

# Mend and make do

Adrian Stokes argues that good design should demonstrate very clearly how design intelligence can turn the tide of waste that is overwhelming us

**F**irst...  
I stopped buying lunch at M&S because I couldn't bear the fact that by the time I'd tucked in, my carrier bag appeared to have more in it than when I left the check out. A modern equivalent of the trick employed for feeding the 5,000, only with rubbish not fish and destined to fill holes in our landscape, not our stomachs. It's been clear for years that the packaging industry creates short-term solutions and long-term problems.

Second...

I have a storage unit and loft filled with old products (computers/printers/phones/kettles/routers/digitising tablets/electronic typewriters etc, etc) because I can't bear the thought that they are still perfectly serviceable, if out of date, or are in perfect condition but in need of a simple part that can't be bought.

Third...

Not so long ago I watched a TV programme *The World Without Us* that revealed how, in about 500 years, most contemporary structures will have crumbled and there will be little outward evidence that 20<sup>th</sup> Century man lived. No bad thing considering; however as Stonehenge, the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China and the concrete Coliseum will still be there, it's not a great legacy, even though the more inquisitive animals might dig up the left overs from my M&S lunch.

I recently went to visit a company who may be retained to manufacture a new range of luggage I've designed. They are a tier 1 supplier to IKEA and also invest in the products of a number of start-up companies. One of these manufactures boxes for transporting salmon from Scotland. The company was set up by two partners who had worked for 30 years in the fishing industry in Grimsby. Nowadays, most fish going through that market are transported in and then out to various destinations, restaurants and so on. At the salmon farms the fish are packed in large expanded polystyrene containers, have ice thrown over them, (which can damage the flesh) and are then moved.





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created to be updated and replaced not repaired. This in turn feeds our worst instincts and makes us all victims of the very corporations who claim to design products under the banner of 'service and the customer experience'. 'Ending is better than mending' would be a more appropriate byline for most corporate mission statements in our 'Brave New World'. In my world though, I had thought industrial designers came into being to 'service' the needs of 'the customer', but in many instances our role has been cynically skewed to have a different emphasis and one that is in fact focused on the needs of the company not the customer - servicing volume and obsolescence. Sadly many designers have entered into this unholy alliance. In a recent Guardian editorial it was reported that at a seminar hosted by the Design Council "one well-known designer argued that great design, caused spontaneous mass outbreaks of consumerism/gives you an itchy wallet/had to be sexy and fashionable/and force its way onto the dance-floor of life." The only mass outbreak apparent in this comedians comment is usually the spoken consequence of eating uncooked chicken. But it is symptomatic of the distorted values that sections of our profession have adopted. Provided it sells don't worry about those left "dancing" in the mess left behind. I design a lot of consumer electronics. The market is strangely polarised. On the one hand, there are products with lifecycles shorter than an average mayfly and on the other, products, no less sophisticated technically and still covetable scores of years after their conception, but which,



when they do break, can be repaired. This is not always possible of course but at the heart of every new product should be the objective of a long and productive life punctuated only occasionally with minor surgery to keep it healthy. I work with Arcam and recently a friend of mine fetched out of his garage an Arcam amplifier bought in 1975. I took it with me to a meeting and before I was finished the product was working as it had done 32 years earlier. The amplifier is now hooked up to his iPod - a marvellous interfacing of products across generations.

The best vacuum cleaner I ever had was a 'beats as it sweeps' Hoover Junior. I took it over when it was 40 years old. Developed around a sophisticated take on 'mend and make do' (the cornerstone of so many lives not so long ago) but without any compromise in performance or diminishing of 'service and the user experience', quite the opposite. With an occasional belt and bristle replacement it went from cutting edge to curio, to classic, in its distinguished career. Now go to any dump and see the Dyson's lined up. Our world is awash with products that are designed to self destruct and are wrapped in packaging with the half life of a plutonium

atom; unfortunately designers are complicit in creating this mess. As ever it takes a crisis to induce circumspection and the global credit/energy and resources crunch could be a big black cloud with a silver lining.

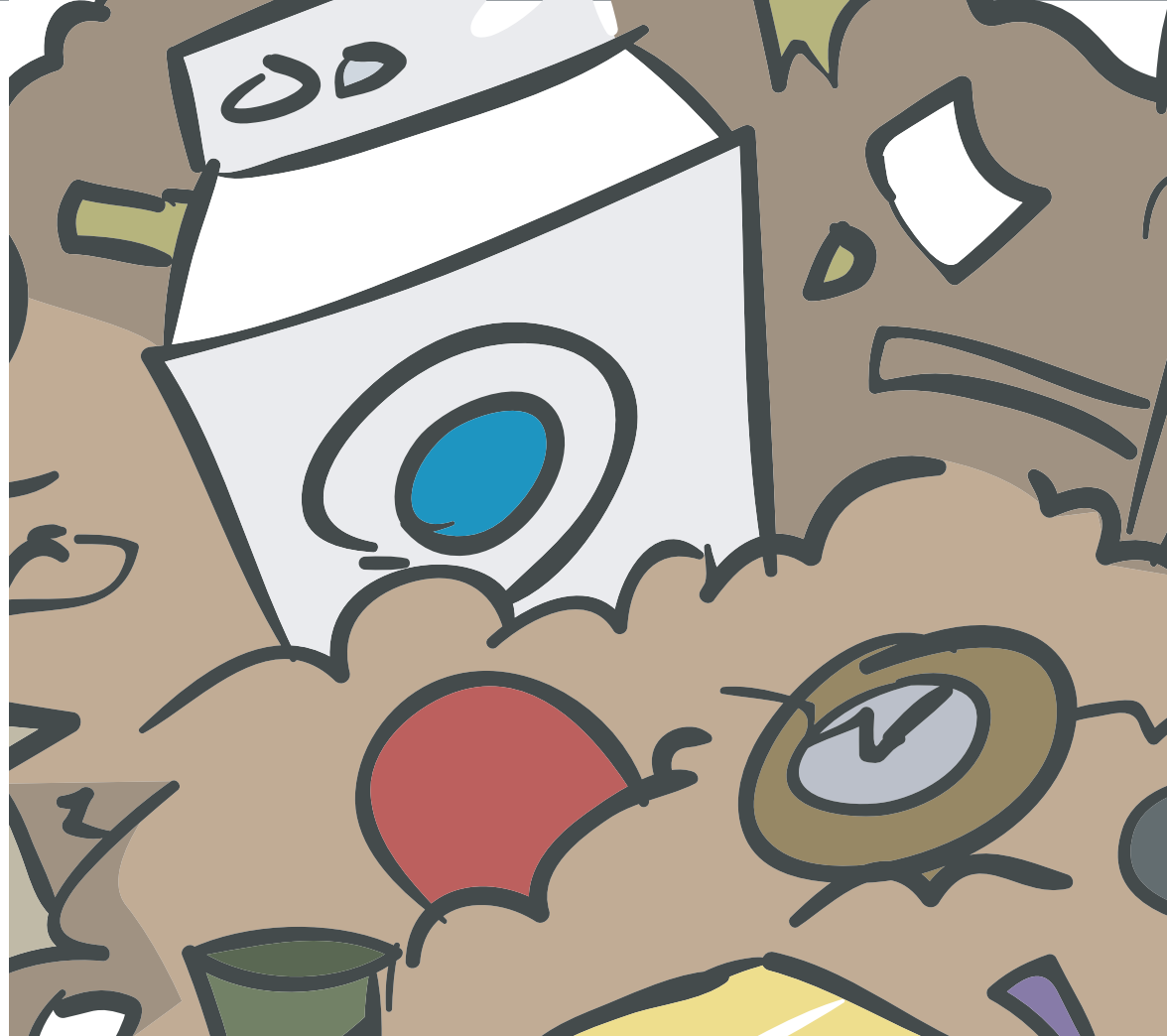
A change in attitude could open up a world of opportunity for western nations in need of new industries and give some assistance to a planet being systematically stripped of its commodities. In the same Guardian editorial referred to earlier, Patrick Butler reported "the Design Council announced, they had come up with a new definition of good design: the most controversial bit being that it ought to be sustainable." Brilliant. On the money. But this particular hobby horse bolted some time ago. Design and its Council are unfortunately spectators in the global scrabble game being played out by the real movers.

But (a small but) I've come across some hopeful signs; I was recently with David Mercer, thinker and head of design at BT, and we talked about his ideas on the subjects of design and sustainability. "BT are keen advocates of developing better made products, which last longer," he says. "The challenge is to change people's

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*mindset so that we are more orientated toward treasuring our products than disposing of them. This might entail our seeking to have products serviced and repaired - like we used to. Technology can play a part here too - the internet enables downloading of software changes and updates, which can upgrade a product's functionality. This in turn negates the need to constantly dispose and replace hardware."*

I'm pleased to report his ideas apply to packaging as well as products. In our world it is a change at corporate level that will filter out to the margins. Forget governments and government bodies and their late arriving pronouncements, global business and imagination change behaviour and boy, do we need license to use our imaginations and address the mess we've made. Bob Pulley, designer and principal at West Dean College, has long been an advocate of the great social and financial benefits of an imaginative alliance. *"Entrepreneurs are amongst our most creative people - we applaud their energy and their positive thinking as it brings a feeling of optimism into everyday life. How can governments and designers encourage such high flyers to incorporate social and environmental sensitivity into their thinking and actions? Many successful designers have accepted that they have a fundamental duty to help new enterprises establish, in a quiet way, values that reflect the importance of longevity in the products they design. Such designers may help to make sure the next generation inherits a better future,"* he says. *"Scenario building in design is like science fiction in literature; it enables crea-*



*tive thinkers to dream of a better world, which includes improved social and environmental awareness. This is not faddish, it is a necessity. Entrepreneurs wish to turn a good profit and most successful people want to help others. Designers can enhance the lives of these highly valuable individuals by trying harder to make sure their hard won investment contributes to a more caring and sustainable future whilst improving the bottom line of their businesses."* This is true, amongst other things we could benefit from harnessing the entrepreneurial energy and visionary outlook of new business to the creative intelligence of designers; remember the fish boxes? There is a deep-rooted cynicism about the ability and motivation of politicians and their devoted attendants to initiate anything of long-term significance. It really is beyond them and their conference agenda's and the problems are beyond wishful tinkering. What is it they say, "Those that can do, those that can't go and write a report for a government department"... some thing along those lines. The desperation of these times demands measures that are not so much desperate but dynamic - a collective, global, common sense.

The issue of a sustainable future goes up the ladder to the corporate roof. Internationally we are at a unique and pivotal point. The sheer number of global crises and personal repercussions, which promote today's mass insomnia, may have provided the inertia busting catalyst necessary to start dreaming and the commercial justification for assigning some serious 'moula' to enacting solutions that could turn the clock back and inject some morality, integrity and vision into the next century of human activity. It is greed that created many of our current problems and crude consumerism that sustained what has proven to be unsustainable. For designers our small part in the coming volte face requires that we cease being stooges and start behaving as equal partners in the new act. In the future, all design should conform to simple tenets, without exception and here they are [http://www.vitsoe.com/ten\\_commandments.php](http://www.vitsoe.com/ten_commandments.php) That done, then at some future date, when 'a world without us' is considered once more, the evidence may stop at 1900, but will start again about now.

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