The beautiful, durable and mundane

exploring notions of value in craft and design practice,
in the context of sustainability

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Signed statement of originality

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**Abstract**

The project addresses issues of value and meaning in objects while at the same time considering more sustainable approaches to designing, making and consuming, through the reuse of already existing materials. By exploring concepts such as durability and ephemerality, the precious and the mundane, I have sought to show possibilities for reconciling the production of objects with reduced environmental effects of their production, use and disposal. This was an issue that tended to be neglected during the period of modernist design with its embracing of technology and the machine aesthetic. Since the 1960’s with the emergence of designers and writers such as Victor Papanek and Buckminster Fuller there has been a growing concern to develop more sustainable approaches to design, and a broader consideration of meaning and engagement with objects. Some of the significant contemporary designers addressing these issues include Paolo Ulian, Hella Jongerius and Constantin and Laurene Boym. It is with reference to this field that I contextualise my practice.

Through the research project I have recognised the importance of a local focus, in supporting more sustainable approaches and engagement with objects. In the process I have identified factors specific to designing with reuse materials, and have used them to guide the direction of the research. These include: material availability, perceived value of materials, time or cost required to achieve a high finish, design complexity and sophistication, and perceived value of the finished product. What has also emerged from the research is the importance of commercial considerations in designing for sustainability, as I believe economically viable objects contribute more than purely symbolic ones in influencing the perceptions and habits of designers and consumers. The project has shown that engagement with objects and sustainable approaches, when considered as integral to a design’s development, can be mutually beneficial and lead to aesthetically sophisticated and highly valued objects.

**Acknowledgements**
I wish to thank Jessica Markwell who, through the course of this project, has given a
great deal of practical and creative support, and critical advice, and has always been there
at times of need.

I also want to thank my supervisors Kevin Perkins and John Smith, and Llewellyn Negrin
(semester 2, 2005), for their consistent and welcome support and guidance. Also thanks
to Philip Blacklow for his always excellent technical support, no matter the medium, and
to Stuart Houghton and Dave Roberts for their help and advice, and to David Stevenson,
post-graduate coordinator, Tasmanian School of Art.

I am also very grateful to Malte Wagenfeld from RMIT for agreeing to be a consultant on
my project; Julian Pratt (also of RMIT) for his willingness to share knowledge; Cadbury
Schweppes, in particular Clinton Luckock and John Sandel for their assistance with
materials; Dr. Aidan Davidson for enthusiastic support; Allen Pullen for technical advice;
Evette Karklins from Warrington International; Scott Blacklow from TAFE Tasmania;
Peter Whyte; Jamie Spaulding; Marcus Tatton and Marie Bakker; everyone at the
Resource Tip Shop; and Meryn from Going Solar.

Thanks also to my parents Ross and Judy Skinner for love and support.
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Introduction

As resources are depleted, there is a growing need to consider sustainable approaches to design and consumption. Connected to this is the need to re-engage a sense of value and emotional attachment lacking in much that is industrially produced. In my research, I am attempting to unite these two aspects of value - sustainability and meaning/personal attachment. These have received increased consideration by designers in the last fifteen years. It is my aim to give an overview of these developments, provide links between previously separated yet similar aspects, and incorporate them into the context of my practice, as a designer-maker.

In this research project I have developed multiple function lighting/furniture objects that explore contradictions and transformations in notions of value, by utilizing materials intended as disposable to create objects of value and permanence. Tensions between the ephemeral and the lasting, the mundane and the precious, are explored within the context of domestic objects. My aim has been to develop work that explores the derivation of value from emotional or evocative responses in the user, and the poetic potential of the re-contextualising of humble materials. The ethical utilisation of materials in terms of sustainability, re-use, and longevity is also central to the task of constructing value in the context of contemporary design practice.

I aim through the project to question terms often presented as mutually exclusive, such as aesthetics and ethics, where one is de-emphasised in order for the other to receive more attention. I aim to show, as Jack Elliot writes in Design Philosophy Papers, that ‘the

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1 An example being the title of the 7th Venice Architecture Biennale -‘Less Aesthetics, More Ethics’ - implying that more (of one) must mean less (of the other). Elliot, J 2004 ‘Reconciling Eco-Ethics and Aesthetics in Design’, Design Philosophy Papers, #2, <www.desphilosophy.com/dpp/home.html>. 
designed object can form the locus for aesthetics and ethics to mutually reinforce each other in the production of an intentional positive form of meaning.\textsuperscript{2}

In his review of Renny Ramaker’s book \textit{Less+More;Droog Design in Context} in \textit{Crafts} magazine, Jeremy Myerson states that there is ‘an inherent recognition of the tension that lies between the need to enrich the experience of living with objects, and a simultaneous desire to reduce the environmental impact of an accelerating cycle of over-production.’\textsuperscript{3} This is one of my motivations for approaching this subject. In their book \textit{Cradle to Cradle}, William McDonough and Michael Braungart challenge the current environmental discourse of limits – use less, be less bad – and, with nature as the model, instead propose a system of abundance. They point out that our current system rapidly converts resources into un-useable forms, but suggest that if we changed to a system of endlessly recirculated ‘nutrients’ within closed-loop cycles, our systems, like nature, could be regenerative not degenerative. ‘Sweeping away, shutting out, and controlling nature’s imperfect abundance are implicit features of modern design, ones rarely if ever questioned.’\textsuperscript{4} Through the designing and making of objects that question such implicit features of modern design, it is my intention to develop practical, producable objects that integrate approaches such as material reuse within the context of contemporary furniture and object design, in locally produced limited edition/small batch production.

I have been designing and making furniture and lighting since 1982. I graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Art in furniture design from the University of Tasmania in 1988. In 1993 I spent 5 months in Tokyo (after being awarded the Australia Council’s studio there), and 2 months in Europe. On return to Hobart I began part-time work at the Resource TipShop, a cooperative business that is licensed to salvage and sell goods from the Hobart landfill. As well as continuing to exhibit in design group exhibitions, I also made work for “Art from Trash”, Resource’s annual educational exhibition. Gradually my design practice was influenced by not only what I found on the tip but by my research

\textsuperscript{2} Elliot, J.
\textsuperscript{3} Myerson, J 2003, Review, \textit{Less+More;Droog Design in Context}, in Crafts Jan/Feb, p.63
into more sustainable approaches to designing and making. In considering post-graduate study I felt a project researching these ideas was important, not only for the development of my own practice but also because it was an aspect rarely considered in the local context of furniture and object design.

It was my initial intention when beginning this project to develop a range of objects, each a manifestation of aspects of sustainability and emotional attachment in object and furniture design. However, as the project developed both practically and theoretically, I recognised the need to clearly delineate the project’s parameters. I felt the project would be most relevant and successful when focusing on my immediate practice, therefore the project does not investigate sustainable approaches for high volume furniture or object manufacture but concentrates on locally produced, limited edition/ small batch production. The project also does not encompass recycling but rather employs reuse. While “Recycling” involves the processing of materials (cleaning, grading, shredding or blending) for remanufacture, “Reuse” utilizes a product or material after its initial lifespan for an identical, similar or new use, without reprocessing the constituent materials.

For a designer/maker, reuse is a more accessible, sustainable and simpler method. Reuse does not require industrial processes, so less energy is required and while recycling often requires centralised facilities, reuse encourages a local approach. Incorporating reuse materials can require extra consideration of methods of assembly, but this can encourage a consideration of disassembly, for the next ‘life’ of the materials. Simplicity and ‘openness’ of construction can also bring engagement with users through a coherence of form, way of making and material. Reuse as a technique also suits my approach to designing which is one of constructing and assembling form, rather than moulding or removing. Reuse is a sustainable, practical approach offering designers a basis for innovation. In this project I have utilized two forms of material reuse. Post-consumer reuse takes materials and objects that have been discarded by consumers (in this project,  

6 van Hinte, E 1997, Eternally Yours; visions of product endurance, 010, Rotterdam. p. 193
purchased from the Tipshop or by salvaging) while post-industrial material reuse uses materials from industries after their initial use, prior to disposal (in this project, packaging from Cadbury Schweppes).

The problem of un-sustainability is a vast one being tackled from diverse directions. For the area of small scale craft furniture and object design, its impact is assumed to be insignificant which, comparatively, it is. It may seem questionable ‘to subject small productions to stringent environmental standards when elsewhere material is being wasted on a massive scale.’ As Ettore Sottsass argues ‘people who build warships and use tons of steel need to bother about ecology. Don’t let them tell me about it, when I make handles every 5 years.’ Similarly Matali Crasset writes that ‘for the time being ecology will remain something that students learn about and study in design schools.’ However, I believe the best way to move to a more sustainable system is through individuals considering their personal decisions and actions, in the context of their own lives. I believe the significance is one of ‘problematising’ - identifying the problem (within the context of my practise), creating the question - rather than providing solutions. While my focus in this project is on limited edition/small batch production, the methods and approaches I have developed are applicable to other forms of production.

Significant to the project is also a focus on the local. Possibilities and new approaches as mentioned above come from local approaches. As Stuart Walker says in *Eternally Yours* ‘sustainability will be about achieving a complex and fragile balance between tradition and innovation’ to ‘harmonise the benefits and reality of mass production approaches with the benefits of local-scale design and production.’ I believe the approaches and ideas outlined in this project provide a site for opportunity and innovation, and show positive benefits to designers and consumers of changing their approach to designing and consuming. They also provide a new standard of measure for the integration of

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8 Ramakers, R, p.10
11 Walker, S 1997
sustainable approaches into designers’ practices, as Stuart Walker says in his article “Games on a stone pavement”\textsuperscript{12}, a foundation on which to establish ideas. There are a number of current definitions for design processes that incorporate environmental factors, including Green Design, Environmental Design, Ecological Design, and Sustainable Design. A useful and inclusive one defines Sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'\textsuperscript{13} Sustainability in the context of this project is a search for new approaches to designing and making that recognise the impacts objects of our production have on social, environmental and economic systems, and the responsibility of each of us to change from wasteful approaches to regenerative ones. It is with reference to the above considerations, background and parameters that I locate my project.

Chapters 1 and 2 look at the context within which my research project is located. In Chapter 1 I research the background, issues and current literature regarding sustainable design and the construction of value in objects. In Chapter 2 I highlight influential designers and how they incorporate sustainable approaches into their practices, while dealing with the issue of value in objects. Chapter 3 focuses on the practical research and describes how the project developed over the course of study including approaches and techniques used, and successes and failures. It includes a discussion of each of the works in the final submission. I discuss products and materials, forms, techniques and functions explored during the research project. The conclusion sums up the outcomes of and the contribution made by the project to the field of sustainable design.


\textsuperscript{13} This definition is from the Brundtland commission in 1987, a UN Environment Commission that was a precursor to the later Earth Summits of 1992 and 2002.