Nikolaus Pevsner: 
Talking Industrial Design to the Workers' 
Educational Association†

Ariyuki Kondo

Introduction

I think we shall be able to distinguish there two Pevsner images, always separate but continually walking in and out of each other. The first image is that of Pevsner the academic, the international art-historian; the author forty years ago of an innovating survey of mannerist and baroque Italian painting; the author in 1940 of a classic study of academies; and the editor since 1947 of the Pelican 'History of Art', whose volumes year by year roll on towards us, the wagonlits of world art hitched to the ever-locomotive present. But the other image, the more endearing one, is Pevsner the discoverer of, and expositor of English architecture.¹

This was what Sir John Summerson, ‘Britain’s pre-eminent architectural historian’², wrote in a tribute to Nikolaus Pevsner in The Architects’ Journal in 1967, on the occasion of Pevsner being awarded the RIBA Gold Medal (Pl.

1). Summerson, whose architectural history was to be described later as ‘intellectually superior to anything that preceded it’\(^3\), was a competent figure for the job of elucidating the academic achievements of Pevsner, a twentieth-century titan in the history of Western art, architecture and design. Yet Summerson overlooked a third image of Pevsner, the image of Pevsner as a social reformer patiently campaigning for a lessening of and weakening in the monopoly of art by the élite by means of promotion of an aesthetic appreciation of the quotidian, the everyday commodities for daily use. Pevsner, a champion of the modern movement in design, was also a keen writer on the design of everyday things used by ordinary people, an earnest advocate of the necessity for improving the taste of the public, and an ardent ‘design educator’ aiming at the broadening of the public’s interest in mass-producible modern style design products.

In some of the recently published biographical works on Pevsner, his writing activities from the standpoint of a design educator have been occasionally referred to, yet his design-educational writings addressed to the general public, more precisely the labouring class, have not received sufficient attention. This paper intends to draw attention to this facet of Pevsner’s academic achievements by taking up his short yet well-presented article,
entitled ‘Thoughts on Industrial Design’, written in 1946, having in mind the labouring classes of Britain as potential readers.

**Pevsner’s Art History**

Pevsner is known today as an art historian with a vast number of publications. Through his extensive writings, from *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936) (Pl. 2) to *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* (1937) (Pl. 3), to *Academies of Art: Past and Present* (1940) (Pl. 4), to *An Outline of European Architecture* (1942) (Pl. 5), to *The Englishness of English Art* (1956) (Pl. 6), to *A History of Building Types* (1976) (Pl. 7), and to his forty-six volume series, *The Buildings of England* (1951-1974) (Pl. 8), Pevsner has been recognized today, more than three decades after his death, as one of the giants who has shaped the twentieth-century world of the history of art, architecture and design; and his diverse achievements in the historiography of architecture and design had
Pl. 4. Nikolaus Pevsner, Academies of Art: Past and Present (1940)

Pl. 5. Nikolaus Pevsner, An Outline of European Architecture (1942)


Pl. 7. Nikolaus Pevsner, A History of Building Types (1976)

Pl. 9. Pevsner’s unpublished manuscript on Vincent van Gogh (1919), now in the collection of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles
and still have a great impact on today’s studies.

The subjects of his publications reflect the wide range of his interest in artistic creativity. Pevsner’s first academic writing was his unpublished work on Vincent van Gogh (Pl. 9). Following his doctoral studies on Baroque architecture at Leipzig University, Pevsner wrote extensively on German Expressionism and followed it up with research in Mannerism as the art of the age of the Counter-Reformation. From Medieval art to the Picturesque, to Victorian writers on art and architecture, to works by Sir Henry Moore, to Modernism in design and architecture, and to a Functionalist evaluation of Municipal Housing Estates of the London County Council (Pl. 10), Pevsner’s research reveals the multiplicity of his interests. In this regard he resembles Sir Kenneth Clark, although Pevsner’s areas of interest are more diverse in

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Pl. 10. Alton Estate in Roehampton, London, an example of the Municipal Housing Estates of the London County Council

From Pevsner’s article for *The Architectural Review* entitled ‘Roehampton: LCC Housing and the Picturesque Tradition’ (1959)
nature than Clark’s.

Admiring the monumental achievements of this scholar, one cannot but ask what drove Pevsner to explore art in such a wide and varied way. The answer seems to lie in his life-long dedication to the democratisation of artistic appreciation of works of art in general, which Pevsner himself suggested in his own words, in 1952, in a radio talk broadcast by the Third Programme, a BBC radio station launched in 1946 which dealt with high culture. On Sunday morning, 19 October 1952, Pevsner gave a radio talk, ‘Reflections on not teaching art history’, which drew his listeners’ attention to the fact that ‘[e]verywhere the History of Art is established as an academic subject; only in Britain it isn’t’. In this radio talk, Pevsner claimed that there seemed to be some notion at the time that academic research in and teaching of art history was ‘sufficiently well looked after’ by just two institutions in London: the Courtauld Institute of Art and the Warburg Institute. He agreed with this view:

> There seems to be some feeling that [academic teaching of and research in ‘the history of art in its own right’] is sufficiently well looked after by the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes in London. Whether these two are enough and whether they provide for all needs — I am inclined myself to think they do... ⁴

Yet, rather than concentrating on art history as an academic subject in British higher education, Pevsner preferred to emphasize the importance of developing the aesthetic faculties of the general public and the indispensable role that historical study of art could play in the post-World War II struggle to develop and improve contemporary society and, in so doing, put an end to the monopoly of the élite in art, design and architecture. Pevsner was determined that artists and academics, as well as the public, should be alerted to how crucial this issue was.⁵
Pevsner’s Idea of the Art Historian’s Responsibility
Since the winter of 1929-1930, Pevsner had been a ‘Privatdozent’ at Göttingen University, teaching seven art history courses a semester. His interests in modern architecture and design, fostered during his Göttingen days, helped him ‘to arrive at the basic idea behind’ his soon-to-be-famous book of 1936, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*. It is said that Pevsner’s academic efforts contributed to Göttingen’s growing reputation in art history education, with the result that ‘some of Germany’s brightest students started enrolling’ at the heretofore modestly rated university.\(^6\) Unfortunately, however, Pevsner, a German-born, Russian Jew, lost his academic position in April 1933 as a result of the ‘non-Aryan’, newly passed Civil Servants’ law, officially known as the ‘Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service’.

Soon after that, Pevsner fled to Britain in the hope of finding another position there as an art historian. Meanwhile, in Germany, Pevsner’s former supervisor, Wilhelm Pinder, who in 1927 had suggested to Pevsner that Pevsner accept a position at Göttingen, had become a Nazi supporter. It must have been quite a shock for Pevsner to realise that his one-time supervisor had become a pro-Nazi academic who did radio broadcasts supporting an inhumane nationalist regime, and who, on the occasion of Hitler’s 50th birthday in 1939, maintained that ‘the departure of Jewish art historians from Germany had gotten rid of “over-theoretical thinking”’.\(^7\)

Pevsner remained in Britain, but lost his mother, Annie Pevsner, who had remained in Germany, under the democratically elected but fascist government. She committed suicide in February 1942 in Leipzig, at the age of sixty-five, out of fear of being deported.

Having had both his academic career and his personal life disturbed so terribly by politics, racism, and ostracism, Pevsner felt compelled to direct his attention to the question of how his own academic interest in art history could contribute practically, directly and concretely to the development,
improvement, and reformation of the terribly cruel and violent society which he himself had lived in.

His first-hand experience of such cruelty and violence both before and during World War II led him to pursue an active role in the teaching of art history in the firm belief that study of and education in architectural and design history could make a vital difference in society.

Pevsner felt that a historian must always be aware of ‘contemporary developments’ in society and must confront ‘contemporary needs’. Galvanized by the need for improvement in the social and political conditions of the 1930s and ’40s, Pevsner came naturally to his assertion that ‘the historian can no longer shut himself off from contemporary needs’\(^8\). An art historian whose main subject of interest was the ‘visual expression of the history of man’s mind’\(^9\) was no exception. In Pevsner’s view, the art historian must ‘reconcile scholarship and direct utility’\(^10\) and cannot remain detached from the ‘realities’ of ordinary people’s lives in contemporary society. In short, Pevsner believed in the power of historical study of art and design: study capable of practically, actively and salutarily contributing to the progress and improvement of one’s own age and society. This belief was manifested in his assertion that an art historian has an obligation to play an active part in the education of designers responsible for fulfilling contemporary needs of society and for shaping the society to come.

On November 24, 1948, Pevsner delivered the Cobb Lecture for the Royal Society of Arts under the title of ‘Design in Relation to Industry through the Ages’. In this lecture, Pevsner defined ‘the designer’ as ‘a man who invents and draws objects for use’\(^11\); and the purpose of these objects, whether architectural or industrial in nature, was and is, in one way or another, to fulfil contemporary needs of society. Pevsner was convinced that the art historian’s responsibility is to reconcile scholarship and direct utility so that the study of the history of art can play a significant role in design education,
precisely because of its usefulness as a means of fulfilling the needs of contemporary society. Thus, when the British government instituted the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design in 1961, with the aim of ensuring high standards in educational courses of British art colleges offering a diploma in design, Pevsner accepted an offer to chair one of five panels set up by the Council, the ‘Art History and Liberal Studies’ panel, actively participating in the task of furthering the extension of design education and improvement of its educational standards.

**Pevsner, Industrial Design, and the Working Class**

Pevsner’s conception of the social responsibility inherent in study of architectural and design history is expressed throughout his writing. It is most apparent in his writings concerning the introduction of mass-produced industrial products to the public, particularly to the working class, with the aim of enhancing and democratizing artistic appreciation of works of art.

In 1933, having been forced to leave his native land, Pevsner found himself in Birmingham, asked to conduct ‘a piece of research on the role of design and the designer in industry’.\(^{12}\) This request came from Professor Philip Sargant Florence, an authority on ‘industrial relations and the relationship of industry with society’, who aimed to raise ‘the general standard of living and thereby promote content and social harmony’ by ‘making mass-produced goods more freely available to the labouring classes’\(^{13}\).

Susie Harris, the author of the most comprehensive biography of Pevsner to date, explains that a socioeconomic analysis of industrial design was not necessarily what Pevsner would have himself chosen to do, since for him such a task was not ‘a job in art history’.\(^{14}\) Thus, in 1934, when a different kind of opportunity arose, he applied for a newly vacant chair in the history of art and architecture at the University of Edinburgh, one of six ancient universities of his recently adopted country. Pevsner’s application for the
position was, unfortunately, unsuccessful, though Pevsner’s biographer records that ‘the interview appeared to go well’\textsuperscript{15}; therefore, his ‘only prospect of permanent employment lay in research into industrial design, and in Birmingham’\textsuperscript{16}.

A socioeconomic analysis of industrial design, however, turned out to be a perfect project for Pevsner, since it persuaded him to explore the utility of ‘historical’, particularly ‘recent historical’, study of art and design, and to broaden his scope as an art-architectural historian, taking as subjects for his research not only past art, design and architecture, but also those of the contemporary age and society.

Through detailed studies of industrial design in Birmingham, Pevsner became well aware of problems connected to the mass production of industrial products, especially in regard to their aesthetic qualities. In his detailed study of English industrial design, \textit{An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England}, published by Cambridge University Press in 1937, Pevsner commented on how terrible the situation of industrial design in Britain was at that time:

Things are extremely bad. When I say that 90 per cent. of British industrial art is devoid of any aesthetic merit, I am not exaggerating. A glance at the British Industries Fair or at any trade paper will corroborate this statement. However, it may be less insulting than it sounds at first. I do not know of any modern country where the majority of industrial products is not deplorably bad in design. So the aim of any campaign for better design can only be to reduce the percentage of objectionable goods from 90 to 80 or perhaps 75 per cent.\textsuperscript{17}

Pevsner also realised the potential that mass production of industrial art
held for reviving a society in which artists could work, not primarily for fame and worldly wealth, but chiefly for a more fulfilling life for ordinary people. The rise of mass production was dynamic, the advent of a new age in which the artist no longer needed to serve merely a small circle of wealthy connoisseurs, but instead a much wider circle, i.e. society as a whole. This meant that, in an age of mass production, the public, i.e., ordinary working people, always the greatly neglected majority of society, became, for the first time, the main target of works of design, with the aim of elevating and enhancing British taste in art, not only that of the working people themselves, but of all of society.

Pevsner was extremely keen to propagate this aim, for, to him, not much could be expected from the upper class. In Pevsner’s view, the British upper class was quite conservative in terms of taste in art and design, and such ‘conservatism’ was a serious obstacle to be overcome in order to elevate and enhance the general British taste in art. This was, in Pevsner’s view, particularly true of the attitude held by the upper class toward products designed in a modern style:

Since [the foundation of the Design and Industries Association] it has taken about fifteen years to create a favourable atmosphere for the modern style, and even now it is much more controversial [in England] than in some Continental countries.

The most serious obstacle to its divulgation lies in the attitude of the upper class. Owing to the general conservatism mentioned, to inborn reserve and a distrust of anything that looks strikingly new, the majority of the English upper classes, above all the aristocracy, still prefer period decoration, period furniture, period porcelain, etc. — whether genuine or reproduced — to modern industrial art.\(^\text{18}\)
Therefore Pevsner began to direct his attention more toward the working class, whom, he felt, would be more receptive to new ideas in art and design than the upper class.

**Pevsner’s ‘Thoughts on Industrial Design’ (1946)**

In the spring of 1946, Pevsner wrote a short article, entitled ‘Thoughts on Industrial Design’ in *The Highway*, a journal published by the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) (Pl. 11). The WEA, a charity organization ‘dedicated to’ providing high-quality educational opportunities to the working class, was founded in 1903. The WEA grew rapidly, and by 1910 the number of local branches had increased to more than 70, and eventually numbered more than 140 by 1914. By 1945, more than 800 local branches were operating. Today, after more than 100 years since its foundation, the organisation is widely-known as ‘the UK’s largest voluntary sector provider of adult education in England and Scotland’¹⁹, still active in pursuit of a better, just, democratic world, through adult education ‘with the support of nearly 3,000 volunteers, 2,000 tutors and over 10,000 members’²⁰. Today, the WEA explains its values through the use of such keywords as ‘democratic’, ‘equal’, ‘inclusive’,

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**THE HIGHWAY**

Thoughts on Industrial Design by Nikolaus Pevsner

The Great Experiment by I. H. Williams

Scientific Research in the U.S.S.R. by Prof. Alexei Stassenko’s Poem by W. H. Auden

Reflections of a Military Student by Enid Knowles

Leadership and the Cultural Pattern by A. H. Smardon

Book Reviews

Seven American Women Writers

Brecht on the Puffy

Correspondence

News of the Movement

**MARCH 1946**

Published by the Workers’ Educational Association

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**USA CONFRONTATION**

Announcement of John Lewis, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers’ Union

'There are many things about the U.S.A. which are strange and interesting to the British Trade Unionist and to the British working man, and I think I am right in saying that the British Trade Unionists have a great interest in the progress of the U.S.A.’

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**U.S.A. TRADE UNIONISTS’ REPORT**

'This is the report from the American trade unionists who visited the U.S.A. and studied the American Industrial Relations Act, which was enacted by Congress in 1947 to prevent trade union activities conferring the unfair advantage to a certain extent to the employers. The report states that there was a significant improvement in the working conditions of the workers. The representatives of the American trade unionists, who were present in the meeting, also stressed the importance of the U.S. Constitution in the protection of workers’ rights.

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'accessible', and 'open', and its mission as:

1) Raising educational aspirations
2) Bringing great teaching and learning to local communities
3) Ensuring there is always an opportunity for adults to return to learning
4) Developing educational opportunities for the most disadvantaged
5) Involving students and supporters as members to build an educational movement for social purposes
6) Inspiring students, teachers and members to become active citizens

It is easy to see that the organization’s belief in the 'power of education and learning' and its commitment to adult education for social purposes and achievement of social justice attracted Pevsner, keen as he was on furthering the aesthetic education of the 'educatable' working classes and eradicating elitism in art.

In the article ‘Thoughts on Industrial Design’, Pevsner, who was introduced in the issue as one of the journal’s ‘leading contributors’, referred to modern style design as 'not ornamental' and as 'the only adequate expression' of the mode of life in mid-twentieth century Britain, and said that ‘while sometimes the modern smooth and flush surface also requires careful, individual — that is expensive — treatment, we can say that on the whole it is easier to produce well-designed things cheaply in the plain, sharp and crisp forms of the so-called Modern Movement than in any of the past.’

Pevsner observed that 'the public can only to a limited degree express its likes and dislikes, simply because it very often has no choice of good and bad’, and that this was a problem. Thus he came to regard the necessity for distribution of good quality, yet inexpensively produced modern design in society as the most important task of his time.
The major obstacle to this task, he felt, was the intervention of 'buyers and salesmen' as middlemen between the public consumer and the manufacturer. Pevsner wrote that 'there is a long chain' between the public and manufacturers, for manufacturers 'meet buyers, and buyers meet the public very often only through salesmen', and 'any moderately articulate need of a customer may be suffocated or twisted round in any way by a salesman or a buyer or a factory sales manager, before it reaches the manufacturer' . According to Pevsner, buyers and salespeople's decisions are made based 'on sales', thus 'they cannot take risks', and it is only natural for them to be 'nearly always frightened of things new'; as a consequence, the public are not given the chance to express its likes and dislikes.

'Buyers and salesmen' were, however, not the only ones preventing modern style from permeating every level of society. 'In this complex trading circle of the twentieth century, everyone has some fault', wrote Pevsner. The readers he addressed, i.e., the labouring classes of post-World War II Britain, were also at fault. The public, Pevsner felt, rarely having an opportunity to express their preferences, were indifferent to or unaware of aesthetic judgement and the importance of their own development of aesthetic taste: they needed to have their consciousness raised.

It was, however, the manufacturer whom Pevsner criticised most severely, for the manufacturer's lack of interest in design was, in Pevsner's view, 'on the whole the worst villain'. The manufacturer is, according to Pevsner, 'more independent' than buyers and salespeople, and 'can quite often afford to take a risk or two', yet resists doing so:

...[the manufacturer] has the right attitude in a lot of cases regarding other aspects of manufacturing quality. He resents, I have found (though not always), being suspected of bad materials and of bad workmanship. It is only bad design that does not worry him — partly
no doubt because he likes to think that taste is everybody’s private pigeon anyway. He will not see that the same sense of responsibility should be applied to design as to make, and that, if he does not, he is just as much a corruptor as if he used shoddy instead of virgin wool for his cloth or filled his upholstery with flock and even less honest shavings.

And yet that callousness concerning design is exactly what we find with the vast majority of large-scale manufacturers.  

Yet merely stating the lack of aesthetic taste in contemporary industrial design was surely not Pevsner’s primary purpose in writing the above-mentioned article. Pevsner ends the article rather peremptorily. Offering as an example the Co-op in Sweden, Pevsner praises it for its emphasis on the affordability of products and the importance of giving value for money without sacrificing ‘matters of aesthetics’.

[In Sweden,] the Co-op. has the very highest standard of design in factory buildings and shops, furniture and textiles, packaging and everything else — exactly as high a standard as that of luxury manufacturers and shops.

As for Britain, Pevsner placed his hope that the work of the C.W.S., the Co-operative Wholesale Society, would prove on a large scale that the production of aesthetically appealing modern design commodities at prices ordinary consumers, i.e., the working people of Britain, could afford was possible and within reach.
Closing Remarks

According to Pevsner, then, mid-twentieth century modern style design sought plain, sharp, crisp forms, rejecting ornamentality; and in so doing made it ‘easier to produce well-designed things cheaply . . . than in any [styles] of the past’\(^\text{33}\). ‘Modern style’ made it possible to produce reasonably priced, yet well-designed, high-quality products that could be purchased by the working class. It meant the beginning of a new era in which working people of Britain came to enjoy art and design and appreciate modern art and design. This was the beginning of a significant and revolutionary era in the history of art and design, for, according to Pevsner, while the attitude of the majority of the English upper class remained essentially ‘conservative’, the inexperience and lack of knowledge of the working class rendered them more open and accepting of modern art and design. The article ‘Thoughts on Industrial Design’, written for the WEA and addressed to workers who were expected to be the main recipients of mass-produced commodities in modern styles, expressed Pevsner’s vison of the democratisation of art through promotion of educational opportunities for working people to increase their awareness of and appreciation for contemporary modern style design.

This vision fulfilled the promise of the Modern Movement, of which William Morris, a pioneer of the movement and a hero of Pevsner’s, said in 1883,

What business have we with art at all, unless all can share it?\(^\text{34}\)

It was these words of Morris that Pevsner quoted to preface *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, Pevsner’s first attempt to examine the role of design and the designer in industry and explore the possibility of elevating the taste of the public through educational writings which manifested his own ‘thoughts in industrial design’.
Acknowledgements

The original version of this paper was first read at the 2017 annual conference of the Japan Society of Design (意匠学会) which was held in Akita City, Akita Prefecture in August 2017. The research by the author on which this paper is based was supported by KAKENHI, the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (type C) of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS KAKENHI Grant No. 15K02123).

Notes
5 Surely, what is ironical here is the fact that Pevsner expressed this view in a radio programme broadcast by a radio station established specifically for the post-World War II British establishment. Yet we can read in between the lines of Pevsner’s statement his anxiety about the state of art history and its education in his adopted country.
6 Ibid., p. 179.
7 S. Harries, Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life, London: Chatto & Windus, 2011, p. 258. Pevsner must have had mixed feelings when he dedicated his Academies of Art, published by Cambridge University Press in both Britain and the United States in May 1940, to his former teacher with the plaintive words: ‘To W.P. in grateful and faithful remembrance of the past.’
9 Pevsner, ‘Reflections on not teaching art history’, p. 162.
12 Harries, Nikolaus Pevsner, p. 143.
13 Ibid., p. 142.
14 Ibid., p. 143.
15 Ibid., p. 151.
16 Ibid.
18 Ibid., p. 206.
19 https://www.wea.org.uk/about-us (date of access: 20 July 2017)
20 Ibid.
21 https://www.wea.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are (date of access: 20 July 2017)
23 Ibid., p. 70.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p. 71.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 See Ibid.
33 Ibid., p. 70.
34 Quoted here from Pevsner, An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England, p. 2.