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Author(s)	Kondo, Ariyuki
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Nikolaus Pevsner: Talking Industrial Design to the Workers' Educational Association

Ariyuki Kondo / Ferris University

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner (1902–83) is known today as an art historian with a vast number of publications, and the subjects of those publications reflect the wide range of his interest in artistic creativity. Admiring the monumental achievements of this scholar, one cannot but ask what drove Pevsner to explore art in such a wide and varied way. The answer seems to lie in his life-long dedication to the democratisation of artistic appreciation of works of art in general.

Rather than concentrating on art history as an academic subject in British higher education, Pevsner preferred to emphasize the importance of developing the aesthetic faculties of the general public and the indispensable role that historical study of art could play in the post-World War II struggle to develop and improve contemporary society and, in so doing, put an end to the monopoly of the élite in art, design and architecture. Pevsner was determined that artists and academics, as well as the public, should be alerted to how crucial this issue was.

* * *

Based on his experience in the socioeconomic analysis of industrial design in Birmingham in the mid-1930s, which resulted in his detailed study of English industrial design, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* (1937), in the spring of 1946, Pevsner wrote a short article, 'Thoughts on Industrial Design' in *The Highway*,† a journal published by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). The WEA, a charity organization founded in 1903, is dedicated to providing high-quality educational opportunities to the working class. It is easy to see that the organization's belief in the 'power of education and learning' and its commitment to adult education for social purposes and achievement of social justice attracted Pevsner, keen as he was on furthering the aesthetic education of the 'educatable' working classes and eradicating elitism in art.

In this article, Pevsner, who was introduced in the issue as one of the journal's 'leading contributors', referred to modern style design as 'not ornamental' and as 'the only adequate expression' of the mode of life in mid-twentieth century Britain, and asserted that it made it 'easier to produce well-designed things cheaply . . . than in any [styles] of the past'.

Pevsner observed that 'the public can only to a limited degree express its likes and dislikes, simply because it very often has no choice of good and bad', and that this was a problem. Thus he came to regard the necessity for distribution of good quality, yet inexpensively produced modern design in society as the most important task of his time. The major obstacle to this task, he felt, was the intervention of 'buyers and salesmen' as middlemen between the public consumer and the manufacturer. Pevsner wrote that 'there

is a long chain' between the public and manufacturers, for manufacturers 'meet buyers, and buyers meet the public very often only through salesmen', and 'any moderately articulate need of a customer may be suffocated or twisted round in any way by a salesman or a buyer or a factory sales manager, before it reaches the manufacturer'. According to Pevsner, buyers and salespeople's decisions are made based 'on sales', thus 'they cannot take risks', and it is only natural for them to be 'nearly always frightened of things new'; as a consequence, the public are not given the chance to express its likes and dislikes.

'Buyers and salesmen' were, however, not the only ones preventing modern style from permeating every level of society. 'In this complex trading circle of the twentieth century, everyone has some fault', wrote Pevsner. The readers he addressed, i.e., the labouring classes of post-World War II Britain, were also at fault. The public, Pevsner felt, rarely having an opportunity to express their preferences, were indifferent to or unaware of aesthetic judgment and the importance of their own development of aesthetic taste: they needed to have their consciousness raised.

It was, however, the manufacturer whom Pevsner criticised most severely, for the manufacturer's lack of interest in design was, in Pevsner's view, 'on the whole the worst villain'. The manufacturer is, according to Pevsner, 'more independent' than buyers and salespeople, and 'can quite often afford to take a risk or two, yet resists doing so'.

Merely stating the obstacles preventing modern style from permeating every level of contemporary society was, however, surely not Pevsner's primary purpose in writing this article. Pevsner ends the article by expressing his hope that the work of the C.W.S., the Co-operative Wholesale Society, would prove on a large scale that the production of aesthetically appealing modern design commodities at prices ordinary consumers, i.e., the working people of Britain, could afford was possible and within reach.

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The article 'Thoughts on Industrial Design', addressed to workers who were expected to be the main recipients of mass-produced commodities in modern styles, expressed Pevsner's vison of the democratisation of art through promotion of educational opportunities for working people to increase their awareness of and appreciation for contemporary modern style design. This vision fulfilled the promise of the Modern Movement, of which William Morris, a pioneer of the movement and a hero of Pevsner's, said in 1883: 'What business have we with art at all, unless all can share it?'

† N. Pevsner, 'Thoughts on Industrial Design', *The Highway*, The Workers' Educational Association, 1946 (March), pp. 70–71.