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

Discuss your ideas with reference to two to of the practitioners or thinkers in your lecture strand.

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

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Within this essay, I am going to discuss the importance designers have in contemporary society and how their role may change due to an increase in sustainable development, technological advancements and consumer consumption. Sustainable development is the economic development that is conducted with depletion of natural resources. (Murray, 1884). Whereas consumer consumption refers to the rate of which customers, use resources in regard to satisfy current needs and wants. Thus, an example of this is 'purchasing a different vehicle to drive for each day of the week'. (Kochitty, 2023). It would be more efficient and beneficial to invest in purchasing a single vehicle to drive for the week, however the consumer's priorities are convenience and their needs at that moment. Therefore, this leads them to disregard accountability for wasting resources. Furthermore, I am going to look at how increasing technological advancements is impacting design. I am going to discuss this further throughout, with the help of the thinkers, Nigel Cross and Thorstein Veblen.

'Designers tackle ill-defined problems' (Cross, 1982). An ill-defined problem refers to a problem that does not hold the attention it deserves or requires to gain a solution. An excellent example of this is the creative director of Mother of Pearl; Amy Powney. (Hunter, 2022) Her film 'Fashion Reimagined' beautifully portrays the journey a designer goes on in order to create designs which hold these solutions. The film shows the difficult journey she undergoes to create garments that are sustainable. She starts at the source and ensures each part of the production process is causing minimal negative impact to the environment. This is relevant within contemporary society as it was released in 2022 and 'Mother of Pearl' is now viewed as a 'commendable, leading example' for other fashion brands (Chomsky, 2023). The Sunday Times describe Powney as 'a voice for a new generation of designers.' (Murphy, 2022) Therefore, within the 21st century, designers are having to create designs which hold solutions for 'ill-defined problems' such as sustainable development. They are forced to create designs which are 'solution-focused'. (Cross, 1982).

Veblen coined the term 'conspicuous consumption'. (Veblen, 1899). Conspicuous Consumption is a term in economics that describes and explains the practice by consumers of using goods of a higher quality or in a greater quantity that might be considered necessary in practical terms. 'An example of conspicuous consumption would be a person deciding to spend thousands of dollars on a luxury watch instead of an economical watch that holds the same functionality' (Kochitty, 2023) Therefore, it could be argued that consumers value appearance over sustainability. Thus, it is the designer's responsibility to ensure their product is sustainable and not harmful to the environment. Evidence to support this is the Freedom of Information Act 2000. (Charles, 2000) This act allows members of the public access to information held by public authorities and companies. Since, this act there has been an increase in 'see-through policies and companies are forced to be more open about the production of their product. Thus, the companies that are withholding information often lose customers and incur fines from disobeying the law. Therefore, the role of a designer within the 21st century is difficult because you have to maintain a record of your production process as to ensure no unlawful

practices are ongoing, create products/designs that hold minimal negative impact on the environment and attempt to keep waste of natural resources to a minimum.

Cross argues that 'design... should be taught alongside science and the humanities.' (Cross, 1982). Although Cross mentioned this during 1982, it remains relevant in contemporary society. This is because from January 31st, 2023, the national curriculum in Wales changed to 'promote individuality, National well-being and encourage critical/civic engagement'. Thus, tackling ignorance and misinformation is viewed as most important within the curriculum (Gov, 2023). Whereas before students gained grades from assessments at specific ages, the curriculum has become more 'holistic', attempting to prepare students with the skillset for 'a fast-changing world. They are encouraging 'enterprise and creativity' (Gov, 2023). Therefore, they are providing students with a wide range of skills, such as those to become a designer who solves problems for real-world issues. 'Each one of us has something to contribute' (Fuller, 1981). This statement by Fuller, beautifully explains how this new education system views students as 'contributors' and 'problem-solvers' (Gov, 2023). This further suggests that the new curriculum is creating the next generation of designers. Designers of whom are equipped with the knowledge and skills to contribute to sustainable production design in the 21st century. Yet, how can creativity remain whilst creating a solution-based product?

Veblen views institutions as 'products of the past process, adapted to past circumstances, never in full accord with the requirements of the present'. Thus, questioning whether the curriculum change is up to date. However, the curriculum changes will not be in full operation until 2026 (Gov, 2023). Thus, proving Veblen's theory correct as in 3 years, there may be new technological advancements, which may lead them to reconsider the curriculum again, and adapt accordingly. Veblen explains how 'new technology reshapes institutions in accord with its own needs'. He further describes how this process can take 'considerable time' and within these 'periods of transition' there is a 'lack of correspondence between institution and new technologies' (Veblen, 1899). It appears that design is in a constant state of attempting to draw level with technological advancement. This is leading to an increased use of 'digital designs. (Wicks, 2006). This proves how significant the 'synthesis of technology trends' has become within design in the 21st century. According to Wicks, designers undertake the important role of analysing trends, specifically the trends within technology. This means that as technology develops and improves, designing must adapt and adjust to it. However, as designers adapt to these technological advancements are they becoming less creative?

'Design thinking is a creative process.' (Cross, 1982). Design is 'driven by creative thinking'. Through creative thinking, designers have 'the ability to find insights and 'empathy' for consumers. This allows them to create designs/products that suffice the needs of their target audience. According to Cross, creativity is crucial within design because it is the 'exploration phase which leads to formulating clear problem statements.' (Cross, 1982). Thus, without the 'exploration phase' or 'creative thinking', the design may be less effective. This leads me to question whether technological advancements help or hinder the creative process for designers. For example, in early 2023, Adobe Photoshop released 'AI Generative Fill'. This tool allows the user to 'effortlessly fill' and 'remove image elements' with 'just a few clicks' (Adobe, 2023). Therefore, creating a design with minimum effort, creativity, and time. AI stands for artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is the intelligence of software and machines (Technology). (Adobe, 2023). Although, this tool is useful and efficient, is it limiting designers' creativity by controlling the creative process? Another example is the 'Pattern Preview' feature on Adobe Photoshop. This tool was released in 2020 and allows designers to 'virtually preview patterns before they're created'. This is a great assist to designers as they can insert their designs with convenience and ease, creating a repeat pattern instantaneously. This tool is beneficial because similar to the 'AI Generative fill' it helps to speed up the design production time, making designing easier. Yet, is this truly beneficial as the creative process is deemed an 'exploration phase' and by

technology reducing the time spent creating, it is reducing the time allowed to wonder and truly be creative.

Furthermore, 'Creativity is a talent' (Veblen, 1899). A talent refers to a 'natural aptitude or skill' (Murray, 1884). Therefore, within the 21st century are creative designs and products with human touch being deemed more desirable and popular than those without? For example, the 'biophilic living project' in Swansea is an 'innovative project' 'revolutionising how we design our living and working environments' (Biophilic living, 2023). They are in the process of creating a building which incorporates nature, architecture and biophilia together in harmony. The designers within this project are 'translating abstract requirements into concrete objects' (Cross, 1982). This specific project has been described as 'creative' and 'innovative' by several news articles. This project portrays the future of design. It is relevant and up to date. This is because it is currently being built right now in the 21st century and is tackling a 'real-world issue' through creative means. The designers within this project are focusing on tackling the pressing issues of depletion of resources, sustainable development, community and well-being. These themes within design have increased in recent years and are highly common within the work of most 21st century designers. Another example of design, which tackles similar themes is the 'Wolfgang Keyboard Bench' (View Figure one below). I admire this design for its creativity, playfulness and uniqueness. It consists of 2,00 keys embedded into a layered Baltic brick wood. Those who use the bench are able to interact with it, pressing the keys which results in a noise coming from each individual key. This links to this theme of community. This is because consumers are provided with the opportunity of coming together as one to make music on this clever design of a bench. I admire how it holds a balance of being 'solution-focused' yet is remarkably creative and individual. Thus, reinforcing that 'each one of us has something to contribute'. (Fuller, 1981). Although, the designer of the Key Bench made the role of a designer appear easy, it is becoming increasingly difficult. The role of a designer in both the present and future is to create both 'solution-focused' designs which are 'innovative and creative'. Designers will face the challenge of finding a harmony between creative designs which hold a purpose.



Fig. 1, Murphy, P. (2020). 'Wolfgang Keyboard Bench'.

Sustainable development is a key theme that is appearing more present within design in the 21st century. This is because we have gained more awareness and knowledge in regard to 'the scale and urgency required to fight climate change' which has 'never been clearer'. (Stone, 2023) There is a significant increase in 'green skills occupations' which has led to more research, statistics and knowledge around sustainability. An example of one of these disturbing statistics is 'approximately '90 billion tons of natural resources are extracted from the earth annually to feed the consumer society'. (Wilson, 2023). This has led to an increase of designs which attempt to limit the materials wasted or merely use waste to create their product/design to create awareness on the issue. Eileen Fisher is a beautiful example of this, she 'has a long history of using recycled synthetics' throughout the production of her garments. (EggenBerger, 2023). She is a fashion designer, of whom 'Since 2009, has sourced recycled polyester from water bottles and other forms of post-consumer waste as well as pre-consumer Lyon waste left over from the manufacturing process. (EggenBerger, 2023). 'Fisher has consistently championed environmentally responsible practices like organic materials, fair labour practices, and recycling programs'. (Zahnizer, 2023). 'Her commitment to sustainability has become a hallmark for her brand'. The word 'hallmark' means what her company stands for (trademark). This is similar to Amy Powney, the creative director of Mother of Pearl as she is also trying to make fashion more sustainable. However, whereas Fisher uses waste materials, Powney is attempting to eliminate the waste materials that come from creating garments. Yet, both fashion labels are viewed as luxurious and expensive. Therefore, although their designs are outstanding, creative and 'solution-focused' can consumers afford them?

Verblen, would argue that consumers would definitely purchase them. This is because Verblen believes there is 'a direct relationship between a person's material possessions and their status in society'. (Verblen, 1899). Thus, if these garments have become increasingly popular and luxurious due to the positive impact, they hold on contemporary society, it may attract wealthier consumers as it will maintain their status in society. However, does this mean that the poor would not be able to afford such designs? As some designs may be unaffordable to lower classes, this could lead to an increase in affordable, creative, sustainable designs also. This links back to 'everyone has something to contribute'. (Fuller, 1981). This explains that every designer has a target audience, thus some designers target audience may include the working class. For example, the brand 'smol' focuses on 'home cleaning' and ensuring packing is sustainable and affordable. (Bann, 2023) Their mission statement is to provide 'innovative formulas' with 'sustainable packaging' at a 'smol price'. This shows that although not all sustainable designs are available to all consumers within society, sustainable designs are slowly becoming available to all. Thus, within 10 years all consumers may be able to afford 100% sustainable products and designs such as designs similar to Fisher or Powney's garments.

To conclude, I think the role of a designer/maker is going to increase in difficulty within the next 10 years. I think that designers are going to rely on technology significantly as it develops and will be forced to adjust and adapt their designs accordingly. Furthermore, I believe that there is going to be a huge increase in sustainable development as a key theme within design. Thus, I think designers and makers are going to attempt to create more sustainable designs/products in order to appeal to consumers. I further think that waste materials will become increasingly popular in the creative design process as natural resources will deplete by 2050, otherwise (Wilson, 2023). Therefore, I believe the role of the designer/maker is going to become increasingly 'explorative' and 'innovative' yet 'solution-focused'. (Cross, 1982). I think designers and makers will be forced to adapt to the 'fast-changing world', creating modern designs which hold sustainability at the forefront and use technology to complement their work.

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List of figures:

Figure 1: Wolfgang Keyboard Bench. Murphy, P (2023).