Product design and industrial design –
what's the difference?

Reading time 11 mins

Product design vs industrial design

- It depends who you ask, where they are from and where they studied
- The difference is subtle and there is no answer everyone can agree on
- Product design is primarily concerned with the user interaction and involves research, observation and prototyping
- Industrial design can incorporate product design but is usually also more concerned with the wider view of how a product works and is manufactured

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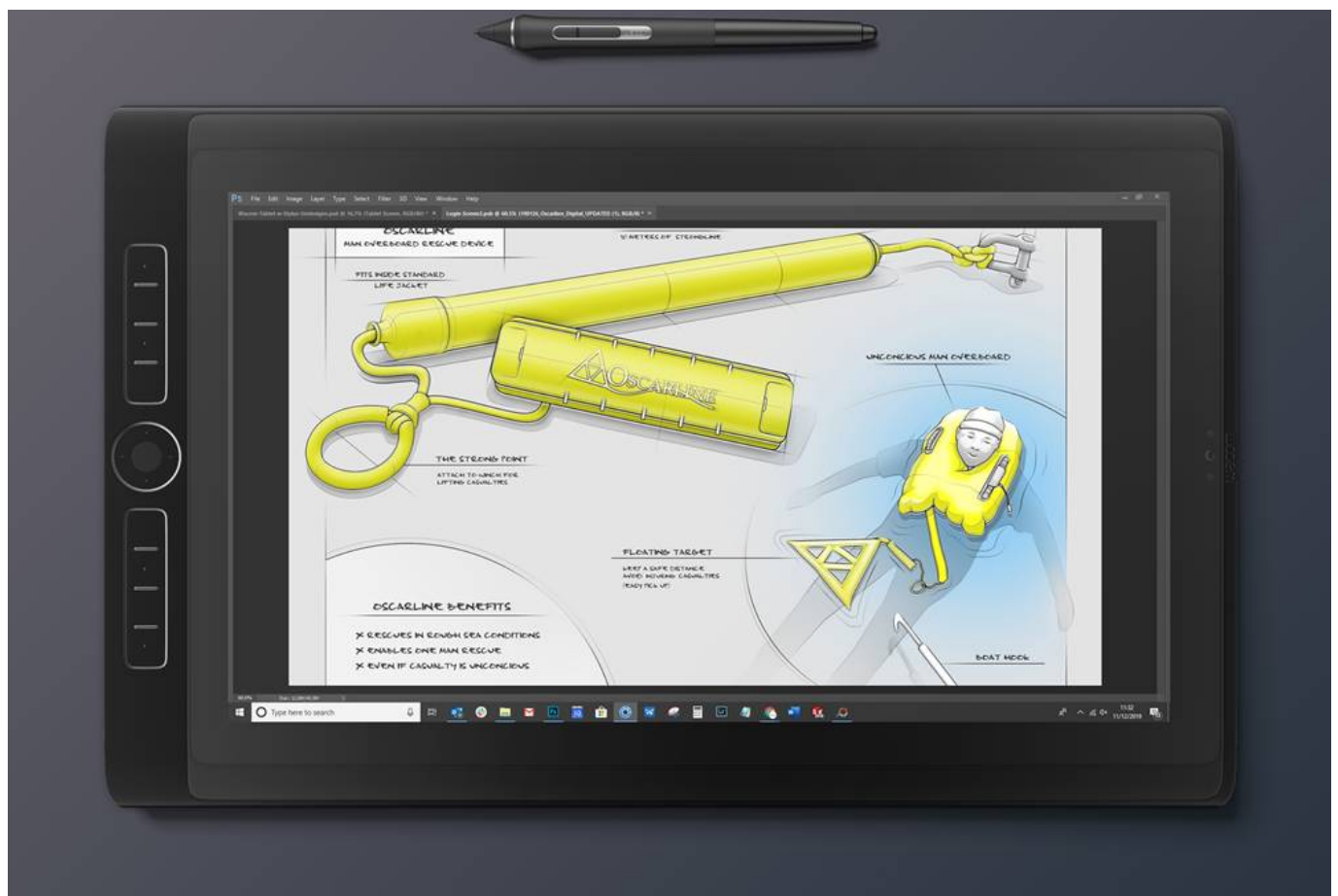
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Product and industrial design

Outside of the R&D space, the terms 'product design' and 'industrial design' are often used interchangeably, but this can lead to confusion. So exploring their differences could help put an end to any misunderstanding.

Some claim 'product design' and 'industrial design' are simply different words for exactly the same thing; others give definitions that directly contradict each other. Working out the difference between 'product design' and 'industrial design', it seems, is far from simple.

Ask those in the industry of products, and we get responses that challenge – and, at worse, confuse [1]: "An industrial designer can be a product designer, but a product designer cannot be an industrial designer", "A product designer needs no knowledge of manufacturing processes or CAD."

There are claims that product design is part of industrial design; there are others that say industrial design is part of product design.

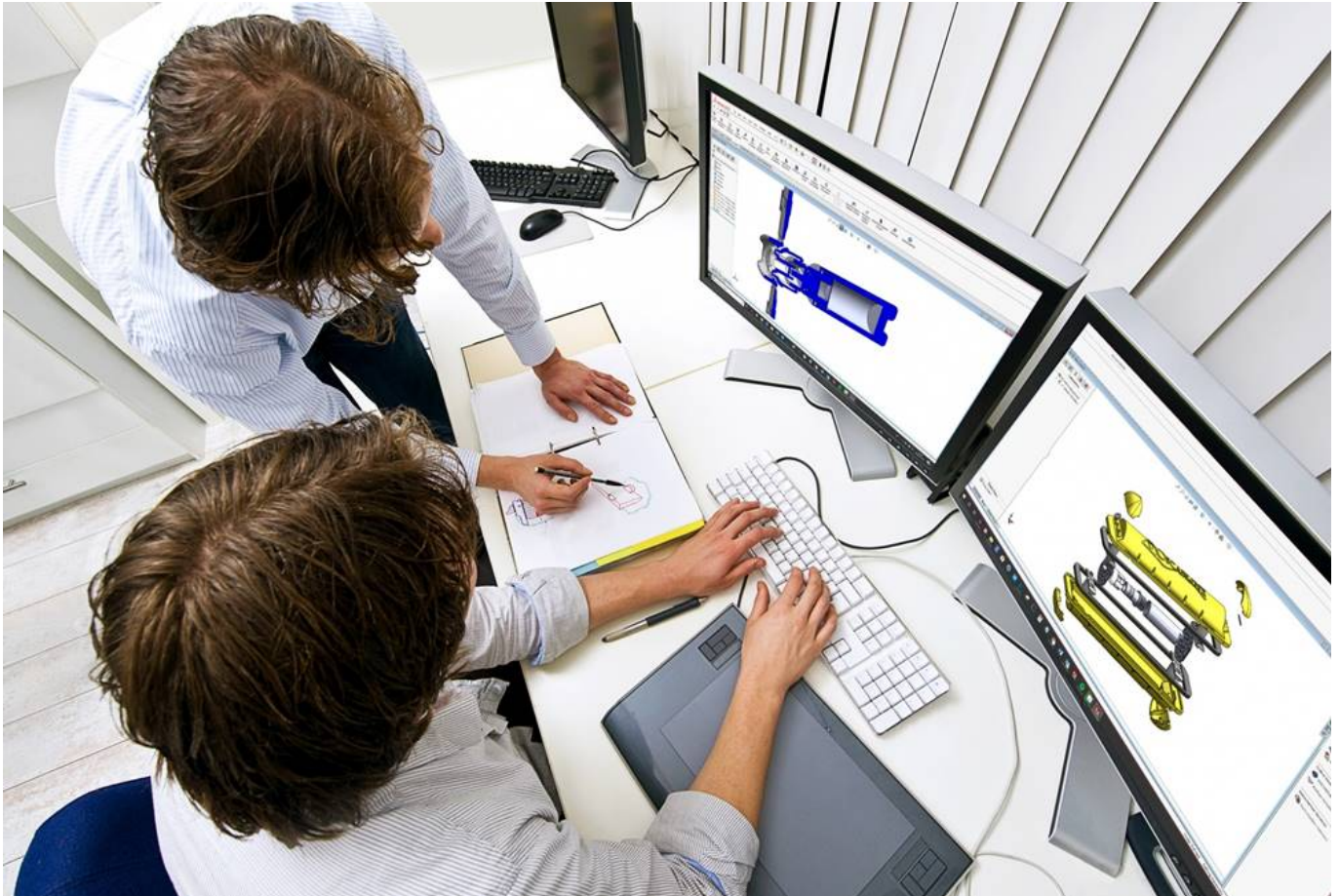After digging around and weighing up input from across the design world, here is a definitive definition.

Exploring 'product design'

Depending on who we ask – and their history, their role and the journey they took to get where they are now – definitions for 'product design' range from a focus on creating conceptual renders to the

entire process of production.

But to differentiate it from industrial design, it makes sense to say that product design is the development of concepts, moving from research to renderings to prototypes. It is the initial phase of the whole lifecycle, and it focuses on products, their design and development – on the users, the product and the interaction between them.

Product design is less about how to make something and more about why we make it and for whom.

Exploring 'industrial design'

Moving on from the initial phase, industrial design is the process of design applied to mass production. It is about exploring techniques and creating ideas for the manufacture of a product.

So industrial design furthers the work done in developing the product designs and readies them for manufacturing, exploring products and systems, interaction and service with business value at its core.

So? What is the answer?

Product design is about creating solutions; industrial design is about taking those solutions through manufacture and to the end user. Essentially, the conceptual design and development of product design is part of industrial design.

An effective multi-functional team combines product and industrial designers and has an awareness of the whole lifecycle and the same goal in mind – to create or refine a product.

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