sustainability {1/2}

The discussion around sustainability goes beyond the design industry. It is a political, economical and social issue that requires understanding of the consequences of all human actions as consumers and producers. Designers are at the forefront of this issue by the way they specify the use of resources in the making of products. This issue is not new, nor is it resolved but it is now at the heart of education and criticism. {December 2011}

During the last 40 years, there have been a diverse range of strategies and approaches taken by designers that illustrate the multifaceted nature of the environmental paradigm. Sustainable design expert Jonathan Chapman identified some of these in *Emotionally Durable Design, Objects, Experiences and Empathy* [2005]:

'Popular strategies include alternative energies, from solar to human power, sourcing local material and processes; collapsible objects to conserve landfill space; supply chain management; zero emissions; compostable products; and a growing left field interest in edible packaging to name but a small handful.' [1]

He also suggested that:

'Aided further by a rich resource of seminal texts by such key thinkers as Victor Papenek, Nigel Whiteley, Ed van Hinte, Fritz Schumacher and Ezio Manzini, a new wave of designers with potent environmental agendas is emerging – designers who realize the potential they possess to slow down environmental decay through elegant, efficient and responsible solutions.' [2]

In the early 1970s, designer, Papanek, well known for his criticism of the state of the design industry in his book *Design for the Real World* [1971] placed a core responsibility on designers.

'Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today. Industrial design, by concocting the tawdry idiocies hawked by advertisers, comes a close second [...] By designing criminally unsafe automobiles that kill or maim nearly one million people around the world each year, by creating whole new species of permanent garbage to clutter up the landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breath, designers have become a dangerous breed.' [3]

This attack alone was not enough to kick start a change in design. Pauline Madge writes:

'It seems important, therefore to evaluate the changing course of ecodesign since the mid-1980s within the framework of the broader development of ecological ideas. One notable feature is a change in terminology: the original term 'green design' is rarely used today and although, it was the buzzword of the late 1980s, it is already passé.' [4]

It seems that when green design was referred to as sustainability during the 1980s, it became a serious issue. *Design for the Real World* was republished in 1985 and the design industry considered the effect it had on the future of the planet.

'In the UK, the Design Council took the lead with an exhibition called 'the Green Designer' in 1986, organized by Paul Burall, Design Council publicity officer, and John Elkington, environmental consultant.' [5]

Change unfolded following the Brundtland Report of 1987, an attempt by the UN to address sustainable development at a global perspective. *The Green Consumer Guide* was published in 1988 and consumers began experiencing a change. In 1993, Nigel Whitely, identified the importance of the relationship between producer and consumer:

'The designer has a key role to play in the Greening of design. S/he is in a special position between the producer and the consumer and can influence both parties. The designer can have a major influence over how things are made; the materials that are used; how they are constructed; how efficient they are to use; their ease of maintenance; and even their recycling/reuse potential.' [6]

Whilst the designer's responsibility was still key, responsibility and awareness was beginning to filter through to consumers as well. In 2001, author of *The Total Beauty of Sustainable Products*, Edwin Datschefski, suggested a new template for how these ideal products might be composed:

'Products should either be part of natural cycles, made of grown materials which can be composted, or else become part of a man-made cycle, like closed-loop recycling. All the energy used to make or run the product should be from renewable energy in all its varied forms, most of which are ultimately driven by the sun. Increasing the efficiency of materials and energy use means less environmental damage. Products can be designed to use one tenth of what they did before. Products and, importantly, their by-products, should not contain hazardous materials. A product cannot be great if its manufacturer exploits workers.' [7]

Datschefski identified chairs such as the 'Louis 20' [1991] and 'Emeco Hudson' [2000] by Philippe Starck and the 'Picto' chair made by Wilkhan [1995] as furniture that met at least one of these criteria. In 2007, Herman Millar made further advancements in

fulfilling these criteria when they launched the 'Mirra' office chair. In the company's overview about the chair, it begins with:

> 'Mirra contains 42% recycled material. At the end of its life, it is 96% recyclable. 12 year, 24 hour warranty.' [8]

Whilst the unpopular aesthetics and the high price tags of these chairs may be off putting to consumers, they were a shift in the right direction for sustainable development in design.

A thinking designer has a growing list of choices to make in the way they interact with clients and how their products are shaped for consumers.

> 'Sustainability attempts to come to terms with processes and interrelations across areas not usually connected.' [9]

It seems it is now a part of a designer's responsibility to consider how to unite the various pieces of information available to them.

> 'Designers must not be just reactive, but proactive and environmentally committed.' [10]

Materials are a good example of where this can begin; a greater appreciation and respect for materials from both the designer and the consumer seems to be what is needed.

> 'Today's sustainable design creative also has access to an extensive palette of low-impact materials from recycled polymers such as polythene and polypropylene to metals such as steel aluminium and brass [...] The one-off usage of wood in the high turnover arena of retail design is, as Peter Howard indicates, irresponsible. Other materials have greater recycling potential although, on the other hand, they are a greater problem than wood if they are not recycled or reused.' [11]

As designers are educated in this evolution of thinking, they can then pass on this practice to consumers who are increasingly being made aware of the social, environmental and personal implications of their purchasing decisions.

Nearly 50 years of discussion has led to many guides of what designers should do but not enough implementation. Whilst discussion about sustainability remains to be on the periphery of the industry, it seems

that answering simple but challenging questions is key for society as a whole to address this widespread issue.

> 'Sustainability can simply be assessed by asking the question: 'How much of this can we take?' [12]

Sustainability may be assessed by asking questions such as the one above but surely the ultimate solution to sustainability in design would be to stop designing new objects and make better use of what already exists.

1. Chapman J., *Emotionally Durable Design, Objects, Experiences and Empathy* [Trowbridge, Cromwell Press 2005] p.6

2. Chapman J., *Emotionally Durable Design, Objects, Experiences and Empathy* [Trowbridge, Cromwell Press 2005] p.6-7

3. Papanek, V., *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* [London, Thames and Hudson 1985], p.ix

4. Madge P., Design Issues: 'Ecological Design: A New Critique' Volume 13, No.2 Summer 1997 p.44

5. Madge P., Design Issues: 'Ecological Design: A New Critique' Volume 13, No.2 Summer 1997 p.45

6. Whiteley, N., *Design for Society* [London, Reaktion Books 1993] p.82

7. Datschefski, E., *The Total Beauty of Sustainable Products* [Switzerland, Rotovision 2001] P.10-11

8. Herman Miller, 'Mirra Chair' [2007] www. hermanmiller.co.uk/publicwebresources/documents/ products/seating/mirra/mirraEnvironmental_ Summary_Sheet.pdf [Accessed 16th February 2012]

9. Davies C. & Parrinder M., *Limited Language* [Berlin, Birkhauser 2010] p.96

10. Whiteley, N., *Design for Society* [London, Reaktion Books 1993] p.82

11. Chapman J., *Emotionally Durable Design, Objects, Experiences and Empathy* [Trowbridge, Cromwell Press 2005] p.6

12. Davies C. & Parrinder M., *Limited Language* [Berlin, Birkhauser 2010] p.96