



Arguing that aesthetics in design are more important than it is fashionable to admit, Virginia Postrel's voice has not yet carried as far as the UK. But given the waves she is making Stateside with her book *The Substance of Style*, it won't be long before it does.

Camille Paglia described her as one of the smartest women in America. In an article in *Vanity Fair* about young female libertarians (or 'right wing Charlie's Angels', as one critic put it) Sam Tanenhaus wrote that Postrel is 'a master DJ who sequences the latest riffs from the hard sciences, the social sciences, business, and technology, to name only a few sources'.

Postrel is certainly in a position to influence. Former editor of *Reason* magazine, she now writes the economic scene column for *The New York Times*, while her articles have also appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

In her new book, *The Substance of Style*, Postrel's position on design has set the creative cliques in New York chattering. Postrel, who lives in Texas, champions style and aesthetics in design, arguing that we live in an age where consumers enjoy more choice and are spoilt for quality and functionality in our products and services, Postrel posits that the way something looks and feels is increasingly important, and therefore something business can no longer afford to ignore.

The Substance of Style is yet to be released in the UK but copies of the US edition can be ordered from www.amazon.co.uk

Henrietta Thompson

When James Dyson resigned from the board of the Design Museum in London last year, he created what the pedagogy experts call a 'teachable moment'. If one purpose of the Design Museum is to get people thinking about design – what it is, and why it matters – then the recent brouhaha has done more than any single exhibit could to accomplish that goal.

The museum's specific mix and mission are primarily questions of organisational governance, but for those of us on the outside, the controversy presents a well-timed opportunity to consider the value of design. Designers like to say their profession solves problems, but so does every occupation, from plumbing to accounting. The real question is: what kind of problems do designers solve? Where does the economic and cultural value of design come from?

Unfortunately, much of the recent discussion has been little more than the exchange of clichés and false dichotomies. Defining design has been treated as a series of all-or-nothing choices: form or function, substance or style, masculine or feminine, classic or fashionable, engineers or stylists, invention or hype, ugly but efficient or beautiful but dysfunctional, dull but important or popular but frivolous.

Much of the debate seems fuelled by anxiety over legitimacy and prestige. Dyson fears that Cool Britannia demeans functional innovation and the industrial processes that produce and apply it. He worries that the country is turning its back on a great heritage of invention and product-oriented entrepreneurship. He doesn't want the cool kids treating industrial innovators as boring social outcasts.

Yet he can be every bit as snobbish and dismissive as the worst fashionista, scorning any concern with how products look and feel. 'If someone says to me that my product is pig-ugly but they will buy it, that is fine with me,' he says. 'At no point in our engineering process do we think, how can the product look good? That just evolves.' Style is not even an afterthought, or so he maintains, because it's just not that

THE FUNCTION OF FASHION

Business innovators are increasingly finding that the aesthetic value of a product is as important as its cost and performance. American author **Virginia Postrel** argues that the look and feel of objects are now intrinsic elements of all our lives

