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Translated (loosely, and in abridged form) from the German by JAY RUTHERFORD to accompany the booklet «form follows function», published by the «Museum für Druckkunst», Leipzig.

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## Origin and meaning of **form follows function**

Who isn't familiar with «form follows function» as one of the most-quoted slogans in all areas of design? Everyone knows exactly what is meant and uses these three words apparently expertly to refer to the source of so-called functionalism. Apparently.

A product will be described as functionally designed when one means that it obeys primary rational/technical conditions: when it has no curlicues, appears linear, smooth, clean, technical, objective. There is a small elite which uses the term «functional» not disparagingly as «unsensual and boring», but rather equates it appreciatively with «sensible and clear». They are referring essentially to the same form canon as those who disparage functionalism; they just place a different value on it.

Both interpretations prove false. When one attributes the phrase «form follows function» as a quote from the author Louis Sullivan, looks at his work, and particularly when one reads the entire text from which this quote is taken (where Sullivan describes it as a «law»), it turns out that «form follows function» is completely misunderstood.

Louis H. Sullivan published his essay «The Tall Building Artistically Considered» in *Lippincott's* No. 57 in 1896. The title gives it away. The word «artistically» shows that Sullivan meant something quite other than what the popular discussion in Germany (and around the world in design circles) has quoted since the 1940s. It would appear that almost no-one has read the original text.

This formula, falsely understood and falsely spread, has taken the blame as a slogan and an alibi in endless arguments on human-centred design and the dignified reconstruction of German society after WWII. In these arguments, **artistic consideration** and **functional design** would appear to be polar opposites, as would **rational** and **emotional**, **technical** and **organic**, **feasible** and **intuitive**.

In the search for this famous «law», one finds in the above-mentioned essay the following passage:

**«It is the pervading law that 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, the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law.»**

Remarkable: **organic, metaphysical, heart, soul,** and **function**, bound up in one sentence. Only the head and pure reason have been allowed in the more recent amicable discussions over so-called functionalism, using the short-form «form follows function».

When one is curious and reads the entire original text, one finds further astonishing passages: «It is my belief that it is of the very essence of every problem that it contains and suggests its own solution. This I believe to be natural law».

Along the same lines, the Austrian architect/visionary Frederick John Kiesler wrote 64 years later, from his chosen place of work, New York:

**»Any problem, big or little, requires a great humility – to let it tell you what it wants, rather than your telling the problem how it should be resolved. It will develop from its own inner concept which must be listened to and understood.«**

In order to put the concept of functionalism into perspective, Kiesler wrote in 1961 as his credo:

**«If we can avert our gaze from the fake functionalism of the desiccated herbaria of architectural fashion; if we can transform the rigid *function* of design into a flowing design of life force and convert hand-me-down functionality into an architecture of continuous process, then we will have played our part as human and social creatures. If we can give up our smugness as ostensible functionalists, then we will be ready to become a part of TEILHARD DE CHARDIN'S «rich and powerful pattern of life»»**

Assumedly Kiesler read Sullivan. At least he understood Sullivan's intended meaning of «form follows function» better than anyone else and expressed it fully in his words and his work.

Seen in this light, and for the first time in this context properly understood, «form follows function» is not so much a law of design as it is a law of development, a law of manifestation. It is an invitation to observe how every creature, every thing, every event finds its formal expression within itself. Creatures, things and events create themselves independently, with or without the intervention of human beings. Seen in this light, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that is not «functionally designed». **Gestalt** and **function** are, in this sense, synonyms.

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