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Furnishing the street

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Street furniture / Council of Industrial Design / 'Good Design' / Taste / Civic reform

This paper will examine the effect of a state-supported interpretation of good taste upon the materiality of the street during the postwar period in Britain. Drawing on original material, this paper will reflect upon the notion of official principles in the design of street furniture and by doing so, address the nuances of responsibility and control in the public realm more generally.

The postwar urban landscape can either be described as a well-designed modern room which 'quietly and unostentatiously' served its purpose¹, or a series of 'endless grey streets' set apart only by degrees of 'extreme dullness'.² Such contrasting views characterize the furnishing of Britain's streets during the postwar period and the strong feelings that process produced. Yet the lamp-posts, benches and litter bins that aroused such strong feelings, were largely expected to perform these roles inconspicuously, while also maintaining a 'modern' appearance. As objects of modern design, their role was not to dominate, but to gently impose a sense of rationality, uniformity and neutrality upon the street. Yet this paradox begs the question: why did objects designed to be ignored incite so much dissent, and – given the role of the state in furnishing Britain's postwar streetscape - what does this tell us about national policies on design more generally?

This paper will seek to respond to these questions and examine the influence of the state upon the materiality of the street during the post-war period in Britain. While several other organizations also extended their reach over the design of postwar street furniture, only the Council of Industrial Design was state-endorsed and state-funded.³ By promoting 'well-designed' street furniture, the Council acted on behalf of the government as an arbiter of good taste and arguably played a crucial role in visually unifying and standardizing the aesthetic of the street. Therefore, this paper will focus on the role of the Council as a state-funded organization charged with maintaining street furniture design standards, and the tensions that surfaced as a result. By doing so, it is the ambition of this paper to explore the way in which the state has sought to influence design in an environment many continue to take for granted – and upon objects which to date have not received much academic interest – as well as to examine the nuances of responsibility and control in the public realm more generally.

1 The CoID, Book L. Street Furniture: A Design Folio, No date [Circa 1951], p. 4

2 W.P. Jaspert, of London NW3, Letters page, Design, no. 168, January 1961, p.81

3 Engagement with this issue extended out-with central and local government to the public utility companies, civic groups and preservation societies, the specialist design press, material associations and Industry, as well as several prominent urban reformers.

It could be argued that the most significant official body concerned with the promotion of design in Britain during the Twentieth Century was the Council of Industrial Design.⁴ Though it had no direct powers and operated mainly through persuasion, its impact was felt across design disciplines in the design of toasters and curtains, portable radios, aircraft interiors and street furniture. According to Council's First Annual Report, the organization's primary task was 'to promote by all practicable means the improvement of design in the products of British industry'.⁵ The need for improvement in design became particularly pressing towards the end of the Second World War when Britain's economy was considerably unstable. And yet the Council's role in the field of design went beyond economics. The organizational model for the Council was as an educational and advisory service for the public, industry and municipal authorities. The Council's interpretation of 'good design' was thoroughly endorsed through exhibitions, symposiums and conferences, publications, the Design Centre and Design magazine. However, given its emergence out of a long period of conflict, it is perhaps no surprise that the Council's mission was felt by some to be a moral one. In its Fifteenth Annual Report, the Council defined itself as a 'missionary' organisation promoting the cause of good design.⁶ Its primary task then, was to promote design as a social and economic good.

Though much of its central work focused on consumer goods, among the Council's early design responsibilities was the approval of street furniture for Britain's streets. The importance of street furniture during this period was underlined by the huge demand for such equipment in the immediate aftermath of the wartime conflict.⁷ Accordingly, manufacturers took advantage of the demand and began producing products in much the same way as they had done before the war. Yet for the Council, the pre-war acceptance of historicist styles was no longer appropriate and ways were sought to replace 'the masses of ugly ornate columns throughout the country'⁸, and remedy what it perceived as a pronounced absence of good taste reflected by the British streetscape.⁹ Yet matters of taste were difficult for a government-sponsored organization to discuss openly for fear of accusations of a centrally orchestrated agenda, but also because 'taste' undermined the notion of inherently 'good' design. For the Council,

4 The CoID will herewith be referred to as the Council in the main body of the text.

5 CoID, First Annual Report 1945-46, p.5

6 CoID, Fifteenth Annual Report 1959-60, p.11

7 This was due in part because of the devastation that had occurred as a result of bombing raids, and a desire to modernise the street; but also because of the 'the post-war proliferation of urban transportation and increase in car ownership' Jonathan Woodham, *The Industrial Designer and the Public*, [London: Pembridge Press, 1983], p.84

8 David Davies, 'Influence of changing transport systems', *The Municipal and Public Services Journal*, 24.11.67, in 'Street Furniture Articles and Lectures' [1432.15 Pt III]

9 The public might have felt differently however - refer to Jonathan M. Woodham, *Twentieth Century Design*, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997]

well-designed street furniture – i.e. ‘good’ street furniture - was ‘no different from that of other articles with industrial design content: fitness of purpose, proper use of materials, and of course, good appearance’.¹⁰ That appearance had to be modern. In a private letter from the third Director of the Council, Sir Paul Reilly, to Lord Snowdon, he noted that,

‘The answer to the lighting problems of today and tomorrow does not exist in the past. Much as we regret the passing of the few fine examples, we should be capable of producing something better than the pathetic reproductions which invariably misuse modern materials and manufacturing techniques.’¹¹

Arguably, such a clear rejection of the past was to be diluted somewhat throughout the post-war period, but at this relatively early stage in the Council’s involvement with street furniture, its position was unequivocal: good design meant modern design.

In order to ensure modern street furniture design was used to furnish the street by those concerned, the Council’s influence was extended through the appointment of an independent Street Furniture Advisory Committee, which approved street furniture designs submitted by manufacturers. The Committee was responsible for approving products for inclusion in the Design Index, which was a photographic database of all the products approved by the Council.¹² Though the Council did not have enforceable powers, it could be viewed as a latter-day QUANGO: state-funded and appointed by the government, which in turn sought advice from the private sector, but broadly autonomous in spirit. The Council was in effect, a consultative body which could not engage with the design process directly but, using inclusion in the Design Index as leverage, was able to influence design decisions by manufacturers. Yet the process by which such decisions were made, especially at a local government level, also affected the aesthetic of the street. For instance, a Council official remarked in 1960, that municipal councils

‘all vie with each other to make their objects conspicuous so that the doings of their department may be readily identified. The whole conception of the subject [street lighting] is crazy because we would all prefer the items to be unseen. Indeed it can be said that the ideal lighting installation is the invisible one’.¹³

Paradoxically, lighting – or indeed, all street furniture – should not only appear modern but also be invisible.

Over the course of the post-war period, the Council developed a number of methods for promoting its understanding of good design, as well as reaching the various groups identified as being influential upon the design and application of street furniture.

¹⁰ David Davies, ‘Influence of changing transport systems’, *The Municipal and Public Services Journal*, 24.11.67, in ‘Street Furniture Articles and Lectures’ (1432.15 Pt III)

¹¹ Paul Reilly, *Lamp post feature: Notes sent to Lord Snowdon (confidential)*, 19th March 1962, p.1, in ‘Street Furniture Articles and Lectures’ (1432.15 Pt III)

¹² For more information on the Design Index, formerly known as the Design Review, read Catherine Moriarty, ‘A Backroom Service? The Photographic Library of the Council of Industrial Design, 1945-1965’, *Journal of Design History* Vol. 13 No. 1.

¹³ The CoLD, *Notes for a lecture given to Durham County Council planning officers on Wednesday the 27th Jan 1960*, p.2, in ‘Street Furniture Articles and Lectures’ (1432.15 Pt III)

One of these was the publication of Design magazine which can be considered as the Council’s mouthpiece during much of the post-war period. Indeed, reflecting upon its formation the February 1970 issue of Design defined its early years as a ‘propaganda magazine’ combining a pulpit message with a crusading determination.¹⁴ Interestingly, Design’s first reference to street furniture appears to support the use of colour in the urban environment by stating that,

‘there is no need for street furniture to apologise for itself by camouflage colouring or tamely traditional design. If it is to be useful it must be noticeable, and England is grey enough without neglecting these opportunities for a blob of colour’.¹⁵

Yet other means through which the Council extended its reach were not so relaxed. In the same year – 1951 - the Council published a Design Folio on street furniture, the objective of which was to educate readers – particularly those considered design literate - on modern design.¹⁶ These visual guides indicate good and bad examples of street furnishings, but invariably celebrate modern design. One plate shows railings from a municipal housing estate built in 1949, and the Council celebrates their ‘invariably uniform’ characteristics, particularly because ‘individualism is avoided’.¹⁷ Another plate explains that the materials used to fabricate modern lamps, in this instance steel and concrete, rendered the lamp unfit to accommodate ornament. ‘The finished effect’, the Folio editors claimed, ‘is of grace and dignity, and their simplicity is such that either would look well in any setting. They are content, quietly and unostentatiously, to serve their purpose’.¹⁸

The Council also attempted to influence street furniture design through the exhibitions it staged on the subject – the first in Victoria Embankment Gardens in 1953, and on London’s South Bank in 1961, and in 1974 the Council mounted Streets Ahead in the Design Centre. These exhibitions were an opportunity for the public, as well as planners and engineers from Britain’s local authorities, to see the best examples of modern street furniture design that manufacturers could supply. While public support for the Council’s recommendations might have been more forthcoming in the immediate postwar period, by 1974 when Streets Ahead was on display, the response was more mixed. Some newspapers, such as The Journal from Newcastle upon Tyne, praised the Council’s efforts, while others such as the Norwich paper, The Eastern Daily Press, announced that ‘the only trouble is, ‘the grey angular conformity of the designs is as depressing as the present clutter is irritating’.¹⁹ Besides exhibitions, the Council also sought to influence the design of street furniture through illustrated catalogues, which it published every two years from

¹⁴ Design, no. 253, February 1970, p.56

¹⁵ Design, no. 32, August 1951, p.3

¹⁶ Penny Sparke (Ed), *Did Britain make it? British design in context 1946-1986*, London: Design Council, 1986), p.34

¹⁷ The CoLD, *Book L. Street Furniture: A Design Folio*, No date (Circa 1951), p. 4

¹⁸ The CoLD, *Book L. Street Furniture: A Design Folio*, No date (Circa 1951). p.4

¹⁹ ‘Grey conformity’ in London Letter section, *Eastern Daily Press*, Norwich, 7 Jan 1971, in ‘Streets Ahead’ (76)

1963 onwards. There were several editions of the Catalogue but the advice changed very little over successive editions. The general message was that street furniture ought to be as invisible as possible, for it could be 'ruined by crude and insensitive painting, in particular by unsuitably bright colours. If in doubt a dark, neutral colour should be used in preference to a light, "pretty" one.'²⁰ Other editions remarked that,

'England it has been said is a water-colour country and bright primary colours used with abandon on street furniture lack the strong Mediterranean light that matches them in key.'²¹

But most editions agreed that, 'in general, repetitive items – other than those concerned with traffic control – should be sited, and coloured, as inconspicuously as possible, so as to minimize their impact upon the streetscene.'²²

And yet, for a category of object that the Council recommended should remain inconspicuous, it is perhaps ironic that street furniture should have provoked such strong opinion during the post-war period. Even from the beginning the Council attracted considerable hostility for its engagement in this area of design. A particularly vocal critic during this early period was John Betjeman, whose ire was repeatedly raised by the Council's recommendations on modern street lighting. His article on 'Ugly Lamp Posts' published by *The Times* in 1950 was one of the first to criticize modern street furniture.²³ Unsurprisingly, the Council rejected Betjeman's interpretation. While Betjeman perceived concrete lamp-posts as 'sick serpents', the Council praised their 'smooth unbroken lines'.²⁴ Yet Betjeman's criticism continued unabated, and in the letters page of the July 1953 issue of *Design* he raised concern over the Council's competition for outdoor seating. Rather than focusing on the aesthetic qualities of seating - objects which he believed were comparatively unobtrusive - Betjeman claimed that because of the high-masted lamp posts approved by the Council several towns 'have been ruined by tall poles with hideous bases with jazz modern decoration on the bottom and giants' match strikes on the sides'.²⁵ He also disputed the 'good taste' of the Committee, writing that 'it is not safe to say that what a committee has chosen as a decent design for one place will look well anywhere'.²⁶

The Council's Director, Paul Reilly, was compelled to recognize the plurality of opinion in 1962, when he informed Lord Snowdon that 'practically no two artists, painters, sculptors, architects or planners seem to agree on this subject'.²⁷ By then, some officers in the Council perceived the criticism of street furniture as having become a 'sport' in which works committees and

engineers were baited by 'eminent architects, aged actors and journalist alike', and 'the excitement of bleeding one or other of the contestants has tended to eclipse the real problem'.²⁸ Others suggested it had merely become 'fashionable' to protest about street furniture, and all that was needed to incite such a reaction was 'for an official body to erect or remove something from a public place'.²⁹ Letters of complaint were routinely published in national newspapers by members of the public. For instance, in 1969 the *Financial Times* printed a letter from a reader who characterised Britain's street lights as 'concrete giraffes'.³⁰ Another warned against the 'danger in too much good design and design planning'.³¹ This particular reader defended the idiosyncratic nature of Britain's streets, whereby 'part of the attraction of English towns lies in the happy disorder of shop signs in the streets, many of which would otherwise be very drab indeed'.³² Such was the strong feeling about modern street furniture that some members of the public decided to take matters into their own hands. One community in a residential area of London, led by a Mrs Ian Davison, objected to its cast iron columns being replaced by their local Council with 'clumsy concrete ones with the pimple lanterns', and fought to pay for replacements to be installed themselves.³³ Another man in Stoke-on-Trent, Arnold Machin, chained himself to an old light fitting on his Victorian estate as part of an unsuccessful attempt to resist its removal.³⁴

From the professional sphere, such anxiety over the Council's narrow understanding of modern design was shared by the architectural writer and critic Reyner Banham. Writing in *Design* in 1955, Banham castigated the Council's 'misplaced desire for unity at a time when diversity and differentiation of product-aesthetics seem to offer the most exciting rewards in the field of design since the Bauhaus'.³⁵ While Banham's point was made in the context of the automobile industry, his general argument can be extended into the context of street furniture. He warned that Design's promotion of a 'single aesthetic standard' was likely to end in disaster, and encouraged Design's readership 'to accept, exploit and enjoy the fact that we no longer have to trim ourselves to fit into a single procrustean aesthetic'.³⁶ However, what eventually undermined the Council's authority however was not aesthetics, but questions over the legitimacy of its position to make those decisions. By the 1960s definitions of good taste and good design had become broader in scope, and well-known designers

28 CoLD, *Report on Lighting. (Lighting: Part of the Streetscene)*, no date, p.2 in 'Street Furniture Articles and Lectures' (1432.15 Pt III)

29 The CoLD, *Notes for a lecture given to Durham County Council planning officers on Wednesday the 27th Jan 1960*, in 'Street Furniture Articles and Lectures' (1432.15 Pt III)

30 James Ker Cowan, of Aldenham Herts, Letter to the editor, 'Standards of lighting', *The Financial Times*, 21st Jan 1969

31 W.P. Jaspert, of London NW3, Letters page, *Design*, no. 168, January 1961, p.81

32 Ibid.

33 Peter Whitworth, 'Street furniture', *The Times Review of Industry*, 11.10.1962, in 'Street Furniture Articles and Lectures' (1432.15 Pt III)

34 Ian Nairn, *Counter Attack against Subtopia*, (London: The Architectural press, 1957), p.407

35 *Design*, no. 79, July 1955, p.24

36 Ibid.

20 *Street furniture from Design Index 1965-66*, (London: CoLD, 1965)

21 *Street furniture from Design Index 1972-73*, (London: CoLD, 1970), p.39

22 *Street furniture from Design Index 1965-66*, (London: CoLD, 1965)

23 John Betjeman, 'Ugly Lamp Posts', *The Times*, 16th August 1950

24 *Design*, no. 42, June 1952, p.29

25 *Design*, no. 55, July 1953, p.6

26 Ibid.

27 Paul Reilly, *Lamp post feature: Notes sent to Lord Snowdon (confidential)*, 19.3.62, p.5, in 'Street Furniture Articles and Lectures' (1432.15 Pt III)

and writers had begun to challenge the moral zeal of the Council in improving the nation's taste. Misha Black, whose bench designs were later favoured by the Council, criticized the Council for adopting 'a position of moral self-righteousness no different from that of the sermonizing total abstainer'.³⁷ Black's position was also supported by Banham, who blamed the Council's patronizing attitude. For him, 'the concept of good design as a form of aesthetic charity done on the labouring poor from a great height is incompatible with democracy as I see it'³⁸ Largely as a result of such challenges, which arguably reflected the changing social and cultural climate of the 1960s, the Council was eventually forced to reconcile itself to the diminishment of its authority to decide what constituted 'good' street furniture design.

In conclusion, it is perhaps unsurprising that in literature produced by the Council itself, the organisation believed its mission to promote modern street furniture had been largely successful, and its influence tangibly felt. Yet while the Council's annual reports, press statements and even its own magazine, *Design*, might have promoted the unflinching view that the organisation had succeeded in its objective to rid the streets of ugly street furniture, it is important to place such claims in context. While the intervention of a centrally funded body might have been tolerated in the immediate aftermath of the war, resistance to the Council's efforts at imposing a particular aesthetic came from both the public and the professional sphere soon afterwards. Its interventions, however subtle, between the manufacturers of street furniture and designers, as well as its advice to local authorities seem to have become increasingly unwelcome. Moreover, eventually its very status as an official authority on good design was called into question. While the Council often deflected criticism by blaming local authorities, manufacturers and even the public for its lack of good taste or understanding of good design, such criticism might, in some ways, have had less to do with the Council itself and more to do with perceptions of authority more generally, and the rapidly changing social and cultural landscape the Council found itself within. Recognition that other perspectives on design, drawn from out-with the elite groups which had determined British culture up until that point, eventually affected the Council and forced its members to adopt a less hierarchical tone.

³⁷ Misha Black, 'Taste, Style and Industrial Design', *Motif*, no. 4, 1960, p.63

³⁸ Reyner Banham, 'The End of Insolence', *The New Statesman*, 29 Nov 1960, p.646

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