Dissident Design:
Resistance through Form

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Introduction

“The goals of sustainability can be expressed in two very general principles, learning to live better consuming less while regenerating the quality of the environment.” (Manzini 2004)

There are many obstacles to implementing sustainable design solutions. Paramount among these is a required cultural shift in thinking away from consumerism and toward sustainability (Manzini 2004). Dissident Design is an attempt to facilitate such a shift. It is at the intersection of product conception and consumption that designers as experts in material culture can play a vital role in the way goods are produced, perceived, and consumed. Dissident Design uses design as an instrument of critical inquiry and commentary to question the current system of the mass-consumption of highly marketed consumer-driven goods.

Dissident Design, originally part of a larger master's design project (Badke 2004), was developed as a means to investigate, critique, and raise awareness about issues surrounding contemporary consumer culture and design's role within it. The writings and design investigations that constitute the original project cover a wide range of issues connected to material culture, from the individual and social drives behind consumerism, to economic and political control structures, through to issues pertaining to professional design practice. The project was aimed at bringing each of these fragments together to begin building a wider context in which to place and discuss the role of design in the cycle of consumerism, the contribution of design to problems inherent in over-consumption, and the potential for design to mitigate some of those problems.

This paper will summarize some of the main points of Dissident Design. Specifically, it will focus on introducing the rational behind the development of Dissident Design. It will also explore how the ideas and principles discussed in Dissident Design can inform a powerful and positive future role for the design community as an agent of change.

Material Culture

Design today is highly creative. Designers are leaders at integrating current and emerging technologies into our everyday lives, frequently creating objects that have not previously existed or breathing new life into existing products and markets. In each case, it is expected that the product will be created or re-created in a way that will make it new, interesting, and innovative so that consumers will want to buy it. It requires enormous ingenuity to keep pace with today's competitive consumer marketplace.

Design is a communicative art. The artefacts created by designers do not communicate directly through words, but they do reflect the culture that produced them. These artefacts carry with them meanings related to social values, cultural priorities, and societal understandings. If one were to look directly at the products and media images of our consumer society, one might conclude that we are an optimistic and playful culture enamoured with the new, with change. One might see the strong allegiances to the technological, where the advancement of technology is seen as a measure of progress (Postman 1993, 42, 117). Reading these objects, one might infer that ours is a carefree society of fun-loving individuals, harmlessly shopping and pursuing pleasurable, entertaining lives.
If we were to step back further and connect to a wider social discussion taking place between concerned citizens, dissenting voices and critical analysis, we might get a different reading of contemporary consumer culture. This second reading might reveal a society lost in the acquisition of goods. Through such a lens, the pursuit of consumerism might appear to be the predominant drive for both producers and consumers. This view may reveal a people seemingly unconcerned or unaware of the physical and social costs of their material consumption. The production of consumables and their wasteful disposal would appear to preclude any deep concern for the environment. The pervasive nature of marketing and advertising would appear to reflect a disregard for individual privacy and for deeper human social values. In such a context, other human, social, and ecological concerns might appear to be subordinate to those of an economic imperative.

There are certainly great pleasures associated with consumer culture and many of them are positive. Ours is an economically driven culture. Much of our society is structured around business and enterprise. We need business, we need to have an active economy, and we need work. Profit and a certain amount of wealth are necessary for both public and private use. However, many social observers would argue today that consumerism has gotten away from us and become something that no longer serves our interests, and in many ways operates against us (Chomsky 1997, Klein 2000).

What we seem to have lost is much of the ability to distinguish between the good and the bad, between our needs and our desires. We seem to have lost the ability to recognize when something—including our own behaviors—maybe harming us irrevocably. We do not consume in a vacuum. The low purchase prices and easy availability of products that characterize the consumer society often conceal the true costs associated with their production and disposal. These hidden costs may include war over oil and development, exploitation of developing nations, economic inequality, instability, and insecurity, diminished human and labor rights, pollution, and resource depletion (Ali 2003; Klein 2000, 195-257, 266-267; Lansley, 173-193; Papanek 1995, 17-28; World Watch Institute 2004, 15-19, 22-23, 44-45, 96-102, 117-118, 144-150). Many of these, social critics argue, are perpetrated in order to prop up the consumer lifestyle of Western nations.

Success in the current consumer economy is based on growth, but as Andrew Howard has said, “Human needs have material limits. This is not good for the economic imperative.” To compensate, he goes on to explain, “New demands have to be ‘created’ so that they can match the profitable output of industrialized production. This is the inversion of supply and demand.” (Howard 2001). The market discovered long ago that altering the look and style of a product was an easier means to increase consumption than pursuing costly functional innovation (Postman 1985, 4). It is in this arena that design has come into its own. In the face of widespread consumerism and the wasteful nature of overconsumption, designers may sometimes be left with an uneasy feeling that our creative efforts are being channelled into superficial, meaningless, and even harmful directions.

Image

“The old credit card ad began, ‘You may not know me,’ but the brands dispel such anonymity: I smoke Merits. I drink Pepsi. I drive a Pontiac. You do know me.” (Frank 1997, 134)

Tom Vanderbilt, The Advertised Life, 1997

Today, much of design is inextricably linked with the ubiquitous images propagated by marketing and advertising. It is often difficult to separate consumer products from the brand image or lifestyle they represent. This effect of advertising and marketing has contributed to consumerism becoming an increasingly dominant source of social meaning. In a consumer society, objects
have become symbols and codes, which, in some fashion, are used as outward representations of who we are (Baudrillard 2001, 10-29). Our identities have become closely associated with the collection and display of consumer objects. A car, for example, is not exclusively a means of transportation in this system of codes and exchanges, it is also a symbol—a sign. It is a sign of your taste, your consumer habits, your sophistication, your ability to afford such an object, your social grouping, your status, and so forth. As Stuart Lansley has said, “products today are valued less for what they do for us and more for what they say about us . . . providing symbols of how we want to appear” (Lansley 1994, 98). In a consumer society, what we are really consuming is image.

Within the consumer cycle, we cannot escape the “conditioning” of the market to break the chain of consumption by limiting our needs to “real needs”, because as Jean Baudrillard argues, “it is impossible to know which needs are real and which are created” (Horrocks 1996, 20-26). Basic human needs are generally agreed upon to be limited—food, clothing, and shelter. Social needs, however, are far more complex (Walker 2004, 4). Marketing and advertising create "false needs," giving people the sense that if they don't buy the newest consumer offering, the latest design, they will somehow be missing out on a chance for happiness. Market rhetoric may claim that its goal is to increase consumer satisfaction and that the main drive of consumerism is the ‘pursuit of happiness’, but it is well known that a good way to increase sales is by creating dissatisfaction with the look and style of previous product lines (Kingwell 1999, 187).

The system of consumption requires “consumer needs” in order to keep consumers consuming. It needs consumers to rationalize (however irrationally) purchases based on need and, more importantly, it cannot allow consumers to satiate those needs or consumption would grind to a halt. As designer Karim Rashid puts it, “Design’s role is to cater to the needs of a changing market” (HGTV 2003). Well, within the system of production this is the true definition of needs. Needs are the needs of the market, the necessary impetus to keep consumption going.

Once accepted as the primary reason for consuming, consumption as a means of social discourse becomes endless in nature. There is no end to people consuming goods as a means of communicating their social hopes, dreams, and aspirations, as these are not values that can be satiated, they are what drive the search for meaning in our lives (Taylor 1991, chapters 1, 5). However, products do not reflect real social values; rather, they pose themselves as having social value. They are what Roger Scruton describes as a “surrogate” for real values (Scruton 2000, 63). This is substitution, not reflection. We as designers are often the intermediaries between the two worlds, and social values are often the sources we draw upon when designing, but the ends to which they are used by the medium of consumption subverts and renders them mere signs (Kingwell 1999, 171-181; Lansley, 100).

Integration

Designers who are sensitive to the destructive nature of overconsumption often look inwards for answers by attempting to alter the way they design as a means of countering the effects of overconsumption. Some attempts have been made to limit design’s impact by limiting interventions to those of human needs, some focus on form and function issues, and others on the design of so-called “green products.” These are all seen in one fashion or another as a means of escaping the destructive tendencies of consumption. As designers, we must address these issues, but are the outcomes moving us away from the consumption cycle or integrating us further into it?

The struggle between form and function has long been an internal argument within the design community. There are ongoing discussions about where the balance between the two should lie. Some believe that the designer’s role is to beautify the environment, to soften the edges of our industrial world. Others contend that form is subservient to an object’s function and that the
designer’s role should lie in perfecting the functionality of designed objects. Designers leaning toward beauty often feel that if they can make an emotional connection to the consumer, in the hope that they can create a lasting bond between the user and the object. The theory is that this will help curb the consumption cycle through the (intentional) creation of sentimental value. Functional designers believe that perfecting the function, durability, and ergonomics of an item might also have the effect of curbing consumption, by creating quality objects that do not need replacement for an extended period.

Both directions, however, usually end up serving the same outcome—of increasing sales—with what marketing refers to as “value added” (a euphemism that describes the contribution of design to a product’s desirability in the market place) (Crawford 1997, 493). The good intentions of the designer are co-opted in service of justifying a purchase. They are subverted again later by the introduction of a fashionably more beautiful or functionally altered model (real or perceived improvement makes little difference). As McLuhan reminds us, “The ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium (McLuhan 1995, 152).” In the market, “different” often equals “new” and “new”, usually, implies “better”. Without addressing the medium in which we design, efforts to change the system from within will continuously be subverted.

Even so called "green products" (products that are sold on their claim to offer an environmentally less destructive alternative to a regular consumer item, i.e. lawn furniture made of recycled plastics) have a superficial air to them that allows the consumption cycle to continue without addressing deeper concerns for sustainability. They become an alibi of consumption, integrating consumers further into the consumer cycle by allowing them to feel comfortable consuming based on the notion that they are being “less” destructive. Too often, internal design solutions only serve to reinforce the system of consumption and further integrate us into it. It would appear that the ability of traditional design roles to effect changes to consumption patterns is limited. Without a change in consumption patterns, which would require a cultural shift in consumer motivations, these efforts by designers will continue to be ineffectual in creating structural change in the medium of consumption, making implementing more sustainable solutions exceedingly difficult. The role of the consumer in the consumption cycle must be critically addressed. Designers can introduce all manner of goods into market place, sustainable or otherwise, but if those offerings are not accepted by consumers, i.e., if they are not purchased or adopted, then design efforts will not influence change.

Informed Choice

Ultimate responsibility in a capitalist society rests largely upon the shoulders of individual consumers. Market rhetoric states that the system is “just giving the people what they want.” If individuals refuse to buy something, producers will not continue to make it. Thus, responsibility is left to individual consumers not to buy products that might be deemed harmful, socially or environmentally. Perhaps, but what of the role that advertising and marketing play in the decision making process? A necessary precursor to being able to act responsibly is being able to make an informed choice (Rorty 1989, 66-67). Without exception, all goods peddled by advertising forces are presented as a positive choice. There are only limited requirements to present consumers with any information that might dissuade them from making a purchase, other than for safety issues (i.e., to avoid a liability suit). There are few visible, alternative discussions as to the way a product is manufactured, shipped, the type of labour used, whether the materials used in its construction have harmful properties to the environment, or what the effects of disposal are—unless of course they are positive (and can be touted as ‘value added’). The onus is on the consumer to research this information. If designers want to affect changes to the cycle of consumerism, they will have to connect to and encourage consumers to exercise their influence.
Dissident Design

The objective of *Dissident Design* is to engage designers and consumers in a critical discussion about consumer culture and sustainability. For sure, designers can play a key role in the development of sustainable systems and product solutions, but there is also a significant role to be played by the designer in encouraging cultural shifts. In many cases, environmental destruction and social commodification have already reached crisis levels, yet there appears to be little change in mainstream consumption patterns (World Watch Institute 2004, 3-21). There is an apparent lack of connection between the consumption of goods and the environmental impact of their production, use, and disposal.

As mentioned previously, *Dissident Design* was developed as part of a much larger project (Badke 2004). It may be valuable to look at the methodology of the original project as a means to inform and model future undertakings in *Dissident Design*. The intended outcome of *Dissident Design* is to encourage both designers and consumers to play a more active role in understanding consumer culture by providing them with a set of perceptual tools, which allow them to critically address the consumer messages they are exposed to daily.

*Dissident Design* proposes using the design process not to create viable products, but rather to create design works that investigate, educate, and potentially subvert our current understandings of material culture by encouraging dialogues to take place around those works. Important areas of focus for these discussions include, but are not limited to, increasing reception to sustainable solutions, developing awareness of the social drives behind consumerism, development of perceptual filters for and defences against marketing, advertising, and branding, and making apparent the environmental impacts of overconsumption. The approach encourages the use of the full range of design techniques from product design to photography to graphic design and multimedia. The idea is to creatively use any medium at the disposal of the designer in order to create focal points of discussion. There are interesting precedents for using this approach, examples of which can be seen in the work of artist Barbara Kruger (Kruger 1994), of graphic designer Tibor Kalman for Colours Magazine (Hall 2000, 240-329) and product design works such as Anthony Dunne’s ‘Faraday Chair.’ (Barley 1999, 63-65).

The structure of *Dissident Design* consists of three foundational elements:

1. **Cultural Exploration.** Three independent critical essays. Each essay concerns consumption, but is written from a unique perspective. One tackles consumption from an individual point of view, another from a social and political standpoint, and the last addresses consumption from a professional design perspective. The issues explored in these essays overlap and connect. Presenting the essays in this fragmented format leaves the reader to discover the connections between them, involving them in a process of learning to see issues surrounding consumption in a wider context.

2. **Design Investigation.** Further explores issues raised in the cultural exploration essays. This component consists of design, graphic, and photographic explorations that question contemporary consumerism, branding, and product identity, and highlight their environmental and social repercussions. Visual explorations often provide a different level of understanding and a more visceral connection to the issues than writing alone.

3. **Design Subversion.** The Design Subversion component consists of a series of functional productlike objects aimed at challenging and potentially subverting current notions of consumerism. The design works employ irony, satire, and subversion in an effort to turn design upon itself. They challenge accepted ways of thinking about product
design, production, and consumption, in an effort to introduce new ways of viewing everyday objects.

The individual essays and design explorations in *Dissident Design* cover a wide range of seemingly disparate issues. By bringing these disconnected pieces together in one body of work, *Dissident Design* intends to subvert the way we normally engage our (mass-) mediated environment. Popular media forms such as television and magazines present an overwhelmingly positive one-sided view of consumption and encourage a very passive, uncritical role for consumers (and designers alike). These media tend to present information in brief bites, with little background or depth of analysis. Issues such as the environment, economics, and politics are regularly discussed, but as isolated independent topics, without connection and often without context. Discourses on design and consumption too often fall into this same trap. It is only by placing issues into a wider context that a meaningful understanding of them can be reached, that more fruitful means of social interaction can be revealed, and that a new, more meaningful role for design can be discovered.

Conclusion

As a creative process, design is, by its nature, a process of uncertainty. As such, it carries with it the risk of failure. It is an approach that does not begin with a preconceived idea of solution; instead, its outcomes are contingent on process. *Dissident Design* uses the design process to test out new ideas as a means of discovery and then to communicate those ideas out into the community. Some of the works put forth may fail and some may succeed. Many people may disagree completely with the ideas it puts forth. The goal is not necessarily to convince others one way or the other, but rather to challenge and engage them in the process. Perhaps most importantly, *Dissident Design* is intended to provoke discussion amongst designers about the role their work plays and can play in the cycle of consumption. As experts in material culture, designers have an obligation to be critical guides of the artificial world (Manzini 2004). It is in this capacity that *Dissident Design*, as both a self-standing work and as a theoretical framework, can serve an ongoing role.
Examples of Dissident Design (Badke 2004):

**Shop**
Photographic essay exploring our shopping culture. (1)

**Which Chair Do You Prefer?**
An exploration of meaning and consumer logos. Testing if the consumer image stands up on a series of branded chairs. (2)

**Commodified. Resistance.**
A series of cut-out projects aimed at encouraging alternative forms of information and communication, raising media awareness, and promoting social activism.

**Footprint of Production**
Photographic exploration linking natural resources to their consumer product counterparts.

**Children are the Future**
Photographic/graphic investigating of children marketing.

**Mommy Where Did the TV Come From?**
A children's book graphically depicting a product’s lifecycle.

**Are You Mac or i-Mac?**
A case study in design intent.

**Warning!**
Proposes a comprehensive consumer product labelling system similar to that used for cigarettes, with ratings for product safety, environmental impact, corporate accountability, marketing, and labor.

**Box TV**
Design experiments that use aesthetically benign facades to make apparent the absence of a consumer image. The project questions the role of facade in the production and consumption cycle and the nature of design’s role in its production. (3)

**CD Player**
Critiques the disposable nature of high-turnaround consumer goods by juxtaposing the ephemerality of consumer image and product durability. (4)

**Lamp**
A functioning cut-out image of a designer lamp. This product apposes function and image to more closely examine consumer motivations. When the ‘designer’ image of the product becomes fashionably obsolete, the owner need only discard the cut-out and replace it with the latest trendy image, while the working components remain. (5)

**Sketch Lamp**
Attempts to subvert the design industry by devolving it towards a more vernacular means of design in an effort to explore, contrast, and discuss the merits and pitfalls of a more locally responsive alternative to producing goods than the image driven mass-production model. (6)
References


