Sustainable by Design

Explorations in Theory and Practice

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REASSESSING ‘GOOD’ DESIGN

objects as symbols of beauty

At the beginning of the last century, many of our possessions, such as furniture, rugs, clothes, tools and hardware, would have been produced locally or regionally, or at least within our own country. Many of them may even have been created by our own hands. Products were generally built to last and the idea of ‘disposable’ products was virtually unknown. By contrast, at the beginning of the 21st century few products are made locally. A large proportion are imported, with different components being manufactured in various countries, brought together, assembled and distributed. Furthermore, the number of products we own has increased enormously; many products are now disposable and the useful life of so-called consumer durables is often just a few years.[1]

This shift has caused a severe detachment from our material world, a detachment that has not only contributed to socio-economic disparities and environmental degradation, but has also resulted in a lack of understanding and a devaluing of material culture. A reassessment of physical products is required, together with a creative re-engagement with ‘things’, if we are to find lasting meaning and value in our material

world whilst simultaneously alleviating the damaging consequences of contemporary consumerism. *Design* can be a key component in this; how we design products, the assumptions we make and the preconceptions we have when we design, as well as our notions of good design, all have to be questioned.

Reconfiguring our notions of material goods and the nature of functional artefacts is a complex and fascinating design challenge. We have the opportunity today to design products in new ways that not only address critical environmental and social issues but also allow us to restore depth and significance to our material world.

The notion that we have become disassociated from our possessions may not be very obvious. After all, we are surrounded by hundreds of material things that we use everyday, from furniture to technical equipment to appliances. We find these products useful and beneficial, and many of them tend to make our lives easier. Indeed, in numerous ways we have become dependent on products to live effectively in modern society – for example for communication, transportation and entertainment. But despite our dependency on them, there exists a chasm between the products we own and our ability to determine, contribute to, and understand them.

As I said in Chapter 4, the manufacturing sector in general, and industrial design in particular, have professionalized material culture and in doing so have usurped our participation. We buy products that are predefined, pre-packaged and presented to us as a fait accompli. This professionalization of the processes of design and making has provided us with functional products that often have considerable instrumental value, but it has made relatively few contributions to the evolution of an inherently meaningful material culture, by which I mean a material culture that is not only economically viable, environmentally responsible and socially equitable but also culturally and personally enriching. Our inability to participate in the creation of our material goods is critically related to these notions of meaning. In terms of our material world and our possessions, when we are unable to contribute we become reduced to mere consumers. Our lack of involvement in the design and making of objects, and our consequent gap in understanding, undoubtedly affect how we value them. We become increasingly divorced from an intimate connection with things – their meaning, their source, their formation and their maintenance. This has

reached a point where, today, it seems almost absurd to suggest that we might play a substantive role in the definition and creation of our possessions. However, such participation is not only consistent with the broad environmental and social principles of sustainable development, it is also essential, on a more intimate and personal level, if we are to imbue our material culture with meaning and value.

It is often difficult to maintain interest in large, long-term, rather nebulous aims such as those of sustainable development unless they touch us emotionally and are continually 'made real' to us at a personal level in our everyday lives. Therefore, if we are to rethink our approaches to material culture, we must see the value in it not just as a means towards some distant, somewhat hazy notion of a sustainable society, and not simply in terms of rationalized steps towards 'the social good' or 'environmental conservation'. A new approach to design and making must also be seen as an end in itself, as an improved, more meaningful rendition of materiality that enriches our lives at a deeper, emotional level, in addition to the utility of the object, the economic benefits of its production, and the inclusion of environmental and social considerations. This requires a greater understanding and a more profound relationship with our material world, which, it seems, can be best achieved at the local level. Numerous authors have suggested a strong connection between achieving more sustainable ways of living and smaller-scale, local initiatives:[2]

> **The most beautiful house in the world is the one that you build yourself.** (Witold Rybczynski, 1989[3])

While it might seem rather unusual to suggest that we should be more involved in the making of our functional goods, in other areas of our lives this is quite normal. For example, many people take an active part in the design and details of their homes. They modify and upgrade them over time, as needs and tastes change, and they personalize them in a variety of ways. To facilitate this, there is a supply chain infrastructure in place, in the form of home hardware stores, which allows people to purchase basic components for home repair and decoration. People can do much more than simply choose from predetermined and pre-designed schemes. The availability of the basic elements enables people to participate in the design of their homes in ways that are creative, fulfilling and affordable. Moreover, a large variety of books, manuals and magazines are available, not to mention numerous television

programmes, which teach techniques and illustrate possibilities. As a result, a house can be transformed into a specific home that reflects the values of the owners and is instilled with personal significance, meaning and value.

Another example is the preparation of a meal. Again, a supply chain infrastructure is in place to provide people with the necessary ingredients, and information, techniques and recipes are readily available. Preparing a meal, particularly a meal for sharing with others on a special occasion, is an endeavour that is steeped in ritual, ceremony and meaning.[4] Opportunities for creativity in preparation and presentation are limitless. By comparison, a frozen TV dinner, where all the elements of the meal are laid out on a segmented tray, is a commodity that has been predetermined and is anonymous; it allows no opportunity for the purchaser to be creative. The TV dinner might be convenient but, beyond satiation of appetite, it is bereft of many of the qualities that render a meal meaningful. This is why it would seem insulting if we were to invite guests for a meal and we placed TV dinners on the table. In most societies around the world the time and care one puts into preparing a meal, especially one for sharing with others, is an important and culturally significant undertaking.

When we consider home making and meal preparation, we place greater emphasis on the intentions, the effort and the meanings behind the decisions and actions, rather than focusing solely on the end result. We can appreciate that a home or a special meal reflects the person who has created it, and the values and priorities of that person. While the end result might not conform to our personal notions of beauty and might not be to our taste, nevertheless it *can* be seen as being beautiful because it is a symbol of the hospitality and generosity of the person who created it.

Unlike homes and meals, we do not generally make our own products. While some people might make a chair or a lamp, products such as music equipment, radios, hairdryers and appliances are not things we generally think of making ourselves. Consequently, these types of products, purchased off-the-shelf, offer no opportunity for us to participate in their creation or to gain a sense of personal accomplishment. These products can be seen as the consumer-durable equivalent of TV dinners – predefined and pre-packaged. They can be valued for their function and, perhaps, for their appearance as an

object, but they generally have little inherent meaning for us. Today, we are inundated with such products. Mass manufacturing, often carried out using high levels of automation and usually in factories located in countries with low labour costs, means that these products are relatively inexpensive to purchase, but not cost effective to repair; and we have little compunction in discarding them when they cease to function, indeed we have little other choice.

By contrast, something we have created ourselves, or that a loved one has created, has a different kind of value for us. Such an object will be valued *despite any lack of skill evident in its creation*, and whether or not it actually functions well or as intended. It is valued over and above function and appearance. Its value for us is inherent to the thing itself as an expression of one's creativity, or because of the personal association that it represents, rather than solely in its utilitarian merits or aesthetic attributes. Like the prayer beads discussed in Chapter 5, its beauty lies in its meaning and the intentions it symbolizes and is part of its essential nature. Hence, its value is inherent rather than instrumental, and its beauty is intrinsic rather than extrinsic. For these reasons, if such an object becomes damaged or ceases to function, we would probably attempt to repair it, rather than simply discarding it. And if we had a hand in its creation, we would be more able to effect a repair because we would already have an understanding of the object – what it is made from, how it is made and how it works.

Examples of such artefacts would include furniture items made in a hobby class, a handmade quilt or sweater or a model aeroplane made from a construction kit. But the electronic products and appliances that we use everyday are not created in this way and consequently are bereft of qualities that make them intrinsically meaningful to us. It is these types of products that we dispose of so readily and which are clogging our landfills. For example, in the Greater Vancouver region of British Columbia, Canada, 13,000 tonnes of small appliances and 8000 tonnes of computer equipment ended up in landfill in just one year, and a recent European directive was introduced to reduce the 6.5 million tonnes of electronic and electrical equipment that is annually discarded.[5] Hence, these types of products are a major area of concern and must be reconsidered and re-conceived if we are to seriously address sustainability within the field of product design.

This line of thought suggests that there is a fundamental and irreconcilable disparity between our conventional notions of beauty – what might be termed 'outer' or extrinsic beauty, and sustainability. The word sustainability evokes ideas of longevity, continuity and endurance. 'Outer beauty', on the other hand, is perishable and transient. It exists only for a short period, but fades with time. We speak of 'the ravages of time', by which we mean the inevitable erosion of outer beauty as occurrences over time besiege its perfection. Thus, the splendour of the rose wilts and the loveliness of youth sags into old age.

So too with products – the modern product encased in its fashionably styled injection-moulded casing is polished and perfect. But its flawlessness is, and can only ever be, temporary. With the passage of time its fashionable colours and lines lose their appeal, its surfaces become blemished, and its once à la mode desirability weakens until it disappears altogether. At which point it will probably be discarded and replaced, and the cycle begins again. Hence, waste is increased, consumption is promoted, the principles of sustainability go unheeded and our material world is devalued.

At this point, it might be helpful to offer an example of an alternative approach. The *dhoti* is a long, loose-fitting loincloth traditionally worn by Hindu men in India; Mahatma Gandhi is probably the most well-known figure to wear this garment. Gandhi's *dhoti* was made from cotton he had spun himself. From a perspective where business suits and western fashions were the norms associated with power, social position and wealth, the *dhoti* could be readily dismissed as unsophisticated, coarse and undignified. Indeed, in the newsreels of Gandhi's visit to Britain in 1931, the predominant tone of the commentary is condescending and disparaging. The reporter makes numerous remarks about Gandhi's clothing and refers to him as a 'bizarre little man'.[6] For Gandhi, however, the *dhoti* was much more than a simple article of clothing; the spinning wheel and homespun clothing had social, political, economic and even spiritual importance.[7] The *dhoti* was a distinct and conscious breaking away from the 'western' business suit, which he had worn during his earlier career as a young barrister, and as such it was deeply symbolic. The *dhoti*, and more generally homespun cloth or *khadi*, represented self-determination, self-respect, creativity, cultural restoration, independence, and a political and economic statement against colonial rule. Seen in these terms, the *dhoti* becomes

an extraordinarily dignified, meaningful and beautiful piece of clothing, a physical embodiment of a philosophy and set of values.

Similarly, the beauty of the 'local' product lies in what it means, what it represents and what it aims for, rather than simply in its outer appearance as a physical object. To appreciate these aspects of a product, we must have some insight and understanding of why the object is articulated in the way that it is. If we maintain our preconceptions, and look at and judge such objects from conventional (i.e. unsustainable) notions of beauty and taste, then they can be easily ridiculed and rejected. However, our perceptions of an object can change once its basis is more fully understood.[8] What may have been regarded as ugly, crude or undignified can then, potentially, be seen as beautiful and an embodiment of meaningful values. And, of course, the converse is also true.

> **Delights from external objects are wombs of suffering. In their beginning is their end and no wise man delights in them.** (Bhagavad Gita[9])

Like many of the world's major sacred teachings, the Bhagavad Gita warns against finding pleasure in worldly objects, because such pleasures and delights are seen as distractions and obstacles to deeper, more profound understandings (this theme will be explored further in the next chapter). However, we *can* find delight, not in the objects themselves, but in their potentially enriching and virtuous meanings – what they embody in terms of individual or collective creativity and the provision of healthy, meaningful employment; personal accomplishment; and equitable and ethical work practices. A functional object can become the culmination, physical manifestation and symbol of 'good' works – in its intention, design, making, use and disposal. Thus, we can understand the beauty of an object in a different way. Beauty can be captured in the object through what it *represents*, and not simply through its appearance.

Unfortunately, most of today's mass-produced products are not representations of 'good' works. Their superficial, fashionable façades too often disguise a hidden world of resource depletion, pollution and social disparity and exploitation. If, in its design and manufacture, the associated environmental, ethical and socio-economic issues are ignored, then the object can become symbolic not of beauty but of ugliness and harm.