

"Salon" Magazine
Kiev, Ukraine
BY Katerina Oshemkova,

February, 2008

Normal and Abnormal in Design:

What, in your opinion, are the criteria that defines standard in contemporary design/architecture?

Simply enough, the criteria that defines a standard in anything is familiarity. Where does familiarity come from? It arrives air-express through social conditioning. Parents, family, friends, schools, religions and most importantly, the media systematically spoon-feed an individual their beliefs; the bylaws and guidelines for belonging to a group. And why not, the world is a daunting place. The loss of love, life, and liberty lurks around every corner. Establishing rational and prudent standards within all the chaos and uncertainty in the world seems to make sense. Therefore, a standard in contemporary design/architecture is anything deemed socially acceptable by a group because it is familiar and discernible with a rational mind, and it hovers within the framework of group thought. This is because groups believe that it is through a point of reference that they can have a window for understanding in world filled with unknowns.

Why is abnormal so attractive usually?

Abnormal is attractive because it is fresh, and fresh is outside the threshold of standard. When something is fresh our five senses, normally dormant, kick in to study specific quantitative features. Curiosity pulls us out of our normal tolerance boundaries as we investigate and explore. A new experience is birthed steps away from the secure enclave of beliefs and standards. Life, that is usually monotonous and predictable, has for a moment become virgin and pure. Oh, but the joy of discovery is fleeting. Our fears and uncertainties surface to remind us we have preconceived values and notions where abnormal is not acknowledged as being part of the club.

Give, please, examples of normal and abnormal in design.

I believe the leading standard for which everything is judged in design is Modernism. The question is always asked by critics "is the new design modern?" Modernism bases all its beliefs in rational thinking-ideas that are ingestible by the human mind. There is an accepted belief that good design needs to be logical and definitive. In the end, Modernism is a predictable assortment of linear lines arranged in smart combinations, with a dash of a floating curve a'la Le Corbusier. Has not this song been played for decades on the same trombone? The architect Richard Meier's design work comes to mind when I think of a design standard for architecture. His palette of colors and materials are predictable, his geometric moves are calculated and balanced, and he never forgets a new twist to keep the attention of his devoted followers. The Jubilee Church in Rome, Italy may be his greatest piece of architecture in his long career. However, Mr. Meier might consider retiring his old white tuxedo he has worn for so many years, for is hard to dance with the stars when your arms are sewn to your sides.

Zaha Hadid, on the other hand, spins poetic circles on the dance floor of abnormal design. Her latest design work is extremely fresh, alive, and pure. For me, there exists great freedom, power, and energy in her work.

Do you tend to work considering the boundaries of normal?

I have no concern about boundaries or standards. My best design work emerges when I let go memories and associations of the past and forge into the future and the unknown with spontaneity and lack of thought. The less I think, the faster I act, the more pure the work. Where nothing is risked, nothing is gained. I learned many lessons welding scrap metal as a sculpture. When you are standing on a high ladder late at night, with a heavy piece of steel in one hand and an electric welding stick in the other, you better make a quick decision before the whole enterprise hits the floor. Welding is fast with electricity, and if you do not like what you have created you simply cut it off and continue on your journey. Abstract oil painting has the same potential. Slap the paint to the canvas, breath, wipe it away or move on. Lastly, to have the purest thoughts today, I tend not to look very closely at the past, nor do I spend much time investigating what is going on to my left or to my right. I keep my eyes on the path in front of me, and the inspiration that lies just in front of my feet.

What is your most normal and most abnormal project that you have ever created?

Every design project that I have created is abnormal. However, I recently embraced the normal qualities of Modernism to achieve an abnormal outcome in the design of a loft space in Manhattan. I set out to turn the interior space inside out. My concept word was cityscape. In that, I brought the buildings and city streets into the design of the apartment. The client loved New York City, but they did not like the filth and crowded conditions prevalent throughout the city. My intention was to bring the romantic aspects of New York into the design, such as the glowing buildings at night, and the sense of discovery that one feels as to what may lie around the next corner. Subsequently, I used the unmistakable linear qualities of the city in creating large translucent glowing towers wrapping around the columns in the loft, and glowing boxes for the office and laundry room. I drove home the theme by painting street lines on the concrete floor intersecting and crossing through rooms. One dashed line ended at the bathroom toilet, another marched across the loft only to terminate in the center of a solid wall. This suggested an abandoned street from the past—a piece of memory and a layering of time.

Perhaps a good example of my most abnormal design work is my 'Woojuin-2007 FL-1' floor lamp. The FL-1 was not created with much thought or worldly references. The FL-1 was a by-product of spontaneity and utter abandonment.

What is the main illusion nowadays?

A primary illusion is that words can describe good design. Premium design is like any other piece of art work. In that, layers of meaning are very personal to each viewer, and quite often, the true meaning for an individual unfolds over time.

Have you noticed that people generally think of design/architecture not in right way? How does professional point of view on design differ from customers?

Design clients generally do not understand the power a 'concept idea' in design. Their desires are multifaceted and run the gambit of styles and personal tastes. They are further diluted and polluted by the influence of family and friends who have many ideas and suggestions on what is best for the design.

In the end, always and forever, I believe a strong concept idea is the DNA for extraordinary design. When a designer and client chose a concept together, they form a partnership and the concept sets the rules for their journey. Whatever fits within the concept is to be considered, and whatever does not is tossed aside. This idea of concept is necessary for multifaceted creations such as architecture. When a concept is used and followed closely, the end product is deep, layered, and profound in an effortless way.

Is it important for creative people to create illusions for themselves? Does it help or prevent?

I am not quite sure what you mean when you say create illusions for themselves. If you are asking if creative people should adopt an illusion that there are no standards in order to create pure design work, I agree. For me, what is most important for a creative individual is to learn how to let go of thought, to be spontaneous and in the moment, and to find the utter freedom that lies just over the line when we stop referencing, analyzing, associating, and caring about how well the end-product will be received by the status quo.

*Victor Vetterlein
NYC February 14, 2008*