

Disconnecting Design from the Bottom Line Separating material culture from wealth creation for the development of meaningful and significant sustainable solutions

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Since its earliest days, design for industry has been strongly linked to the economic viability of products and the financial requirements of industry. The discipline of Industrial Design was created in the early years of the 20th century to address the, then, new idea of product design for mass-production. Industrial Design quickly became employed to distinguish one product from another, to create market appeal, and to spur consumerism. In those early days, the subsequent damaging environmental and social effects of mass-production and mass consumption, on a global level, could not have been foreseen.

Just as in the early 20th century there was a need to redefine our notions of material culture for the new context of mass-production, so today we have to redefine material culture for the new context of the 21st century and to fully recognise the urgent imperatives of environmental damage, global warming, and the principles of sustainability. To do this, we must set aside, at least temporarily, our traditional notion of product design and its tie to industry and economics. It is necessary to de-link product design from these considerations in order to more freely explore new conceptions of material culture for a new context. Without such a 'de-linking', conceptualization will be restricted and progress will be hampered.

The creativity of designers can be employed in many ways to explore new conceptions of material culture, which address vital environmental and socio-cultural issues. As new directions emerge (and some are already emerging), inevitably, there will be new opportunities for wealth creation and new opportunities for industry.

Long term, design-based research into sustainable product design being carried out by the author and a number of PhD and Master's students is placed within the context of new directions in design, and significant developments in other areas, such as information and communication technologies. Directions that are indicative of a groundswell of new approaches that stand well outside the mainstream of Industrial Design. The research outcomes demonstrate that 'de-linking' material culture from wealth creation facilitates creativity and yields solutions that cross traditional boundaries between art and design, industrial design and craft, large scale and small scale production, and globalization and localization. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that freeing design-based research in material culture from conventional understandings of 'industrial design' can lead to new, potentially economically viable directions that address a wide range of 'sustainable' imperatives.