BOOK REVIEW

Fragile Innovation: Episodes in Greek Design History by A. Yagou

Marina Emmanouil

Fragile Innovation is a brave first step in the study of design history in Greece. Yagou, a Greek design historian and lecturer at VU University Amsterdam, is addressing the relatively unexplored periphery of Southeastern European design history. Drawing on carefully selected secondary and primary sources (often rare or ill-archived), this ambitious new publication becomes a valuable companion for the intended audience of students, researchers and scholars of (design) history. Written in a simple, clear and concise language, it offers an engaging interweaving of Greek historical phenomena with the peculiarities of the emergence of local design from its 'pre-history' in the mid-19th century to the present day. Borrowing Steven Heller's wording (Heller and Ballance, 2001: ix), Yagou did manage, 'to find pegs on which to

hang design history so that it is relevant beyond the design ghetto'. In that respect, this work is a success story.

From an actor and network-based approach, the author argues for a diachronic impediment in the development and legitimization of design in Greece. This is characterized by unstable, fragmentary and inconclusive attempts to synchronize Greek design to the aspired Western model. At the outset, the book title prepares the reader for the problematic aspects of modernization and innovation in the case of an emergent design domain; indeed, case study analyses adequately support the claim of fragile innovation. The words anxiety, fear and insecurity are frequently used to describe the continuous anguish evidenced in its development in a nexus of participating actors: state officials, manufacturers, private enterprises, editors, art critics, journalists, artists, architects and designers.

The book is divided into seven chapters that correspond to design-related state and private initiatives. These are chronologically and thematically arranged, and derive from earlier articles (except chapter 6), published in refereed periodicals. Put together in this single volume to form 'episodes in Greek design history', they combine insightful perspectives drawn from original research in the areas of product design (chapters 1, 3), fashion design (chapters 2, 6), product advertising (especially chapter 7), as well as institutionalization and professionalization (chapters 4, 5). As noted by the author, the 'final synthesis is an idiosyncratic and perhaps uneven puzzle of generalist ambitions' (p. 3), and so this eclectic collection of episodes urges the careful application of meaning around *modernization* in a *peripheral* context: two key concepts that are only partially addressed and deserved a more refined theoretical analysis in the introduction. Nevertheless, one easily understands the canonical unfolding of the general narrative as it addresses modernization, national identity and design identity. It would be unfair to expect this first attempt to break much new thematic ground. Notwithstanding, the comparative framework between the local and Western (mostly British) design terrain becomes one of the book's strengths.

The first chapter focuses on Greece's participation in the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. It presents the '*Seeds of development*' for industrial design production in the newly instituted nation-state after the War of Independence era. The 'off the point' exhibits of mostly raw materials and craft objects, and the heated debate they inspired in the local and international press, are analysed as part of an ideological struggle on consolidating Greece as a modern country following Western (European) industrialized models. At a period when Greeks had 'neither the things, nor the names, nor the shapes', to quote from a Greek correspondent to the Exhibition (p. 12), questioning the comparison criteria becomes pivotal for a new critical thinking on modernization. This, and all subsequent chapters, urges the reader to think that, with the emphasis placed on the

knotty aspects of design's development, modernization takes the form of a teleological act in which certain standards and objectives are seen necessary for design to reach fruition.

Modernization as a prefabricated concept, therefore, can create a restricted understanding of the process, undermining lateral interactions/links or/and alternative paths. On the subject of professionalization (chapter 5: '*Renewal and ambition*'), even though Yagou focuses on interprofessional competition and conflict as the central features of professional development rather than solely on organizational aspects, her analysis misses out from Magali Larson-Sarfatti's advice (1977) on the importance of the link between individual aspirations and collective action and mobility. If the attention was shifted to the designer's priorities, time allowance for collective actions and general working environment, then the futile case of the Athens Design Centre, 1961–3 which was modelled after the British Design Centre, would tell a different and perhaps less subservient story as more strongly suggested in the original article title 'Unwanted innovation' (Yagou, 2005). What Yagou's research offers is solid confirmation that the lack of development of professionalism on Western lines casts serious doubt on the utility and validity of the professional project in other societies – especially those that came late to industrialization.

If the first six chapters talk primarily about the 'evolution of attitudes and unfolding of institutional activities', it is the last chapter (chapter 7) that shifts the discussion to the aesthetics, and to 'the visible form of design' (p. 129). Product advertisements from the mid-19th century to today form the backdrop of a diachronic examination of the 'thorny' issue of national identity ('Greekness', discussed also in chapters 1, 2, 4). This last chapter would have been an excellent opportunity to extend the discussion to design identity and its so-called peripheral status. Chapter 4 introduces the interesting concept of an interstitial or threshold space ('third space', p. 67) for design in connection to art and engineering, so to elaborate on the often unidentified/able concept of 'periphery'. This would have been a constructive insight.

On the downside, the limited number of black-and-white images in the volume and the little direct commentary in the main text, as well as the faulty rendering of the detail from the 1938 exhibition catalogue on the cover page, may be a disappointment. But these are minor quibbles in an otherwise fine analysis of design history in Greece from within.

In summary, what emerges from *Fragile Innovation* is a convincing story of the narrow paths of development, maladies and ambivalences in the silent life of Greek design for over 150 years, as seen from a Western-tuned lens. I think readers will gain from Yagou's thoughtfulness and sober judgements, and enjoy (fairly) equally strong chapters in a well-written book.

References

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Biography

Marina Emmanouil is a lecturer at the Visual Communication Design Department in Izmir University of Economics (Turkey), and teaches practice and theory in the area of visual communication design. She graduated with a BA(Hons) in Graphic Design (University of Hertfordshire) and holds an MA and a PhD in the History of Design from the Royal College of Art. Her latest academic activities include the coordination of the *Balkan Locus-Focus* Symposium (June 2012, Izmir), and the organization of the *Crisis Is a Greek Word* traveling exhibition and colloquium (March 2013, Izmir). With her design practice, she contributes to the development of accessibility programmes for visually impaired people.