

Josef Welch
1800724
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Julia Lockheart

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Independent Inquiry Proposal: Change, Obsolescence and Ethics.

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In this research document, I will be investigating the meaning of the words; change, obsolescence and ethics within the context of product design. I have always been interested with the question, 'what is the role of a product designer?' especially how they can affect society with their design ideologies and practices. I have picked these three words in particular because they represent some of the aspects a designer may consider when producing a product. It is my intention to use the knowledge I accumulate from these words, to form a question for my independent inquiry.

Change

The first philosopher of change, Heraclitus, summarised change as "all things are flowing" by which he inferred that everything is in constant change (Heraclitus, cited by Kirk, 1951, p. 35). Plato later stated that Heraclitus likened change to the "flow of a river" (ibid). This is evident in product design. Like a river, change is portrayed by the continuous flow of product development. There is no set formula to designing. For centuries, there has been a push by designers to strive to innovate and improve people's lives. Heraclitus said "we can't step into the same river twice". This is because the river is constantly changing. These fundamental teachings are echoed and essential in developing design. The continuous change in design practice has prevented the stagnation of design; as a result, the acceptance of change has helped improve our design outcomes and societies development.

Through my investigation I have been able to distinguish how change has affected the way we design. It has made me question whether or not the act of designing has really changed. In terms of design thinking and ideologies, the positive impact of change is abundant. The introduction of change through the use of manifestoes has helped evoke collaboration efforts in design, as they bring together like-minded individuals (Mau, 2004). This has helped develop and change design ideologies. However, have these design values been put to practice?

One of the greatest changes seen in the design world has been the introduction of mass manufacturing. Driven by the development of new production technologies, the industrial revolution started the product design profession; where the emergence of the specialized, commercially produced items, could appeal to a broad market. It helped implement the concept that form and function could be considered together within design. However, in turn a capitalist market was conceptualised. The establishment of the idea of division of labour by Adam Smith (2010); a father of political economy, resulted in a tremendous increase in productivity under capitalism.

The introduction of capitalism started to change the role of the designer. The art of craftsmanship associated with design at the time had started to separate in an attempt to satisfy the needs of a larger target audience. In the book, *Understanding Industrial Design* (Chang & King, 2016), Simon King concluded that "For the first time, the act of design became separated from the act of making." It has engaged the designer to consider the importance of how a product is produced, rather than how it successfully fulfils the need of the user. Craftsmen are no longer creating products just for their apparent needs, but for the demands of the consumer. As a result, a consumer driven society has blossomed. An example of this is today's throwaway society.

Users can now demand what they want – companies are now meeting the demands of users rather than the needs of society as a whole. It makes you question whether the changes we've seen in design over the last century have actually been altered due to our fundamental design principles for example, manifestoes, or instead been influenced by our capability to produce and cater to societies demands. This change has also questioned ethics within design and what actually is good design. Are we producing meaning full products anymore?

In the book *Architecture and Design Versus Consumerism* (2012), Anne Thorpe concludes that applying social movement similar to social innovation may be the answer to changing the way we design and as a result, hopefully implementing sustainable, meaningful design outcomes.

Is it still possible to produce universal products which meet the needs of the individual and the collective, instead of lowered quality, unnecessary goods for niche markets? Do we need to change the way we design?

Obsolescence

The Collins dictionary describes obsolescence as “the state of being no longer needed because something newer or more efficient has been invented” (2020). Although the definition is true in some aspects of product design, through my investigation of the word obsolescence I believe this broad statement doesn't explain its complex nature within design. Academic Tim Cooper, sorts design obsolescence into 3 categories; technological, economic and psychological (2004).

Also known as “absolute obsolescence”, technological obsolescence occurs when a product is either no longer fit for purpose because of its failure to effectively function, or due to the introduction of a newer technology (ibid). This can be likened to how we age through our lives. As we grow older our bodies start to degrade and bodily functions are reduced, effectively making us less useful. On top of this, younger generations are born and can improve upon our own understanding, finally superseding us. Through this process, this is how humanity has evolved. This outcome is evident in a product's life cycle. No product can realistically physically last forever because of natural degradation and our continuous need to innovate. This refers back to the importance of change in design. Therefore, it is important that designers responsibly manage the life cycle of a product. Similar to a doctor, they need to consider how their approach to design can affect design obsolescence.

Like older members of society, although products become superseded, it doesn't mean they are no longer useful. This is why I disagree with Collins dictionary definition of 'no longer needed' (ibid). A product can become technologically obsolete, but still useful and relevant. Even though product trends can become outdated, I believe the principles and the fundamental core of design need to be sustainable over time to uphold its relevancy (timeless design). Psychological obsolescence is the change in perceived trends and desires and is usually a result of fluctuation of aesthetic, functional or symbolic value (Cooper, 2004). Although some may argue that obsolescence created through the fluctuation of trends and tastes is a result of natural change; most trends are purposely contrived by designers in an attempted to sell larger product quantities. Incremental technological development is being used to sell more products. Referring back to the idea of consumerism, designers are now designing for the want of it instead of the need. Philosopher Gunther Anders (2002) criticises

obsolescence in society. In his book '*Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen 1*' (2002) he formed the idea of obsolescence of mankind. He argued that with our advancements in design, production and the creation of consumerism; we have created a society that no longer stands by ethics. In essence, society is eating itself-up. This ideology is currently present in product design. The problem is that our society is built on consumerism and the greed to be wealthy. Products are now seen as a social symbol. On the whole, ethical design philosophies are no longer taken into account.

Economical obsolescence is the act of designing a product for financial gain. A designer would consider design aspects like low performance/cost ratio and lower quality materials. It leads to the product suffering from inadequacies with function, durability, and sustainability (Cooper, 2004). As a consequence of a consumerism society, designers are more inclined to produce products to sell, rather than thinking about the ethical and ideological values that make a good design. The introductions of design practices like planned obsolescence have evolved as a result. Planned obsolescence is the common practice of deliberately shortening the life span of a product for financial gain (Pope, 2017). An example of this is how Apple build in planned obsolescence into their phones, by restricting iOS updates to make older phone stop functioning (BBC, 2020)

Planned obsolescence is questioning whether the current stance of some product designers is unethical. Is Anders (2002) right? Do we live in society that prevents ethical design? Kamila Pope (2017) describes the wastefulness of planned obsolescence and reiterates the importance of sustainable design by referencing design ideologies like the *Good Life*. The theory created by the philosophers Aristotle, Plato and Socrates states that good life is not about being wealthy but rather being happy and having moral and intellectual virtues in life (ibid). Maybe this ideology should be recognised in design and applied to our society. Perhaps to reach ethical design, society must change first.

Ethics

Ethics derives from the ancient Greek word ἠθικός which means 'character or moral nature', which encapsulates the idea of doing something right or doing something wrong (Liddell and Scott, 1889). In terms of design, this can be conveyed within good and bad products. This raises the question of what is good and bad in regards to design, creating a dilemma between ethical design choices and choices which prioritise the attractive nature of a product. Applied ethics hold the most relevance in a designer's outlook of the real world. Applied ethics is the balance between consumerist demands brought forward through rapid production and technological advances, and the ethical consequences of design choices (Giorgini *et al*, 2015). Elements of applied ethics assume that the right policy will always result in the greatest benefit; discussion around this can lead us to consider whether we produce products for the benefit of mankind as a whole, or for the benefit of niche groups in society.

Papanek (1985) refers to the moral and social responsibility of the designer in his book *Design for the real world* (1985). He says, "Isn't it too bad that so little design, so few products are really relevant to the need of mankind". Papanek explains that rather than designing for real needs, designers now tend to focus their attention on the highly niche preferences of a narrow proportion of society.

He continues by stating that even though design does occur for the need of mankind, it's only as a result of market pressure, rather than as a result of either a genuine response to a real global need or a research breakthrough. This idea of design capitalism was mentioned during my investigation of the word change.

In the book *Ethics in design and communication* (2020), Laura Scherling encourages the designer to evaluate the social and environmental impact of their work and how they may design for the greater good of society and "social and moral judgment". This methodology is also mentioned by Ann Thorpe (2012) in her book *Architecture and Design Versus Consumerism* (2012).

Even though Papanek (1985) develops the idea of holistic design, he still considers the importance of fundamental design characteristics. Design should still appeal to our senses e.g. sight, touch, smell. Customers are still attracted by the romantic atmosphere captured by design. He believes "that the designer bears a responsibility for the way the products he designs are received at the market place". He implies that although designing for a consumerist market can contradict ethical values, for example sustainability and designing for real needs, if you do not cater to consumer wants, new ethical dilemmas can ensue. He explains this with an example of a man losing his job due to the lack of income made by his Design Company; as a result of unwanted products (ibid). On a grander scale, even though the GDP of individuals is small in less economically developed countries because of exploitation (ibid); if there was no need for their services due to reduced product demand, how would they earn money to survive? This example shows the knife edge decisions a designer must make when considering ethics. It shows the complexity associated with ethical design and makes me question whether design can consider morality while staying true to core design ideologies like aesthetics, function, and usability.

Ethical problems in the product design profession are being questioned by the introduction of contemporary design ideologies such as Meta-design (Wood, 2019). Meta-design has helped conceptualise the idea that designers can encumber the importance of ethical sustainability and meaningful design, without compromising key design features. Can the introduction of these new ways of thought and the use of processes like systems design (ibid) still allow ethical design to be achieved? Perhaps the real question is whether there is any such thing as truly ethical design.

Conclusion

In summary, the three words I have analysed present the complexity of the role of the designer. A designer has to be aware of all aspects of society, resulting in a balancing act that questions, what makes a good design? The reason that designers encounter these conflicts is a result of the way in which society has evolved. Design is no longer developing to improve products for mankind, but instead, society is dictating what the designer produces. As Anders (2002) states, where design used to improve the society we live in, it's now having a reverse effect causing society to eat itself up. This is seen through the consumerist society, which prioritises meeting the demands of society rather than its needs. This has led me to consider that a designer is no longer the influencer of societal change for the greater good, but is now being influenced by society to meet the wants of consumers. As Papanek (1986) argued, few things are designed for the real needs of society. This can be likened to Heraclitus' river analogy, in that the river is no longer innovative design, but the pressures and expectations of society are pushing the designer in an unbounded boat. To return to ethical design, perhaps we need to change society rather than the way we design? However, I still understand the importance of producing a product that people want to buy. My research has raised my awareness of the concept of meta-design (Wood, 2019) which combats against unethical design, and provokes collaboration between ethical ideologies and design that meets societal demand. This reiterates the importance of a designer's balancing act to achieve this middle-way. I understand this opens up the question of what is good design. I would like to continue researching how we can change society to return to a time when design was producing products to meet the need of mankind. This idea is conceptualised in social innovation (Manzini, 2015), a social practice, which aims to meet social needs and evidently results in positive impacts on design. Ezio Manzini may be a scholar who I reference in future work.

My research has led me to the question; **can truly ethical design be reached through the application of social innovation?** This will be my working question for the independent inquiry; however they may act as a starting point. Numerous sub questions have been created from my research for example, what is good design? These sub questions can help evolve my understanding of ethical design. They will be incorporated in my final inquiry for that reason.

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