

Question 1

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 of the practitioners or thinkers discussed in your lecture strand.

Name: Scarlett Davies

Student number: 2305688

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Lecturer: Julia Lockheart

From creativity, technology, cultural references, and global challenges, designers and makers have evolved from “traditional roles” of fashion, product design, and architecture to playing a key role in addressing a response to social change, sustainability, and innovation. Design has always been engraved into human history; “Design, in the most generic sense of the word, began over 2.5 million years ago when Homo habilis manufactured the first tools. Human beings were designing well before we began to walk upright.” (Chapman, J, 2005, p.3) We often think of design in the modern sense as being about aesthetics or user experience; in its most basic sense, design is about problem-solving. Designers of the 21st century are using problem solving to achieve long-lasting ideas and sustainable solutions.

This essay is an investigation into why designers need to be able to evolve and change effectively in the next ten years to meet the needs of modern society and how to do so. Specifically, that of surface pattern, fashion, and design. From the perspective of two different thinkers whose ideologies both explore long-term revolutionary ideas for reshaping the future with sustainability in mind. The essay begins by exploring deeper into the works of Jonathan Chapman, who recognises why reusing, reworking, and being resourceful are better than using unsustainable products that we cannot reuse. After that, the essay explores ideas about the work of Brian Smith, who wanted to challenge existing norms by provoking critical thinking about how design is taught, practiced, and understood.

Jonathan Chapman, who authored the book ‘Emotionally Durable Design,’ wanted to influence and inform those who want to change the way design is for future generations. “Eco-design limits itself to an environmental technological approach, and recycling is sometimes an excuse for more rapid discarding.” (J. Chapman, 2005, p.7) Here, he is suggesting that recycling can sometimes be misused as an excuse to keep producing more to maintain an unsustainable consumption pattern. This is seen as a ‘band-aid’ solution rather than a long-term alternative. The ‘band-aid’ solution is usually a quick fix that does not address the underlying issues, which in this case are sustainable ways of living. The true sustainability of a product does not rely on if it can be recycled but whether it needs to be replaced in the first place. Reducing the consumption of making clothes rather than focusing on ways to handle the waste afterwards is a better approach.

Design is about addressing human needs, and sustainable development is fundamentally involved with meeting the needs of people without destroying resources for future generations. “Design takes concrete form in the work of the service professions that meet human needs, a broad range of making and planning disciplines.” (J. Chapman, 2005, p.3) Chapman relates to the designer's role in addressing human needs in a responsible and sustainable way. Although as a society we have a long way to go in the hopes of a cleaner, eco-friendly planet, some fashion businesses have begun to influence others. Patagonia's Worn Wear program has decided that their focus is using repairability and reuse rather than recycling and replacing to encourage customers to buy used gear, trade in their old items, or repair them instead of replacing them with new ones. (Seen in figure 1.) This approach helps to extend the lifespan of their products and reduce unnecessary waste in addition to this they offer repair services and even show consumers how to repair items themselves. Patagonia Worn Wear program promotes a mindset of mindful consumption, where quality is valued over quantity and environmental impact is considered throughout the brand. Patagonia addresses the problem of overconsumption and disposable culture by promoting the idea that products can be used longer rather than discarded after a few years of use.



Figure 1

Another important example of a sustainable influence is Stella McCartney, as her brand has been promoting ethical and eco-friendly practices within the fashion industry since launching her brand in 2001. Her approach focuses on a few key elements, including being cruelty-free, where rejecting animal products like fur, leather, and feathers is an important part of her brand. The brand also prioritises the use of organic cotton, recycled materials, and biodegradable fabrics as well as creating garments that are durable, repairable, and recyclable. McCartney uses the circular economy approach, which involves designing products with their end of life in mind; while also introducing a concept called ‘The Loop’ which is another key part of her commitment to sustainability and circular fashion. The concept revolves around creating a closed-loop system for fashion, where products are designed to be used, returned, recycled and transformed into new products. This promotes resource efficiency and reduces waste. They are committed to being transparent, providing detailed information about its supply chain and production processes,

and partnering with like-minded companies like the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, which also promotes the circular economy.

Following on from this, Brian Smith, who wrote the book 'A polemic—conceptual design,' suggested that small, continuous actions may seem insignificant in the moment but contribute to a much larger movement over time. "The best they can do is to try and change things within their own particular sphere of influence, harming others as little as possible, in the hope that they can help to alter things bit by bit." (B, Smith, 1977, p.2) By saying this, Smith influences others to focus on what one person can control by making a meaningful impact in their own worlds, hoping small actions can help where one has power. Being mindful and having an ethical approach to not just achieving one's own goals but also considering the impact on others, whether that's individuals, communities, or the environment, is important for the environment and future developments. For instance, in eco-design, sustainable fashion businesses may not immediately change the entire industry but play an important role in shifting consumers attitudes to influence others and create new norms.

Within Smith's book, he asks different questions, one being if we are content with improving the way we design: "Do we really hope for the big changes? If tomorrow is too soon, but the year 2000 too late for a revolution, just when is a revolution 'acceptable'?" (B, Smith. 1977. p.2) Suggesting here that a sense of urgency about change is needed, but timing may also feel problematic. The idea of sustainability requires revolutionary change, and that waiting too long could leave us with no other options, this underscores the historical moment we are in, environmental problems have become so ingrained that 'band-aid solutions' are now not enough. Smith also talks about a revolution but a revolution in sustainability is not about a 'radical,' disruptive approach. It is more about rethinking our daily lives, how we produce, consume, and relate to resources. When the transition of 'a big change' may feel quite daunting, taking smaller actions, whether it is creating more sustainable designs, minimising waste, or pushing for policy changes, may appear minor in the short term, but over time, they collectively build momentum and make a significant impact on the bigger picture. Prioritising short term profits over the long-term health of people and the planet is not what sustainable solutions are about.

Designers and makers have the ability to use artistic freedom in design, suggesting that they can 'create their own paradigms' and 'bring their dreams to a reality.' The quote "But we are supposed to be artistically creative too—we can damn well invent our own paradigms, right out of the blue, just like that, and design our dreams into reality, and no one will be very surprised." (B, Smith. 1977. p.3) emphasises the power of creativity while underscoring the idea that designers and makers can push boundaries and invent new ways of living, including pursuing innovative ideas that may seem impractical or unconventional at first glance. In the context of sustainability, the quote implies that designers are not confined by existing conventions but have the freedom to reimagine and reinvent systems, products, and environments. Smith is saying that designers can envision and create new models that are more harmonious with nature and society. As sustainable development needs a 'paradigm' shift in how we view our relationship with the environment designers can lead this change by creating new approaches that challenge traditional growth that exploits resources. Whether it is through circular economy principles or sustainable agriculture, designers have the power to invent new systems.

Lastly, encouraging a shift in focus towards root causes rather than just alleviating the symptoms could enhance the value of long-term sustainability solutions and be more impactful. "Sustainable design has developed a tendency to focus on the symptoms of the ecological crisis rather than the actual causes. In consequence, deeper strategic possibilities are overlooked, which if developed might build further value into existing creative methodologies." (J, Chapman. 2005. p.1) Chapman argues that by focusing on the surface issues, designers and makers may miss more profound strategic opportunities that could lead to transformative solutions. Adopting principles of the circular economy or questioning why replacing objects or clothing drives waste can redesign to function in a way that is sustainable. By addressing root causes Chapman suggests that designers can unlock deeper, more creative solutions. Rather than just adjusting existing designs to be less harmful, sustainable designs could evolve into 'revolutionary methodologies' that challenge current practices. Pushing designers to consider the full context and how their work fits within a broader system might contribute to solving fundamental challenges like environmental destruction or resource depletion.

One of the critical aspects of synthesis is the process of reduction to simplify complex information into its core elements. In design, this often means reducing excess and removing clutter to highlight the most important aspects of the design. "Synthesis reveals a cohesion and sense of continuity; synthesis indicates a push towards organisation, reduction and clarity" (J,Kolko, 2006 p,4) synthesis helps designers and problem solvers see these systems as interconnected parts of an entire system. For instance, sustainability challenges such as climate change and waste management can not be solved in isolation; they need an integrated approach that sees the link between

these issues. Synthesis allows designers to recognise patterns and relationships between areas leading to more effective long-lasting solutions. In this context, the circular economy model is a form of synthesis that takes various elements, waste reduction, resource efficiency, reuse, and recycling and organises them into a unified system for production and consumption. Kolko's idea of reduction through synthesis suggests that the process of simplifying and organising information can lead to more efficient and focused design solution, which reduces complexity and resource use. For example, when designing a sustainable product, synthesis could lead to a minimalist approach, where unnecessary features are not used, and the product is designed for durability, repairability and reuse rather than consumption. This is an approach that Stella McCartney and Patagonias Worn Wear program are already working towards.

In conclusion, in the next 10 years the role of designers and makers must evolve and change gradually to become a cleaner, more environmentally friendly place for fashion and design. We must create new visions and reflect what we want future generations to continue forward. Although we can still push personal creativity forward, we must do this in a way that is considered and carefully thought out, not just for our own gain. "Every action in the present is also a movement into a future that it helps shape but cannot determine." (S, Reeves, M, Goulden, R, Dingwall, 1987, p.3) This quote reflects the uncertainty that our actions today have an influence on the future, which is meant to be a good thing, but not being able to control or predict the future can also affect the future badly. In this essay, the context of adopting sustainable design practices now and not just in 10 years from now can shape a future where environmental impact is minimised, creating the conditions for future innovation and adaptation. Hopefully in the next 10 years the shift towards a circular economy will also accelerate, this involves reducing waste, recycling materials and designing for longevity and reuse. Minimising waste and designing products with their end of life in mind will help the crisis. The role of the designer and maker will be driven by innovation and collaboration with the need for systematic change. This will push sustainability from a small concern to a foundation and focus of modern life.

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