

Industrial Strength Design: How Brooks Stevens Shaped Your World. *Edited by Glenn Adamson*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003. xi + 219 pp. Photographs, illustrations, bibliography, notes, appendices, index. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-262-01207-3.

Reviewed by Carolyn Thomas de la Peña

Brooks Stevens, whose Milwaukee-based design career spanned six decades, embodied his philosophy that an industrial designer should be “a business man, an engineer, and a stylist, and in that direct order” (p. 203). His statement seems incongruent with a body of work that contains such standards of postwar American life as the Harley-Davidson motorcycle, the Jeep station wagon, and the Miller Brewing logo. Yet for Stevens, as revealed by Glenn Adamson, the success of a design was not found exclusively in the product. A free-market conservative, Stevens’s real interest was in how his designs moved products through the marketplace, creating profit for his clients and, as he saw it, contributing to a vigorous national economy. In this edited volume, a companion to the recent Milwaukee Art Museum retrospective, Stevens emerges as a unique hybrid within the field of industrial design, a man who contributed countless iconic products but who was proud to state that his most important design contribution was “dollars in the bank for the client” (p. 23).

Such pragmatism, in tandem with what Adamson terms an East Coast, New York bias in industrial design history, may account for Stevens’s absence from the field’s canon. While numerous volumes have documented the work and influence of Stevens’s contemporaries, including Norman Bel Geddes, Raymond Loewy, and Walter Dorwin Teague, this edited volume is the first to elevate him to their ranks. Stevens entered a design marketplace in the 1930s and 1940s where “good design” was defined as that which expressed pure form (most famously realized in the “streamline” style of the 1930s). Adamson’s volume, which combines scholarly essays on Stevens’s influence with decade-by-decade overviews of his designs and excerpts from Stevens’s public addresses, allows us to understand how the designer earned such neglect, along with the moniker “the enfant terrible of industrial design” (p. 7). By declaring his design inspiration as “the joyful ring of the cash register” and antagonizing his fellow designers

by calling them “long haired artists” (p. 2) and “wide-eyed surrealists” (p. 24), Stevens invited the ire of colleagues and the disdain of critics. Yet, as this compelling volume reveals, Stevens’s hearty embrace of the capitalist imperative and efforts to use product design to fuel consumer spending render him an intriguing case study for the postwar era.

Of particular interest to historians of business and consumption are Stevens’s definition of design and his consumption philosophy. One of the volume’s main strengths is the attention it pays to materials: Stevens’s products become the narrative structure through which his design practice is explored. The Steam-O-Matic (1940) was a redesign, one that made minor changes to an existing product. Here Stevens’s concern was with “Mrs. Consumer,” who was currently shying away from this “good product” because of its heavy appearance. As Stevens explained in 1940, a primary challenge facing “progressive manufacturers” was the “extent of consumer resistance.” Steam irons were efficient products, but female consumers often avoided them because of their heavy weight when filled. Stevens’s solution was not a dramatic restyling, but rather the addition of flourishes, such as a “graceful” handle and a polished line down the side to add “the appearance of height” (p. 57). He had no qualms about working for clients who wanted only minor product changes. Given Stevens’s design definition, which privileged sales over style, projects that he took on, like one in the 1950s that involved styling the 1950s Olympian Hiawatha train (he urged his client to “inject . . . more individual identity and passenger appeal” through painting color on a product his firm had already designed) or another, carried out in 1958, that entailed retooling the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile, where, as he put it, his contribution “was to put the wiener in the bun” (p. 145), emerge as major design successes. This is not to say that Stevens’s most important contributions were mere retoolings: Adamson’s ample documentation gives us an array of Stevens’s strikingly original concepts. Rather, it is to suggest that Stevens’s primary contribution—a point Adamson would have done well to stress more—was his dismissal of the very idea that surface changes were not good design. Both new designs and paint changes (not to mention slight modifications to other designers’ products) reflected Stevens’s belief that styling was, in fact, 90 percent merchandising and 10 percent artistry, and that those who practiced it well were all, to a certain degree, “charlatans” (p. 130).

Stevens's approach, disdained by Raymond Loewy as "camouflage," was in fact based on "planned obsolescence," Stevens's philosophy of the relationship between design and consumption. The concept, termed by Adamson as Stevens's "lasting contribution to design theory" (p. 129), was defined as "instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary" (p. 129). It, along with the proclamation of provocative statements such as "I believe in status symbols," earned him the attention of manufacturers and advertising executives and the distain of cultural critics. This concept emerges in Adamson's volume as serving two purposes: first, it earned Stevens a great deal of attention and money; second, it allowed him to theorize that frequent consumption was essential for consumer happiness and market health. By encouraging manufacturers to invest in the expensive process of annual restyling, often with only minor actual changes, Stevens ensured a continual market for his firm. Yet the concept also provided a rationale for material flow that justified endless consumer acquisition. Planned obsolescence was not waste, as Stevens explained in 1956, as items traded in or given away are then resold secondhand, helping those "who might not have had the product in any other way" (p. 130).

Adamson does not weigh in here on whether Stevens indeed believed that the consumption of unnecessary products was, ultimately, a form of altruism. This omission represents both a larger strength and a minor weakness of the volume. Adamson's format reveals Stevens through multiple lenses: early essays describe him in a scholarly context; the decade-by-decade overview of his products and ideas conveys a sense of how his practice and philosophy developed over time; and the appendices allow us to read his own writings and speeches. It is a pragmatic approach whose embrace of variety reflects the pragmatism of its subject, but at the same time it resists classifying Stevens's contributions or questioning the implications of his philosophies for an emergent culture of hyperconsumerism.

Adamson's volume is ultimately a rich entry point for scholars who, one hopes, will soon accord Stevens a place within the broader history of twentieth-century industrial design, business, and consumer history. Along with that achievement should come important revisions to our definitions of "good design" in the postwar era and our

understanding of the relationship between business, consumption, and art in the American marketplace.

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