Unmaking waste in our suburbs and days

Session 21

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Grave to Cradle Design: Creative Practices of revalorization in suburban opportunity shops

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Design Ethnography

Recent approaches to sustainability from the perspective of Design are still based on the production and consumption of ‘brand new’ things (McDonough and Braungart 2002). Although these approaches have made significant contributions, it is necessary to explore other approaches based on reuse. This paper develops the concept of ‘grave to cradle’ presenting a case study of an opportunity shops in Melbourne. Grave to cradle is proposed as a design approach aimed at intervening ways to reduce waste through the re-valuation of things at liminal stages in their lifecycles (Reno 2014). Grave to cradle is a response to recent approaches to Sustainable Design that are based on the production of ‘brand new’ designs and lifestyles revolving around consumption of new products. The grave to cradle approach is developed through a study of a Vinnies (St. Vincent de Paul Society) store located in a Melbourne suburb. This case study has been developed through ethnographic fieldwork of the everyday routines of these places, which has involved the participation in collaborative activities of sorting, pricing, rotating, exhibiting, selling, and discarding. The paper will propose to consider creative collaborative practices of re-valorisation that have taken place as part of this fieldwork between designer-researcher and non-designers (volunteers, store managers, donors, customers) (Hallam and Ingold 2007) as ways by which design can harness reuse as alternatives to ‘brand new’ consumerism (Walker 2011).

Keywords: Grave to cradle, second-hand, revalorization, design for reuse
Introduction

Proposals for ‘closing the loop’, ‘cradle to cradle’ design (McDonough and Braungart 2002) upcycle design (McDonough and Braungart 2013), and life cycle analysis (Fiksel 2009) have been introduced as approaches to sustainability based on ‘brand new’ products. These are often proposed for professionally trained designers using traditional design methods and are developed at design studios. Although these approaches to ‘brand new’ ‘sustainable design’ represent great innovation, they are still based on industrial modes of production, and have strong links to values and cycles of unlimited commercial growth and fashion obsolescence.

This paper presents advances of a practice-based research based on a design ethnography methodology (Pink 2014, Akama and Prendiville 2013) at a second-hand shop in Melbourne. This project is part of my doctoral research at RMIT University and uses the concept of ‘grave to cradle’ to consider the processes of revalorisation that occur in second-hand shops as approaches to sustainability emerging from the everyday life. The projects is in its second year and has counted with the participation of store managers, day coordinators and volunteers experts in their own fields. Based on preliminary results of these process, this paper will present some insights of how the second-hand retail area may work as a channel for designers to learn and practice ways to revaluing things in liminal stages of their lifecycle. Not only by briefly slowing the fast rhythms and amounts of waste making, but giving more visibility to alternatives to ‘brand new’ consumption. This case has allowed for the reflection of material and technical possibilities for reuse, as well as given insight of the benefits and dynamics of local collaborative work.

As such grave to cradle appears in many contexts and can be related to various concepts in the literature, involving practices of bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1966, 17), vernacular design (Walker 2006), product lifetime optimisation (Manzini and Vezzoli 2008), creative reuse (Johnson 2009) or ‘trashion’ (Emgin 2012). A common element of all these concepts and implied in the concept of grave to cradle is to make/do using what is already available as resources. As a process grave to cradle can be associated too with Do It Yourself (DIY) practices (Shove et al. 2007), with thrifty practices (Podkalicka and Potts 2013) and with the popularisation of second-hand markets (Parsons 2002, Crewe and Gregson 2003, Palmer and Hazel 2005), where goods have continual cycles of being renovated as commodities (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986). Representing a phenomenon of ‘unplanned durability’ that extends uses and cycles of things by exploring ‘hidden meanings and little-known forms of value’ not conceived by the initial designers, but that emerge at second-hand cycles (Boradkar 2012, 224-225).

As a design approach, ‘grave to cradle’ is a creative collaborative multidisciplinary process that can happen at many scales. From domestic everyday reuse and garage sales. To suburban cases, including scavenging through hard rubbish, organized waste transfer shops, second-hand/charity shops, repair and recycle initiatives. To offline and online secondhand markets such as eBay or Sunday flea markets. Including also cases of Freecycle and sopping exchanges. Grave to cradle becomes a useful framework to locate planned and improvisory creative practices, processes and platforms where people meet for the revalue of things coming from ‘cradle to grave’ processes. A previous step from ‘cradle to cradle’, and a parallel framework for co-design approaches to experiment alternatives for the positive transformation of value of objects entering into liminal phases.

For another way of interpreting grave to cradle see the industrial ecology perspective proposed by Valero and Valero (2013).
Practices of reuse\(^2\) have been recognized as the main entry point for analysis of value creation within the waste hierarchy (Gregson et al. 2013). Complementary Daniel Miller has proposed the context of second-hand exchange as a site for the creation of value that is not only linked to the market but which becomes a reflection of culture as well, where meanings of value extend to non-economic ones. In his analysis he points to the social practices of these second-hand places as sites where ‘we can still see something of the raw creativity of social actors in inventing the conditions for the ‘birth of value’’ (Miller 2000, 82).

This paper examines the ways in which the ‘grave to cradle’ approach appears in a ‘Vinnies’ store in Melbourne. Vinnies is the commercial branch of St Vincent de Paul Society, a catholic charity that works in 140 countries. In Australia, there are 627 Vinnies shops, of which 104 are located across Victoria. Vinnies raise funds from the sale of donated goods including clothing, furniture, books, bric-a-brac, toys and nearly anything coming as donation from the local area. The shops are operated by paid store managers who work with the support of volunteers. Among the volunteers there are school teenagers, who work there as part of their community service programs, unemployed people of various ages, and pensioned people with different professional backgrounds.

In these shops, practices of revalorisation occur through everyday routines that include: receiving and sorting donations, pricing and tagging, packaging and exhibiting, and selling. These routines evolve in spontaneous ways when volunteers adjust organically to processing the everyday donations. And although there are systematic procedures, these are open for improvisation (Barber 2007). These routines are key in the processes of revaluing and devaluing things. In the context of my research, routines of sorting, pricing and exhibiting are key moments in the process of ‘grave to cradle’ and are seen as entrancec for developing design tactics for reuse.

In the case presented here, benefit is considered in terms of value created. And value is understood in an open sense: from productive volunteer time, to the increase of sales, waste reduction, material creative transformation, to the moments of social sharing. Parallel, sustainability is in a corresponding manner (Ingold and Gatt 2013), understood as a fourth bottom line approach (Inayatullah, Walker 2013, 2011, 2014) and as the result of interrelated work in the spheres of the social, political, economic, environmental, technological and spiritual (Yoko et al, 2014).

Discussion

This section presents an example of grave to cradle through an intervention into the routines of sorting, pricing and exhibiting toys. In Vinnies, toys are received in large quantities, which results in considerable amount of them going to landfill. When criteria of hygiene, condition and safety are not met then toys are considered unsaleable. To minimise the amount of unsaleable toys received, and make the most value of the ones accepted the charity has to implement a series of tactics. These not only facilitate the work of volunteers, bring awareness to donors about the optimal conditions of future donations, but also reduces the waste and with that the costs the charity has to spend in rubbish removal. These strategies for revalorizing toys involve processes of sorting, pricing and exhibiting.

Sorting

\(^2\) ‘Reuse suggests we substitute new things with those that have already been used by someone else or for something else, again obviating the need to buy new.’ (Lane, Horne, and Bicknell 2009, 152)
To tackle the challenges mentioned above, the first moment of intervention is at the receiving and sorting area. This is where donors arrive with their donations. After donations are accepted, the volunteer starts the sorting process. At this moment, criteria for keeping donations and for identifying value consists of looking for clean condition, complete pieces, functionality and safety regulations (e.g. children prams, electronic devices, etc). However, since this initial stage is done by the same person and involves many types of donations, it is a fast process with little time for detailed inspection.

At this initial stage of sorting, it is also when toys have an initial classification by size, material, and gender. Bigger toys are accommodated in boxes (reused from other donations), small toys are divided in containers for ‘boys’ and ‘girls’, and for ‘small soft toys’ (see figure 1). These are often bagged if part of a set, to avoid losing pieces and correspondingly, value. This stage of classification defines the next route for the toys, big toys in boxes are moved to the specialized pricing area, small toys are kept in the driveway until the containers are full (approximately three weeks) and deteriorated toys (partially incomplete, broken or dirty) are given a chance for bargain prices at the entrance street path.

**Figure 1: Pre-sorting of small toys**

This is also the moment when ‘treasures’ are identified. This process is difficult because it requires specialized knowledge in relation to their rarity, shape, material, made in labels and age. Then, if the ‘treasure’ is an old piece, it may be broken, dirty or incomplete. And as these are the first filtering criteria, then they have to be considered as very special by the person sorting them not to dispose them. The ‘treasures’ kept are then taken to the manager for further investigation in the process of revalorization.

The sorting process at this shop, includes the stages of initial inspection, classification, and distribution to specialised areas and people from the team. These are some key tactics to deal with the difficulties of rotating the great amounts of donations received. Sorting is the first moment in this case of grave to cradle, where criteria of order, cleanliness and functionality become useful insights for designers to find ways of collaborating in facilitating this complex and ambiguous initial process stage. This moment not only classifies between saleable donations from unseleable (to become
waste), but as a result exemplifies cases of ‘symbolic rejection’, ‘social relativities’ and ‘regimes of value’ (Reno 2014, 5).

**Pricing**

Since toys are considered in many cases disposable, assigning a price for a second-hand item that makes them attractive is a subjective decision. Not only it has to keep a balance in relation to their original economic value (considering already a devalue by being in a second-hand context, even if ‘brand new’), but it also has to consider the complexity of valuing volunteers work and time involved in the process of revalorization. Pricing is a stage in the process that is based on personal knowledge and judgment, experience and skills of the volunteer in charge. To gain a better understanding of the kind of lay knowledge that enabled this process in the area of toys, I worked in a design intervention with two volunteers experts in the area. With the use of sticky notes, we registered some of the key criteria for identifying qualities and value in the toys (see figure 2), and with photography we registered the process of selecting, classifying and packaging. Donated toys worked as probes and triggered our conversations and actions (Madden et al. 2014, Akama and Ivanka 2010). These notes collected were organized in the form of a ‘toy guide for sorting, pricing and displaying’ and in a ‘toys price schedule’. This isolated moment of working together and the method of taking notes facilitated our reflection in action (Schön 1983). Furthermore, the resulting documents made visible volunteers’ specialized skills and tacit knowledge, and became useful tools for sharing with new volunteers.

![Figure 2: Method for registering](image_url)

During this activity, small toys were classified and packaged in plastic bags for their sale. On the one hand, this bagging strategy facilitates not only the sale of toys that would be difficult to sell individually (e.g. advertising ones), it also enables the rotation of more toys to keep up with the rapid rhythm of donations arrival. In addition, to helping keep the display area organised and safe. On the other hand, from a design perspective, this bagging process highlights cultural narratives such as gender, brands,
and popular/unpopular characters. While evidencing the usefulness of categories such as size, shape, material, colour, and theme, when defining the contents and prices of the packages. Key characteristics in the revalorization process.

During this process of sorting, organising and classifying toys to be bagged and priced, it is common to find more ‘treasures’. These toys with additional value can be generally of two types: ‘new’ with original package and price, or toys that can be considered ‘vintage’ or ‘antique’. The subsequent process of pricing is different. Those new toys are priced according to a charity’s rule of assigning the third of the original price. The pricing of the ‘vintage’ toys requires a specialised search, usually in second-hand online markets such as eBay. For this latter products, the labels used for pricing are different and include additional information of their value. Words such as ‘vintage’, ‘retro’, ‘old fashioned’ are used and details of the year, brand and material are included to create a short story that informs the customer about the piece. The toy then, changes its route of being displayed as a toy, and is transformed into a ‘collectable’ object. During this process the functional and cultural meanings and values of the object are transformed.

The pricing process makes visible lay knowledge of volunteers for revalue and reuse, as well as their creative skills for packaging and labelling (see figure 3). This is also the moment that sets the commercial value for second-hand goods, one that is often open for negotiation (Gregson and Crewe 1997) between manager and customers.

Figure 3: Bagging and labelling design

The pricing process suggests that the relationship between waste and value is ever changing according to cultural and economic transactions that define possibilities to transform ‘negative’ value into various alternatives to re-value (Strasser 1999, Hawkins and Muecke 2003, O’Brien 2008, Thompson 1979, Hawkins 2006). The definition of the
price of donations represents then in this case, a key moment of value transformation from liminal objects into revalorised products.

Displaying

Although the shop has shelves and objects for display provided by the charity and standard to all the Vinnies shops, often donations are kept for shop use and display. The shop exhibition is organised by typology of products, by colors and themes. In the case of toys there is a main section for their display, but as mentioned before, ‘treasures’ and deteriorated toys are exceptions presented for sale in other sections. The former ones moving to bric-a-brac sections and the latter to the street path for bargain prices. Display at this second-hand place, where there is not much certainty of the products to be received, requires from volunteers to constantly adapt and creatively adjust the space according to the changing stock.

The display at the toy section consists of three shelves (see figure 4). The bottom one is where the small toys previously bagged are placed within baskets to keep them contained. The middle shelf is for medium size toys and the top shelf for bigger toys. Toys are not only organised by size, but volunteers working in this area also recommend to organise them by similarity (e.g. board games together, Barbie and similar dolls together), as a strategy for visual merchandising and order. Despite this strategies, the toys section becomes messy rapidly. This messiness, however, at some level contributes to an important part of the feel of these second-hand places, and triggers a ‘hunting’ attitude that some customers enjoy as part of their secondhand shopping experience.

![Figure 4: Shop display area](image)

Sometimes, toys are organised in special displays. Either because there are much donations of the type (which happens regularly with board games (see figure 5)), but it can also be a collection for a themed display (see figure 6). Both strategies require team work from identifying those selected items to the creative collaboration in their exhibition. These working routines, moments of transition and movements of people and things, become sites to look for creative collaborative imagination and improvisational practices (Pink and Leder Mackley 2014).
These processes of assigning donations value through its pricing and appropriate display become evidence of how the ‘individuation of rubbish thus involves determining what it might yet be… most evident, in acts of reuse which demonstrate forms of ‘know how’’ (Reno 2009, 34). That results in the transforming of materials with the crafting production skills available (Rossi 2013). This processes remind us how Miller’s proposal of ‘raw creativity’ enters into practice when reusing; making evident tacit knowledge and everyday design interventions, which have been further pointed to ‘require even more creativity than original production’ (Strasser 1999, 10). Practices of extending the use of liminal objects in second-hand charity shops become a creative entry point that represents grassroots processes of value transformation.

Conclusion

Overall, the challenges realted to revaluing waste in the second-hand context are faced with a blend of tacit knowledge and specialized skill from volunteers and workers, a process in which donors and customers also intervene in the redefinition of value with their stories and experiences about the things and with a common want for a bargain. In the particular case presented in this paper, the process of grave to cradle is a combination of systematic activities with creative practices, which not only involve the careful attention to safety regulations, but it is a process open for creative collaborative
improvisation. From the speculative conversations about the possible value of donations, to the practice of designing the appropriate way of displaying to reintroduce the once liminal objects into another cycle. This paper presented this case of a second-hand charity shop as an example of how these places represent an area of opportunity where designers can harness everyday design strategies for designing for reuse in collaboration with a local multidisciplinary community of experts who do it already in various empirical and sophisticated ways. This research considers these places have the potential to enable the development and testing of sustainable ideas. Ideas for which not only design can contribute with its creative and technical skill, but also learn and enjoy from working together with people from various ages, backgrounds and expertise. A place where the revalorization of material things happens, but where an additional social, environmental and spiritual awareness is possible.

References


Melisa Duque is a PhD Candidate in the School of Media and Communication of RMIT. Her research proposes the notion of 'grave to cradle' as a way of engaging in co-design processes based on the revalorization of 'liminal' objects. As part of her research she is currently conducting fieldwork in opportunity/charity shops in Melbourne using a Design Ethnography approach.
Alternative agreements through making: What is wasted now?

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Fashion Design, Ontological Design and Practice-based Research

When Italo Calvino takes out his rubbish, his family’s leftovers are transferred, firstly to the small kitchen poubelle, then onwards to the large poubelle agréée outside. It is an agreement entered into, through the practice of ‘correct’ disposal, that not only maintains their civic role, but designs the life of Calvino and his family in particular ways. As Calvino notes: “the gesture of throwing away is the first and indispensable condition of being, since one is what one does not throw away” (Calvino 2009, 72). Calvino’s account of how his own, and associated lifeworlds, are shaped by waste disposal aligns with Tony Fry’s conviction that “design designs” (Fry 2009, 34) — that “we live amid, create and are created by, the designing of the designed as we design” (Fry 2012, 161).

Waste management systems, such that Calvino relates, are designed into our lives — and design us — as easy, customary practices, however many other alternatives exist. One example is the practice of the late Marjorie Bligh, a ‘housewife superstar’, who pursued a lifelong, personal aim to convert all of her ‘waste’ through craft, feeling the “need to do something — anything — with all that waste” (Wood 2011, 171). This alternative to conventional waste management has been explored through a series of practice-based research projects. Situated in an everyday, domestic environment, the using of the materials that make waste, and the rearranging of this waste through craft-based making merge. An emergent practice evolves that both emanates from and enriches the researcher’s fashion design-based skills.

What would be wasted is instead used through making, but more significant is the different kinds of agreements that the researcher is committed to through these practices of useful making. As the practitioner sits amidst the remade, but also the piled remnants — the useful materials that redefined waste has become, they feel the palpable calling to use and make ‘with me’, alongside the dreaded burden of making not done. The valued hoard grows, prompting reflection on Marjorie Bligh’s home-based museum of thriftily crafted objects — a collection of use and usefulness that itself is never used. What might the ultimate usefulness of all this using through making be?

Keywords: Waste; Upcycling; Design through making; Contemporary craft; Ontological design
Introduction

As Calvino observes in his short story *La Poubelle Agréée* (Calvino 2009), every day we enter into a multitude of agreements through our waste disposal practices. Many of these agreements are modern phenomena that developed alongside the everyday ‘consumable’ products that we relentlessly use and throw away, a practice that has displaced the careful and thrifty management of waste that was common in the past.

Through practice-based research, alternatives to the easy, heedless discarding of potentially useful materials have been explored. Crocheted ‘lettuces’ are fashioned from plastic and foil-impregnated bags, many of which are the leftovers from the intermittent chips binges of the researcher; a human scale ‘nest’ is woven to fence an unsightly sewer manhole, using the branches from an overgrown bush nearby that might otherwise have become mulch. Acts that ‘save’ the off-casts through such craft-based making, seem to make good use of the waste, but is use for the sake of use alone a good enough reason to make? The agreement to personally manage one’s own waste is a challenging proposition, but as an experimental enquiry, offers insights regarding the alternative relationships that one might develop with the stuff that they normally throw away.

Agreements by design

When Italo Calvino takes out his rubbish, it is a practice aided by the subjects of his short story — the small, family *poubelle*, and the particular civic model of the large, communal version outside, the *poubelle agréée* — a pleasing dustbin (Calvino 2009). Calvino notes the physical design of these objects, the proponents of disposal, specifically in connection with his performed rituals of waste removal — actions that pragmatically shift the family’s waste into its rightful holding locations, but more significantly, act to maintain the family’s identity. The detritus that was once part of them is separated and thrown away, aiding the family with their vital dispossession since it is supposed that “the gesture of throwing away is the first and indispensable condition of being, since one is what one does not throw away” (ibid., 72).

Brushing away the French with the English verb, Calvino then comes to ponder — what makes the *poubelle* agree? There is the agreement that ‘we’, the family, are no longer ‘that’ — the refuse that is disposed of. The agreement is also with the city, evidenced by the service of unburdening provided for those who pay taxes, on condition of the correct positioning of the *poubelle agréée* at the designated time and place. Its agreeable collection by the presumably less privileged dustbin man, gives access to the excess from a preeminent sphere of living only accessible as remains. But the most fundamental agreement here could be seen as the accord with an “economic process that multiplies new products fresh out of the factory and likewise their worn-out remains to be thrown away” (ibid., 77), leaving Calvino and the dustbin man “the sole task of lifting up this container to fill and to empty” (ibid.). Unlike the “cyclical completion peculiar to the agricultural process, in which — so they say — nothing was lost: what was buried in the earth sprouted up again” (ibid.), this is a system that agrees to something being lost.

The implications of ubiquitous systems of waste disposal, such as that detailed by Calvino, evidence what design philosopher Anne-Marie Willis describes as the inherent ontological nature of all design1 — that certain conditions are allowed or even forced to

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1 Willis describes ontology as “belonging to the understanding of being” and ontological as referring to “the condition or behaviour of what is” (Willis 2006, under ‘Ontology, the Ontic and the Ontological’).
unfold through what design is “directing-itself-towards” (Willis 2006, under ‘From Worlding and Thinging to Ontological Designing’) This perspective is affiliated with Tony Fry’s assertion that design designs (Fry 2009, 34, 190) — essentially that design outputs are not endpoints. Design is directional, reliant on past/present prefiguration and future projection, and so does not “create a finalized object or product. Rather all that design brings into being remains in process within a particular kind of ecology of things, organic or inorganic” (ibid., 30) All design contains “horizons of possibility” (Willis 2006, under ‘From Worlding and Thinging to Ontological Designing’) which fold into surrounding lifeworlds 2; “we literally live in a designed and designing world of designed object-things” (Fry 2012, 158) and we ourselves are designed by these designed worlds, we are ontologically changed, our very being is changed. Calvino himself, in connection with the design of the poubelles and the designed system within which they operate, is forced into a particular way of being. He is designed as a disposer, and through his intrinsic acts of disposal agrees to particular kinds of relationships with others — the people, other living species, objects and materials, within his lifeworld.

Alternative agreements

Integral to the poubelle network of Calvino’s time, and likewise the ubiquitous waste management systems of today, is a rapid and inefficient throughput of materials. In the past however, conditions of material scarcity once engendered profound materiality, as shown throughout Strasser’s history of waste management (Strasser 2000). Within both professional and domestic domains (and often the spaces between), materials were organised and utilised as resources through practices of product stewardship, encompassing sorting, repair and adaptation. Taking personal responsibility for our own waste through this kind of careful interaction with the materials that assist with everyday life is no longer an immediately obvious course of action. While there are many contemporary examples of upcycling and reuse of materials within art, design and creative practices, the avoidance of waste and wastefulness in everyday scenarios isn’t necessarily their intention. Art works such as Fiona Hall’s Medicine bundle for the unborn child, a baby layette knitted from coca-cola cans (Ewington et al. 2005, 128), use coded meanings within post-consumer waste to give potent and political expression to the work through the re-appropriation of these materials. Design works that emerge from the creative reuse of waste, such as Tejo Remy’s Rag Chair, constructed from layered, discarded clothing (Ramakers 1998, 36), seek to find new potential in the materials via context shifts and unexpected and provocative design, but may have nothing to do with rescuing waste in the long term at all. Some artistic reuses of waste, such as Aurora Robson’s sculptural forms fashioned from discarded plastics found in marine and man-made environments (Robson 2014, biography) actively seek to draw attention to wastefulness and the problem of environmental waste through creative practice, however such examples are the exception to the norm and certainly do not significantly stem the dominant paradigm of disposal. Our waste management systems are so convenient and integral to everyday life that ridding ourselves of many potentially useful materials is normalised, habitual, mindlessly executed, and unquestioned. Furthermore, many products are designed to be short-lived and

2 Willis reaches her understanding of this “worlding” through the reading of a suite of Heidegger’s late essays; in brief summary that being, in relation to humans and things, is present in accord with the “covert throng of a surrounding into which they are linked”. We are pervaded and our worlds created by what comes before to allow us to conceive of our dwelling or the potentiality to pour from a jug, the physical form of which is shaped around this very action of gathering and outpouring in itself (Willis 2006, under ‘From Worlding to Thinging’).
‘disposable’, which alongside the systems for disposal, design us into a collective agreement — this is waste.

One particular practice of upcycling that did aspire towards an alternative system of waste management, at least for one person, was the everyday craft practice of the late Marjorie Bligh. She was a ‘housewife superstar’ who worked tirelessly towards a lifelong pursuit to convert all of her ‘waste’ through creative making projects, feeling the “need to do something — anything — with all that waste” (Wood 2011, 171). She created a constant stream of ‘useful’ objects such as crocheted hats fashioned from plastic bread-bags cut into strips to act as yarn, ice-cream containers covered with crochet skins also created from plastic-bag yarn, and table-cloths crocheted from worn-out hosiery. Her quest to manage her waste through making could be likened to a closed-loop ecology — the stuff that enters does not leave, it stays and recirculates, assisted by craft-based making, to be forever used and useful within Bligh’s own closed loop. The agreement that Bligh makes, through her prolific and persistent making, is a pledge to her useful materials. Through her practice she is telling them that she will never let them go.

Engaging with alternatives

Inspired by and following in the footsteps of Marjorie Bligh, I enacted an array of practice-based research experiments to explore how making might act as a system of waste management — how can I withhold my waste from the waste stream through making while making use in ways that are congruent with my own everyday, domestic environment? Similar to Bligh, I utilise craft-based making techniques, drawing on my expertise in fashion and textiles to probe the potential within materials that were once destined for the rubbish tip. This ‘saved’ stuff is primarily made up of leftovers from my consumptive activities but is also inclusive of other superfluous material arising from my activities, or that of other living forms, within my local surrounds.

The examples presented here are snapshots that evidence the making and using practices that have emerged through the doing of this work. An alternative set of agreements have been entered into, an agreement that begins with the hesitation to easily and thoughtlessly throw something into the bin. Other agreements materialise when the responsibility for what happens next is felt beyond this initial moment when the waste is saved. As my making with the waste progresses, the depth of my own personal agreement, the ongoing commitment to my waste becomes clear, also affording insight into the ramifications of Bligh’s agreements with her own ‘used up’ waste.

Bags and lettuces

Much of Bligh’s upcycling involved cutting diverse kinds of materials into strips to act as yarn, thus converting them into a consistent form that could be easily used for making when employing techniques of knitting and crochet. I was inspired by Bligh many years previously to make a useful object from waste — a shopping bag crocheted from a multitude of plastic bags, but now I wondered what other possibilities might unfold through employing this simple technique in other ways.

Over a series of crochet experiments I tested the limits of material and technique by cutting the strands of ‘yarn’ as finely as possible and trialling making with a variety of bags comprising different kinds of materials. To maintain this focus on the interplay between material qualities and my variations in making technique, I relinquished the making of useful objects and settled on the repeated making of a form inspired by the
garden — the lettuce. Using the technique of hyperbolic crochet, where each row of crochet stitches increases exponentially, I generated ever-expanding forms that curl and contort as they grow. This making of the same repeated object reveals the differences between and unique qualities of the ordinarily disposed of bags, sometimes revealing surprisingly beautiful material qualities that I never would have known without making with them in this way. Some bags possess the ability to become porcelain- or fabric-like, while other types of unlikely bags — the strange amalgams of foil and plastic that comprise the repercussions from my occasional, indulgent chip binges — yield an even more surprising, sparkly form.

Figure 1: An ordinary white plastic shopping bag becomes porcelain-like

Figure 2: A wispy plastic bag is cut into fine yarn, crocheted with my smallest hook, and becomes fabric-like
Given the potential that I uncover within these customarily trashed chip packets, I undertake a quest to convert every single one that I generate through my sheepish consumption into a lettuce form. For each lettuce I begin by crocheting over a plastic ring as a central core made from hard plastic take-away food containers cut into strips — a development in the form that allows a habitable space, perhaps for a finger or a crocheted plastic chain that supports the wearing of the lettuce around the neck. Thus, beyond the experimental phase of lettuce making, I aim to create objects with a possible use-function that direct themselves towards a usable purpose.

As I progress, the material that I ‘save’ after consuming the packets’ contents far outweighs the number of lettuces that I manage to complete. Ideally, the agreement I should make is to refrain from chip eating until my stockpile of packets is fully depleted. I do attempt this for some time until the pressures of completing my PhD become too much and I succumb to the satisfying crunch. The other concern that plays on my mind is the actual usefulness of the chip packet lettuces, despite embedding these resulting objects with a rudimentary use-value. How many sparkly lettuces do I (or anyone else) need? I am reminded of “the sheer volume of handmade goods on show” (Wood 2011, 166) that Wood tells of, residing in Marjorie Bligh’s ‘museum’ that she constructed upstairs at her home. It comprises all the objects that Bligh created in her endeavour to never let anything go to waste, but that despite all their own usefulness in using up the waste, now lay there unused.

Should we ever make anything that we do not effectively use? Perhaps we should all agree — no, we should not!

Manholes and man-sized nests

A recent making project, currently unfolding within another sphere of my life, offers a different perspective on the alternative agreements that might unfold through the choice to make rather than dispose. Along the back fence line of our suburban property we have an easement, and unbeknown to me until our state water company needed to access the sewer line, this includes a large, one-meter wide, concrete manhole. Since
the time when I was made aware of its existence, I have intended to furnish the manhole with some kind of addition to prevent the build up of soil and mulch — which had reached a depth of at least twenty centimetres or so the few times I cleared it away. Inspired by the hand-woven, basket-like fences I have seen edging garden beds, I determined that this would be an ideal solution to create a barrier to hold the buildup back. Around the edges of the concrete, I hammered in eight hardwood stakes leftover from another project, then set about weaving in and out around the stakes. Conveniently, there happened to be an extremely rampant, old buddleia bush nearby that was desperately in need of cutting back. Its long, cane-like branches were perfect material for the task and the woven barrier began to take shape.

As I progressed, the wall became progressively more nest-like — an unexpected consequence of following the circular perimeter of the manhole and of my inexperience in basket weaving, the untidy, rustic weave evidencing my learning how through the process of making.

![Image of the manhole barrier in progress, taking on the form of a nest](image)

*Figure 4: The manhole barrier in progress, taking on the form of a nest*

When nearing completion, the edge of 'the nest' seemed almost perch-able, so I fashioned a simple seat from scrap timber, refining the outcome further to become a quiet and delightful spot for seated contemplation in the corner of the garden — a man-sized nest for one.

Without my making, the potential of the unsightly sewer cover and the branches from the buddleia would never have been discovered, and could have been seen as being wasted, but significantly, unlike the chip packets, at least would have continued on within my locale, albeit in a less notable form. Other possible waste could also have occurred if other more materially intensive approaches I previously considered for keeping the cover uncovered had gone ahead — such as building a short brick wall or buying in other materials to act as a barrier. As it is, the solution arises naturally from the materials and circumstances at hand. It is an approach akin to that within Stuart Walker's 'simple 'tallying device'' comprised of stones gathered from a stream bed.

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3 There are other issues around waste going on beneath the sewer cover, but that’s another story outside of the scope of this paper!
nearby to his rural home, placed onto a small cloth made by a local weaver from the fleece of her own sheep (Walker 2011, 63-4; depicted in photo essay, 72-82). This is “an artefact of place, which emerges from a gentle rearrangement of the elements within the local environment” and is easily absorbed back at the end of useful life (ibid., 65).

Prior to this ‘nest’ making I would always chop up my prunings and drop them down as mulch as I went, which is not a waste of the material since it returns back to the earth and enriches the soil. However, the potential of the material, as more than just mulch, has now been revealed to me, and every time I prune a long branch from anywhere in the garden I am compelled to take it to the nest and use it to fill gaps in the weave or help to finish off its top edge. It takes me longer to prune now, but I feel unable to refuse. Through the potential of making I have entered into an agreement with my pruned branches that I will always offer them this alternative life.

Concluding discussion

As demonstrated across these making experiments, the choice to make, rather than letting materials leave via conventional pathways for their management, is an agreement entered into like a contract — I now take on a responsibility for the tangential life that these materials will now lead. The extent of these agreements however is not upfront, or even knowingly entered into, as often I am uncertain as to what will unfold following on from the commitments that I make. As the making progresses I am compelled to spend more and more time with the materials. As I come to know them better through this making, a deeper agreement with the material develops. Through this system of management through making I am ‘designed’ into being more careful with the potential life that might be secreted away within any encountered material. I hesitate to put anything in the bin now, but still there is a limit to the amount of time I am able to spend on making. My time, and the potential ‘waste’ materials that I choose to allow in, are what I must carefully manage.

The demands that these agreements with ‘saved’ materials place on my time, depends largely upon the nature of the materials themselves. Those emanating from what Cradle to Cradle pioneers McDonough and Braungart refer to as the “technosphere” — “technical nutrients” such as “metals, plastics, and other materials not continuously created by the biosphere” (McDonough and Braungart 2013, 14) — demand much more assistance to continue having any kind of valuable life. More care is required when they are brought into my locale — like the chip packets that will continue on as a non-perishable pile — since they will not perceptibly change or become anything useful without my intervention. The remade forms also demand more care — otherwise I face the prospect of a ‘museum’ of unused, useful, objects, like that within Marjorie Bligh’s made accumulation.

The demands imposed by natural materials from the “biosphere” (ibid.), such as my buddleia prunings, are much gentler since they don’t need me to continue living; with or without my assistance through making they are able to make their own way in one way or another. Many however treat these materials as waste, as evidenced by the proliferation of green-waste bins in the suburbs. In my neighbourhood these are wheelee bins with a green lid. Last year our local council instigated a mass delivery of free waste bins — previously ratepayers were charged an additional fee for the bin if they wanted to use the service.
could have easily assimilated back into the local environment from which they came, become the responsibility of someone else. As Calvino observed (2009, 77), through engaging with such a system that easily classifies ‘waste’ within the confines of the shiny plastic bin, we agree to something being lost — stuff that has the potential to be enriching within a living ecology of materials, particularly those that emanate from the “biosphere” (McDonough and Braungart 2013, 14) — and part of this loss is our own chance to connect with and understand these materials on deeper levels.

An alternative to this normalised and wasteful throughput of materials is possible if we take on more responsibility for waste management ourselves. However the refusal to allow one’s actions to be ‘designed’ by conventional waste management systems need not be extreme and demand so much time as Bligh’s and my own making efforts. While these particular approaches to making with one’s own waste offer ways of taking responsibility for the refuse resulting from practices of consumption, more significant is the centering of attention on the materials that are thoughtlessly let go. A space is opened for reflection: on the materials that we easily categorise as waste and thus easily discard; and on the practices and systems that make this discarding seem effortless, as effortless as the materials themselves seem when they come to us so easily as wrappings for products such as potato chips. This reflective space encourages an interrogation of the practices that bring waste materials into and out of our lives. It might begin simply by questioning what one is in agreement with, when wheeling the bin to the curb on rubbish collection day.

References


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‘Wombling Along’: Unmaking waste in a pedestrian practice

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Trig zered by my coining the phrase “unmaking waste” to evoke the ethos of an eponymous conference, in this paper I reflect on an art and design practice that I call “magpie making”, and have embodied and explored for the past two decades. I explain the childhood origins of my philosophy and practice by describing my enjoyment of English author Elisabeth Beresford’s books about those industrious furry advocates of reuse, the Wombles, whose exploits were also depicted in the BBC television series (The Wombles, 1973-75) that I, like many other children of the 1970s, watched. The Wombles’ aim to “make good use of the things that we find, things that the everyday folks leave behind” was also evoked through their songs, which I heard repeatedly as a girl, as I played the much-loved records that were a spin-off of the tv series. I trace how my childhood exposure to the values that Beresford’s characters promote reinforced ideas about the value of “old things” that I absorbed by osmosis from my antique-collecting mother, herself an interior designer. As well as giving me a passion for historical relics that verges on the antiquarian, these have combined to inspire my own art and design practice, and to explore what environmentally-responsive and responsible ethics might mean and be in this context.

In describing some examples of my “magpie making”, I note the sources that have enriched it: particularly French film-maker Marguerite Duras’ documentary, The Gleaners and I (2000), and, most recently, the Discard Studies blog created by Robyn Nagle, an American anthropologist. I highlight the importance of my being pedestrian — in both senses of this phrase. First, my being a “walker” has occasioned many of the serendipitous “finds” that inspire my work; secondly, seeing my practice as quotidian means that it is an intimate part of enriching my ordinary life, and making it one that is worth living. I conclude by asking: does this personal pedestrian journey have meaning beyond the life of an individual? Could it point the way to how we might engage other children’s and adults’ values, or offer some ideas about innovative practices with which they, too, might experience the deep satisfaction of “unmaking waste” in their daily lives?

Keywords: Walking, ordinary, making, pedestrian