After Taste:
The Power and Prejudice of Product Appearance

Stuart Walker, University of Calgary

INTRODUCTION
Our initial visual impression of a product has a powerful influence on our judgment, and our response will be strongly related to factors such as convention and personal notions of taste. Convention refers to what we expect a product to look like, allowing us to place it within a known milieu and, thus, understand it. Taste refers to the kinds of associations a particular aesthetic will prompt; it allows us to decide if the product supports our idea of ourselves within the sociocultural grouping to which we belong or aspire. The potency of this first impression raises two important points. Firstly, convention and taste tend to hamper acceptance of new kinds of design solutions that depart significantly from current norms, which, in turn, can hamper progress in design practice. This is especially important today because there is an urgent need to develop new, more sustainable ways forward in product design and manufacturing, and it may well be that such approaches do depart significantly from what has gone before because they take into account issues that have not previously been considered. Secondly, this overriding influence of a product's appearance can create a false impression of the product's contribution. For example, if a so called 'sustainable' or 'eco-' product is given a 'simple, clean' appearance, then there will be a causal association set up in the viewer's mind between a clean and simple appearance and environmental responsibility. Equally, if a simple and clean appearance aligns with one's own personal taste, then there will likely be a strong positive impression created that sustainability and one's personal taste are congruent. As will be discussed here, this association between product appearance, taste, and sustainability is not determinate, and appearances can be deceptive. The outer appearance of a product is infinitely variable and can appeal to many different tastes irrespective of whether the product is 'sustainable' or not. For sustainability, there is a need to go beyond appearances and to carefully consider the product as a whole, both in terms of its production, materials, use and after-use, and in terms of its meaning and contribution. This discussion explores these issues and illustrates the arguments with exploratory design examples, which demonstrate that notions of taste are a powerful but often highly prejudicial aspect of product design. The discussion raises issues about the design process and the assumptions we make when designing products and it indicates directions that could begin to overcome 'designerly' preconceptions about taste in order to address design for sustainability within a broader and richer aesthetic palette.

TASTE AND ITS PREJUDICES
Penny Sparke has defined taste as "that highly personal, and yet collectively negotiated agent of aesthetic discrimination which is 'at work' continually, influencing the food we eat, the music we listen to, the books we read, the way we adorn ourselves and the manner in which we modify the physical spaces we inhabit" (Sparke, 1995). This definition indicates that taste refers to social mores and individual perceptions. As such, it is not universal but relates to our personal associations with, or aspirations to the conventions of particular social groupings with similar interests, backgrounds, or cultures. Our notions of taste are influential in the discriminating judgments we make. Those things we prefer and choose, we tend to regard as being of good taste, there will be a host of things on which we have little opinion either way, and there will be those things that we regard as being of bad taste. This highlights two key issues that are relevant to this discussion. Firstly, judgments of taste are related to the conventions of social groups. Secondly, these judgments lead us to categorize, and subsequently accept, reject, or be indifferent to the artifacts in our material culture.

Convention and Creativity: The alliance of taste with convention means that, inherent to our personal notions of good taste, is a predisposition to aesthetic expressions that conform to preestablished norms. Consequently, acceptance of designs that embody new sensibilities, but whose aesthetic definition, for that reason, do not align with common expectations may be impeded. Many highly creative people have scorned notions of 'good taste' for this very reason. For example, Picasso called good taste "the enemy of

creativeness" (Simpson, 1988). For the design professions, notions of good taste can impose a straightjacket of conformity that prevents the development of new directions that respond to important contemporary issues and which, potentially, could help mitigate many of the damaging consequences associated with current practices. If we are to advance the design professions in ways that more readily embrace these challenges, then it becomes necessary to place more emphasis than is evident today on exploratory and critical design practices that challenge current norms and demonstrate alternatives. By placing such designs in the public arena, this type of work serves to illustrate and embody new considerations and, in doing so, raises awareness. In this way, the unfamiliar becomes, over time, familiar and thence part of the milieu of material culture against which people make their judgments of taste and aesthetic discrimination.

Convention, Discriminating Judgments, and Prejudice: The relationship of taste with allegiances to particular social groupings leads to a further consideration. It is an unfortunate but common tendency within human society to associate the judgments that are influenced by these allegiances with a sense of cultural superiority. Notions of good taste are closely related to ideas of social merit and elitism. For example, Hughes (1987) has provided an outline of the tastes and habits of social distinction during the settlement of Australia, which offers an insightful glimpse into the lengths to which people will go to distinguish themselves from those whom they believe to be their social inferiors. In the early years of the colonization of Australia, the free settlers and 'upper crust' tended to choose and place value on certain activities, foodstuffs and products simply because these were not available to convicts. Convicts went to the beach, washed in the sea, and were tanned by a life of outdoor labor – therefore free settlers avoided the beach, they did not swim in the sea and it was especially important for women to maintain a pale complexion. Convicts ate fresh fish and salt meat, so free settlers ate salt fish and fresh meat – to do otherwise would have been considered in very poor taste. Carey (2005) has suggested that taste "is so bound up with self-esteem, particularly among devotees of high art, that a sense of superiority to those with 'lower' tastes is almost impossible to relinquish without identity crisis." Similarly, O'Doherty (1986) has criticized the exclusivity of high art audiences with accusations of social elitism and intellectual snobbery. Hughes (2006) is quite frank about being elitist when it comes to aesthetic discrimination and Scruton (1999), in a discussion about kitsch, is especially disparaging when he alludes to the easily assimilated choices of the 'steaming herd'; the term 'kitsch' here referring to popular and sentimentalized renditions of material culture and mass-market art, which Khan suggests has become the universal culture (Khan, 1989).

In terms of the relationship of taste to design for sustainability, it is perhaps enough to recognize that those who tend to enjoy or choose what is regarded as high or good art and the more avant-garde examples of design have usually been privileged with a certain education about that genre – be it in literature, painting, music, or design. Such work is usually more difficult to appreciate, it takes more effort – it is *not* the easily assimilated world of popular culture and kitsch. Indeed, the very intention of the more advanced forms, such as the avant-garde, is to be unorthodox and experimental in order to challenge existing conventions, provoke discussion, and influence ideas. Appreciating this type of work requires more practiced, nuanced and demanding consideration, and the rewards it offers require time, effort, pertinent education, and inclination (Eaton, 2001a). Many people are simply preoccupied with other activities and interests and may have neither the opportunity nor the appetite for such pursuits. This is not to say that considered critique is not valuable and important. However, because of the prerequisites mentioned above, those who generally appreciate the more sophisticated forms of material culture often come from a rather more advantaged place within society. It is therefore entirely inappropriate to bolster one's own views and social place through overblown rhetoric and a language of exclusivity that are too often derisive of the preferences of others.

Despite these arguments for or against popular culture and 'higher' forms, it is clear that tastes and preferences span a broad range: from popular culture and kitsch and the often banal offerings of mass production, to the more considered and sophisticated, to the rarefied, thought provoking productions of the avant-garde. If *'design for sustainability'* is to have any significant impact, it must not only be capable of spanning this range, it would seem that special attention has to be given to those much more popular forms that are so often vilified by cultural critics. Indeed, if sustainable design is to become more relevant to locale and cultural preferences, which are vital aspects of sustainability, it will have to be able to

accommodate a wide variety of tastes. Therefore, the challenge is to explore product design concepts that are flexible enough to absorb such diversity in taste and appearance, but without compromising sustainable principles. This is especially important in product design areas such as electrical and electronic goods because these products often have extremely short useful lives and their success in the market is dependent, to a large extent, on the aesthetic attributes of casing design – an area of particular relevance to the industrial designer.

TASTE AND PRODUCT DESIGN

The mass-production of consumer goods assumes large audiences for the same kind of product and this requires that the design of these goods will appeal to a broad range of tastes. This is considered essential not only because of the economic necessities of capital intensive production, but also because of the economic aspirations of companies and the desire to maximize shareholder profit. To achieve this, the appearance of mass-market products tends to be of a type. Things begin to look the same – they are inoffensive, acceptable to most, bland, even boring (Dormer, 1997). It is implicit within the current production system that the designers who define the appearance of these products will be removed, physically, culturally, and economically, from many of those who will actually be using them. There is a distancing from the particularities of place and local culture because of the system in which design exists. Hence, there is both an assumption and an imposition of 'taste' within this process. And as Thackera has pointed out, for us to continue with this type of top-down, "high concept" design in today's more complex environment "is irresponsible and probably counterproductive" (Thackera, 2005a).

When it comes to the promotion and marketing of these goods, notions of social elitism and exclusivity are, somewhat paradoxically, interwoven with popular preferences and tastes in order to encourage consumerism. Thus, even though the designs of mass-produced products necessarily tend to be rather uniform, and the products themselves have to be affordable to many, their marketing often suggests privileged lifestyles and exclusivity – the implication being that one's expression of good taste, through the purchase of the product, somehow aligns the purchaser with such lifestyles. Setting aside the hollowness of this assertion, the monotonous homogeneity of contemporary product aesthetics, as noted by Dormer, is characterized by qualities that speak of glossy perfection, newness and impeccable surfaces that are nevertheless extremely vulnerable and inevitably fleeting. Due to the methods used in their design and production, and their materials, there is a remoteness and inscrutability to much contemporary design that is impenetrable, lacks warmth and character and which is largely impervious to cultural difference and local expression. Nevertheless, advertising and lifestyle magazines promote these offerings as the height of good taste, but omit critique and considered discussion of the social and environmental consequences of their production and consumption, consequences that include the continuance of a culture of dissatisfaction and inordinate waste based on transient novelty. In this, there is a heavy reliance on the power of the initial visual impression of the product, which can have a major influence on our judgment. It is in this first contact that we are liable to decide whether or not we like what we see before us. The designer Richard Seymour has succinctly summed up the potency of this effect. Referring to the work of psychologists, he has suggested that judgments about products are made almost instantaneously and a design that is capable of making an emotional tie spurs the viewer to make three subconscious statements, namely, "I like it. I want it. What is it?" (Sawyer, 2001). Such emphases within contemporary product design conflict with deeper understandings of beauty and with many of the issues related to sustainability, and they highlight the need to consider further the relationships between design, taste, and sustainable principles.

TASTE, AESTHETICS AND THE MORAL DIMENSION

Aesthetics have long been associated with goodness, virtue and truth and many artifacts of human creativity and design, from fine art, architecture and gardens to poetry and music have been seen as inspiring and understood to be in some way informed by and expressive of ethical or spiritual underpinnings (Eaton 2005b; MacMillan, 2007; Martin, 2006; MAMAC, 2006; Bakhtiar, 1976). Therefore, it seems that aesthetic discrimination must be based, at least in part, on our knowledge about an artifact, what Eaton has termed its extrinsic qualities (Eaton, 2001c), and the relationship of these qualities to our understandings of goodness and truth – and not simply on a consideration of outer appearance, which is so strongly attached to transient fashions and taste. Knowledge about an artifact can affect how we see, experience and respond to it. For example, if we learn that a painting, by an artist we admire, and that we

consider beautiful is, in fact, a fake, this knowledge will diminish our view of it. Such a revelation affects and, justifiably, alters how we see the painting because fakery is a form of deception and is considered morally reprehensible.

This relationship of aesthetics and taste to our ideas of goodness and virtue is highly relevant to the ways in which we advance our understandings of design and to the processes we employ in producing our material culture. There is a moral dimension to taste and beauty which is too often obfuscated in the one-sided rhetoric of product marketing. Social exploitation and inequities and environmental damage associated with much contemporary production, and the fostering of a culture of dissatisfaction among the buying public, belie the outer perfection of today's industrially design products and point to a moral vacuum at the heart of our globalized production system; a system that continues to either turn a blind eye or, given the extent of the problems, more realistically knowingly engages in practices that fail to address the social and environmental problems that are, today, so widely apparent. For example, a prominent designer, who shall remain anonymous - because it would be unfair to single out one person when the view is evidently so common – after recently delivering a keynote address responded to a question about the current challenges facing design and the problems associated with contemporary products with, "We produce more and more for consumer lifestyles, so I try not to think about it too much."

AFTER TASTE

It is apparent from the foregoing that taste is a significant factor in the judgments we make about products; different people have very diverse ideas about what is tasteful; it can be used to encourage consumerism; it is associated with social distinctiveness and elitism; and it is a highly dynamic and often short-lived aspect of modern culture. It can also impede creativity and advancement in new directions that address urgent contemporary issues. However, it is also the case that the dominant characteristic of taste is outer appearance and it is here that an opportunity exists for designers to move beyond the vagaries of taste in their attempts to address substantial issues, while still acknowledging that taste and styling have a powerful effect. Design for sustainability does not necessarily imply any particular type of aesthetic or outer appearance for a product. On the contrary, the relationship of sustainability to localization, cultural expression and use of regionally available resources suggests a diversity of expressions that are concomitant with local preferences and, where appropriate, local capacity. And in further contrast to the current uniformity in product appearance that relies so heavily on 'newness', design for sustainability must also embrace the aging of products, the accumulation of meaning over time, and more profound notions of attachment and empathy. It is possible to deal with these various aspects of sustainable design while still acknowledging a diverse range of tastes and preferences in the appearance of products. In contrast to the homogeneity of much contemporary design, which promotes characterless novelty as good taste, design for sustainability suggests the development of approaches that foster diversity, difference, and meaningful choice based on culturally relevant expressions and moral responsibility – even if this means that the outer appearance of some of these expressions will, somewhat inevitably, tend towards kitsch. If the essential conceptual basis of the artifact is founded on sustainable principles, then the treatment of surface and outer appearance will be a relatively minor concern with respect to the essential nature and contribution of the artifact.

Design for sustainability therefore implies a significant change in priorities. Thackera has spoken of emergence and flow, and design as a continuous activity within an ever-changing and evolving system, rather than a series of episodic, discrete events with fixed outcomes. The emphasis moves away from how things look and towards how the whole system of producing, engaging with material culture works. He suggests that a fundamental shift in thinking is needed, with greater prominence given to "the relationship between the people who make things and the people who use them" (Thackera, 2005b). Chapman has suggested that users should be "designed into narratives as co-producers and not simply as inert, passive witnesses" (Chapman, 2005a). He speaks of the need for design to overcome its preoccupation with what he terms 'box-fresh' experiences and novelty in order to develop a material culture where there is a continuous narrative of progressive change and meaningful, mutual growth (Chapman, 2005b).

DESIGN AFTER TASTE

The design of consumer goods within a concept of material culture that is in a permanent state of flow and emergence and informed by social and environmental responsibilities, requires careful consideration of product design, continuity and product endurance – and this has implications for our notions of taste It would be simplistic and even counterproductive to merely design products to last longer. Needs change and evolve, and advancements in technology can offer new functional benefits as well as more efficient use of materials and energy. Rather, approaches are required that explore a variety of routes for developing a material culture that is capable of being continuously revised and renewed, and that seamlessly integrates older, still useful elements with new. Designs can be developed that allow elements to be updated, maintained, and reworked in order to sustain a product's value, in terms of its functionality and its visual attributes. Other approaches can explore ways of revaluing the plethora of out-of-fashion but still functional products that are so prevalent in modern society. Such products can be seen as a resource and opportunity for creative design. They provide fertile ground for coming to terms with product aging and offer a challenge for designers to develop imaginative frameworks in which such products can find a valued place, rather than simply being discarded and replaced. Several of these approaches have been explored by the author and two of his PhD students, and a number of propositional designs have been developed. These illustrate that sustainable principles can be addressed within product design in diverse ways. Moreover, these examples demonstrate that factors related to appearance and taste can be highly variable without compromising sustainable principles. Indeed, this diversity in appearance – which in all the following examples can be locally adapted to individual interpretation and culturally relevant expression – is to be welcomed as an important component of design for sustainability.

Panelplay (Figure 1) by Cagla Dogan is a concept for a music player. A panel, which can be made from locally available sheet-stock materials such as plywood, acrylic, or MDF, is pierced by a series of apertures. The panel size and the arrangement of the apertures are variable. Circuitry is mounted on the reverse side, portions of which are revealed in the apertures, which are fitted with acrylic to protect the electronics. When elements of the circuitry require replacement – either because of breakdown or for upgrading they can be easily changed, variations in size of replacement or upgrade circuitry can be accommodated and the change is recognized because new circuitry will present a slightly altered appearance in the aperture. As shown in Figures 1a, 1b, and 1c, the surface of the panel can be treated in a variety of ways to suit particular tastes or to be expressive of local preferences. Thus, the design integrates, in a flexible, adaptive manner, mass-produced functional elements with locally produced expressive elements, both of which can be upgraded, maintained, and renewed. The fundamental concept is based on sustainable principles, but the appearance is highly variable – to repeat the suggestion of Thackera, referred to earlier, the emphasis in the development of this design is away from how things look and towards how the whole system of producing, engaging with, and reproducing material culture works.

Continuity in Diversity (Figure 2), by Anne Marchand, is one of a series that explores how older products can be reinstated through locally achievable design interventions. The emphasis here is on product families. Here, an assortment of old, battered dining chairs are given aesthetic continuity through the design of a partial slip-cover for each chair. Fig. 2a illustrates how this transforms a diverse assortment into a collection. One of the chairs was photographed from front and back, and this was printed onto each of the slip covers. The lower parts of the chairs remain visible, revealing their diversity and their scarred history; the upper parts are covered to provide continuity. Thus, a simple, low-tech, but imaginative design intervention, that uses relatively few resources, enables an assortment of old products to be reinstated and revalued. This example reveals an aspect of design for sustainability that is perhaps a little uncomfortable for designers. The main contribution here is the development of a simple, locally achievable concept for creating aesthetic continuity among disparate, used products, which transforms them into useful and desirable collections. However, for this concept to take effect and have impact, the particular aesthetic treatment to the covers has to be given up by the designer and handed over to others at the local level, so that it can be adapted to local preferences. The treatment shown in Figure 2a can be judged as having aesthetic merit because it is consistent with the idea of 'chair' and is an artful way of providing visual continuity; it is not arbitrary but intentional to the reinstatement and renewal of these objects. But this need not be the case. Without compromising its sustainable basis, the concept could be given a very different appearance. Figure 2b shows the same concept, but here the rendition is

sentimental and kitsch. This again illustrates that design for sustainability can address product aging and aesthetic revision while also spanning a wide range of tastes.

The final examples are based on a simple, locally producible frame, constructed from timber and sheet stock. **Winelight** (Figure 3a) combines reused bottles with electrical parts to create a wall sconce rendered in a clean minimalist aesthetic. The conceptual basis here is on localization, reuse of otherwise discarded objects, and the use of standard, off-the-shelf parts. However, this concept can, again, be executed in manner that has a quite different appearance, without affecting any of these sustainable principles, as shown in Fig. 3b. **Replay** (Figure 4a) utilizes an old portable cassette player as a speaker unit for an MP3 unit and is finished in a manner that presents the composition on a stark, white ground. The contrast between the functional elements and the white ground gives the whole a minimal and simple aesthetic. In contrast, Figure 4b shows the same concept rendered in a more decorative manner—creating a tired, aged mood that is saved from kitsch by the frame edge, indicating an intention of commentary rather than compliance.

Despite their apparent simplicity, these examples represent a complex and substantial readjustment of design and production in order to better address sustainable concerns. They integrate old and new, innovation and continuity, and mass-production, regional sourcing and local production. Aged products become elements within larger compositions so that they can be seen anew, and the aesthetic expression is achieved through a combination of mass-produced elements and local involvement. These examples illustrate, in a variety of ways, attempts to address the conceptual shifts in design thinking that are needed to more fully embrace sustainability in the production of our material culture. They demonstrate that outer appearance and surface treatment of products is of relatively little import with respect to the inclusion of sustainable principles in the conceptual basis of the object – and yet a wide variety of visual treatments are still possible, to appeal to a broad range of preferences and tastes. Beyond visual treatment, however, there is a deeper notion of aesthetic experience that responds to the fundamental basis of the artifact – a basis that is perceived by the viewer or user through its overall visual construct, the materials used and the tangible aspects of the object. In addition, if the sustainable basis of the object is known, this can also affect one's appreciation and aesthetic experience of it.

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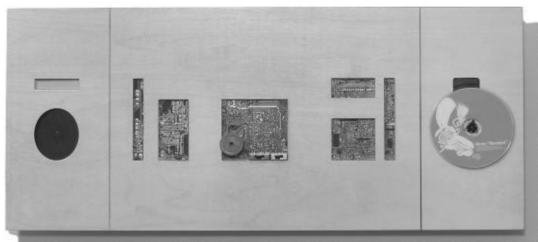
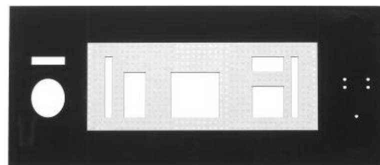
Figures
1 (a-c) Panelplay, PhD student Cagla Dogan, Environmental Design, University of Calgary
2 (a, b) Continuity in Diversity, PhD student Anne Marchand, Env. Design, University of Calgary
3 (a-b) Winelight, Stuart Walker
4 (a-b) Replay, Stuart Walker

Figure 1. Panelplay, Cagla Dogan. (a)



(b)



(c)

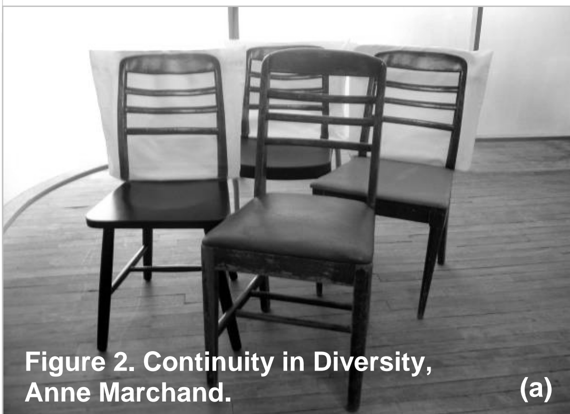


Figure 2. Continuity in Diversity, Anne Marchand. (a)

(b)

Figure 3. Winelight, Stuart Walker. (a)

(b)

Figure 4. Replay, Stuart Walker. (a)

(b)