Foundation*, n.d.). The need for functional construction is tied to considerations of what was most useful, but it was during circa 1940s when the disquiet was felt among leading European art critics and culture philosophers such as Sir Herbert Read:

We have produced a chair which is strong and comfortable, but is it a work of art? (Hansson, 2005).

Nevertheless, as Ross (2004) finds, the foundation of modern furniture design and marketing was further laid through Gilbert Rohde's innovative modes of consumer engagement, wherein sales catalogues, bulletins, show-rooming and publicity materials became the promotional tactics to create conscious consumption decisions (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Herman Miller Advertisement (1949) for Interiors Magazine

Since the aesthetics of art concepts like Bauhaus is its adaptability, suites of varied designs shape minimalist innovations without losing its basic essence. In today's urban lifestyles, Bauhaus minimalism, with innate focus on space efficiency and pragmatism, has become the leading preference among urban consumers with living quarters like apartments that do not allow for lavish, ornate furnishings. Current research on factors influencing furnishing purchase motives identify appearance attributes such as product form and shape as a critical decision-making attribute (Luchs, Swan and Griffin, 2016, p.308). While literature and studies examining the role of aesthetics find that appearance affects and creates the greatest impression in consumer decision making (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005), the implications for *quality product design* is just as important from the manufacturing perspective. Durability and care maintenance are crucial to appeal to increasingly discerning and educated consumer markets. It can be summed that the conjunction of product and consumer engagement strategies through media, marketing literature, campaigns as well as information through the Web, has grown to be as complex as the different periods of human

civilisation that produced these lifestyle goods. The prestige derived from consuming cultural products such as minimalist interior furnishings seem as adaptable in domestic settings as they are publicly, in exhibit halls, or produced for export markets.

3. Methodology approach

Case study research, through reports of past studies, engenders the descriptive, exploratory and explanatory dimensions in understanding complex issues. It is considered a robust research method particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required. Recognised as a tool in social science studies, the effective application of case study method in research is evaluated when investigations are centred on design. One factor enabling the recognition of case study as a prominent research method is the deregulation of qualitative methods in providing holistic and in-depth explanations of specific social and behavioural issues in the context of inquiry. Going beyond providing results to understand the cultural and behavioural conditions through developing perspective and insight, case studies, when carefully chosen and executed, evaluates the processes and confirms the validity of relative outcomes of phenomena through critical design, observation, reconstruction, and analysis of the cases under investigation (Tellis, 1997).

The following section summarises the analyses of Bauhaus furniture styles, and further explores some attributive criteria which determine preferences for furniture.

4. Analysis of findings

Bauhaus developed a distinctive, modern style of furniture design that remains influential even today. Bauhaus is conceived to present immaculate evidence of its key principle, simplicity, in its sleek, light, and ultra-chic form. Ornamentation found in other pre-21st-century styles of furniture design, such as scrollwork, inlays, or carved forms, was absent in Bauhaus. This aesthetic honour was augmented when consumers were introduced to its stunning beauty at a time when the furniture industry was undergoing rapid industrial and economic revolution to make it easier to produce pieces efficiently. Newly-introduced materials facilitated mass production of Bauhaus furniture, but at the time, these were perceived as non-traditional methods of furniture making, and were criticised, perhaps rather unjustly, by the older segment of cultural craft leaders. The spirit of innovation, combined with manufacturing practicality, was at the core of the Bauhaus approach. Bauhaus furniture was also meant to be versatile so that consumers would find the pieces to be useful for modern living.

Case Study I: The Barcelona Chair

Bauhaus is personified in the Barcelona Chair (Figure 2) designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1929, with its sleek, dignified and distinctive “rhythmic grace” ensuring its place as an interior furnishing icon of the modern era, whereby the marriage of classical regal forms, durable industrial materials and superior craftsmanship in proportional and planning are tangible (Knoll: Barcelona Chair, n.d.). While some believe the influence of K.F. Schinkel can be traced in the cantilevered seat, slender transverse legs and the Roman *curule* (scissor-shaped) form, it represented the neo-classicist’s notion of high art.

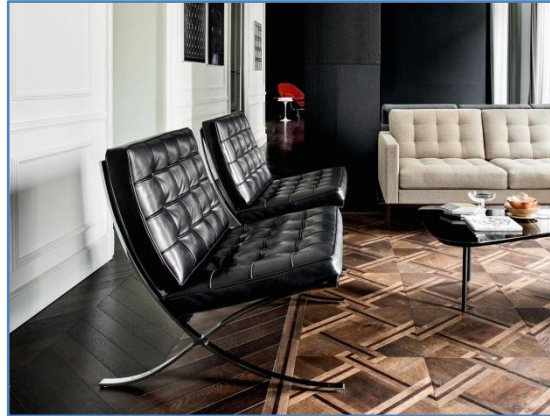


Figure 2.The design of Barcelona chair

With its intent of exclusive symbolic function, being designed for the King and Queen of Spain, and exhibited at the Barcelona Pavilion, it gained international eminence, in spite of demure criticism of its unreasonably low height (Schulze and Windhorst, 2012, p.125). Since 1953, designer Florence Knoll's company has held the production rights of the Barcelona chair, embodying her philosophy of holistic interior design (Knoll, 2015). The chair's dimension is 29.5"(W) x 30"(D) x 30.25"(H), with a seat height of 17" (Knoll, 2014). The upholstery comprises quality tanned leather, its tubular steel legs buffed with a mirror finish. Handcrafting involves cutting 40 individual panels from a single cowhide, which are welded and hand-tufted with leather buttons. The cushion is made from premium polyester filling, supported by 17 straps. The straps are attached with aluminium rivets, emblazoned with the Knoll Corporation logo and with Mies' signature running down one side of its leg (Figure 3). The sustainable design has earned the Barcelona a reputable environmental certification.

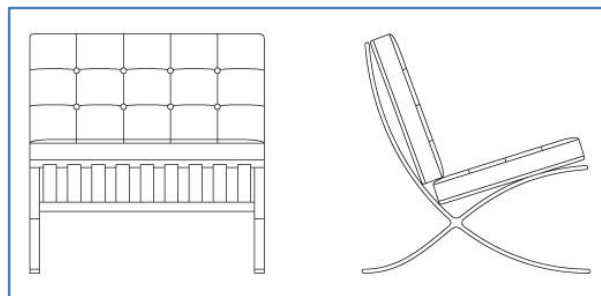


Figure 3.The elevation of Barcelona chair

Case Study II: The Brno Chair

Another Mies design is the Brno Chair (Figure 4), launched in 1930 after the Barcelona. The dimension of this chair is 22.75"(W) x 22.5"(D) x 31.5"(H) with the seat height 31.5" and arm height 25.75". This chair exemplifies lounging comfort with its simplicity of structure, lean profile, clean lines and a unique leg design (Figure 5). Tubular steel frames are wrapped under nickel and silicone coatings to protect from rusting and improve durability. Mirror finishing provides gloss, and its joints and drill are hidden. Similar with the Barcelona chair, the Brno has earned recognised sustainable design certification.



Figure 4.The design of Brno Chair

Juxtaposed, both chairs are reliant on masterful creativity as expressed in their elegant timelessness, both provide fitting aesthetic enhancement which expresses personal taste in décor, but bearing very different price tags. Knoll's range of Barcelona chairs, made with Sabrina leather, costs USD\$5592 (Knoll Barcelona Chair, 2016), while the Brno chair with the same type of leather, is sold at USD\$1771 (Knoll Brno Chair, 2016).

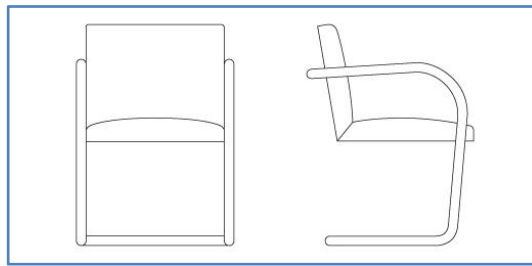


Figure 5.The elevation of Brno Chair

Pricing strategies of the Barcelona and Brno derive from fair appreciation of their socio-historical traditions, and technical manufacturing processes involved. Regal identification positions the former as a unique hand-tooled proposition, enhancing its intrinsic valuation, while machine-made Brno is a feat of factory manufacturing precision, a tangible proof for the man-machine leverage in the advancement of civilisation, where out of challenges come endless possibilities (Schulze and Windhorst, 2012, pp.127-133).

Modern Furniture Design Appeals

Many factors influence consumer preferences. Consumer behavioural studies seek to understand why, how and what people buy, through understanding a range of psychological factors (motivation, perception, learning, beliefs, attitudes), demographic and socioeconomic circumstances of lifestyle and personality, as well as the influences of social role, status and culture. The preference of consumers aligns to personal tastes, which derives from the socioeconomic demographics of individuals in society (Bourdieu, 1984).

Arguments that individual taste determines preference are nearly always used in developing appeals and strategies for the Italian furniture market (Troian, 2011). Ingeniously simple, sparsely-built appearances make distinctive products such as the Barcelona chair a natural target for commercial copy art. In discussions about authenticity, consumer evaluations of product appearance attributes are widely discussed. However, it is no less important to consider the effects of channels of marketing, promotion, as well as pricing, in influencing purchasing behaviour of quality goods perceived as long-term investment. Criteria such as comfort, functionality for possible multipurpose use, spatial fit, durability and easy-care, on the other hand, are functional attributes.

Design critics argue that in cases where motives of consumption are based on externalities (appearance), functional attributes like durability and costs are not as important in influencing perceptions (Blijlevens, Creusen and Schoormans, 2009).

Creusen and Schoormans (2005), studying the role of aestheticism and symbolism among consumers, found that products with preferred attributes such as ergonomics, shapes, colours and materials that catches immediate attention influences choice and purchase considerations, although other researchers believe design acumen among those with more experienced taste judgement determines the cultural and social appraisal of product appearances (Bloch et al, 2003).

This implies that the design of mass consumer goods and products, when imbued with perceived value attributes, lends itself to commercialisation potential. Quality is contentious in considering the price which investment valuation would put on authentic furnishings. By extension implication, although consumers seek meaningful attributes in factors such as crafting precision and solidity of materials, it is in the symbolism of sensorial attributes and details such as proportion, shape, colour, feel and textures, that furniture appearances tend to communicate quality and a certain taste judgment and social class. Additionally, cultural factors greatly impact consumer attitudes in that cultural viewpoints determine perspective of individuals towards aesthetics and styles.

When planning for mass-production of interior furnishings, argues Knoll (2015), the international interior design styles this century dictates a more inclusive approach, a *conjunction* of upper and lower taste cultures, a mix that “can happen in the landscape and should and can happen in your own living room with furniture” (Knoll, 2015, p.57). This could be translated into business models that put designers into management roles as key business partners, to tap their instinctual, observational skills which helps identify cutting-edge designs. In the final analysis, this paper provides ample evidence that the continued present appeal of minimalist furniture reveals a union of consumers’ intellectual and aesthetic depths.

5. Conclusion

As an emblem of modernism, Bauhaus connotes a fluid transition of industrial design, product design and graphic design (Sparke, Martin and Keeble, 2006, p.13), and herein, the use of technology in designing superior interior furnishings would seem disputable, since consumers could always rationalise their preferences based on externalities like appearance.

Aesthetics and style attributes are unmistakably the most crucial factors in justifying choices, followed closely by material quality, durability, maintenance, and pricing. As Mies noted in 1930, “It’s almost easier to build a skyscraper than a chair”

(Social Design Magazine, 2012), taking all factors into consideration, the appeal of Bauhaus furniture as a mature lifestyle concept for modern living has yet to reach its potential in the international design arena, giving competitive furniture makers and marketers opportunities to streamline operational efficiencies, and to find solutions enabling the design to reach consumers as an affordable furnishing trend. Stripped of ornate embellishments, inspired by non-conformist values, Bauhaus expresses the essence of postmodernist culture, an updated traditionalism that portrays timeless stories of graceful chic and contemporary sophistication, taken to new heights of taste. It is under the shadows of social class markers that minimalist Bauhaus appears to leave its greatest legacy.

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Images Credit

Figure 1: Herman Miller (1949) *Irving Harper: The Mediums Beyond the Message*. Retrieved from:

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