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BUSINESS NETWORK

A Design Change:
the impact of sustainability

Tim Allan, Principal at Locus Research, and member of the Sustainable Design Working Group, explains the issues designers are facing and demands a major rethink by New Zealand's design community if we are to survive the business changes ahead.

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The landscape of mainstream design over the last 2-3 years has undergone a dramatic shift. Design is often seen as a discipline that leads, but in the case of sustainability it has been dragged to the door and had the door opened for it, leaving many designers ambivalent, unsure and in some cases gravely concerned that their discipline is in the process of being hijacked.

Well known chemist Michael Braungart brusquely stated during a session with New Zealand designers that "I am doing your job" when it came to developing effective new products. Many jaws clenched at this provocation, and whilst it may be a simplification in many respects he is probably right.

Designers have to change the way they design to align with this new thinking and broaden their horizons out to the whole product life cycle and not just the artefact they have historically worked on.

A recent trip to the European Union and United States reinforced the difficulty of applying sustainable design principles commercially. The larger product development companies such as Frog or IDEO seem concerned that an overt and across the board position on sustainability could affect their project pipeline. They risk offending one of the global companies they work for. Instead they adopt the approach of having a 'specialist' or 'department' within their company.

Within these companies there are pockets of designers who are active such as IDEO stalwart Bob Adams, and Valerie Casey (Frog, now IDEO)

who formed the 'Designers Accord' (http://www.designersaccord.org). But a much larger portion of their teams find the concept difficult and are not yet directed or incentivised to embed the concept into their thinking at a company-wide level.

I also visited Professor Ezio Manzini at Politecnico di Milano (Italy) and Associate Professor Jahn Carol Diehl at TU Delft (Holland). These important European Institutions both occupy design leadership roles and are producing high quality graduates. Both Delft and Milan have strong industry linkages and have undertaken extensive research since the early nineties and in some cases before this.

'Eco-design' may seem an abstract term now, but was the basis for most of their research undertaken from the early 1990's through to after 2000. This considered the economic and environmental factors of a product.

The emergence of 'Sustainable Product Design' coincided with the growth of ethical consumption. Society became more interested in where things were made and under what conditions. Product Service Systems were actively investigated during this period and it continues to be an important avenue of investigation.

The next step and the current focus of research in design is 'Social Innovation'. This recognises that people and society are a critical part of sustainable design, and as such new business models and ideas may represent the most progressive solutions. An example of this research

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by Manzini is the 'Creative Communities – Emerging user demands for sustainable solutions'. The research sought to 'identify cases of social innovation geared toward sustainability and clarify demand for products, services and solutions they give rise to.'

There are increasing moves to internationalise, harmonise and promote sustainable design practice through initiatives such as the 'Learning Network for Sustainability' (LeNS project: http://lens.test.polimi.it/index.php?M=0). This joins a number of key universities worldwide in the attempt to produce an open source, common body of knowledge.

With the critical mass and funding from the European Union focused on research rather than practical application, there is a widening gap between academic institutions and professional design companies. As a result it is easy to see why a designer sits in their chair, with a straight design brief from a client and is not sure where to start on being more sustainable.

Starting with your own company and integrating sustainable design practice into your design process is a critical first step. The previously mentioned Designers Accord provides designers with a specific vehicle to make a public commitment to sustainable practice. The vision of the Designers Accord "is to integrate the principles of sustainable design into all practice and production. Our mission is to catalyze innovation throughout the creative community by collectively building our intelligence around sustainability".

Some manufacturing companies such as Patagonia (clothing), Method (household products), and Steelcase (furniture) have been doing a much better job than design at integrating sustainability throughout their companies' culture and operations.

These companies characteristically admit they have a problem, acknowledge they are not perfect, and then do their best to improve the situation. They publically announce this information and it is always backed up with effective and objective research.

Moving toward sustainable design practice should not be prefaced by the requirement for mountains of data, new tools or definitions. It is simply a state of mind, starting with the acceptance that sustainable design is effectively just good design.

The good news locally is that I am working with researchers around increasing our capacity in Life Cycle Thinking Assessment and Management, as well as with other enthusiastic supporters of sustainable design as part of the Sustainable Design Working group.

By collaborating with key organisations, we aim to be a catalyst for change for design here in NZ and our objectives are to communicate the value of sustainable design, help embed it into business, develop the capability and capacity of the design community and to support this thinking into tertiary education so new designers enter the workplace with a better understanding of their role.