

## The Designed Object:

As presented at Practicing Resurrection at Russet House Farm,  
August 11 + 12, 2006

Lee David Fletcher

# The Designed Object:

## Summary

Every object is designed, intentionally or otherwise, design is an objects language. The intent of this workshop is to explore that language, through how objects come to be, and what we can glean from what we see in them to better inform our choices for what we surround ourselves with.

## Introduction

Industrial designers design objects. In the process they are always talking about language, vocabulary and how objects and details 'speak' to one another. When you look at it objectively it's a strange thing to say, but it is deeply true – things do speak to us, they have a language, and each objects language is unique. The elements of this language are made up of forms, proportions, radii, planes, surfaces, colours and textures, and they come together to form sentences, telling us what they are for, how you might use them, and how they are made. They also speak to what values they stand for. I think designers speak like this because we believe in the importance of objects, that they are not disposable commodities, but valuable elements of our lives and need to be considered this way.

A number of years ago I was fortunate to attend a presentation by Lister Sinclair, a prominent Canadian broadcaster – he opened with the statement, that everything we say sends a message, whether we intent it to or not – so be careful what you say. He was referring to broadcasters, but at a design conference – I think he saw that in the same sense, every object that is made sends a message – so we need to be careful how we design it. The messages objects send is most often not considered, or at least not considered from a user, or human point of view – balanced, simple, accessible, and useable.

The key points I'd like to make in this presentation are:

- objects are important, they enrich our lives
- objects speak, and they can be understood
- we can live with them harmoniously

## "Ode to Common Things" - Pablo Neruda

I have a crazy, crazy love of things.  
I like pliers, and scissors.  
I love cups, rings, and bowls -  
not to speak, or course, of hats.  
I love all things, not just the grandest,  
also the infinite-ly small -  
thimbles, spurs, plates, and flower vases.  
Oh yes, the planet is sublime!  
It's full of pipes weaving hand-held  
through tobacco smoke,  
and keys and salt shakers -  
everything, I mean,  
that is made by the hand of man, every little thing:  
shapely shoes, and fabric,  
and each new bloodless birth of gold,  
eyeglasses carpenter's nails, brushes,  
clocks, compasses, coins, and the so-soft  
softness of chairs.  
Mankind has built oh so many perfect things!  
Built them of wool and of wood, of glass and of rope:  
remarkable tables, ships, and stairways.  
I love all things,  
not because they are passionate or sweet-smelling  
but because, I don't know,

because this ocean is yours, and mine;  
these buttons and wheels and little forgotten treasures,  
fans upon whose feathers love has scattered its blossoms  
glasses, knives and scissors -  
all bear the trace of someone's fingers  
on their handle or surface,  
the trace of a distant hand lost in the depths of forgetfulness.  
I pause in houses, streets and elevators  
touching things, identifying objects  
that I secretly covet;  
this one because it rings,  
that one because it's as soft as the softness of a woman's hip,  
that one there for its deep-sea color,  
and that one for its velvet feel.  
O irrevocable river of things:  
no one can say that I loved only fish,  
or the plants of the jungle and the field,  
that I loved only those things that leap and climb, desire, and survive.  
It's not true: many things conspired  
to tell me the whole story.  
Not only did they touch me,  
or my hand touched them:  
they were so close that they were a part of my being,  
they were so alive with me  
that they lived half my life  
and will die half my death.

The author here is speaking of many things, but among them, humanities emotional connection to things, the tools for daily life. He is also speaking of items that bridge between people - things I have touched, and you have touched - that they connect us in some way. And finally I think, that collectively, they capture our intentions, the character of our age in order to speak to other generations of what we value and hold dear – this could well be rather terrifying, given the toxic nastiness of so much of what we produce and discard.

It can be said that industrial design is to objects, what architecture is to buildings. Architects need structural engineers and the building trades – industrial designers need mechanical engineers and manufacturers. Throughout the process, the basic goal of industrial design is to create products that are: –

- beautiful (in whatever sense you can define that),
- useable (it needs to easily perform the task it is intended for),
- economical (to the maker and the buyer), and
- sustainable (in its manufacture, use an end of life)

Unfortunately, not all things that are manufactured or designed, are made sharing the same values – this is an ideal. These things are not required on an economic or engineering level, just as architects are not required on design|build teams producing buildings that in their own way are disposable commodities. But if they are, if designers and architects are involved, there is an opportunity to make a connection, and to speak through the objects and places we make.

## Participation

I think we all have connected with a 'thing' at some point in our lives, that we have been 'spoken to' by a thing, something that helps to define us. It is possible to discern values and processes when you experience an object, and I think all of us do this, whether consciously or otherwise...we all have favorite things, we may not be able to articulate it but we know. At this point I would encourage you to think of a favorite object, something you think is truly wonderful, or something you would take with you from a burning building, or something that speaks to you, and

to clearly ask yourself why, why does this speak to you, is it the object itself; is it what it might do, its function; or is it what it represents to you, possibly in a sentimental way – you need not limit it to one.

Below are 3 items I have selected:

Lamy Safari Fountain pen – a beautiful design with tremendous attention to detail. Being a fountain pen, it is re-useable, it has a refillable reservoir. I also selected this, because it is a pen, it is not a technological object, for me design is about the development of an idea, and that is always more effective when done manually than with a computer. The computer is very effective in refining an idea, and communicating an idea, but generating the idea, that is manual. From Bruce Mau, in his Incomplete Manifesto for Growth – number 29. Think with your mind. Forget technology. Creativity is not device-dependent.



Dr. Skud: designed by Phillipe Starck and made by Alessi – this is a brilliant use of the required manufacturing processes to bring fun and life to a banal object – the restriction of manufacturing became an opportunity for poetry.



Morrison Kettle: designed by Jasper Morrison and manufactured by Rowenta – this kettle has a deep attention to detail, a very clear intent and rationalized use of form and material. Its semantics are self evident, and the form character captures something of the moment, something of our age, while also being timeless, something that is not likely to age poorly.



## Brief history of Manufactured Objects

An object comes into reality because of a need, a physical need, a financial need, and aesthetic need, a medical need, the list goes on. Generally, a need requires analysis and clarification to really understand it, that is if it is not a personal immediate need. This analysis becomes the design brief – the terms of reference for the design to achieve. Concepts are produced, models and prototypes made, tested, modifications are made, and then the objects definition is complete, and it can be manufactured.

It has always been like this, even in the earliest times – think of having to cut wood, or dig a hole – you would get the sense that doing it by hand is not likely the best way to do it, it could be better, and then think about what would make it easier. For digging a hole, a stone would be better than hands, and that would evolve to a flat stone with a more specific shape, and then as materials evolved, maybe to a metal one, as it can be thinner still, and stronger, and then put a handle on it for longer leverage, you may not know why these changes make improvements, but through trial and error, you find what works and what doesn't. With making objects for manufacture, the process is no different, except of course for the increased level of complexity of these simple activities, and the number of people and disciplines involved.

Before the industrial revolution and after the time when we made things for ourselves, "objects", tools, furniture, clothing, utensils...all were made locally by local crafts or trades people etc. – they were the first specialized manufacturing skills. There was the local carpenter, stone mason, tailor, farmer, blacksmith. With industrialization began the development of tools to make the objects, the furniture, clothing and utensils, in order to make more of them more efficiently, and consistently, thereby giving access to things never before seen, at prices previously unattainable.

As they continued to evolve, it caused an increase in the complexity of the objects themselves, as well as how they were made, and subsequently an increase in the complexity in the development of objects. Now, not only did the object have to perform its function, it had also to be made in these mechanized processes in order to be made in the numbers and at the rate required.

This could be seen as the dawn of the profession of Industrial Design. It used to be that the craftsman was designer, engineer and manufacturer. With industrialization, a wedge formed between designer/engineer, and manufacturer, and as this evolved to focus efficiencies, the human/emotional component of objects became less a priority, a wedge formed between the designer and engineer. By the 1920's, consumer products had become generally utilitarian in their character and as an example of the response emerging from retailers, Macy's dept store hired Henry Dreyfuss, a theatre set designer to bring a little character back into their products.

## Role of industrial designer

The role of the industrial designer has evolved and is to give the defined 'need' (as defined earlier) form and identity, working within the limits of the context of the object.

"The Industrial Designer began by eliminating excess decoration, his real job began when he insisted on dissecting a product, seeing what made it tick, and devising means of making it tick better – then making it look better. He never forgets that beauty is only skin deep. For years in our office we have kept before us the concept that what we are working on is going to be ridden in, sat upon, looked at, talked into, activated, operated, or in some way used by people individually or en masse. If the point of contact between the product and the people becomes a point of friction, then the Industrial Designer has failed. If, on the other hand, people are made safer, more comfortable, more eager to purchase, more efficient – or just plain happier – the designer has succeeded. He brings to this task a detached analytical point of view. He consults closely with the manufacturer, the manufacturer's engineers, production men, and sales staff, keeping in mind whatever peculiar problems the firm may have in the business or industrial world. He will compromise up to a point but he refuses to budge on design principles he knows to be sound. Occasionally he may lose a client, but he rarely loses a client's respect." This is from *Designing for People*, and was written by Henry Dreyfuss in 1955.

Today, as marketing and sociology has become ever more sophisticated, and our means of measuring and understanding human behavior has grown, industrial design has embraced these activities, to produce more useable, and more relevant objects. Although the manufacturing and retailing world has not historically taken the same path. Product development is happening at unprecedented levels, vast numbers of things are being produced to feed the retail appetites, and the Chinese manufacturing capability is able to respond in lightening speed, the goals of industrial

design are reduced to differentiation and price points. Also with the amount of product development, many products have matured, unlike in Dreyfuss day, when there was much scope, today, how much impact can be made on a toaster?, it can be made cheaper, it can be made to look different for the competitors, it can be made to wear out sooner, all working toward an economic goal, too often to the exclusion of all others.

Companies like Apple, Nike, and even Target, and many more are changing the historical direction of manufacturers and retailers. They are creating and selling things that have been far more considered, things that are resonating with people, and with our culture. They have recognized the potential economic rewards of considering their customer much more deeply than before, their objects are rising beyond commodities. Many of these things do genuinely make our lives better, make us safer, more comfortable and just plain happier – and that is where industrial design succeeds. These companies are creating products that speak clearly, and I think that is central to why they are succeeding.

So how can we take this and interpret it in the language of the objects speaking to us...

## Language

The English language is comprised of certain elements: nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, grammatical structures etc..

For design the elements are: form, character, semantics, metaphor; and material, including colour, texture and process.

All forms have character, think about it for a moment and I'm sure you can agree, you may not have always been conscious of it but you are aware. They are happy, sad, sophisticated, quiet, etc.. Dieter Rams of Braun talks about products having the character of an English butler. He says he doesn't walk into a room introducing himself by shouting "Hey I'm Dieter Rams", and doesn't believe products should do it either. Jerry Hirshberg, a past director of the Nissan design group in San Diego told of the first car they developed, and its first viewing by Japanese directors. The directors were quite concerned about the car's unhappy 'face'. The design team was focusing on elements that made the form appealing to a North American sensibility, fast, or aggressive in its styling – things that work in a North American context. Forms can look fast or slow, heavy or light, grounded, floating, utilitarian or fanciful.

The Bauhaus architect Mies VanDerRohe said God is in the details – In most things you look at, you perceive the details, you may not be aware of them, and could likely not even articulate them if you were asked to, but they all add up to complete the picture, they are like your peripheral vision.

Early modernists insisted the form of an object had to suit its function, and that standardized simple forms facilitated the mass production of good quality, durable goods at an affordable price, thus contributing to social reform. (eco design) This of course is open to much debate, but I believe there is significant truth in this statement, and warrants further discussion.

The Morrison Kettle shown in the Participation portion of this presentation is a good example of a rigorous application of simple and clear form language, attention to detail and a strong, reserved form not shouting its presence, but clear and effective in its function.

Semantics is what the object is telling you it will do for you, and how should you interact with it. A light switch for example – switch up for on and down for off, that's all it does, and it communicates it clearly. Door hardware is another good example- -plates on doors are for pushing, and bars are for pulling (for the most part!) VCR's are a classic example of poor semantics, they even give people an inferiority complex, thinking that they are somehow inadequate because they can't use them.

Bruce Mau says in his Incomplete Manifesto for Growth in point No. 19. "Work the metaphor. Every object has the capacity to stand for something other than what is apparent. Work on what it stands for" – that's for designers, but as a user it is something to look for. Metaphor is used to build a link between something new and unfamiliar with something familiar and conventional. It adds to make an object accessible and more likely to be useful over a longer period of time.

Another use of metaphor is for visual effect, pure and simply – the Womb chair designed by Eero Saarinen is a soft form, enveloping and inviting.



Materials are elements of an objects language as well. Polished metal surfaces are intended to last, resist breaking and rusting. Plastics have been engineered to perform a staggering array of functions, and their 'feel' suggests what they do. I have a camera that is 'ruggedized' the essential difference between it and a 'standard' camera is in the material it is made from – it is ABS not polycarbonate – ABS is far more impact resistant, and as soon as you pick it up, it does not feel fragile, simply by virtue of the material.

Designers often speak of an honest use of materials. There is a lot of debate here, but generally when considering a purist view of design....honest is best. Interestingly for sustainability, new composite materials may in fact be better sustainably but may not reveal to the viewer an honest impression of what it is. This is in part due to the previous point on metaphor, for us to embrace something new, it often has to connect to something known first. These new materials are introducing new textures and colours, and it will take time for them to enter the mainstream.

Imitation wood vs. real wood as a surface finish is another interesting debate - fake laminate wood is, in a sense lying to you, it's saying it's wood, but it's not. Although interestingly, the fake wood may be more durable, more impact resistant, use less raw material and more recycled material than real wood. But is still not real, it won't patina or 'live' as real wood does. Wood veneer is curious because it is wood, but only truly on the surface – what is below is engineered wood, particle board, or mdf, so is it lying to you, or not? And is it right or wrong? In one sense it is lying to you, but in another it is an efficient, and responsible way of making a large panel of wood, using waste material, maximizing yield, and minimizing waste. The debate can go on and on at this point, suffice to say that what a material is, tells you something about the product, and its intent.

Process is yet another element of the language – how was the material used. Was it cast, moulded, formed, or extruded, these things tell you about how it was made. Were there a lot of them made, was it highly tooled, very consistent, or were only a few made, each one a little different from the other? How are the connections made? Finished products so often live or die at connections. Consider closing the door of a BMW, and then compare that to a Toyota corolla. Are the gaps between things consistent, were they glued together, or fastened in a way that can be separated. These elements can tell you about the sustainable aspects of the object – how easy will it be to recycle?

The language of an object can be very complex, and at the same time very intuitive, we are emotional and we like things or we don't. My hope is that with increased understanding of this language, our like for this or that will slowly become more attune to a clear and sustainable product language.

## Resurrection Issues

I would suggest that all of us here at this conference share a couple of general points of view, or have at least in some ways wrestled with what results in a somewhat contentious or skeptical relationship to objects – 1) we are spiritual, and therefore aware of the moral and spiritual issues around ownership, consumerism, materialism etc, and 2) that we have an environmental perspective that adds to our rejection of objects, that we try to eliminate objects from our lives, and that although we continue to buy more things, it is with great resentment, almost as if holding our breath.

Wendell Berry seems to also share this point of view, and he has a defined standard for technological innovation:

The new tool should be cheaper than the one it replaces.  
It should be at least as small in scale as the one it replaces

It should do work that is clearly and demonstrably better than the one it replaces  
It should use less energy than the one it replaces  
If possible, it should use some form of solar energy, such as that of the body  
It should be repairable by a person of ordinary intelligence, provided that he or she has the necessary tools.  
It should be purchasable and repairable as near to home as possible  
It should come from a small, privately owned shop or store that will take it back for maintenance and repair.  
It should not displace or disrupt anything good that already exists, and this includes family and community relationships.

It is hard to argue with all these points, wouldn't it be great if...

During my study for my MA I did a lot of 'navel gazing', and it dawned on me that my profession, what I considered to be my very vocation was directly at odds with the values I held very closely. It was about creating more stuff, for stuff's sake, because the capitalist engine runs on people buying more stuff, and industrial design's goal is to make that stuff ever more enticing to buy. At that time, a new director for the program arrived – he had worked with Tearcraft, a division of TearFund that works with makers in the developing world bringing things to the UK for sale, a bit like MCC's Ten Thousand Villages. I put the question to him. I don't remember his response exactly but the spirit of it informs my work today. He said:

Firstly we are physical and emotional beings, we will always need 'things' in our daily lives, furniture to sit on, clothes to wear, buildings to live in etc.. Regardless of how virtual our world may become, we will need things.

Secondly, things will always wear out, and need to be replaced, regardless of how well made it is, it will wear out eventually.

And thirdly, people are emotional, and these things that we need around us need to contribute in a positive way to our lives, they need to enrich us, and feed us, not harm us, back to Henry Dreyfuss, they need to simply make us happier.

The vital role for industrial design is to ensure those things that surround us do feed us, and that when their life is over, they can be replaced, repaired, refurbished or disposed of responsibly. In addition to this is the issue of consumerism, and in my work these are the core issues for me, how to practice resurrection while creating still more objects in this world full of objects.

What I have come to, is to think about these issues applied in 2 ways, sustainably **executed**, and sustainably **conceived**. The execution refers mainly to how it is manufactured, material use, recyclability etc. It assumes that the products definition is fixed, and we need to make this 'thing' more responsibly. Sustainably conceived refers to the broader issues of, yes we can design and make it, but should we. It looks more at the function the object is serving, and seeks the best response to that function, and then execute that sustainably. While studying for my MA, the Royal Society of Arts issued a call for entries for projects around this subject. A colleague of mine and I responded to a brief calling for the design of a domestic can crusher, the sort that sits in your kitchen and crushes cans prior to them going to the curb. When we looked at the entire picture, we found that all garbage trucks crushed garbage once it was picked up, and that the net effect of this can crusher was to reduce the number of garbage bags used, and in a minor way possibly raise some awareness of waste. Beyond that, it was another consumer product, trying to find a need to solve for. Our response was to presume that if you have a can opener to open a can to get at its contents, you could open the other end of the can, thereby eliminating any of its structure, and collapsing it by hand. This proposal culminated in a logo that could be applied to all cans and conceptually address the end goal of the can crusher without the production of another object.

William McDonough is an architect with very strong sustainability credentials has said; "I am going to speak about the concept of design as the first signal of human intention.....If we understand that design leads to the manifestation of human intentions and if what we make with our hands is to be sacred and honour the earth that gives us life, then the things we make must not only rise from the ground but return to it soil to soil, water to water, so everything that is received from the earth can be freely given back without doing harm to any living system. This is ecology. This is good design"

He goes on to talk about his colleague, Michael Braungart a German chemist who talks of 3 distinct product types. First consumables, eaten used or thrown away; second, products of service known as Durables – cars, tv’s, and third unmarketables – nuclear waste, dioxins, essentially bi-products.

The key to the first category is to return all their elements back to the earth where they can become food for other living organisms, plastic bags should bio degrade, all packaging should be recyclable, furniture should be made from lignin, potato peels and technical enzymes so they can safely be returned to the earth.

The key to the second category is a move from buying products to buying services. This is where the product is in fact providing a service, light fixtures provide light, cd’s supply music, cars provide transportation, and houses provide shelter and home. Here in Toronto there is an autoshare program where you can rent cars hourly, bike share programs also in Toronto, but also widely used in the Netherlands and around the world. Commercial carpets are also sometimes handled this way, as tiles, heavy traffic areas can be replaced more often than low traffic areas. An interesting benefit to this approach, is that it would eliminate the need for planned obsolescence. It becomes an economic imperative to make the products to last as long as possible. If your business is providing this service, you want the objects providing that service to provide it for as long as possible. This presents fascinating challenges for designers.

The key to the third category is to eliminate them.

## the way ahead

The way ahead lies in seeking different values in objects, and perceiving in them what they are about.

Perceiving manufactured realities in what you’re about to buy is a complex and often difficult thing to do, even for those who know what to look for. But if you were to look, for an example could be a pair of suspension forks for a mountain bicycle costing \$5, that I saw for sale some time ago. This is a strong indicator of abuse somewhere in the system. It is not reasonable that an object of such complexity, can come to be for sale in my neighborhood, with the cost of living (wages, rent, taxes etc.) such that it is still profitable to sell this thing at such a price – I think we have to ask ourselves, whether the cheapest is the best, and not simply from a quality perspective. To follow the route of these forks made in China - from the shop shelf, they came on trucks from distribution hubs, on trucks again, on ships, on trucks yet again, to a factory where there are assembled by hand, assembling parts possibly made on site but more likely made in yet another factory, turning processed materials into components. This is a disposable product manufactured unsustainably.

Consider organic apples for sale in Ontario, grown in New Zealand - they lose their sustainability credentials when you consider what it took to get them to the shop in Ontario.

Victor Papanek in Design For The Real World speaks of “Kleenex culture” – the disposability of things. He goes so far as to make a connection between throw away tissues to throw away marriages and even lives. This seems at first glance to be a bit of a stretch, but I think the implications of mass disposability over generations can have a larger impact than we may be aware of.

A number of years ago, Teknion Furniture Systems, and office furniture manufacturer did a life cycle analysis of one of its cubicle workstations to determine where the greatest environmental impact of the product was. The surprising result was that painting the steel was the largest impact. The steel is powder coated, and the ovens to back the paint finish, in Toronto, were powered by electricity produced in coal fired stations, and that combination resulted in the greatest impact. This is impossible to see without a detailed analysis, but gives an idea of the complexity of the issue.

There are so many examples of poor things, we could go on and on. There are also many great examples around us that are pointing at the way forward.

As a counter to the disposability and commoditization of objects, Philips in the Netherlands did a design exploration a few years ago around objects as carriers of meaning. They tried to identify what carries meaning, and develop objects to capture that in a meaningful way. One captured scents, another sounds, not unlike picture frames for other senses.

Domus, and Italian architecture and design magazine did a feature in 2006 called "Super Normal", with Jasper Morrison and Naota Fukasawa. "looking at things that are anonymously Super Normal means you are looking at the feel of a thing, at the relationship that has built up around its shape. I think it's a bit like feeling with other senses even though you're looking at it with your eyes."

Interface carpets have taken environmental responsibility to new levels in manufacturing. Particularly in carpet making which is a notoriously nasty business. Ray Anderson, CEO, has implemented many strategies to reduce energy usage, waste, and resource usage in making their carpets. The irony is that they have found this to be profitable too – it required investment, but it is more than paying off in savings increasing profitability as a result.

Nike have launched a line of shoes they are calling "Considered". From their website - "The Nike Considered mission is simple: We're dedicated to product design that delivers more from less. That offers unparalleled performance while using less energy to make. Features innovative cushioning systems, yet produces less waste. Looks great, yet requires fewer chemicals in production. Nike Considered is an entirely new perspective— where innovation meets conservation. And it's a central part of the next chapter of Nike's corporate responsibility evolution."

The Bo Boolo table [1995] is more interesting for its history than as an object. Every seven years in Europe, there is a fad for wood that is supposed to be an ecology fad - they cut more and more wood "for ecological reasons," which is deeply stupid. That's why I made this table with the National Office of Forests, and said to people, "OK, once more you will see this picture in a mail order catalogue," and you will say, "Oh, what a nice table - so chic." And you will pay for it, but you will receive just the top and the legs. "Oh, something's missing!" But you get a map of France, and on it is a letter that says you will receive the final piece of the table when you go with your map to this forest with an ax. You will have a discussion about the forest with the warden, and he will give you this branch. Then you go back home, and you will have your table. And, it's interesting because people want wood, but they don't know what wood is, they don't know what a forest is, they don't know you have to get wood by cutting down trees. So they come back with a real piece of nature, and now they know.

These are just a few examples of what can happen when there is desire and creativity. There are so many more examples, and the encouraging thing is that the as time goes by, there are more and more, there is a ground swell coming.

## a vision of sustainability

In the early days of sustainable product design, much of the results were appealing on an ideological level, not so much an aesthetic, functional or even durable level. For sustainability to have any real impact it needs to almost be conspicuously absent from the product, sacrifices in aesthetics and functionality are not acceptable. When working on a project a number of years ago, the team came to look for "Sustainable sexy" – not from lust but from refinement and intention in what the object is and what it does, and how it does it – no compromises, just new solutions to a new set of project parameters..

I used to work for a furniture company, and when addressing sustainability it occurred to me that the most sustainable desk, is one made from a tree that was cut down, on your property for instance, built well, built to last realistically 70+ years, at which point it can be discarded, and the tree that grew in its place can be cut down to make another desk - the cycle continues. This is a little naïve, especially in the context of needing to provide work space of 14,000 people on an IBM campus in North Carolina, and not likely appropriate considering the storage requirements, efficiencies in shared components etc. that systems furniture can offer, but it is an interesting lens to look through.

Sustainability is not always about using the right materials. It is about the right mind set – shared uses, recyclability – materials engineers seeking ways to better use recycled material so not so much virgin material is used. Recycled plastic for instance cannot be used in any food grade products. Surely this is not a limitation of the material, simply a limitation in the motivation to find a way to do it. Aluminum, is great example because it is cheaper to use recycled material than to process new from the raw bauxite.

Another way to think about products is to consider product to service models. This is conceptually a great way to achieve a number of goals. Consider cars - some need to own them, but others reluctantly buy them because they need to use them for mobility. They would gladly use another option should one be available. It is really the service of transportation that's needed, not a car. Car companies may not see things this way, but many people do. Organizations like AutoShare and ZipCar (both operating in Toronto), have responded to this, providing a

transportation alternative – car rental by the hour, in locations throughout the city, that many are finding works very well for them. This is also turning the manufacture to sell an object model on its head. If products were developed to sell as services, they would be far more robust, reliable, and serviceable, as those elements that contribute to the sustainability of the object coincide with all the economic drivers.

So in closing, we should try and gain an understanding of the things that we surround ourselves with, to value things more and try to make more responsible decisions in what we buy. Remember the 3 categories of objects: consumables, durables, and un-marketable; and the sustainability's of execution and conception.

I had the opportunity to view an installation by the artist James Turrell. The piece was essentially an illuminated space in a totally dark room. The light was very dim, almost a black light, and at first impossible to see. Over the course of about 10 minutes, my eyes adjusted to the light. I could see its colour and shape and depth, it was a space of almost no definable dimensions. The strange thing was leaving, only to return later – my eyes perceived the light almost immediately – no adjustment, they have always adjusted – my brain has been trained to see the image. So it is with objects, you know when you see it, when you are listening, and once you see it, you will always see it

## Reading List

"The uncommon life of common objects"

"Design for the Real World"

"Industrial Design"

"The Evolution of Useful Things"

"LifeStyle"

"The Design of Everyday things" and "Emotional design"

"Icons, Magnets of Meaning"

And or a juicy bit of what's new and interesting, "Spoon"

by Akiko Busch

by Victor Papanek

by John Heskett

by Henry Petroski

by Bruce Mau

by Donald Norman

by Aaron Betzky

published by Phaidon

## Bibliography

<http://www.brucemaudesign.com/manifesto.html>

<http://yasminthestoryteller.blogspot.com/2006/02/ode-to-common-things-pablo-neruda.html>

<http://www.mcdonough.com>

Wendell Berry, "Why I'm not going to buy a computer" from "what are people for?"

"Design for the Real World" by Victor Papanek

Eco Design, Alistair fuad-luke

[http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/prizes/design\\_arts\\_initiative/starcklecture.html](http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/prizes/design_arts_initiative/starcklecture.html)

Domus 894 – Super Normal

<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikeconsidered/context.jhtml>

## Bio

Lee Fletcher studied an undergraduate diploma in Industrial design at Fanshawe College, in London, Ontario, and pursued a master's degree in Manchester, England. In Manchester, he focused on what he then called Social Design- not the design of society, but broader social impacts on the design of objects. Since then, he had a short time of self employment, where he installed an outdoor public children's playground, the subject of his thesis project. He then worked directly in design consulting for 5yrs, then in a manufacturing environment for a further 5yrs. As of this past Christmas, he set up Fig Industrial Design, a design studio aimed at pursuing projects a little closer to his heart.

Fig industrial design inc.

69 King Edward Ave,

Toronto, Ontario,

M4C 5J5

Canada

416-884-3869

[lee@figindustrialdesign.com](mailto:lee@figindustrialdesign.com)

[www.figindustrialdesign.com](http://www.figindustrialdesign.com)