

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?

Name: Robyn Thorpe

Student Number: 2304559

Module Course: Research in context ADAD5003

Course: BA (hons) Surface Pattern and Textiles

Word Count: 2,416

Lecturer: Julia Lockheart

Everyone has bought something that has been designed by someone. From a patterned cushion, and the house that it will live in, to the food labels on shopping, and the fridge they will be stored in. It is no doubt that design is everywhere, and we throw it away as quickly as we buy it, onto the next grandiose thing. In the book *Meaningful stuff: Design that lasts*, Jonathan Chapman says, *'relentless cycles of desire and destruction through which we shop our way closer to an ever-evolving idea of the good life.'* (2021, P.151). This suggests that we live in a wasteful society, where the products consumers are buying do not last like they should, and this is where designers are challenged. In this essay I will analyse the role of the fashion designer in the 21st century, and the many factors that they must respond to, to create efficient products for their consumers. I will also discuss how this role might change alongside technological advancements, as well as consumer awareness of sustainability and the environmental impacts of the products that they are buying.

Designers are expected to be innovative, on trend, and ethically aware. People are often drawn to design to combat a problem. A bare room is solved by an interior designer's knowledge of how to fill space efficiently depending on the function of the room. The need for a new spring/summer collection is thought out by a fashion designer who is aware of past, present, and future trends to make sure that their line is still wearable in years to come. In the book *'How designers think'* by Bryan Lawson, he suggests that *'the control and combination of rational and imaginative thought is one of the designers most important skills'* (2017, P.38). Designers must be proficient in finding solutions to societies problems, creating outcomes that people not only need, but want too. To be equally creative as they are logical, is a skill that all designers should have now, and will continue to develop this skill in the future as more problems arise.

All designers create with a purpose, whether that be a more solution-based purpose, or decorative one, design is always crafted from an existing problem or idea to enhance. In the book *'Art, Design, and Visual Culture'* by Malcolm Barnard, the theory of visual culture is discussed, and how there is always functional or communicative intent to design, mainly referring to product or graphic design. However, Barnard also mentions ideas of art products, such as fashion or interior design, and if they do count as having a functional purpose. *'Many examples can be argued as having decorative function but the appearance, or aesthetic, of the object takes precedence over the job it is there to do'* (1998, P.15). For example, fashion's main function is for people to have something to wear, however, in society fashion is a way for people to express themselves through the visuals of garments like colour, shape and pattern. A basic principle of modern-day design, which was distinguished in the nineteenth century by architect Louis Sullivan, in his essay titled *'The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,'* he states *'It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, that form ever follows function. This is the law.'* (1896, P.34). In this quote, Sullivan is saying that the decorative output on designs should come from the functioning of that object and not be added primarily for aesthetic purposes. In contrast to Barnard and Sullivan's ideas on design, in this contemporary creative world, products can be perfectly practical, whilst still being aesthetically pleasing. In the 21st century designers have the ability and resources to not only design to face a problem but add the needed aesthetics to create visually pleasing and practical designs. The decoration to these designs is also a necessity depending on the product and who it is being designed for. A handbag must be able to sufficiently hold

people's day to day items but should also be equally appealing for the target market, therefore making decoration of a product the solution to a company's problem of lack of sales.

The process of design is a creative outlet for those who can find solutions to problems effectively, whilst still maintaining the need for the aesthetic of a product, especially when regarding fashion. This can prove difficult when sustainability comes into play. Lawson states *'The future role of designers are inevitably linked to the kind of direction in which we wish to go as a society'* (2017, P.20). All designers in the 21st century, and as we continue forwards, should be aiming to become more sustainable when designing, especially with the rise of climate change and resource depletion. With the rapid increase in consumer awareness of sustainability in this Anthropocene, the design community have found an abundance of inventive ways to combat the environmental crisis and create more environmentally friendly products. The discovery of using more sustainable materials such as hemp, bamboo, and any recycled materials like plastic, wood, and steel, displays the designers' abilities to solve these worldly issues and supports Lawson's statement that the design process is *'a response to changes in the wider social and cultural context in which design is practiced'* (2017, P.17). Designers are required to stay up to date with current world issues to ensure that their products are necessary and will be popular amongst buyers. Designer's roles are to be resourcefully mindful of their choices of materials and to take social responsibility on the possible outcomes on what could happen with their products after the design process. They are encouraged to incorporate the closed loop cycle, which was passed around by several thinkers, Swiss architect Walter Stahle's being one of those in 1970, and discussed how his products should be created for reuse instead of disposal at the end of their life, showing ideas of the idea of the 'cradle to cradle' way of designing. William Donough and Michael Braungart made this phrase popular, in their book *'Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things'* which is simply all about the sustainability of the life of a product and has had a significant impact on how designers think about their processes and how they can make items better for the environment when they are no longer wanted or needed. The expression 'cradle to cradle' which as Mark Gareth Corpuz describes in his article *'Cradle to Cradle: Principles, Examples, Pros, and Cons'* is simply, *'a criticism of the popular corporate phrase "cradle to grave," which describes traditional production and consumption models within a [linear economy](#)'* (Corpuz, 2021). Which is describing how products are made by designers knowing that they are not going to last and will inevitably end up in a landfill. The design philosophy of this is that designers will design products with recycled materials so that there is zero waste, creating this 'closed-loop system.' McDonough and Braungart state, *'in a cradle-to-cradle world, materials are continually cycled in a regenerative manner, never down-cycled or discarded, and the system itself is designed to maintain the health of the natural world'* (2002, P.72). Suggesting that although we do not yet live in this world, it is possible if designers can adhere to it, which a lot are already trying to do or are doing.

Expanding on this, within the world of design, the sustainability of a product requires thought about all aspects, from the manufacturing, to being bought, to eventually, and hopefully, being recycled. In Jonathan Chapman's book, *Meaningful Stuff: Design that lasts*, he suggests, *'The greatest professional challenge we face in moving toward a culture of design that lasts embracing the beginning, middle, and end of a products journey'* (2021, P.150). To be a sustainable designer is to evaluate the entirety of your products life and what

impact it could potentially have on the environment. From the sourcing of materials, to how it is manufactured, and the transportation of this product to your buyer, as well as considering when it becomes out of your control of what happens when it is no longer needed for its purpose. Chapman states, *'The design challenge is to ensure that products last in the hands of their users, and not in the depths of a landfill site'* (2021, P.149). supporting the well-known design phrase 'cradle-to-cradle', which is now a duty of modern-day and future designers to embed within their work.

Not only are the roles of designers to be ethically and sustainably responsible through their design, as well as being problem solvers, but with 21st century technology, designers are changemakers and social advocates in the world. Modern day designers hold a significant role in the public eye, through their creations, whether that be graphic design, advertising, promotional campaigns for societal issues, or even fashion designs, their creations can change the narrative and share their beliefs and values to wider audiences. Designers today have the power to influence opinions and send messages through their designs, that is why it is so important for designers to take accountability for the ethics that their products hold.

Within the world of fashion, the designer's role is not only to create new and on trend garments of a respectable quality, but to remain ethical and sustainable throughout the production. There are many designers who are striving for more sustainable futures for their brands. Pangaia being one of them. Pangaia is a materials science company pioneering for a more sustainable future. Whilst some companies work towards their products leaving less of a negative impact on the earth, or no impact at all, Pangaia's mission is for their products to leave a positive footprint on the planet, making it better for them to be manufactured than if they were not to exist at all. Pangaia are known to create new from old, reusing and recycling anything they can get their hands on. McDonough and Braungart suggest, *'We can do better than sustainable; we can create a world that is constantly renewing and giving.'* (2002, P.5). This is an ethos that Pangaia seem to hold close and follow, striving to be better than sustainable and give back to the earth whilst taking the negative away. With the rise of recent technologies, Pangaia's brand becomes increasingly more successful through their innovative ways of combatting the world's environmental issues. One example of how they are doing this is their collaboration with Graviky Labs and introducing Air-Ink into their apparel. Air-Ink is an incredibly ingenious discovery and displays how designers have the ability to change the way of design to do good for the earth. Anirudh Sharma, the founder of Graviky Labs, reflects on the quote from the 20th century architect's, R. Buckminster Fuller, in his 'The design of the future' speech, when interviewed with Smithsonian Magazine, he says, *'Pollution is nothing but resources we are not harvesting. We allow them to disperse because we have been ignorant of their value'* (1970). This is the outlook of a good designer, who can see solutions in everything, merging the creative and logical thinking. Pangaia is consistently working towards the future of their brand, and with their technological discoveries already making way into the fashion industry, there is no doubt that the brand will continue to advance within the realm of sustainability and positive change for the environment.

Unfortunately, not all fashion businesses are as environmentally aware or yet willing to take responsibility for the damages done by their products. 'Earth Logic Fashion Action Research Plan' is a book written by Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, which is a strategic and radical

plan to change the fashion industry and its ways of working, so that brands are taking the right precautions to include more sustainability into their business. Fletcher and Tham state, *'Those at the helm of fast fashion brands would put "the needs of the market" first, conforming to growth logic and pursuit of profit' (2019,P.7)*. Making it apparent that the big businesses in the world of fashion would rather stay unsustainable just to keep profits high. It is unlikely that every designer in the world would be completely sustainable within their craft in the next ten years. However, with society becoming increasingly aware of the major negative impact that the fashion industry has on the environment, designers would be forced to begin making changes to their usual ways, in order to keep their customers happy and buying. More designers will start changing their methods of making, whilst also becoming advocates for transparency of their products and others within the fashion industry.

Designers today are much more than just artists creating functioning and aesthetically pleasing products. They have had to adapt to our rapidly changing world, with its expanse of problems to combat, technologies to learn and incorporate, and trends to follow. Answering to the markets wants and needs, they are constantly being pushed to create new, out of the box products. Fashion designers are especially faced with plenty of challenges today, and will continue to face more issues, mainly with the ethics and sustainability, when creating their products.

In the next ten years, designers will continue to push their innovative ideas and respond to social and environmental factors, what is new in the media, and technological advancements. Their problem-solving skills will continue to advance alongside the issues which they are faced with, and the discovery of recent technologies will enhance designing, with hopes of helping towards making sustainability more available in design as well as for those buying. The sustainability talk will continue to grow, a conversation between the customer and designer should be had where both are aware of the impact of what they are involved in. The designer should continue to be transparent with their consumer, from the initial stages of sourcing their materials, to how the product can end its life, ideally by being recycled. Furthermore, the 'Cradle-to-Cradle' idea will be embedded into the majority of designers design processes, keeping the industry as green as possible, making most clothes from recycled materials, until they then can be recycled again for making new. The term designer is broad, but so is sustainability. Anyone can be a designer if you are creative enough. Anyone can be sustainable if you care enough. So, in ten years' time, designers will hopefully care more about the impacts that their products are having on the earth, and care more about designing excellent quality, efficient products that their consumers will want and need.

Bibliography:

Barnard, M. (1998). *Art, Design and Visual Culture*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Chapman, J. (2021). *Meaningful stuff: design that lasts*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Mit Press.

Corpuz, M. (2021). *Cradle to Cradle: Principles, Examples, Pros, and Cons*. [online] Profolus. Available at: <https://www.profolus.com/topics/cradle-to-cradle-principles-examples-pros-and-cons/>.

Fletcher, K. and Tham, M. (2019). *EARTH LOGIC Fashion Action Research Plan*. [online] Available at: <https://earthlogic.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Earth-Logic-E-version.pdf>.

Lallensack, R. (2019). *This Ink Is Made from Air Pollution*. [online] Smithsonian Magazine. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/ink-made-air-pollution-180972212/>.

Lawson, B. (2017). *How designers think*. Architectural Press.

McDonough, William, and Michael Braungart. *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. North Point Press, 2002.

Sullivan, Louis. *The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered*. 1896, edited by William H. Jordy, University of Chicago Press, 1986.