

HOW SHIPPING CONTAINERS HAVE CREATED BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE UNINTENDED
CONSEQUENCES FOR OUR WORLD

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HOW SHIPPING CONTAINERS HAVE CREATED BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES FOR OUR WORLD.

‘The prime impulse of man is to create objects’ (Keeps, 1966, p1) and we want to share the things which we create- in our current time, this is mainly through our use of shipping containers. These containers create a more global market, which comes with both positive and negative impacts. More specifically, the unintended consequences and the sustainability of these containers are a big area of conversation both now and for the future, as many consumers are now more considerate of them than ever. ‘Design ethics is massively underdeveloped and even in its crudest forms remains marginal within design education’ (Fry, 2009, p3). Design ethics includes a range of areas but primarily ‘concerns moral behaviour and responsible choices in the practice of design’ (Encyclopedia.com, 2022). This can include the impacts of the materials, management of production and also sustainability, which is an area that needs more consideration than we realise and often give it. When resources that are used are sustainable and managed, then this lack of consideration is not an issue; however, when there is no sustainability or considerations made we see the unintended and potentially devastating consequences of our increased globalisation. As Fry states, ‘The relation between creation and destruction is not a problem when a resource is renewable, but it’s a disaster when it is not’ (Fry, 2009, p4).

This relationship between creation and destruction can cause designers to think of the unintended consequences of their work. The Fraser Institute defines them as ‘the results of an action that differ from the expected outcome. Unintended consequences can be either positive or negative. (Coyne, J. Undated). Designers, both those who are well established in their field and new and upcoming graduates need to consider the unintended consequences of their work. Through this consideration of the sustainability and consequences of the work and products, we can hope for a more sustainable and managed future. Shipping containers have been a staple of our good transportation since ‘Companies first utilised shipping containers for combined rail and horse-drawn transport in Britain at the end of the 18th century’ (PSL Logistics Service, 2022) and they have helped increase the rate of globalisation. However, shipping containers also have many negative side effects, especially in more recent years there has been a rise in human trafficking through shipping containers. These containers also cause environmental degradation, as when the Evergiven was stuck in the Suez Cannel for 106 days in 2021 (Ebrahim, N.,2021) causing many shipping delays for consumers across the globe. This is yet another example of the unintended consequences of using shipping containers, which designers could not have predicted when they were sending and sharing their products around

the world. These consequences haven't ever been fully explored, but this essay is going to attempt to explore a small portion of them.

The shipping container has become a symbol of the wealth of our world, the increased connectivity of it, and the growth in our population. The increased use of shipping containers was an unintended consequence of the rapid population growth and our need to sell and transport goods across the world. Our population has reached its highest ever recorded levels at '8.0 billion in mid-November 2022 from an estimated 2.5 billion people in 1950' (United Nations, Undated) as we are facing an increase in our population, there is the potential for the destabilisation of many governments and global organisations.

As Fry suggests, there is 'Potential geopolitical destabilisation as a result of massive redistribution of human populations (Fry, 2009, p33). This potential destabilisation is another unintended consequence of the rise in the use of shipping containers. Combining this with population growth may mean that there are even more unintended consequences in the future. This population growth and change will result in the need for centralisation, to create and gain economies of scale; which are key to globalisation and greater geopolitical impacts and success. 'Some centralisation is going to be important if for no other reason than to gain economies of scale (Shedroff, 2009, p138). If there is centralisation, then it would mean that economic growth would be less distributed. It would more likely be concentrated in a select few governments; those with higher income, who are more developed and have already well established ports to allow high volumes of container ships to access and trade there.

In order to gain economies of scale, globalisation through the use of shipping containers needs occurs. 'Transport development has produced cheap travel, reaching everyone and causing time-space compression (as transport is quicker than ever)' (Physics and Maths Tutor, 2012) cheaper methods of transport have allowed for a greater increase in globalisation. This is because there is a lower barrier to entry, allowing many more countries to take part in imports and exports via shipping containers. This has all resulted in making our world more connected than ever, 'Globalisation has made people richer, forming a larger global market who consume goods and services' (Physics and Maths Tutor, 2012). This larger global market has relied on the mass movement of goods in order to keep up with the demand that this growing population has faced. The mass demand meant that there was a need for more effective modes of mass transport, so 'By the late 1970s, containerisation had become a worldwide system' (Broeze, 2002, p51).

Ever since the introduction of the containers, they have been a great benefit to global economies. As there has been an increase in the amount of shipping, the world has felt as though it has become smaller. 'This has contributed to a 'shrinking world' where the world seems much smaller due to its interpretations' (Physics and Maths Tutor, 2012). The ease of shipping globally has made the entire world feel much more connected than ever. This has increased the unintended consequences as despite this increase in population and more of a focus on mass transportation methods, there was not an increased focus on sustainability. 'Globalisation, however, did not bring sustainability to the container business' (Broeze, 2002, p276).

As both practitioners of our craft and people who actively create things in the world, we are more in control of the way we create things and the sustainability of our things than the average consumer. We have a greater opportunity to be sustainable in our choices as we can pick the materials that we use and the way our things are transported 'The opportunities to address sustainable issues are numerous, as are the advantages for business' (Zaksenberg, I and Cuffaro, D, 2013, p172). We need to be aware of the way we not only think about our world but how we interact with it too. As these two things don't always necessarily match up with each other, and our actions may have a more negative impact than we intend. 'Currently, how we think about 'our world' is indivisible from how we treat it' (Fry, 2009, p30). This is most clearly seen in the way that we are as consumers. We have a tendency to want the newest things, often with little regard for the way that items are disposed of, or the sustainability impacts that there will be. Even if consumers are more aware of their impacts and try and shop and live sustainably they may still be unintentionally caught out by the impacts of the shipping container.

The shipping container has been one of the most influential products that has been created. As it is able to be easily and quickly repackaged onto different vessels and containers, many goods can be rapidly transported. This flow of goods has been greatly advanced and accelerated by globalisation, as it 'has increased the flow of ideas, goods and services, creating a global community' (Physics and Maths Tutor, 2012). This global community has allowed more people to export and import goods across the globe. This helps contribute to and grow the global economy as it 'has made people richer, forming a larger global market who consume goods and services' (Physics and Maths Tutor, 2012). With a larger global market, more people are able to establish themselves and their communities through exporting items. A global market also allows for outsourcing, which means that parts can be made across the globe to enable cheaper production.

Shipping containers 'offer numerous benefits in regards to logistics, handling, supply chain management, and warehousing.' (One World Bazaar, 2021). This versatility is why shipping containers have become such a great resource for the global economy. 'The container made shipping cheap, and by doing so changed the shape of the world economy' (Levinson, 2016, p2). This cheaper shipping cost means that there are many companies that are available to help move products around the world- which also contributes to a global economy.

This range of companies gives versatility to the amount of things that can be moved. The most common items to be transported by shipping containers includes items such as 'computers, meat, clothing, televisions, and toys' (International Forwarding Association, 2019). This truly showcases the versatility of the shipping container and the wide range of items that are exported allowing for greater globalisation. There is almost no doubt that without the creation of the shipping container, the effect of a shrinking world would have taken much longer to occur.

However, as Broeze says, 'Of at least equal importance was the fact that the very same container could, without any sort of repacking of its cargo, be carried by rail, road or water (or any combination of the three) from the producer to the ship, and from the ship to the consumer' (Broeze, 2002, p11). The fact that the shipping container can be used on boats, trains and also trucks means that the rapid transport of goods, and therefore globalisation is not hindered by the need to repackage items. Although not necessarily fully intended, the ability of a container to be repackaged quickly is a positive unintended consequence of the shipping container.

Despite this being an unintended consequence, it has had a massive positive impact by enabling rapid globalisation. Which in turn has allowed our world to feel smaller and more commented than ever before. The importance of packaging is stated by Zaksenberg and Cuffaro 'Is packaging effective and efficient? Are materials reusable or recyclable? Does the packaging inform the user and is it easy to interface with?' (Zaksenberg, I and Cuffaro, D, 2013, p172). The shipping container answers many of these questions. The packaging of the container is effective and efficient as it allows for 'up to 24,346 containers on a single container ship' (Container FAQs, 2023). This means that many more products can be transported at one time, allowing for faster spread of products across the world.

The materials of the shipping container are not only sustainable as it is made out of steel. These containers are recyclable even though they are made from a man-made metal, as 'steel is one of the only man-made materials that are entirely recyclable' (Unit Hire Group, 2018). Not only are the materials themselves recyclable, but the shipping containers can be reused when they have reached the end of their use. These containers can be used in many ways: 'retired shipping containers can provide the framework for a school or a classroom, container boxes as retail spaces or being used as office spaces.' (Philspace, 2019). This repurposing is a positive unintended consequence of the use of

shipping containers as it means that the materials don't need to be broken down and recycled. In particular, these containers are of great use in developing countries, such as 'a poverty-stricken community in Honduras, that has no electricity.' (Cambridge Shipping Containers, Undated).

This use of shipping containers means that many more people are able to access education, which then gives more opportunities for them to develop in the future. Shipping containers are reusable in a school building as 'they're a cost-effective building material that can easily be converted and redesigned to suit a variety of purposes' (Unit Hire Group, 2019). Although the containers were originally designed to move products across the globe, the end of their life doesn't mean that they are at the end of their useful period. This repurposing is a great unintended consequence means that there is a reduction in the number of containers that need to be disposed of as they are instead being repurposed into much more useful items. This is definitely an unintended consequence that Malcolm McLean could never have even thought about when he first introduced the shipping container. However, it is a positive result of their creation.

'Coastal shipping is seen and promoted as the green alternative to road and rail transport' (Broeze, 2002, p269) this is true; but as well as the positives from increased globalisation, shipping containers have many negative unintended consequences which designers need to be aware of. The creation of these cargo routes has caused massive environmental damage. These damages are unintended consequences of shipping containers as designers don't intend for the products to get stuck, as seen when the Evergiven was stuck in the Suez Canal.

The Evergiven caused massive delays to many people, as the boat was stuck for 106 days. In the end, the only way for the boat to be removed was through dredging, as 'dredgers were brought in to dig mud and sand from under the bow and stern of the ship' (BBC News, 2021). These allowed for the removal of earth and silt to create more space for the ship to move again. However, as Broeze mentions 'The dredging of over-deeper access routes and wharf-side berths in order to attract the largest container ships create serious environmental (and, occasionally, also heritage) problems at many locations' (Broeze, 2002, p5). So although dredging may seem like the best course of action to help improve the transportation of containers on ships, we need to be aware that there may be unseen implications and consequences. One of the main consequences of dredging is that 'it can damage or destroy fish spawning grounds and make river banks unstable' (UK Government, 2021). The destruction of spawning grounds creates potential gaming consequences for the natural environment and the ecosystems as it could result in massive ecosystem change as the food chain is changed with the removal of species resulting in the loss of their habitats.

Dredging isn't the only way that containers have an impact on the environment,

'Torrey Canyon, Amoco Cadiz, Exxon Valdez and Erika are just a few of the ships whose names conjure up the ecological disasters connected with vast oil spills, environmentally unfriendly cargo and occasionally drunkenness at the rudder' (Broeze, 2002, p265)

The oil spills from these containers also have a great impact on the environment as 'research on previous oil spills shows that toxic chemicals remain in the ocean for years, often sinking to the seafloor and poisoning the sediment' (World Economic Forum, 2021). These damages go against the sustainability that so many designers strive for and aim to achieve and 'The grave environmental problems relating to oil spills, accidents at sea and port expansion stand, ironically, in contrast to the 'green' character of shipping in general' (Broeze, 2002, p269).

In addition to unintended environmental consequences, shipping containers have unintended human costs too. The main human cost of containers is the growth of human trafficking and the loss of life that also occurs within that. 'In the 2012 survey, the ILO estimated that 20.9 million people are in forced labour globally, trafficked for labour and sexual exploitation or held in slavery-like conditions.' (International Labour Office, 2014).

Human trafficking has been made easier through the increase in ports around the world. Although, 'With the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of trafficking victims fell as travel restrictions made human trafficking more difficult.' (Statista, 2022). In an attempt to keep up with the rapid globalisation many two key factors: increased political instability resulting in an increase of refugees and people fleeing the country and increased globalisation. A greater number of refugees has meant that there are more vulnerable people who are willing to go to extreme lengths for what they believe is a better life. This has increased the number of people who are being trafficked, as 'traffickers prey on vulnerability' (Free for Life, undated). This has resulted in greater numbers of victims as increasing globalisation has made it easier to move people globally. As there has been an increase in globalisation, more ports have been created. However, not all the ports are up to date and as well equipped as the ones in more established countries such as Felixstowe in the UK.

Instead, 'Traffickers and organised crime groups exploit weak, ineffective and inconsistent port controls' (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014). These ports are still frequently used but are just not as well managed and inspected which is why it is easier for human trafficking to occur. Human trafficking is a devastating impact of the increase in the use of shipping containers with incidents set to rise as more and more containers are used and ports struggle to keep up with the demand. Although these ports are key to contributing to the economic growth of countries, the costs to maintain and update systems in place are often much more of a challenge and cost.

In addition, many 'Ports only have a finite amount of real estate and so speed of processing is paramount to the efficiency and profitability of the port' Ship technology global, undated). This finite space means that even if the port has the funds to update its systems to be able to catch more trafficking victims, the amount of space that is needed to do so reduces the capacity of the port to import and export goods which in turn limits the amount of profit that a port can generate. As with the environmental impacts, these are not something that designers are able to directly control, however, this again brings up the question of how can designers transport their products in a way that reduces the unintended consequences of using shipping containers.

In conclusion, there are many unintended consequences of the creation and use of the shipping container. These have been both positive and negative, and designers have a responsibility to manage the impacts of them. As Fry says, 'There is a huge gap between urgently needed action and the current and imminent availability of means to create, globally, the political, social and economic changes that would enable humanity and all it depends upon to be sustained' (Fry, 2009, p5). This has clearly been shown through the topics discussed in the essay, as designers have no way to influence the use of shipping containers, they cannot control if the container gets used for human trafficking, or if it is used to create schools for deprived areas.

In order to be truly sustainable, solutions need to both last longer and have a life after their normal use period (Shedroff, 2009, p176). Many designers are now becoming more aware of their impacts and are trying to anticipate the unintended consequences of their work. They are working on becoming more sustainable, although 'In order to be truly sustainable, solutions need to both last longer and have a life after their normal use period' (Shedroff, 2009, p176). The positive unintended consequences of the use of shipping containers certainly meet this aspect of sustainability.

As discussed, the 'retired shipping containers can provide the framework for a school or a classroom, container boxes as retail spaces or being used as office spaces.' (Philspace, 2019) these containers being used as the framework for many useful buildings goes further to ensure that containers have the reputation of being truly sustainable. Despite the many positive unintended consequences of the shipping container, there are also many negative consequences. The most prevalent of these has been the increase in the amount of human trafficking that is taking place.

As countries rapidly create new ports, in order to keep up with the rapid globalisation and increase in imports/exports that is happening. As with the repurposing of containers into schools or other useful products at the end of their life, designers cannot be in complete control of what happens. However, it is important that designers are aware of this as a consequence of their choices- no matter how unintended it is. Along with human impacts, the negative environmental impacts of the shipping

containers including the dredging that takes place to create new channels or to improve those that are already in place to make more room for the ships, or in the case of the Evergiven, the creation of wider channels to allow the ships to travel through without the risk of being stuck. Zaksenberg and Cuffaro summed up the responsibility of designers well when they said 'Taking responsibility and effectively planning is necessary for manufacturers and designers have the ability and responsibility to assume the role of champion for sustainable issues.'(Zaksenberg, I and Cuffaro, D, 2013, p173). This truly shows the attitude that designers should be having towards not only sustainability, which for a long time has often been neglected leaving it as an unintended consequence but all of the unintended consequences of design. While, by their very nature, these consequences and impacts cannot be predicted- as they are unintended- perhaps designers should at least spend a little more time thinking about the potential impacts that both their choices and designs will have and the way that they are going to shape our world in the future.

As many will point out, the impacts of the shipping container cannot be controlled by designers, as the products are out of their control once they are being transported. However, designers can have an impact on these processes of transportation as alternative methods of transport can be used- even if they may be slower or more expensive. Designers have to choose whether they want to pay more of a financial cost or to pay with the environment and the damage it receives.

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