

The affective sustainability of objects; a search for causal connections.

This trans-disciplinary research project aims to answer 2 vital questions concerning the 'timeless' object:

1. Can designers' way of thinking be enlarged and deepened to include the knowledge *how* to make an object retain its significance over time in a changing human context?
2. Will designers' way of thinking thus further developed contribute in a substantial way to an improved and more *holistic view* on sustainability?

'*Affective sustainability*' doesn't belong to established terminology and didn't exist when these research questions were formulated. It has grown out of ongoing research but its relevance is still explored.

The compressed results of the deconstruction of 'timeless' and its numerous abbreviations are the notions *affective* and *sustainable*. These have been mapped individually and combined. Research to this stage is promising with the emergence of patterns of variables causal to the phenomenon of 'timeless' and essential for understanding why many objects contrary to the aim have a short lifespan and are rapidly 'wasted'.

Keywords: product design, philosophy of design, design history, timeless, classic, affectivity, sustainability, cognition, perception.

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INTRODUCTION

Timeless has according to Osborne (1995) mainly philosophical implications and an early but important way into a research area within something as physical as design has thus been philosophical. It has consequently been of major importance to start the research with a very clear aim and avoid getting so deeply involved in philosophical issues as not to find the way either round, about or out. Even if this research in a way is virgin, it is not meant to be basic in the meaning of not being in the reach for practical application. It is aimed at being an addition to design theory and thus enlarge knowledge and rise consciousness among designers about how to think to be able to design affectively sustainable objects, designs that last beyond their physical capacity and outlast generations and often also transcend as well family as national borders, sometimes even cultural borders. Objects you could say have a high affective capacity on the human level (Kwinter 2002).

The aim, thus described, could also contribute to an improved balance between design development and designing for the future. The latter issue has long been omnipresent among designers.

As this research hasn't got the form of a continuation of an existing thread, the first phase is about a) exploring and trying to better understand the notions of *timeless* and *timeless-ness* and all their abbreviations and secondly about b) mapping the notions of as well *affective* as *sustainable* and what they represent when made into 'one'. The choice to do b) the mapping, then grew out of a) the exploration of timeless. This, which took the form of deconstruction, gave reason to believe that affective and sustainable were likely to best embrace the complexity involved. If proven appropriate, the resulting denomination when combined will facilitate communication and also have the capacity of being a reminder, which at its best when heard will start certain processes in the mind of designers. There is of course some way to go before affective sustainability with reason can be called: 'An important parameter to take into consideration'.

Before continuing it is however essential to stress [again?] that the aim of this research never was to arrive at a new denomination. The aim is, and has been since the start, to search for causal connections, which may explain why some objects retain their significance over time and in a changing human context and others don't. Is it then at all worthwhile to introduce a new denomination? An easier way to proceed would probably have been to concentrate on a description within the frame of 'how designers could develop their thinking in new directions' and describe the different variables with possible causal connections. As the number of necessary disciplines to explore to cover the question increased so did of course the complexity. It became obvious that there was a need to compress in the form of an appropriate denomination.

If this new denomination can contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon, it is worth the effort to take it into consideration, even if it means a complication from a research point of view.

This paper is a review of ongoing research and the work presented here is the result of this research if not otherwise stated with references. The number of references is purposely kept down to those, whose works make up the foundation for further reasoning. The main reason for this is to make the introduction of a new and complex trans-disciplinary research area more accessible. The disciplines involved are philosophy, sociology; cultural studies, communication theory - psychology; cognition and perception - art history - design and architecture; history, theory and practise.

DECONSTRUCTION

Timeless design in its later day meaning has become a retail- and auction denomination, as has classic. Pleasurable products and emotional design, which are within the domain of affectivity, have probably just started to make their way into people's conscious, not least as a conference topic. The debate about the real nature of these products and the importance of the area from a designer point of view is vivid. We have, to cite Lupton and Miller in their 1994 writing on Jacques Derrida and deconstruction, arrived at a stage where we don't know 'how representation inhabits reality'.

Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, is the father of deconstruction. The term deconstruction is or has been primarily used in design to label physical deconstruction, a style, e.g. Gehry's architectural work etc. This is not what is referred to here. The aim of his work (*Of Grammatology*, 1967/1976) was, to put it a bit simpler than the man himself, to understand what we really mean with what we are actually saying or showing; thus to go beyond representation.

The first phase of this research, a combined literature review and desk research, is about deconstructing in this sense; to find out which reality the denominations timeless, classical, eternal and their abbreviations represents, not only in a philosophical sense but also as a matter of later day creation.

After looking into all the disciplines, which this research embraces and which are referred to above, in a consequent search for these denominations and the contexts in which they appear certain patterns have emerged.

Time and objects have not one but three relations; to time generally, to a time and over time. Timeless, timelessness and eternal is thus rather about a certain relation to time than being without time [which with reason normally is regarded as beyond reality] This offers the possibility to judge *time-less* as having a time of origin but from then on flow with time, thus being in the relation; object over time. An object, which flows with time can't be depending on how we live, which is continuously undergoing big changes, but rather how we are.

- Timeless is therefore referring to what is directly perceived. It is an affective experience.

Everything aesthetic is by default also perceived, an affective experience, whilst beauty is judged by cognition, a mental experience.

- There is thus a relation between timeless and the aesthetic as an affective experience.

Classical is either an established (traditional?) way of doing something or a reference to Roman or Greek antiquity (Svensk Ordbok 1990). In its later day creation it has come to mean something that has lasting value and therefore is a synonym of timeless. It has moreover to certain extent 'contaminated' timeless with traditional.

Traditional and modern are often used as oppositions and the current omnipresent expression 'modern classics' is thus very contradictory. But tradition and all its derived forms; traditional, traditionalism and traditionality are not one and basically not about established ways of doing and thinking (Osborne 1995). It is about handing over, *tradere*, and consequently about experiences.

- Timeless is thus not linked to the established in the meaning of a fixed form but to experiences, which are handed over through the objects capacity to flow with time or continue over time. As stated above, nothing is without time, it has a time when it originated, but this is irrelevant as long as the experiences continue to flow with time. When a better one replaces another experience, the flow stops or slows down.

Did the modernists really want to break with traditions? There is evidence here that this was not the case. As traditions are not one, what was the break about? As no one seems to have gone beyond representation here, we might guess or alternatively follow logic. Cognition is guiding reflective action and resulting in how we live. Direct perception is triggering non-reflective reaction, the way we are. *How we live* is therefore naturally very prone to change through learning and also due to all kinds of development in the environment. Human ways of being are on the other hand not guided by learning but by experiences. *How we are* can't thus be changed but instead developed through adding a new experience or replacing an existing one. This is what we normally call: To make better use of who we are. To be able to judge, which experience has a chance to be perceived and stored, you must of course look to those that has already managed to do so, the traditions, even if your intention is to replace them with something better (Dewey, 1934). There is a clear tension between human ways of living and human ways of being when it comes to progress. The break with traditions was probably a result of this tension in the form of opposition to routines as fixed forms of behaviour. The legacy of the modernists could then be revised. They wanted to add affective experiences and thereby enhance development by building on human ways of being. The problem was perhaps rather a misconception of how the latter are constituted.

- Timeless is then an affective experience which is non-reflective as it has a capacity to flow with time (to constitute "a pattern language" to quote Alexander 1979) - perceived by humans over time - be stored and continue to affect our ways of being. "Inspired and remembered by repeated encounters", to use the vocabulary of Pye (1978). This argues for the designer to study direct perception and non-reflective user reaction [also his/hers own] before entering a cognitive phase with reflective practise.

THE RESULT OF THE DECONSTRUCTION PROCESS.

The result of the deconstruction can be presented as follows, where A is the cruder version whilst B is refined:

A. In relation to the phenomenon of timeless there are four major notions to consider:

- **Time** is something we always have to relate to but not as a single notion.
- **Traditions** are handed over and thus in some way proven relevant to human ways of being by their mere existence.
- **Aesthetic** is a sensual experience.
- **Perception** of a sensual experience is direct and not mediated.

B. These four notions are each representing more than one reality and have to be further broken down.

1. **Time is a process rather than a number of eras.** This view is a precondition to be able to avoid being ruled by the notions old and new, ancient and modern.
2. **Traditions are not orders or truths** to be followed or shunned **but experiences** to be further developed.
3. **Aesthetic and Beauty is not one.** The difference is about un-mediated and mediated sensual experience respectively.
4. **Direct (un-reflected) perception of a subjective solution contains valuable information,** if not absolute direction, **about the reflected objective solution.**

Ongoing simultaneously as the process of deconstruction has thus been one of compression, which has resulted in these four sub-hypotheses. The two most prominent variables involved are time and senses, whilst the issue of consciousness is omnipresent: What is actually passing the mind and what is not? The element of sustaining is dominating in the first two hypotheses, whilst affectivity; the sensual, un-reflected reaction, is the principal element in the two latter.

MAPPING

Sustainability is something, which we understand as the result of a cognitive process. It has been 'mentally processed'. Everything affective refers to the senses and an affective reaction often bypasses the mind, it is directly perceived and unconsciously registered (Lave 1988, Capra 2003). This doesn't mean that it is not contributing to experience, rather the opposite. According to Dewey (1929, 1934) the emotions felt at the moment of perception, e.g. an aesthetic experience, can't be changed by any facts, just future experiences. Sustainability is of course closely related to the notion of time as an aspect of durability (i.e. Papanek 1995). In this sense it is in opposition to new, which became the essence of modernism and its trademark brake with traditions, which has posed a challenge to designers and architects ever since (Henket in Henket & Heynen, 2002). Our senses, on the other hand, are related to time beyond our control. Some sensual experiences stay with us for our entire life, others disappear without leaving a trace (Rée in Osborne, 2000). There is an enormous tension involved here. Physical objects, the result of design, are representing culture. Culture is based on traditions. For many years designers have been preoccupied with the new and with de-traditionalisation (Lash in Heelas, Lash & Morris, 1999). With culture thus to a certain degree suppressed, a *creation* of, what could be called, *replacement values* [as these normally are embedded in culture] has been, if not necessary, so inevitable. Sustainability is one of these creations, classic a second and affectivity a third. This has not least been the case within design where sustainable, classic and affective all are common prefixes to designing and designed products.

The importance of creating sustainable societies can't be exaggerated. The ways forward, on the other hand, are to be further explored and evaluated. Waste is produced in several different ways of which some seem to be permanently on the agenda, others overlooked. To the latter belongs affective 'waste' [if this term is allowed]. Products that don't 'take care' of **us** are discarded. The anthropocentric perspective, the discarding of objects that has no obvious utility for **us** or is understood by **us** is also discussed as an issue we have to come to terms with (Hill in Birkeland, 2002).

The challenge is to try and judge whether it is at all possible to meet these problems; can we make people think differently about affective waste or should we instead enhance our ability to design for improved affective sustainability? The outcome so far of this research is pointing in the direction of the latter.

INTO REALITY

There is thus a true empirical aim for this project. Whilst there since long has been made efforts to calculate the economical gain of sustainable development, it will never be possible to single out the contribution of affective sustainable products. The individual company might have a better chance to make some estimates. The cost for developing new products could easily be compared to those spent to 'revitalise' products, which have proven to retain their significance. One of the best examples of this is IKEA, which seem to constantly being able to design products, which flow with time and over cultural borders. This is not a talent they boast about in their marketing - and for obvious reasons. Neither do other companies who have succeeded in doing the same. We don't even know exactly who they are. Meanwhile the discussion in academia as well as in practise goes on: Why do some objects have as well 'staying power' as the capacity to 'hand over', whilst others don't. One reason might be that the discussions mainly have stayed within the individual disciplines and a limited amount of variables have subsequently been considered: form/geometry, art/sensuality psychology/perception, sociology/culture. There has evidently been little effort to combine the findings within the different disciplines and thus create new, or rather, improved knowledge. Conclusions, which might have been able to serve as directions for designers, have consequently neither been made. This is therefore the empirical aim of this research: To produce these directions in the form of a manageable number of possible paths to consider. At its best 'Affective Sustainability' will, as already mentioned, become a parameter to take into almost habitual consideration and direct the designer to these paths, which at this stage concerns the enlarged notion of time, the revised notion of tradition, the division of aesthetic and beauty and the seemingly overlooked role of direct perception. What we have arrived at is a grounded theory, a base, from which to embark on the next phase of this research project.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Exploration of the grounded theory will be made possible through further analyses and some applied research. Focus will be on the relevance of the new denomination and the accurateness of the sub-hypotheses. For this purpose it has been crucial to define what merits an object to be designated affectively sustainable:

The object has to be designed 50 years or more ago and still be in demand.

Thorough analyses of selected designers' works; theory and practice, are almost completed. The aim has been to acquire an as detailed knowledge as possible about the thinking, which characterises the designers who have had objects defined as above ascribed to them. Planned for October 2005 with a pilot due to run in May is an investigation where young designers doing their MA will curate a fictional thematic [Affective Sustainability] exhibition on the Internet. What today is set to be the final of the applied research phase is a series of interviews with companies involved in the re-edition of different objects. This is on the agenda for June/July.

The outcome of the applied research will guide further desk-research before the final conclusions are made.

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To note: Two areas of design are not included in this research project; fashion and graphic design. Both are excluded on well-founded reasons, which concerns risks of biasing the research.