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DESIGN

When More Is Decidedly Less

By ALICE RAWSTHORN

LONDON — It wasn't my finest moment. A friend was showing me his new house in which all of the bathrooms were fitted with what looked like gloopily shaped iPods instead of taps. I switched one on, and lights appeared to reveal the controls. You could change the water's temperature by pressing one control, and its velocity with another. But, hard though I tried, I couldn't turn it off.

"Don't worry," groaned my friend. "It happens all the time." He struggled fruitlessly with the controls, then went online to find the instructions on the manufacturer's Web site. Guilty though I felt at having caused such a kerfuffle, I couldn't help wondering why he'd bought those fancy digital taps. What's wrong with the old-fashioned ones that you turn on and off by hand?

My friend had fallen victim to the curse of over-complicated design. He'd believed in the blandishments of a dazzling "innovation" that promised to make his life easier, but was so woefully misconceived that it threatened to make it harder.

You've probably been cursed too. Inoperable cellphones. Impenetrable Web sites. Neurotically overstyled objects. Too much packaging. Digital versions of this, that and the other. Things with esoteric functions that we're unlikely to ever be able to pronounce correctly, let alone to want to use. We've all tussled with them from time to time.

There's nothing new in this. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, designers have striven to make things that offer more than their predecessors. More speed. More power. More functions. More whatever. If the "more" is well chosen and executed, it can lead to progress; but if not, it could have the opposite effect. Who has enough time to go online to find out how to turn off a tap?

The problem is that we're at a particular stage of the design cycle when so many "innovations" are spurious, that the risk of them over-complicating our lives is scarily high. There's no excuse for this, not least because qualities like "clarity" and "simplicity" loom large in almost every design doctrine.

"Clarity" tops the list of the key principles of design thinking identified by the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council. One of the sessions at the Forum's annual meeting this week in Davos, Switzerland, will explore how those principles can help to tackle urgent social, economic and environmental problems. (Full disclosure: I am a member of the Global Agenda Council on Design and will be speaking at the session in Davos.)

Another speaker will be the American software designer John Maeda, who devoted a book to defining "The Laws of Simplicity" in which he identified "thoughtful reduction" as the key objective of responsible design.

“When I wrote the book four or five years ago, it was during the rise of complex all-in-one devices that coincided with the ‘more is better’ mood,” he explained. “Now we’re in a situation where simplicity isn’t just a good idea — it’s a necessity.”

Why then are so many designers — and the companies they work with — still so prone to over-complicating things? One explanation is habit, because lazy designers have always presumed that adding “more” will make things better, without bothering to assess whether it will.

Sometimes the result is dodgy styling. Take the current crop of espresso machines. They’re the SUVs of the modern kitchen. Too big. Too blingy. Too tricky. Too much. My vote for the worst offender goes to Casa Bugatti’s ridiculously overwrought diVa. The silly name says it all, and the over-complicated spelling makes it worse.

Worse still is functional over-complication, especially if it is intended for use in desperate circumstances. Cameron Sinclair, co-founder of Architecture for Humanity, the global volunteer network, encounters far too many examples in development and emergency reconstruction projects. “My favorite is the reverse osmosis water drum designed for women and girls in Africa,” he said. “The designers neglected to realize that 80 percent of the water was waste so people spent hours rolling 30 gallons of dirty water back and forth to get a few gallons of clean water.”

Thoughtless designers have always caused such problems, but now face new challenges, many of which are linked to digitization. One issue is the sheer power of current technology. As Mr. Maeda points out, even the smallest cellphone is more complex than a bulldozer these days.

Yet many exemplars of clarity and simplicity in design are recent digital inventions. Among them is data visualization, the new visual language that depicts complex information clearly. So are digital devices, like the iPod and iPhone, whose operating systems — or user interface (U.I) software — were developed from scratch. These are the products that can be operated most easily and instinctively. It tends to be trickier to use ones whose U.I.s have evolved over time by patching together different software programs. Trickier still are newly digitized versions of existing objects. Not only can they feel counterintuitive, their U.I. design is often less coherent.

The digital tap is an extreme example. As the original works so well, there is no justification for digitizing it, and the result is doomed to feel unnecessarily contrived. But similar difficulties apply to products that need to be digitized, like television sets. “They drive me crazy,” groaned Mr. Maeda. “Pick any one of the new ones. Turning on the TV doesn’t mean you’ll necessarily be able to watch anything.”

Sadly, more and more products seem set to suffer the same fate, as many of the objects we use daily are “replaced” by digital touch screens. Think of the iPhone, which fulfills the functions of a watch, phone, camera, clock, DVD and CD player, barometer, and so on. The skills of their U.I. designers will be just as important in determining how pleasurable — or otherwise — it will be to use them, as old-fashioned considerations, like how they look. And it’s those same designers that we’re counting on to save us from the curse of over-complicated design.

