

Form Follows Function: The Short, Unhappy Life of the Airflow - IO



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Whenever I hear the old saying “form follows function,” my contrarian brain responds with, “REALLY?”

First identified in the late 19th century by the American architect, Louis Sullivan, “**form follows function**” is *the* fundamental design cliché. Erudite dinner guests and high-end furniture sales folk say it when they want to emphasize the value of what something *does* over how it *looks* while doing it. Sullivan, obviously reveling in his Eureka moment, called it a “law.”

And laws must be true forever, right?

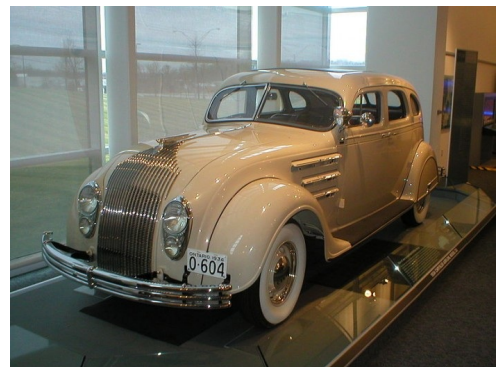
It WAS true for a long time. “Form follows function” revolutionized **architecture** and **industrial design**. In Detroit during the 1930s, the engineers at Chrysler took the old saw to heart and delivered to American car enthusiasts the first pass at an **aerodynamic automobile**.

(As a curious aside, when the first wind tunnel testing began at General Motors in 1930, the engineers found their cars to be such aerodynamic failures that driving them backwards was more efficient.)

This new car had it all: a better, safer, smoother ride, better handling, better weight-to-power ratios, and far less drag than all its competitors. Function definitely ruled the day.

Except the buyers stayed away in droves.

The 1934-37 Chrysler Airflow, with all its functional innovation, was an unqualified commercial disaster. No more than 10,000 units were produced during any of the model years and the average was about 7,000 units.



Customers could not embrace the Airflow. And though it may be elegant to our 21st-century eyes, potential customers found the streamlined, modernistic duckling too ugly. Form, it appeared, still had a critical part to play in the success of a product.

"Form follows function" seems an unshakeable idea though, even in the face of contrary evidence. Some **very clever people** still profess Mr. Sullivan's "law". But **Curt Cloninger**, author of Fresher Styles of Web Designers: More Eye Candy from the Underground, emphasizes the nonsensical tautology of "form follows function." Taken to its conclusion, each function could only be expressed in a single form. The form would change only when the function did. A stroll through the crowded aisles of Target can tell you that is not reality.

If "form follows function" is, at best, distracting, what's a more effective way to approach design? In a world where a product's life or death is decided by an anonymous mouse click, there's not a lot of sympathy for marketplace experiments. Responding to the function-oriented design tragedies brought on by Web 2.0, Steven Bradley's article, "**Does Form Follow Function?**" calls on designers to forget function and form for a moment and work on success criteria before beginning any work.

It is these success criteria, or the prioritized and harmonized stakeholder goals, that determine the form of a thing. Considerations are broadened to include not just aesthetic considerations and functional requirements, but cultural standards, material properties, client desires, ethical (and legal) obligations, and environmental and audience needs.

After all, what good is a car that works well, but can only be approached while wearing a blindfold?

With success criteria guiding design, the Chrysler Airflow's place in history might have been revolutionary rather than cautionary. The engineers might have realized earlier that Louis Sullivan's dictum is really more of a guideline than a law. And though Sullivan wasn't wrong for wresting design priority away from ostentatious form, his eagerness to codify "form follows function" into immutable law seems reactionary.



IO looks at data center design in terms of success too. Never content with the status quo, **we recently partnered with McLaren Applied Technologies (MAT)** to use their "extensive Formula 1-derived intelligence" to tackle a wide range of challenges.

Form and function will come together with other critical factors to further optimize data center operations and energy usage. Just seeing what McLaren can do with 4 wheels and an engine, the results of this partnership should be breathtaking.

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