Sustainability as/in Culture and Design

Session 19

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Anti-consumerism: Contributions and paradoxes in the ‘sustainable turn’ in consumer culture

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This paper examines three artefacts representative of anti-consumerism: the ‘Blackspot Unswoosher’, a shoe produced by the ‘Blackspot Anticorporation’ and publicised as the shoe that will reinvent capitalism; ‘Buy Nothing New Month’, a Melbourne-based initiative promoting a ‘more “custodial” valuing of possessions’ based on the premise of ‘old is the new new’; and ‘Buy Nothing Day’, an international day of protest against over-consumption that encourages consumers to advance sustainable causes through the slogan ‘participate by not participating’. In doing this, it aims to shed light on new approaches to sustainability emerging from consumer culture. These approaches, as the paper shows, advocate for a movement away from modern consumerism towards sustainable ways of consumption. The discussion of these artefacts draws on critical approaches to consumer culture and is framed by what I propose to call “the sustainable turn”. The literature suggests that from all the approaches to sustainability emerging from consumer culture, anti-consumerism appears to be the most radical and paradoxical. Unlike other approaches based on “greener” forms of shopping, anti-consumerism explicitly advocates a reduction in levels of consumption. Ironically, however, the tactics utilised to advance anti-consumerist agendas are still based on and operate within the commercial circuits that it opposes. The discussion of these cultural artefacts presents some insights of what could be a more sustainable cultural economy, while at the same time it identifies the paradoxes intrinsic to approaches to sustainability emerging from consumer culture.

Keywords: Anti-consumerism, Consumer Culture, Sustainability
Anti-consumerism: Insights and paradoxes of the sustainable turn in consumer culture

In the last two decades, the ‘myth of sustainability’ (Walker 2007) has been incorporated in consumer culture. Since then, a series of commercial approaches to sustainability – such as ‘green consumption’, ‘political consumerism’, or ‘ethical-consumerism’ – have appeared in the marketplace. Most of these approaches advocate for a movement away from the cultural and economic machinery of modern consumerism, towards a more sustainable cultural economy. Under this logic, consumerism is no longer about depletion of resources, unlimited economic growth or social inequalities, but a platform where corporations, commodities and consumers advocate for sustainability. It seems to be that sustainability has become an integral part of capitalism; this is a phenomenon that I propose to call the ‘sustainable turn’.

The concept of the sustainable turn is based on a holistic understanding of sustainability and aims to explain some phenomena occurring around cultural practices of production, promotion and consumption. Firstly, the way in which the myth of sustainability appears in consumer culture encompasses a variety of interrelated manifestations, including social, economic and environmental spheres of sustainability, but also spiritual, technological and political dimensions (Akama et al. 2014). Secondly, in terms of production, promotion and consumption, the sustainable turn is characterised by: a) the incorporation of sustainable principles and responsibilities in the corporate cultures of commercial enterprises; b) the use of marketing to objectify sustainable causes in the form of commodities; and c) the mediation of civic participation in sustainability agendas through specific forms of consumption.

This paper will explore a specific dimension of the sustainable turn, an interesting and paradoxical phenomenon known as anti-consumerism. Literature on this topic suggests that from all the approaches to sustainability emerging from consumer culture, anti-consumerist is one of the most radical, though paradoxical (Humphrey 2010, Binkley and Littler 2011, Binkley 2008). While other approaches are based on ‘greener’ forms of shopping, anti-consumerism explicitly advocates for a reduction in levels of consumption. Ironically, however, the strategies utilised to advance anti-consumerist agendas are based on and operate within the commercial circuits that it opposes. This radical and paradoxical character has inspired praises and criticism. On the one hand, when it is seen as a consumer movement, anti-consumerist could be acknowledged for being able to involve collective and individual forms of participation in favour of sustainability. On the other hand, anti-consumerist can be criticised for reproducing neoliberal paradigms of responsibilisation in the marketplace and for being unable to achieve its long term objectives.

This paper moves beyond pure praises and condemnations. It puts the phenomenon of anti-consumerism into dialogue with the topic of ‘Unmaking Waste’ by exploring the ways in which anti-consumerism sheds light on the principles of a more sustainable cultural economy, recognising at the same time the implicit paradoxes of any approach to sustainability emerging from consumer culture. In doing this, this paper examines three cultural artefacts representative of anti-consumerism: the ‘Blackspot Unswoosher’, a shoe produced by the ‘Blackspot Anticorporation’ and publicised as the shoe that will reinvent capitalism; ‘Buy Nothing New Month’ (BNNM), a Melbourne-based initiative promoting alternative ways of consumption based on the premise of ‘old is the new new’; and ‘Buy Nothing Day’ (BND), an international day of protest against over-consumption that encourages consumers to advance sustainable causes through the slogan ‘participate by not participating’. In examining these artefacts I utilised the
'circuit of culture', an analytical framework developed by a group of scholars from the Open University as a tool for doing cultural studies (Du Gay et al. 1997). The circuit of culture operates by analysing five interrelated dimensions of a cultural artefact: production, regulation, representation, consumption and identity. In this case, this framework is useful for developing a holistic approach of anti-consumerist that takes into account not only practices of consumption, but also others crucial for understanding approaches to sustainability from consumer culture, namely, production and promotion.

In discussing these cultural artefacts this paper finds that from the perspective of anti-consumerism elements of a sustainable cultural economy involve: the establishment of commercial enterprises based on corporate principles and productive systems different to those of the free-market; the use of marketing to extend the lifecycles of existent objects, rather than for encouraging consumption of brand new products; and the establishment of worldwide movements based on lifestyles that oppose to over-consumption. At the same time, the discussion finds out that some contradictions of this approach revolve around the construction of new fetishes of sustainable consumerism; the transformation of second-hand economies into sustainable fashion; and the reinforcement of an idea of sustainability as something occasional.

**Reinventing capitalism: The Blackspot shoes and new fetishes of sustainable consumerism**

One of the main causes of waste-creation in consumer society is related to the corporate cultures of neo-liberal enterprises, in particular, to the role played by traditional corporations in modern societies. These corporate cultures can be summarised in the Friedman Doctrine, according to which ‘the only one social responsibility of business is to increase profits for itself and its shareholders’ (Friedman 1970). Conversely, one manifestation of the sustainable turn is the incorporation of sustainable responsibilities in the corporate cultures of business. Examples of these process of responsibilisation can be the appearance of ‘social enterprises’, business focused on making profits for social causes; or the consolidation of Corporate Social Responsibility, a business paradigm in which corporations assume responsibilities beyond profits.

The example of the Blackspot shoes is useful to illustrate how these sustainable corporate cultures appear in the context of anti-consumerism. The Blackspot was created in 2003 by the ‘Blackspot Anticorporation’, an enterprise established by the Adbusters Media Foundation (AMF) to produce and market the shoes (Haiven 2007, Nomai 2008). Blackspot was created when the AMF ‘decided to stop merely criticizing the status quo and actually do something about it’: ‘kick Phil Knight’s ass’ and ‘reinvent capitalism’ (Adbusters n.d, Haiven 2007, 85). The first version of Blackspot resembled the design of Converse All Stars’ low-top sneakers, and was a direct response against Nike acquisition of Converse, a brand that was regarded as a symbol of American counter-culture (Ives 2004). The second version presents a different design, but states a similar objective: “to dethrone the Nikes, Adidases and Reeboks out there by jamming the global shoe industry with a new paradigm of #truecost brand liberation” (Adbusters n.d).

The corporate culture of the Blackspot Anticorporation opposes to the labour practices, environmental impact and marketing empire of corporate brands such as Nike. It does so, by assuming sustainable responsibilities related to the production, environmental impact and marketing of the Blackspot. Both versions of the product have been
produced by Adventure Boots, in a factory located in Felgueiras, Portugal, where workers said to work under fair conditions, have access to free medical services, earn more than the minimum age, and be represented by the union. The shoes are said to ‘comply with vegan standards’, they are made using organic hemp, and biodegradable and recovered materials. The process does not involve the use of chemicals, include handmade operations, and guarantee extra durability of the final product (Adbusters n.d). Furthermore, the Blackspot brand is represented through an ‘anti-logo’ and the marketing strategies promoting the shoes are said to be part of Adbusters’ agenda for ‘uncooling America’ by implanting a new idea of coolness (Lasn 2000).

Although the Blackspot Anticorporation is supposed to be based on corporate values that move away from the irresponsible corporate doctrines of today capitalism this enterprise contradicts itself in its attempt to stop global consumerism. In this sense, the Blackspot reflects what Sam Binkley (2008) calls a ‘fetish for de-fetishization’, a paradox by which anti-consumerist movements reproduce the market logics they say to oppose. I would argue that in their attempt to de-fetishize the shoes by making their production and promotion sustainable and transparent, the Blackspot Anticorporation re-fetishizes their product transforming it into an icon of sustainable consumerism. The shoes are in fact an icon of fashion. Despite they are made in Portugal they were designed in Canada by John Fluevog – an important figure in the shoes fashion industry. Apart from that, more than a pair shoes, the blackspot can be considered a form of branding: its promotional discourse is changed periodically according to seasons of protests, are highly advertised in Adbuster Magazine and they are even represented by a commercial symbol: the ‘anti-logo’. In this ay, the commercial discourse build up around the shoes depict them as something that must be consumed as a medium for expressing political dissidence and for constructing sustainable lifestyles and identities. In other words, into an accesory of rebel consumers.

‘Old is the new new’: Buy Nothing New Month and second-hand chicness

Another manifestation of the sustainable turn is the use of marketing to make tangible sustainable qualities of commodities. ‘Green marketing’, for example, highlights the benefits that consuming ‘green products’ can bring to the environment. Labelling schemes such as ‘Fair Trade’ certify that production and distribution of products is done ethically. Although many of these approaches might have positive outcomes – especially when seen as ‘better than nothing’ – many of them are greenwashing and are used to incentive the consumption of brand new products by making us aware of what we need to be sustainable consumers.

The example of BNNM represents a different approach in which marketing is used, not to promote consumption of new things, but to ‘revalue waste’ by extending the lifecycle of goods. BNNM was founded in 2010 by a PR agent, Tamara DiMattina, and has since then operated with the support of charity shops and second-hand retailers such as Salvos, Brotherhood St Laurence and Gumtree (BNNM 2013); though recently it has involved companies operating in the market of brand new sustainable products. The original and main objective of this initiative is to inculcate in consumers the principle of ‘old is the new new’, or in other words, to spread a ‘more “custodial” valuing of possessions’. Since it was launched, advertising agencies considered BNNM as ‘an attack on marketing’ and sales of manufacturers. Organisers on the other hand, argue that BNNM ‘is about positive behaviour change’, pointing out that ‘an economy built on
wasteful consumption is not sustainable or good for our business, our people or our environment’ (Hendy 2011).

A main strategy of BNNM for achieving positive behaviour change is the promotion of sustainable lifestyles that move away from traditional consumerism and explore alternatives in the second-hand economy. In 2012, the campaign presented The New Joneses, a staged experiment in which a couple went to live for a week in an apartment built in Federation Square (Melbourne), where everything including furniture, utensils and clothing, was second-hand¹. Since then, the experiment has been repeated during BNNM and the Sustainable Living Festival, where visitors are told about the value of second hand goods and are invited to become ‘New Joneses’ by making a pledge where they commit to: ‘do more with less’, ‘maximise resources’, ‘think where stuff comes from and where it goes’, and to ‘buy experiences over stuff’. These sustainable lifestyles seem to be attractive; 62 per cent of participants in an opinion poll about the initiative said that it was ‘good’ and that they will do it (Hendy 2011).

The attractiveness of this proposal, however, confirms Swinburne University scholar, Aneta Podkalicka (2012) when she suggests that thrift – including second hand shopping – is becoming fashionable, and at some point part of mainstream capitalism. In fact, according to information distributed by BNNM and Gumtree in the last version of The New Joneses, the second-hand economy is adding $580 billion to global economy and in Australia it ascends to $29 million². But in its attempt to inculcate a more custodial value of things through participation in the second-hand economy, BNNM is establishing a new form of consumerism that could be called ‘second-hand chicness’.

The campaign presents thrift – and second hand-shopping – as a new form of fashion and coolness. In the media – usually in the same reports about the second hand economy – Buy New Nothing New Month is advertised with this kind of messages: ‘Second hand Wonderland… If you’re not down with the fantastic world of second hand shopping, you are really missing out’ ‘It's ethical, eco-fabulous, social and fun’. The problem with this economy is that it spreads a form of ‘free-guilt consumerism’ and the belief that consumerism can be sustainable. Even more, in the particular case of opportunity and charity shops like those sponsoring BNNM, this second hand economy hides a culture of waste-making disguised as charity. In December 2014, for example, the ABC published a report explaining that opportunity and charity shops were going to lose millions of dollars ‘disposing of rubbish and unusable donations over the Christmas’ period (Williams 2014).

**Participate by not participating – Buy Nothing Day and business as usual tomorrow**

An important characteristic of the sustainable turn is that consumption is seen as a form of participation in the advancement of sustainable causes. Associations between civic participation and consumerism have a long history as part of social movements (Gabriel and Lang 2005), but it is since the 1990s that the belief that citizens can vote with their dollar has become part of neoliberal capitalism spread across consumer culture (Frank 2000). Based on the conviction that consumption is a form of participation, private companies and organisations encourage citizens to engage in different forms of commodity consumption as a way of participation in the advancement

¹ See: http://www.thenewjoneses.com/
of different agendas, including sustainable causes. Consumers of the brand ‘Thank You’, for example, are told that by buying their products – including bottled water – they are helping poor communities in developing countries.

From a general perspective, these associations between civic participation and consumerism can be related to forms of ‘commodity activism’ in which social action is grafted to commodity consumption. Although scholars recognise the potential of these commercial forms of activism to change social and political landscapes, they suggest that commodity activism – including tactics of ‘brand aid’ (Richey and Ponte 2011) and ‘shopping for change’ (Littler 2009) – is a reminder that there is no ‘outside’ to the logics of neoliberal capitalism (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee 2012). They explain that we are living in a ‘brand culture’, where many forms of participation, including protests, are mediated through consumerism (Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky 2008). Despite its political promise, these forms of civic participation through consumption result problematic for their impact in terms of waste-making.

Anti-consumerism brings up a different form of consumer participation as part of the sustainable turn. Through the slogan ‘participate by not participating’ the ‘protest’ Buy Nothing Day encourages consumers to stop shopping for a day as way to advance sustainable causes. BND was created in 1992 in Vancouver, Canada and popularised through the AMF. Today, it is celebrated in 65 countries during November, always coinciding with Black Friday. In general, BND opposes to over-consumption and the effects it has on the environment (e.g. depletion of natural resources) and developing countries (e.g. unfair distribution of wealth). Apart from not shopping anything for a day, BND involves other forms of participation such as pacific protests in shopping centres (e.g. credit card cut up, zombie walk, Whirl-Mart) and online distribution of graphic materials such as memes (Adbusters n.d.). More recently, BND has incorporated forms of protests based on consumption of specific commodities. In the United Kingdom, for example, participants are encouraged to ‘get beyond the brands and make commitment to shop locally and support your independent shops, cafe’s and businesses’, on the basis that ‘local shops act as community hub’ and fifty percent of their sales ‘goes back into the local economy’ (BND 2014).

Despite its growing popularity BND is widely criticised for not being able to achieve its objective. While it is true that as a day of protest BND counts with the participation of consumers, the long term of its proposal is dubious. Some critics point out that BND is directed to well-educated and high-income consumers, who firstly, have the cultural capital needed to understand this protests as a form of sustainable activism, and secondly, have enough economic resources for organising their shopping routines abstaining themselves from shopping for a day. It is precisely the temporary character of BND what puts in doubt its effectiveness for reducing overconsumption and its negative effects on the environment and developing countries. Shoppers might decide to stop shopping for a day, but the next day – in the absence of long term solutions – they will buy what they missed. An example of this critique can be found in the case of Adbusters. Even though they close their online store during BND and stop selling magazine subscriptions and other products – including Blackspot shoes, the next day it is reopened and it is just ‘business as usual’.

Conclusion

To conclude it is important to highlight some insights brought by anti-consumerism in terms of the transformation of production, promotion and consumption in consumer culture. In terms of production the blackspot shoes suggests that we need a shift from
the Friedman Doctrine according to which the only social responsibility of corporation is to increase profits (Friedman 1970), to corporate cultures assuming responsibility for sustainability. In terms of promotion Buy Nothing New Month shows a shift from the ‘ethos of disposable’ – according to which the task of marketing is to make people “use up” products that they formerly “used” (Calkins 1932) – to a different ethos in which marketing is used to extend the life cycle of existent things. In terms of consumption Buy Nothing Day suggests a movement from the conviction that ‘shopping is voting’ – that ‘Every time you step up to a cash register, you vote’ (Lang & Gabriel 2005) – to forms of civic participation not mediated through commodity consumption. Although these insights might be inspiring they are paradoxical. They suggest that corporations should keep exercising control over society and culture; that human values, ideals and principles have to be advertised and sold as if they were commodities; and that the marketplace is the only space we have for exercising our rights and duties as citizens.

References


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Greening *The Block*: Sustainability in mainstream lifestyle TV

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Residential renovations have become commonplace in westernised societies. Homeowners’ expectations can be affected by environmental concerns and energy efficiency. However, it is unclear if these concerns influence homeowners’ aspirations. Renovations occur more frequently and often without a clear rationale such as the repair or maintenance of a house (Maller and Horne 2011). The scale of renovation ranges between minor improvements to major alterations (Thuvander et al. 2012), the carbon impact of which is often difficult to determine. However, the waste produced presents a quantifiable measure that can be used to determine the environmental impact of projects.

Meanwhile, mass media and television programmes in particular are increasingly penetrating people’s lives, promoting reality shows, in which ordinary people are taken through transformative narrative of their daily lives (Lewis 2008a). Television, as a domestic media, represents the ‘normality’ of a household while programmes often relate to the triviality of everyday life (Ellis 1992). Property ‘makeovers’ have been promoted and amplified by media since the 1990s as part of a desirable lifestyle and have been turned into a perpetual activity (Goodsell 2008). More recently, there has been an attempt to ‘green’ such lifestyle television shows, introducing issues such as ethical consumption, environmental awareness while presenting and reflecting on the challenges that climate change brings to daily lives (Craig 2010).

Using ‘The Block’ as an example, the paper discusses whether there is evidence of sustainable practices, particularly to do with managing waste in the renovation process in mainstream television shows and investigates whether the show can act as a kind of ‘popular education’, promoting viewers’ (pro-environmental) choices when conducting similar real-life projects.

**Keywords:** Lifestyle television, home renovation, sustainability, waste
Introduction

“*If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, Junk-Space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet. […] Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course, or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in process, its fallout.*” (Koolhaas 2002)

Contemporary Australia has been characterised as a ‘Renovation Nation’. Through the progressive change of status from a nation of tenants, during the beginning of the 20th century, to that of home owners and landlords, in the last twenty years, property investment and maintenance has become an obsession (Allon 2008).

Amongst current discourses on sustainability, policy makers are investigating ways to shift and cultivate low carbon lifestyles (Whitmarsh and O’Neill 2010). However, in order to develop a long-term strategy and vision for a low carbon future it is imperative that home renovation practices consider the appropriate use of natural resources, the waste produced during building construction, as well as reconsider the lifecycle of residential design (Paduart et al. 2011).

Waste as a by-product of time and daily lives, has transformative value; it can be turned into art or into a source of profit (Hawkins Gay, Muecke 2003). This paper is concerned with waste as a result of household renovations and how this is being portrayed in lifestyle television renovation shows. It also investigates whether mainstream popular reality television shows support and promote, and in which ways, sustainable practices in the process of home renovations.

“The fashioning of house as home has become a public televisual spectacle, enabling us to witness and share the triumphs and disasters of strangers’ home styling” (McElroy 2008).
Background

Amongst climate change concerns in Australia and worldwide, the renovation and retrofit of homes present an opportunity to reduce households’ carbon emissions through a technical, technological and behavioural ‘upgrade’ (Judson 2013; Reid and Houston 2013; Meijer, Itard, and Sunikka-Blank 2009). Households are increasingly becoming aware of discourses on environmental policy and climate change scenarios and recognise the need to deal with improvements on their carbon footprint (Maller, Horne and Dalton 2012).

However, with regulations and low carbon initiatives primarily targeting new built homes (Kelly 2009), policy makers currently rely on people’s voluntary commitments when it comes to sustainable renovations and retrofits. These decisions are driven by diverse factors, such as financial reasons, health benefits and pro-environmental intentions (Maller, Horne and Dalton 2012).

Meanwhile, home renovations have been promoted by media since the 1990s as part of a desirable lifestyle and have been turned into a perpetual activity rather than a once occurring event (Goodsell, 2008). Once dedicated to daytime programmes, makeover shows are now part of prime-time broadcasting, claiming to transform the viewers’ homes, health and family upbringing (Lewis 2008b). The narrative of such programmes are characterised by an escalating anticipation of the transformation to come. The scene, often set in artificial contexts, presents an exaggerated situation that requires resolution under the guided observation of experts (Lewis 2008a). ‘Experts’ in this context range from presenters, designers, trades people, decoration ‘gurus’ and other individuals with relevant experience, passionate to share their proficiency. The participation of these ‘experts’ is often linked to the commercialisation and marketing products that come along with the lifestyle that the programme promotes. We often encounter scenes when the ‘experts’ support or reject a decision and the dream lifestyle that it promises by suggesting specific, often affordable, products (Medhurst 1999).

An interesting aspect of the televised and mass produced property programmes is their effect on the property market. It is estimated that ‘the increasing interest in home renovation may also be attributed to reality TV series such as, Grand Designs and The Block (Johanson 2011; Housing Industry Association (HIA) Economics Group 2010) as well numerous lifestyle magazines’ (Judson 2013). In specific, The Block has contributed to the boost of home renovations across Australia. According to Harvey, HIA economist, “In quarters in which The Block is aired there is, on average, a $251 million boost to quarterly renovations investment two quarters (or six months) following the airing” (Estate Network and Johanson 2015).

As the interest in pro-environmental products and services is rising globally (Maller, Horne and Dalton 2012), there is a potential in the promotion of sustainable practices through lifestyle television, particularly in the area of renovations. However, as Shove (2012) suggests, in order to achieve change, there needs to be a systematic overview of everyday household practices and routines which go further than the technical nature of renovation itself.

The greening of lifestyle television

A series of trends, ranging from pro-environmental and ethical consumption to activist movements, are shaping suburban nations such as Australia and the US and reconstructing the model of our citizenship (Lewis 2012). Television as a symbol of suburban normality in modern nations (Ellis 1992) has recently turned on a sustainable
'face', aiming to transform 'ordinary' people towards a 'greener' and ethical lifestyle (Lewis 2012). This turn is set within broader community concerns and anxieties about our modern lifestyles, such as how our homes respond to environmental challenges (Lewis 2012). Furthermore, 'green' consumerism, often labeled as 'good' or ethical consumption is usually linked with aspirations of class distinction while it transforms individuals to active citizens who control their (sustainable) actions (Lewis 2008c).

Within the genre of lifestyle makeover show, a new format has been introduced: the eco-makeover. Eco-makeover shows are contradictory, as despite offering a platform for debate on ethical or 'conscience consumption' and responsible citizenship they still promote highly branded products and services (Lewis 2008c). However, a rise of a new model of active citizens-consumers, who might not be environmental activists but rather individuals who want to break free from the mainstream model of disposable income and meaningless spending and understand the social impact of consumption can bring closer the meaning of responsible citizen and consumer (Soper 2004).

Discourse analysis based on Gee’s Tools and Building Tasks

The methodology used in this paper is adapted by James Gee’s Discourse Analysis framework. Building on a range of precursors of critical discourse analysis including Bourdieu, Foucault, Fairclough, and others, Gee proposes that analysis should focus on the binomial D/discourse. The 'small d' discourse refers to language per se and its deployment in representing and constituting particularly socially contested but coherent narratives on aspects of the world. This means that with reference to any key socially distributed concept like sustainability, gender, etc., there will be a range of discourses competing to define the dominant interpretation. Institutions, e.g. government, advertising, church, tabloid newspapers, television, promote or encourage particular discourses in so far as they match their desired purchase on society. According to Gee D/discourses collect around key concepts, which circulate in society, e.g. community, lifestyle, working families, and in linguistics and social context we see ways in which these key terms are interpreted. Thus, the popular recourse of politicians to 'working families' is a rhetorical flourish to align policy with an essentially fictional. It discursively constructed majority, who unsurprisingly agree with their policies.

Most narratives have a history and competing discourses with a history, which are in competition, Gee refers to as in Conversation. So in this sense there is a Conversation about causes and effects of climate change, the role of women in society, migrant rights and responsibilities, etc., all institutionally promoted and embedded with particular knowledge-power interests. Gee then suggests that beyond language, ways of behaving, e.g. consumption practices, and acting in the world, demonstrate our affiliation with particular groups we wish to identify with. These non-linguistics affiliation moves he refers to as Discourse. This might translate for example into a particular program representing 'typical' renovators as young, cashed-up, inner city dwellers looking to renovate to sell or budget conscious 'families' looking to maximize returns on investment.

This perspective applies especially to media representations of things like green practices. The practices and language of actors in such programs aim to reinforce particular discourses about the home, sustainability, and so forth. They are therefore amenable to analysis. Thus analysis is sensitive to both linguistic and non-linguistic sources seeking in particular to uncover D/discourses and where there are areas of contestation.
The Block as a sample

The paper is focused on the Australian reality programme *The Block*. Since its first transmission in 2003 by Channel 9, during a national property ‘boom’, *The Block* has ‘set a benchmark in popularity’ (Estate, Network and Johanson 2015). As ‘a unique hybrid of reality-tv, game-show, home-improvement, lifestyle programming and soap-opera’, it was created as the popular mix of the nation’s obsession with real estate in reality television (Allon 2008). The first season of the programme had an estimated 2.6 million viewers on average whereas the last 90 minutes of its final episode had a larger television audience than the 2000 Sydney Olympics; a phenomenon referred to as ‘property pornography’ (Allon 2008).

The narrative of the show follows the televised renovations of apartments or houses, performed by a number of couples over a set period of time. Contestants aim to sell their houses at an auction, and make the maximum profit. The first three seasons ran for 11 weeks with weekly episodes, however the show became more intense later, with episodes broadcasted every weeknight and on Sundays for a period of eight weeks. The format of the show has been recreated around the world (US Fox network, UK ITV1, TV2 Denmark, The Netherlands, Belgium, South Africa and France) (Hill 2005).

*The Block* as a descendant of ‘aspirational television’ shows originating in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, is an excellent representative of the combination of home ownership, politics and consumer culture (Allon 2008). The paper has identified season 7, “SkyHigh”, as the pilot for this study. Produced in 2013, it introduced contestants to a high-rise block in Melbourne, while it was the first season to promote itself as ‘the most sustainable ever’. Energy Australia became an official partner, advertising their services extensively to the viewers (Australia 2013).

Findings

Findings are clustered into themes that emerged from a sample of season 7 episodes. Further research and analysis could expand the discourse analysis, focusing on a close analysis of text and further non-linguistic elements of the programme as can be seen in Giles’s (2002) audience participation study. The initial reflections on this season were sparked with the building choice and the expected accommodation. It is a paradox that the first *Block* season to proclaim itself ‘most sustainable ever’ sets the expectations of whole-floor apartments, each complete with five bathrooms and ‘luxury’ fittings. Additionally, throughout the series there are connotations that bigger equals better. Furthermore, it was observed that the decision-making process of the overall architecture of *The Block* was presented to the audience and contestants without any explanation or clear rationale. The decision, for example, to paint the exterior black, enhanced with vertical living walls, was not accompanied by an explanation of whether it would be done in favour of building performance or aesthetics. Instead contestants commented on the financial gain the building would get from its new façade. Similarly, most of the feedback received from the judges was focused on soft furnishings, colour and style rather than architectural design decisions or on pro-environmental choices.

“Out of all that we’ve learned from the judging so far is that they don’t give a ‘***’ about architectural skill, it’s all about what cushion or pillow or colour you use.” (Trixie, s7e9)

This comment reinforces Giles’s point that the primary goal of lifestyle programmes is the education of taste rather than the transmission of education and skills (Giles 2002).
The broader themes that were identified are commented on below.

**Branding and the Lifestyle expert**

In the last two decades, the roles of lifestyle experts in popular television programmes, whose aims are to teach or influence people’s lifestyle choices, providing everyday expertise, are increasingly taken over by celebrity figures. These experts/celebrities, often referred to by their first names, have been characterised as ‘living brands’ (Lewis, 2010). Such personalities, perceived as lifestyle role models, are major figures in home renovation programmes in particular. In the case of *The Block*, the three judges of the show include a lifestyle and design magazine editor and two interior designers, who are highly regarded by the audience and producers.

This consumer-led lifestyle advice, is reinforced by the role of branding, in the form of sponsors, products, services and the advertising during the episodes and the frequent commercial breaks, becoming the most dominant element of the series. Contestants are presented with ‘gifts’ of branded tools and products, ranging from food supplements to renovation products and cars, while there is an evident and unrestrained promotion on behalf of the couples to reconfirm that indeed the brands are performing as they should.

The challenges set, aiming to test the contestants’ ability to ‘stand out’, are often based on predefined products, while the winners are rewarded with branded products or services. This closely associated relationship between the products, services and ideas is seen in almost every episode where a problem is resolved after a visit to a suitable shop or application of a certain product. There is great emphasis on the act of shopping, which is presented as a primarily female responsibility, with scenes of confused women gradually reassured by retail owners who offer their homewares as a resolution.

The energy sponsor of the programme, which awards the star ratings, keeps a high profile in terms of marketing, with their logos visible in every possible occasion; however, the process under which the star ratings were awarded remains invisible to the audience. Scott Cam, the host, often compliments the participants for achieving a star:

> “Let me tell you that you’re all winners today because Energy Australia has awarded you another star” (Cam, 2013, episode 19).

> “Congratulations and if you can earn the 8 stars you’ll be truly eco-warriors…” (Cam, episode 25).

**Desire for the new**

Modern consumerism has been associated with a desire for the new; often linked with a craving for new products or services which in their turn contain and amplify this artificial ‘need’ (Campbell, 1992). Campbell provides three definitions to the term: “there is, first, the new as the fresh or newly created; second, the new as improved or innovative; and third, the new as the unfamiliar or novel”. Similarly, ‘old’ at the other end represents the worn-out, tired or deteriorated (Campbell, 1992).

In the context of *The Block*, we encounter all three variations of the ‘new’. Initially, the concept of *The Block*, as an adaptive reuse, introduces the idea of the ‘new’ as improved and upcycled. Throughout the series, particularly on behalf of the judges, there is a repetitive projection that quality is synonymous with brand new (and expensive) products and fittings:
“You can’t go for second best quality around this area” (New as improved, new as freshly created)

Similarly, the contestants are playing in the same tone, stating that:

“I need something that no one’s done before” (Trixie, s7e1, New as novel)

“Madi and Jarrod are good at delivering ‘new’. I haven’t seen that lamp before, I haven’t seen that range hood before, it’s really clever design” (Neale Whitaker, s7e31, New as innovative).

Campbell states that people often ‘prefer the new to the familiar and hence desire new products’ (Campbell 1992). We observe that this often happens during judgement days, when comments are made for styling or design elements that are considered familiar, therefore depreciated:

“. . .I think . . .it’s a little bit of. . .we’ve seen a lot of this. . .and maybe we’re expecting something a little more mature and a bit different” (Shaynna Blaze, s7e12, commenting on a bedroom setting).

“ ‘I felt like I’ve seen everything before and that’s because I had” Neale Whitaker, s7e12)

The embrace of re-use or extension of the lifecycle of materials, defined as the ‘improved’ has the potential to address sustainable practices in home renovations. However, in The Block, very rarely is such an act given much attention and in some cases it is considered as a ‘shabby’ or unprofessional option:

“This guy’s got amazing [. .] old jetty timber and real industrial stuff. Our chief concern is to tie in a timber to what we’ve got going to the house already. [. . .] I think will respond with the buyer a bit more” (Matt, s7e29, collecting timber at a yard)

“Because we’ve been decorating a home apartment, we’ve not been able to use these recycled products” (Trixie, s7e27, buying recycled products to sell at their marker stall).

An interesting point is when contestants prefer to recreate the ‘used’ effect for a new mesh to make it appear as ‘old’ rather than use already rusty material. This act brings up issues of implied authenticity and questions about the perception of the appreciation of the real as opposed to imitation and how this influences the experience of space.

Sustainability = profitability

The importance of ‘economic value attached to styling’ at The Block was highlighted from season 1 (Allon 2008). This has also been apparent in season 7, particularly from the judges:

“Houses across the street go for $5 million dollars. [. .] so [. . .] they have a massive responsibility to produce high-end, boutique apartments, in an apartment building that’s never been done before. These are expensive places and they need to really bring the best that they’ve got.” (Shaynna Blaze, s7e6).

“It felt expensive in terms of the finishes and it has a sense of cool [. . .]” Neale Whitaker, s7e24).

However, season 7 had an important add-on value: sustainability. Characterised as the ‘most sustainable ever’, the series joined up with a major energy provider, who supported the contestants to achieve an 8-star rating When the rating was introduced in episode 8, the contestants were very excited:
“I think it’s a great selling point, that’s the way buildings should go, the 8 stars” (Bec, s7e7)

Labelled as a ‘development for the future’, sustainable development brings many benefits to developers: it offers buyers an association with progressive thinking, it adds value to the property and it improves public image. Furthermore, buyers, particularly those who are environmentally aware, are willing to pay more for houses with ‘green features’ (Kellenberg 2004; Mandell and Wilhelmsson 2011). There have been efforts to create various measures for sustainable development. However it is often difficult to interpret these indicators (Partidario, Vicente, and Belchior 2010). In season 7 it appears that the Australian building code rating system is the one that is used, although this is never explicitly mentioned. This rating system works well in the context of The Block as it emphasizes the ‘sweetspot’ between sustainability and profitability and notably cautions that once costs exceed benefits, higher star ratings are wasteful. The Centre of International Economics (CIE) report suggests that the optimal star rating is generally around 5 in terms of profitability of the development (Economics 2010), while The Block supported the creation of the first 8-star rated building in Melbourne.

Conclusions

This paper investigated how home renovations are represented in lifestyle television shows and in particular if and how they promote sustainable practices and waste in through an investigation of the episodes of series 7 of The Block. As discussed in the findings, three broad themes were identified as indicators of those issues: branding, the desire for the ‘new’ and the suggestion that sustainability equals profit for renovated properties.

An important aspect to consider before commenting on The Block’s representation of home renovations is the concept of house and home. “Whereas a house is [...] a physical shelter [...] a home is a place of protected intimacy” (Bachelard 1994). Recently, this interpretation has been promoted by real estate agents in particular, who don’t sell just houses but homes (Allon 2008).

In search of evidence for representations of sustainable practices in televised home renovations, we encountered the concept that sustainability often equals ‘bonus selling points’. The Block provided the audience, participants and potential buyers with the vision of an 8 star rated building: the only one in Melbourne at the time of broadcasting. However, as evidenced in the CIE report, although high star ratings are highly desirable, particularly as a description of economic efficiency, at ratings over 5 stars costs magnify and benefits decline noticeably. Additionally energy savings for existing buildings, such as The Block, would be substantially more expensive to incorporate (Economics 2010). As the show’s principal target is the maximum profit, sustainability seems to become another bonus point for them to construct a desired — and new — image of a home. Therefore, renovation in this case did not relate to the practice of (sustainable) homemaking but to the addition of value (Allon 2008).

Ultimately, modern lifestyles are often associated with un-sustainable practices such as overconsumption and waste (Partidario, Vicente, and Belchior 2010). We have related consumption with the branding of materials and services as well as the desire for the acquisition of new things. Waste in The Block is represented not just by the rubble remains of the gutted building, but in the symbolic aspect of loss or remains of economic, emotional and ethical principles of social practices. “Waste[s]”, here, are the leftovers of overconsumption, effort and control.
References


Dreaming sustainability, realising utopia: ‘convergence’ and ‘divergence’ in art and design practice

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Design Studies, History of Art

Throughout the twentieth century, the disciplines and practices of artists and designers were convergent and divergent in the way they developed similar ideas identified now with sustainability. Whilst under early modernism, artists concerned themselves with the retention of ‘aura’ (Benjamin [1936] 2008), designers released this in pursuit of reproduction. Consequently, designers discarded individuality for commonality, and old for new in the guise of economic and technological advancement, whereas artists concerned themselves with cultural artefacts. Both had social impact.

The designer’s grasp of systems thinking and reproductive methods as ‘social systems’ (Nelson and Stolterman 2012) set against the modernist artist’s preference for the one-off characterized different motivations. Subsequently, in the second half of the twentieth century design became closely associated with the mass-production and promotion of products, but subsequently became implicated in consumer culture and the massive problem of waste (Walker 2014). Design’s deviation towards ‘wicked’ problem solving on a global scale – often to improve social and economic well-being – before the challenge of sustainability came to light, sits in contrast to art’s concern for individuality.

There are a few exceptions. In 2004, in Beyond Green, Stephanie Smith brought together a series of sustainable art and design projects – such as the Learning Group’s Collecting System - arguing that the convergence of these two strands can provide rich opportunities to rethink approaches to environmental questions, as both shared a goal of bringing social and aesthetic concerns together with environmental and economic ones (Smith 2006). Yet, when systematic approaches to the problem of waste are discussed in terms of integrated sustainable waste management frameworks, the potential contribution of artistic strategies and methodologies is absent and the opportunity for an expanded view of design to readdress concerns is overlooked. Are we to assume it to be buried in the socio-cultural aspects of environmental and contextual concerns? Or is it also related to the financial/ economical, technical, environmental/public health, institutional, and policy/legal aspects of waste management frameworks?

This paper makes explicit the potential for specific socially-engaged art practices to contribute to a waste discourse about re-purpose, re-use and appropriation. We also challenge notions that design as a product of modernist twentieth-century thinking emanating from early modern art practice is devoid of re-use, by positioning ‘practical meaning’ as a paradox of scale and context.

Keywords: Waste, Art, Design, Divergence, Convergence
Overview

Since Picasso transformed brown cardboard packaging from a Paris department store into *The Dream* (1908) (Taylor 2004), artists have utilized throwaway materials in collage, assemblage and installations. Now, in the early twenty-first century, the spirit of appropriation, re-purpose and re-use thrives in a global context of socially-engaged and ‘eco-art’ practices (Weintraub 2012), characterized recently as ‘eco-aesthetics’ (Miles 2014), with artists adopting a range of strategies which could broadly be viewed as ‘critically realist’ or ‘creatively utopian’ (Demos 2009).

The meaning of waste is ambiguous because it so often substitutes for other words. It is essentially “stuff that someone, somewhere, does not want” (Steel 2009: 260) and both a tangible (e.g. food, packaging) and intangible (e.g. opportunity, potential) phenomenon. As a human construct it affects us all. In academia concern for waste spans the continuum between hard and soft disciplines. Waste questions may be asked and answered from many perspectives, and must be approached as an “a-disciplinary” or transdisciplinary subject, encompassing all ways of knowing. But when waste research is concentrated in institutional research settings, aesthetic considerations rarely feature. Historical and contemporary artistic encounters with waste are extensive (Whiteley 2011). These range from the utilization of discarded materials and objects as a raw material in artwork to the direct engagement with social, political, ethical and environmental concerns relating to waste through various forms and platforms of artistic practice. Pertinent examples include the extensive work of photographer Edward Burtynsky documenting the industrial waste in contemporary China or the recent Wasteland Twinning project (www.wasteland-twinning.net) operating physically and digitally across a global spectrum.

Artistic practices encourage us think about waste differently, as something of material and intellectual value, aesthetic pleasure or as a catalyst for public dialogue on environmental issues. This paper, therefore, calls for an holistic response to the problems and possibilities of designing out waste, by considering aesthetic rather than anaesthetic approaches to knowledge creation. In what follows, we highlight art’s preoccupation with reclamation and design’s concern with reproduction, with reference to specific examples which recycle ideas and objects, with tangible and intangible outcomes.

Re-imagining waste

Art’s long history of utilising reclaimed materials (particularly in Western Europe and the Americas) is characterised by the tradition of the *objet trouvé* which featured in various modernist movements of the early 20th century. Since then, working resourcefully with whatever is to hand, the makeshift notion of *bricolage* (de Certeau,1984) has become a paradigmatic model for the contemporary global artist (Whiteley, 2011b). That said, artistic strategies of re-use have had different aesthetic and social motivations, depending on time, location and context.

The lineage of re-purposing discarded objects as cultural artefacts runs from Kurt Schwitters’ interest in the ephemeral nature of stuff with his concept of *merz* in the 1920s, to 1960s assemblage, an artform of juxtaposition employing found objects and detritus scavenged from the urban environment as a transgressive act of dissent. Sixties’ West Coast assemblage and the work of Sydney’s Annandale Imitation Realists, challenged hegemonic modernism and institutional conventions about what counted as ‘proper’ material for art (Whiteley, 2011a). In many instances, however, that
broad set of practices engaged with anti-consumerist discourses: French artist Arman’s iconic series of *poubelles* and *accumulations* operated as a polemic against capitalism’s alienated system of the division of labour and the mass production of goods with in-built obsolescence.

Since the 1970s, ecological imperatives and concerns with sustainability have led artists such as Helen and Newton Harrison to develop pioneering collaborative practices which not only highlight environmental issues but propose and realise creative social and economic solutions to waste reduction and management. As residential artist with New York Sanitation Dept, Mierle Laderman Ukeles has worked extensively with waste for over thirty years, revealing and erasing the boundaries between citizen and garbage. In *Touch Sanitation* (1977-80), a ritualistic and celebratory performative piece, she shook the hands of New York City’s 8,500 sanitation workers; her innovative project, *Flow City* (1983-96) based at the 59th Street Marine Transfer Station on the Hudson River, was designed to incorporate waste-processing into the fabric of the building’s structure, enabling New Yorkers to experience their own garbage being processed around them as they moved through transparent walkways, passing through ‘a state of potentiality’ (Ukeles 1995, 185).

Art’s capacity not only to aestheticize, fetishize and critique cultures of obsolescence, but to explore, envision and activate, other ‘states of potentiality’ (to borrow Ukeles’ phrase) carries through to the 21st century. In tandem with the postmodern dissolution of consensus about what constitutes ‘art’ and the ‘greening’ of politics through preoccupations with sustainability, the spirit of appropriation and re-purpose thrives in a global context of ‘socially-engaged’, ‘eco-art’ and ‘eco-aesthetic’ practices featured in a series of recent surveys (Thompson 2012; Weintraub 2012; Miles 2014). Artists and ‘social practitioners’ (Jackson 2011), adopt a range of strategies which could broadly be viewed as ‘critically realist’ or ‘creatively utopian’ (Demos, 2009).

In a series of small-scale ‘creatively utopian’ guerilla-style ‘forays’ in New York in 2007-8, artists Adam Bobbette and Geraldine Juarez used trash and makeshift methodologies. Creating incidental objects in marginal urban spaces, they describe their practice as ‘the creation of open-source minor architectures and low-tech modifications of everyday life’ (www.forays.org). With a feral ethos, based on ‘copyleft, hacking, larceny and alternative forms of exchange’, the artists re-purposed scavenged objects to create hammocks, cocoons, dens and nests which were left in situ for others to stumble across and use.

The Mexico City-based collective of artists, TRES, also use ‘foray’ tactics alongside a range of interdisciplinary methodologies and research models, gleaning detritus from urban wastelands in global cities. See Figure 1.
In *Desechos Reservados* (2011), *Chicle y Pega* (2012) and a recent project with detritus retrieved from Manchester’s canals, they deploy forensic techniques and methods from archaeology and garbology, to produce works which initiate questions about the (mis)management of personal and collective waste. Primarily, they use garbage as a catalyst to generate public dialogue about its social and political implications (www.tresartcollective.com)

Other artists have used ‘ecological visualisation’, creating public spectacle on a grand scale, to generate debate about waste. In February 2008, the Paris-based art collective HeHe produced *Nuage Vert*, a temporary project in which a laser beam projected a green outline of a cloud onto the real emissions cloud of a power plant in Helsinki. When residents were invited to participate by unplugging electrical appliances for a specific hour, the green cloud dramatically increased: the more they switched off, the larger the green cloud. The project demonstrated how artistic methodologies can work alongside scientific data to visualise and materialize environmental issues such as waste reduction (Miles 2014, 154).

A prime resource for the generation of interdisciplinary approaches to waste problems is the Curating Cities project database of ‘eco-public art’ (initiated by the National Institute for Experimental Arts at UNSW in association with the City of Sydney and Carbon Arts). This features many large-scale artistic projects offering innovative approaches to waste management, recycling and upcycling, including works by the Slow Art Collective and Ash Keating’s *Activate 2750*. In common with Keating’s previous projects, *Activate 2750* incorporated a series of ambulatory performances alongside monumental amounts of waste (in this case ten tons of consumer and industrial waste diverted from a centre in Western Sydney) installed prominently in the grounds of a major shopping centre. Public responses suggest that the art project successfully mobilised debates around consumerism, landfill and the invisibility of waste. Other groups include the Spanish Basurama group which has worked for over ten years on an extensive range of small and large-scale projects in global locations, operating somewhere between art and architecture, challenging consumption habits,

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**Figure 1**: TRES, A cluster of oblivion (*Un archipielago de olvidos*) 2009. Three months’ garbage, collected and sorted, from 5 blocks of Downtown Mexico City.
reclaiming trash for artistic installations, and making participative public intervention (Mazon 2013).

From imagination to appropriation

In many of these projects, art functions as a critique of the waste production and management systems of global capitalism or, in some cases, it re-models utopian alternatives. If we encounter art as Grant Kester advocates - as a process of communicative exchange rather than a physical object (Kester 2004) - then a plethora of contemporary artistic interventions and projects catalyse and engage public debate. Moreover, the strategies and methodologies of openness and creativity characteristically associated with art, can change other ways of making and thinking. As Stephanie Smith argues in the introduction to Beyond Green,

> Imagination is an artist’s greatest asset. It can produce bold visions of what a sustainable future might be like. People can be moved and aroused by powerful environments, innovative designs, and practical demonstrations of active engagement….the distinctions between art, design, and architecture will blur as critics discover new relations between the value of form and the value of use. (Smith 2006, 28)

Such other ways of thinking have been adopted by less privileged people. For example, the spirit of appropriation, re-purpose and re-use of discarded products and material is very much present in Brazilian vernacular material culture, where there is a strong sense of creativity. It is possible to identify the same practice of re-use in the survival repertoire of the homeless people, resulting from a severe condition of deprivation.

In the context of deprivation, Lina Bo Bardi brought light to the re-use of with a qualified and erudite view regarding the vernacular appropriation of discarded products, mainly in the Northeastern part of Brazil. She captured the essence of vernacular material culture and Brazilian soul through her essays, exhibitions and design activism. See Figure 2.

![Figure 2: Bardi, Lina. 1994, Lubricant tins act as drinking vessels. Provencia Feira de Santana, Bahia.](image)

This re-use practices from different perspectives; housing, such as favela building processes; the homeless fragile and nomadic habitat; the vernacular design of objects for everyday life; and samba school parades from Brazil’s famous carnivals; all convey this sense of resourcefulness and creativity in the appropriation of re-used materials. See Figure 3.
The designer and professor Aloísio Magalhães (1927-1982) allows us the opportunity to reflect on design and its relationships with design in the context of Latin and Brazilian cultural formation, especially considering the multicultural, multiethnic origins and the aesthetic diversity present in Brazilian culture and society. According to him, this diversity presents contrasts and tensions with significant repercussions on the practice and cultural identity of design.

If art’s greatest asset is imagination, design’s is its capacity for ‘appropriateness’ (Cross 2006). Thus, a conjoined art and design perspective provides a distinctive approach to questions associated with re-purpose and re-use. But, there are contradictory and competing critical contexts that determine it as a convergent or divergent practice. Next, we focus on the paradox of design through the analysis of a case study of spatial and temporal re-use.

A paradox of modern design

‘… waste’s relationship to time – the value of things rises and diminishes according to the work they do or the future imagined for them, in other words, to their potential realized in time’ (Viney 2014: 4).

At the same time as Picasso introduced collage to painting, the foundation was also laid for what would become ‘modern typography’ and an ongoing preoccupation with the values associated with it (Harland and Loschiavo dos Santos 2008). The four images featured in Figure 4, all from the early twenty-first century, exhibit basic design principles now a century old. The images of football memorabilia, a restaurant name, property marketing, and television broadcasting, are exemplars of the re-purpose, re-use and appropriation of graphic values pioneered by Europe’s early modernists. All display a level of clarity and simplicity discussed in early discourse about ecology and ethics in design (Papanek 1995: 210).
In the early decades of the twentieth century, a bold ‘painterly’ approach to typographic design evolved that aspired to reflect a closer relationship between art and society. Its beginning is attributed to Marinetti’s 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism*, printed in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* (Spencer [1969] 2004: 11–67), but early ground-breaking modernists such as El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters, H. N. Werkman, Piet Zwart, Herbert Bayer and Jan Tschichold followed. Their ideas promoted asymmetric layout, bold typography, use of black and red, with heavy and fine rules to divide space, reaching an emerging post-war generation of British graphic designers through the pages of *Typographica*, edited and designed by Herbert Spencer between 1949 and 1967. One ‘iconic’ ‘graphic object’ (Harland 2015) emerged at this time demonstrating a fusion of early typographic experimentation, legibility, and systemic design: the City of Westminster street nameplate in London. See Figure 5.

The sign exhibits characteristics developed early in the twentieth century, resembling the early ideas of Lissitzky and the painter Kasimir Malevich. Lissitzky introduced typographic elements into his painting (as Picasso had done), with strong use of black and red. The sign’s composition also utilises a rule running left to right across the
picture plane, reminiscent of the way Tschichold used the same device in his 1937 exhibition poster ‘konstruktivisten’.

As an ‘iconic’ design, the nameplate is an example of both un-sustainable and sustainable design. Designed in 1967, it displays a one-size-fits-all approach regardless of whether you are in Soho or Knightsbridge and has the appearance of utility and function. Considered one of the ‘best postwar British signs’ and ‘exemplary,’ it is also ridiculed for ‘shamelessly and needlessly’ replacing ‘perfectly usable older models and can be seen as a kind of civic cleansing’ (Baines and Dixon 2003).

The design responded to the establishment in 1965 of 33 London boroughs after the London Borough Act in 1963. The new nameplate replaced what had previously been a localised approach to street identification, as seen in Figure 6, the new design incorporating systemic design principles involving a fixed design format.

The nameplate is a sustainable paradox. Its implementation rendered much of what it replaced wasteful. The systemic nature of the replacement design does what Nelson and Stolterman (2012: 58) suggest as focus ‘our full attention on the connections and relations between people, subjects, objects and ideas—rather than just the things themselves,’ initially at the scale of a city borough, but also as an idealised example of European modernism.

The sign’s arrangement is based on principles established a half-century earlier and continues to be adopted and adapted a half century later. This implies a durability of basic design principles that resist needless change and place high value on identity, structure and meaning. But more fundamental is the re-use of defining properties in graphic design, such as the centuries old alphabet – an exemplar of re-purpose, re-use and appropriation.
Conclusion

This paper set out to bring a dual perspective on the aesthetics of waste by exposing how ideas about re-purpose, re-use and appropriation have unified and diversified in art and design. This has led to the cross-fertilisation of objects and ideas in artworks and designworks over the last hundred years or so. When measured against the guiding principles of sustainability, innovative aesthetics and subsequent appropriation does not easily fit with the discourse about un-sustainability or sustainability. Artists continue to pursue a re-purpose, re-use and appropriation agenda in their material outputs, as do designers. The ideas associated with early modernism remain a source of inspiration in contemporary art and design practice, often re-purposed to serve socio-cultural-economic needs. But these are overlooked in waste discourse about sustainable integrated waste management systems, assumed to reside in socio-cultural perspectives. The convergence of art and design provides rich opportunities to rethink approaches to environmental questions, as both share a goal of bringing social and aesthetic concerns together with environmental and economic considerations.

References


