

Less is Less, More is More

By Luciano Cassisi

The time is coming – to retire the nearly centenary motto «less is more».

Which is better: a barroque, overloaded, complex design? Or something simpler, more austere? Industrial designer and architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's answer was: «less is more.»¹ This famous motto has managed to implant, from the very first decades of the twentieth century, the idea of simple things being better than complex ones; that ornaments are always a spare. With almost a century of time since designers —of many areas— adopted that modern motto, it is curious that we continue to reproduce it, even when our very own daily reality proves it wrong.

What is ornamented and what is complex are part of human creation, probably in the same proportion than what is austere and what is simple. Give it yourself a try. Choose any space you have nearby and make an inventory of how many things are simple and how many are complex, and then ask yourself if the latter ones would really improve if they were like the former.

«Maxims», mottos, dogmatic conceptions... At certain times, these can be useful to fight other previously installed canons. For example, in the times of van der Rohe, of the Bauhaus, the governing canon imposed the flourish. The motto «less is more» represented a crippling blow to the creators' style of that time, and managed to pull them out of their confinement. It gave place to a new aesthetic, as dogmatic as the previous one, and in total consonance with a new need for programming object obsolescence and renovation, imposed by the economical system that started to settle in the world: industrialized products consumption economy.

Although it is true that the motto «less is more» proved to be useful for many years, during this time professions devoted to design have evolved so much. Designers no longer work blindly. We have knowledge empirically proved by infinity of projects for over a century. Before starting a job, we define with the client a specific and unique program of needs for each project, that determines, among other things, when simplicity is convenient and when complexity is, free of dogmas and marketer mottos.

The time is coming to put the motto «less is more» in the shelf of memories, due to the fact that its conscientizing function is no longer necessary, in fact it's even superfluous. It's time to abandon the figurative meaning and give words their proper meaning: «less is less» and «more and more».

The issue is so simple that we all know it: when less is needed, design is made simpler, more austere; and when more is needed, design includes decorative resources. If it were necessary to count with a motto like the previous one, it could be: «less when less is convenient, more

when more is convenient».

A footnote

Every time I'm about to publish an article I discuss it before with friends. In this particular case, I find of special interest to share what Norberto Chaves wrote me about the article: «the problem with "corrective dogmas" is that they soon lose their corrective nature and remain as dogmas». Also, he reminded me of a phrase by Thomas Henry Huxley that he quoted himself on his book [Desafueros](#): «It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and to end as superstitions».

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1. The expression «less is more» is usually attributed to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the one who made it famous, but previous authorship has been assigned to German poet Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813). Whether he is or not the creator of the motto, there are those who consider that the meaning usually given to this phrase doesn't match with the one van der Rohe meant. In fact, his architectonic work is not simple at all. On the contrary, he introduced during his time complexities not visible at first sight, and even less a hundred years later. His «less is more» wasn't focused on a stripped aesthetic, but in optimizing material usage and facilities to obtain performance, economy and comfort benefits, among others.

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