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# I “Like” Design: Participatory Web Sites and Design Lessons for the Masses

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**Abstract:** *In North America, published advice literature and design-based television and radio programming served as prominent vehicles for communicating lessons about what or what not to do when making their own interior design decisions to the general public in the twentieth century. This passive approach to teaching the lessons of design has been supplemented in recent years by a more interactive model: the participatory web site. This research is a qualitative analysis of social media platforms, independent web sites and blogs that monitor and promote new contemporary works from around the world and this paper focuses on the content of four: designsponge.com, apartmenttherapy.com, clippings.com, and houzz.com. By providing platforms that use imagery and text as persuasive devices to promote new designs, such sources present the qualities of “good design” to be potentially absorbed by the general public. By linking site readers to design professionals or by addressing direct inquiries about solutions to design problems, today’s participatory sites enable non-designers to envision improvements to their own environments. The invitation to comment on designed products and spaces provides a valuable vehicle for formulating and sharing critical perspectives on the qualities of design that matter most to those who participate.*

**Keywords:** *Advice literature, design criticism, design-based web site*

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## Introduction

Design education for non-designers has the potential to take many forms and address many dimensions of design. This research is focused exclusively on aspects of design education that address the interior architectural environment through the cultivation of knowledge about the design of buildings, interior environments, and features or objects intended to be used in interior environments. While models for design education that relate to the built environment exist to one degree or another throughout Western culture, the focus of this discussion will be on North America, and most specifically, on the impact of the resources analysed here within the context of the United States and Canada.

Modes of educating non-designers about design varied from the latter half of the nineteenth throughout the twentieth century, ranging first from printed and published materials to radio and later to television programming. They also include face-to-face presentations to various types of women's clubs and group meetings (Beecher 1999, 254). The interpersonal communication of design knowledge occurred most directly through short-term or informal educational programs, and also as part of design-based housing improvement efforts such as the "Better Homes in America Movement" that were initiated by social reformers at certain critical points in history (Hutchison 1986, 168).

Domestic advice literature appearing in newspapers and several women's magazines throughout the twentieth century gave non-designers guidance based on the application of the principles of design, often filtered through factors of taste and economy. Author Sarah Leavitt details the history of this literature in *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*. Leavitt traces the epicentre of published history of domestic advice to Boston and New York in the United States and she links interest in making improvements to one's environment to the proliferation of educational opportunities for women via the rise of the study of home economics (Leavitt 2002, 26).

In state-sponsored universities across the U.S. and provincial schools in Canada, design education emerged from the context of architectural engineering and home economics. In both countries, such institutions reached out to the general public through nation-wide systems known as "Extension." Through these programs, free published bulletins communicated design principles to a largely rural readership with narrative, diagrams, and drawings. Later, photographs were also used to communicate lessons about color theory; visual principles of balance, rhythm, and emphasis; facilitation of function through the installation of appropriate lighting; layouts that minimize effort; and the incorporation of other aspects of efficiency by integrating storage opportunities. The extension program brought information about new materials to persons interested in modernization by promoting their properties and appropriate applications (Cushman 1933, 15-17).

In the United States, shelter and builder's magazines such as *House Beautiful*, *Better Homes and Gardens* and *American Builder* all routinely ran articles during the first half of the twentieth century that featured discussions of significant and emblematic historic examples of Western—mostly European and Early American—architecture and design. By pointing out the crucial characteristics of historic architectural styles and describing important historical properties, readers were trained to recognize key stylistic characteristics along with the relationship of those traits to the design elements and principles such as symmetry.

Along with these educational articles, popular magazines also sometimes provided opportunities for readers to consult with experts about design problems by sending in questions that were subsequently answered in a published column. Readers received guidance about colour choice, furniture arrangement, and strategies for updating outmoded environments through such means. For instance, the popular builder’s journal *Keith’s Magazine* published a column variously entitled “Inside the House” and “Decorating the Home in Good Taste” between January, 1922 and December, 1928. This feature invited readers to send in letters describing the exposure of the room in question, its woodwork finish, the reader’s preferred colour scheme and a diagram of the floor plan. These inquiries were to be submitted to “Keith’s Decorative Service” so that answers could be published for all of the magazine’s subscribers to read (*Keith’s Magazine* 1922, 28). In these ways and others, popular magazines became one of the first and most prominent modern vehicles for educating interested members of the general public about design practices such as the use of significant historic works as precedents in new design efforts and the importance of dialogue and participation in the form of question-and-answer formatted advice columns.

Although this early modern period saw the establishment of a modest number of design experts through the publication of domestic advice, the latter part of the twentieth century hosted an explosion in the number of celebrity experts on design, particularly, in the domestic realm. The emergence of Martha Stewart is perhaps the clearest example of how experts (with massive support teams) established wide-sweeping multi-media efforts using paper-based publications, television and radio broadcasts, and Internet-based communications for conveying design information to readers, listeners, and viewers about what to do to improve their environments and how to do it. From the inception of her media strategies, Martha Stewart’s interest in the application of design elements such as colour, pattern, and texture; her use of taxonomies; and her promotion of connoisseur-based practices for discerning the quality of designed objects served to promote rhetorical strategies that resonated with followers who hoped to gain knowledge about designs—past and present—from the prolific body of knowledge provided through her various media venues. Stewart’s corporate web site, “[marthastewartliving.com](http://marthastewartliving.com),” became a ground-breaking model for communication by providing participatory opportunities for participants to communicate with Martha and also with each other through devices such as discussion boards. Her extensive and graphically-appealing site, and others like it, encouraged persons interested in the design of their domestic environments to seek knowledge using web-based resources.

## Method

While the web sites of rather specialized American design and life-style gurus like Martha Stewart still play a role in the communication of design information to non-designers, such lessons are usually presented within a dense web of recipes, health news and craft projects. Today, a proliferation of more architecturally-oriented web sites, social media platforms, and blogs that monitor and promote new contemporary works in interior design around the world serve as clearer and more focused sources of design knowledge for non-designers and designers alike. Sites such as Stewart’s combine a rather “local” knowledge about design with a full range of domestic practices that include crafting and cooking while web sites and blogs that concentrate

on the architectural environment often provide a greater global focus on the design of buildings, interiors, and domestic objects such as furniture and light fixtures.

For the purpose of this qualitative research project, the content of eight web sites and blogs has been tracked over six months to establish the extent to which education about design is explicitly and implicitly communicated to readers. The thirteen knowledge categories used to define the professional standards of the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) have been used to define the attributes that constitute the presence of design-based lessons in the sites studied. Preliminary application of these categories indicated that only ten appear at a level of significance in the content of the web sites and blogs. The relevant knowledge categories are: global perspective for design; human behaviour; design process; communication; history; space and form; colour and light; furniture, fixtures, equipment and finish materials; environmental systems and controls; and interior construction and building systems.

In this paper, four of the design-oriented sites will be discussed as cases that illustrate how web-based resources best extend the historical traditions of domestic advice literature and promote the idea of the taxonomic study of works of architecture and design as a means of extending design knowledge. These four web sites serve as clear examples of the overt and also the more subtle ways that non-designers are exposed to design lessons as part of everyday societal practices. The sites are “*designsponge.com*,” “*apartmenttherapy.com*,” “*clippings.com*” and “*houzz.com*.”

## Web Sites and Blogs

### *DesignSponge.com*

Similar to Martha Stewart’s communication model (and the more conventionally-published models that preceded it) is Brooklyn-based writer Grace Bonney’s blog entitled “*Design Sponge*.” Bonney worked as a contributing editor at a number of shelter and design-oriented publications before she established the blog in 2004. Now with more than 50,000 daily visitors, *designsponge.com* is a full-service life-style blog that covers interior design, product design, and do-it-yourself projects alongside life-style or domestically-oriented information about gardening, cooking and travel, among other topics. The blog’s current senior editor, Amy Azzarito, hales with a master’s degree in the history of decorative arts and design from the prominent American design school Parsons/Cooper Hewitt and under her guidance, the blog sustains an emphasis on combining the physical and emotional qualities of one’s environment through design considerations, attention to detail, and carefully channelled consumption (designsponge.com 2012).

Perhaps because of its more recent development and slightly more youthful and eclectic perspective as seen in the range of its features and topics, the site has been dubbed by *The New York Times* as a “*Martha Stewart Living* for the Millennials” (*New York Times* 2008). Like Martha Stewart’s brand, from the graphics used to the content categories, *designsponge.com* seems to be marketed largely to women. Indeed, according to data published at “*findthebest.com*” (a site dedicated to comparing web sites based on collected data), 71% of the regular visitors are female; most are Caucasian and 35% are between 18-34 years of age. The bulk (57%) of the blog’s readers are over 35, however, and just over half of site registrants have graduated from college and a quarter have graduate degrees (Findthebest.com 2012).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of *designsponge.com* is its role as a platform for featuring amateur and professional design efforts, mostly in urban centres of the U.S. eastern seaboard. Blog editors present photographs and descriptions of inhabited spaces every week and readers are welcome to comment on what they see. Each week, two or three “Sneak Peeks” at spaces are provided and participants on the site actively weigh in. The “Sneak Peeks” provide a range of photographs of spaces as well as descriptive commentary provided by the resident and/or the designer and/or the editor. Often the person responsible for the design provides insight into the sources for some of the finishes and products shown in the photographs and more details often emerge in the dialogue generated by readers’ comments and questions. Some of the projects generate sixty to eighty notes of praise—one is hard-pressed to find a critical remark among the commentary—making the content of this web site less useful as an educational site since popularity seems to be the primary criteria for measuring what is deemed “high quality” by participants. Readers of *designsponge.com* definitely “like” design but there is little evidence that the site helps them become substantially more knowledgeable about it as a subject.

### *ApartmentTherapy.com*

Rather than taking on all aspects of the domestic environment, some blogs and web sites are more focused on particular types of spaces. Author and interior designer Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan and his brother Oliver Ryan established the popular web site “*Apartment Therapy*” in April, 2004 (*apartmenttherapy.com* 2012). The site’s intended audience is intentionally broad and the content focuses on the organization and aesthetic quality of smaller-scale residential environments—mostly in cities but not exclusively urban—as well as their ability to promote health and well-being. Despite the web site’s name, not all designs shown are rental units. By emphasizing environments that tend to be smaller in square footage and are less likely to be owned by their occupants, however, readers’ attention can be steered toward the use of temporary and affordable means of cultivating improved designed environments.

Web site data identifies more than 60% of *Apartment Therapy*’s readers as women and that same percentage of site visitors are 35 years of age or more. The site’s visitors tend to be college educated as nearly half of the more than 4 million visitors per year have a post-secondary degree and a quarter have also been to graduate school (*Findthebest.com* 2012).

The *apartmenttherapy.com* site regularly includes features such as tours, how-to and do-it-yourself information, contests for site followers, and free classified ads for readers in various U.S. and Canadian urban centres. It is supported by advertisers and corporate sponsors such as Sherwin Williams (a prominent American paint company). With the inclusion of the “Chip It” toolbar tool from Sherwin Williams, site users can see photographs of their favourite interior spaces converted on screen to a series of the company’s paint samples should they want to execute the same colour scheme in their own rooms. A link to a “marketplace” sends users to the source sites for vendors whose works have been featured, and many are independent artisans and small companies.

What is most noteworthy about *apartmenttherapy.com* in relation to this research is the nature of the some of the participation found on the site and its ability to further the notion of design education. While the tours usually elicit the usual range of generically praising phrases (“Love the house!” “Cute place” “Awesome tour!”... ), this web site is also often used by readers who request design advice that will improve their

ability to make design decisions. The “Good Questions” area of the site invites users to post photos and floor plans of their dwellings if they want some guidance from peers and the answers that result from such queries are often quite detailed and specific. For instance, when “Brooklyn Studio updates?” posted a photograph and floor plan of an empty one-room apartment, twenty-seven responders chimed in with suggestions that ranged from radical alterations such as changing the location of the kitchen to voicing opinions about whether the flooring should be consistent throughout to minute details such as shopping advice for particular furniture items, radiator covers, and light switch covers. “What’s Needed in this Room?” heard from well over one hundred respondents who weighed in with suggestions about the scale of the rug shown in the room, the lack of colour and texture in the space, as well as the general lack of variety in what could be seen in the photo. These terms, and their associated meanings, all added up to a concise design lesson for readers who participated and the voyeurs who follow along.

### *Clippings.com*

Like the two web sites already mentioned, *clippings.com* seems geared toward both designers and non-designers alike but it isn’t as open or public as *Design Sponge* or *Apartment Therapy*. The intent of *clippings.com* is to feature the works of designers, new design ideas, and designed products and to help link persons in need of help with designers in their area. It is also a web site developed to capitalize on the popularity of *Pinterest*, a site that provides a virtual means of collecting, arranging, and automatically sharing what users discover when searching the web through social media. By making one’s interests known by using *Pinterest*, it is believed possible to then identify others who share them or who are inspired by similar images as a contemporary means of making connections through sites like Facebook that automatically broadcast images to one’s “friends” list when something is “pinned.”

*Clippings.com* may be capitalizing on the popularity of *Pinterest*, but it is different in both its focus on bringing together persons offering design services and potential customers and the level of privacy it offers users who browse and “clip.” The UK-based site was developed by the same group that produces *Openbuildings.com*, an ever-growing database of information about buildings around the world. The site is organized around three categories: “Shop,” “Ideas,” and “Professionals.” Under the “Shop” heading, new products for interiors are featured in a category that is dedicated to presenting details about the item, including its cost (in UK currency) and providing a link to the supplier for *clippings.com* users who wish to make a purchase. Photographs of whole rooms with prices attached to certain goods or images of individual products are both used to entice users’ interest. The “Ideas” category presents the contents of folders that are curated by site editors who bring together thematically related items, processes, or spaces. In the “Professionals” category of the web site, professional architects and designers are invited to contribute information about themselves and portfolios of their recent work so that persons who seek a designer in a particular locale can get detailed information about one alongside general fans of design who also surf the site.

Users, who must register and choose a password to access the content and use the “folder” save feature, create private or public collections of the images they choose and organize according to themes that each defines. Much like traditional practices of “clipping” photographs from magazines as a means of documenting and articulating what design features a person desires and admires, this now digital practice has the

advantage of providing a global and ever-expanding collection of options to site users who are no longer constrained by the editorial direction of an individual magazine.

While this may, at first, sound more like a digital match-making service than an opportunity for non-designers to learn about design, it is important to recognize that the actions required to use *clippings.com* actually rely on two foundations of design education: precedent-study and curatorial practices. Although the study of design history has slipped in its prominence as a part of many designers’ contemporary education, the analysis of precedent buildings, spaces, or objects—old or new—to inform contemporary design decision-making is still a widely-embraced method of teaching design. By closely examining existing works, it is believed that design students can understand more vividly certain consequences of converting theory into practice. The assembly of virtual collections of images on *clippings.com* mimics this activity. The site presents a broad spectrum of designed environments for site users to study and select with the implied intent that the images will become models for future design activities of one form or another, either as inspiration or as a means of identifying a designer who is capable of producing some version of the work again.

Likewise, the practice of collecting and, more importantly, curating images invokes aspects of analysis based on functional and visual criteria. Site users determine the themes or purposes of their folders. They then identify images to “clip” and place in each based on the ability of the image to suggest new information that relates to the theme. By assessing and comparing designs, and then determining if and how they share or illustrate certain design traits, users of the site are taught to recognize the expression of elements and principles such as pattern, colour, texture, and scale along with harmony, variety and emphasis, among others. The assembling of folders with contents that share properties becomes a bit like playing a mental puzzle game where the ability to recognize and evaluate the content of images is valued. This active seeking and filtering process is employed by many contemporary web sites that acknowledge that trends in web-browsing have slowly crept from “searching” to “discovery” with the rise in popularity of social media sites.

### *Houzz.com*

*Houzz.com*, as the name suggests, is a site dedicated to aspects of the design of houses/domestic environments. The founders of *houzz.com* are non-designers, but they are not a presence on the site. Like *clippings.com*, one of the original purposes of the site was to help match people in need of design services with interior designers and architects. This activity was first directed at the area surrounding the site’s home base in the Bay Area in California, but it quickly became a much geographically broader repository of information. It is noteworthy, however, that the site began as an archive of the recent works of active designers and there are links on the home page that help users identify design professionals in their area as well as to leave reviews of their performances.

Visitors to the site tend to be women and college-educated persons with an income of more than \$60,000. Registration and the establishment of a profile are required to access the contents of the site. Like *clippings.com*, registrants’ profiles and saved content can be private or public. The site’s current popularity is shown by the fact that it had more than one million iPad app downloads as of March, 2012 (Kurtz 2012). It is also one of the top ten web sites noted as a source for imagery registered on *Pinterest* (engage.com 2012).



Similar to *clippings.com*'s use of folders for saving design ideas, *houzz.com* users have the opportunity to create "Ideabooks." They can be made public or be kept private. "Ideabooks" operate like scrapbooks because they are places to collect inspirational images and projects. In addition to sorting saved images according to their shared characteristics or themes, comments about each project can be registered and saved. When an image is saved to an "Ideabook," users are asked what they like about the project. These comments, if made public, become an important registry of considerations of the design lessons that can be learned from the published projects.

As with other web sites, the comments posted by web site users are largely favourable. Questions about where an object or finish material can be purchased are frequently posed, perhaps because unlike other web sites that focus on the domestic environment, *houzz.com* is not a venue for selling products or services. Like the others discussed here, it is only a portal to other sites.

Public idea books and the dialogues that they generate, however, are the real places where design lessons are taught on *house.com*. For instance, Bud Dietrich's Ideabook entitled "*Discover the Real Meeting Grounds of Architecture*" communicates Dietrich's theory of how to best identify the presence of "architecture:" that is, that architecture is created "where two things meet (Dietrich 2012)." Illustrated with an eclectic grouping of images found on the Houzz website, Dietrich's blog-like visual essay communicates the importance of considering the role that architectural elements play in the establishment of transitions between the ground and a building, between one plane and another, or between a plane and an opening. Dietrich uses the stylistic differences of different eras to illustrate his points and by pointing out shifts in the construction of transitional elements over time as a means of understanding and explaining the differences. The effectiveness of his "teaching" is shown in the comments left by readers such as "*Thanks for this article, it gave me a more focused way to look at and think about things I thought I already understood.*" (from "Pam") and "*Thanks for the interesting article. I'll never look at my house (or anyone else's for that matter) the same way again.*" (from "terryp") (Dietrich 2012).

Other public Ideabooks are geared toward more practical information. For instance, in "*How to Design an Accessible Shower*" by John Whipple, a bathroom renovation contractor, a range of bathroom projects by various designers and contractors exemplify what Whipple considers to be desirable attributes of bathrooms designed for elderly or physically disabled persons (Whipple 2012). Although the numerous comments left by readers are largely complimentary about the quality and usefulness of the information, some of Whipple's recommendations raise debate. With regard to the use of a step in front of deep tubs, some responders present a case for the importance of maintaining a level relationship between the floor and the bottom of the tub for persons with compromised balance or mobility. Other readers questioned the slipperiness of some of the wet room floor designs promoted by Whipple. Technical details about the skid-resistance of specific tile products were even provided by one reader, adding credibility to the contrasting opinion. The tone of the dialogue in both of these examples remained civil and respectful, even when contrasting views were being presented, and such decorum seems to be the norm on the *houzz.com* site, evoking a professional atmosphere.

## Conclusions: Lessons Learned

Although each of these sites offers a slightly different model of design education for non-designers, there are some characteristics they share that are worth noting. First, as long as someone has a computer with an Internet connection, web-based resources are broadly accessible and information is immediate. Most design sites and blogs streamline access to imagery and descriptions of spaces and objects to enhance readers’ efficiency and enjoyment. Secondly, the content of design-based web sites changes frequently. Because blog authors and editors desire to entice readers back on a very frequent—often daily—basis, they endeavour to post new material weekly, daily, or even hourly. Thirdly, one of the greatest opportunities presented by web-based educational resources is interactivity in the form of providing a platform where designers and persons interested in design can come together. With the prevalence of social networking, most web sites have integrated the ability to initiate dialogues and leave comments about materials posted by others. All of the sites reviewed here provide mechanisms for allowing readers to ask questions about what they see, whether it be requesting the specifics of a paint colour, the source of a particular product, or clarification about some aspect of a depicted or described condition. More than anything else, the interactivity takes the form of an invitation to users to register opinions of what they see, and this is done predominantly in the form of expressing approval if users like what they see/learn. Lastly, because the Internet is truly a world-wide platform for information, these sites have the potential to expose readers to a broad and international range of designs and design applications. The exposure to examples of designed environments from nearly every continent encourages site users to see similarities and differences in the execution of design ideas in a wide range of places, and readers are undoubtedly exposed to possibilities and potentials that they might otherwise not have imagined. At the same time, most readers are probably struck by the similarities seen in interior spaces that share no geographic commonality.

On all of the sites considered here, new designs—both spatial and product-oriented—are featured, and their presence broadly demonstrates what is valued or considered “good design” today. By exposing users to patterns that emerge through their repeated contact with images and other content, the criteria to be used for evaluation are implied and absorbed as a kind of framework for helping users develop the ability to evaluate design quality. Statistics that verify blog and web site readership demonstrate that participation with both frequently becomes habitual, making them all-the-more powerful sources of design information (Steele 2005). By returning again and again, it is easy to imagine that readers can’t help but notice the commonalities and differences between projects and products in combination with the copious amounts of reader feedback provided. This process begins to implicitly lay out a case for what *good* design is in the historical tradition of advice literature.

Given the statistics that register the gender of site users, it is tempting to further the association between contemporary web sites and blogs and their largely female readership with historical modes of discussing and teaching about the interior environment that assumed that making improvements to spaces was largely the purview of women. Although there is little evidence of the establishment of a significantly gendered identity for most of the site content analysed, certain female-centric and uncharacteristically negative dialogues did sometimes emerge when specifically male gendered spaces were featured and discussed. For instance, when a line-up of remote controls for electronic gadgets showed up as a design detail in an

Apartment Therapy tour recently, the readers quickly disparaged the gratuitousness of the photography and also the general character of some of the spaces shown. One reader even described the apartment as going from “frat boy chic to man-child cool” (Comment by Cooklyn, 2012).

By presenting all participants with opportunities to inquire about solutions to their own problems, design knowledge is instilled by site contributors who acknowledge and capitalize on this condition. *Apartmenttherapy.com* founder Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan noted in the *New York Times* that he views his site as a “form of coaching to help readers to solve problems...” and the focus on linking design professionals with members of the public on *clippings.com* and *houzz.com* furthers the intent to publically solve problems that can also serve as lessons to others who may share similar challenges and circumstances, also a previously established mode of design teaching (Steele 2005).

Although the critical dialogue about design is limited on the sites reviewed here, discussions on *houzz.com* that involved designers and non-designers alike revealed the most substantive exchanges. The value of exchange is verified by Hall and Davison in their research on the use of blogs in educational processes. They demonstrated that giving people access to the ideas of others and opportunities to leave feedback and comments enhanced opportunities to increase their understanding of a subject. By exposing an author’s posted content to the challenges of others, such exchanges also become an important aspect of the constructivist learning context—a mode of learning that is rooted in connecting knowledge to first-hand experience (Hall and Davison 2007). Even when simple questions are posed and answered, therefore, the public exchange of information facilitates an educational environment.

Although there are many positive conditions to recommend design-based web sites and blogs as educational tools for non-designers, there are limits to this system as well. First, the nature of the design lessons conveyed in such circumstances is more likely to be implicit than explicit, since it is possible that the majority of the site users “lurk” as passive readers and observers rather than as open participants. The ability of the content to register clearly as educational is most applicable to those who are actively seeking input or information.

Likewise, because the use of the Internet is not consistent on a world-wide basis and less than half of all Internet users are English-speaking (Zahedi and Bansal 2011), the nature of this enterprise as a global means of promoting design education has yet to be assessed as all of the sources considered here are geared toward a North American or UK-centric audience. A much broader multi-lingual study would be required in order to assess whether or not the conclusions drawn here are applicable in other global regions.

Because products and other consumables are so prominently featured on most design-based web sites and blogs, it is tempting to look at them sceptically as thinly veiled commercial enterprises instead of neutral sources. The fact that projects and products are sometimes reviewed helps convey the possibility that the content of such sites extends beyond the purview of commercial promotion (although most sites display sponsors’ advertisements prominently and the potential for conflicts of interest does exist when associations between contributors and manufacturers are not made explicit). Still, the web sites and blogs discussed here uphold the position of acting only as conduits to the sales sites of others by providing links rather than becoming point-of-purchase entities themselves in order to maintain the perception that they are

disinterested and critical. By maintaining this line, such sites sustain greater credibility as educational resources and community- rather than special-interest-based places.

What is also missing from the ability of design-based sites to cultivate real dialogue and new knowledge about design is increased clarity about what constitutes high quality and conditions to which to aspire. The application of principles of sustainable design practices are explicit on some sites but not all, and in many instances, the designed interiors and products featured are expensive and culturally-specific. If the design lessons of the twenty-first century are to transcend the realm of taste and perceptions of preoccupations with high culture, there is still work to be done. Yet the participatory nature of these sites provides a platform for such shifts to occur. Site users who demand that designers demonstrate the relevance of their work to the benefit of the masses stand to shift the lessons of design in new and perhaps even more significant directions. This may not happen, however, as long as design-based sites continue to celebrate "like"-able projects that photograph well but do not communicate their roles in shaping the social, environmental, and economic fabric of readers' lives.

This work is a first step toward defining the place of this media in the process of providing design education to non-designers. In future phases of this research, this qualitative "outsider's" perspective should be verified by establishing the overt intent of web publishers to include or promote design lessons as content on their sites. This should also be balanced with a study of users' experiences in order to determine whether or not there is a conscious perception of educational efforts on the part of regular site readers/followers and whether, in fact, the lessons are learned. These subsequent studies could also contribute a more holistic understanding of whether or not these lessons are intentional or are the unintended by-products of other purposes. Finally, a study looking at a more international scope of web sites could add valuable comparisons to support assessments of a more broad-based potential for this mode of communication and education.

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