

Design for unsustainability

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Is it possible to design a sustainable world?¹ Some recent publications seem to suggest that it is (eg Thorpe 2008; Williams 2007). The underlying rhetoric is that objects, built environments and services that comply with the principles of economic, social, cultural and ecological sustainability have a great potential to change the course of events on the planet. In this article we, in a somewhat pessimistic tone, argue that design has very limited possibilities of bringing about sustainable change. Even though design disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, industrial design and product design are experiencing green winds, we find few arguments for the longevity of these ideas.

Western economies are overfilled with physical products, and their material consumption are still increasing. Even if industrial production has become more efficient in economic terms, the great quantity of products and services, and the way they are used and consumed, appears to inhibit the social trail toward sustainability (Gardner, Assadourian och Sarin 2004). Underlying this development is the notion that production and consumption is becoming progressively more fashion sensitive,

¹ An earlier version of this article, entitled Design, Lifestyles and Sustainability. Aesthetic Consumption in a World of Abundance, was published in *Business Strategy and the Environment*, Vol 14 (5) pp 324-336 in 2005.

dependent on aesthetics and well designed products and services (Dobers och Strannegård 2005).

In such lands of plenty, serious ecological problems come to the surface. Products and services overflow an increasing number of saturated markets, and companies need to search for new creative ways of selling their products and services. Companies become more sophisticated in their marketing and sales activities, and benefit financially from an ever-increasing consumption pattern. From a sustainability viewpoint, this is bad news. Scholars have suggested that the road to sustainability requires measures such as green accounting (Gray and Bebbington, 2001), green product development (Ritzén 2000), life-cycle assessments (Baumann 1998; Baumann och Tillman 2004), new consumption patterns (Solér 1996), green marketing (Belz 2001) and functional sales (Söderström 2004). A majority of the influential texts in the field of corporate environmental management are normative and technical in the sense that they point at what *needs* to be done in order to reach a more desired future (Dobers och Wolff 2000). The academic community has thus generated substantial knowledge that the present situation is unsustainable. Yet, the results are meager considering the fact that the world is becoming an increasingly unsustainable place (Worldwatch Institute 2007).

The overarching argument stemming from the normative strand of sustainability management suggests that consumption patterns need to be altered, lifestyles need to be changed and the ways products and services are extracted, distributed and consumed need to change. The general critique of today's business system is that a production system geared toward ever-increasing growth and consumption creates one of the most serious impediments for sustainable development, especially when the business practices move away from addressing people's needs to exploiting their desires (Böhme 2003). In contrast, the production system must, in every aspect, be related to consumer needs. Sustainable products and services need to be enrolled and activated in consumption to be a part of an economic system.

Against this backdrop, we argue that the studies of sustainable design have not sufficiently taken the role of lifestyle consumption and identity projects into account. By exploring contemporary consumption and production, and connecting them to different aspects of the design and identity concept, we seek to draw the perspectives together in order to point at the complex interconnectedness between design, consumption and sustainability.

Consumption: a Lifestyle Project

An increasing part of the world is entering and belongs to what could be described as the consumer society. One example points out that there are 1.7 billion members of 'the global consumer class' (Bentley 2003; Gardner, Assadourian och Sarin 2004). Its members have incomes of more than \$7000 of the so called purchasing power parity (an income calculation for the purchasing possibility in local currency), which is just about equal to the publicly announced poverty line in Western Europe (Bentley, 2003). Although ranging widely in levels of wealth, the consumer class people are archetypal users of television, telecommunication and the Internet, along with contemporary media culture and commercial ideologies that these widely distributed products transmit.

One would assume that most of the members of the consumer class are found in Western industrialized nations. Almost half of them, however, come from the 'developing' world (ibid). Although there is clearly an increasing gap between the few very rich and the many very poor, it suffices here to say that a material lifestyle and consumer culture has become widely accessible to an increasingly growing middle class throughout the world.

We have probably only seen the start of this development, which will take on a much more massive scale. When considering the top national consumer class populations of 2002, the United States of America headed the list in absolute terms (242.5 million), slightly ahead of China (239.8 million) and well ahead of India (121.9 million). However, when looking at the share of the consumer class of the national population, we get a strong presentiment of what will happen once the consumer class of the two most populated countries in the world grows: in the USA, the share of the consumer class is 84% of the national population, whereas it is much smaller in both China (19%) and India (12%) (Gardner, Assadourian och Sarin 2004). Obviously, an increased (over)consumption has become a problem in both developed economies such as Europe and the Northern Americas, and the economically growing, but in many ways still developing, economies in Asia and Africa.

A number of books published since the early 1990s document an increased frustration with societies organized around consumption (Schor 1993; Schor 1998; Cross 2000; Kasser 2003). On a general level of human cognition, consumption is thereby seen as an attempt to escape the boredom of everyday life (Cohen och Taylor 1972), as a means to create one's own lifestyle and identity through consuming goods

and services with specific social attributions (Featherstone 1991), not to mention as the material creation and interior decoration of a home 'expected to serve as a family haven with the emotional and material aspects interweaving' (Löfgren 1990; Sanne 2002).

Consumption is thus a strong tool in signalling belonging to, and exclusion from, certain groups and certain identities. We thereby connect with the argument by Sanne (2002) when he suggests that signalling does not presuppose commercial markers and thus that people most basically want to make themselves seen, not consume. On a more subtle level of human ambivalence, people are faced with an almost endless number of choices, implying that they are also faced with existential doubt and insecurities when attempting to deal with multiple identities from one relational context to another (Gergen 1991; Wynne 1992) p 295. When people put trust in a brand, company or social institution to consume a certain good or service, this trust may be a shallow proxy for a deeper level of existential ambiguity and social *Angst*. Along previous lines, consumption is thus much more of a process of social and cultural relations rather than a cognitive, single act: a process taking place in a society marked by increasing alienation, isolation and individualization (Giddens 1990; Beck 1992; Beck 1994; Giddens 1994)

Sustainable Consumption and Design

Recent attempts to take into account the social and cultural side of sustainability include concepts of 'less consumption' (Sanne 2002; Sanne 2005), 'happiness' (Putnam 2000; Layard 2005), or 'well-being and a good life' (Gardner, Assadourian och Sarin 2004). A heavily criticized statement is 'more leisure, less work', implying that by working less people will have more time for leisure, but fewer financial resources to spend on consumption.

The challenge lies in those leisure activities that do not rely on heavy consumption. The recent work on happiness and social ties takes on the relationship between increasing wealth and happiness. In a book based on multi-faceted pieces of scientific evidence, Richard Layard (2005) examines the fact that people do not become happier although their societies in the Western world have become richer. The West has more crime, more alcoholism and more depression than 50 years ago, although the average income has doubled in the same period (Layard 2005). It seems that income above \$20 000 is no guarantee for happiness and a good life. Thus, extra income seems to matter more to people with less income than to people with more income. The

challenge here lies in avoiding being caught in the spiral of wanting more to sustain happiness; the more we earn, the more we want to consume.

Finally, definitions of the concept of well-being might vary, but have a tendency to unite around several themes:

- the basics for survival, including food, shelter and a secure livelihood;
- good health, both personally and in terms of a robust natural environment;
- good social relations, including an experience of social cohesion and of a supportive social network;
- security, both personal safety and in terms of personal possessions; and
- freedom, which includes the capacity to achieve developmental potential (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2003) (Gardner, Assadourian och Sarin 2004) p. 165.

In an official report on sustainable consumption from the Swedish government (SOU2005:51 2005), the suggestion from the investigator is straightforward, but not very helpful: 'Products and artifacts should be designed in a sustainable way and with an aesthetic that contributes to that we use them for longer time periods in our households'. The, necessary, overarching change presented in the report is 'contentedness', i.e. a satisfaction with the present state of affairs. Hence, the investigator commissioned by the Swedish government suggests that sustainability requires that consumers refrain from constantly striving for more. A suggestion of how such a switch of mindset is to be achieved is however not presented in the report.

These normative calls for sustainability are thus common in studies of consumption and sustainable management. The sustainable design field is no different. The words "must" and "necessary" are omnipresent in academic reports as well as handbooks and inquiries. A good example is the conference "Changing the Change" that took place in Turin, Italy in 2008. The design-oriented conference encompassed a series of speeches and workshops revolving around the question of how designers can work in order to boost sustainability. The conference motto reads "Changing the Change seeks to make a significant contribution to a necessary transformation that involves changing the direction of current changes toward a sustainable future." The conference ended with a presentation of a design research agenda for sustainability research. The research agenda included a number of background statements, i.e. ideas

that had to be shared by those intending to participate in the research program. The first statements read:

Sustainability must be the meta-objective of every possible design research activity.

Sustainability here is intended as a systemic change to be promoted at the local and global scale. It will be obtained through a wide social learning process, re-orienting the present unsustainable transformations towards a sustainable knowledge society.

Design research has to feed the social learning process towards sustainability with the needed design knowledge. That is, with visions, proposals, tools and reflections to enable different actors to collaborate and to move concrete steps towards a sustainable knowledge society.

Hence, the normative touch is very clear. Designers are to minimize any activity that jeopardizes the path toward sustainability.

Sustainable identities? For a limited time only

The calls for green design are thus normative and full of requirements of what needs to be done. In the late few years we have witnessed green issues and sustainability specialists in consumption-oriented magazines such as *Time Style and Design*, *Vanity Fair* and *Financial Times How to Spend It*. The argument put forward in the editorials is that a change is underway and that consumers are turning increasingly conscious regarding the environment and other ethical issues. Yet, as soon as the financial crisis hit the world markets, the interest in sustainability plummeted. All of a sudden, recession became the new "chic". The deteriorating planet that was hot news for a number of months, suddenly cooled off on the lifestyle pages. Sustainable design is thus a very fragile concept, and the normative calls do very little in a fashion- trend- and identity oriented world. Or in other words: sustainable design as a concept and as a collective interest is unsustainable.

Hence, the normative calls do little good. Calls for sustainable design need to take the users into account to a much greater extent. Sustainability is, like all ideological concepts, subject to fashion. And hence a hermeneutic understanding of consumption, of design processes and consumption as an expressive project is needed. Without casting consumption in a hermeneutic light, sustainable design becomes a normative call without resonance. In short, the ethical imperative seems to be clear: designers are to design for sustainability and consumers are to consume less. But the pragmatics

seem to speak another language: consumers in the developed world do not want sustainability per se, they want identity.

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