

On the Inevitability of the “Planned Obsolescence”

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Abstract: Since the introduction of the “planned obsolescence”, it has been widely criticized by environmentalists, design theorists and some designers, and has proposed to abolish the “planned obsolescence” from many angles, but has little impact on design practice. Starting from the influence of capitalist industrialized production, social psychology and modern social structure on modern design, it is an inevitable outcome of modern society to develop after a certain stage. It is not an easy task to abolish the “planned obsolescence.”

1. Planned Obsolescence

Harley Earl put forward the idea of “planned obsolescence” in GM's automotive design. According to his opinion [1], when designing a new automobile style, it must be taken into consideration that part of the designs will be changed continuously in the next few years, and basically form a system, so that the automobile style will change at least once every two years and once every 3-4 years, which will result in the psychological aging process of consumers by constantly changing the design style. The aim is to encourage consumers to abandon their original products in order to pursue new styles and trends and buy so-called “new products” that have only changed in appearance [2]. The planned obsolescence has a tremendous impact on the commercial design of developed countries. The implementation of “planned obsolescence” and its wide application in various industries are like opening Pandora's box, bringing various problems to society, people and the environment. Although Earl first proposed the implementation of “planned obsolescence” in automobile design, which is widely criticized by future generations, from the perspective of historical development, “planned obsolescence” is the inevitable outcome of the development of modern society to a certain stage. The inevitability of “planned obsolescence” is analyzed from the three angles of capitalist industrialization production, the social psychology of ostentatious consumption and the change of modern society [3].

2. Overproduction Caused by Capitalist Industrialized Production

Since the industrial revolution, with the emergence of various new technologies and new energy sources, social productivity has been greatly improved, and the number of products has also expanded rapidly. It has made the capitalist society experience a stage of getting rid of poverty and excess goods. But in the early stages of industrialization, people who begin to emerge from poverty have a great demand for abundant and cheap products on the market, and mass-produced products are still in short supply. Therefore, this period also does not matter modern design, some are only intellectuals to the industrial production of ugly products, think that the products at that time are either flowing in commercialism surplus or flow to blindly move on to mechanized production [4].

In 1910, the United States had one car for every 184 people on average, and in 1930, one car for every 5 people. By 1947, the United States accounted for 3/4 of the world's total automobiles. At this rate of development, the market supply always exceeded the market demand. In the late 1920s, the economic development of developed countries in Europe and the United States is still halted by the commercial depression, followed by the economic crisis of 1929. During the 1929 recession, American manufacturers found that changing the “style” of their products helped to increase their sales, which led to the birth of the first generation of independent consultant industrial designers,

such as Raymond Loewy [5], Norman Bel Geddes, Walter Dorwin Teague and Henry Dreyfuss. Rowe once put forward that “the curve of rising sales is the most beautiful curve”, and Dreyfuss is called “silent salesman”, whose design help the United States get rid of the economic downturn. Goods of this period “are just competition for appearance, designed neither to give the product a beautiful appearance, nor to the investigation of effective functions, or indeed to be commended social attitude, design is only a product characteristics and is easy to sell the appearance of the combination.”¹ Therefore, American design theorist Victor Mahling mentioned that “when the word design first appeared, it is positioned as the art of design for mass-produced goods, so it has been deeply rooted in consumer culture. ²So before Earl proposed a “planned obsolescence”, “formalism” of commercial design already existed, and “formalism” business design helped the U.S. economy and helped the U.S. in the “economic crisis.”

Vance Packard believes that consumption inevitably leads to overproduction, which leads to the need for the abolition of the products themselves. This makes the capitalist economy fall into a strange circle. Overproduction requires a lot of consumption. The completion of large consumption stimulates capitalist mass production and brings about overproduction. The “planned obsolescence” has solved the problem of overproduction to a greater extent. That is, by constantly introducing new product styles, consumers can constantly replace products that have not lost their use function and consume surplus products in the market.

Therefore, “planned obsolescence” is the inevitable product of the capitalist production system, which plays an irreplaceable role in stabilizing and maintaining the existing capitalist production system.

3. Social Psychology of Conspicuous Consumption

In Maslow's theory of demand, being respected is a high-level psychological need of human beings, and individuals must establish their own prestige if they are respected by others. Prestige is established through wealth, power, knowledge and cultivation, that is, through material and non-material means.

Van Buren points out that the upper class in traditional society “conspicuous consumption” for a “sense of honor”, in order to show their identity and visualize their consumption ability, the upper class must change their clothing style in a certain period of time. This change is not due to the disappearance of the use function of the old clothes, but just for the updating of the style, through the updating of the style to maintain their sense of honor. Sambatt describes a luxury and wasteful game played by the rich in Paris in the 18th century, in which fashion, clothing, customs, manners and speech continued to change without proper reasons. The rich soon became numb to new pleasures. The furnishings in their rooms can be changed at will like stage equipment. Zimmer also described his life at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. “Today, people still seem to think that furniture should be used for 25 years, but when people buy other goods according to the latest fashion time and again, they don't think about the popular goods two years ago. Obviously, after a year or two, the appeal of fashion abandoned the current merchandise in the same way, just as it once abandoned the earlier merchandise.”³

From the descriptions of Veblen, Sombart and Simmel, it can be seen that in both traditional and modern society, human society has a tendency to conspicuous consumption, but not everyone in traditional societies has conspicuous consumption, because traditional societies are acquaintance societies. In the traditional acquaintance society, because the transportation is not developed enough, people's travel is limited, so the scope of activities is smaller, the communication between people is more carried out among acquaintances, and the chance of contacting strangers is relatively small. That is to say, in traditional society, the middle and lower classes do not establish their prestige by conspicuous consumption, which mainly occurs in the upper classes. But with the advancement of urbanization, more and more convenient transportation, more and more frequent population flow, “stranger society” also comes. In the modern society of strangers, the number of strangers that each person touches far exceeds that of the traditional society, and the understanding of strangers is far less direct and convenient than that of the acquaintance society. Therefore, the understanding of

strangers can only be judged by the explicit factors, the most important of which is the property that he can boast. "The only way for a person to impress the indifferent observers he meets in his daily life with his money power is to constantly show his ability to pay." "In order to enable one to maintain a self-satisfying mood under their observations, it is necessary to reveal the power of their own money, so that people can see at an instant." 4In the traditional acquaintance society, the conspicuous consumption of the upper class only extends to everyone in the modern stranger society.

It can be seen that although Harry Earl proposed to implement the "planned obsolescence" in design, the planned updating of product style has already existed in traditional society. This kind of behavior is based on conspicuous consumption, which exists in both traditional society and modern society. Therefore, the emergence of planned obsolescence in modern society is inevitable.

4. Changes in Modern Social Structure and the Formation of the Middle Class

In the recovery phase after the capitalist crisis of 1873, entrepreneurs realized that the main reason for the decline of the capitalist world economy was inadequate consumption - the general public did not have enough money to spend on consumption, rather than overproduction. Therefore, it is considered that improving the consumption ability of the public is an effective measure to promote productivity and economic development. In the pyramid structure of traditional society, the rich account for a small part of the top of the pyramid, while the poor account for the vast majority of the bottom of the pyramid. In the modern mature industrialized society, the social structure is shuttle-shaped, and the middle class accounts for the majority of the social population.

The middle class is mostly well-educated, has a corresponding social status, has a fixed occupation and stable income, has a certain leisure time, pursues quality of life, and has strong spending power. Zimmer once pointed out the characteristics of the middle class. Compared with the conservative upper class and the insensitive lowest class, the middle class is inherently changeable and insecure. The middle class is not satisfied with its own class, they are eager to enter a higher level of society. According to French sociologist Nicolas Elpan, "Members of the middle class perform well in the fields of economy, politics and ideology. Their positions in these fields change their social status. They subjectively believe that they belong to the ruling class, at least in the upward mobility closer to the ruling class. There is, of course, an illusion that the individual profession of the middle class does not necessarily help them integrate into the ruling class; all members of the middle class who aspire to professional success and are absorbed by the ruling class simply enjoy special opportunities for upward mobility." 5The desire of the middle class to integrate into the upper class is manifested not only in its conscientious work in order to get promotion, but also in its consumption pattern. They imitate the conspicuous consumption pattern of the upper class, even if they are unable to integrate into the upper class in their identity, they should make their life style look like that of the upper class.

The conspicuous consumption of ordinary people is forbidden in traditional society. One is through the high price of luxury goods; the other is through explicit regulations. After the lifting of the long-term material deprivation and external confinement, the middle class's desire for wealth and the pursuit of status become more intense, people's yearning for a better life is no longer so nihilistic, for them, material ostentatious consumption, the most easy to meet their own sense of superiority and the desire for upper-class life. Bourdieu and Featherstone's research also shows that the emerging middle class is a betrayer of the traditional thrifty consumption culture and the supreme consumer hedonism. They insist on the hedonistic consumption concept based on borrowing and waste, even called the "consumer class".

There are two kinds of conspicuous consumption: one is the possession of luxury goods, the other is the waste of ordinary goods, that is, the constant replacement of possessed goods. In traditional society, the first is the dominant one, and the main group is the upper class. In modern society, these two modes coexist and extend to other social strata.

In modern society, the upper class still occupies only a small part of society, but they occupy most of the wealth of society, so the possession of luxury goods is still the right of minorities.

Luxury goods still play a role in separating all sectors of society. Luxury goods consumption is still out of reach for most middle class. But conspicuous consumption is human's social nature. In the hopeless pursuit of luxury goods, the pursuit of the middle class turns to the frequent updating of ordinary goods, which is called "middle class conspicuous consumption", in order to achieve the purpose of establishing their prestige and identity. In the upper classes of traditional society, frequent replacement of ordinary goods is also common, but because of the backward productivity at that time, this kind of behavior is also too expensive for ordinary people.

Under the influence of such factors as the increase of middle class income, the sharp drop in the price of industrialized products, the development of consumer credit in the 1920s, and the promotion of the consumption mode of installment payment, etc. The consumption ability of the ordinary middle class has been greatly improved, and the concept of consumption has also changed from Protestant ethical thrifty consumption to hedonic consumption, all of which provide the possibility for the conspicuous consumption of the middle class.

5. Conclusion

The "planned obsolescence" is deeply rooted in capitalist industrialized production, and deeply influenced by the changes of social psychology and modern social structure. It is the inevitable product of the development of modern society. Although the theory of "planned obsolescence" has been criticized by environmentalists, design theorists and some designers since it is put forward, it is also proposed that "planned obsolescence" should be terminated in design, and many suggestions are put forward. However, these proposals are always marginalized in the design practice, because they fail to take into account the root causes of the planned abolition system. To eliminate the negative impact of the "planned obsolescence", it is necessary to change the basis of the industrialized large-scale production of modern enterprises, and also to change the social psychology formed by people over thousands of years and the consumption habits formed by the middle class. These changes are currently impossible to complete, so the end of the "planned obsolescence" will take a long time.

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