Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism: A Historical Perspective on Forerunners of Inclusion and Accessibility in Design

Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism (Forerunners: Ideas First) by Dreamstorm Publications

★★★★☆ 4.5 out of 5

Language	: English
File size	: 1450 KB
Text-to-Speech	: Enabled
Enhanced typesetting	: Enabled
Word Wise	: Enabled
Print length	: 130 pages
Screen Reader	: Supported

For centuries, the field of design has been dominated by the concept of aesthetic exceptionalism – the idea that certain objects, spaces, and experiences are inherently more beautiful or valuable than others based on their aesthetic qualities. This has led to the exclusion and marginalization of individuals who do not conform to traditional standards of beauty or who have disabilities that make it difficult or impossible to access or enjoy certain designs.

However, throughout history, there have always been designers who have challenged this idea and advocated for the creation of inclusive and accessible designs that prioritize the needs of all users. These pioneers have laid the groundwork for the field of universal design, which seeks to

create environments and products that can be used by people of all abilities.

Forerunners of Inclusion and Accessibility in Design

The roots of inclusive and accessible design can be traced back to the early 20th century, when a group of forward-thinking architects and designers began to question the prevailing aesthetic norms and advocate for the creation of designs that were accessible to all.

One of the most influential figures in this movement was the German architect Erich Mendelsohn. Mendelsohn was known for his innovative use of curves and organic forms, which he believed created more inviting and accessible spaces for people with disabilities. He also advocated for the use of ramps and elevators to make buildings more accessible to wheelchair users.

Another pioneer of inclusive design was the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright believed that buildings should be designed to fit the human body, and he incorporated many accessible features into his designs, such as wide doorways, ramps, and accessible bathrooms. He also designed furniture that was comfortable and easy to use for people with disabilities.

In the mid-20th century, the disability rights movement began to gain momentum, and this led to increased awareness of the need for accessible design. In 1961, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) adopted the first set of accessibility standards for buildings. These standards were based on the work of pioneers like Mendelsohn and Wright, and they helped to ensure that new buildings were more accessible to people with disabilities.

Challenges to Aesthetic Exceptionalism

Despite the progress that has been made in recent years, aesthetic exceptionalism remains a significant barrier to the creation of truly inclusive and accessible designs. This is because many designers still prioritize aesthetics over function and usability, and this can lead to the exclusion of people with disabilities or other marginalized groups.

One of the most common challenges to aesthetic exceptionalism is the idea that accessibility features are inherently ugly or disruptive to the overall design. However, there are many examples of accessible design that is also aesthetically pleasing. For example, ramps can be designed to blend seamlessly into the surrounding environment, and accessible bathrooms can be just as stylish as non-accessible ones.

Another challenge to aesthetic exceptionalism is the belief that people with disabilities do not care about aesthetics. However, this is simply not true. People with disabilities want to be able to use and enjoy the same products and spaces as everyone else, and they want these products and spaces to be aesthetically pleasing.

The Need for Inclusive Design

Inclusive design is not just about making things accessible to people with disabilities. It is about creating environments and products that are usable and enjoyable for everyone, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. It is about creating a more equitable and just world for all.

There are many benefits to inclusive design. For people with disabilities, it can mean increased independence, freedom, and participation in society.

For everyone else, it can mean a more welcoming and enjoyable environment.

In addition, inclusive design can make good business sense. By creating products and spaces that are accessible to everyone, businesses can reach a wider audience and increase their sales. They can also avoid costly lawsuits and negative publicity.

Aesthetic exceptionalism is a harmful and outdated concept that has no place in the 21st century. It is time for designers to embrace the principles of inclusive design and create environments and products that are accessible and enjoyable for everyone.

By following the example of the pioneers who came before us, we can create a more inclusive and equitable world for all.

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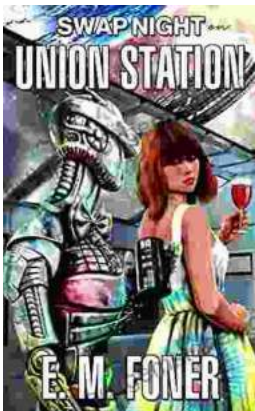| Word Wise | : Enabled |
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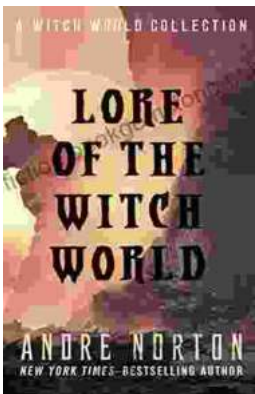
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