

A Manifesto for Design: How Ecofeminism and Ecosophy Could Transform the World

In this essay I intend to discuss how applying some of the theories of ecofeminism, deep ecology and ecosophy to everyday design could greatly lessen the negative environmental impact of many products and help change the path from new, wanted product to obsolete landfill. These proposed thought processes should be applied to all areas of design including packaging, will reduce waste across all areas and lead to a “cradle to cradle” (Braungart & McDonough, 2009) production system thus making green design the obvious option for designers and manufacturers.

The definition of design by the Oxford English Dictionary is “underlying purpose or planning” (Soanes & Hawker, 2005, p268). Green (in relation to the environment) is described as to “make something less harmful to the environment” (Soanes & Hawker, 2005, p441). Therefore we can summarise that 'green design' as where the environmental consequences of the object, packaging, by-products, and the potential materials used are considered as an integral part of the design process. I am interested in green design because I believe that including ecological care in one's design process will lead us to a better future as “once you understand the destruction taking place, unless you do something to change it, even if you never intended to cause such destruction, you become involved in a strategy of tragedy.” (Braungart & McDonough, 2009, p44) In my opinion it is necessary to re-evaluate design and production processes in order to make them more environmentally sound and more sustainable, I also believe it is possible to do this without compromising on quality or quantity, whether it concerns large scale production or the individual maker.

Feminism itself uses gender as a consideration when analysing situations. True feminism should be as critical of the feminine as of the masculine because feminism is a movement toward equality, therefore, both sexes must be held to the same standards. Ecofeminism is a relatively new branch of feminism that states that, as male bias should be recognised and

eliminated wherever it is found, ecologically the domination of nature by humankind should be stopped, and argues for a step away from anthropocentrism towards a more equal standpoint, where nature's 'voice' is heard. It is well described by Gaard (1993, p1) as follows:

“Ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism: peace movements, labor [sic] movements, women's health care, and the anti-nuclear, environmental and animal liberation movements. Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. Its theoretical base is a sense of self most commonly expressed by women and various other nondominant groups – a self that is interconnected with all life.”

Here she is likening those who oppress nature to those who oppress any group, and saying that in order to free one oppressed group one must free all of them.

Ecosophy is a neologism of ecology and philosophy, where humankind's disregard of the planet's needs are opposed philosophically; ecology is viewed as an integral part of life. It is a discourse where in the natural world and humankind live in harmony with one another. It is a branch of ethics and as such disallows the clouding of one's judgment by feeling or emotion, taking only the rational and logical arguments into account. If one looks at the Aral Sea where “in the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Union more or less stopped the flow of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers into the sea by diverting them to irrigate cotton crops”(BBC News, 2002) which led to drastic changes in the environment. Since then “the water volume has fallen to such an extent that it covers just 25% of its former area” (BBC News, 2002) which has impacted on the area so hugely that

“Unep [United Nations Environment Programme] says that every day 200,000 tonnes of salt and sand from the uncovered sea bed are carried by the wind and dumped on farmland within a 300 km radius of the sea. This salt pollution is destroying pastures for livestock, poisoning arable land and causing severe health problems for the rural population.” (BBC News, 2002)

This has brought warnings that the sea itself could disappear by 2020 if its use is not changed. Ecosophy would see this not as an emotive tragedy for the people, flora and fauna nearby but as a scientific, social and ecological disaster as the local biosystems have since and continue to suffer in the effects. The intentions of ecosophy are well described by Arne Naess, the acknowledged inventor of the terms ecosophy and deep ecology –

“With Ecosophy, politicians or decision makers will no longer push for more science, as much as they will push for more wisdom. Because however much we get of science, ignorance will increase if we do not know the consequences of what we do by means of the science.”
(Rothenberg, 1993, p134)

Ecosophy could be seen as continuing the dualistic thought pattern that humans and nature are separate; deep ecology very definitely states that humankind and the natural world are one, with the planet seen, not as a machine but as an organism in itself (Pepper, 1996).

“Deep ecology fundamentally rejects the *dualistic* view of humans and nature as separate and different. It holds that humans are intimately a *part* of the natural environment: they and nature are one.”
(Pepper, 1996, p17).

One of the main drawbacks of ecosophy and deep ecology is that they do not take into account the personal, this is why they should be paired with ecofeminism as it embodies a warmer set of tenets. To enable ethics, ecosophy and ecofeminism to be applied to mainstream design one must be aware of, and avoid, the possibility of these principles becoming that which they stand against, they must not be aggressive or dominant traits but work alongside the other considerations that designers have. One must not become blinded by ecologically sound production considerations to the detriment of the form, desirability and suitability of the designed object, as an

ethical object that lacks these qualities is as environmentally unsound as one designed un-ethically; ethics should not dominate the design process but work in harmony with it. In this new way of thinking no single design element should take precedent, ecological, financial and consumer interests etc should all be of equal holding.

These theories work well together as they embody the multifaceted personality of humankind and they look forward to a better future for the natural world. Their philosophies can be simply applied by a designer, as their traits are so naturally human. However one cannot change what one does not understand so designers must make commitment to environmental understanding and consideration even if it involves breaking thought patterns and design habits.

“The essential point of my paper is that to invent something new, and to bring it into being, is to change not only one’s surroundings but to change oneself and the way one perceives, to change reality a little perhaps?” (Jones, 1984, p127)

In terms of textile production, many leaps and bounds were made during the industrial revolution of the early 20th century. At this time material production became mechanised and the guiding principle was to make things fast, cheaply and regularly (both in terms of producing similar amounts over similar time spans and also with a regular finish) and therefore accessible to the masses (leading to the ‘high street’ and mass consumerism) At this time the fossil fuels used to power the factories and, later, to make fibres from (nylon, polyester etc) seemed bountiful and unending, smoke in the air signalled people and machines hard at work and therefore production and accessibility became feasible, turnover and profits higher, total wage bills lower, and waste seem to be the natural by-product of a positive future.

Less than a century later our scientific knowledge of the planet and the effects of human inhabitation on it is much greater, implying a much more solemn future. With fossil fuels becoming shorter in supply, waste, landfill and rubbish dumping becoming greater problems and ecosystems dying out as a result of human behaviour, designers and manufacturers must take responsibility for the products they make, packages, ship and sell, both pre-

and post- consumer and also during the products useful life span. As “genuine responsibility for nature begins with the root meaning of the word – ‘our capacity for response’ “ (Kheel in Gaard 1993, p260) I would say our first response should be to look for simple eco solutions upon which to build new, larger patterns of behaviour.

Although I feel these ecologically sound tenets should be applied across the whole design industry, in terms of textiles this means looking at the fibres one uses, how and where they’re sourced, how fabrics are made and the effluvium from making both the cloth and items from it, how the items are cut, stitched, used, washed, and disposed of. We need to take the brute force out of production (as discussed in Braungart & McDonough, 2009) and start working more ethically, taking more responsibility for what we make and how we make it.

The inbuilt obsolescence of many products is as much an example of the down side of our fast advancing technology as it is a tribute to its success and that of marketing; if a product is designed to only last as long as it takes to create a updated version, and the new version is made to seem better, faster and more desirable then there is no reason not to buy it as soon as possible. Similarly with packaging; much of it is designed first and foremost to protect the interests of the manufacturer (tamper-proof, easy to stack etc) that the environmental aspects are ignored. It is easy to overlook packaging as a designed product in itself, when in fact it is often the first part of a completed product to become obsolete. Everything we throw away, particularly in terms of packaging and casing must be remade, costing the manufacturers money and adding to landfill unnecessarily. If companies were to take the ‘waste’ packaging back for reuse it would lower costs, create less landfill and less need for virgin materials to be farmed. As Duracell proved with their all-cardboard battery packaging, not a lot needs to change visually or physically to make packaging that is easy to recycle or reuse while also being easy to produce.

At a company such as Howies deep ecology and ecofeminism in green design has worked very well as business practice and provide a good example. Founded on a belief in making slogan laden clothes to make you

think as well as being desirable, wearable garments, and considering the planet needs by growing carefully and sustainably, working in natural materials selected to have the appropriate properties for the garment they are to become as well as being sustainable and biodegradable, sound production values (in terms of staff and of manufacturing) and listening to their customers to design items that are wanted, like their thermal clothing; made from sustainable merino wool and knitted in such a way to trap air thus keeping you warmer. As the garments have been thought about right to the end of their lifecycle they can be composted.

Large companies have the power, money and resources to invest in scientific research into ecology and should lead the way by example, such as Nike's recent teaming with Creative Commons and the GreenXchange. The basic premise is that companies share their ideas and information with one another to speed up the forward movement of green design while reserving the rights of the company who holds the original idea. This sharing has a very definite ecofeminist ethic to it, by calling for the end of secrecy of ideas it calls for the end of the oppression of freedom of speech and thought, also it hails all as having equal rights to the information available. Ecosophically it takes a rational and logical approach – to share knowledge will benefit all yet retaining the right of ownership of the ideas means it in no way compromises the integrity of that ownership.

One must however be aware of green-wash when analysing ecological practices or design options. One must constantly question the materials used, the processes, the motive for the companies move towards greener practices and so on especially when the information on those methods is provided by a third party. Similarly one must be aware of greenwash when choosing companies to purchase from. Greenwash describes situations where environmentally positive terms such as sustainable, organic and natural are used in vague explanations to imply that a person, product or company is more ecologically sound than they truly are. The phrase 'eco-efficiency' is a good example of a form of greenwash, it first came into being as an idea around 1987, and became a recognized term in about 1992. Braungart and McDonough (2009, p51) describe it as follows.

“Eco-efficiency would transform human industry from a system that takes, makes and wastes into one that integrates economic, environmental and ethical concerns. ... Primarily the term means ‘doing more with less’ ”

The trouble with eco-efficiency is that, as one can set ones own green standards, it allows ecologically unsound practises to continue, still causing harm just more slowly: If you reduce your carbon emissions by 50% that is an extremely positive step but you are still emitting 50%. The definition of efficient in the OED is “working well with minimum waste of money or effort” (Soanes & Hawker, 2005, p317); this still allows for waste.

It could even be said that, in today’s new and enlightened age of sustainable awareness, design has become a lazy and somewhat cosmetic practice” (Chapman & Gant, 2007, p4)

However if designers took the initiative to think about the products they are creating they could literally change the world. By applying ecosophical and ecofeminist thought to their work it would instantly become more green. Working in a sustainable fashion could easily be seen as a strong way to work – saving the planet, the race against extinction etc are all very heroic terms which fit easily into a business plan or design work, making the business or the designer, the hero saving the damsel in distress (Kheel in Gaard, 1993, p245); the planet, or mother nature.

As designers we should be pushing further forward than those spoken of by Gary Hustwit: ‘Everyone I have talked with has been thinking about materials, efficiency and sustainability for years, but I think they’re probably more focussed on making things insanely great (therefore indispensable) rather than cheap’ to a complete life-cycle as every product will one day become disposable. (Iezzi, 2009)

Because we live in an era when consumerism is encouraged and want is endorsed, discussion about want and the background of the wanted or designed object is often dissuaded in case of enforced change by legislation or consumer boycotting. To make your product green seems to be perceived as expensive unrealistic by many producers although it can actually prove to be very financially viable. For example when Nike redesigned their shoeboxes they reduced the amount of materials used by 16%, over 5,00 tonnes of cardboard a year, which is a considerable financial saving on

materials (Allaway, 2006). Our future also concerns the question of whether the consumer can be content while buying less. Thus one must also ask oneself if this is the question for the designer or if, as a designer, the answer is to facilitate positive purchasing by making environmentally sound decisions and allowing the consumer the choice as to whether to buy or not.

Encouraging designers to look at the materials they use and to feel connected to nature can only lead to improvements in how they work, design and feel in everyday life. Once one feels connected to nature and a part of it, it is unfeasible to think of designing anything that would harm it or go against its natural rhythms, and therefore against oneself.

Many products that have been created since the turn of the 19th century have become an intrinsic part of life. We should look at these materials in an ecosophical way. Take plastic bottles as an example, designed to be readily available, used once, then thrown away. Currently we then drill for more oil to make new plastic, however the bottles could be recycled to make new ones from the reclaimed plastic or we could make them into fleece or insulation, or many other items but it cannot be done without designer collaboration. If the designer of the bottle itself says to the manufacturer that it must be made from recycled materials then it will be, should the label designer make it clear that the bottle is recyclable the consumer will be confident in leaving it for collection, which in turn will lead to it being recycled and so on. If both label and the bottle designer collaborate to make the bottle such a shape that the label will stay on with no glue, or is part of the bottle design itself, all the better for ease of separation and recycling.

Over the festive fortnight 2008 we threw out approximately 125,000 tonnes of plastic packaging (Hickman, 2008) in the UK, most of which could have been recycled. Recycling is a fairly complex process, mainly due to the mixing of original materials during manufacture. Because of this, often what is reclaimed is of a lower quality than the original material (for example plastics can come back with a shorter molecule chain, therefore are weaker) but this does not need to be the end of their lifespan. With careful addition of chemicals the materials can be made as good, or even better than the

original. Even with the addition of extra chemicals the recycling process is still a much healthier one than continued mining and landfill. With careful and creative thought in the design process glueless and compostable packaging, products made from a single material or easy to dismantle items could become the standard.

Green design is as simple as adding "...one universal label, perhaps a colour coded tag similar to the nutritional information on some supermarket food" as championed by Beth Smith in *Selvedge Magazine* (2008, p63). Ecological thought must not work against technology; they should work hand in hand. We cannot go back to a pre-industrial era, nor should we want to. We must not let eco-heroism become another dominator. In this new way of thinking no single design element should take precedent, ecological, financial and user interests should all be of equal holding.

Ultimately the appropriate ethic for how we treat our planet is to be respectful and considerate. By applying the main principles of ecofeminism (caring, nurturing, connected, thoughtful), deep ecology and ecosophy (ethical, clear-headed, practical) to design we, as designers can take the lead in making a sustainable and greener future for both humankind and the natural world.

The future should lie with better quality items, fewer purchases and thoughtful disposal. To become truly sustainable will be a rewarding process in which designers can have the largest impact. For a truly creative designer ecologically sound material choices or ethical concerns should not be constraints but should instead lead to alternative thought patterns and therefore solutions to perceived problems – eco constraints are no more a problem than budgets or time limits.

