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Walker, Stuart. 2019. "How the Other Half Lives - Product Design, Sustainability and the Human Spirit".
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How the other half lives - product design, sustainability and the human spirit

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Abstract

This paper focusses on the relationship between material goods, inner development and sustainability. The inner, or spiritual, side of our nature is discussed and the implications for design and the nature of products are explored. The notion of 'appropriate concern' for products is introduced as an approach for re-assessing the conceptual, production and use stages in a product's life cycle.

Keywords: aesthetics, art, design philosophy, spirituality, sustainability

Introduction

'Long ago it was said that "one half of the world does not know how the other half lives."' (Jacob A. Riis, p.1)

In the 19th century Jacob Riis wrote about the other half of society - the weak and under-represented. In contemporary society and in the process of design, there exists a similar division - but in this case the 'other half' is not to be found externally, as a particular sector of society, but internally, as a facet of ourselves. The other half of who we are - the creative, the imaginative, and the spiritual - is also weak and under-represented, compared with our rational, instrumental side. The emphasis on utilitarianism, economic efficiency, competition and progress in today's societies and today's world of design has often eliminated the poetry, elegance, and creative austerity of our other side.

The suppression of this 'other half' has led to a materially abundant but spiritually impoverished world. It is argued here that greater acknowledgement of this 'other half' in industrial design can lead to products that are expressive of a more balanced understanding of human needs. Such a shift would not only contribute to a culturally richer material environment, it would also allow us to more effectively address the principles of sustainability.

This Half and the Other Half

There are numerous references to two sides of the human condition, which have been characterised as inner/outer, higher/lower, and physical/metaphysical (Schumacher, pp.47, 75, 154). These two facets can also be expressed as a distinction in our ways of thinking and knowing, such as subjective/objective, and intuitive/rational. There are also dualisms recognised in traditions such as Taoism where *yin* represents emotion, and passivity, and *yang* reason and activity; *yin-yang* also represents our inner/outer or heavenly/earthly facets. (Wing-tsit Chan, p.146). Furthermore, distinctions have been made between 'scientific experience' and 'aesthetic experience', the former being characterised as transparent, homogeneous and specific, and the latter as opaque, heterogeneous and totalised (Barilli, p.19).

The public school systems in North America effectively ignore our inner, spiritual side (Noddings, pp.49, 83) and attention to our rational, scientific and logical side prevails (Sperry, in Edwards, p.29). This emphasis is also dominant in contemporary societies - overwhelmed as they are by advances in technology, utilitarianism and economic rationalism (Taylor, Ch.1).

Traditional teachings tell us that inner

attention leads to true happiness. However, this whole concept of inner and outer dimensions to our humanness has become increasingly foreign as utilitarian, rationalistic understandings have developed and expanded. When the inner dimension is neither recognised nor understood, then inevitably we seek fulfilment and happiness through other means - such as increasing comfort and pursuing physical or sensory pleasures. This links directly to products and product design. Television, VCRs, DVDs, computer games and a host of other products are created to cater to *outer* pursuits by providing entertainment and transient satisfaction. Use of these products, in turn, occupies our minds so completely that they become highly effective diversions that steer us further away from an *inner* course. This emphasis on seeking pleasure through objects and acquisition is also closely associated with spiralling consumerism, waste production and environmental degradation.

It is important to consider how things might be if more emphasis were given to that part of us that contemplates purpose and meaning. For the designer this poses important questions about the relevance and nature of products. How would we live, what products would be important and how should they be designed? How would this other half live?

The Other Half, Art and Design

Our inner side, which can be cultivated to seek and appreciate the ethical, the spiritual and the virtuous, is also the part of us that is imaginative, creative, aesthetically sensitive and artistic. Murdoch has stated 'Art makes places and open spaces for reflection, it is a defence against materialism and against pseudo-scientific attitudes to life. ... Great art inspires because it is separate, it is for nothing, it is for itself. It is an image of virtue. (Murdoch, p8.) Similarly, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has at its lower end, physiological needs, while at the higher end are the personal growth needs of aesthetics, self-actualisation and transcendence (Huitt). Hence, metaphysical and psychological discussions point to an aspect of our being which, potentially, can lead us towards the 'higher', and which is

associated with artistic endeavour and aesthetics. It is somewhat removed from everyday *outer* activities and, therefore, can provide a counterbalance to our more worldly, materialistic pursuits.

Design *also* calls upon our imagination, creativity and aesthetic sensitivity. There are commonalities in techniques, processes and thinking that bring the design process and the artistic process close together. But, design is *not* art. Kant defined art in terms of 'purposiveness without purpose' (Murdoch, p.21) - it has no empirical, practical or utilitarian intent. However, design *is* purposeful and does have utilitarian intent; it is driven by social and/or economic motivators, and products are designed to be purposeful. The utility of the object together with the purposeful intent behind its conception is what distinguishes design from art. Good design is neither art nor barren instrumental device, neither wholly artistic nor wholly utilitarian, but an inseparable union of the two. Therefore design can be regarded as an activity which, potentially, bridges the two sides of our nature and, when it does so, becomes an holistic endeavour that looks towards our inner self to bring meaning and aesthetic sensitivity to the design of functional objects. When this inner aspect is developed and brought to the design process it can have significant implications for how we go about designing and how we think about the nature of objects.

This more balanced approach allows us to consider the quantitative and qualitative aspects of material goods in relation to inner/outer accord. After basic needs have been met, the quantity of products an individual might see as desirable will be a function of many factors, including societal norms, but beyond a certain point, further acquisition can start to detrimentally affect one's ability to develop inwardly. Too many material things can distract us from inner attention - this is a teaching of many traditions.

It is also important to reflect on what our 'inner' side can tell us about how we might define the qualitative characteristics of material goods. This is not simply an issue of

high or low quality - but one of *fitting* quality, such that the object is congruent with our inner nature. There is, it would seem, a level of 'appropriate concern' to be found in the design of objects - whereby the decisions pertinent to materials, form development, detailing, etc, reflect an adequateness and avoid being immoderate, indulgent or excessive. This notion of appropriate concern is critical if we are to take a more balanced approach - one that affords greater recognition of our inner selves, and that begins to address sustainable issues at a more fundamental level. To more fully appreciate this 'appropriate concern' it is necessary to look more closely at our inner or other half.

How the Other Half Lives

To understand something of how the 'other half' lives we have many sources from history and from around the world. These give an impression of how a life dedicated to inner development regards outer material culture. This is not to suggest that we should all seek the life of an ascetic, but it does allow us to see our contemporary lifestyles in the economically developed countries from a different perspective. Probably our most extensive sources are the texts and traditions of the world's religions. While there are many examples of great opulence in religious artifacts, there is an important distinction to be made between objects of ceremony and objects for personal use. Moreover, if we look at the more ascetic traditions, where the pursuit of the inner life is perhaps more fully embraced, we see that possessions are often kept to a minimum. Many teachings suggest that material goods, and a mind that is preoccupied with such things, hamper inner development. We are told that the person seeking the inner path must seek it alone, free of possessions (The Bhagavad Gita 6.10). Buddhism regards possessions as a form of bondage that prevents enlightenment (Dhammapada 89 & 355). In Judeo-Christian texts numerous passages declare the necessity of eschewing material possessions and personal wealth (eg, Prov. 30:8, Acts 4:32, Matt. 19:21). The Islamic faith tells us, "It is difficult, for a man laden with riches, to climb the steep path that leadeth to bliss", (Al-Suhrawardy,

p.110) and Chinese traditions say that a fixation on fine clothes, foods and possessions places one far from the inner way (Tao Te Ching, 53). Monastic 'rules' are often quite categorical about the dangers to spiritual progress of private ownership, preferring to share possessions (The Rule of St. Benedict, p.10, Ch.33 & 55). Similar views on sharing, simplicity and material austerity are expressed by other intentional communities dedicated to the spiritual life, such as the Shakers (Sprigg & Larkin, p.22, 44,) Amish (Kephart, pps. 15-16), and Hutterites (Kephart, pps. 253-256). Such communities also tend to reject decoration and embellishments, regarding unadorned objects more fitting to spiritual pursuits (Sprigg & Larkin, p.33, 72, Shea, p.33, Kephart, p.10 & p.15).

It becomes evident that inner development can have a direct bearing and influence on both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of material culture and, *ipso facto*, environmental stewardship and sustainability. From the designer's perspective, the qualitative implications are particularly important.

Design and Appropriate Concern

There is no definitive 'right way' to design products, but we can derive some impressions that encompass outer imperatives and inner potentials, and that might be helpful in our search for more sustainable ways forward. The notion of 'appropriate concern', introduced earlier, is an essential element for developing this more comprehensive approach. Wittgenstein considers a similar idea when he discusses inconsistencies among the four Gospels. He argues that these inconsistencies are preferable or even necessary and gives the following analogy: '... a mediocre stage set can be better than a sophisticated one, painted trees better than real ones - because these might distract attention from what matters.' (Wittgenstein, pp. 31e-32e) What matters are the actors, the dialogue, and the ideas being conveyed. So in this example, and in the Gospel stories - the details of the tangible (ie, the physical or the historical) are not so important. The account or artifact is necessary, but only in a rough or approximate form that

is sufficient to provide the setting or the basis for what really matters; in the case of the Gospels, 'the putative transcendent reality' to which all sacred texts point (Hick, p.10). Schumacher, who pioneered appropriate-technology, with its inherent idea of adequateness, expresses a similar view: 'To enhance our Level of Being we have to adopt a life-style conducive to such enhancement, which means one that grants our lower nature just the attention and care it requires and leaves us with plenty of time and free attention for the pursuit of our higher development.' (Schumacher, p.153)

A shift toward appropriate concern or adequateness in the *quantity* of goods has the environmental benefits of reducing resource and energy use, reducing production of waste and pollution, and preserving habitats. A sense of adequateness in the *qualitative* characteristics of products has various implications for design, and for more sustainable ways of living. Firstly, 'adequateness' can be considered at a product's inception - the conceptual framework of a product can be examined with regard to its potential in creating conditions that allow for inner attention and development. Secondly, 'adequateness' can be applied to a product's physical characteristics; that is, how the product is designed and defined. An 'adequate' or 'good enough' approach to product definition suggests a quite different set of priorities than we have come to expect in the fields of design and mass production. High precision, close tolerances, and perfect finishes are constantly strived for - but these are the priorities of a design and production system that is, by and large, unholistic, driven by economic rationalism, severely detrimental to natural systems and often ethically questionable. Similarly, the notion of appropriate concern questions the approach of the Shakers, who sought precision and attention to detail through dedicated craftsmanship. Although emanating from a deep commitment to things inner, their approach could be criticised as reflecting an excessive attention to material goods and their definition. A counter argument here could be that the mode of work itself is a form of contemplation and its product a manifestation

of inner pursuits. It does, however, pose intriguing questions as to the relationship between inner development and outer expression; and it is perhaps a particular irony that products from a group dedicated to the inner life now command extremely high prices and often become objects of status. A similar example might be the products produced in the nineteenth century by William Morris, with the best socialist intentions. Here again, because of attention to detail, craft and perfection, the products had to be sold at relatively high prices thereby negating the egalitarian principles at the heart of their conception.

Hence, precision and perfection would appear to be, in many cases, contradictory to the evolution of conditions of adequateness so critical to inner development. In certain applications precision is, of course, necessary to ensure that a product will properly function. However, it is frequently unnecessary and can impede inner development and sustainability.

A quite different approach to design and production *is* possible. The idea of 'rough' products, imprecision, and adequateness would seem to be more in line with achieving an inner/outer balance and sustainable ways of living. 'Good enough' products can reduce 'concern' in the making, and in the use and ownership of products to a level more conducive to inner development. Sustainability emphasises local production and the provision of fulfilling, local employment. This contributes to environmental stewardship by evolving a locally-based industrial ecology, and to social equity which is also an essential element of *inner* teachings. Production that employs and values people rather than machines also implies a qualitatively different type of product. A machine aesthetic is obviously inappropriate. The human hand can produce items of beauty but high tolerances and reproducibility are not its forte. Similarly, uniform finishes are well suited to automated production - whereas multifarious or even unfinished surfaces are often more appropriate and more achievable when using natural materials and human labour. Moreover, variegated, rough finishes allow the marks of use to be absorbed without

Figure 1 Low Chair - Rough Finishes, Re-used Materials

spoiling the overall appearance - thereby contributing to product longevity and sustainability. Potentially, the production of such products at the local level, employing local people can be an economically viable alternative to today's mass-produced, largely unsustainable products. The 'adequate' product can, because of its nature, and should, because of its intent, be relatively easy and quick to produce, making it an economically feasible alternative. Its viability and acceptability are however, crucially dependent on imaginative and innovative design. Some examples of such products are illustrated in Figures 1 – 3. These explorations, conducted by the author, attempt to embody some of the principles discussed above. Figure 1 is a chair quickly and intuitively constructed from reused, unfinished materials. The triangulation in the geometry of the design

Figure 3 Wall Telephone (detail) - Standard Circuit plus Simple 'Local' Product Assembly

ensures structural stability and the 'rough' nature of the finish results in a piece that is texturally rich, which allows the object to absorb wear and tear without detracting from the overall aesthetic. The lack of traditional finish also allows speedy manufacturing utilising reused materials and human labour. Figure 2 illustrates a pair of ephemeral lamps that combine off-the-shelf electrical components with a twig, a paper bag, for the shade, and a small cast concrete base. The electrical parts are simply 'hung' on the forked twig – facilitating reuse of these standard parts. Figure 3 is a detail of a wall mounted telephone. Standard electronic phone circuitry is painted and simply mounted on a board - design variations are infinite. This piece illustrates the potential for exploring low cost, locally producible design options for products that are normally capital intensive, mass produced objects.

Figure 2 Twig Lamps - Standard Electrical Parts plus 'Local' Components

Such a direction for design would acknowledge and foster our 'other half' by redefining the nature of products; it would also make a fundamental contribution to the goals of sustainability. It has the potential of making our material world richer, multifaceted, locally appropriate, and culturally and spiritually significant which, compared to the global homogeneity arising from today's mass produced objects, is a prospect to be welcomed.

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