

# Iconic Designs: The Apple iPod

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The iPod branded by Apple is the first cultural consumer icon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; it represents a perfect marriage between aesthetics and functionality, of sound and touch – the auditory world in the palm of the hand. The iPod is the cultural equivalent of the Citroen DS written so elegantly about by Raymond Barthes in nineteen fifty seven:

“I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.” (Barthes (2002) in Wallen, P. and Joe Kerr (eds) *Autopia. Cars and Culture*. London. Reaction Books. p341)

From Gothic cathedral to Citroen DS to Apple iPod - A Western narrative of increasing mobility and privatization. The Gothic cathedral: immobile, massive and austere, an entirely public edifice magnifying the glory of god whilst reducing the size of the individual to a mere speck on the horizon. Gothic cathedrals were the largest man-made structures in Europe at the time, just as the pealing of the cathedral bells was the loudest man-made noise that the population regularly heard.

Barthes, in his analysis of the Citroen DS, had already reduced the scale of the cultural icon from the size of a gothic cathedral to that of a five seater automobile - and of course, one could inhabit and privately occupy the Citroen in a way that you could not inhabit the cathedral - the DS was something not merely to be looked at or desired, it was something to be owned and travelled in – an icon of social and physical mobility. Barthes discussed the enveloping nature and tactile sense of the automobile - the leather seats, the suspension as well as the sleek external lines that make the Citroen appear to slide through the air, like a slip of paper, effortlessly.

Barthes's interpretation of the Citroen DS is of a domesticated icon – this icon is largely a visual and tactile oriented one whilst Barthes's brief description of Gothic cathedrals is visually based. Yet a parallel cultural history can be developed from Barthes's sharp insights into Western aesthetics – an acoustic history of increasingly mobile privatised sound.

For Gothic cathedrals were not merely to be looked at or to be entered for silent prayer - they were also cathedrals of sound in which sacred vocal music reverberated through those massive spaces. The populace invariably went into these spaces not merely to pray but to enter envelopes of sound resounding through their bodies, amplified by the great arches of the cathedral.

By the 1950s, even as Barthes was shrinking the scale of our cultural icons to five-seater auto size, so our acoustic envelopes began to shift. First, hi-fi began to train its post-war auditors to demand deeply private, acoustically intensified, almost entirely non-resonant “fidelity” sound. With the invention of the miniaturized transistor and the hand-held, battery powered radios it made possible in the 1950s, a new culture of personal mobile sound emerged, reimagined in the 1980s with the Sony “walkman” (equipped with privatizing earphones) and ghetto boomboxes (outfitted with loudspeaker quality sub-woofers). Now at the beginning of the 21st century, the culture has shifted again. No longer prey to the whims of corporate radio, our sonic envelopes, our cathedrals of sound exist in the personal playlist of the iPod. In the head and mind of the iPod user, the spaces of culture have been redrawn into a largely private and mobile auditory worship. Technology, precisely in its miniaturization - the whole digital world in your hand – acquires a magical quality. As one enthusiastic yet typical New York user commented:

The design is just flawless. It feels good, to hold it in your hand, to rub your thumb over the navigation wheel and to touch the smooth white surface. It looks nice, I'm proud of owning such a device. It

represents and holds an important part of my life, so I don't want an 'ugly' package around it. I have never cherished anything I bought as much as this little device. When I was a child, I used to watch a kids show called 'the music machine' and I always dreamed of, having something like that. A device that plays any song there is. The iPod comes pretty close to the fulfilment of this childhood fantasy. (1)

The iPod – more even than the Barthesian automobile with its multi-channel car radio or its super 8 - offers the user the unfettered auditory freedom of movement from home to street to automobile to office. Time is woven into a seamless web of controlled sound and space, as another urban user comments:

I now listen to music any time I can. Walking to and from work, at work, on vacation, on a train or airplane, even at home when I don't want to disturb my partner. I have any song I want to listen to at my fingertips at any particular moment. That amazes me. It truly is my own personal jukebox, and puts the soundtrack to my life in my pocket and at my fingertips.

Revealing the commercial music infrastructure that supports his listening habits, this "jukebox" owner believes in the individuality of his life's "soundtrack. With its enveloping acoustics the iPod user moves through space in their auditory bubble. In tune with their body, their world becomes at one with their "soundtracked" movements; they move to the rhythm of their music, not the rhythm of the street. In tune with their thoughts - their chosen music enables them to focus on their feelings and desires; in tune with their memories - they create an auditory mnemonic of their day via the playlists on their iPod. In sum, the iPod puts them in tune with their desire to eke out some aesthetic control as they weave their way through the day. The illusion of a fully private sonic envelope is the paradoxical price of an ever more intensely populated public space:

"Well, I think I've come to the conclusion that overall I feel pretty out of control in my life. Stores play music to get me to buy more. Work tells me what to do and when. Traffic decides how quickly I get from here to there. Even being in public places forces me to endure other people and their habits (the guy slurping his soup, the brat crying for a piece of candy). I didn't realize how much I yearn for control and probably peace and quiet. Strange since I'm blasting music in my ears. I think I'm really tired of living on someone else's schedule. The iPod has given me some control back.

Some years ago Richard Sennett used the place of the church to analyze the desire for centeredness in Western culture. The church, in Sennett's argument, created a zone of 'immunity' for the citizen, an ordered space in which the subject could feel secure. Today this zone of immunity and security is a mobile one existing between the ears of iPod users as they move through the city – enveloped in what they imagine to be their own reality, each holding Apple iPods - 21<sup>st</sup> century icon and acoustic metaphor for much urban life.

#### Notes

1. All iPod user quotes are taken from a study of iPod use undertaken by the author in 2004.