

Q1: 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 will explore three topics all affiliated with ways in which we can be sustainable in order to better our environment. Throughout, you will see how sustainability will forever be the focus of a designer in the present and future. The first topic addresses the key role of a designer within the 21st century, which is to design sustainably. This conveys the importance of designers using sustainable processes and materials to help reduce carbon emissions and toxic waste. I will then delve into how this role may change in the next 10 years, sustainable designing and innovative thinking may need to become more extreme to make an impact. Therefore, becoming a design activist may be at the forefront of the designers role. Alaister Fuad-Luke's book 'Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World' allows me to signify 'be an indication of' (Oxford Language Dictionary, 2021) the importance of designers becoming design activists to implement substantial change for our future environment, by acting upon their innovative ideas. William McDonough and Michael Braungart also feature in my essay, their epistemology 'the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion' (Oxford Language Dictionary, 2021) regarding produce and waste leads me in the direction of mass-production and fast fashion. Their book 'Cradle to Cradle Remaking the Way we Make Things' tells us how producing and disposing of less will be far more beneficial to the environment rather than trying to recycle all unnecessary waste produced. Following on from the topic of design activism and fast fashion, I explore the notion of how advanced technologies such as virtual reality could help reduce carbon footprints if used for fashion shows. I discuss how designers have already begun to do this by using simple technology to create digital fashion shows due to the pandemic. Using VR instead of cameras, tripods and monitors may become the new way of showcasing in the future to take innovation and sustainability to that next level. Environmentally friendly materials and processes are not the only things us designers should be worrying about; it is our carbon footprint too. Reducing this could make real change and Fuad-Luke, McDonough and Braungart all support this change to better our planet.

Innovation, sustainability and problem solving are all things familiar to a designer within the 21st century. Designers have a duty not only to create prolific designs for the public but to also design for our environment. Sustainability is incredibly important within the design industry; it is inevitable that sustainable designing will continue to have crucial significance within the future. Alice Payne says that “Those who design can, theoretically, select ‘less bad’ processes and materials” (Payne, 2021, p.108). This means that the power is in our hands and designers have the ability to change the way our designs and processes effect the planet. A designers role is to be creative and design in a way that will not harm our environment, just a select group of designers and companies chose to change the way they design to help limit damage to our environment. However, times have changed and now many designers are considering the effects of their designs on the environment including myself. Experimentation with eco dyeing is present below (Fig:1) it shows my efforts and contribution to a sustainable way of designing to reduce toxicity in our waters. The pot contains a piece of sustainably sourced cotton, mint leaves and spinach, all of which will do no harm to our waters and the environment. Although the process did not work that well for me, I am glad I tried it and will one day perfect the method. Designers need to be open minded to trying processes like this and not get disheartened if it does not work the first time.



Fig 1: Zoe White, Eco Dyeing, 2021

A website called Insider says that “Textile dyeing is the world's second-largest polluter of water” the website also states that “the fashion industry is responsible for 20% of all industrial water pollution worldwide” (McFall-Johnsen, 2019). Imagine if companies only used the process of eco dyeing to dye their fabrics, the fashion industries contribution to water pollution will decrease immensely. Due to these statistics many smaller companies and designers do now use plants, vegetables and fruit to dye fabrics instead of using toxic dyes. We will still not see substantial change from this, it is important for larger companies to join so we can tackle this issue together. It is incredibly important as the chemicals within textile dyes are not only harmful to humans but are also harmful to wildlife that habitat in them and that drink from those waters.

Moving on from sustainable processes, the consideration of materiality is another vital role that designers have. Working with natural fibres like cotton and staying away from synthetic fibres such as polyester is a necessary action all companies and designers should take. The article by Morgan McFall-Johnsen states that

“Many of those fibres are polyester, a plastic found in an estimated 60% of garments. Producing polyester releases two to three times more carbon emissions than cotton, and polyester does not break down in the ocean” (2019).

This shows the detrimental effects of synthetic fibres on our planet and how natural fibres like cotton is preferable. Even though using natural fibres like cotton instead of synthetic fibres is good, the way in which cotton is sourced damages our environment. “It takes on average 10,000-20,000 litres of water to cultivate just one kilogram of raw cotton depending on where it is grown” (Common Objective, 2021). This shows that even though cotton is better it can still harm the environment in other ways. In correlation to this some companies are joining initiatives to cut back on textile pollution and are choosing to grow cotton in a more sustainable way. Designers in the 21st century must be open to changing the way they work throughout their design journeys. Fletcher and Tham say that you should “Employ sharp thinking to minimise the barriers to change, alter our course, and press on towards real, substantive change?” (2019, p.5). Designers today must not lose their style amongst all of this. Yes, sustainability is important but remaining unique and individual is just as important for designers. It is challenging designing all in the same manner and then trying to create designs that are distinct and that we have never seen before. Our consumers have a desire and need for captivating designs whilst they remain environmentally friendly. There must not be an absence of striking designs once sustainability is implemented.

In the next 10 years all designers need to take on the role of a design activist. The Oxford Learners Dictionary defines an activist as “a person who works to achieve political or social change, especially as a member of an organisation with particular aims.” Designers need to act upon their innovative ideas, we must act before it is too late. William McDonough and Michael Braungart state that “The best way to reduce any environmental impact is not to recycle more, but to produce and dispose of less” (2009, p.40). More designers need to realise this especially the fast fashion industry. Fast fashion is where items of clothing are mass-produced at an incredibly low cost, this is causing excessive amounts of waste. It is interesting to me that designers have the correct mindset when it

comes to re-using and recycling, and their epistemology in relation to reducing waste is negligible therefore they do not try to prevent unnecessary waste. The impact of fast fashion is shown below (Fig:2). The damaging effects that mass-production within the fast fashion industry has on environment is clearly exhibited. You can see an abundance of items that do not belong within those waters. There is litter, toxic dyes, fabrics and multiple other damaging items.



Fig 2: Rohan Chauhan, The impact of fast fashion, 2019

“There is a strong sense that design activism in a sustainability framework reinvigorates the agenda for design, can genuinely affect ‘now’ and give fresh directionality towards a more sustainable future” (Fuad-Luke. 2009. p.190)

This shows the importance of activism within the design and fashion industry. This way of working has so many benefits not only in the present but for the future too. Some people may have the wrong impression with activists, they may associate them with rebellious groups. However, this is not the case, and I would hope that in the next 10 years all designers have taken on the role of a design activist and stop mass production for the sake of our planet. Although designers and companies have the power to stop mass production, the consumers also play a large part within this detrimental cycle. If people stop buying fast fashion clothing and start to shop more sustainably then there will no longer be a need to mass-produce since companies will not make a profit from it. You could say that the role of the designer could develop into being an informer. It is important for the public to be informed by companies as to how damaging fast fashion is to the environment as some people do not think twice before stepping foot into shops such as Primark, Zara or H&M. “Fast fashion acknowledges the consumer’s insatiable demand for newness” (McNeill and Moore, 2015, p.213). This implies that the problem is not the designer but it is in fact the consumer’s desire for the latest items of clothing. People do not realise that for mass-production to stop then consumers need to swiftly terminate mass-buying.

Change is constant, and we must embrace it. Some may fear that in the next 10 years our design jobs could be lost to machines. However, creative jobs have been found to be future proof according to Creative UK Group. Their reasoning behind this is that “87% of highly creative roles are resistant to automation” (Creative UK Group, 2021). This means that most creative jobs cannot be replaced by

machinery. As future designers our roles may consist of working with new advanced technologies that will enhance our creative designs and experiences.

“The time frame of ten years is the same as a child’s time at school, one eighth of most people’s lifetime, or ten annual reports for a business. Consider what you, your family, community workplace will do in the coming ten years. Every moment will count. (Fletcher and Tham, 2019, p. 29).

Continuing from the topic of machinery and technology, Virtual Reality has been used increasingly within the architectural and automotive fields. In the next 10 years this could be the same for the textiles and fashion industry. An article on the Forbes website says that “It predicts that by 2030, we will be able to enter digital environments that appear completely real to all of our five senses simultaneously” (Marr, 2020). This means you will be able to touch, smell, hear, see and taste through virtual reality. The ability to be able to feel something like a material through VR will be incredible for future designers, as materiality is such a big part of fashion and design. VR could also play into the aspect of sustainability and help reduce the fashion industries carbon footprint. Having hundreds of people travelling to fashion shows all around the world is contributing highly to global warming. Therefore, finding more sustainable ways to attend these events will be vital. Throughout the pandemic we have had a glimpse of what our future fashion shows could look like. Since no one was able to travel or meet up, fashion brands had no choice but to have their fashion shows online. This was however not done through VR but in the future, it could be, “we’re able to create entirely interactive and collaborative working environments wherever we are in the world, simply by slipping on a headset” (Marr, 2020). This will enable designers and big fashion brands to become environmentally friendly in a new and innovative way. Due to the pandemic, I believe that companies will be much more open to this new way of working since they already had an insight as to what it could be like. This will undoubtedly be a big step for fashion brands and could have extensive impact on our planet. Below is an image in regards to Prada’s first ever digital fashion week show (Fig:3), you can see a model walking with cameras and monitors attached to moving tripods. This allows them to capture her every step and provide the audience with an engaging show. You can see how much they put into trying to create a scene that made the viewer feel like they were at the show. If a brand like Prada is capable and open minded to this innovative way of showcasing a fashion show then think of the possibilities that lie within Virtual reality.



Fig 3: Recommend, Prada’s First Ever Digital Fashion Week Show, 2020

In conclusion, the importance of sustainability is extensive to this day. It could be suggested that sustainability will remain the focus of the designer within the next 10 years. Returning to what Alastair Fuad-Luke stated about design activism, if one takes on the role of a design activist this will have the most positive impact on our environment as change is likely to occur from this way of thinking or working. With evolving technologies arising, having a sustainable fashion industry will be much easier to achieve in the coming years as new ways of manufacturing, and showcasing can be developed such as Virtual reality. This will lower carbon emissions and reduce the industries carbon footprint which is exactly what our planet so desperately needs. The measures taken to become more environmentally friendly as discussed, will be far more extreme and advanced. The focus on sustainable designing can never be shifted this will be constant throughout the whole of our life time. As said throughout my essay this is not just the designers battle, consumers must develop an understanding as to how the clothes they purchase effect our environment. We are all to blame for the suffering of our planet, now we can all act and make substantial change to the way the fashion industry operates. Furthermore, the designers role in which to be environmentally friendly will not necessarily change within the next 10 years but this focus on sustainability will be heightened and implemented in innovative ways.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. White, Z. (2021) 'Eco dyeing'

Figure 2. Chauhan, R. (2019) 'The Impact of Fast Fashion'. Accessed from:
<https://www.thisislocallondon.co.uk/youngreporter/18072040.impact-fast-fashion-rohan-chauhan-nower-hill-high-school/> (Accessed: 8th December 2021)

Figure 3. Recommend, (2020) 'Prada's First Ever Digital Fashion Week Show'. Accessed from:
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