

Ffion Richardson

1505031

Research in Context ADAD5003

BA Hons Surface Pattern Design

Julia Lockheart

What is the role of the designer / maker in the 21st century and how might this role change in the next 10 years?

Word count: 2,435

What is the role of the designer / maker in the 21st century and how might this role change in the next 10 years?

Designers have pursued the role of 'change' for centuries on end and are continuing to do so today (Sassoon, 2008; Lawson, 1980; Potter, 1980). Not only do they lead the role of change but the role of understanding it by dealing with it in their own way. By creating this 'change' in society, designers inflict new values upon the world by expressing it within what happens in the *now*; realising deeply that "The present moment is all we have. Make the *now* the primary focus of your life." (Tolle, 1999). Eckhart Tolle mentions this in *The Power of Now* (1999) as he highlights the importance of living in the present moment, indicating that worrying about the future and the past is purposeless. Similarly, designers know how important it is to constantly live in the present moment in order to know how to move forward within their product. In addition to this, designers carry the role of creating culture by listening to people, experiencing life and meaning for society. However, their most crucial creation is creating their own futures through designing which is as significant as generating the product. Designers in the past have demonstrated that there will always be a relationship of influence between creator and creation. In other words, when designers create beauty, this beauty will affect the way people interact with the world hence how *they* decide to view the world. This confirms the great responsibility designers have on the behaviour that occurs in society.

A stimulating scene of design in the early twentieth century was the Bauhaus movement, founded in 1919 in the city of Weimar by German architect Walter Gropius (Droste, 1990). Many argue that the influence and core objective was a radical concept of combining aspects of craft and fine art which inspired designers throughout the century. The Bauhaus evolved using industrial materials such as chromed metals in a space that was domestic, a new environment for everyone which resulted in a minimal and clean aesthetic by subtracting all decoration. The designers uniquely focused on the function of the products to create the desired aesthetic and used the materials only for their structural properties. For decades people have included materials such as metal, wood and high-gloss paint finishes in their homes because it's considered stylish owing to the Bauhaus influence. This proves the role of the designer and the influence of the Bauhaus as being functional in order to create the best product for everyone which rapidly radiated across the world.

Nonetheless, a hundred years ago this was a fresh but peculiar style for a homely and welcoming environment. In the light of living within unfamiliar surroundings, people in society swiftly adapted to this new way

of living. Having been a movement that changed the world it is inevitable that small aspects of it will live on in years to come. Bauhaus founder Gropius was inspired by Russian Constructivism alongside the English Arts and Crafts movement. Similarly, this movement established an increasing understanding that society needed to take on new concerns in regard to the construction of the objects. Advocate William Morris (1834-96) who had already mentioned the importance of utility in the 19th century. Morris refers to this by stating in 'The Beauty of Life' (1882):

“If you want a golden rule that will fit everything, this is it: Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.” (Morris, 1882)

Evidently, the masters of Modernism had been experimenting with simplicity and functionality for more than thirty years before the Bauhaus was founded which clearly had the greatest influence on Gropius and the growth of Bauhaus as a creative and educational association (Droste, 1990). Bearing in mind how strong the influence it had on twentieth century design, society has well and truly developed from then; from using hard sustainable materials such as metal and wood to experience with other materials, shapes and fresh palettes colour. The Bauhaus aesthetic was once very functional in terms of architecture rather than the appeal of it which is the reason why other designers acquired knowledge from this, took their own twist to it then made it into something new, something beautiful.

The importance of designers and their input is representative of what goes on in the world, how change happens in society. Today, humans are finally beginning to understand their role and impact on the environment. Correspondingly urging design strategies to focus on providing healthy and sustainable surroundings for people to live in. This conveys a sense of hope as society starts to recognise the analogy between buildings, people and community. It's extremely important that designers choose materials and products that are sustainable and have the lowest environmental impact, for instance, organic materials such as wood; wool; stone; bamboo.

Waste is a recurring issue in the world and people are noticing that discarding products as soon as they go out of style is unjustifiable especially now the planet's precious resources are restricted. Fortunately, the zeitgeist within the world of design today identifies a growing interest in sustainable trends such as recycling and reusing - instead of throwing away outdated furniture while they are still useful. Designers have the ability to propose creative ways to give them a new life, with expectation that their clients will do the same. The designer's role is to consider the longevity of their product in a timeless space, subduing the need to change the whole design every few years. However, people grow and change and they wish their surrounding spaces to grow with them and reflect those changes.

Plastic has truly become a material we have all been too dependent on. It is now everywhere we look - polluting our planet step by step. Plastic, a word that originally connoted as something "pliable and easily shaped" (Freinkel, 2011) quickly changed the way humans live after the manufacture of the first synthetic plastic, Bakelite, created in 1907 (Meikle, 1995). It has only recently become a name for a category of materials called 'polymers' meaning 'of many parts' which consists of long chains of molecules. Bakelite could be shaped into almost anything making it a material of a thousand uses, providing endless possibilities. After the Second World War, the possibilities of plastic as a substance gave a number of designers a utopian sight of a future using this abundant material owing to its inexpensive, safe and sanitary qualities.

However, it was during the late 1960s that the awareness of pollution was raised as the sum of plastic waste was increasing in the oceans. It quickly moved from being an inexpensive and safe material to something cheap, flimsy and fake acting as a symbol of cheap conformity and superficiality. Characteristics of being unsustainable comes from the structured culture of modernity; the way humans hold reality in relation to holding themselves as beings, how we choose to solve things. In this case, some remain ignorant to the recurring environmental issues whilst others will do everything to fight against it.

"Continuity tended to be valued over change, and innovation was regarded with suspicion because it challenged approaches that had been tested and refined over centuries and which fitted with people and place. Meaning was found through observances of religion and ritual within the cycles and repetitions of time." (Walker and Giard, 2013, p.3)

Walker conveys a sense of continuity as he discusses how time allows for change, as if the challenges that had been “tested and refined” over centuries was just one big process and is continuing to be tested by designers. The aspects of being unsustainable are almost accidental due to the addictive patterns of modern life, humans simply do not know the consequence for their actions, for instance; buying a plastic water bottle and not recycling it. This small, effortless action may not seem crucial, but it is effacing seconds off the life of the planet. This urgent issue is finally being considered seriously by higher people and designers are working on reflecting this in their work.

The oceans are drowning in plastic causing huge amounts of damage to the creatures who live there too as one in three species of marine mammals die due to plastic pollution (Siegle, 2018). Recurrently entering the bloodstream of fish and other ocean creatures, plastic has already begun to enter the bodies of humans whilst many are still completely oblivious of this matter. As humans are held accountable for this emergency, fortunately things are beginning to change for the better; for a more sustainable future.

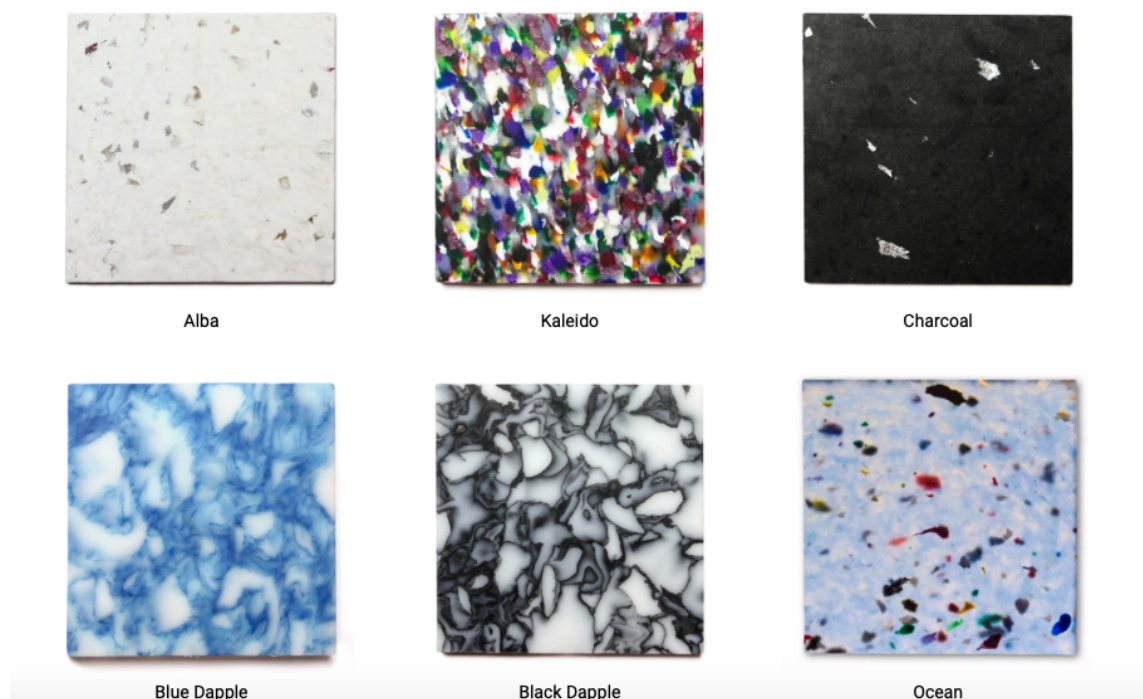


Figure 1) (Smile Plastics, 2018)

Figure 1 exemplifies a company who not only support this growing interest in sustainable trends but are also fighting against the pollution of plastic as the materials they use are all “lovingly hand-crafted” each with a different recycling story. Their materials have inspired designers around the world as they voice their mission to “change people’s perceptions around waste” through innovation. Many companies similar to Smile Plastics have found the beauty in scrap due to how reusable it is - whether it’s cutting it into smaller bits of scraps and putting it back together to create something new or combining it with other various materials. This aspect of generating brand new substance via remnants of material convinces us how feasible recycling really is by hoping to inspire more people about this sustainable way of designing.

The world is different today. People have developed weapons of such power that ignorance takes over everything, to the point that humans can no longer make excuses for the damage made in periodic hiccups of history (Ehrenfeld, 2008). Social media allows people to discuss problems like pollution and global warming which then leads to turning to the authorities to find a solution for us. However in reality, the most impact will be in numbers depending on how society work together in order to achieve change, creating something positive.

In the light of doing everything possible to combat the pollution made by plastic, it proves how having a system within a material allows a constant cycle for your product to be sustainable meaning that not all use of plastic is bad. If designers could encourage their users to return the product at the end of its life to rebuild it, then the impact and value will never be lost. This also means if plastic as a material is used properly, providing scraps are used for newer products there would be no such thing as discarded plastic.



Figure 2) (Adidas, 2017)

The second figure reveals a shoe designed by Adidas made entirely from plastic waste. Using creativity and imagination, the designer company have found ways to reduce environmental issues by creating products in collaboration with organisation Parley for the Oceans to create something more useful. Designer Alexander Taylor (1975) was the core of this design process, dreaming up big ideas and actually bringing them into reality. The plastic to create this clothing is collected by Parley and its global clean-up network which is then cleaned and processed into a thread.

By exploring new materials in order to replace plastic, Adidas are working towards a “plastic-free future” (Adidas, 2017) and have made a commitment to cut out all virgin polyester in their products by 2024. Taylor understands the problem as an industry that “has become complacent” urging the world to “redesign and challenge” (Taylor, 2018) by enforcing the fashion industry to create alternative, more responsible, material solutions.

Everyone feels a great sense of responsibility for this waste but everyone is able to make a difference by educating each other. Designers like Taylor are always looking to improve a product or a material by challenging the system to seek alternative, more intelligent methods of creating which almost defines design. The designer has the opportunity to be the instigator alongside the representative for change.

The future is now, it starts today. Whatever designers, people of the world decide now is what will come in the foreseeable future. The designer's role is to constantly inspect the connection between the user and the environment and how the relationship between them might change in the future. In addition to this they must be aware of any major shifts in patterns of society or mindsets. By leading a role in reducing the negative environmental impact of society it is expected of them to build a better, more sustainable future.



Figure 3) (IKEA, 2019)

Interior designers are able to work with sustainable materials responding in how ecologically people will interact within their surrounding spaces. IKEA desires a world without waste in which the people are able to make “more sustainable choices”. The word ‘renewable’ is frequently used in their advertising which encapsulates their frame of mind as a company working towards a more sustainable way of living; how products can be renewed after a certain period of time instead of being thrown away.

Today, more than 60% of their product range is based on renewable materials. Their sustainability strategy is titled ‘People and Planet Positive’ (IKEA, 2018), which consists of an IKEA home furnishing range that will be based on completely recycled materials by the year of 2030. Accordingly by the beginning of next year, items such as cutlery and straws will be exchanged with disposables that are made from 100% ‘renewable sources’.

Having researched and read about the impact of waste and plastic pollution, designers are able to educate themselves and urge others to do the same. By doing this, we can move forward by taking into account the threats of throwing discarded plastic; how designers can reduce this risk by presenting alternative ways of using waste, bringing things back to life. Reverberating Adidas' fantastic work with Parley, it exhibits and is a perfect example of the endless possibilities designers can do with recycled materials. Designers will continue to inspire people of the world, adapting to any change that is thrown at them. The role of the designer will only change as society does, similarly to the ebb and flow of life; any adjustments in life will turn out well as long as the right decisions are made. In view of today's social and environmental issues, it is a call for urgency how quickly we need to act in order to stop polluting the Earth before it's too late. Designers are working together to create a better world and will continue to do this for centuries to come. Together, we can encourage others to join the fight against plastic pollution and be the start of the end of it.

Bibliography

- Lawson, B. (1980) *How Designers Think*. The Architectural Press Ltd: London.
- Morris, W. (2003) *The Beauty of Life: William Morris the Art of Design*. Thames and Hudson.
- Droste, M. (1990) *Bauhaus*. B. Taschen.
- Freinkel, S. (2011) *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Meikle, J. (1995) *American Plastic*. Rutgers University Press.
- Siegle, L. (2018) *Turning the tide on plastic: How humanity (and you) can make our Globe clean again*. Trapeze.
- Adidas. (2018) *adidas x Parley Ocean Plastic*. Available at: <https://www.adidas.co.uk> (Accessed 7 December 2019)
- IKEA. (2018) *Sustainability at IKEA*. Available at: <https://www.ikea.com/gb/en/this-is-ikea/sustainable-everyday/> (Accessed 7 December 2019)
- Smile Plastics (2017) *Inspirational Hand-Crafted Materials*. Available at: <https://smile-plastics.com/about/> (Accessed 7 December 2019)
- Ehrenfeld, J. (2008) *Sustainability by Design*. Yale University Press.
- Taylor, A. (2017) *ALEXANDER TAYLOR: THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER*. Available at: <https://www.parley.tv/updates/2017/11/29/alexander-taylor-the-role-of-the-designer>
- Giard, J. and Walker, S. (2013) *The Handbook of Design for Sustainability*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sassoon, R. (2008) *The Designer*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Potter, N. (1989) *What is a Designer*. Hyphen Press.
- Tolle, E. (1999) *The Power of Now*. New World Library.