

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

Torino, 10th - 11th - 12th July 2008

Organised by Co-ordination of Italian Design Research Doctorates with
Conference of Italian Design Faculty Deans and Programme Heads.

In the framework of WORLD DESIGN CAPITAL TORINO 2008 | © ICSID
An ICSID initiative of the IDA.

Marchand Anne [amarcha@ucalgary.ca]

**Visiting Professor, École de design industriel, Faculté de l'aménagement, Université de Montréal;
PhD candidate, Faculty of Environmental Design, University of Calgary, Canada**

Walker Stuart [s.walker@lancaster.ac.uk]

**Professor and co-director, Imagination Lancaster, Lancaster University; Professor, Faculty of
Environmental Design, University of Calgary, UK**

Cooper Tim [t.h.cooper@shu.ac.uk]

Head of the Centre for Sustainable Consumption, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

BEYOND ABUNDANCE

**Motivations and perceived benefits underlying choices for more
sustainable lifestyles**

Abstract

The need for 'lighter' patterns of consumption, particularly in industrialized countries, is widely recognized as an essential step towards a more sustainable future (United Nations, 2002; OECD, 2002; UNEP, 2000). The idea that people's choices, behaviours and lifestyles play a vital role in moving towards more sustainable patterns of consumption in particular, and towards sustainable development in general, is a point of agreement in international environmental policy debates (Jackson, 2004).

For the individual, participation in the vital but still fuzzy project that is 'sustainability' can be realized by adopting more responsible consumption patterns. Broadly speaking, responsible consumption refers to minimizing the negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts related to a) consumption choices, b) the amount of goods and/or services consumed, and c) the acquisition, use, maintenance and disposal of a product. It involves consuming less and consuming differently. Furthermore, it could be said also to require "getting more with less, not more stuff but more satisfaction" (Manno, 2002, p. 67). For product development, "it involves rethinking how needs are met and products are conceived" and "will involve finding a mix of products and services through which consumers will be able to buy less, use less, and dispose of less without suffering a loss of wellbeing" (Cooper, 2005, p. 50). This represents a significant challenge as it is not only about 'things', but also how we relate to them. Responsible consumption implies important lifestyle changes and the development of different attitudes towards the material world. With regards to lifestyles, this is an area where design can play an especially important role. Imagining the unknown, visualizing alternatives, and proposing desirable scenarios and solutions are the areas of skill and expertise that characterize the profession. Design has a significant contribution to make, since it has the potential to envision new practices and ways of organizing daily life.

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

To develop such solutions and to present them in ways that are both feasible and appealing to a broad public, it seems essential to understand the motivations that have already led some people to adopt more sustainable lifestyles. This paper presents the results of a qualitative study conducted among citizens who, on a voluntary basis, have decided to diminish their levels of consumption and to opt for more ecologically sound solutions. It looks at the motivations and factors underlying the re-orientation of their lifestyles. Eleven people participated and a total of eighteen interviews were conducted. These interviews, of one to three hours duration depending on whether respondents wanted to meet once or twice, were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using qualitative research methods. In addition, one of the researchers actively participated in existing citizen meetings in which topics related to sustainable lifestyles regularly animated the discussions. More than 40 meetings, each of two hours duration, were attended, representing over 80 hours of participant observation. The paper draws on empirical data and on the work of scholars such as Schor (1998) who discusses motivations for downshifting, and Princen (2002) and Kasser (2002) who discuss the hidden costs of high consumption.

The study, which is part of a larger research program that looks at product design and material cultures for sustainability, highlights and describes different factors driving consumption and lifestyle changes. It reveals that the adoption of more sustainable consumption patterns is not only motivated by altruistic and environmental considerations, but also, significantly, by perceived personal benefits, including an expected increase in personal well-being. These motivations, together with how they unfold into preferences for particular product's qualities or characteristics that are illustrated, are discussed. This 'individual' dimension often seems to be omitted in academic literature. However, this research indicates that it warrants more emphasis as it seems to represent a key incentive for change. Greater understanding and knowledge in this area could, potentially, help in developing and promoting design solutions that are more in line with the principles of sustainability.

References

- Cooper, T. (2005). "Slower Consumption: Reflections of Product Life Spans and the 'Throwaway Society'", *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, vol. 9, no. 1-2, pp. 51-67.
- Jackson, T. (2004). "Motivating Sustainable Consumption: A Review of Evidence on Consumer Behaviour and Behavioural Change", A Report to the Sustainable Development Research Network, Center for Environmental Strategy, University of Surrey, Surrey.
- Kasser, T. (2002). *The High Price of Materialism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Manno, J. (2002). « Commoditization: Consumption Efficiency and an Economy of Care and Connection », *Confronting Consumption*, Princen, T., Maniates M., Conca K. (eds.), The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA): London, pp 67-87.
- OECD (2002). *Towards Sustainable Household Consumption: Trends and Policies in OECD Countries*, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Publication, Paris.
- Princen, T. (2002). *Confronting Consumption*, T. Princen, M. Maniates, and K. Conca (eds.), MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Schor, J. (1998). *The Overspent American*, Harper Perennial, New York.
- UNEP (2000). "Sustainable Consumption and Production", *Creating Opportunities in a Changing World: Report of the 4th International Business Forum*, Berlin, 1999.
- UNITED NATIONS (2002). *Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development*, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August-4 September 2002, United Nations Publications.