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The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking
Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness
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One of the things I'm going to be talking about is how life can change in ways we don't recognize, because it has a tendency to sneak up on us. In the late 1990s, people started to notice that something was a little bit different in the way the economy looked. It wasn't just the Internet. There was something going on. We had a famous cover of *Time Magazine* devoted to what they called the rebirth of design. And a lot of it was focused on these kinds of "blobjects," as Karim Rashid, the designer, calls them. Things like the iMac, the Beetle, the microwave toaster at Target. These sort of rounded biomorphic forms. But there was this notion that there was something going on in the economy that had to do with objects turning colors and getting round. Well, I looked at this and I thought, "You know, there is something more fundamental going on, and broader and more inclusive and it's not correct to call it design, really. And it's not just about things turning colors." That it meant what we are seeing is the increasing importance of aesthetics, the look and feel of people, places and things as a new source of value. A source of value added in the economy and reflecting an increasing importance attached to the look and feel of people, places, and things by individuals. So it wasn't just objects and it wasn't just blobjects and it wasn't just things turning colors.

Now let me start with the question of "What is aesthetics? What do I mean?" Well, I don't mean the philosophy of art. Immanuel Kant will not be making an appearance today. What I mean is communicating through the senses. Creating reactions without words. It's not verbal. It shows rather than tells. It delights rather than instructs. The effects are immediate, perceptual, and emotional. They are not cognitive. If you think about the look and feel typography, the aesthetic component is what the letters make you think of, or the shape of the

letters, the color of the letters; it's not what they spell. That is important, that message, but that is not the aesthetic component; that is the cognitive component. Now designers have to go through a cognitive process when they design. This has been developed over the years through reasoning back or reverse engineering of a sort. Figuring out what works and what doesn't, and what design principles there might be. Just like writers, our designers know a lot of things about what is effective but that they find is difficult to articulate. It just comes with experience. But when design is working, when aesthetics is working, the effects on the audience are immediate. They are emotional. They are perceptual. They are not cognitive.

Now let me take a different way of defining aesthetics. That is to apply a definition of art developed by the theorist Ellen Dissanayake. Ellen Dissanayake tried to figure out what all art in all cultures, all art, and all ritual had in common. How could we define art? And the definition she came up with is what she called "making special"—"behavior that is sensorial and emotionally gratifying and more than strictly necessary."

It isn't necessary for survival to decorate your pottery. It isn't necessary for survival to braid your hair or paint your nails. The photo I have here was taken by a Reuters photographer about a week after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and it is a woman in a burka with her hand in front of her face. The reason that she has her hand in front of her face is that she is a very, very poor widow begging on the street and this is a gesture of supplication. What is interesting about it is, this is the poorest of the poor in a poor society and yet as soon as it was legal for her to do so, she painted her nails red. Though Taliban forbade nail polish, women who didn't ever go out of the house could use it and there was apparently a trade of illegally imported nail polish. But a woman who begs on the street naturally has to show her hands and therefore she couldn't paint her nails until it was legal to do so, and so she did as soon as she was permitted. If you look closely, you can see that her hard life has chipped her polish. Going back to the notion of making special, there is a deep human drive to engage in this behavior that is sensorial and emotionally gratifying and more than strictly necessary. There is something

about us as human beings that drive us to decorate our world, to enhance the look and feel of people, places, and things beyond the mere notion of function. And, bodily decoration is one of the oldest and most pervasive versions of that.

Another way of getting at this question of “What is this phenomenon of aesthetic value?” and “What is going on in our economy today?” is to think about design. Against the advice of certainly my speakers’ bureau and to some degree some people at my publisher’s, I did not want the word *design* in the title of my book because my book is not about design. Design has three ways of adding value to products, to places, and to the world. The first way is function. Designers worry about function and rightfully so. Designers who design car interiors have to worry about the ergonomics of the controls. Graphic designers are very quick to tell us these days that there was no graphic designer involved in the design of the butterfly ballot, and if they had had even the lowliest graphic design student, we never would have had such a mess. Function is important. It is part of the value of design, and it is not what I am talking about.

The second value of design, however, is pleasure. Designers do not just make things work. They make things enjoyable. And pleasure has two components, both of which are rooted in our basic human biology. First, there are universal pleasures. There are things that human beings just enjoy because they are human beings. And a lot of the ones that have been studied carefully have to do with what we find appealing in other human beings, symmetry in faces, smooth skin. We don’t interpret them this way but these are indicators of biological fitness, of good health. Again aesthetics works at the visceral and emotional level. You don’t say, “That person has smooth skin and clean complexion. That means they don’t have any internal parasites.” You just say, “Oh they’re good looking.” But there are these universals, and they have to do with texture, color, many things that have to do with other people, and they are biologically based.

However, there is another sort of paradoxical universal and that is that human beings notice changes more than levels. That’s the way that psychologists put it. That is to say that

we tend to notice when the world around us is different rather than when it's the same. If you go to a loud rock concert, when you come out the rest of the world seems very quiet because you've gotten used to that level of volume. You don't notice how loud it is. Where as when you first got there, wow, those were some very big speakers. If you work or live in a very unpleasantly smelly environment, you have the fortunate trait of after fifteen or twenty minutes, you probably don't even smell it anymore. Well, this a biological trait, it's a survival trait. If you're thinking about prey, or predators, and issues like that, noticing changes in the environment is very important and noticing what always there is less of. But when it translates into a cultural and social context, what we get is a fashion.

By fashion, I don't just mean apparel or I don't just mean hairstyles. I mean anything that changes for purely aesthetic reasons, for reasons that have nothing to do with technical innovation or functionality. These things change because we appreciate change. We as human beings like novelty. And by the way, you don't have to have a commercial environment, and it doesn't have to be just with apparel. We even see fashion changes in the purely noncommercial area of, for example, children's names. Nobody takes out ads that say name your daughter Emily. No fashion editors declared that Brian is the new Michael. And yet we have managed to see patterns in children's names. When I was growing up, when I was in school, there were zillions of Susans in my school and every little girl named Katherine went by Kathy spelled many different ways. Today, Susan is even less common for little girls than Virginia, which you still can never find any of those little personalized things for, and every little girl named Katherine goes by Katie. Why? Fashion. It changes and it will change again. In fact, what's interesting is that there are sort of vintage fashions in the same way that there are for clothes. The name like Emily is like a vintage fashion. It sounds a little old fashioned in a positive sense. A name like Kimberly or Susan just sounds dated now, even middle aged. It's like wearing clothes that are slightly out of style. So going back to the value of design, the first

aesthetic value of design is pleasure, which has these two components, the biological and the cultural, the universals and the value of fashion or novelty.

The second aesthetic value of design is meaning. This is something that designers try to incorporate into their work but it's really out of anyone's control, because meaning comes from our association, from our experience. Now some of these meanings are very widely understood. They have explicit symbolic content. For example, you can use red, white, and blue to represent America. People use school colors. Professors at graduation wear academic robes that have very explicit meanings. But many of the meanings of aesthetics come strictly through association and a change over time.

In one of my favorite examples, in the late 1990s everybody wanted to have a new logo to look very forward-looking. They put these swooshes on their logos. Even Al Gore, when he designed the Gore/Lieberman logo, he even put a swoosh. Everybody put a swoosh, and the idea was you were forward-looking. You were progressive. You were optimistic, looking to the future, cutting edge. But now all it means is you must have been designing your logo in the late 90s.

The meaning that we draw from aesthetics usually has something to do with identity. And that identity comes from two factors—it comes from standing out and fitting in. People tend to dress like their friends. Not exactly like their friends. Not identically to their friends, but sort of in the general area of their friends or their colleagues. People in different professions often have sort of unwritten dress codes, and I'm not talking about when the company says you must wear so-and-so. I'm talking about things that nobody ever talks about, where people just kind of mimic each other without even realizing it. And it's a matter of standing out and fitting in.

Similarly if you are designing a product, you want it to stand out, be unique in its category or if it's a line extension to look like Coke but be caffeine-free or whatever. But you also want it to fit in. To look like it's categorized. You go to a newsstand, the fashion magazines all look different from each other but they don't look like hot rod magazines. Similarly the hot

rod magazines all look different from each other, but you would never mistake them for fashion magazines. Standing out and fitting in, the third value of design, talking about the value of aesthetics, is meaning.

So the substance of style, to quote the title of my book, to answer the implicit question in the title of my book can be summed up in two sentences, “I like that,” pleasure, and, “I am like that” meaning.

I talk in the book about what is today an aesthetic imperative, particularly in the business world. It starts with this notion that on the margin, as the next increment of value added, when we are talking about improving quality, we increasingly look to make things special, to enhance the look and feel of people, places and things. And as this happens, there is more and more competition on this aesthetic dimension. Your competitor has the bright idea to offer pagers in different colors instead of just basic black. And when your competitor, Motorola, did this first, when they came out with it, there is a huge advantage. They could get fifteen dollars more for their green pager, which is exactly the same as their black pager. Well, today, every pager company offers colors and pagers. And this is just something that is assumed and there is more and more competition.

This suggests, as consumers, we get great benefits from this emphasis on aesthetics. We get to live in a more stimulating, more interesting, more personalized world. The look and feel of our surroundings is enhanced. However, as producers, whether it's producers in the marketplaces or just people trying to get dressed in the morning, we face new pressures because everybody is paying attention. If you start a little company today, you have to have decent looking business cards even if it's just a one-person shop.

“Aesthetics, or styling, has become an accepted, unique selling point on a global basis,” the head of GE Plastics Global Aesthetics Program said to me. Well, first of all, I find it interesting and fascinating for the beginning of my book, that GE Plastics—a very hard headed, engineering, financially oriented company—has a global aesthetics program. Why does it have

a global aesthetics program? Well, because they don't want to be in a pure commodity business, and even more importantly their customers who are making things like personal digital assistants and water bottles don't want to be in a commodity business. We live in a world in which competition is so intense that quality as traditionally defined as function has been pushed so high and in many, many cases, price has been pushed so low that the question is, if you want to differentiate your product or service, or your place, what do you offer? And the answer is often aesthetics. The result is that we're seeing design, design in the sense as aesthetics, creep into everything. Everything from airports to staplers, from TV shows to, again, now *Newsweek* has discovered design as the *Time* did a few years ago.

Now this naturally shows up in employment. I'm just going to use a couple of examples. It shows up in traditional, obvious design professions. There are 150,000, approximately, graphic designers today. A generation ago there were 15,000 of them. A ten-fold increase. It also shows up in unexpected places, places and businesses no one thought of. The number of nail salons in this country has gone from 32,000 to 53,000 in the last ten years, and the number of manicurists from 189,000 to 372,000. And there are other similar beauty professions growing. There has been a tremendous growth in facials and this sort of stuff.

But it's not all personal beauty. Take all those granite countertops that are showing up everywhere. All the granite countertops have to be made by somebody. And the slab, the natural stone, comes from abroad. But the fabrication, turning them into the design, not only in the United States, but also usually in the local community where the countertop is going to be used. And right through the recession these businesses have been multiplying and flourishing, and people start out working for one of the companies fabricating and then eventually they start their own company.

Another example is hair color. The reason I use hair color is because it represents such a cultural shift. U.S. hair-coloring sales were over \$1.1 billion in 2001, up thirty four percent since 1997. And by the way this number is quite low, because it doesn't include Wal-Mart. I

don't know, it's the best I could, but the truth is it's a lot bigger than that. In a survey by the AARP, 71 percent of middle-aged U.S. women 45-54 said they dyed their hair to cover gray and 13 percent of the men said they do it as well, and of course those are the men who are fortunate enough to have hair.

What's particularly interesting is that there is a new and rapidly growing market for hair color among young men, men in their teens and twenties. People who are long away from worrying about gray hair. Sales are up 25 percent initially from a very small base in five years. You even see products like Herbal Essences featuring the cutting edge blonde tips as a part of their packaging, which they are selling to women as well. And these guys are not only not worrying about function or covering gray. They mostly have the motivation of most teenage boys, which is that they want to get girls.

Now in some ways that is the biggest cultural change, but the real touchstone example of today's aesthetic imperative is Starbucks, because Starbucks understood early on that they were not just selling coffee, even gourmet coffee. They were selling a multi-sensory aesthetic experience for which people would pay more money and which they would use in fact to create social spaces. "Every Starbucks store," writes the CEO, "is carefully designed to enhance the quality of everything customers see, hear, smell, or taste. Starbucks also has another challenge for its designers, and there are quite a few, 50 or 60—they wouldn't tell me the exact number—in their headquarters in Seattle. That challenge is that everyone copies them, so they were always having this standing out and fitting in problem. Everybody wants to be Starbucks. When I was researching *The Substance of Style* I was told by people who design hotel lobbies, malls—I was at Albany airport which was completely furnished like a Starbucks—libraries, even churches who said they looked to emulate Starbucks and used that as a way of saying we want an aesthetically well designed environment that will create a social space.

One of the examples that sticks in my mind is I was interviewing some architects in Dallas who work on megachurch design. They were designing what in the old days was called

a fellowship hall. They said we want it to look like Starbucks, except to seat 900 people. Everything is bigger in Texas, including the churches, especially. But it's not just churches and its not just some hotels. This is a picture of the study room at the University of Tennessee Library and as you can see it looks very much like Starbucks except for the florescent lights, and in fact it is a Starbucks. That is the counter where you can buy Starbucks coffee, although this is obviously not owned by the company. But again there is this notion of paying attention to the design and it has gotten to the point where when you write about Starbucks, when you dare to write about Starbucks, designers who review your book say "Oh, Starbucks, such a cliché." Well, ten years ago it was not a cliché. The difference is we've gone from Dunkin Donuts, my mother's old coffee hangout, to Starbucks; which suggests there is this sort of ratchet effect.

The more we see, the more our expectations rise. We see more and more possibilities as consumers. There is more and more competition, producers trying to outdo the competition, and the results are increasing expectations. One of the most striking examples of this is what has happened to graphic design as the computer tools have made it very inexpensive and ambiguous. "There's no such thing as an undersigned graphic object anymore, and there used to be," Michael Bierut, a graphic designer, told me. Now he was thinking about specific examples, a law firm's newsletters, because it used to be that if he suggested that his legal clients use pull quotes or a lightly larger typeface in their newsletters, they'd say, "Oh, that looks like advertising. We can't do that." Today he said they are using PowerPoint and they have two kinds of graphic objects, ones that are traditionally linear and others that look like a *Good Night Moon*.

But it's not just high-end law firms with big budgets. Even people who are in the cleaning lady business. These are actual brochures and fliers left on my door in Dallas from people soliciting business. Now as you can see, none of these people hire professional graphic designers. Some of them did a better job at their amateur efforts than others. But it illustrates how ten years ago you would never have expected someone who is soliciting for jobs cleaning

houses to give you a typeset, laid-out flyer with clip art. And today as our expectation has grown, if you're hiring one of these people, you're going to check references, but when you're going to decide whom to talk to first, the first impression is going to matter. And you're probably not going to hire Blondie who forgot to put in her area code and had to write it in on the other side on the vacuum cleaner, which is too bad because she may be a wonderful cleaning lady. But these first impressions matter.

This has also happened in the blending or melding of the medical end of cosmetics. Our expectations go up. Take dentistry. The *Journal of the American Dental Association* writes, "the dental profession's traditional domain centered around the eradication of disease, now finds itself on the threshold of uncharted territory, the enhancement of appearance." Or as a writer of *Slate* magazine suggested, we are going to ratchet effect in tooth whitening because "The more of us who get whitened, the grungier your teeth will appear in contrast."

There are really two aspects of this trend. We have higher expectations in more aspects of life; in places we've never had aesthetics before, even toilet brushes. At the same time there is much more variety, more personalization. Your toilet brush doesn't have to just look like a brush that you hide under the sink. It could actually look like something you enjoy. Then the question is "what should it look like?" Well that's really up to you. There is not one best way. If you go out looking for toilet brushes you'll find that even the very basic ones, the \$4.99 Wal-Mart ones come in seven different colors. And I'm not saying there's necessarily more talent or taste today than there ever was before. The point is not *what* style is used—but that *style* is used. That people are paying attention to aesthetics in areas where they never paid attention before and for reasons that are not necessarily having anything to do with status, but rather with pleasure and with personal meaning.

Now I would argue—and this is something that has become clearer and clearer to me over time—that in order to have this sort of aesthetic intensity, more and more attention, not just the lowest common denominator, we in fact have to have variety. That is, we have to have

some things that some people will love and other people will hate. Now partly that's because of the importance of meaning and personal identity, and people declaring something about themselves. And partly it is simply because tastes differ. While there are some universals, there are many different ways they can be expressed.

You see this even in automobiles today which are difficult to offer, just technologically and economically, in different styles. Increasingly automakers are coming to the conclusion that "it is better to polarize some shoppers than to generate mass apathy. Because if you have mass apathy people just won't bother. This is a real change. It used to be that economic progress was represented very well by the Holiday Inn slogan "The best surprise is no surprise." The notion was "not bad." You will have a clean room. You will have an ugly floral bedspread that will hide dirt. But it will look good in the sense of not bad. Things will be dependable. We laugh but this was tremendous progress when compared to what had gone before.

There are still industries and there are still areas in the world where there is a lot to be done in the "not bad" dimension. But increasingly we've got "not bad." We have had "not bad" for twenty-five years. We want something more and we are demanding and there is competition out there in the marketplace. So in hotels today, to give you an example, people are looking to offer something a little more distinctive. Either something that you wouldn't get at home, whether it's a sort of exotic modernism or luxury or a quaint country inn, or its something that's as nice as your rising standards at home. This is Westin's "heavenly bed." Westin and Sheraton, which are owned by Starwood Hotels and Resorts, have both put a big emphasis on the aesthetic in recent years and partly it's because their guests are coming from homes that are nicer and nicer.

If you are not going to have the lowest common denominator, it is possible to have intensity. You can have a dictator, and here is a good example. It's a Harvard dorm. The dorm was built in the mid 1960s. It was designed by the Bauhaus architect, Walter Gropius, and he bolted the furniture to the floor. A *Harvard Crimson* reporter writing a story about the new dorm

asked the great man, “What if a student doesn’t like the way the furniture is arranged? What if a student wants to rearrange the furniture?” “Well,” replied Gropius, “Then they are neurotic.” This is the alternative to having design variety and to having the lowest common denominator. You can have a dictator. But that is not the world we are living in and that is not a world that a market will sustain over time.

Today what high-end designers say is “good design is not about the perfect thing anymore, but about helping a lot of different people build their own personal identities.” Now this does not mean that designers don’t know anything and that anything goes. Designers do know things learned through long experience of themselves and their profession about how to make pleasing people, places, and things.

But again the value ultimately is in the eye of the beholder in subjective appearance. One of my favorite examples of this proliferation in the marketplace is going to the Great Indoors, which is owned by Sears, a home store. They carry 1,500 different styles of drawer pulls. I remember when we bought our first house in 1992. I was excited, I never even thought about changing drawer pulls. I was excited that you could go to the local hardware store. I think they had about twenty different ones. Well, today you can go to the Great Indoors and they have 1,500. And, if you’re like me and you write about this and you need drawer pulls, of course that’s what you do. I went to the Great Indoors and, lo and behold, they didn’t have the ones I wanted. So I had to go someplace else and for another project, I had to go on the Internet. Well, why is all this happening?

There are a whole bunch of reasons that I’m going to go through very quickly because of limited time. Obviously we have more wealth and income. We’re living in a more pluralist culture. Pluralism both in the sense that there are many more cultures that are mixing together, many more sources of aesthetic ideas, and also in a sense that we have a greater assumption of individualism and self expression. We have better, cheaper technology, distribution, and trade that lower the costs and increase the availability of aesthetic goods. There is increasingly

intense competition on price and function so that companies that are looking to get an edge have to look at other dimensions as well. As long as we continue to see these trends, which are going to be for quite awhile, the aesthetic imperative will continue.

Now I want to correct one common error. What is the effect of increasing wealth and income? A lot of smart people will draw this diagram, which is Maslow's Hierarchy, and they will conclude from this notion that we have this hierarchy of needs that only when you get to about \$40,000 of household income does anybody care about aesthetics. Well, this is totally wrong. In fact, in subsistence economies people spend a relatively large portion of their limited resources on aesthetics, on doing things like decorating their homes, because aesthetics is relative to other goods fairly cheap. A lot of goods like hygiene and transportation are unavailable practically at any price. What we've gone through is this 100-year period of the best surprise is no surprise, where we were getting more and more things that were not aesthetics but we are very excited to have them, because we've never had indoor plumbing and rapid transportation, and intercontinental communication, and privacy and all those things before.

The real question is an economics question. It's not about Maslow, it's about microeconomics. It's thinking on the margin. It's what we can spend, what we have available, our resources, and money, and time, what we already have and the relative prices of goods and what do we want next. The answer is not the same today as it was a generation ago because the answer to all three of those questions has changed. We have more to spend, yes. We also have gotten used to a certain level and we already have an inventory, so to speak. A certain level of basics and then basics defined in a very unbasic way to include things like business travel. The relative prices have shifted. The relative prices of aesthetic goods have gone down.

Another question is about variety. I said in order to have intensity you have to have variety, but variety seems so cut against the notion of mass production and mass distribution, all the great progress of the 20th century. How can we afford it? Well, you go back to Adam Smith. "Specialization is limited by extent of the market." He was talking about specialization of labor,

but the same thing is true about the specialization of goods. And what we've seen in the past 25 to 50 years is the vast extension of the market. First through population growth, the baby boomers, their children, each generation of which is about 75 million people. Immigration in this country has also spurred population growth. Urbanization—we think of urbanization as either a phenomena of the past, of the 19th century, or of developing countries. But in fact within even the last 10 years there has been significant urbanization in the United States. Fifty-eight percent of Americans live in metropolitan areas of more than 1 million people. And that is up from just under 50 percent in 1990, and something like 38 percent, and don't quote me on this—it's in the book, at the end of World War II. There has been a tremendous growth in our urban centers. So therefore, if you're thinking about retail, if you're thinking specialized goods, there's much more opportunity, international trade, obviously.

I want to talk about one other thing, which is direct marketing. Roger Horchow started the first luxury gifts catalog in 1971. I interviewed him and asked him if he could have done it ten years earlier, and he said no. It was the advent of the credit card, by which he means MasterCard or Visa, that really did it. You could start a specialty catalog and you had this trusted third party. You could trust that your customers would pay you and they could trust that you would deliver the goods because Visa or MasterCard stood between the two of you and the result was that you could start a little specialty aesthetically oriented catalog. You didn't have to be Sears, you didn't have to be Spiegel, you didn't have to start a whole credit card operation. This then grew into a massive industry of direct marketing first with catalogs, later with the Internet. That changed very much the availability of aesthetic goods.

We've also seen a drop in the cost of aesthetic goods partly because of information technology. Aesthetics today is the "killer app"—whether you're talking about designing textiles, designing graphics, doing land use planning, doing animation—you can use information technology as aesthetic technology.

And finally we have the Wal-Mart revolution—everybody asks me about Wal-Mart because, you know, Wal-Mart is ugly. Well, Wal-Mart may be ugly—they too are under pressure to get a little less ugly—but they make aesthetic goods cheaper and more widely available. Whether you're talking about teenagers decorating their room or people decorating their homes for Christmas.

In the mid 1980s for \$10, a ten dollar bill, you could buy two 35 light strings each 20 feet long. Today you can buy four 100 light strings each 50 feet long, and that's not in real dollars. That's a ten-dollar bill, the nominal dollar and that's the Wal-Mart revolution. The result is that "it's easy and inexpensive to put up a tasteful display and not much more cost or effort to try and humiliate your weak-willed neighbors." And on that seasonal note I will conclude.

Questions

Q1. How does the Internet influence aesthetics?

A1. Well, there are a few different ways. First of all there's the distribution of goods. If you want to buy copper drawer pulls with certain spacing apart—this is a true story for me—the internet is a good place to shop, and so you go to it at that point. Another influence is just the general cultural mixing which the internet does in other ways—informational ways. But I think in some ways the most pervasive influence of the Internet so far has been, or I should say the Web, has been what it's done to expectations about graphics and what things look like. It's really only after the advent of the Internet that you just couldn't put out a black and white magazine, because everybody got used to seeing things in full color. It's really only after the Internet and HTML that teenagers grow up designing *Buffy the Vampire* websites. In the same way that TV raised people's visual awareness, in another way the Internet has raised it more and because its more interactive and it's not just professionals feeding you stuff, you do it yourself or your friends do it. It's had that sort of rising expectation quality as well.

Q2. I'm worried about style replacing substance . . . for example Starbucks . . . that they're aesthetically pleasing but not making good coffee . . . the title of your book is style not substance . . .

A2. First of all while it is true, I've heard this comment about Starbucks' coffee. Believe me if you go to Starbucks they don't think that. They're obsessed, and in fact even when they do—I went to Starbucks and did a coffee tasting, even when they do the aesthetics they say, "it's all about the bean." Designers use things to get inspired that the customer doesn't necessarily appreciate or apprehend. I don't think that people who go to Starbucks don't like the coffee—I think that in fact they do like the coffee. They just like the coffee in that atmosphere better than maybe they would like somewhat less good coffee or somewhat better coffee in a different atmosphere.

And I think that points to an important point, which is that it is not a matter of style rather than substance. Substance I think has to be there, however, it doesn't necessarily mean that you're maximizing that substance. One of the examples I use in the book is the computer guy who is scoffing at people who buy a Mac rather than a cheaper, more powerful Windows machine—it's just a pretty box—and we could go into those whole wars of Mac versus Windows and the software but let's just assume this guy is right. It's just a pretty box and it's not more powerful. Well, how many of us actually need the maximally powerful computer? I know I am not doing movie special effects on my computer. I don't need the maximally powerful computer. I need a computer that is powerful enough for my purposes. Then on the margin, the thing that I might value—I actually buy a Mac for its software but I might very well buy it on look and feel. The question is what's good enough in terms of function. It's not that they don't work—it's that they may not be maximally powerful or the coffee may not be maximally delicious—but you're buying a bundle of goods, including aesthetics.

Q3. I was wondering whether what you're describing is restricted to the United States, a very affluent part of the world, or whether we see it in other areas of the world as well.

A3. Well, it's complicated—you do see it in other parts of the world. It's particularly noticeable in the English speaking countries because they have this sort of Puritan heritage being suspicious of aesthetics, so that when they start to pay attention to how their tea pots look and that sort of thing you notice it more than you would notice it in Italy or France or someplace like that. Then there's the issue of the developing world. There it's complicated because on the one hand many of those cultures partly because they weren't particularly economically advanced already put a big premium on aesthetics because you could have aesthetics when you couldn't have other goods. But as they get industrial goods, they don't have to start where, say, the United States would have been at the same level of income. They can benefit from all of these advances in lowering costs, technological, distribution or manufacturing advances that lower the

costs of aesthetics. So that you will, for a given level of development, I think, see more aesthetic expectations, especially in cultures that have strong aesthetic traditions. And then the other thing that you see in developing countries, and I think maybe someday we'll see more of is the export of aesthetics of style. I mean it's obvious in crafts type goods, which with the Internet and direct marketing and all that sort of thing are becoming increasingly important. But I think you'll see it in other more commercial ways. I've had some email correspondence with some people in South Africa who are looking at sort of encouraging design—we're not talking about little crafty stuff, we're talking about professional designers—drawing on the sort of aesthetic traditions that exist in South Africa as opposed to the United States to add some value in the world economy as a place that's kind of distant from much of the developed world. You can export certain kinds of design more with the Internet.

Q4. You talked a little bit about the investment in aesthetics. Could you talk a little bit about when you can get a price premium for a window of time but then when everybody is doing it. . .

A4. Yes, this is the sad sad story. What happens when you invest in aesthetics? What about returns? Well, the big story is you get to stay in business. And you'll particularly notice that at the level of something like a mom and pop restaurant where they're not really, really a competitive business and the expectations have just gone up a whole lot. I think a lot of it unfortunately is this window of time story—the first mover has a temporary advantage. But in a way it's no different than any other technological advance, advanced distribution logistics. In a competitive market place your competitors will find a way to come out with something to beat you, or not necessarily beat you, but to catch up, and this is just another area. It's the same thing I tell graphic designers or industrial designers—the good news is there will be more jobs in your profession, the bad news is you will not necessarily get paid any more.

Q5. David Brooks had a piece in the *New York Times* yesterday or the day before about one magazine person's quote, the quote of which was that in the past fashion and aesthetics were a snob appeal to distinguish themselves from everybody else. Today fashion is for everybody. Where is the next snob appeal going to come if not in aesthetics?

A5. Well, that depends. That's a really good question, and I will say that the people who have been the most upset about my book are the ones who are the most invested in snob appeal. They absolutely can't stand the fact that the book is not about a style hierarchy. So they may point to Starbucks and say, oh, this woman has horrible taste. The book is not about the triumph of Virginia Postrel's good taste. It's not about my taste. It's about aesthetics in the marketplace. I think there are a couple of different answers to where's the next snob appeal. It depends on what you think snob appeal is about. I think the big trend; the long-term trend of which this is just a part, is that snob appeal increasingly is not about money, because mass affluence means too many people can have anything you can buy for money. In fact if some of you may have read Robert Frank's book *Luxury Fever*, you may know about his argument, which I take issue with somewhat in this book. He actually confuses two things, he confuses luxury goods—that is something like a Viking range that's expensive—with “positional goods,” which is an economics term which means something which is necessarily ranked; beach-front property is a positional good. There is a limited amount of it; therefore not everybody can have it. Viking ranges—in theory, everyone could have one. There's no inherent limit on it and if the economy keeps growing the way it has run in the past, you know 500 years from now everyone will be as rich as Bill Gates.

So what about positional goods? What about things everybody can't have? Well, in the aesthetic realm I think there is an issue that some people are better at this than others. Some people can put together really interesting rooms, or really interesting outfits, shopping in thrift stores or making things themselves. They're just good at it. They're talented, and talent is another part of snob appeal and one that maybe the *Vogues* of the world could exploit. And

then you also have other things like education, training, a knowledge of how aesthetics works. You're going to see both professional rewards and cultural rewards to people who have a knack for aesthetics, who have both inherent talent and some training.

Q6. How has style changed the culture of China?

A6. Well, China is a great example of when you have a—I don't know if I'd say style has changed the culture of China or if style has reflected the bigger economically, cultural and political changes. If you go back to what is the quintessential everybody-dresses-the-same is the Mao suit. One of the points that is made by someone I quote in the book is that oppressive governments oppress not merely the big picture things like freedom—you don't have freedom of speech, you don't have freedom of religion. When they're really oppressive they also oppress aesthetics. They say you have to dress a certain way. They say art has to be a certain way. They tell you that you must wear burka or a Mao suit. As China has opened up it has had an opening up of style and it has been one of the areas people have expressed themselves in. I have a great picture—but something went wrong between different software packages and it didn't come through, but I had this great picture from *The Economist* a few years ago. The cover title was "China Changes" and how they illustrated "China Changes" was with young guys with blonde, dyed hair, slightly punkish and dressed in very western clothes.

Then of course the other thing about style and China is where are the Christmas lights coming from? They're coming from China. Part of the other side of the Wal-Mart story is that a lot of these aesthetic goods are becoming more available because of the inexpensive manufacturing in China.