The spirit of design: objects, environment and meaning


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Abstract

Imaginative design will be a crucial factor in enacting sustainability in people’s daily lives. Yet current design practice is trapped in consumerist cycles of innovation and production, making it difficult to imagine how we might develop a more meaningful and sustainable rendition of material culture. Through fundamental design research, The Spirit of Design challenges a host of common assumptions about sustainability, progress, growth and globalization. Walker’s practice-based explorations of localization, human meaning and functional objects demonstrate the imaginative potential of research-through-design and yield a compelling, constructive and essentially hopeful direction for the future one that radically reimagines our material culture by meshing mass-production with individuality, products with place, and utilitarian benefit with environmental responsibility. The author explores: how understandings of human meaning affect design and how design can better incorporate issues of personal meaning; how mass production needs to become integrated with localized production and service provision; how short-lived electronic goods can be brought into a more sustainable design paradigm; the changing role of the designer in a post-consumerist world.

REVIEWS

These days design is a glamorous covering draped over machines whose final purpose is the satisfaction of desire. Stuart Walker is reopening the issue of design with provocative experiments and thoughtful reminders of what design should be—the moral excellence of the material culture. Albert Borgmann, Regents Professor of Philosophy, University of Montana, author of Real American Ethics (2006) Stuart Walker has provided a valuable reflection on the nature of design in our time, as we seek to move beyond the consumption model that has driven design thinking for decades. I am glad to recommend it as an important addition to the growing literature on sustainability and the moral responsibility of design. Richard Buchanan, Professor of Design, Management, & Information Systems, Co-Editor, Design Issues Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, USA In the age of networks and sustainability, material products will still have to be designed, produced and used. But they will have also to be deeply re-thought. The same is true for product design: for its practice but also, and most of all, for its cultural meaning. Stuart Walker’s The Spirit of Design. Objects, Environment and Meaning indicates a challenging way of dealing with these topics. A very original one. Ezio Manzini, Professor of Design, Politecnico di Milano The Spirit of Design is a series of narrative compositions challenging the practical, ethical and spiritual functionalism of our contemporary design and material cultures. Just like the example of the Japanese shakuhachi flute invoked in the text, this book is immediately accessible but will deeply reward anyone who invests time. Alastair Fuad-Luke, Professor of Practice, School of Art and Design, Aalto University, Finland, author of Design Activism (2009)