

Abstract

Fortunately or unfortunately, design can never leave anything alone, even if it is good enough. Design intervention is called for to effect change. Designers face this dilemma, when confronted with good, judicious products, which they would have liked to leave alone, but cannot, because 'design' must be carried on. Incidentally, the above-mentioned qualities i.e., good, judicious, are meanings of the word – 'sensible'.

Design intervention can also lead to product qualities, which could be termed as sensational, so that product says loudly that 'it has been designed'. In this case the design intervention is required to be very visible to the clients, as is required in advertising.

On the other hand, one may try to keep the sense in tact and yet go beyond to achieve a quality of subtle awareness in the product, which harmonizes well with the environment and also makes an individual statement, and create an aura of curiosity & mystery. One word that comes nearest to these qualities is 'sensual', which according to dictionary meaning is 'gratifying to the senses'.

In this paper the aspects of sensible, sensational and sensual attributes of products will be discussed, and investigate what 'sensual' means? Does it appeal to human emotion universally, and if so, what methodologies can be adopted to create sensual products.

Sensible to Sensual and Beyond

Generally it is difficult for designers to read papers in conferences, probably because design is a visual medium and translating it into another medium like written word leaves most of us cold. Nevertheless it needs to be done for the sake of developing theories of design, education, creating acceptance for design and above all communicating it to the people who do not understand visual language of design. The translation of visuals into words and vice versa is often used as effective and integral part of design methodology - Design process starts with words and verbal articulation and is converted into a visual statement by the designer. The end of the process is not product or prototype, as is usually believed, but another set of words and verbal articulation, translating the visual design into words for presentation to the clients / customers.

If the designs are too sedate, attempts are made to use such words, which give more verve and punch, and in the process highlight the sensational qualities of the product. Advertising people do this. In the next design iteration, these punch lines / words may be translated into the visual language of design for producing products, which have more verve and punch - sensational products.

The title of this paper 'Sensible to Sensual' may sound sensational, and the punch line hopefully gets your attention to raise some issues during the discussion that will follow. But that is not all to it. The title has come out of deliberation and thought on the subject, and feeling that 'words have power' and, if articulated, can have a bearing on the design outcome, the design process, and the methodologies.

'Sensational' and 'sensual' are emotive qualities - our responses to stimuli, which in case of design are largely 'visual'. Of course, other qualities of products also contribute to these emotions. For example the 'smooth writing' of an ink pen, car 'holding the road like dream', 'purr' or 'roar' of a motorcycle engine, the 'rustling sound' of silk garment, 'soft touch' of velvet, and so on?

If we see around us, we are totally surrounded by designed environment, by whole lot of man-made objects and products. They all communicate to us providing stimulus to our senses. Some of these products do fulfill the purpose for which they were designed. Some fulfill other needs. Most of the products that we have around us are practical, judicious, reasonable, and perform fairly well. They make sense in the environment they are kept. Incidentally all these qualities are meanings of the word 'sensible'. They are also ordinary products of day-to-day use without which, we cannot do. They may therefore be labeled as 'Sensible Products'.

Fortunately or unfortunately, design can never leave anything alone, even if it is good enough. Design intervention is called for to affect 'change'. Designers face this dilemma, when confronted with redesign commissions for good, judicious products, which they would have liked to leave alone, but cannot, because 'design' must be carried on. Design intervention has to lead to the addition of qualities, which can make it say loudly that it has been 'designed'. Designers have to see that design intervention is visible to the clients - therefore they build some sensation into the design or make it sensational.

The products, which are loud, which create a strong impression, excitement or even horror, could be termed as 'Sensational Products'.

On the other hand, there are products, which go beyond use, beyond function, beyond our accepted sense of aesthetics, which also inspire us. Besides performing well, they create an aura of mystery, curiosity and beauty; products that blend harmoniously, and yet make a statement of their own, and are gratifying to the senses. One word that comes nearest to these qualities is 'Sensual'. These products may therefore be termed as 'Sensual Products'.

The examples in each category are umpteen. A VW product like Golf is a good and a sensible product for us. Porsches & Ferraris go beyond their function towards the sensual. If we look at American cars of 1950s, some of them, with fins and chrome, could be termed as sensational. Many sensational products can be found in exhibitions, entertainment parks etc. where these qualities are required.

Designers attempt to use words to derive forms. Words like 'security', 'pleasure', 'fun' etc., are used by car designers, to create vehicle forms, which would evoke such feelings in their customers.

Can products be classified according to these attributes - sensual, sensible and sensational?

I would like to share with you, my attempt to develop a 'design tool' termed as 3S scale (SsS), which I hope takes us a little forward in this investigation. I draw a linear scale with one end representing sensual products and the other end representing sensational products and the middle representing sensible products (fig.1).

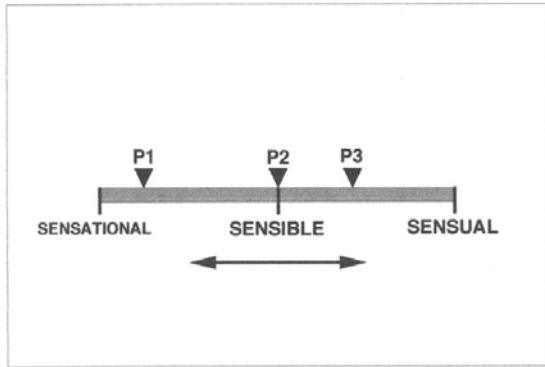


Fig. 1

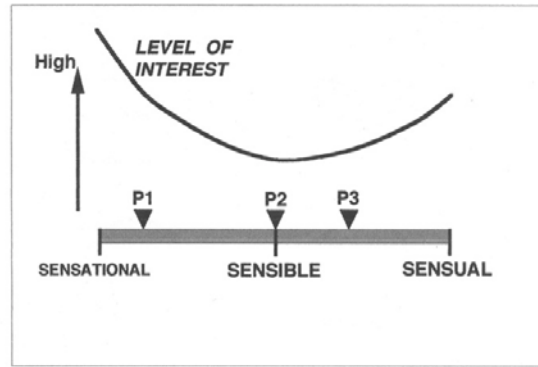


Fig. 2

We can classify these products (P1, P2, P3...) and position them according to these attributes on this scale. Highly sensual products are to be placed on the right and highly sensational products are to be placed on the left. The distance from the centre (position for the sensible) represents the intensity of sensual quality and sensational quality respectively.

If we superimpose 'level of interest' generated by these qualities, we may find the levels of interest on the sensational side are high, compared to the sensual side, whereas purely sensible products illicit rather low interest - probably because of their staid, matter of fact and expected qualities (fig.2). Sensual side shows 'lower interest' levels as compared to sensational side. It takes time to decipher the qualities of the sensual product, probably because of element of mystery built into it. Therefore another parameter that needs to be added is 'time' - 'level of interest retained over a period of time'. We find that there is a reversal of interest over a period of time (fig.3). That is why we find that some trends or fashions loose their sheen in short period of time, and others become ageless designs with interest in them growing with time.

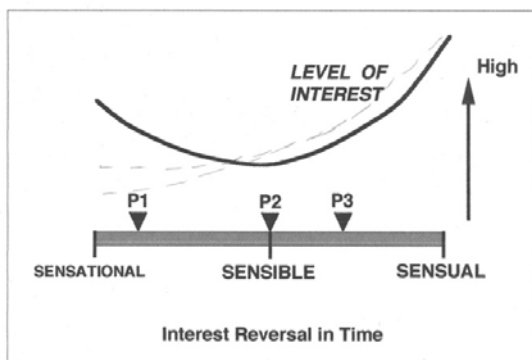


Fig. 3

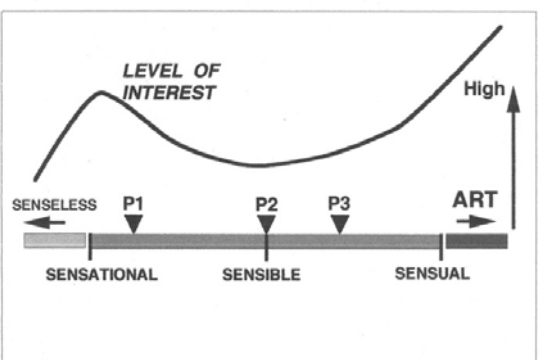


Fig. 4

If we go beyond the extremities on either side of the 3S (SsS) scale, we will find that too much 'sensationalisation' leads to a sharp decline in the 'level of interest' (fig.4) rendering them to a category of senseless products. If we go beyond the extreme on the sensual side, we enter into the realms of art and loss of some functionality. That is why we see products on this edge have become object-de-art and are immortalized in museums around the world. Many of these products are failures in the market place.

If the linear scale is turned into a curve, we see sensational and sensual almost meet, a very thin line dividing the two (fig.5). We need to be highly sensitive to this line. That is why, at times, piece of 'junk' get passed as artistic (arty) product and the real 'artistic' product, with great reviews from designers / critics, gets low interest rating from customers. This graphic model (fig.6) seems to be nearer to the reality.

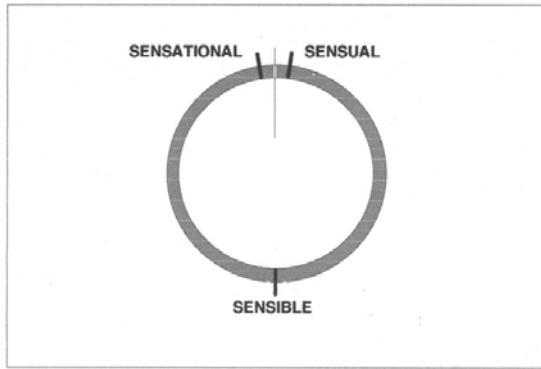


Fig. 5

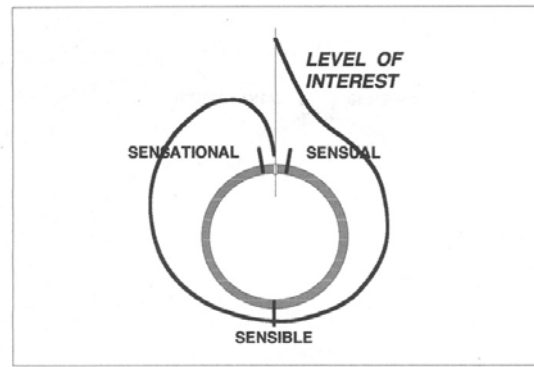


Fig. 6

If we look at some more properties, sensible products are typically contextual. They fit properly. They are often products of rigorous methodologies. Sensible products lend themselves easily to conventional design methodologies, which have been perfected since the days of Bauhaus, UIm and to the present times. Many design schools lay great emphasis on the methodologies in their educational programs. With the help of techniques like market research, customer research, product planning, feature analysis, designers create many a sensible product. There are, however, mild echoes heard from time to time that these methods do not lead to extraordinary designs. These voices eventually die down, as there has been no breakthrough in developing methods to create sensual products (fig.7).

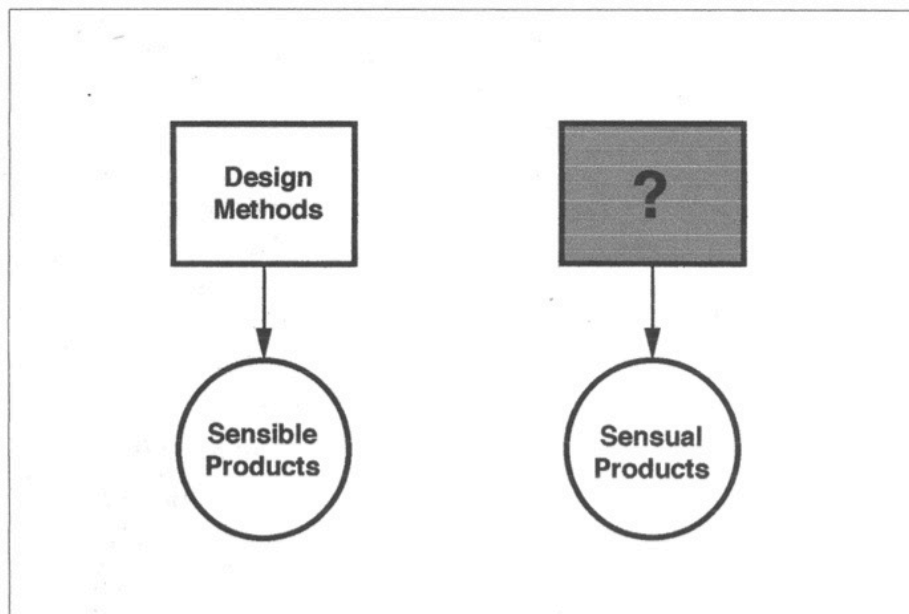


Fig. 7

To get an insight into the method of developing sensual products or even sensational products, we should study the methods used by makers of show products - show cars by car makers, ramp fashions by fashion designers. What drives them, what inspires them, what makes them select a design or reject a design when criteria are not so well defined like function, manufacturability, ergonomics, man-machine interaction? What methods to use when one has to work in the domain of 'feelings'? What to do when one has to work under the dictum - 'Form Follows Feelings'? I would like to see if product designers could imbibe some of these methods.

The question is - can we develop & use such methods? Is it possible? Would the products lose the very essence of sensuality, which we are trying to create, by imposing a method on its process of creation? Or should we leave it alone to the intuitive abilities of the designer, her experience, sensitivity and sensibility? In that case, where is its place in a design education program? Being a design educator & researcher, my position is that we cannot leave it alone; we must find answers.

Experimental methods

Here it will be right to mention the movements like Memphis, Alchemia led by people like Sottsass, Mendini, Michael Graves and other post modernists, who freed the products from the shackles of pure functionality. Alchemia group commissioned four architects to design four legs for a single table. They opened up the minds to see the alternate possibility as viable, more universal and acceptable and, thereby possibly Global. Many would of course dub their efforts as sensational. However, over the years designers have regaled in this freedom to create sensual & global products.

Shift the context

Memphis products were often the 'products of experimental methods without carrying the burden of context, ethnicity etc'. It is not easy to unburden the mind from the shackles of context when the classical design training lays great emphasis on the context. Under the circumstances it may be strategic to shift the context and redesign. For example a solar cooker is a natural gadget for a tropical country like India with 300 days of Sunshine available in a year. What could be done if a solar cooker has to work in Europe? If we work on this idea, we could probably make a much superior product for India.

Reversing the design process

One of my students at AHO is designing ski gear for professional skiers. He is going about the design in reverse - brand and branding as the first step. He developed the brand around the legend of a place - Lyngen. The Lyngen community has special laws and rules as compared to the rest of Norway. It houses a military garrison. It has rugged landscape with steep ski slopes. From this name, he is building a logo, and only after that he will do the garment design. He talked to professional skiers - not about the garment or gear and its functional qualities, but how do they see themselves - 'Knowledgeable about mountains', 'mentally strong and determined', 'physically strong with body control and flexibility', 'disciplined' were some of the answers. This is not the regular method he adopted in the earlier projects, but hopes that this experimental

methodology will open new insights about the product he is designing, and he is looking for breakthroughs.

Shadow watching

I have been talking to Jan Digerud, my colleague at AHO, Oslo, who delivered a lecture - Game of Observing - to my students. He argues that you see an object because of the shadow it creates. He wants the students to look at the 'shadows' that objects create, and start the process of design from there - 'start from effect and design for effect'.

Free wheeling

Computers offer great possibility for 'form free-wheeling' - doing kind of things with forms that were unthinkable in the past. The commands like stretch, skew, distort, morphing, nerb pulling & pushing can change ordinary shapes into inconceivable and interesting shapes. These are shapes generated without thinking of consequences. If one is not too much worried (an inhibiting factor) about the consequences (function, ergonomics, manufacturability etc.), one can generate a large variety of forms and variations, and possibly stumble upon an 'extra-ordinary' shape, from the generated pile. The designer will require a keen eye to pick a winner form the shapes so generated, and develop it further to create a sensual product.

Freeing the mind

Ancient meditation techniques have gained acceptability in the modern world as means of relieving stress and improving physical and mental health - improving 'awareness', perception & creativity. Notable among these are Yoga, Tai chi, Vipasana. There are studies, which have shown that these techniques reduce tension and improve concentration, creativity and sensory acuity. These techniques may help designers to take an intuitive leap into creating 'extraordinary' products.

Role of Ritual

After drinking tea in 'Japanese Tea Ceremony', one concentrates on the tea cup - looks at it from all sides, at the patterns, at the cracks, at the irregularities, in silence, with deep concentration and reverence, till the minute features of form and texture of the tea cup get revealed to the observer. Can this 'ritual' be extended to observe other products, which need to be judged visually? Can this ritual be used as a method for visual appreciation, evaluation, and eventually a creation? So what is the method or ritual - look at the object (do not care for other criteria) for a long enough duration, and then again, and again, and again with concentration and reverence, till it starts revealing itself and communicating. The process is ritualistic, repetitive in nature, and therefore meditative (freeing the mind) aspects are built into the process. To place a product in its correct position on the SsS scale, meditating on the object through ritualistic observation technique, as described above, can help.

These are not comprehensive answers to the concerns raised above. They need further deliberation, experimentation and research, which can lead to better insights to help designers to move the products on the SsS scale from sensibility towards sensuality.

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