repertorio básico de la imaginería del diseño».[7] Aunque puede tomarse postura respecto a algunos de sus argumentos en concreto, la forma general de su investigación me parece muy valiosa.

Sin embargo, mientras intentamos alcanzar mayor nivel de generalización y fuerza teórica, nunca debemos perder de vista ese primer nivel de placer y curiosidad del que depende toda la edificación del estudio. El estudio del diseño nace de nuestra fascinación por la destreza y la ingenuidad humana; si intentamos disolverlo en la historia intelectual o social, o recogerlo en un discurso metahistórico, corremos el peligro de perder la sustancia. Por este motivo, el estudio del diseño nunca debería alejarse mucho del taller, la fábrica, el punto de venta; ni perder nunca contacto con la realidad sensual del objeto.

7. Forty, A., *Objects of Desire: Design and Society. 1750-1890* Thames and Hudson, Londres, 1986, p. 12.

ON THE INTERPRETATION OF DESIGN

A design lies at the meeting of many roads; to create any complex object means to unite several kinds of understanding and, reciprocally, to study an artefact engages us with many different chains of interference. The main logical difficulty in interpreting designs seems to lie in keeping these chains clearly separate until the last possible moment, so that different orders of explanation are not confused.

Two examples may illustrate what I mean by this.

The first machine textiles were, without exception, simple patterns (dots, plain repeats, stripes, *chevrons*, etc.). To what degree was this the result of technical constraints in fairly primitive mechanisms, or was it because a certain market had been identified? A recent writer has argued that

> Despite the many factors at work bringing design into being, the new machine-produced patterns can be seen, anthropologically, as the sign language of a people changing from a predominantly rural to an increasingly urban culture.[1]

This is a large and important claim, which is not easy to justify; we know that there was a certain vogue for plain patterns in the relevant period and place (1820's England and France). At the expensive end of the trade this was a romantic gesture toward simplicity; at the cheap end, plain stencil and block prints had been employed for many years to decorate wall-papers, textiles and any other surface (they appear in England as a sort of fossilised folk art).

However, once we step outside Europe we find that the export of these patterns was the main means by which indigenous pattern making in India or West Africa was disrupted; Lancashire cottons became one of the first promoters of a global visual culture, and took on a world-wide anthropological role as signifiers of modernity. Greysmith's assertion is justified in one set of circumstances, but not perhaps those he first envisaged. And in time, these simple patterns have been revived throughout Europe and given «traditional» associations they never had when fresh.

In more recent times, the evolution of the stiletto heeled shoe affords another example. Lee Wright has described the process by which shoe technology, assumptions about gender and the demands of fashion interacted together in the 1950's to raise the height of heels to an extravagant degree. In the process, the signification of the style changed; from associations of female subordination to female aggression.

> Once the aspired-to shape was a reality, the meaning had changed [...] It seems then, that in one form [...] there are different meanings.[2]

1. Greysmith, D., «The Impact of Technology on Printed Textiles in the Early 19th Century», in Hamilton, N. (ed.), *Design and Industry*, The Design Council, London, 1980.

2. Wright, L., «Objectifying Gender; the Stiletto Heel», in Attfield, J.

In the process of changing the meaning, the technology was also changed; plastics and adhesives were brought into shoe manufacture.

It thus becomes very difficult to give priority to any one aspect of the design process —the formal, the technical and the ideological, though utterly distinct as orders of explanation, are inextricably unified in the object. And since the process of design, manufacture, distribution and use extends over time and space, the signification of the design (what is represented by it) is not stable.

The consequences of this for any interpretative study of design are important. Not least, it raises in an acute form the «base-superstructure» problem. If we grant that fabrics, footwear, furniture and other goods express certain styles of life and social values and the assumptions that go with them (i.e., they embody ideology), do we grant priority to the «top» or to the technical/productive «bottom»? Or do we make a sharp separation between the one and the other and make two quite distinct kinds of enquiry? If so, upon what basis can we link them?

The case of the Art Nouveau movements is especially interesting in this respect. Here we see the phenomenon of an attempt to create a new decorative style, right across Europe; a style which would owe little, formally, to previous decoration and which would express a sense of modernity. This would appear to be a common endeavor, with common values, and there is no doubt that there are certain points of commonality. But what is just as interesting are the points of difference between one centre and another.

Debora Silverman has recently published a study of Parisian Art Nouveau that firmly identifies it with a government sponsored and nostalgic conception of France (and Paris) as the fountainhead of all refinement. This was part of a wider movement of national *rassemblement* consequent upon the debacle of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and the socialist uprising of the Commune. In an attempt to recover the lost glories, French traditions were designated as decorative rather than scientific, and craft-based rather than industrial. Government departments encouraged the «new art» and identified it with a modern domesticity. This domesticity was also, inevitably, an ideology of gender whereby a «traditional/modern» femininity was being opposed to the «radical» New Woman. This in turn was supported by a *psychologie nouvelle* which attributed to women a particular nervous constitution that expressed itself «naturally» in a heightened sensitivity. In one sense, this is a conservative and *retardataire* movement, but considered in a progressive mode this movement and its new psychology accorded to women the special task of innovation. The fashioning of the new interior was, by common analogy, a refashioning of the inner life to suit the demands of a new age.[3]

Silverman provides us with a model of a many-sided interrogation; but when we apply her method to other centres of Art Nouveau we get very different conclusions. This is particularly the case with the «Glasgow style» created and developed between 1896 and 1906, most notably by C. R. Mackintosh and his immediate colleagues. No trace of conservative nostalgia can be detected here, though there is a strongly regional character to Mackintosh's buildings. Though the Glasgow Style is primarily a craft style, yet it came about in the midst of an immense expansion of industrial activity. Glasgow in 1900 was a world centre of collossal technology and the application of science to design and manufacture. There is nothing here of that compensatory aspect which Silverman so carefully atributes to Parisian Art Nouveau. When we come to the ideology of gender, though there is still the familiar equation of the feminine with the interior, yet its intellectual basis rests upon an evolutionary concept of equality between the sexes

> reconstituting that complex and sympathetic cooperation between the differentiated sexes in and around which all progress, past or future, must depend... the social order will clear itself as it comes more in touch with biology.[4]

This is an attitude rooted in Spencer's application of Darwinian theory to social evolution, but given a distinctly «progressive» turn by Patrick Geddes and others.

The Glasgow Style was received with enthusiasm in Vienna, where it played a significant part in the development of the Secessionist movement. Though it is not easy to be certain about this, it appears that the work of Mackintosh and his wife Margaret Macdonald offered the Viennese designers a model of a progressive modern style which would enable them to transcend the regional and ethnic pressures of the heterogeneous Empire —which pressures were nationalistic, conservative and *retardataire*. In Belgium, through Victor Horta's work, Art Nouveau was associated with socialism.

It is my understanding, uninformed by serious research, that the creation of a Catalan Art Nouveau had both modernist and nationalist implications, and was therefore different yet again.

The «social evolutionist» interpretation of the new art is reinforced by English examples. Though there is little in England that can be described clearly under that category, yet two immensely important figures in the genesis of modern decoration were English. Both Christopher Dresser and Arthur Mackmurdo had a scientific training, and described themselves and their work in terms of Spencerian social evolution. Dresser wrote that

> We cannot hope that (traditional) symbolism will again prevail [...] What must find utterance in a national system of decoration is our secular knowledge, our knowledge of nature as revealed to us through the sciences, and of refinement.[5]

and Kirkham, P. (eds.) *A View from the Interior; Feminism, Women and Design*, The Women's Press, London, 1989.

3. Silverman, D. L., *Art Nouveau in fin-de-siecle France; Politics, Psychology and Style*, UCLA Press, 1989.

4. From Geddes, P. and Thompson J. A., *The Evolution of Sex*, Scott Hall, London, 1889, Ch. 19, «Psychological and Ethical Aspects». See also Brett, D., «The Eroticisation of Domestic Space; a mirror by C. R. Mackintosh», in *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 10, Fall 1988, pp. 6-14. These ideas are amplified in my book entitled *C. R. Mackintosh, the Poetics of Workmanship*, Reaktion Books, London, 1992.

5. Dresser, C., *The Art of Decorative Design*, 1862. See also Brett, D., «The Interpretation of Ornament» in *Journal of Design History*, vol. 1, nº 2, pp. 103-112.

The writings of Mackmurdo are likewise full of references to «evolutionary tendencies» and «harmonizing laws»; for him, a design «is a work of nature as a plant may be said to be a work of nature».[6] This tendency to identify culture with the laws of the universe is a constant theme in the British discourse of decoration and its ideological force is self-evident; it is the cosmological justification of industrial modernity. It is also, quite clearly, at the opposite pole to the subjectivism of Paris.

So we are faced with a considerable problem. A category exists, called Art Nouveau. This category corresponds to a feature of reality, in that its various manifestations have significant elements in common (the search for modernity, the reliance upon scientific theory, a certain eroticism, stylistic features etc.). But the signifying intentions of the category vary in very important respects from one centre to another.

There appear to be two means by which this dilemma can be resolved; the one interpretative and the other generally methodological, pertaining to our understanding of the whole subject of design.

It becomes clear that the idea of modernity (and hence, of course, «modernism») is not simple. The demands of the Parisian clientele and the official ideology of the French government body forth an idea of the modern which is constantly looking back over its shoulder at an ideal of pre-modern ascendancy. With this go certain attitudes toward the life sciences and «Nature»; Parisian Art Nouveau remained tied to a pictorial concept of «Nature» and a descriptive science, whilst in Glasgow there is a strong tendency toward abstraction and toward incorporating natural structures into design, rather than the appearance of «Nature». The differing modernities are predicated upon differing concepts of science, as well as on different social and gender assumptions. Hence Glaswegian design can be seen as a natural bridge into the twentieth century, whereas Parisian Art Nouveau cannot be so seen, even though the new style in Paris was consistently linked to the latest electrical technology and had popular and mass-commercial aspects which were lacking in Glasgow.

The inability of English society to accept and absorb the new art —which it had done so much to develop— should (following this approach) be interpreted as an indicator of England's decline into the first Ancien Régime of the industrial epoch.

An interpretation of the gender implications of the new art would reveal that in each case the discourse of decoration was becoming wrapped up in the wider discourse of femininity. There are, once more, subtle but important differences to be observed; whilst the traditional equation of the feminine with the interior is maintained in all cases, the degree and kind of «feminism» varies between the renovated patriarchy of Parisian Art Nouveau, and the «equal-but-different» ideology of Mackintosh and Macdonald.

That it is possible to pose questions of this kind shows that the study of design and its history has evolved onto a new level. Categories such as Art Nouveau are useful because they help to define a field; but they are not explanatory or interpretative. They are, essentially, categories based upon delighted curiousity and connaisseurship rather than upon analysis and social history. The situation is similar to that obtaining in nineteenth century botany which moved, around 1850, from being essentially descriptive, to develop the analysis and comparison of botanical structures and their functions. In the case of botany, the essential tool was the microscope; in the case of design we must research the intellectual and technical cultures within which particular artefacts are created, and their ideological assumptions. The study of design should be viewed as a process of interrogation; we ask of an object how it comes into being.

The main difficulty with this approach lies in relating one line of enquiry to another. The development of new glass-working methods by Émile Gallé, Tiffany and others enabled the workforce to produce new kinds of aesthetic effects which are part of what we now recognise as Art Nouveau. The astonishingly delicate and lustruous surfaces of their glass-work seems to stand as a metaphor for the extreme sensibility of the period —such as was given literary form by J. K. Huysmans and others. Effects of iridescence and changing colour are the perfect objective correlative of certain psychological states. But other than simply pointing to these metaphors, is there any reliable theoretical structure which will enable us to show how a strictly technical process is firstly invented and then extended by aesthetic/psychological intentions? This problem is not, of course, peculiar to the decorative arts; we encounter it frequently in painting and architecture, and we should consider it as a central question of the whole material culture.

An enquiry into these large scale unifying questions would constitute a third level of study —general, inclusive and philosophical in character. There are signs that this is coming into being. Books in English such as Adrian Forty's *Objects of Desire...* (1986) discuss design in terms of response to change, and employ inclusive categories of the kind I have in mind. He identifies three basic strategies —the archaic, the suppressive and the utopian— «which have recurred so often in industrial design that they might be said to form a basic grammar or repertory of design imagery.»[7] Though issue may be taken with some of his specific arguments, the general form of his enquiry seems to me very valuable.

Yet, whilst reaching for greater generality and theoretical strength, we should never lose sight of that first level of pleasure and curiousity, upon which the whole edifice of study depends. The study of design grows out of our fascination with human skill and ingenuity; if we try to dissolve it into intellectual or social history, or gather it up into a meta-historical discourse we are in danger of losing the substance. For this reason, the study of design should never get too far from the workshop, the factory, the point of sale; and never lose touch with the sensuous reality of the object.

6. A relevant paper on Mackmurdo has recently appeared; see Lutchmansingh, L. D., «Evolutionary Affinity in Arthur Mackmurdo's Botanical Design», in *Design Issues*, vol. VI, nº 2, Spring 1990, pp. 51-58.

7. Forty, A., *Objects of Desire: Design and Society. 1750-1980.* Thames and Hudson, London, 1986, p. 12.