

## Designers Anonymous

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### Introduction

The Designers/Consumers Anonymous project was undertaken to synthesize some of the discussions undertaken during a pilot course in Sustainable Product Design conducted in the faculty of environmental design at the University of Calgary. The project outlines a comprehensive, yet nonprescriptive, two-fold approach towards more sustainable forms of product design and consumption that uses the analogy of addiction and draws upon the language of well-established and effective addiction recovery programs.

What is interesting about a program like Alcoholics Anonymous is that it addresses addiction in a way that does not treat the specific symptoms of alcoholism or any of the problems and issues related to excessive drinking. Instead, it takes a very different approach, one that advocates living a good life, developing meaningful social relationships, and understanding one's place within a larger frame of reference. The premise is to treat the cause of the problem and not the symptoms.

Important parallels are being drawn in progressive academic discussions about sustainability. For good or bad, with the decline of traditional sources of meaning (religion, class, and so forth) our identities have become increasingly linked to design and consumption (Lansley, 1994). Increasingly, we are defining ourselves and are defined by the products we buy, the spaces we inhabit, and the activities in which we partake (Sparke, 2006). In this light, consumerism and the negative effects that have been associated with over-consumption can be seen as a social issue and not an environmental one. In other words, environmental degradation is a symptom of the social nature of consumerism, and as such, suggests that 'solutions' must include an understanding of this social dimension.

There is a part to be played by both consumers and designers, to critically evaluate the values driving purchasing choices for consumers and design decisions for designers. It is from this understanding that the two-fold approach was developed.

### Addiction

A number of writers have compared 'the West's' relationship to consuming and shopping to an addiction (de Graaf, 2001). Howard Clinebell, among other psychologists, has described consumerism as a behavioral addiction, even going so far as to call it "one of the fastest growing and most destructive addictions in our society." (Oskamp, 2001)

In a recent radio interview, writer/director Gregory Greene, of the documentary *The End of Suburbia*, stated that "our unsustainable consumer lifestyles are predicated on the notion of a cheap and plentiful oil supply." (Greene, 2007) Oil is, of course, the key factor of the consumer society, as a source of cheap energy it makes possible and drives globalization, the auto industry, the plastics industry, etc. *New York Times* journalist Thomas Freidman (Freidman, 2006) has written extensively about the United States' addiction to oil and in the 2006 presidential State of the Union address, even George W. Bush said "America is addicted to oil" and that the U.S. needed to "break" this addiction. (CNN, 2006).

The modern pursuit and drive for advancement of technology is also a driving force behind consumerism, predicating the rapid turn around of a great many consumer products. In his book *Technopoly*, Neil Postman discusses many aspects of our society's addiction to technology (Postman, 1993). Writer/Artist Brian Eno and author Roger Scruton also question the deleterious effects of our often uncritical allegiance to technology and technologically based solutions. (Eno, 2006), (Scruton, 2000)

Assuming that this notion of 'addiction' has at least some validity, the Designers/Consumers Anonymous project carries the analogy further by considering the behavioral effects of the addiction and adapting a well-established addiction treatment program for consumer society.

## Part I: Consumers Anonymous

The first component of the treatment program deals with the consumer side of the issue. The approach advocated makes the case that pursuing meaningful social relationships and values and encouraging a critical and informed engagement with material culture could lead to more responsible consumption patterns. The approach does not prescribe how to act or what to buy, but rather how one might participate actively (as opposed to passively) in understanding and navigating our contemporary consumer culture.

### Identity

One of the characteristic shifts of postmodern times has been the emphasis of consumption over production as an important factor in the formation of one's identity (Sparke, 2004). With this shift in relationships, products have increasingly taken on greater social roles far beyond their functional utility. Consumption has become not just the major force driving the economy, but also a dominant source of social meaning. In this context, products are valued less for what they do for us and more for what they say about us (Lansley, 1994).

This form of association is not inherently negative but, as we have often seen with some of the more questionable forms of marketing and advertising, there is potential for abuse and manipulation. Fashion cycles change and new design offerings are introduced that can in turn create dissatisfaction with the things we already own. This also encourages a kind of competitive individualism in which objects are bought for how they position us in comparison to others (Lansley, 1994). According to economist Alan Durning "Even if television commercials or magazine ads fail to sell a particular product, they sell consumerism itself by ceaselessly reiterating the idea that there is a product to solve each of life's problems, indeed that existence would be satisfying and complete if only we bought the right things." (Oskamp, 2001)

The appeal, excitement, novelty, and sheer inundation of media and design in our contemporary consumer culture can be highly distracting, creating a susceptibility to getting caught up in trivial individualistic pursuits. Charles Taylor writes of the dissatisfaction that people experience with these shallower forms of individual expression as a *"loss or decline, even as our civilization develops."* (Taylor, 1991). As such, our notions of progress become distorted and appear less and less tied to any sense of a social good. Taylor goes on to say,

*"I can define my identity only against a background of things that matter. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, were something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial."* (Taylor, 1991).

While the novelty of such products might not encourage much critical engagement, these products do not stand up to much scrutiny. Their novelty quickly wears off with the rapid turn around we have come to expect with each new consumer cycle. The environmental costs associated with this high turn around, which is encouraged by technical and fashionable obsolescence in many consumer products, are well documented in terms of the problems associated with their production, shipping, and disposal. In addition, there are the social costs, which include use of inequitable labour and trade practices of their production, and the trivialization and a sense of purposelessness often associated with affluent lifestyles (Lansley, 1994).

What seems clear is that many of the objects in our consumer society represent a particularly shallow conception of progress and innovation. John Thackara writes, *"We've built a technologically focused society that is remarkable on means, but hazy about ends. It is no longer clear to which question all this stuff is an answer or what value it adds to our lives."* (Thackara, 2005)

There is a pressing need to understand our consumer culture beyond superficial wants and temporary desires, to understand not only how our objects relate to us, but also how they relate to others and to the environment. Davidson calls this process 'triangulation' and in it we find a means toward a deeper

understanding of our material culture. (Kent, 1993) Implicit in such critical engagement with the objects of our consumer culture is that it allows us to gauge whether our relationships with these objects are appropriate or not.

### **Myth of Sustainability**

In his book *Sustainable by Design*, Stuart Walker has compared sustainability to a contemporary myth (Walker, 2006). Although this myth is currently too ideological and immature to completely satisfy the fullness of human experience, it nonetheless is an evolving idea that provides much needed goals to strive for. Whether referring to the 'Three Es' of sustainability (ethical, environmental, economic), which William McDonough calls the 'Triple Top Line' (ecology, equity, economy), or business leaders often refer to as the triple bottom line (people, planet and profit), in its simplest of form sustainability calls for us to understand each of our actions as a balance between social, environmental, and economic considerations (Edwards, 2005), (McDonough, 2002).

Building on years of development and tradition, progressive discussions concerning sustainability push our understanding beyond often instrumental, prescriptive, rationalistic, and purely environmental directions, into the philosophical. Such dialogues represent a search for meaning in our contemporary world. Just as discussions of the enlightenment and modernity were 'of their time,' such discussions concerning sustainability are 'of our time.' As noted, sustainability maybe in its infancy, but it does provide a convenient and useful set of ideas and goals, given the current state of our environment, economic, and social development.

### **Consumer 12-Step Program**

The Consumers Anonymous project follows the format of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 12-step program. The AA program has taken on many incarnations both secular and religious, but they all follow the same consistent format and basic understandings. Each step must be fulfilled before moving on to the next. Each step is an affirmation of what the participant has accomplished. Each statement is only a summary statement representative of a significant journey and set of understandings and actions undertaken by the participant and their support group. In this same fashion each statement in Consumer/Designers Anonymous 12-step program (see below) is meant to be a summary of a larger discussion on sustainability.

#### **Consumers Anonymous**

Step 1—We admitted we have an addiction to consumerism and that our lifestyle had become unsustainable.

Step 2—We came to believe that a connection to something beyond self-involved pursuits could restore meaning to our lives.

Step 3—We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to sustainability (1), as we understood it.

Step 4—We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5—We admitted to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our unsustainable lifestyles.

Step 6—We understood that sustainability could provide us with more meaningful social values to live our life by (2).

Step 7—We became aware of the forces that drove our consumption and which distracted us from more meaningful pursuits in our lives (3)(4).

Step 8—We came to realize that our consumer choices had consequences to others and to the environment, and made a list of all the ways our choices were unsustainable (5).

Step 9—We took responsibility for our purchases and sought out answers to questions of how products were made (materials, manufacturing, labour, etc.), shipped, marketed, and disposed of. We admitted our naivety, took action to live light (6), and made considered choices by understanding the impact they had on the lives of others and the environment.

Step 10—We sought to question our desire for consumer products and why we wanted them, actively questioning their usefulness and meaning in our lives.

Step 11—We learned to live differently, amid mistakes and contradictions, and understood our everyday actions in the context of sustainability (7), with the knowledge that thinking right and living right allowed us to discover more stable forms of identity (2)(4).

Step 12—Having discovered a deeper connection with our material culture as a result of these steps, we learned to live better consuming less (8) and shared those experiences with other consumers and our families and took a more active role in our local community.

#### Consumers Anonymous References

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- (2) Lansley, S. (1994) *After the gold rush: the trouble with affluence*. London: Century
- (3) Scruton, R. (2000) *An intelligent person's guide to modern culture*. Indiana: St. Augustine's Press
- (4) Taylor, C. (1991) *The malaise of modernity*. Toronto: Anansi
- (5) World Watch Institute (2004) *State of the world: The consumer society*. New York: Norton
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- (7) Manzini, E. and Jegou, F. (2004) Sustainable everyday: Scenarios for urban life. [online:] [http://www.triennale.it/triennale/sito\\_html/quotidiano/eng/home\\_.html](http://www.triennale.it/triennale/sito_html/quotidiano/eng/home_.html)
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## Part II: Designers Anonymous

Dominate paradigms of industry, professional practice, and design education can often bias designers to certain design approaches. While the idea of the triple bottom line is becoming more commonly held, many of the design approaches for dealing with sustainable issues still tend to be environmentally based (LCA, ecoefficiency, green materials and production, recycling programs, and so forth.) with little or no emphasis given to the social considerations. The purpose of this project is to critically examine the values and contexts that drive contemporary design decisions and approaches with the intent of developing an approach to design that is accessible, comprehensive and responsible but, importantly, nonprescriptive.

The intent is not to prescribe a sustainable design process (with all the inherent complications for creativity, adaptability, and adoption that such attempts would engender), but rather to outline an approach to design that prefigures the design process with critical thinking, deeper social values and understandings concerning sustainability.

John Thackara has warned that meaningful discussions are not well served by "*the dichotomous view that consumers are blind and ignorant ingestors of the products perpetrated on them by an unscrupulous and mercenary design profession.*" (Thackara, 2006) Discussions on sustainability are not always well defined and exist amid complexities, contradictions, and evolving understandings, requiring a more nuanced dialogue.

### Balance

The question of what a large portion of the offerings of our consumer market place can add to our lives seems especially difficult to discern given the negative environmental impacts associated with product production, use, and disposal, as well as the negative social implications, distractions, and dissatisfaction they often engender. Despite these negatives, desire for such objects appears deeply embedded in our culture and our economy relies heavily on such products. It is easy to see the motivation and commitment behind continuing down our current path. To disrupt production and consumption could have serious

consequences on our economy, employment, and stability. In 2001, the importance of the economy was not lost on anyone when the U.S. administration urged the public, after the attacks on the World Trade Center, *to go shopping*.

The value that design brings to the market lies in its ability to spur consumption and keep the economy going. In doing so it helps generate wealth, provide jobs, and economic growth, which are important factors in both personal and societal wellbeing. Despite these perceived benefits, our current system, and design's place within it, has led to a particularly shallow vision of material culture and, by implication, design itself. The economic context has dominated design discussions and this imbalance is another characteristic of addiction, if not its defining characteristic. If the industrial design profession is to be relevant in the substantial changes required to overcome growing environmental and social concerns and to move material culture in a more sustainable direction it must aspire to being more than a superficial image producer.

On one hand we have economic benefit, on the other a lack of depth together with severe environmental implications, inequity, labour, and social problems. We have a system that provides jobs for millions, provides a safe and stable environment in which to raise a family, and allows us to live a life of our own choosing, but at the same time there are many facets of this system that are deeply harmful and clearly unsustainable. We need to deal with these negative aspects, while not destroying those things that make our pursuits possible in the first place. We do not require a dismantling of our economy, but we do need a more expansive conception of our material culture, one that includes consideration for the environment and seeks to place our activities within the broader social context. A way forward is needed that provides employment, wealth creation, and a desirable quality of life but which also reduces consumption, energy use and waste, and is based in ethical, socially responsible, and equitable industry norms and practices. Some of the changes needed are related to areas such as politics, urban planning, education, media, the way we consider our communities, and so forth, but others are related to the way we conceive of and design our material culture.

Design occupies a unique position in society at the intersection between production and consumption (Sparke, 2006). Designers have a significant role in defining the conceptual notion of products and this can have wide ramifications. Of great importance in this discussion is the designer's ability to envision a new and rather different conception of material culture, one that enables us to have and do the things we want to do and that contributes to wealth creation, but that also contributes to a transformation towards a more responsible (environmentally, socially, and economically), more meaningful, more enjoyable, more delightful, more rewarding, and more permanent notion of material culture.

### **Designer 12-Step Program**

Consumers Anonymous (see preceding list) advocates active and meaningful engagement in material culture, understanding the meaning of our choices in a wider context, in relation to others and to the world around us. The approach proposed in Designers Anonymous challenges designers to reflect on their underlying assumptions, to question industry conventions and business norms of meaning and value. It demands of designers a broader perspective that questions the prevalent distinctions between 'values at home' and 'values at work' and asks us to consider, at a deeper level, ethical considerations - considerations that are critical to being full human beings and that enable us to live meaningful lives. In other words, the approach asks not what we can do, but rather what we ought to do. It emphasises a moral dimension and places this moral dimension within a wider frame of reference than the narrow business context – a context that so often leads to blinkered moral justifications and which ignore larger responsibilities and culpabilities.

The task is not an easy one as Roger Scruton explains,

"Life in the actual world is difficult. Most of all it is difficult in our confrontation with other people who, by their very existence, make demands that we may be unwilling to meet. It requires a great force, a desire that fixes upon an individual, and sees that individual as unique and irreplaceable, if people are to make the sacrifices upon which the community depends for its longevity." (Scruton, 2000)

## Designers Anonymous

Step 1—We admitted that design has played a significant role in the unsustainability of our contemporary consumer culture (1)(2)(3)(4).

Step 2—We came to believe that a greater understanding of how values shape design could restore meaning to our profession (3).

Step 3—We made a decision to turn our profession and our design process over to Sustainability (3)(5), as we understood it.

Step 4—We accepted that design has no content of its own other than that which we ascribe to it (6) and we made a searching and fearless moral inventory of the values that drive our profession.

Step 5—We came to see that our society was formed by design decisions. In discussing the ideas of sustainability with other designers, our role within the creation of material culture, the problems facing our profession, and possible solutions, we came to realize that if we could design our way into an unsustainable society we could design our way out it (4).

Step 6—We were entirely ready to understand that the dematerialization required by sustainability would mean a significant shift in focus for design from product to process (7).

Step 7—We came to see that design operates between production and consumption (2) and that our interventions can have broad and often unanticipated implications, culturally, environmentally, and economically (4)(7)(8).

Step 8—We made a list all persons, cultures, and environments that we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them (8).

Step 9—We sought to make amends except where it would do injury by insuring all of our interventions were balanced by ethical, environmental, and economic considerations (3).

Step 10—With the foreknowledge that our interventions have unexpected consequences we made efforts to proceed cautiously and humbly (4)(5). Acting mindfully and with sensitivity, we learned from our mistakes and continued to evaluate our process concentrating on the ends to which our interventions were used and not just their means (9).

Step 11—We sought to prefigure our process with critical thinking. To understand that if we change the way we think and live we will change the outcome of our design process and the in doing so we changed the destructive path we were on (1)(2)(4)(7).

Step 12—As designers and experts in material culture, we readily accepted our role as critical guides of the artificial world (5) and sought through design to communicate our understandings of sustainability and material culture to others.

### Designers Anonymous References

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## Conclusions

This project has drawn on the approaches and language used within addiction recovery programs and applied them to both consumers and designers. The basis for doing this lies in the observation by many that Western societies are hooked on consumption, and this exhibits similar traits to other addictions such as alcohol and nicotine. As consumers, we seem never to be satisfied. We make a purchase and 'get our hit', but the thrill soon wears off, and we return, again and again, to consumer more. Like the tobacco industry, the product production industry maintains a constant supply of products to feed this appetite, and like the cigarette advertising of years gone by, we are constantly told that the latest product will bring us satisfaction, happiness, and fulfilment.

Despite overwhelming evidence, for decades the tobacco industry denied any links between their products and damage to human health and it provided news items and counter arguments that confused these links in the minds of the general public. Today, a similar situation exists in the consumer goods industry. The health of the planet, which, of course includes human health, is being damaged – but business leaders and government officials often fail to acknowledge the links between industry activities and our systems of economic growth, and issues such as climate change, environmental damage, and gross social inequity. There is denial, avoidance and a confusing of the issues that is analogous to the responses from the tobacco industry 30 or 40 years ago.

This project developed programs to deal with these addictions—from the perspectives of the consumer and the designer. The intention is not to start CA (consumer's anonymous) and DA (designers' anonymous) groups. The aim was rather to provide a fresh perspective on our activities—one that would allow us to reevaluate our assumptions and norms of behaviour in order to build awareness of the problem. Twelve step programs have been developed that draw attention to the issues and which, succinctly, allow us to see our activities from a new perspective. This awareness raising, in order to accept the nature of the problem, is the first stage of 'recovery'.

## References

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