

**Guy Julier**

**How can we design pleasurable and sustainable spoons and cities?**

### **Measuring Sustainability and Pleasure**

When asked for a definition of beauty, the American industrial designer Raymond Loewy once quipped that it consisted of, 'a continuous upward sales curve'. Certainly he would find much to turn his gaze on, these days. Econometrics tell us that globally more goods are being produced, shipped and consumed. In 2006, for instance, merchandise trade grew by 21 per cent.<sup>1</sup> And alongside this we will see more design and more design schools. China has seen a 23% increase of enrolment on art and design degree courses between 2003 and 2004. A further 1200 design schools are planned to add to the 400 that have opened in China in the last two decades.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, few responses are being offered by politicians and industrialists to the current world economic recession that do not offer more of the same. The general view is that any emergence from this will be structured around a return to 'business as usual'. Alternative models of production and consumption, work and leisure, alienation and identity will largely remain outside the frame. In keeping with this, some efforts to stem carbon emissions are beginning to be conceived of in on an industrial scale. Hence, China's recently declared ambition to hit a 20% renewable target by 2020 to match Europe's goal.<sup>3</sup>

Such declared emissions saving calculations testify to a statistically-driven, big-picture approach to climate change. Gil Friend claims that there are currently 67 systems available for calculating the environmental impact of products.<sup>4</sup> The proliferation of statistical systems has become a statistic in itself. Whether it appearing as all out war or a special operations strategy on climate change, the campaign is carefully enumerated in a number of ways.

There have been several recent attempts at the macro-scale to rethink the values through which governance is enacted. Indeed, happiness itself has become a new object of statistical fascination. Most celebrated amongst is, Bhutan's Gross Domestic Happiness indicators.<sup>5</sup> Equally, France's President Sarkozy is exploring happiness as an indicator of economic growth. The UK's New Economics Foundation has created a 'Happy Planet Index'.<sup>6</sup> These attempts to measure happiness draw in such questions as family life, heritage and cultural values or social cohesion. Can notions of happiness or pleasure, and their measurement, be distilled down to the micro-scale of encountering design products?

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<sup>1</sup> WTO (World Trade Organization) (2008), *International Trade Statistics 2008*, Geneva: World Trade Organization.

<sup>2</sup> Rigby, R. (2007), 'Can design inject some creativity into China's karaoke economy?', *Design Council Magazine*, 3: 22-9.

<sup>3</sup> Borger, J. and Watts, J. (2009) 'China launches green power revolution to catch up on west', *The Guardian*, 10 June 2009

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/002811.html>

<sup>5</sup> [www.bhutanstudies.com](http://www.bhutanstudies.com)

<sup>6</sup> [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org)

## Extrinsic Pleasure

Sustainable product design expert, Edwin Datchefski begins to open up a new criterion for thinking about the relationship between design and sustainability. He puts this forward a compelling notion of 'total beauty of sustainable products'.<sup>7</sup> Their inner beauty is in their low carbon impact that is measured around. By repositioning the notion of 'beauty' he deftly turns it into a measurable item.

Datchefski is not alone. A burgeoning market in 'sustainable products' has opened up in recent years. There is a steady stream of new sustainable products that, ironically, add to the global system of novelty. These may be categorised into three types.

Firstly we have the *heritage* category of sustainable products, ones that hark back to a pre-carbon economy. They might be, literally, 'unplugged' from the international carbon-based grid to remind us that there was an age when some of the same tasks or pleasures that we indulge in didn't need electricity. Thus, for example, Dick van Hoff's 'Tyranny of the Plug' project creates 'high-specification engineered kitchen products that reinstate the joy of manual methods of food preparation'.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, association is made through materials, processes and a resultant aesthetic that makes them appear as pre-industrial craft objects. By extension, many of these products of both sub-categories of heritage sustainability exist in their utilitarian sense in the milieu of craft-type activities. These might be the old artisanal skills of gardening, cooking, making and mending. Thus pleasure exists in having and using, both of which have extrinsic meaning. Such and such is a pleasurable product because it makes us think about a pre-carbon emission world and, in itself, the object affords acting according to the former's energy systems. By extension, it is connected to an ensemble of objects and activities that define this former world.

A second category of sustainable products aligns itself with conceptions of *modernity*. Here, for example, new materials might be derived from natural resources but deliver the same performance as more carbon-dependent resources. Alberto Lievore's Rothko chair is made of Maderon, a moulded bio-material made from pulped almond shells mixed with synthetic and natural resins. In effect we have here a system of modernity substitution. One material or technology is swapped for another. The pleasure, again, is extrinsic. It is for the thought or the satisfaction of knowing that what you own or use is doing the carbon-saving job. Otherwise why do this swap?

Finally, an emergent category might be called *activism* products. Here the consumption thereof is much more self-consciously positional. A waterbottle is available to be bought that declares that its owner gets their drinking water from a tap and not from a faraway natural spring and is then shipped by land and sea to my local supermarket. Often these begin as cottage industries and find their way into mainstream systems of production and distribution. Thus Periel Aschenbrand's 'body as billboard' T-shirts which sported slogans

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<sup>7</sup> Datchefski, Edwin (2001), *The total beauty of sustainable products*, Crans-Près-Céligon: Rotovision.

<sup>8</sup> Fuad-Luke, A. (2009) *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World*, London: Earthscan, p.115

such as 'the only bush I trust is my own' began as an amateur craft project. They are now distributed worldwide.

In all three of these categories the pleasure quotient is semantically laden. They require a connoisseurship of sustainability in order to know their effect and experience their affect. Knowing about notions such as 'cradle to grave', eco-procurement or 'recycle, re-use' helps the consumer feel good about owning or using such products. Being able to recognise these, to decode the eco-labelling or to know where to source the objects involves skill and knowledge in reading the systems as well as an iterative indulgence in these symbolic values. As such it keys in perfectly with the systems of insatiable desire that fuels modern capitalism. *I want more green products!*

### **Intrinsic Pleasure**

But is there a way that pleasure can be embedded more deeply into eco-design? Can engagement with the features of a product and its sustainability be folded together? Could there be such a thing as 'eco-pleasure' that is an embodied experience? These are probably absurd questions but through a consideration of this possibility we might arrive at a different understanding that is productive.

One of the key philosophers who considered pleasure was Jeremy Bentham. Writing in 1780s he reduced the experience of pleasure to a series of moments. Pleasure, for him, was utilitarian. Each act was a bounded, staccato, serial experience that was either good or bad. It took his pupil John Stuart Mill to begin to open up the possibility that pleasure is relational. Some pleasure may well be restricted to the discreet moment of their realisation (for example gulping down a cold drink). But others, such as the discovery of reciprocated love, last longer. The former involves primarily a physical sensation; the latter involves a 'cognitive appraisal' that requires an assessment of a set of conditions in order to be judged as pleasurable or not.<sup>9</sup>

In his investigations of pleasure, emotion and usability of objects, Donald Norman takes a somewhat anecdotal product-by-product approach to highlight the aspects that make them *work* or not.<sup>10</sup> His method encourages the student of design to pause and consider the complexity of cognition that is involved in encountering objects from ticket dispensers to software programme interfaces to kitchen gadgetry. While the prevailing dominant modes of representation in design criticism often reduces the object to a flat, visual image, Norman reminds us that objects are containers also weight, articulation, texture, smell, luminescence, sequences and many other qualities.

Naturally (pun intended), many sustainable products carry intrinsically pleasurable affects. Some sustainable building materials are intensely satisfying to work with lambs wool as an insulation material is a joy to manipulate. Building a straw bail house involves constructing and fashioning the material that is at once assembling and carving. It is also a quick and

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<sup>9</sup> Parducci, A. (1995) *Happiness, Pleasure, and Judgment The Contextual Theory and Its Applications*, Psychology Press, p.29

<sup>10</sup> eg. Norman, D. (1990) *The Design of Everyday Things*, Doubleday Business; Norman, D. (2005) *Emotional Design*. Basic Books;

easily understandable construction method, providing a pleasing feedback loop. Natural, eco-friendly or the natural fibres based carpets of Interface do not give off the toxicity of their chemical-based substitutes.

None the less, these are hardly products of everyday use for most people. By contrast the kind of quotidian artefacts that interest Donald Norman are those subject to repeated re-use. They don't necessarily provide the less frequent pleasure of encounter that intensifies appreciation, be that the art object, a performance or a construction process. And here lies a problem in Norman's methods. Just as Bentham conceived pleasure as residing in individual moments, so Donald Norman's dominant mode of analysis is to render encounter as that between individuals and singularized objects. Experiencing design, for him, is holding, lifting, touching, looking, smelling, seeing, reading. One cannot disagree with this.

However, extending from Norman's framework one must be careful not to reify objects, assuming that encounter of objects is a self-conscious, enquiring investigation of meaning that one might make of works of art. These practices are far more often than not everyday, routine and unreflective. But with the exception of recent curatorial practices (eg. Nicholas Bourriaud's or Mark Wallinger's) where constellations of art objects are arranged into assemblages, art encounter is about the contemplations of individual things, the interaction between viewer and viewed. Likewise, Norman assumes a similar field and practice of consuming design. It's about a person doing something with something.

### **Relational Pleasure**

No object is an island, however. Harvey Molotch puts this most clearly in his shorthand explanation of the Bruno Latour's Science and Technology Studies approach to phenomena. When you buy a toaster, he posits, you don't just buy a toaster but a *toaster project* – you also contract into sliced bread of a certain dimension, plates of a certain size, jam and marmalade and so on as well as a set of bodily dispositions, knowledge and skills (eg. knowing the right setting not to burn the toast) and social actions (e.g. sharing toast and toastmaking at breakfast).<sup>11</sup> Objects, in other words, are part of and contingent upon a complex network of people, things and understandings. Instead of determining pleasure as merely the result of encounter with singular artefacts, we should be thinking relationally in terms of their connections to human and material practices.

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<sup>11</sup> Molotch, H. (2002) *Where Stuff Comes From: How Toasters, Toilets, Cars, Computers, and Many Other Things Come to Be As They Are*. London: Routledge.



Harvey Molotch and a toast project. Photo copyright: Guy Julier

Let us now turn back to the question of sustainability and pleasure and see where this 'networked' thinking takes us in evaluating two attempts to reduce environmental impact through design. The first one arguably delivers sustainability without pleasure, the second delivers the two together.

Once a month I wheel my recycling bin out to the street. A truck comes along and empties it of its cardboard, newspapers, plastic containers and tins. The bin itself is the identical dimensions as my ordinary waste bin, except it's predictably green. Thus apart from its colour there is nothing to distinguish it and the processes I use around it from other waste. I throw things in it. They get taken away. Okay, sometimes I have to think about which bin a piece of garbage might need to go into which bin. But that's it.



What if, however, the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of disposing rubbish via this green bin were married? For starters the bin is contingent upon my having read the instructions provided by my local authority on how to use it, sorting and handling recyclable packaging items and upon a truck pulling up once a month to empty it. The bin could be designed to make chucking recyclable material away more fun or more intuitive – countless student design projects have attempted to do this. I could have more information on where this stuff goes. Does it just, as many suspect, reach the same landfill as all other garbage? Does it actually get recycled? Does it end up being shipped to China for this purpose? (I actually know the answers to these questions but for sake of my loyalty to my city authorities I'm not going to tell you them.)

Any pleasure in participating in a project of recycling is therefore absent. This is because of a downstream alienation from the means of disposal. Marx posited that capitalism was configured through the serial alienation of people from the means of production and circulation and therefore from each other and from goods.<sup>12</sup> In the case of the green bin, the lack of connectivity between the act of throwing an old newspaper it and a wider 'project' of recycling denudes any hope of finding either intrinsic or extrinsic pleasure in this system.

Here's a contrasting example. My friend, Mariona, lives in Barcelona. When she goes to work or visits her sister she sometimes takes her 'Bicing' smartcard to a cycle station. Fortunately, there is now one of these just outside her apartment. She swipes the card at a post which then tells which one of a row of bicycles is available to her and then she disengages the respective bike that would otherwise be locked into a retaining bar. The Bicing card cost her a flat 50 Euros and gives her the first 30 minutes bicycle use free, after which 50 centimes

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<sup>12</sup> Marx, K. (1957 [1867]) *Capital: Volume One*. London: Everyman.

per half hour are charged to her credit card. She has the choice of some 400 Bicing stations across the city to leave the bike. The bikes themselves are of reasonably sturdy design, with integrated lights, a three-speed hub gearing and a bag carrier mounted at the front. Most of Barcelona is on an even incline toward the sea, so there is fortunately no need for a more performance kind of bike and many cycleways are integrated with the pedestrian infrastructure, making 'bicing' a leisurely affair. In the first 6 months from its inauguration in March 2007, an estimated 960 tonnes of carbon were saved.



For similar examples, one might have equally chosen the bicycle systems in operation in Paris (Vélib'), Lyon (Vélo'v), Montreal (Bixi) or Oslo (Bysykkel) and many others. In Barcelona, Mariona is just one of many users of this system. Whilst the metropolitan area of Barcelona is well-provisioned with bus and metro facilities, Bicing adds a crucial new dimension to the city. At one level it offers a chance to participate in a shared extrinsic pleasure of playing one's part in contributing to the aims of a sustainable city. Intrinsically, there is always the fun of riding a bicycle – so much so, indeed, that Bicing also acts as an introduction to those pleasures many citizens have gone on to getting their own bikes, including Mariona.

Bicing also provides secondary practices that loop back into this sustainability agenda. It promises other forms of navigating the city. The Bicing stations produce a dense cluster of nodes between which cyclists travel. However, the possibility of wandering, of not taking the most direct route, and certainly not those straight lines of other forms of public transport or those dictated by automobile lanes. The possibility, then, that Barcelona – traditionally a somewhat frenetic city – could also be a 'slow city' is suggested. By extension, this moves the user into the sphere of other activities associated with ecology in a rejection of 'fast' (automobiles, global distances, the fading out of the local in one's lifeworld) and embracing

locality. Furthermore, the bicycles and their supporting material infrastructure (the smartcards, the maps, the stations, the telephone support line and so on) anchor a new visual identity for citizens and visitors. Rather than being yet another slogan or graphic signature, Bicing allows action on the part of users that *both consumes* the symbolic capital of being in a city that is oriented toward sustainability *and produces* bodily and attitudinal dispositions that engages outlooks and practices toward sustainability.

Ultimately, then, the two examples given above suggest that sustainability and pleasure are inextricably linked. The burgeoning of global design education in recent years has gone hand-in-hand with an exponential growth in world trade and, of course, carbon emissions. The steady flow of alienated objects puts increased pressure on their design to deliver pleasure and satiate desire. However, this pleasure is often limited how much an individual user can derive through interacting with that singularized thing in a discreet timeframe. This is a strictly utilitarian approach to design. Contrastingly, by thinking in terms of the networks of things, people and knowledge, the designer can recast the notion of pleasure across a number of temporal and spatial points, rendering it both social and sustainable. Perhaps, therefore, the measurement of sustainability will also then become a measure of happiness and pleasure.

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