

Let's Talk - dialogue, design and sustainability

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Contemporary understandings of sustainable product design address not only life-cycle issues, but manufacturing innovation, de-materialization, ethics, and the shift from product to service. However, the dominant narratives and interactions among North American consumers, consumer organizations, producers, advertisers, and designers have not been conducive to large-scale 'green' innovations. On the contrary, they promote an emotional and habitual dependency on material consumption. This paper draws upon economic, planning and political theory – including works by Harrison, Porter, and Booth – to describe how a lack of effective dialogue among these key constituents is currently impeding the development and widespread distribution of sustainable design. It suggests that further development is only possible within a supportive social framework – one that encourages consequential interactions among those involved in production, consumption and post-use. The paper also demonstrates that a local approach to interaction facilitates a fairer representation of interests, and may be the most successful in achieving appropriate innovations in sustainable design.

According to Harrison, dialogue can build trust, cooperation, transparency, coping with complexity, developing common goals, and thence the development of superior technological, social, or organizational innovation. These processes are most prevalent and intense where they are locally embedded – allowing the various constituencies to develop multi-layered relationships – and where information flows freely. Indeed, places that foster local dialogue and collaboration are among the most competitive worldwide, due to the uniqueness that can emerge from local interactions, resources and assets. If aimed at environmental problems, this kind of innovative edge could be crucial to addressing the pressing and complex issue of sustainable production and consumption. However, Booth argues that there is a tendency in North America to exclude certain parties from public dialogue. In a society where mass-media is largely controlled by corporations, he suggests that environmental interests, among others, may be unfairly represented. *This paper argues that such a phenomenon is detrimental to mutual learning, with the result that no one's interests – be they public, private or individual – are optimally served.*

A more balanced representation of interests facilitates a shift towards common goals and, potentially, the creation of new markets. Denmark, for example, has been successful in creating markets for wind turbines, clean technologies, etc., largely due to its tradition of collaboration, egalitarianism, local governance, and public dialogue. In attempting to foster sustainable design, it is this kind of intense, representative dialogue to which communities must aspire. Although Denmark's unique history cannot be replicated elsewhere, its more recent social innovations, such as the Green Network, do provide inspiration. Comprised of businesses, government, researchers and NGOs, the Network provides knowledge- and idea-sharing. This paper suggests that the advent of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) may provide a starting place for the development of a similar network in North America, which would promote the social innovations so necessary to tackling the challenge of sustainability.