



SLOW THOUGHTS

Why We Keep Referencing The Past To Feel Good About the Future, or: A Brief History of Skeuomorphism

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I love Paris. It's such an explosion of diversity, and yet so instantly recognisable. When I used to live there, I found the landmark that contributed most to the local flavour were the beautiful Art Nouveau metro stations, or more specifically their street level gateways, often adorned with stunning cast iron floral motives.

That's why it caught my attention the other day when I read about how the German Bauhaus movement generally held decorative art in contempt, and particularly looked down upon the Parisian metro stations. Bauhaus dictated that form follow function, and the ornate wrought iron patterns of Art Nouveau, often imitating organic forms, symbolised everything that was wrong with the old world.

The story of how disciples of Bauhaus loved to hate Art Nouveau appears in the book *User Friendly*, where the authors Cliff Kuang and Robert Fabricant claim that it's one of the first examples of how designers turn against what they perceive as *skeuomorphism*.

Say what!?

Skeuomorphism is a fancy word for when design of a new artefact is heavily influenced by an older paradigm. Such as when French architect Hector Guimard took this brand new technology that was the subway, and veiled it in friendly flowers.

This is bad design practice, the argument goes, because it presumes that whatever the new thing is, it's going to be perceived as vaguely threatening, and thus the user needs to be shielded from it.

An industrial designer, claimed the acolytes of Bauhaus, must never shy away from what's radically and disruptively new, but instead create form factors that are as groundbreakingly innovative as the technology itself.

Arguing the pros and cons of skeuomorphism has kept the design community busy to this day. Early versions of iOS were blatantly skeuomorphic, and drew a lot of criticism for it. The iBooks interface imitated a wooden shelf and when you opened the note taking app the top of the screen presented a torn paper; as if the previous page had been ripped out.

Apple changed paradigm radically in 2013. With the seventh release of iOS every trace of skeuomorphic design elements were gone. This was two years after Steve Jobs passed away, and according to company insiders he'd been the driving force behind the skeuomorphic design of iOS.

Steve Jobs is not the only influential individual to have been pro-skeuo. Design guru Don Norman – the father of “user centered design” – also propose that retaining design cues that no longer serve functional purposes, can make something new feel familiar. Or to use another fancy term, this one coined by Norman himself: skeuomorphism will increase the affordance of a new object.

Perhaps in the end it's not so much a question of “for or against” as of *when* does it make sense to leverage skeuomorphism and at what point does it become redundant?

Like take the example of “horseless carriages”. A hundred plus years ago that expression made people more comfortable around cars, and then at one point the analogy had played out its role and thus faded away.

I can't help thinking that the notion of “virtual reality” is a contemporary example of skeuomorphism.

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