

David Report

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YOUR PATHFINDER INTO THE FUTURE



# The Sustainable wheel

## Our keynote

### Foreword

The climate debate is probably the one sole topic getting the most attention in the global media torrent. The discussions on sustainable design are there, lurking in the shadows, but David Report is of the opinion that the concept is too narrow. Often it is about romanticising different ways of production, with emphasis on the environmental aspect which of course is important, but we shouldn't forget that design is more complex than that. "Green" or "eco" are only parts of the concept sustainable design.

Design interacts constantly in our lives, it both solves problems and creates desires. Design is everywhere around us and affect our lives in most evident ways. But how constant and sustainable is design? One says that something is ecological or green and therefor automatically good, but it may still be a crappy product that no one wants. In this issue of the David Report bulletin we will go deeper and propose a new definition of sustainable design.



Image from the Designboost "boost show" in Malmö

## Designboost 2007

In David Report we argue for an open-minded attitude concerning sustainable design. As always we have a true design perspective in everything we do and in this issue we are happy to present the event Designboost. David Carlson of David Report, is the founder of Designboost together with his long-time friend Peer Eriksson. The theme for Designboost 2007 was sustainable design and the first Designboost event ever took place in Malmö, Sweden October 17th to November 17th.

Designboost is a completely novel concept at the Swedish design market. It will be annual, different, international and will penetrate questions of current interest on design in a broad perspective and put it at the agenda in the society at large. Designboost is supposed to inject both it's participants and the audience with new ideas, make them ponder, reflect, worry and be amused about what design really is and how it should be used in order to create a better life for people, and a more durable society. Designboost consists of Boost meetings, Boost chats and Boost show (formerly known as workshops, lectures and exhibition). Designboost is also an exclusive network. Some of the most important international designers, researchers and creative thinkers were participating in the event together with people from the Nordic industry and students from leading Swedish design schools. The list of participants include Jennifer Leonard, Stephen Burks, Jody Turner, Brent Richards, Satyendra Pakhale, Thomas Sandell and Sean Pillot de Chenecey to mention a few. You will find a complete list of participants at the Designboost web.



## To be dynamic

Many believe that duration/sustainability is about being static in a static world, to not change anything, ever. What fewer think of is that the only possible way forward is being dynamic in a dynamic world. I.e, everything constantly changes everywhere, all the time. Nothing and no one resists change in the long run. Evolution, according to Darwin, is the ultimate proof that change over time generates change, it can however be a slow process which spans over many generations. Design plays a big part in the evolution that is affected by the human, or as the architect Tim Power says (by the way one of the boosters at Designboost):

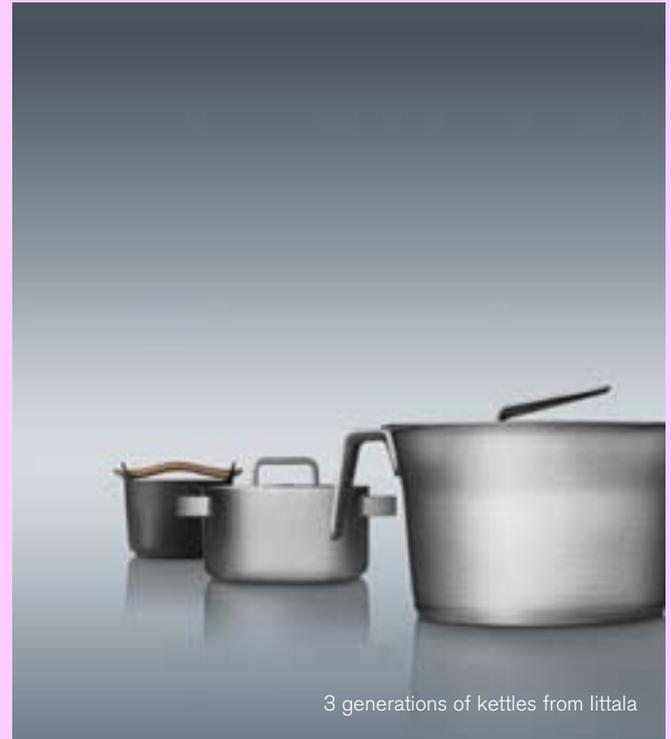
"Everything that is an artificial artefact has indeed been designed. In other words, everything that is not 'natural' is designed."

The inner meaning of "sustainable" gives the guides, the vision and way to follow. So what is "sustainable" then? The Cambridge Dictionary:

1. Able to continue over a period of time.
2. Causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time.

If one takes the regard on sustainable (according to our study) of the world around one the meaning is often focused, as we mentioned before, on environment and recycling.

Our David Report team looks upon the phenomena in a



more profound way and sees more alternatives and possibilities. Sustainability, to see things in the long run and continuity are all the essence of the above. The definitions were definitely deepened during Designboost 2007, where the concept sustainable design in the largest sense of the word were discussed in thirty different workshops, looked upon from all angles in twenty or so lectures and showed in a questioning exhibition.

Kristina Börjesson – PhD, Research Associate/Central Saint Martins Colle of Art and Design and also one of the invited boosters at Designboost said with great insight, "we must have more holistic approach to sustainability to avoid sustaining the unsustainable". Kristina here illustrates a big issue; too many are defending bad and unattractive products with the fact that they are (according to them) "sustainable". Dan Hill describes the same thing in the book *Realize – design means business*; "After all, what good is a product if nobody wants to use it?"

Greenwashing, the phenomenom that describes companies and persons that in a false way exploits the green trend, is a degenerate that has surfaced and grown over the last year. Greedy and unscrupulous businessmen scent money and act in any way they can. John Thackara from *Doors of perception* recently wrote, with a twinkle in his eye: "In business, greenwashing often means changing the name and/or label. Early warning signs that a product is probably toxic include images of trees, birds, or dew drops. If all three are on the box, the product will probably make your skin peel off in seconds".



Savoy vase by Alvar Aalto

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## Our interview

### ...with Jennifer Leonard

Jennifer Leonard is a designer researcher and writer at IDEO, in Palo Alto, California. Jennifer co-authored *Masive Change*, a book about the future of global design. She has spoken at design conferences around the world and is a graduate of the inaugural year of the Institute without Boundaries, a design think-tank that once-upon-a-time lived inside the Bruce Mau Design studio in Toronto. Jennifer was also one of the boosters at Designboost 2007.

#### **-What is sustainable design according to you?**

It's a wonderful collision of concepts, both of which are hotly debated at the moment. Together, they help form a necessary, albeit mind-bending, meditation on our global fate. Also, what I love about this discussion today is that it's open to all disciplines, designers and beyond. Well, well beyond.

#### **-Do we need to see sustainability in a wider picture than today?**

Yes, this is what I consistently communicate. Sustainability cannot be contained by a single discipline. Rather, it's a necessary force driving and shaping all disciplines.

#### **-How can a human component be included in the sustainable discussion?**

It's unavoidable. Humans shape business, technology, design and everything else in our world today - including the natural environment (although nature also shapes us... and has mysterious ways, beyond our capacity to fully grasp).

#### **-How can we use the knowledge and authenticity from handicraft and local heritage in a global industrial context?**

Hmm...interesting question. Perhaps this is where storytelling has its greatest value in design thinking today? It points to our global need for sustaining stories about local culture, and distributing this sort of knowledge in a myriad of mass-mediated ways, including face to face communication (in the spirit of oral tradition).



Jennifer Leonard

#### **-The marketers have finally understood the "green" is selling. Do you see any danger in that? Or is it good?**

It's only dangerous if "green" is seen as a trend, as all things trendy come in and out of fashion. Green is good for our planet, and it's good for us humans who occupy it. So I'd say green is here to stay. And if it sells, great!

#### **-Design has a double role when it is both a driving force for "conspicuous consumption" at the same time as it can make life better for the lots of people. What role has the designer in this situation?**

The role of the designer is critical. No longer is it good design if the output is all about good looks. If the output (be it a product or a process; a system or a service) sustains over time, then consuming it is a win-win purchase. It destroys what's known as "conspicuous consumption" and brings to life "conscious consumption." Designers have the power to take this to the next level and make all things associated with it desirable.

## Our believes

It's not an exaggeration that environmental issues often are the main ingredient in the sustainable design debate. We would state a more open-minded definition. For the Designboost event we have identified seven different themes that we see are the most important in the definition of sustainable design. They are:

- Environmental influence
- Innovation
- Emotional connection
- Aesthetics
- Quality
- Authenticity
- Compatibility

The themes may be seen as important parts of a fictitious "sustainable wheel" (a wheel that isn't stronger than it's weakest spoke...), and the themes were used as discussion bases during the Designboost event. They are also visualised in the exhibition both through filmed interviews and products on display.

Here follows the descriptions of the seven themes:

### 1. Environmental influence

*"to have an aspiration to affect the environment as little as possible"*

Environment is a concept that has been reported massively during the past few years. Is it "environmentally friendly" to drive an ethanol car when we know the problems of the ethanol production? Or are we often just transporting the problems onto other, less obvious and exposed areas? Perhaps in the end the sum we pay ends up on the same bill? The same thing goes for buying ecological food that has been transported from the other side of the globe.

The David Report team listened to a lecture with trend analyst David Shah where he pointed out that us Swedes are so good at turning off the television at the same time

as we've got the dirtiest and and most gasoline eating cars in Europe. The stand-by electricity you save on your television is completely without significance compared to the affect your car driving has on the environment... It's important to see the whole picture, and not just the romantic notion of eco. You as a consumer must be both critical and open by indicating your stand point and your choices. At the other hand it is like Stella McCartney use to say about being a vegetarian at the same time as she wears leather shoes; " I think doing anything is better than nothing".

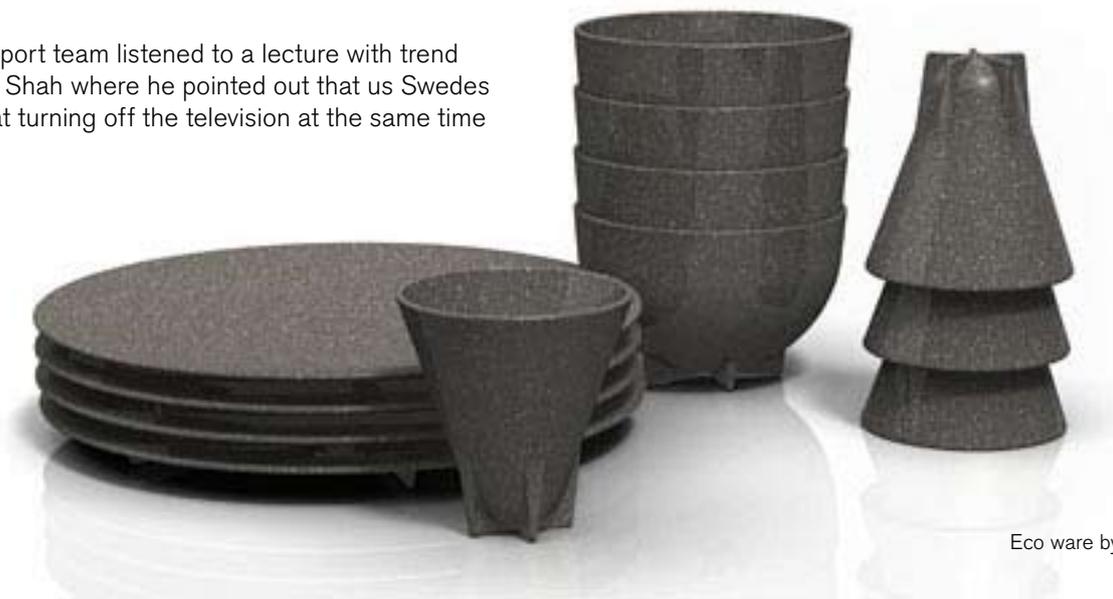
Recycling is a part of the identity of the concept "design" together with innovation, long-sightedness and thinking out of the box. ReCycle and ReUse have probably become the hottest buzzwords of 2007. Now we'd like to see ReUse in a bigger, industrial context. And why not ReMix?

IKEA and H&M have done much to democratise the concept design. But at the same time they've eroded the durability perspective. When consumption is constantly growing, or must grow due to different influences, more artefacts are established on the market. More artefacts doesn't automatically equal better products, in fact quite the opposite. More products mean competitive prices, which sadly often leads to worsen quality (moved out production, poor material and so on to keep prices low).

Sustainability is a better and wiser strategy. We don't need more products, we need better. The backyard of our consumption society is abundance, that will lead to over-abundance, which could lead to holocaustic consequences.

We get more wear and tear products and in many cases we also forget the importance of craft. When craft is missing we often get less durability and sustainability. A never ending spiral that completely erodes the original quality and durability perspective.

Quality/durability/service are often overseen today. Walk into a fashion store and ask the shop assistant about the



material and production of the commodity and alas, there are few who can answer. Why? Surface and fast commercial satisfaction is apparently more important than quality and durability.

An important part of the environmental aspect is that products and services shall be produced with a minimum of energy consumption and also consume as little energy as possible during its lifetime. In total, environmental influence is about a responsible use of resources, a sustainable product is always beneficial to both society and environment.

## 2. Innovation

*"to develop unique attributes on several levels"*

If we are aiming for a decent sustainable future (and aren't we all?), we must invest in science through research and innovation. Today, unfortunately a future dream-world built on emotions instead of scientific facts seems to be the main target for the many people.

Only through constant evolution can we create better sustainable design and a more durable society. It's for example better to create completely novel materials instead of only trying to make old materials ecologic. Organic cotton is one example. Focus should be on creating new functions that improves our life. If we can increase the level of innovation in each developed product, we will increase the pace in which we're going towards the future.

Innovation is both about seeing things in different ways, to think out of the box, to think renewal and change, remove the blinkers and create innovation through creative and bold processing and briefing. In many ways everything is already invented and it's the ability to see the already established in new ways that is the strength of innovation.

Products are in the end the result of human acts and therefor an extension of humans. That's why we mustn't forget the importance of social innovation...

Now we just have to make sustainable design available to the masses. Isn't it time to make it inclusive rather than exclusive?

## 3. Emotional connection

*"to be part of the user"*

Emotional connectivity is a parameter which often falls short in a mechanical and technical friendly culture, which sadly is the case in the majority of the companies in Sweden. This is not acceptable in 2007 were we believe both tactility and sensorial designs to be decisive for commercial success.

A farsighted sustainable strategy is to involve design and communicative elements in the product, or in its immediate surrounding, from the very beginning of the



Artek pavillion by Shigeru Ban

product and service process. To make the product attractive with, among other things, a clearly defined identity. By doing this you can eliminate or at least minimise communication costs (advertising) in the product's launching phase.

Design is sustainable, advertising is not (read more about this in our two earlier bulletins "The credibility loop" and "Communication through products").

A clear identity can create an emotional connection to a product. This is not strange as basically everything stems from identity, the individual as well as artefacts have an identity. Both from a social and psychological point of view the identity is the core, the material physical objects "really don't exist". Nina Persson of the Cardigans recently said "I like when clothes and objects have an aura, or a secret story..."

What meaning has recycling, durable materials, environmentally friendly production and use if the consumers don't discover, understand and care for the product, ie, it's disregarded while still functioning?

What makes us want to keep certain objects while we throw away others without thinking? And we're talking about products that have many years left to live. Is there an important parameter that ties us to an object? Could it be that we have greater affection for a product which we have saved up to and longed for compared to a tear and wear product we have no relation to at all? It's important to create a lifelong love and not just a brief fling...

## 4. Aesthetics

*"to age with grace"*

Aesthetics is personal. It has its given definition but at the same time it is subjective and a personal question about what is good or bad.

Pierre Bourdieu said a long time ago "taste is the generative formula that lies behind a lifestyle". I.e, taste and lifestyle goes hand in hand and so does aesthetics too.

A product can create a craving by different reasons, where aesthetics is one of the most common. Aesthetics is important when it comes to most forms of design such as furniture, architecture, fashion, products and typography. In the beginning of the industrial revolution function was the most important factor, an ingredients that today more or less has been reduced to a matter of hygiene, (remember the blinking VHS player that no one could really programme?). Today aesthetics has taken over the role from function as one of the most important factors.

Aesthetics is however dependant on culture, seeing that in some cultures it is everything and in others much less important. In Sweden and Scandinavia there is a double nature that at the same time facilitates and bars the way for aesthetics and its meaning. This is made obvious by the fact that the ones familiar with the concept (which are few seen on the entire population) are internationally in front of development and knowledge of the subject.



Common man (a large part of the population) is on the other hand not interested, in a country ruled by the tall poppies syndrome there is no room for an emotional and subjective force such as aesthetics, everything should be the same! In other cultures and in many European countries aesthetics, appearance and timelessness are the key elements. In Italy, for example, tradition is everything; food, design development, the importance of family (although these values are about to loosen up). In Sweden cars are built to manage a crash, big, safe and functional (SAAB and Volvo were for a long time world leading in safety for personal cars). In Italy they build cars that are not meant to crash! Small, elegant and hot tempered. See the difference in vision and expression. One is not better than the other since there are other parameters involved, but it is without doubt a fundamental difference in thought and innovation.



According to us timelessness is a strong and important aesthetic value. The Seven and Ant chairs by Arne Jacobsen are great examples of timeless, iconic products. Classics that survives year after year, are inherited by the generations to come and excellent examples of truly durable products.

Technological products such as Apples iPod, or several mobile phone manufacturers with special "design editions" (LG and Samsung vs. Prada, D&G etc.) may have an iconic or special aesthetic appearance, but will still have a limited life length, since the evolution within technology is at brake neck speeds. Many mobile phones have a life-span less than a year. At David Report we believe it would be interesting to look into the technological maturity (instead of continuously evolving consumer electronics) and let it contribute to creating long-lasting products.

## 5. Quality

*"to own multi-quality capacities"*

With quality we mean durability and function as well as consumer value. Quality is at the same time an environmental responsibility to think in long term. For example by

seeing cost in the long perspective, the entire life length of the product. You can buy a sofa for a 300 EUR and throw it after three years, or one for 3000 EUR and keep it for thirty years. Which is the more expensive in the long run, both for you and society? It all comes down to quality, timeless design and a sustainable economic as well as ecological way of thinking. On the other hand it is not unreasonable to challenge the need to make sofas that last for thirty years when the buyer may get tired of it after five. Is it a waste of resource to deliver too high quality? It's unfortunately a relevant question in our mass-consumption world. Satyendra Pakhale, another of the Designboost "boosters", recently designed and curated an exhibition at the Tendence Lifestyle 2007 in Frankfurt called "We can't afford to buy CHEAP things". We love the title! Here follows some words from Satyendra on sustainable design; "One could talk a lot about the ecological side of design therefore sustainable design and one must not forget it's a political issue. But I would argue whatever we produce it pollutes our environment in one-way or the other. So for me, real sustainable design is the design that people will cherish and keep it for generations to generations." The Gucci family slogan refers quite well to the topic; "Quality is remembered long after the price is forgotten".



Shinkansen railway in Japan

Besides from our basic need of food and a roof over our heads (Maslow) we live today in a society where people has a need to fulfill themselves through consumption. Shopping has turned into a lifestyle. This phenomena is growing fast in Russia, China, India and other developing countries where an economical middle and upper class is growing rapidly and with the help of different products shows it's status and place in society. This is a difficult balance act and also double standards when we in western countries deny others a development we ourselves had the opportunity to take part in earlier. From one perspective they must be allowed to go their own way, but from another, global environmental point of view, they must listen to the ones who already made that journey and saw both the good and the bad parts of it. Last but not least it is crucial with an interactivity between all countries. There must be a generosity from the rich part of the world that have technological and other possibilities.

Quality is also a concept that falls under the emotionally ruled objects, which are all subjective and strange to many people, especially the technically and/or economically ruled companies/cultures that have to compare, count and measure everything and is in a clear majority today... The Swedish architect Thomas Sandell describes quality in a great way with his Designboost one-liner quote "quality is always sustainable".

## 6. Authenticity

*"to be able to tell a credible story"*

Authenticity runs or rather should run the world. But what is authenticity? Authenticity is both a demand and a necessary and desirable attribute. Authenticity is among other things origin, quality and identity. Authenticity is to perfectly perform a service or to produce a perfect product. Or to produce a product/service that is not perfect, but with which the individual executing it has done his very best, despite, or thanks to, lack of resource/knowledge.

Authenticity is both subjective and objective. This means both the history as well as the ability to tell it is of uttermost importance; storytelling, soul and/or cultural inheritance are tactic models to use.

We have described the phenomenon of authenticity in an earlier David Report Bulletin called Future Luxury (in fact the whole issue was more or less about authenticity). Here is a short resume on the current global out smoothing; "Will future consumers see a Swedish designed but Chinese produced Orrefors glass vase as Swedish? Don't you think that some of the authenticity gets lost in the Chinese mass-production? Maybe some of the substance and history as well?"

We believe a product won't be "durable" before it tells a credible story. We live in a materialistic society with a lack of spirituality. People like storytelling, it's a part of human history. As soon as something has a story, it becomes important. It gets a soul. And if it's important it will soon be durable!

## 7. Compatibility

*"to be part of a bigger coherence"*

Compatibility in it's innermost form is to get people to interact. Without communication nothing works and both future and innovation becomes utopias. Humans are social creatures that wants and needs to belong to a social group in order to function. To make the group function it must communicate both internally and with other individuals and groups. The goal is always to understand, interpret and interact with other individuals and/or groups to reach the desired result. In this process compatibility is the key, all communicators (groups/individuals) must be compatible to understand each other and hence reach their goal. We have different tools at our disposal, such as language and social/cultural upbringing, but without the main process (compatibility) there is no durability.

This human compatibility is analogue with many different techniques (MP3, IR, video, CD, DVD, Blu-ray, TV, HDTV etc...) that producers try to convince the market to adopt. All producers want a monopoly, but a compatibility regard would grant a sustainable development. All involved will gain off of it if the product/service becomes standard. The companies will find new and better means of competition, it's the core of evolution. Bluetooth is a good example of collaboration that supports and generates more, that is sustainable development/design.

In David Report issue 1/2005 we reflected upon the concept "open source" and we drew the conclusion that it is not free or open. The importance is that everyone has access to the content and can develop it on their own. In "open source" the compatibility regard is everything, it doesn't work without it... In the same way more companies should be able to take advantage of the opportunity to create common platforms (designers, materials etc) with several outcomes and out of that get sustainable coordination advantages.

Just as when we talk about emotional connectivity compatibility is also about making products emotionally sustainable, to create long-sightedness and long lasting desirability. And last but not least, create human to human relationships.



Detail of a robe from  
KR LT Studio in Lithuania

## Our windup

We don't have the answers, we have the questions. But we do know this; living on planet earth demands sharing planet earth in order to save planet earth.

A general conclusion of our thoughts above is that emotion and their meanings is everything. The mechanical and rational rules, one believes, but when it comes down to it we are biological creatures ruled by emotion - they cannot be excluded.

A product could be defined as sustainable first when it consider all ingredients of the "sustainable wheel". We argue that in the end, a product is nothing worth not favouring a human context. We always have to extend sustainability beyond materials. We have to remember to always look through the lens of humanity when we are trying to define a sustainable product.

Designboost will be documented with a book and a dvd. Release beginning of February 2008. Stay tuned.



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