

“Form Follows Function”

Have you heard of the phrase “form follows function”? What it means or what or how it might apply to Design Photography? On the surface, “form follows function” seems to make a lot of sense. The way something looks should be determined by its purpose. Is this really true? Does the phrase hold up upon deeper inspection?

In the context of designing a photograph, “form follows function” is often taken to mean that the designer should first gather the photographs requirements from the client and then determine the aesthetics of the photograph based on those “**functional**” requirements. While that’s certainly good practice, is “form follows function” really being applied? Are client requirements the “function” of the photograph or something else?

History

The phrase “form follows function” was coined by American architect Louis Sullivan. In his 1896 article, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” Sullivan wrote:

“It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law.”

At the time, technology, tastes and economics were rapidly changing. The forms of late-19th century buildings were still being worked out, based on innovation going all the way back to ancient Greek and Roman architecture. It was clear to Sullivan that a new form for buildings was needed, and he thought that form ought to come from the function of a building, not historical precedent. This new form became the modern structural steel skyscraper.

Well known architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who was then Sullivan’s assistant, adopted the phrase “form follows function” and further promoted it. The Guggenheim Museum in Venice is a good example of Wright’s application of the principle. Its spiral shape was intended to allow visitors to easily view the artwork within.

In 1908 Austrian architect, Adolf Loos proclaimed that architectural “ornament was a crime”. Modernist architects such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe adopted both “ornamentation is crime” and “form follows function” as moral principles and applied them to design. The two phrases do not mean the same thing though. “Form follows function” allows for ornamentation as long as it serves a function.

Still, modernism in architecture emerged from both principles. Its goal was to determine the form of a building solely from functional requirements and not traditional aesthetics.

Walter Gropius founded the **Bauhaus**, a school of thought and movement in art that espoused that an object’s design should be dominated by its function. The Bauhaus was in some ways a reaction against the emotional expressionism of the time, and its design aesthetic was based on simple forms, clean lines, rationality and, of course, functionality. The Bauhaus was eventually closed under pressure from the Nazi regime, which branded the school, and modernism in general, as un-German.

Interpreting “Form Follows Function”

There are two ways to interpret the phrase “form follows function”:

- Descriptive: beauty results from purity of function;
- Prescriptive: aesthetic considerations in design should be secondary to functional considerations.

Descriptive Interpretation

The descriptive interpretation favours simplicity to complexity. It states that beauty results from purity of function and not from ornamentation. This ideal derives from the belief that form follows function in nature. Is this really true?

Actually, the opposite is true. Evolution passes on genetic traits to subsequent generations without any rationale for their purpose. Each generation of a species then finds a use for the form it has inherited. Function follows form in nature.

Applying functional elements to a design is generally a more objective process than applying aesthetic elements. A functionally objective process results in designs that are timeless but may be perceived as simple and uninteresting.

Prescriptive Interpretation

The prescriptive interpretation prioritizes functionality over all other design considerations, including usability, ergonomics and aesthetics.

Aesthetic considerations in design should be secondary to functional considerations. Is this interpretation problematic? Does it lead designers to ask the wrong questions about a given design?

This interpretation would seem to lead to designers to ask what should be omitted from a design. What elements of a design do not serve a function and thus ought to be removed? Should the form of a design be determined solely by its function?

Taken to the logical conclusion, every element would ultimately have the same design. Every functional item would have one and only one design. Before an object’s form could be changed, it would need to serve a different function.

Better questions come from your criteria for success. What aspects of your photographs are critical to success? When time or resources is limited, what photographic elements trade-offs would least harm the photographs success? Sometimes, certain aesthetics will have to be abandoned, and sometimes certain functionality will have to be abandoned. *Sometimes both aesthetics and functionality will need to be compromised.*

<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/03/23/does-form-follow-function/>

Form and Function in Design

Often applied to architecture, engineering, and industrial design, the statement *form follows function* applies to graphic design and desktop publishing too. For designers, form is the elements that make up our designs, our pages. Function is the objective of the design whether it is a sign giving directions or a book that entertains with a story.

Form

In print design, form is both the overall look and feel of the page as well as the shape and look of the individual components - the typefaces, the graphic elements, and the texture of the paper. Form is also the format whether the piece is a poster, a tri-fold brochure, a saddle-stitched booklet, or a self-mailer newsletter.

Function

For designers, function is the practical, getting down to business part of the process of design and desktop publishing. Function is the purpose of the piece whether it is to sell, to inform or educate, to impress, or to entertain. It includes the copywriting message, the audience, and the cost of getting the project printed.

Form and Function Working Together

Function needs form in order to accomplish its goal. Form without function is just a pretty piece of paper.

Function is deciding that a poster plastered around town would be the best way to inform the general public about a band's upcoming club performance. Function is specifying how much the band can spend on that poster. Form is choosing the size, colors, fonts, and images based on the function and arranging the text and graphics so that the poster attracts attention and looks good.

To practice the rule of form follows function, start the design process by first getting as much information as possible about the purpose of the piece you are creating. Ask questions about how the piece is to be used, such as:

- . Who is the target audience and what are their expectations?
- . Is the piece supposed to sell a tangible product or an idea?
- . Is it to develop goodwill, create branding, or public awareness about a company, an event, an issue?
- . What is the budget for this project? What quantity of this piece is needed?
- . How will this project be distributed - by mail, door-to-door, in person, as part of a magazine, newsletter, newspaper, or book?
- . What action is the recipient likely to take with the piece - throw it away, stick on the wall, file for reference, pass it around, fax it around, put it on a shelf?
- . What elements are required by the client - specific colours, specific fonts, specific images, a certain printer?

Once you know the function of the piece and the practical parameters and limitations for putting the job together, you get to put it into a form that supports the function using your knowledge of the principles of design, the rules of desktop publishing and graphic design, and your creative vision.