The Implications of the Male and Female Design Aesthetic for Public Services

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Aesthetic choices: who do you please?

The public services are there to serve the interests of the public in a general sense. An interesting issue arises when it comes to meeting peoples aesthetic tastes. Is there a universal norm of good taste, or does taste, like beauty, lie in the eye of the beholder? More specifically, do men and women's taste converge, or do they differ?

The politically correct response would be that they converge. At least in the Anglo-American, Anglo-Saxon tradition. Here the pervasive paradigm is one that eschews notions of sex difference, focusing instead on a social constructionist analysis of the institutions of cultural productions. A discussion of sex differences in this tradition is brandished essentialist, a term with derisive overtones. In parts of continental Europe and Canada, however, essentialist discussion can find a place in the academe. Gilligan s work on differences between male and female approaches to ethics is a case in point.

The politically incorrect response, then, would be to say that men and women _s responses diverge. This is in fact the conclusion the present author has reached on the basis of her research.

At the risk of generalising, females tend to like bright colours, surfaces replete with detail, curvy as opposed to straight lines, humour, and elements that blend in with their surroundings. Against this, males tend to prefer darker colours, surfaces devoid of detail and so on. The dilemma for public services, in a world in which men and women's tastes may be polar opposites, is which set of values to choose. The male or the female?

The swimming baths: conflict between male and female aesthetic

The case of a municipal swimming pool in London, United Kingdom, shows what one public authority is doing. The pool (the _Finchley Lido _ in north London) was designed by a woman and opened in 1996. The interior was all of a piece - the walls and visible areas were uniform in appearance (all bright white) and the brightness of the area was aided by the light that flooded in through long oval- framed windows. The floor tiling was also white, the doors visible from this area were powder blue and mauve and the appearance of the water in the pool a matching powder blue. All the table furniture in the neighbouring seating area was white. The yellow typography on the light blue signage is whimsical and not four square. The lettering has a curvy underscore.

Those who manage the building are men and they slowly introduce changes. A large mural with a preponderance of orange fills an entire wall (male painter), featuring aggressive looking octopi and assorted shell fish. On the grounds of functionality, dark tables and chairs are brought in to replace the ageing white furniture and the whimsical signage in light blue, with its curvy underscore, is replaced by serious signage with dark green regular lettering. A long stretch of dark blue tiling is installed along a panel the full length of the side of the pool, with the surface of the panel blocking out the elegant line of the arched windows. These changes are inspired by

aesthetic considerations as well as practical ones (eg the decision to replace the white chairs by dark ones - the latter were thought to attract less dirt). If the *female* aesthetic is one which is drawn to white and bright colours and ascribes value to the coherent look of a design, and; and if the *male* aesthetic is one which attributes value to functionality, disconinuity and dark colours, then the stage is set for a clash between male and female values, between aesthetics and functionality. The purpose of this article is to articulate some of these differences and show the extent to which values, held up as universal, are rooted in the preferences of one of the sexes - the male sex.

Male and female aesthetics compared

The author conducted some simple experiments in order to compare the male and female aesthetics. Three samples of adult work were used - chocolate box designs, buildings and also business cards. The fourth sample was a sample of children _s work taken from a colouring competition (the children coloured in the outline of a cooker). A number of differences were apparent when the male and female work was compared. Firstly, colour - females use brighter colours than males, use rounder lines, and fill in open space with detail and colour. Their work tends to shun the technical and the serious. Details of the empirical work which formed a basis for these conclusions can be found elsewhere (Moss, 1995 et al), but a single example will be cited here by way of illustration. It is a large sample of personal business cards taken from newly graduated design students.

Every day, people exchange business cards, a ritual as normal as shaking hands or making a new acquaintance. A business card oils the wheels by providing information about a person's occupation and sometimes qualifications. Were the men and women's business cards different?

The sample consisted of 227 cards, 83 from male designers, and 144 from females and a comparison of the two yielded significant differences in both shape and colour. Thus, the men were more likely than the women to adopt the standard size of business card (90 x 55 cm) while the women were likely to vary the size in one of three ways:

- producing cards with overall smaller or larger dimensions

- increasing the height, thus creating a card which was squarer in appearance

- using circles, or other unconventional shapes (see three of the female cards here for examples).

The second main difference concerned colour with men were more likely than the women to use a white card, and women more likely to use a coloured card. These differences in the approach to self-promotion were statistically highly significant, and point to differences highlighted in studies by the author as well as scattered studies by other researchers. The coincidence amongst the findings suggests that these are not chance results. Moreover, a recent piece of work carried out by the author consisted of a survey of forty people connected with design. This revealed that 73% of those interviewed perceived a difference between men and women's designs.

The interviewees singled out men's use of "straight aggressive lines", "hard surfaces", "a three dimensional quality", "large size", " a different use of colour" and "themes focused on men and

vehicles". They referred to the women's use of "soft surfaces", "round, fluent shapes", "detail and pattern", "less emphasis on three-dimensionality", and themes based around "plant life", "a subtle use of humour" and "themes focused on women rather than men". Women are likely to consider the overall look, and how the different parts fit together, where men may consider parts of the design in isolation. Many of these differences are displayed in the designers' business cards shown here.

Reasons for the design differences

The explanation? A design, like a doodle, says something about the person who creates it, and if men and women have different personalities their designs will be different too. The process of drawing or designing has been described as a process of projection - as Alfred Tunnelle declared the artist does not see things as they are but as he is (Hammer, 1980) - and this offers one explanation for the often observed phenomenon that males tend to draw males, and females, females. This observation was observed by Majewski (1978) in a study of the drawings of 121 children, with the differences registering a statistical significance at $p< 0.05$ level. This echoes earlier findings including that by Levy (Hammond 1958) showing how in a sample of 5,500 adults, 89% drew their own sex first. Levy _s sample included college students, high school students and psychiatric patients, and if the latter groups are excluded, a total of 72% drew their own sex first.

This tendency to draw oneself into a design may be one factor in the appearance of the pan-player in the logo of the British Telecom's utility, British Telecom (BT). Despite the fact that the designer _s brief had been to produce a hermaphrodite figure (one which combined the two sexes) a survey of 37 subjects revealed that 74% of respondents considered the figure to be male in appearances, with only 13% of respondents considering it to be hermaphrodite (a further 13% were undecided). One explanatory factor as to why the figure appears masculine rather than hermaphrodite (as demanded) may be the tendency (described earlier) for people to depict people of their own sex. Since the designer in question refuted the notion that the sex of a designer could have any influence on his / her output, this tendency must have been operating at a level that was not conscious to the designer.

Physiological factors cannot be ignored either. Men's preference for three dimensional vision may be related to the fact that men's eyes are 4 centimeters further apart than women's, as well as to the fact that the part of the brain used for three-dimensional vision, the inferior parietal lobe, is larger in men than in women. Women's instinct for colour on the other hand, may be related to the lower incidence of colour blindness amongst females than males. On average, 8% of males suffer from colour blindness as compared with 0.5% of females. Some might see these attributes as the outcome of an evolutionary process which placed a premium in women on the development of close-up skills, skills not requiring superior 3-dimensional vision (skills such as food gathering, child rearing and the construction of the domestic foyer and its contents); while men _s superior 3-dimensional skills and preference for dark colours could be seen as an adaptation to the need to stalk and hunt prey at a distance (note that colours look dark on the horizon).

Implications of the design differences on design preferences

A distinct male and female design aesthetic would, alongside other variables such as nationality and age, have major implications for design choices, marketing and education. If, for example, men's visual skills are well-adapted to long-distance tasks (such as hunting) are they always best placed for the close-up task of designing artifacts, graphics and advertisements in the modern world? And if the differences in visual perception result in subtle differences in the designs produced, would each sex show an equal liking for the work of the opposite sex? Can a woman design optimally for men, and can men design optimally for women? Equally, can opposite sex assessment in education and employment be fair?

The author has carried out a number of preference tests in which subjects were asked which of a set of designs they preferred. In all of these there was a tendency, statistically highly significant, for subjects to select designs originated by people of their own sex. A study of Christmas cards, of all things, illustrates this tendency. Subjects were shown four cards, two designed by men and two designed by women, and despite the fact subjects were unaware of this, almost 80% of respondents selected a card designed by someone of their own sex.

Own sex preference

The phenomenon of _own-sex preference _ would seem to carry implications for public sector design and product marketing, as well as for education. Given that some services are aimed at one or other sex, or even both sexes, those designers who take into account the visual preferences of the end-user are likely to find their services achieving most visual appeal.

Traditionally, the majority of designers have been male, so products aimed at men could be expected to be well adapted to those markets. Given the proportionately small numbers of female designers worldwide, and the fact that it looks like male and female ways of seeing cannot be grafted onto the opposite sex, one might expect problems to arise in respect of the quality of the design in services aimed at women.

Implications for the Public sector

Females constitute 51% of the population and therefore males and females are both important constituencies in the receipt of public services. In some services, women may constitute the majority of customers. This is the case for example in parts of the health service. According to information created for the Canadian Health Network by the Centre for Health Promotion (and compiled by the University of Toronto and the Northwestern Health Unit), men see doctors 25% less often than women do (2003) and are likely to seek counseling less often for emotional problems than women. Conversely, men are admitted to emergency more often than women in Canada, and stay in hospital for longer periods (see reference above). It is not possible to estimate the proportions of males and females who are in receipt of other services, but it is possible to conceive that services have either a fair mixture of the two sexes, or a mix which is dominated by one or other sex.

The importance of the female customer mirrors the position in the private sector. Here, according to the Target Group Index (TGI) survey for 1995, a survey involving 26,000 adults over the age of 14, there are significantly more male than female purchasers of chocolate, china and glass, electric kettles and furniture. It is not only these areas than women dominate. Research by the

retailer, Tesco, suggests that 80% of shoppers at their grocery outlets are female, while a survey by the Henley Centre for Asda found that men shopped for an average of two-and-a-half hours per week while women shopped for four hours. The greater involvement of women in grocery shopping is confirmed by the Marketing Director of Lever Brothers (grocery brands) who is quoted as saying that _the bulk of our brands are targeted at women who still do the bulk of the shopping _ (Moss, 7,2, 1999).

The key position of the female consumer does not end there. The percentage of women who buy new cars in the United States has risen from one in three to one in two in l995, while in the United Kingdom a motoring survey by Conde Nast in 1996 revealed that 60 per cent of new car sales are to women. According to 1994 research, in just under 70 per cent of car sales, women either take the major decision or have an equal say. In the field of housing, a survey in the UK in 1996 by the National Association of Estate Agents (NAEA), men have a decisive say in the choice of house purchase in only 9 per cent of cases. Over 76 per cent of estate agents surveyed in the NAEA Market Trends report agreed that women were the key decision makers.

According to an analysis of data in the Family Expenditure Survey, a survey of 7,000 households in the UK each year, women predominated as purchasers of books, china and glass, cosmetics, kitchen equipment, jewellery, photographic equipment, small electrical goods, stationery and toys. The data indicated telephones and major electrical goods to be products in which there was no significant difference in the proportion of male and female purchasers.

The case of telephones is an interesting one. Research into the design history of the telephones marketed by the British telephone utility, BT (British Telecom) revealed that all but one of the telephones had not received any design input from a female designer. The single telephone that had (the _Duet _) is one the author purchased years ago, long before her interest in this subject had been kindled. She had bought the telephone on account of its compact, rounded shape, a welcome break with the aggressive, techno look of the other telephones. Given that equal proportions of men and women buy telephones, and that, allegedly, women spend twice as long on the telephone as men, it would make sense to ensure that a fair proportion of the telephones on the market exemplify a female, and not simply a male aesthetic. This is patently not the case in the UK where the telephones on offer conform almost exclusively to the male aesthetic. In fact, in some circles, talk of such differences is frequently waved aside as politically incorrect.

Implications for assessment

The finding that men and women's designs are different, and that each sex operates own sex preference would carry implications for recruitment and educational assessment as well as business. Where recruitment is concerned, an own sex preference would perpetuate the existing trend for men to dominate the design industry. Where educational assessment is concerned, an own sex preference would lead assessors to unwittingly indirectly discriminate against candidates of the opposite sex. In the UK, the majority of assessor of art and design at school level are female (the teachers) and at this level, both in respect of 15 year stage examinations (GCSE's) and 18 year stage examinations (A levels), males receive a consistently lower proportion of the top grades at school-level art and design examinations than boys. At degree level, the majority of assessors are male, and the scales are tipped against women, with male students obtaining proportionately more first class degrees.

If the phenomenon of _own sex preference _ is accepted - and something similar is acknowledged in the study of men and women _s preferences as between male and female styles of management - then it helps account not only for the reversal in examination success of male and female students at secondary and tertiary levels, but also for the male domination of the art and design faculties of tertiary institutions. It is true that the greater numbers of men than women studying product design may be an important factor in the domination of that Faculty by men (surveys by the author reveal that about 88% of full-time teachers of product design, and 63% of part-time teachers are male) but this cannot be an explanation in fine art (where 70% of full-time teachers and 62% of part-time teachers are male) since there are more female fine art graduates than male, a factor related inter alia to the fact, referred to above, that females traditionally outperform males in Art and Design school-leaving exams (true at least in the UK). If, in addition to other factors, we allow for the effect of the self-selecting tendency, then those in positions of influence (men) are likely to select others with aesthetic tastes similar to their own.

These are not purely academic questions. Careers often hang on impressing assessment panels, and it would be critical if the gender of the assessor was a factor in the selection decisions. In much of public life in Canada, and elsewhere, women continue to be under-represented in various spheres. For example, in Canada, 18% of members of the House of Commons are women, and 15% of current members of the Senate Of Canada are women. 15% of the federal judicial appointments made in 1993 were women. As of June 1995, 34% of the federal judicial appointments were women. In 1994, 17% of deputy ministers were women, and 18% of women in executive managerial appointments. These kind of statistics, showing women massively under-represented in senior positions in public life, could be reproduced in many countries. Imagine the significance and implications of a finding that the gender of the assessor was a factor in appointments.

There are implications also for services and products aimed at consumers. Many products have one sex as the dominant purchaser but how often are products or m-services designed with that particular sex in mind? And how often are those providing the service reflecting, in their demographics, the demographics of the purchasing constituency? The majority of advertising practitioners and product designers (just to take two professions) are men and how can they stop themselves projecting their own, male view, of whast constitutes good design. The BT pan pipe player logo, discussed earlier, is a case in point.

On a more esoteric level, a details of differences in a male and female aesthetic might help identity the sex of prehistoric cave artists, and whether the first ever painters were men or women.

Implications for the history of prehistoric art

The implications would not end there. An understanding of the differences between the male and female aesthetic would correct the art historical record regarding the world's first painters. These paintings are found in caves in France and typically date from the Upper Paleolithic period, between 18,000 and 20,000 BC. A series of paintings found recently in a cave to the north west of Avignon was pronounced by the French cave expert, Jean Clottes, as the work of the Leonardo da Vinci of the Ice Age. The British press joined in and unerringly referred to the artist as male, with one paper even accompanying the story with a picture of prehistoric man. In

assuming male authorship, they were following a tradition, illustrated in Gombrich's *History of Art*, in which male authorship is taken as read.

In fact, research shows that the artist is every bit as likely to have been female as male. There are four principal factors bearing on this. First, the predominance of female deities over male ones at this time has led people to hypothesise a matrilineal and matrilocal society and if this is the case, it is just as likely that the artists were female as male.

There is, moreover, the subject matter of the paintings to consider. In very few instances is violence depicted. At the Avignon caves there are depictions of horses, lions and other felines, none of which were hunted, and at the Lascaux caves in the Dordogne there are over 2,000 paintings and engravings, none of which feature the reindeer which was hunted here (its bones were found in great profusion). The depiction of a man felled by spears is a rather exceptional instance of violence and fierce felines and cave bears, though dangerous adversaries, are depicted in a tranquil state. Research into the paintings of children and adults shows that females are much less likely than males to take violence as a subject matter for their paintings.

They tend to prefer expressions of life, and the numerous depictions of pregnant animals in well with this schema. Then there are the small hands depicted in the Avignon caves as well as those at Pech Maries near Cabarets. One French scholar, Michel Schmidt-Chevalier, remarked that these appeared to be the hands of women and went on to argue the case for female artistry in many of the caves in south-west France.

Finally, more speculatively, there is the question of form. There is a large body of research (including my own) which suggests that male artists have a preference for straight and angular lines, and females for rounded ones. If we look at the cave paintings, there is a notable absence of straight lines. The artists seem to take pleasure in depicting the curves of the animals, their underbellies and their horns. And the female statuettes from the same period show exaggeratedly round forms. There is not a straight line in sight. Much later, during the late Neolithic period (2,500-2,000 BC) a simple tier society took over from the previously egalitarian society. At the bottom of the structure were the children, next in rank were the women and adolescents and then the men and the big men. Art now contains a mass of abstract geometrical ornament and few attempts at representing animals or natural objects. The era of female dominance in art is, arguably, over, and the Leonardas of the prehistoric art world have been superseded by male artists.

Accounting for the differences

The million dollar question, if you like, is why on earth men and women's design aesthetic should differ. Given the politics of gender, this is a subject the prudent commentator would duck. However, putting prudence to one side, there would appear to be three main factors. Firstly physiological – men's preference for three-dimensional vision may be related to the fact that their eyes are an average 4mm further apart than women's, as well as the fact that part of the brain used for three-dimensional vision, the inferior parietal lobe, is larger in men than in women. Moreover, women _s instinct for colour may relate to the much lower incidence of colour blindness (only 1/2%) amongst women compared to men (8%). Then there are issues of familiarity. If boys and girls are exposed to different kinds of objects early in their life, these objects could grow to influence their preferences (the familiarity effect). Lastly, personality may

play a role. Attitude surveys around the world point to differences in the male and female personality, and if these correspond with actual differences then men and women's designs will differ too. For a design, like a doodle, reveals a lot about its creator.

The written work: male and female signatures

A brief foray into the world of books and the written word provides a useful parallel. Unlike the small literature on male and female design preference, there is an extensive literature on male and female written and verbal styles. One of the questions this literature has addressed turns of the issue of whether a piece of writing by a man be distinguished from a piece of writing by a woman. In 200 this question was put to the test when the organisers of the international Orange prize, the women only award for fiction, carried out an interesting experiment. They supplemented the official all-female jury with an unofficial all-male jury, and asked both juries to produce a short-list. Novelist Paul Bailey anticipated agreement between the juries.There is only good and bad art. The better the writing, the more impossible it is to tell the gender from the style. Jenny Hartley, official observer of proceedings at the Orange Prize and an academic at the UK's Roehampton University, thought otherwise. Author of Reading Groups, a study into the reading patterns of men and women, she anticipated variations between the male and female choices. Whereas women's reading is directed at male and female authors she said 75% of what men read is written by men, and in random surveys, it is rare to find men reviewing women's fiction. Men practically never review female fiction.

A comparison of the choices of the two juries bears out Hartley's predictions. The male jury came up with a strikingly different list from the female one, with only one book appearing on both lists. In Hartley's view, men and women use different criteria to judge the fiction they read. Included in the female criteria are the notions that a book should:

- have something to say about the wider world
- evoke a strong feeling of what it was like to live in a different time or place
- have a positive rather than negative outlook

Included in the male criteria are the notions that a book should:

- be spirited and sassy
- have a tight story line and plot
- be shorter rather than longer (fear of boredom threshold)
- not be issue-driven. The relationship between fact and fiction should be clearly marked and not blurred. This was not a major concern in the discussion of the women's jury.

Hartley spoke of the emphasis placed by men on the novel as a work of art, in contrast to the women's desire for something that spoke of life. She commented that men read for emotion but in a much more muted way than women - it was a desirable but not necessary condition for

fiction - leading her to conceive of a head/heart distinction. These findings are supported by other research. Statistics by Book Marketing Ltd show that 75% of male respondents could tell an author's sex from a piece of writing, and gender emerged as a key variable in choice of book. Research by the Orange Prize for fiction in 2000 showed that women novelists have to work harder to be taken seriously by men than men do.

The general perception may be that in the world of work and education, men and women, and boys and girls, are judged against universal criteria of excellence. The reality however may be rather different and criteria may be being applied that are not gender-neutral. This would serve to undermine the impartiality of educational as well as employment assessment. It also leaves one to ponder why the marketing and design industries - aimed at the task of persuading men *and* women to buy products - are not staffed more equally by men and women. At the moment they are heavily skewed in favour of men, which is fine where services or products are targeted at a male market. Where the majority of customers are female, this policy may be sub-optimal.

Of course, an understanding of this whole area is beset with politics. The politics of correctness, and this demands that one presumes a like mindedness in the way men and women think. Typical of this way of thinking is the view that gender is an irrelevant variable, a popular view in certain circles. As has been shown in this paper, the evidence runs counter to this where visual and verbal stimuli are concerned. The failure to acknowledge the range of preferences that exist is to run the risk of presenting one of these preferences as a universal norm.

Implications for public services

The implications for public services? If Diversity is to have any real meaning in the public sector, then the services offered to the public need to match the needs and preferences of the majority of end-users. This is true of all elements of the offering, whether it is in customer care or in the quality of design offered. A design has a personality and needs to mirror the personality and preferences of the person at whom it is targeted rather than the person who has originated it. There are moral as well as good commercial reasons for doing this. Certainly, public services looking to optimise their services and operations need to be mindful of the opportunity cost of not optimising customer satisfaction. I for one will not be returning to the swimming pool where the male aesthetic has forced out the female. I prefer to attend a pool where the aesthetics are more in tune with my own way of seeing.

Other people, given a choice, may react similarly. Those in positions of authority need to borrow the lenses of their constituents. The world would certainly never look the same again.

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