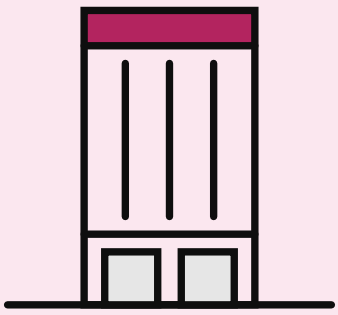
Concept

Form follows function

The principle that the shape of a building or object should come from what it does, not from an inherited style or added ornament.



In Spanish
La forma sigue a la función

Origin
Sullivan (1896)

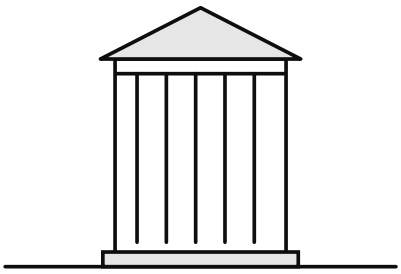
What problem it addresses

It gives a rule for deciding form without copying past styles, and the modern movement made it its own. It left design with the habit of starting from what the object has to do.

An example

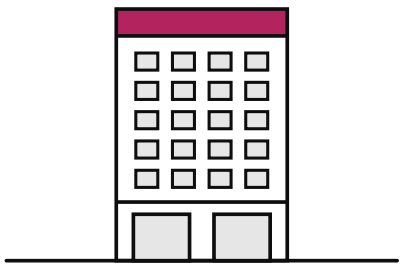
An illustrative example, in the spirit of Sullivan's essay: the facade of an office building.

Following a style



Temple columns and a pediment, even though there are shops and offices inside. **The facade says nothing about what happens inside.**

Following the function



An open base for the shops, identical office floors and a closed top for the machinery. **Each part shows its use.**

Both facades serve the same building. What changes is where the form comes from.

Why it happens

1

You analyze what each part of the building or object does;

2

each use gets its own form, and what repeats looks the same;

3

the result can be read without forms borrowed from another era.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Start from what the object must do and let that rule out forms before you think about style.

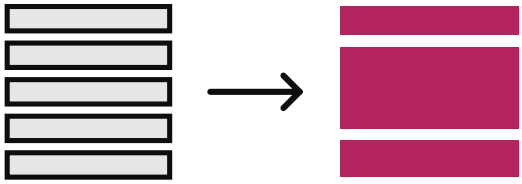
Avoid

Using the phrase to assume that anything austere is, by default, functional.

Don't fall for it

Function also includes understanding, liking and feeling: if you only count the mechanical part, you fall short.

5 uses → 3 parts



What the research says

Sullivan listed five uses of an office building, from the machinery basement to the attic, and from them derived a three-part facade: base, shaft and top (Sullivan, 1896).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** It is a rule, not a measured result. Meeting the function is not enough to decide the form: there are almost always several options left, and choosing well among them is what makes the difference (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

Connections

Used in

- Industrial design

Related to

- Ten principles for good design
- Emotional design
- Design for the real world
- Aesthetic-usability effect
- International Typographic Style
- The crystal goblet

Authors and works

1896	**Louis H. Sullivan**	Stated the rule in an essay on the tall office building. Form should grow out of use, not out of past styles.
1971	**Victor Papanek**	Broadened the idea of function into six aspects: method, use, need, telesis (fit with its time and society), association and aesthetics.
	Hartmut Esslinger and frog design	Answered with the motto “form follows emotion” to demand that products also move people.

Sources

Original sources

- Sullivan, L. H. (1896). The tall office building artistically considered. Lippincott's Monthly Magazine, 57, 403–409. View source (https://archive.org/details/tallofficebuildi00sull)
- Papanek, V. (1971). Design for the real world: Human ecology and social change. Pantheon Books.
- frog (n.d.). About frog: Our history. Consultado el October 27, 2026. View source (https://www.frog.co/about/)

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- Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.). Functionalism (architecture). In Encyclopaedia Britannica. View source (https://www.britannica.com/print/article/222115)

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