

# UNCOMFORTABLE DESIGN

## A DISCURSIVE APPROACH

Deepa Butoliya

University of Illinois at Chicago

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Design has been long associated with practical problem solving and creating artifacts /things/products of aesthetical quality intended to make life better and efficient with an overarching motive of “Development”. This points out to the broader, the most popular and positive role of Design i.e. to solve problems. However the central argument of this paper is to propagate the fact that Design has an alternate and important purpose to raise awareness by serving as a medium to ask thought provoking questions. Design can be used as a tool to manifest underlying realities that could address spiritual, political, social-cultural values. In this age of technological advancement, Design could play a critical role of challenging and questioning the norms of our ever- advancing society. Critical Design is related to creating fantasies for the future like concept cars, but its purpose is not to visualize a new future, or present new trend, rather, its purpose is to stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry and the public about norms practiced in our society (Dunne and Raby, 2011).

### 2. WHAT IS UNCOMFORTABLE DESIGN?

*Uncomfortable design* is a discursive and experimental approach to address the psychological discomfort and confront it with an equally uncomfortable design and alternatively trying to address the discomfort by creating an artifact that embodies an attempt to ease the uncomfortable situation. The main purpose of such designs is not to make objects for commercial use, rather use the objects as mediums of engaging the viewers at a much deeper level.

As Designers, we always think about Comfort an object can bring into our life. The idea of making things Comfortable is a major driver and plays an important role in Design. Such factors made the author curious to think critically about the Affirmative design and led her to take a creative risk by exploring the term- “*Uncomfortable*” as a decisive aspect of design. *Uncomfortable Design* - explores both Physical and Psychological aspects of the term ‘*Uncomfortable*’ as applied in design in specific context and provides a critique of the prevailing situation thorough designs that embody alternative social and cultural values.

The author wants to explore the way an *Uncomfortable Design* can become a means for dialogue, reflection and reaction to the tabooed topics which arise psychological and moral discomfort.

### **3. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE**

The Concept of *Uncomfortable Design* is manifested via designed objects as an underlying question in our value system by designs that delight, transcend and provoke. The primary goal is to deliver a deliberate message, one potent enough to spark contemplation, discussion, and debate. Due to the limitations of this exploration in a master's thesis topic, its impact is not documented. There were limitations due to time, practicality and even due to the question of existence of such a topic and its scope. Many times such topics or even the whole domain of critical design is dismissed as being fictional or escapist and regarded as secondary.

Its scope is purely academic as far as the initial exploration is concerned and the author perceives the future of such work to be a new chapter in the existing world of critical design-a design that makes people uncomfortable and provokes, pushes the boundaries of lived experiences. Since the scope of such designs is not defined by its success in the marketplace, it is difficult to promote this category as a commercial venture.

It may work in the concept of (un)popular design coined by Dunne and Raby in their article "Designer as Author". The scope of such designs is limited to taking a more responsible and a more proactive role in the society.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The approach is based on viewing the deep and sometimes dark human desires, embedded in the conscience, as raw material and converting them into designed objects that are presented as being functional, but are not necessarily intended to be used. Although, there is a hidden potential in some pieces to be commercialized, that is not the agenda behind the design process. The process is non-linear, intuitive and based on quality rather than quantity of research. The design process is highly influenced by the author's personal experiences and philosophy and developed over a course of two years as a constant struggle from its conceptualization to prototype. The Design process still remains in progress as the impact is yet to be recorded.

#### **4.1 DISCURSIVE DESIGN**

The whole idea originally germinated from on Discursive Design taught and propagated by Bruce Tharp and Stephanie Tharp at Graduate Design Studio at UIC.

'Discursive design is a category of product design that treats artifacts principally as transmitters of substantive ideas, rather than as mere instruments of utility. The primary intent of the discursive designer is to encourage users' reflection upon, or engagement with, a particular discourse; the goal is to affect the intellect.

As distinct from objects of art, architecture, and graphics, which can all be agents of discourse, products have particular qualities that offer unique communicative advantages' (Bruce and Stephanie).

## 5. DESIGN AND THE PROCESS

Comfortable is the word used broadly to define a situation or object that provides us with physical ease. It becomes a major criterion in terms of usability of a product. Unarguably, the most popular meaning of the word is to provide comfort or solace as reflected through the term 'making someone comfortable'. Comfort, also has two major aspects – *Physical* and *Psychological*.

While Physical comfort is given utmost importance in solving problems and rendering new solutions, psychological comfort has its own medium in a given situation. Specially, in social situations, psychological comfort is often considered detrimental in making decisions. Again, the main purpose remains the same-solving a problem. The author is interested in taking the unconventional approach and an opposing direction on the term *comfortable* and thereby exploring the term *uncomfortable* to be applied in discursive design.

The ideation of this topic started with three main questions:

- What role uncomfortable emotions have in future design thinking?
- Can discomfort become an ideal?
- Can a state of dream or surreal be applied in design without making it look like “art”?

Overall the whole conceptualization was based on the idea of making products in everyday use that are uncomfortable or manifest an underlying discomfort of the society or the user. These products may be physically comfortable or not, but the main idea is to make the viewer shift in their seats by using the power of psychological and moral discomfort it creates in their minds.

The challenge was to materialize such hypothetical topic in reality and eventually make such objects and find its context. Initially, this looks very intimidating and challenging, as the term uncomfortable sounds broad and vague in its meaning and scope. The author explored the idea of comfort objects before designing uncomfortable objects so to understand the deep values that make those objects –comfort objects e.g. Fleece, blankets, teddy bears etc.

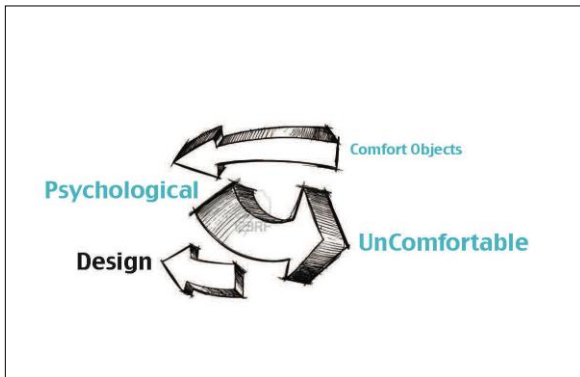


Figure 1. Ideation

Eventually, after months of brainstorming and arguing and getting critique from faculty and the academic circle, the author decided to take the approach of narrowing down the situations in which *Uncomfortable Design* could

be experimented. There were moments of decision-making where logic fails and intuition works. Eventually, after word mapping in opposite matrices, the options were narrowed down.

The author concluded that the most vile and extreme uncomfortable situation in life arises in the moments of tragedy which is again a huge topic in itself but exploring the higher side of any situation was one of the criteria in the beginning. However, taking into consideration the limitations author explored the uncomfortable tragic events. The words that stood out most were Death and Rape that are the most uncomfortable events in life. The author wanted to use these extreme situations in order to manifest her design ideas.

Further development of the topic led the topic of *Uncomfortable Design* to be experimented in three possible categories:

- Humor - Uncomfortable on the lighter side, yet powerful.
- Visceral - The idea is keep the discursive element yet make it look tangible
- Provocative - Make a bold statement with a fictional and strong visual aesthetic

There were a total of 3 ideas of products created, one in each category that would try to embody the design intent and also design philosophy.

There was another layer of thinking and methodological approach towards these objects as a part of experimentation of this topic of *Uncomfortable Design*. The idea was that there could be two main approaches to build the argument – one being that designed object could address the uncomfortable situation by designing an object that tries to embody values to ease the discomfort but maintain an uncomfortable aura and second- to accentuate the uncomfortable situation with an equally uncomfortable object thereby raising thought provoking questions. This approach is illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Two approaches for Uncomfortable Design

## 5.1 HUMOR AND UNCOMFORTABLE

Humor often masks our true fears. The products selected for this category was kids products and the author was interested in examining the values behind products specially designed around kids. Some explorations were done in image matrix to determine the area of opportunity.

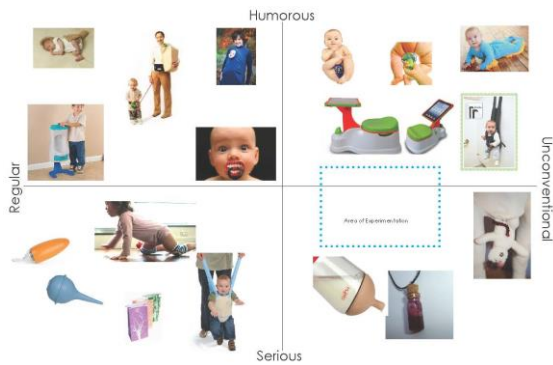


Figure 3. Image matrix for products in children and humor category

The Object Designed in this category is called *Leashh*. It is a leash/harness meant to be used by the user for a pet dog and child together. It looks like a simple but funny object in which the child and the pet dog are carried together on leash. However, the juxtaposition of this sort creates complexity and discomfort among the viewers and users and serves as a critique on the juvenile objects used in our society and also creates a fictional view of the possible future of designs in this category.

Control and protection: There is a clear difference between the notion of control and Protection. The author attempt to reimagine the levels of protection we offer or control we practice on our dependents. This design takes issue with the Parental control via child harnesses and the whole notion of child safety in the western cultural context. The discomfort both physical and psychological raises questions about the current state of parent child relationships. The design is playful as the dog harness is designed aesthetically to look like a child harness with a backpack style chew toy which his detachable.

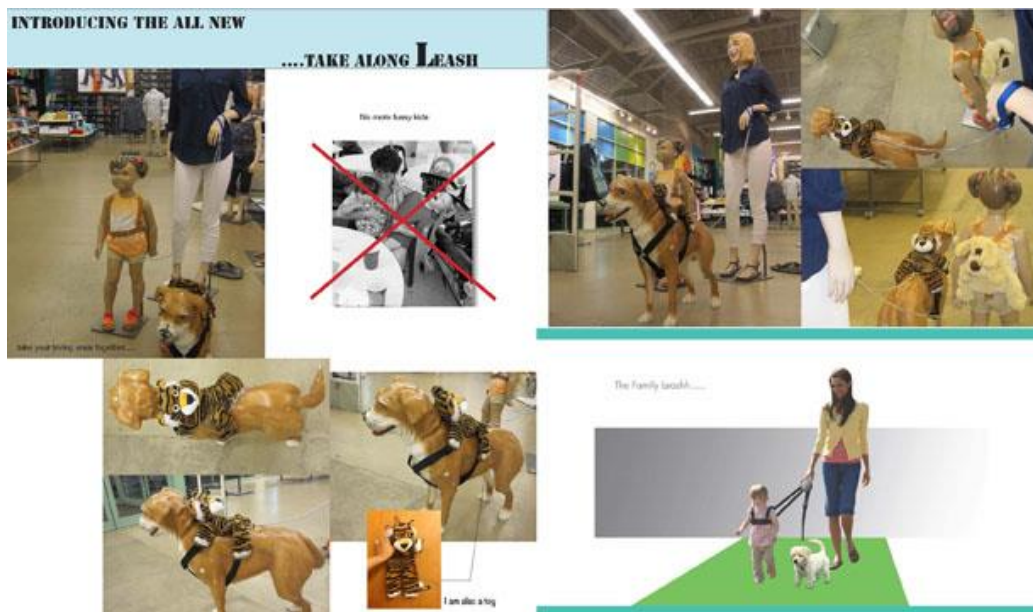


Figure 4. The Leashh

## 5.2. VISCERAL AND UNCOMFORTABLE – CREMATION URN

Cremation represents the Last Rite, major event in a Person's life. Cremation Urns in Eastern culture and treated as not mere objects that encapsulate the last remains but as sacred instruments of passing into after life and letting the soul free from earthly bounding.

Ironically, the form is given least importance and the process of which the form is important part is more crucial. The author has experimented with the idea of reimagining the act of dispersal of ashes as practiced in Hinduism in which the form plays an important role and let the uncomfortable process transcend into a visceral experience. Urn is a poetic piece in the process that metaphorically represents passing into another form.

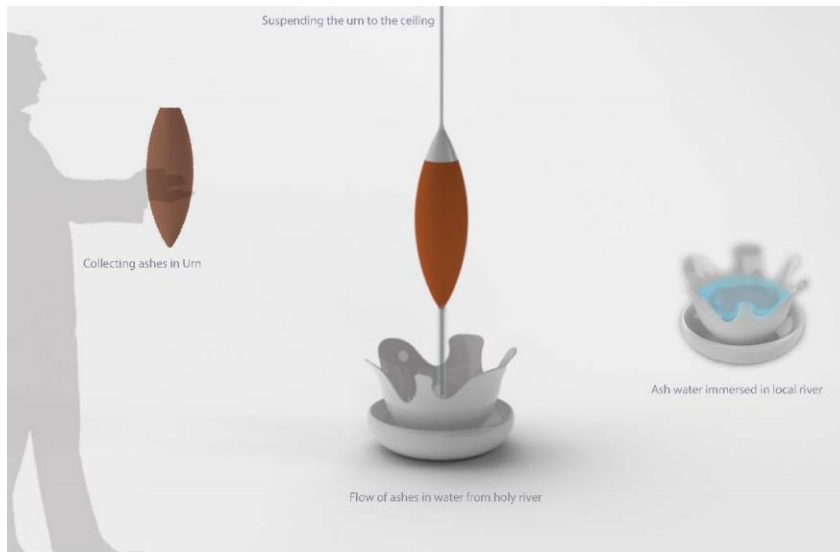


Figure 5 The Cremation Urn

The Urn is a suspended, biodegradable ceramic piece that will hold the ashes of the deceased and the removal of spout at the bottom end would activate the process of flow of ashes in water of Ganges that is prescribed in Hindu religion. This design would provide comfort for the family of bereaved and would provide a comfortable object in an uncomfortable situation and still asks an important question about our existence and how can rituals that are inherently rigid, be reimagined. This piece is intended for Indian Diaspora in US and has deep cultural values.



Figure 6. Context of Use: Cremation Urn



### 5.3. PROVOCATION AND UNCOMFORTABLE- THE ANTI RAPE DEVICE

This was the most provocative idea and the author intended to make it a strong work of discursive design that is fictional but the mere absurdity of its lack of being a reality raises addresses the issues fiercely and raises thought provoking questions.



Figure 7. Anti Rape Device

This device challenges the critical response given to a woman from the society while addressing the uncomfortable topic of Rape that being “ Don’t get raped”. The discomfort created both psychologically and physically serves the purpose of design to reflect and create dialogue on the sensational topic. The Design generates a hideous visual appeal symbolizing the very notion of rape and embodies a hint of black humor by using aesthetical quality of that of a Medieval Torture Device.

### 6. CONCLUSION

These designs were prototyped at UIC and exhibited at the UIC MFA Design Show in Chicago, IL. The response was mixed. Although the design work was highly experimental and hypothetical, the development was very critical and difficult. These designs do raise questions and though the designs do not have a market yet, the main purpose i.e. to create discussion and debate was fulfilled. The viewers who were exposed to this idea of design philosophy were intrigued. The idea was to germinate a seed in the minds of the viewers that stays with them and lingers in moments of random remembrances. The further development of this design philosophy depends over the course of time. There are many possibilities that could be explored which the author would attempt in future. Uncomfortable Design helped the author understand the possibility of alternate role of Design as an agent for discourse. Generally, such roles or asking critical questions are reserved for the Art world and the author has made an attempt to create a new vision for design.

## REFERENCES

Dunne and raby, (2011) *Designer as Author Design Act: Socially and Politically Engaged Design Today — Critical Roles and Emerging Tactics*. Editors Magnus Ericson and Ramia Mazé Iaspis, Sternberg, 2011