

## **The Post-Mass Era**

By Jimena Cordova

*El Mercurio*, June 9, 2001 (pp. 34-35)

Born in Coventry, England, John Heskett is the eldest of seven children. He admits to having always been interested in design, but this discipline wasn't well received in his home country when he was a child.

With a solid preparatory background, it was easy for him to enroll in the London School of Economics, where he specialized in Economic Geography, which included elements of what is today known as Urban Planning.

Disappointed by bureaucracy, he abandoned the practice of his profession two years after graduating. He worked a number of temporary jobs, until he saved enough money to travel to Adelaide, Australia. There he taught History and English.

In 1967 he traveled back to England and taught Socio-Economical Fundamentals of Industrial Design at the University of Coventry.

"Up to that moment," he says, "there were no theoretical studies related to the historic context of design, hence the experimental nature of my courses."

From '77 to '84 he was a docent at Sheffield Hallam University and then, between 1984 and 1989, he was director of the Department of Theoretical and Historic Studies at the Ravensbourne College of Design in London.

Heskett has taught Masters classes at the Royal College of Art, London's most prestigious institution of Plastic Arts and Design. He also collaborated as an external consultant for the Masters Programs.

*Q: Currently you work as a Professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology - IIT - what are the differences in design education methods between the two institutions [RCA and IIT]?*

A: Design may be seen as a form of art, and thus based on subjective perceptions, or it may be treated as a creative discipline that has a direct relation to technology and commerce. I consider the latter approach to be the more important. What brought me to IIT was the opportunity to get involved with the techniques and methodologies necessary to face the complexities of modern problems. Art is defined by the artist, and design should be defined by the user's perspective.

*Q: How did you gain the opportunity to publish and why did you center one of your books on German Design?*

A: After ten years as a docent at the University of Coventry, my courses were renowned and Thames & Hudson - Britain's major publisher - invited me to write a book about Industrial Design. The content was based on a research project about the role of Industrial

Design in a socio-cultural context. I believe that design has played a major role in Germany's economic success.

Heskett is currently working on a study about governmental and institutional design policies around the world. He also works as a consultant for numerous organizations, including the Hirano Design Group, Japan's major company in this area.

*Q: What are the key points in the management of corporate design and their importance today?*

A: Basically, I believe that the world is moving away from the Era of Mass in terms of Production, Media, Advertisement and Mass Consumption, which altogether standardized products and tastes. In exchange, today we have a flexible industry and new processes based on information technologies, which allow focus on smaller groups of people and their specific requirements. The challenge of the present era is to use the new technologies and procedures in a way that people may, progressively, make their own decisions about what they need and want, instead of being limited to accepting what the market has to offer.

*Q: And, thinking about the new millennium, what are the trends in the different areas of design: Domestic, Corporate, and Industrial?*

A: The answer is not simple because there are many trends. On one level, mass production is changing towards a global production, with all the constraints that bridging diverse cultures presents. At another level, there are many products in saturated markets that don't change, and the designer's role is to experiment with shapes that adapt to obsolete technologies. There's also a shift from what I call "modelers," who are only interested in the visual appearance, to designers who allow people to make their own decisions, creating new systems and necessities. I think that the priority today is to make people understand that their options about what they buy and how they use it may give shape to the world.

*Q: Back to our [international lighting design] contest, what would you ask the participants, in other words, what should an illumination object be like today?*

A: The creation of lamps is a specific type of design, with its own demands. If we emphasize the utilitarian character of illumination, for example a working space or a kitchen, the designer should consider criteria that differentiate instants of relaxation from those of socialization. However, from the user's experience, I would say that in any approach to the subject it is fundamental to keep in mind that the light's quality is the factor of most significance, and not only what determines the fixture's shape.

*Q: What are your most immediate projects?*

A: I just finished a text for a compact collection by Oxford University: *Design, A Brief Introduction*. It's a book for students and the general public, which will be published in fifteen languages including Spanish. I'm also working on a more extensive book about the history of design in general. This book, which will be published in 2003, examines design as a basic human capability, showing the different ways in which it has manifested throughout history.