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BOOK REVIEW

Turkish Touch in Design: Contemporary Product Design by Turkish Designers Worldwide by Gökhan Karakuş

Istanbul, Turkey: Nurus, 2007, 159pp.
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When I was given a copy of *Turkish Touch in Design*, I could not help but think that it was yet another lavishly illustrated coffee-table book. Apparently, I had forgotten the old phrase 'never judge a book by its cover', and I was soon convinced that it was a duck soup with an insubstantial textual substance that could easily be overcome. Well, leafing through its first few pages, I realized that rather than a glossy coffee-table book, I was in fact being offered a cup of freshly brewed

coffee, invigorating and challenging, an excellent accompaniment to a thought provoking discussion on the current state of product design by Turkish designers. This inspiring book was published by Nurus, a leading furniture company, which has always been a driving force for the progress of Turkish design, not only due to its constant output of cutting-edge design but also through its regular support for design exhibitions and publications.

Opening with an introductory essay by Gökhan Karakuş, which lays the groundwork for a visual analysis of contemporary product design by Turkish designers worldwide, the book proceeds with individual profiles of thirty-two designers and their selected works. Each designer's profile is complemented by a commentary from the author that extends the initial arguments into the visual characteristics of individual design works. What sets this book apart from ordinary design anthologies is its unique theoretical framework, elaborated at the beginning and applied consistently to the analyses of the works of individual designers.

The book deserves acclaim because Karakuş skilfully avoids the pitfalls of essentialism and formalism that impair the majority of works treating design on national grounds. These works either end up positing an immutable essence that informs the design output of a nation or limit themselves to a purely formalist characterization of the works under analysis, impervious to any social or historical account. Karakuş, however, treads another path and connects the unique formal characteristics of these design works firmly with the cultural and historical sources that visually inform them as well as the economic conditions that materially shape them.

Based on the time span and locale of their practice, Karakuş divides these contemporary designers into two broad categories: the so-called Turkish Designers, whose practices have been concentrated in Turkey, predominantly in Istanbul, and Global Turks, who have spent much of their careers abroad, while maintaining business contacts within the Turkish market and industry. Examining their respective works, Karakuş identifies visual characteristics uniquely manifested in the formal composition of the design output delivered by each group. While the work of Turkish Designers can be distinguished by a form of geometric abstraction, attenuated by an intuitive recourse to an archaicism, whose origins can be traced back to a nomadic space-time nexus unique to Turkish geography, the work of the Global Turks demonstrate a more thorough engagement with Western rationalism, resulting in a less weighty, more refined treatment of the geometric abstractions indigenous to the former group's works.

Yet, it would be misleading to regard this theoretical excursion as an isolated effort to describe the visual characteristics of contemporary Turkish design in a wholesale manner, unproblematically lumping individual design works together in one of these categories without further ado. Instead, Karakuş daringly follows through the

consequences of his theoretical discussion in each and every designer's work, allowing disparities as well as consistencies to appear. In this sense, his painstaking commentaries on each designer profile are as valuable as his theoretical framework.

Sipping my coffee, towards the last few pages, I begin to ask whether his sustained discussion on the visual composition of these works amounts to a detached formalism, an exercise in hair-splitting in the service of a burgeoning design connoisseurship. Well, it can certainly be appropriated into the discourse of a new class of taste, upon whom a vocabulary of appreciation might bestow distinction. Curiously, however, I believe the author manages to offer more substance than mere formalism. As Barthes remarked on the necessity and limits of semiology as a formal study:

> . . . the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism. To parody a well-known saying, . . . a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it. (1993: 112)

This is precisely how Karakuş links his formal descriptions and categories to a diversity of historical sources, which are still alive and inform the visual composition of these design works in a unique sense. This uniqueness is by no means a consequence of a pure essence common to these works, unifying their formal compositions. Rather, it is the outcome of a unique combination of heterogeneous elements in articulation, which generate creative tension, a fertile ground for the shape of things to come in contemporary Turkish design. As the author argues:

> Not one design idea can adequately cover the many forces, be they universal, modern, rationalistic, mechanistic or autochthonous, Turkish, Istanbullite, Ottoman, Byzantine, Seljuk, nomadic, shamanistic, European, archaic, artisanal, primitive, that are coming together as a nexus of influences in design, in the practice of design in Turkey and Istanbul today. (p. 26)

It is perhaps the richness of sources, articulated in unique compositions, that is the original contribution of contemporary Turkish designers to the world of design.

Reference

Barthes, R. (1993). *Mythologies*. Trans. A. Lavers. London: Vintage.

Biography

Dr Aren Emre Kurtgözü is a lecturer in the Department of Communication and Design at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. He was a member of the Executive Board of the Turkish Society of

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