

Design for the Real World: An essay on Victor Papanek's Ideals of Design with relevance to our world today

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What is Design?

Dick Buchanan states "Design is the human power to conceive, plan, and realize products that serve human beings in the accomplishment of any individual or collective purpose."

According to Ralph Kaplan, "Design is making things right."

Design is a creative process whereby one thinks of ways to problem solve and create products or services thereby improving lifestyles. The amount of thought that goes into each of these products determines if a product is well designed or badly designed. Design in our age may not be limited to creation of tangible products. It could be intangible in terms of designing education and systems design.

We are at a stage in time whereby anyone can be a designer, with DIY kits to YouTube videos, designing an object is relatively easy and possible for anyone and everyone who is interested in doing it; but what separates a man on the street building a home and a designer is the amount of thought that goes into the process of creating the product and prototyping. Each stage right from the start to the end product is carefully thought out. Designers follow a process which initially I was sceptical about when I first joined Srishti. The whole idea of having a concept and drawing inspiration from it baffled me. But I now realise that is what separates me from the man on the street. The process is important as it helps generate ideas and gives me direction while working and chalks out a clear pathway for the designer.

Design for the Real World

Victor Papanek's main ideals with respect to the design process, are pre-determining the use and need of the product, the tools required to make the product, the materials and its impact (in production, use and disposability) on society in the short term as well as long term. The product must have an element of association in it which is intrinsic to the culture for which it is created. He laid stress on the word *Telesis* by which he meant that there must be an intellectual harmony in the production process between nature and society.

It is on the basis of these ideals that I will be chalking out my essay with issues in today's world.

My take on Victor Papanek's Ideals

Victor Papanek believes that all design is not honest. That a designer manipulates situations to create products according to their own vested interests or that of their clients not taking into account its impact on the environment and the linkage effects it might have on society. At this stage where we are facing an environmental crisis, design must come to play a key role in innovating and creating "sustainable" products. It is we designers that actually have the key to make or break the planet. It is we who create products and put them out in the market and it is from there that the consumer buys it or rejects it. If we create irresponsible products the consumer buys these products.

The Sustainable and Eco- Friendly Bandwagon

Sustainability is nothing more than' meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Eco- friendly or environmentally friendly on the other hand refers to goods and services, laws, guidelines and policies considered to inflict minimal or no harm on the environment.

A key question I'd like to raise in this essay is how do we make eco- friendly and sustainable goods affordable to the masses? Sustainable is becoming a matter of status. It's becoming a new trend, a fashion statement. But how much of these sustainable products actually reach the masses? The prices of eco-friendly good are exorbitant. They are not affordable to the every – day consumer, even if he is and wants to be environmentally conscious. No doubt such products require greater time and effort. But these products must be mass produced instead of being produced for elite consumption if we want to make a difference. History is repeating itself. To put it in Marxian words the proletariat procure organic; the bourgeois don't.

How do we do it? How do we make organic fruits and vegetables available in the local markets, at local prices available to local people?

Most often consumers prefer cheaper "use and throw" products that end up pilling up in landfills. Educating consumers about *quality VS quantity* is important. Then again do we trust standardization organizations like ISI, Craft mark etc to deliver quality? Is there really a need for eco-friendly products in the masses? Are they even aware of it?

Though we think we are producing cheaper goods, we really are not. The prices of these goods are cheap in terms of money, but in terms of social cost (cost to the environment) they are exorbitant. The genetically modified food we consume these days, unknowingly affects our health, maybe not in the short term, but definitely in the long term. These lead to illnesses which have to be treated. Hence the long term cost of these products is definitely expensive but we are not aware of it.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Monsanto seeds entered the Indian market a few decades ago. India was thrilled. We called it the "Green Revolution". India would no longer be hungry, bumper crops were produced, TV advertisement encouraged farmers to use these genetically modified seeds. The long term results were innumerable farmer suicides. Why? Here comes in Victor Papanek's ideal of "association".

Apart from the legal issue of cloning and bio technology, these seeds were not suitable for India as they require irrigated fields. The small and medium scale farmers do not have capital for such facilities. They rely on the rain. But no one warned them about this. Instead, when the crops turned out bad, they encouraged them to use more and more pesticides leading them into a debt or should I say a dead trap.

The words “eco-friendly” and “sustainable” are being abused by Multinationals with their “Corporate Social Responsibility” programmes. No doubt it is an effort but real change does not come from top down, through any organisation. It starts only from passions of individuals who stand up for a cause.

Multinationals Corporations and even nations are driven by profit. The Copenhagen conference on Climate Change came up with elaborate plans for climate change like the “Cap and Trade” plan. This is just another version of Subprime Mortgage Crisis but instead of trading stocks and derivatives, we are trading the resources of our planet. A major loop hole in this system is the offset clause where by a firm can trade rights to pollute.

How does design get affected by all this? How do we as designers fight for the cause of a true “green” planet? Since we cannot control the production process and the laws that govern it, we must control the disposal of waste. The future is a world where nothing is thrown out unless it is really deemed useless and nothing is created unless it is really needed.

Those are Victor Papanek’s ideals which are very much relevant in our doomsday scenario of today. Where design is not mere aesthetics but a problem solving, function driven activity. Function must give way to form, instead of the opposite. It is the future of design and of our world.

Intellectual Dialog between Designer and Consumer

Almost all the time, a product is designed without any knowledge of who the consumer is going to be. Proper market research is imperative. However the tools we use today to conduct research seem obsolete. Questionnaires may not be accurate as most of the time the answers are biased or wrong. Interviews may not always be accurate or honest. Data may be unreliable. One must take into account “Errors” in data collection. A more practical method to find out the use of the product would be to interact with the consumer on a personal level and find out his needs and uses and design the product with constant consultation with him even after the product has been bought. Honest feedback from clients is important and it must be positively accepted by the designer.

The Earthquake and Tsunami in Japan and its impact on the world of design

The Nuclear Reactor blowing up is an example of bad design. Some say Japan opted for cheaper substitutes. Most developing countries do as financial resources were limited. China made goods of inferior quality flood markets. Cheap is always considered best and it is true only momentarily. We don’t think long term. We are often more concerned with short term objectives.

These similar short term objectives in terms of profit caused the economic meltdown in 2008. One must think long term especially in terms of safety issues. Strict regulations never amount to any

good in our capitalist society. It is only personal ethics or individual conscience that can trigger out real change. For that it is the responsibility of a good education system and personal upbringing.

Apart from the havoc that nature has caused on Japan in terms of radiation released into the atmosphere, one thinks little of the impact man himself has caused consciously on the environment in terms of creating nuclear weapons of mass destruction. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb blasts were as bad or far worse in terms of radiation pollution. Man continues to create these weapons of mass destruction which are too dangerous to even use. Yet they exist. They are all created by a designer, an engineer and a scientist somewhere on this planet. If the same energy and brain power put in by these individuals were used to create something sustainable, our planet would be a safer and greener place to live in.

My Product

I truly believe we have to re-think what we call “waste” before disposing it off. Thinking in a Global manner, I realised that plastic cups we use to drink water and coffee in, straws for juices and drinks, plastic bags etc. are barely used and merely chucked out. Do we really need them? It is a choice of the consumer to use the straw or drink straight-a-way from the glass. But most often a consumer chooses to use straws as it is more hygienic.

According to Brian Merchant the days of the straw industry are numbered. Are there other alternative uses for the ones already produced? A number of interesting objects like furniture, lamps etc. have been created by different artists like Scott Jarvie with wastes.

I thought of doing something different with them. I went to the Yelahanka market one evening requested two *juice wallas* to collect a bunch of straws for me. I returned two hours later to collect them; I got around 100 plus straws together in barely 2 hours. All these straws barely used for a few seconds and then discarded.

I disinfected and cleaned these straws and decided to weave them together. Initially I found it difficult because of the round curvy structure of the straws. The weave technique that I used to create this prototype is double cloth. Double cloth means weaving 2 cloths simultaneously on a single loom. This is less time consuming, efficient way to create a double layered fabric or in my case a clutch. A pouch forms automatically while weaving a double cloth. This creates zero waste and lesser and more efficient use of materials.

I also made another product of used guitar strings. A guitarist often has to change his guitar strings once they break. I began collecting guitar strings from people and wove them together to make a lamp. Thus putting use to something that would otherwise be thrown away. The guitarist tends to have sentimental attachment to these strings. Hence the product would have a meaning to the owner of the strings.

(Note: The products created for this project are prototypes and need to be worked on further to become functional.)

References

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