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SOCIAL INNOVATION

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With this in mind, a small team of us at Smart Design tackled the project of innovating shopping from a social perspective. Shopping, we learned, is perceived as a personal project of goods acquisition. Most economists still view consumption as socially competitive, where the one to beat is your colleague or neighbor, and the good life is full of things new, big and plentiful. But Douglas Holt's words about the good life as a project of self-creation ring true. To these other traditional views on consumption, we now issue the challenge:

Can't we just share?

It's a provocative question, and yet the answer is surprising: We already do. We share in networks of social trust, as among family and friends. We share under conditions of extreme scarcity (when we have to) or extreme abundance (because there's always more). We rent, lease, subscribe and borrow when the cost of consumption is beyond our means. And we share when the experience is communal rather than individual. In other words, we share all the time. Still, we don't very often think of it that way.

"ID is in a great position to mine social changes for innovative opportunities." —Melody Roberts, IDSA
Sharing is a social concept of relatively low value in our individualistic society. We celebrate goods acquisition both as daily routine and as a leisure-time activity. My focus on sharing emerges from trying to reconcile escalating use of resources (leading to eventual resource scarcity) and trends in consumerism (shopping as both routine and entertainment) with the world view of the innovator: the future will definitely be better than the present. If the pessimists are right about natural resources in the future, how can we fulfill our professional mandate to make the world a better, “cooler” place to live?

Social Innovation 1: Circulation
Emerging technology networks will help us create the stronger social networks—of interconnectedness, information and therefore trust—that are needed to enable us to more freely circulate and thereby share goods. But producers must make a profit, or they won’t make a product. Because they can’t charge us for their investment in acquisition, they must successfully commodify the time we spend with products.

Here’s how it might work: Manufacturers can digitally tag goods so that their social and commercial “lives” can be tracked and valued. (This is essentially what museums do after acquiring objects and accessioning them into their collections.) Over time the value of a manufactured object will change in accordance with wear and tear, popularity, extent of circulation, geographical location, use by someone famous, damage or improvement, nostalgia or revival, and the like. (Think eBay.) Everything we make can become a collector’s item economically without ever being collected physically.

Take clothing, for example. Suppose Banana Republic stops trying to sell you new items every two months and starts renting you clothing on a weekly basis? Select a weekly wardrobe (online or in the shop), and pick it up clean and ready-to-wear. Drop off last week’s items for lauding and recirculating. You could always be fashionable without going broke or building a California Closet. The total amount of clothing manufactured would drop, but the diversity of items of available would increase. For the manufacturer, circulation fees or service contracts would eventually surpass the revenue generated from a one-time sale. For consumers, more choice, less consumption and total fashion indulgence! From consumers of brand-new to circulators of brand-used.

Social Innovation 2: Coolness
For this to really work, we have to design things to be cooler used than new. Things would have to age well or be specially modified over time. Like an artifact in a museum, an object’s value would be linked to its condition, rarity, cultural value and unique past. If a garment made its way from one continent to another, it would be cool to imagine its previous uses. Its worn edges, foreign label and maybe an identity tag left by a previous wearer would tell a story about its origins, experiences and “social life.”

Social Innovation 3: Indulgence
Sharing suffers because it sounds counter-instinctual and ultroliberal. But if we transform sharing from punitive to indulgent, that would all change. Beer bongs, Napster and vintage VW Bugs retain none of the negative stigma of hand-me-downs or thrift-store. The fun of experimentation with products can help Americans give up the cachet of brand new. The system is in place. You can already rent a different sports car every month if you so desire. If you could lease one at a cost comparable to ownership with no more hassle than picking up your dry-cleaning, only the fear of being too indulgent would stand in your way.

Although we have spent our lives accumulating and stockpiling goods, we can now begin to acquire, use and recirculate things at an accelerated pace. We can have more, but for less time. To design for circulation, tag it digitally so it can be tracked. Make it cool. Make it quality. Make it modular. Make it customizable. Make it fixable. Make it updatable. Make it niche. Make it age well. Make fewer. Make more versions. Plan to share and share alike. Consuming will one day be out of the question.
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