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Reflecting, Rethinking, and Reforming:
Exploring the Power, Purpose, and Potential
of Design Activity

This work and its defense approved by:

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Reflecting, Rethinking, and Reforming: Exploring the Power, Purpose, and Potential of Design Activity

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Abstract

Design has the power to change the world. There is great potential for design to positively impact the world and its people. As the world changes, it is important to question methodologies, motivations, influences. There is a need for designers to acknowledge their role in shaping culture and society, to accept responsibility for the outcomes of their work. There is a need for designers to take a more proactive role in shaping the message of the lifestyle. In order to secure the future of humans on the planet, the activity of designing must be viewed as part of a larger fabric of human existence: it must serve to connect us with each other and the world.

Design, as the intentional activity by humans for humans whereby the fundamental existence of being human, is experienced, communicated, and understood; and the narrative of this activity is reflected in the designed product, which then shapes and serves human activity. The designed product, as a result of design activity, provides insight into human existence by creating a narrative of how to live: the narrative is created and influenced by both the designer and the user. The Model of Holistic Philosophy of Human Existence describes the concepts and attributes of human existence and the function of design in this existence.

This thesis explores the limitations of design when confined to the market economy and the power and potential design has to positively impact the world when practiced holistically offer necessary the reflection and rethinking to bring about a reformation of design activity, The model of the gift economy serves as inspiration for design's potential.
Dedication

I wish to dedicate this work to my husband, Hans, who has stood by me, encouraging me, challenging me, and supporting me. You are my love, my life, my pride.

To our daughter, Eva Sabine. My hope is that she knows a world of grace, peace, harmony, and especially love.

And to all of the babies of all of the planet everywhere, they are our future, our purpose, our hope.
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Ron Carraher for his virtual presence in my life. I appreciate your fresh views about the world, your stories and your wisdom.

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To Hans, without whom this journey would not have begun, nor ended with delight and happiness.
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5.1: Cycle of Work-Spend
Optimism is a strategy for making a better future. Because unless you believe that the future can be better, it’s unlikely you will step up and take responsibility for making it so. If you assume that there’s no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, there are opportunities to change things, there’s a chance you may contribute to making a better world. The choice is yours.

*Noam Chomsky*
How do people derive meaning from their world?
What experiences are common to all people?
What is the role of design in human communication?
And how do people come to understand design?
This section explores the concepts and aspects of design, human existence, and their interrelation.
The quality of our perceptions determines the quality of our judgment. The quality of our judgment determines how we interact with the world. How we interact with the world changes the world. So, the quality of our perceptions changes the world.

*Robert Fripp*
Design is Everywhere.

In his book *Design Discourse: History, Theory and Criticism*, Victor Margolin writes, “Design is all around us: it infuses every object in the material world and gives form to immaterial processes.”¹ There is no more befitting way to begin a writing on design. This seems like an obvious, maybe even ridiculous, statement — of course design is everywhere. It is the houses we live in, the buildings we work in, the parks we play in; it is the coffee cup used in the morning and the processes that get the beans turned into coffee and brought to the local store for purchase. Design is everywhere. It constructs the human-made material world and its results have far-reaching effects for the larger natural world. Design affects everyone and everything. But what is design? How does it function? What does it do? What is its purpose?

Margolin identifies design as the central feature of culture and everyday life.² Yet the role of design as a cultural force is usually absent from the dialogue of most designers. Richard Buchanan’s definition of design “as the conception and planning of all products made by human beings”³ emphasizes design as a process — an activity. William McDonough categorizes
design as “the first signal of human intention.” While the statements by Buchanan and McDonough describe design as an intentional activity basic to all humans, little attention is paid to design beyond its professional activity: the attention is focused on the professional designer and the designed product in service to industry. Most designed products in the material world originate with the designer and the profession of design, and the results of their labors — intended or not — impact the world. Tony Fry notes, “every design decision and form has an ongoing directional outcome — the designed always goes on designing.” Rarely are the effects of design considered beyond the form of the resulting product. Aesthetics, not ethics, remains the focus of much design activity.

Design Discourse

Too often the conversation is about the formal characteristics of design rather than on the effects or consequences of the activity of designing. Traditional design discourse has reinforced design functioning in this way because much of the discourse has focused on the pragmatic practice of design which emphasizes characteristics or form. Describing design as purely the results of the labors of designers and solely about the product defines the experience of design by focusing on the subject: the design professional and the profession of design whose primary concern is the form of the resulting product in service to business, and especially on the object: each and every thing originating with the design professional and the profession of design. This description is narrow and isolating. Such a view of design contextualizes design as an activity occurring outside the realm of the everyday world, it denies its connection with people; with the world at large, and among disciplines; and it greatly impacts the consciousness of all who come in contact with design.

Recently, design has been getting much needed critical inquiry that is necessary for a profession and a discipline to grow and evolve. Design
studies is a relatively new field of study which provides a venue for those involved in design — directly or indirectly — to investigate it as a driving force in the way people live. This broader investigation and resulting discourse reveal design’s power and complexity. What contemporary design discourse offers could substantially and positively effect design activity; however, there is still a gap that exists between practice and theory. With the current Western lifestyle negatively impacting personal and communal relationships, this gap must be addressed in order for design to be a meaningful and purposeful activity in the lives of people. With the results of human activity creating an environmental crisis, this gap must be addressed in order to secure the future of humans on this planet.

At no point in history has it been more urgent to examine the way people live. At no point in history has the purpose of design been more relevant. At no point in history has the need to understand the purpose of design in the lives of people been more crucial. This important discourse about the power and complexity of design must reach the audience who would most benefit from it: professional designers and people who use design. The way design functions in everyday life not only reflects the context in which human activity occurs, but shapes it. And the way that people experience design affects the way they perceive and interpret it. The ways that design functions in time and space connects people with each other and their world, affecting the way people communicate. How people engage with design and are influenced by it is a function of their design consciousness: their awareness of design as a language and a medium. The way design is described has significance for the people and the world. The way design is described and defined effects the way design is perceived, categorized, understood and treated by designers and users alike. There is a need for a deeper and more meaningful understanding of design — a vision that all can share — what it is and what it can be.
For the purposes of this paper, the concern is the metaphysics of design, rather than the formal or functional aspects of individual products. The term design refers to the intentional activity by humans for humans whereby the fundamental existence of being human is experienced, communicated, and understood; and the narrative of this activity is reflected in the designed product, which then shapes and serves human activity. The premise: the designed product, as a result of design activity, provides insight into human existence. More pointedly, designed products provide a narrative of how to live and this narrative is influenced by the context of the design activity and is reflected in the designed product. Designed product refers to all human-made material and immaterial objects, activities, and services, and complex systems or environments that constitute the human-made world. In order to differentiate from the more common ‘design process’ where the activity is more deliberately and narrowly focused on problem solving and aesthetics related to an externally defined problem, the term ‘design activity’ is used in association with the human activity of being. Additionally, the terms constructed, human-made, and material are used interchangeably to refer to the primary environment of human activity — most closely associated with the contemporary way of life — and to distinguish from the natural environment or world, of which humans are part of a larger whole.
Design is a way to explain the relation between the different forces in the world.

Victor Margolin
Model of the Holistic Philosophy of Human Existence

Human existence involves the three core concepts: context, connections, and consciousness and each concept has a defining attribute (figure 2.1). The defining attribute expresses the properties of human participation in each concept.

Context: Experience

Context functions as the domain of being. It is concerned with the mode of being or form of existence of a person or thing and/or the way something is with respect to its main attributes. It may be helpful to view context as the surroundings, conditions, circumstances, and attributes that create a ‘place’ of being. In physical terms, context refers to the environment. Context is the conditions of being which include, but are not limited to, the social, cultural, spiritual, natural, artificial, philosophical. The defining attribute for context is experience.

Connections: Communication

Connections is the sphere of human interaction: how humans interact with each other and their context. Connections occur as social relationships; interac-
tions with people and phenomena in direct and mediated experiences. A concern is how interactions occur among participants: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, and many-to one. Connections may be viewed as the collective, community, or society. The defining attribute for connections is communication.

Consciousness: Awareness

Consciousness is the realm of awareness. This construct makes sense of the other two. Consciousness deals with what people understand of their connections with others in the context and their connections with context. Its concerns are interaction with context and interaction with others within context. The awareness of context affects connections, and engaging in connections affects awareness context. Consciousness may be seen as the self, and the self in negotiation with the things beyond the self. The defining attribute for consciousness is awareness.
Concept Pair Relationships

Each concept pair has a defining relationship (figure 2.2). The concept pair relationship represents the primary human activity in negotiating between concepts. The context-connections relationship is engagement/influence (A.), the connections-consciousness relationship is perception/interpretation (B.), and the consciousness-context relationship is time/space (C.).

Context-connections: experience and communication are affected by engagement and influence. Connections-consciousness: communication and awareness are affected by perception and interpretation. Consciousness-context: awareness and experience are affected by time and space.

Balance-Relationships

Each concept-pair relationship balances the third concept (figure 2.3). Engagement and influence affect awareness (a.); perception and interpretation affect experience (b.); and time and space affect communication (c.), but
not in the ways explained by the concept pair relationship. The balancing relationships involve the kinds, types, and quality of this activity. Equilibrium is maintained when concept pair relationships allow the third concept to be integrated. It is this feature that characterizes the holistic quality of this philosophy. If the activity of the concept pair relationship does not bring the third concept into balance, then there is discord and conflict.

Design and the Model of the Holistic Philosophy of Human Existence

As a dynamic characteristic of the collective experience of being, design is ontologically significant as a product of and in human existence. The meaningful features of this design philosophy are: 1) design creates and reinforces the realm of daily life (experience); 2) through encounters with design, people interact with each other and the world (communication); and 3) the kinds and types of interactions people have with design affect what they know and understand of their existence (awareness). In other words, design creates context, enables connections, and engages consciousness. These features exist
2.4: Design relationships and the model of holistic philosophy of human existence


simultaneously; the concepts are relative and relational, no one feature is more important than another (figure 2.4).

A desire for a deep and meaningful relationship with design led me to develop the Model of Holistic Philosophy of Human Existence. At first, I was trying to understand the concepts involved in design activity, the attributes of the designed product. Eventually, I realized that it has significance with respect to the way design functions in human existence. Eventually, I realized that as I explored design and described it, I was in fact, describing the concepts involved in human existence and the attributes that went into a holistic state of being.
We become what we behold.

We shape our tools, and

thereafter our tools shape us.

*Marshall McLuhan*
Design serves as a dominant feature in daily life. As it creates and reinforces the realm of human experience, design is intimately involved in constructing reality. Design is a social and cultural force. As it mediates human interaction with others and the world, it plays a significant role in communication. Design is a sophisticated and effective medium. What humans know and understand of their world, how they engage with and are influenced by design depends on their awareness of it. Design is powerful and complex. The relationship of design and human existence is intimate and reflexive. Design creates and reinforces the context in which people live, and design is created through the way they live in that context. The way people define the experience of designing “tells a story” of how people live. To gain insight into the human-design relationship, it is important to explore the significant way design functions in human experience, communication, and understanding.

Design is a dominant feature in daily life intimately involved in creating reality and experience.

As people engage with their surroundings, they perceive and interpret these encounters. Through these experiences, people create their reality. The envi-
environments in which people engage and perceive, in which they interpret and influence are not neutral. Marshall McLuhan observed that, “environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes which are invisible.” Whether aware or not, people are influenced by, and exert influence on, these environments. In his book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference*, Malcolm Gladwell explains the significant role of environment in the lives of people. He defines his environmental argument, the ‘Power of Context,’ and asserts human behavior is a function of social context. The essence of the Power of Context is “that in ways we don’t necessarily appreciate, our inner states are the result of outer circumstances.” This outside-in theory for behavior challenges the long-standing belief that reality, feelings, and emotions are an inside-out action. It says that people are affected and influenced by context. Manicured lawns, broken bottles in an alley, upscale shopping malls, small town Main Street districts, buildings covered in graffiti, newly constructed subdivisions all exert influence on people: they communicate information, a message, about the environment in which a person exists. To these encounters people bring their own histories, experiences, and expectations, which affect how the context is interpreted. Gladwell notes that people are more than just sensitive to changes in context, they are exquisitely sensitive to them. Gladwell does not dismiss the role of the individual in situations nor the intrinsic characteristics or internal motives of individuals, he simply recognizes that people are powerfully shaped by external environments and the features of the immediate social and physical world play a huge role in shaping who people are and how people act. What Gladwell describes is the social activity of communication and its influence on behavior as people communicate with their social and physical environments.

Social interaction involves the social process of communication where language is an integral component of meaning making. As people describe, explain, or make sense of experience and encounters with and within
their environment, they participate in constructing their reality. People’s perception and reality are shaped by and through these experiences. In their book, *Strategic Political Communication: Rethinking Social Influence, Persuasion, and Propaganda*, Karen S. Johnson-Cartee and Gary A. Copeland state: “What one knows and what one thinks one knows are both shaped by the communication process.” The theory of social constructionism asserts that reality is constructed through the social process of communication.

The theory of social constructionism is significant to design because design activity is a form of social communication. People communicate with their environment and their environment — a product of design — in return communicates. In other words, manicured lawns or graffiti-covered walls do not just occur, they are an outcome of intentional human activity, and what they communicate is infused with the activity that manifested it. As people engage with the material world designed products communicate more than themselves, they communicate the activity and the context of the activity that created them. Context is affected by the collection of products in the space they inhabit, and the relationships they share. A manicured lawn of a house in a newly built subdivision is congruent to expectations, but a manicured lawn in front of vacant, crumbling building would be incongruent. Issues such as material, quality, form, shape and context all impact the message of the product. A wooden ball looks, feels, and acts much differently than a rubber ball. Origin of creation: time, place, designer, also play a role in communication. Certain products from the past are considered antiques and valuable, others are just old; some objects hold personal meaning: a grandmother’s wedding dress or a grandfather’s watch, others are simply clutter. Designed products serve as the basis for communication, they are a language in themselves. And like language, issues of semantics (the comprehension of the intended meaning of individual products), syntactics (recognition of the product in relation to other products)
and pragmatics (interpretation of the product in terms such as relevance, agreement; impact on the audience) are relevant and applicable.\textsuperscript{14}

People derive meaning as they interpret perceptions and reconcile interpretations with experience and expectations, as they act on this information, they construct reality. Reality is produced and reproduced through social interactions; people create their perceived reality by acting on their interpretations and the knowledge of that reality.\textsuperscript{15} Meaning about the material world is formed as people communicate in social interactions with designed products. Design is a social and cultural force playing a significant role in human interaction and communication.

For most of human evolution, communication was primarily direct and personal. People interacted with each other or their environment directly in shared time and space. The interaction was in the present and occupied a space proximate to each participant. For example, in an interaction with a rose, a person would be in the presence of the rose and could see, touch, smell the actual rose. The person shared the same environment with the rose in the present, the engagement and influence was direct, and what the person perceived was based on the actual experience with that rose. The kind, type, and quality of engagement would be at the full discretion of the person: to hold it, smell it, eat it, water it, destroy it. The person would be actually physically part of the environment and physically proximate to the rose.

In recent years, people’s social interactions have become increasingly mediated experiences. John-Cartee and Copeland write: “The ‘pictures in our heads’ or the images we hold in modern society are primarily created through an individual’s contact with the media [and here we can include design] rather than through direct experience.”\textsuperscript{16} A mediated experience of a rose may be a photograph of a rose, a perfume that smells like a rose, a plastic or fabric flower fashioned to look exactly rose-ish: what people have come to
expect when they think of a rose. No longer is it necessary to be in the presence of a rose to have an experience of it, a photograph will do. The rose in the mediated experience of a photograph is now able to cross time and space: the context of the rose is present-past. In that the experience of a photograph of a rose occurs in real time, but the time and space of that rose is from the past. The photograph also becomes part of the present environment of the person viewing it. This has a strange experience of integrating an artificial or simulated experience into a person's present context, while fragmenting the person from the actual experience of the rose. The experience is mediated through a photograph. An example of fragmented space would be when phone call occurs in present time but different space. And now that phones have cameras, time and space are even more abstracted. That it can document an event where the user is and send it in the form of a picture to someone who can see the picture and talk to the person almost instantaneously, the camera phone poses an interesting question: is it about the experience of being there or the experience of being able to show that you are there?

The mediated experience of the photograph did not just appear, it was created by someone (design activity) using a camera (designed product). Mediated experiences require involvement by an outside source — person or institution — to create them. As a result, they are not neutral experiences. The very fact that they are created by someone or some institution necessarily means that they are infused with subjectivity. The experience of the viewer is influenced by the decisions of the person taking the photograph. The photographer’s experience of the rose and/or the context in which the rose resided, decisions the photographer made about cropping, lighting, etc., would be factors in the mediated experience. (With digital imaging technology, it is quite easy to alter the photograph by removing or adding to it, further affecting the mediated experience.) Those involved in creating mediated experiences function in the realm of social influence: the systems and forces in play in creating
reality. The special genius at work in this system of mediated experience is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible.17

Whether people communicate directly or indirectly, in order for communication to be effective, there must be a shared understanding of language.18 Language is fundamental to communication. It is a system of signs and codes which are always anchored in the form of a medium.19 A sign, in itself is meaningless, it only acquires meaning when it resides in a sign-system. Signs can be words, pictograms, ideograms, even designed products, but the significance of any of these examples, exists in its relationship to other signs in its sign-system. Meaning is created as the signs are interpreted and the message is decoded.

Design is a sophisticated and effective medium greatly influencing people’s engagement with and understanding of the world.

In communication, language requires a medium to “carry” the message to the receiver in order to be decoded. A medium is the vehicle which represents the message. Insofar as designed products create the constructed world and become the mediated experiences people use to create their reality, design is a language: the basis for the exchange. As the system, structure, methodology and vehicle for design-as-language, design functions as a medium: it represents the message and is normally transparent to the viewer. This is what Richard Buchanan refers to as ‘the rhetorics of products’ in his essay, “Rhetoric, Humanism and Design,” where he describes the rhetorics of products as the study of how products come to be as vehicles of argument and persuasion about the desirable qualities of private and public life.20

Despite its prevalence and significance, design remains virtually invisible to most people, in fact, many people are unaware of its presence or influence. This is because everyday use of a medium by someone who knows
how to use it, typically passes unquestioned, unproblematic and ‘neutral’. It is the frequency and fluency of its use that makes a medium more transparent or invisible to its users. In other words, the familiarity with a medium determines how fluently it is used, the more fluently it is used, the less it is noticed, the less it is noticed, the more effective it becomes. For most routine purposes, awareness of a medium hampers its effectiveness; it is when a medium acquires transparency, that its potential to fulfill its primary function is greatest.

An easy example is when a person learns a foreign language: the message the person wants to convey must be translated from one media: words in the native to words in the foreign language. As the person becomes more fluent in the new language, the translation from native to new eventually disappears.

Another example is when a person learns a use a computer for the first time, initially every action is packed with awareness (and usually frustration because this new mediated experience is hindering a normally easy communication), but eventually the computer is learned fluently enough, that most actions are usually habitual.

When a sophisticated medium is used to construct experience and convey information, the message and meaning are conveyed in ways congruent with the media but go largely unnoticed. This invisibility has powerful communication potential as the medium exercises great influence over people and conditions. It has penetrated deep into our psyche and becomes an integral and meaningful part of our culture. For people to be involved in choices about the communication, they need to be aware of not only the ends of the communication (the message), but the means (the medium) as well. If people are unaware of the influence of a medium, they cannot exercise choice in its use.

The term media can refer broad categories such as speech and writing, or print and broadcasting [design can be included here], etc.; or related to the specific technical forms within the media of mass communications or the media of interpersonal communication: visual, auditory, tactile, and so on.
A medium is typically treated instrumentally as a transparent vehicle of representation by readers of texts composed within it, but the medium used may itself contribute to its meaning.\textsuperscript{24}

Since design produces the things considered to be categories of media, design is more prevalent, influential and powerful than what is normally considered mass media; mass media is design. Meaning is not 'contained' in the world, it is not ‘transmitted’ to us — it is actively created according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which people are normally unaware.\textsuperscript{25} Loaded with meaning, design is simultaneously both a language and a medium: designed products have inherent communication properties and are the delivery mechanism of the message is design itself.

Engaging in design activity creates designed products, designed products then go on to influence people in their activities in the constructed world. The constructed world, as context for this activity, influences this activity. Humans and design are involved in mutual influence, yet this influence is not reciprocal, but more like a mobius strip. According to Daniel Chandler, “when we use a medium for any purpose, its use becomes part of that purpose.” When we engage with media we both act and are enacted upon, we use and are used. This relationship manifests itself in Marshall McLuhan's statement, “The medium is the message.”\textsuperscript{26} When people engage in design activity, they produce designed products; these designed products then go on to influence people and their activity in the constructed world.
My imagination takes its strength
and guides its direction from
what I see and hear and learn and feel
and remember of my living world.

_Eudora Welty_
Products create the environment for human activity, and they have increasingly become the primary way that humans interact with and within their context. The human-design relationships are experienced, communicated, and understood through social interactions which serve as the basis of constructing reality and this reality influences human activity. The designed product is infused with the experience of the narrative of the designer: the designer-product narrative; and, in interacting with designed products, people engage in the user-product narrative. In all of these situations, design is intimately involved in creating messages and meaning. But what is the message? What does it all mean?

This chapter is devoted to the last part of the definition of design described in Chapter 1: the narrative of design activity is reflected in the designed product, which then shapes and serves human activity. The term narrative refers to a message that tells the particulars of an act or occurrence of events. Narrative is, in the case of the designed product, the story of its making of itself: the singular product; the story of its relation to other products in its cultural or social system; and the story of its system in larger context of the material world. It is the third feature that is most significant, because it is the collective story of all of the activity of designing: people’s interactions with
individual products in the everyday world, which is always present to be perceived and always present to influence: it is the story of the way people live. This third feature where the designer-product and the product-user narratives exist. Designed products communicate the message of the context in which they occur and are reflective of the activity in that context. They communicate the message of the way of life that brought them into existence, they communicate the way people live, the lifestyle; the message is: how to live.

Human-Product Narratives

It is important to understand that a designed product is not neutral, but subjective, as it is infused with the narrative of the designer and the designer’s experience in the world. Therefore, the designed product, through the designer, represents the narrative of the world from which they came or the world they aspire to create. As a participant in the material world, the designer is, too, influenced by the narrative of designed products, yet adds to or alters the narrative with personal beliefs and values formed through experience and interpretation. The designed product is a manifestation of the degree of awareness of the designer in the context of the material world. To the extent that the designer is engaged with and influenced by interactions in the context of the material world, what the designer comes to know and understand of the world through perception and interpretation, is evidenced in the designed product. As people interact with the designed products, as the designed products convey the meaning of the context in which they live, the designed product also serves a function in the narrative of the users interaction with the product as part of the everyday world. The designed product always communicates more than intended, and as part of the user’s experience of the world, the designed product serves as more than just an product for use. The product becomes an externalized manifestation of the interior aspect of humans, that

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becomes the part of the larger context of everyday life. To the degree that the product is able to fulfill this function, is a reflection of its place within the system of exchange and values.

**Contextual Meaning and Design**

The field of study concerned with meaning making and representation in many forms is called semiotics. It is not only concerned with intentional communication but also with ascription of significance to anything in the world. Semiotics, like social constructionism, is concerned with the forces involved in the construction of meaning: the relationships of the parts: signs, sign-systems, codes, and mediums.

In semiotics there are three kinds of signs: icon, index, and symbol. An iconic sign has a relationship that has a resemblance to what it signifies — a person can see the relationship; an indexical sign has a causal connection to that which it signifies — the relationship can be figured out; and a symbolic sign is totally conventional or arbitrary to signifier — the relationship must be learned. For example: an iconic sign would be a photograph of a famous person, an indexical sign would be smoke indicates fire, and a symbolic sign would be words or gestures. To the degree that a person is familiar with the signs used in language, they are able to decode messages and meaning.

Messages are either denotated or connotated. Denotated message is the direct, specific meaning gotten from a sign, essentially a literal description of a sign. For example a denotated message of a rose is a flower with overlapping petals on the end of a long green stem with thorns. Connotated messages involves means and associations connected with concepts or objects. The connotated meanings of a rose are beauty, love, romance, nature, friendship, admiration, respects, encouragement, “I love you,” etc.

Regarding meaning, Arthur Asa Berger writes: “Nothing means anything in itself and everything means something because of some kind of
relationship in which it is embedded."[original italics] In this statement lies a fundamental attribute of how people derive meaning in their lives: contextual relationships. “Big” only has meaning if there is a “little,” and “hot” only has meaning if there is a “cold.” These opposite relationships — oppositions — are relatively easy to understand and basic to the human mind. As a basic model of understanding it is from this point that meaning is built. In citing Saussure, Berger continues: “concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with other terms of the system.” In other words: I understand that I am “here” not because I am, in fact, “here,” but because I am not “there.” I understand that I am “happy” because I am not “sad.” Not all contextual meanings are binary or simple; cultural and social contexts also affect meaning as well as personal experience and history which impact what people come to know and understand, what they hold as values and beliefs; this affects how they interpret but too how they act.

Designer-Product Narrative

In observing how people write about design, Richard Buchanan notes that what a writer believes the origin of design to be greatly effects the rhetoric of the written content. He continues, “different conceptions of design also carry with them different conceptions of history.” What Buchanan refers to is similar to what Dean MacCannell addresses in his statement:

Everything written in the ‘objective style’ of the 1950s social sciences or ‘New Criticism,’ and everything written in the opaque style of post-structural discourses, now risks being read as a kind of political cover-up, hidden complicity, and intrigue on either the right or the left. Interestingly, the one path that still leads in the direction of scholarly objectivity, detachment, and neutrality is exactly the one originally thought to lead away from these classic virtues: that is, an openly autobiographical style in which the subjective position of the author, especially on political matters, is presented in a clear and straightforward fashion. At least this enables the reader to review his or her own position to make the adjustments necessary for dialogue.

While approaching it from different directions, Buchanan and MacCannell are
referring to the subjectivity of personal experience as it manifests in the production of writer. The premise: the beliefs one has are a result of personal life experiences. Here Buchanan and MacCannell are referring to writers; however, this premise can be easily extrapolated to designers. The subjectivity of designers is an important consideration, yet seldom gets enough attention: in design discourse or design education; and users of design, most of whom are unaware of the medium of design, are certainly not aware of the subjectivity of the designer reflected in the designed product.

To see how designers are impacted by the history they believe, it is interesting to explore Buchanan's thoughts regarding the origins of design. While I draw heavily on Buchanan's claims about the impact of beliefs of the origin of design on the resulting product, Buchanan refers to writings on design, and for the purposes of this paper, these ideas are applied to the designed products as it has been discussed herein. Additionally, Buchanan states the origins of design are usually traced to one of only four beginnings:

1.) design began in the twentieth century with the formation of new disciplines of design thinking, 2.) design began in the early days of the Industrial Revolution with the transformation of the instruments of production and the social conditions of work, 3.) design began in the prehistoric period with the creation of images and objects by primitive human beings, or 4.) design began with the creation of universe, the first act of God, who represent the ideal model of a creator which all human designers, knowingly or unknowingly strive to imitate.[italics added].36

The way a writer identifies the origins of design indicates a broad rhetorical perspective on the nature of design. The perspectives related to the origins of design, he argues, are the “rhetorical commonplace” which may be made fundamental in the practice and study of design [original italics].37 The rhetorical commonplace for each origin are outlined below:
1.) *Human character and discipline:*

When the origins of design are traced to the first decades of the twentieth century, the principle lies in human character. Design rests on the ability of human beings to reason and act with prudence in solving problems that are obstacles to the functioning, development, and well-being of individuals and society. Furthermore, design is inquiry and experimentation in the activity of making, since making is the way that human beings provide for themselves what nature provides only by accident. There is a deep reflexive relation between human character and the character of the human-made: character influences the formation of products and products influence the formation of character in individuals, institutions, and society.38

2.) *Power and control:*

When the origins of design are traced to the Industrial Revolution, the principle lies in the power of individuals to control surroundings, satisfy needs and desires, and influence social life through mechanization and technology.

He cites John Heskett who writes:

> In the last two centuries, human power to control and shape the surroundings we inhabit has been continuously augmented, to the extent that it has become a truism to speak of a man-made world. The instrument of this transformation has been mechanized industry, and from its workshops and factories a swelling flood of artefacts and mechanisms has poured out to satisfy the needs and desires of an ever-greater proportion of the world’s populations. The change has not only been quantitative, but has also radically altered the qualitative nature of the life we live, or aspire to live.39

Buchanan adds: “The focus is that this is the power to invent and shape useful products was distinguished from the laborious physical activities of making them.”40

3.) *Material conditions*

Design began in the prehistoric period with the creation of images and objects by primitive human beings: While Buchanan admits that it is difficult to know exactly the way design functioned in the lives of primitive beings, he makes his statement based on the images and objects that have survived: “Characteristic
of this approach, human life is seen as progressively complicated by a hierarchy of needs, ascending from the physical and biological, to the emotional needs of the human animal. Design is the natural ability of human beings to shape and use materials to satisfy all these needs.\textsuperscript{41}

4.) \textit{Spiritual ideals:}
Design began with the creation of universe, \textit{the first act of God}, who represents the ideal model of a creator which all human designers, knowingly or unknowingly strive to imitate. Buchanan, in noting that this aspect of design has not been adequately articulated in modern design theory, writes: “Judged by the ideals of Western and Eastern cultures, the obsessive materialism, injustice, warfare, environmental degradation, and inhumanity of the past century of progress is a cruel denial of something fundamental in the human spirit, a betrayal of reason and conscience, of right thinking and right acting.”\textsuperscript{42}

Buchanan cites the work of George Nelson, who he describes as a distinguished designer who believes the design process is integrated in the principle of appropriateness, and he grounds this principle in the model provided by God and natural order. He states that Nelson, as an enlightened practitioner who, in seeking unity and harmony among the disparate elements of every product, offered a spiritual feature that is sometimes neglected by people who “interpret ‘function’ in a narrow, mechanistic way, rather than as a connection between human beings, products, and the broader system of nature and the universe.” Indeed, Nelson argues that products which internally achieve harmony and balance serve the ethical life of human beings, who are actively seeking their own place in a unity of social experience and nature.\textsuperscript{43}

Buchanan’s observations have significance for the practice of design. If a designer believes — whether aware or not — the origins of design are the Industrial Revolution with the function of power and control, then the resulting activity of the designer will be infused with that belief. As the design
determines materials, form, function, user interaction and engagement, power and control will factor into decisions. If a designer believes the origins of design are the creation of the universe, and is inclined to make products that, as Nelson describes, “internally achieve harmony and balance” and that “serve the ethical life of human beings, who are actively seeking their own place in a unity of social experience and nature” design decisions will reflect this belief. Equally, if a designer has no belief, or is of a different belief, that, too, will be manifested in the resulting product.

Designers do not design in a vacuum. Designers are influenced by the larger context in which they live, are influenced by their experiences, communications, and awareness of that environment. While that environment contains meaning about the way to live, the message may be accepted, altered or rejected the designer. This subjectivity becomes part of the narrative of the designed product. The designed product is then infused with the designer’s interpretation of the story of how to live. In shaping products that will ultimately provide the context for human existence, the designer is a natural, important, and powerful person in affecting lifestyle. The designer, as a key player in creating cultural and social artifacts, is an agent of social influence. Through the tactics and strategies of persuasion and/or propaganda, agents of social influence can reinforce and continue a particular kind of reality (and corresponding lifestyle) or they can offer an alternative message — an alternative reality. If a change in lifestyle is to occur, then designer will play a significant role in affecting that change. Designers serve not only as agents of social influence, but as agents of social change. With most things in the constructed world originating with the designer and the profession of design, and since design is inextricably woven in with communication and meaning, the designer — in shaping and forming the message of design — is one of the most powerful people in the world.
In her book, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart writes that metaphors arise whenever we talk about the relation of language to experience, or specifically, whenever we talk about the relation of narrative to its objects. These metaphors: history and stasis, inside and outside, partiality and transcendence form the focus of her book as she asks: “How can we describe something? What relationship does description bear to ideology and the very invention of that ‘something’?” Stewart is concerned with the communicative power of objects. She describes this narrative as a structure of desire, a structure that both invents and distances its object and thereby inscribes again and again the gap between signifier and signified that is the place of generation for the symbolic. In other words, the narrative is of a desire that becomes the object but a desire that the object cannot fulfill, and this disjunction becomes the symbolic activity as its cycles again and again. Stewart is particularly interested in what she calls, “the social disease of nostalgia” and its relations of narrative to origin and object which is longing. She defines the word longing as a “number of meanings which taken together, in fact encompass this study of narrative, exaggeration, scale, and significance: yearning desire, the fanciful cravings incident to women during pregnancy, belongings or appurtenances.”

As for “yearning desire,” Stewart notes that the location of yearning desire is always future-past. As for “fanciful cravings incident to women during pregnancy” this brings us to the “threshold between nature and culture, the place of margin between the biological ‘reality’ of splitting cells and the cultural ‘reality’ of the beginning of symbolic. Out of this dividing — this process of differentiation and relation — the subject is generated, both created and separated from what it is not; and that initial separation/joining has a reproductive capacity that is the basis for the reproductive capacity of all signifiers. Stewart explains the third description of longing as “belongings or appurtenances, con-
continues this story of the generation of the subject.” She is interested in the capacity of narrative to generate significant objects and hence to both generate and engender a significant other. Simultaneously, she focuses on the place of that other in the formation of a notion of the interior. In this respect, Stewart is saying that in the activity of longing, in the desiring of an object, that people place meaning on that object that becomes a projection of some aspect of themselves, some aspect of the human interior.\(^45\) She continues:

> The function of belongings within the economy of the bourgeois subject is one of supplementarity, a supplementarity that in consumer culture replaces its generating subject as the interior milieu substitutes for, and takes the place of, an interior self...The reader who arose from the mechanical reproduction of literature is a reader acutely aware of the disjunction between book as object and book as idea. And the solitude of his or her reading takes place within the milieu of the bourgeois domestic, a milieu of interior space miming the creation of both an interior text and an interior subject.

These conventions of description are intimately bound up with the conception of time as it is both portrayed in the work and partaken of the work. By means of depiction, temporality, and ultimately closer, narrative here seeks to ‘realize’ a certain formulations of the world.\(^46\)

According to Stewart, in consumer culture the designed product becomes a focus such that it replaces the interior self. Where one would normally have an ongoing relationship between the interior and exterior self, the focus of this relationship is a narrative between exterior self and object, an externalized projection of self. The designed product is thought of as a significant part of the person’s being, and the longing occurs as the relationship between user and product is never reconciled as such.

**Narratives and meaning**

The designed product is infused with narrative and also represents this narrative. When people engage with design, they engage with the narrative of the product itself, and with the larger narrative of the context in which both people and products reside. In interactions with products, people both absorb the nar-
rative of the material world through the designed product and enact their nar-
native of the world with the designed product. As these narratives are recon-
ciled; as they merge or part, meaning is created.

Gaining insight into how meaning is derived, becoming more aware of the all the facets and nuances — relationships and forces — involved in constructing reality allows people to engage in their lives in a more purpose-
ful manner. Reality and meaning are not fixed, they are actively created among many factors. As anything can serve as a sign, understanding the message depends on the way the signs and codes are organized and the way they are interpreted. Increasing awareness of the processes and forces that influence reality, communication, and meaning, people come to know and understand these processes and forces, and as a result, they can more consciously negotiate their interactions with them. Awareness empowers people as they create their realities. The kinds, types, and quality of engagement people have with others and their world affects perceptions and interpretation, engagement and influence. Through our interactions with other people and designed products — we come to know and understand of the world. And what we know and understand of the world affects how we view it and how we treat it, ultimately, how we view and treat ourselves.
Where we reckon our substance by our acquisitions, the gifts of the gifted man are powerless to make him substantial.

*Lewis Hyde*
The activity of designing reveals the story of how people (ought to) live. What are humans doing with design? How is it used? How does it function?

In order to understand, to become more aware, it is important to explore the current activity of designing and evaluate the effects on this activity and designed products in the lifestyle of people and the world.

Critiques play an important role in the evolution of an idea to a completed design. A critique offers the opportunity to reflect upon the process, rethink the decisions, and reform the direction. Chapter 5 is a critique — description and analysis, interpretation, and evaluation — of the current function of design.
The modern little red riding hood, reared on singing commercials, has no objection to being eaten by the wolf.

Marshall McLuhan
Description of Current Function of Design

The contemporary Western lifestyle is rooted in capitalist culture. Capitalism is an economic system which is based on private ownership of capital. Capital refers to the assets used in the production of further assets as well as the wealth of economic value — money or property — owned by a person or business. The activity of capitalism is defined by commerce where transactions — sales and purchases — have the objective of supplying commodities which are the articles of commerce. In our lifestyle, buying and selling is not just an experience involved in everyday life, but a necessity. People choose to purchase products and services like televisions, cell phones, or entertainment to fulfill wants and desires, but even the basic needs of life: food, water and shelter are commodities and must be purchased. In this context, the experience of the designed product is as a commodity — to be purchased, owned, consumed; and in the service of commodities, the activity of designing becomes a formalized process — an enterprise — concerned with the matters of commerce and capital.

The production and manufacturing of products for financial prof-
it becomes the business of the *profession of design* and the *design professional* where the objective is the realization of made forms, aesthetics, systems, or financial return. In the market economy, the role of the designer becomes a professional activity often viewed as aesthetician. Primarily concerned with the form of the resulting product, the designer shapes and forms the product, but rarely is involved in the process of product development from conception through completion.

**Interpretation of Current Function of Design**

The activity of designing is reflected in the designed product. The context of the design activity influences designed products and these designed products go on to shape and serve the context of human activity. In the case of the current function of design: the context is industry, connections serve the market, and consciousness is established by the vision of capitalism. With capitalism as its context, this reflexive process manifests a materialistic lifestyle which has become *the way of life* in Western culture, and the way of life many people of the world aspire to live. In his book, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Lewis Hyde writes: “Capitalism is the ideology that asks that we remove surplus wealth from circulation and lay it aside to produce more wealth.” Separation and isolation are not only encouraged by capitalism, but required. In service to this ideology, the activity of designing becomes an isolated activity separated from the realm of everyday life; consequently, the designer, too, becomes isolated from the world at large.

The professional designer can serve as a metaphor for people’s activity in a materialistic lifestyle. As people’s reliance on products designed by others increases, the engagement in meaningful design activity decreases. This void is subsequently filled with the activity of consuming: consumption has replaced creation as the activity people use to construct their reality; and in this way, design serves to reinforce the importance of materiality and consumption.
The constructed world becomes an experience unto itself, creating and recreating its environment through the production of designed products.

Confined to the market economy and driven by commerce, design activity is devoted to creating commodities. With the designed product serving as a commodity, any relationship with it is reduced to a consumptive act. Designed products communicate the message of the context in which they occur and are reflective of the activity in that context. The message is how to live, and the message of the materialistic lifestyle is: consume. In contemporary life people are more often described as consumers than citizens. People must live in a way that is congruent with reality, so to be good consumers, they must ‘shop ’til they drop.’ How does this lifestyle serve us?

Materialism and Discrepancies: A Problem in Deriving Meaning from the Current Materialistic Lifestyle

In the introduction to Tim Kasser’s The High Price of Materialism, Richard M. Ryan writes: “We have enough material resources to feed, clothe, shelter and educate every living individual on Earth. Not only that: we have at the same time the global capacity to enhance health care, fight major diseases and considerably clean up the environment. That such resources exist is not merely a utopian fantasy, it is a reality about which there is little debate.” All we have to do is look at the state of the planet and its people to see that very little is being done to address these issues. Why is this? It has to do with the way people live — the intentional activity by humans for humans — in the service to the market for profit. It has to do with the intent of the activity. Ryan notes a division among people: those who live with material wealth: surplus and abundance; and those who live without: deprivation and poverty. Yet, where people seem to unite most is in their conversion to the ‘religions of materialism and consumerism.’ The effects of consumerism have far-reaching effects for individuals, communities, and the natural world.
Results of materialistic lifestyle

No longer is it about having enough to have a comfortable, even ‘good’ life. Now, the ‘good life’ means having more than enough wealth and material possessions — more and more and more. No longer is it about keeping up with the Joneses, but exceeding the Joneses exponentially. It is not just consumption, but conspicuous consumption; people ‘need’ to show it off. And why not consume? It is the message of the materialistic lifestyle, after all. The message, like design, is everywhere. Want to feel great? Buy this. What to have lots of beautiful friends? Buy this. What to look like this? Buy this. Want happiness, health, and freedom? Buy this, and this and this. What people learn from these messages is directly related to the semiotic explanation of understanding what something means in opposition. I understand that I am not that (image I see reflecting happiness) so I must not be happy. If I want to be happy, I want that (image I see reflecting lifestyle). In this activity of ascribing the acquisition of happiness (an interior condition) to owning a product of design (an external thing), the relationship is an externalized manifestation of an interior state of being. All of these interactions are mediated by design. But what happens when the expectation of fulfillment does not occur? In the market economy, the user-product relationship is more than the longing and desire of an object to fulfill a need of the self that Stewart asserts, because the message of materialism promises fulfillment through consumption, yet what actually results is dissatisfaction and disappointment when the need is not met. In a materialistic lifestyle, coping with dissatisfaction of materialism results in more and more consuming. It is a vicious cycle.

The obsessive almost religious quest for economic expansion that has become the core principle of what is called the American Dream, and what is termed affluenza in a book of the same title.53

affluenza (n.) 1. The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses. 2. An epidemic of
stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American Dream. 3. An unsustainable addiction to economic growth. 4. A television program that could change your life.\(^{54}\)

Affluenza is a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.\(^{55}\)

Affluenza is rooted in the idea that every generation will be materially wealthier than its predecessor and that somehow each of us can pursue that single-minded end without damaging the countless other things we hold dear. We human beings, especially in this century, have been producing and consuming at a rate that far exceeds the ability of the planet to absorb our pollution or replenish the stock.\(^{56}\)

Materialism and consumption are not just having an effect on our wallets, but on our friendships, families, communities, and environment. Many understand that we spend and buy far more than we need. That our children are learning this materialistic lifestyle at an alarming rate, and that these actions are at expense of future generations and our own future. This ‘disease’ crosses religious lines, age lines, race, income and education. There is an overwhelming feeling in this nation that we have become too materialistic, too greedy, too self-absorbed, too selfish, and that we need to bring back into balance the enduring values that have guided this country over generations. Values of faith, family, responsibility, generosity, friendship.\(^{57}\)

*Impacts of materialistic lifestyle on the health of the planet*

Our lovers, our children, our neighbors, our society, and our planet are all affected when the desire for wealth, status and image directs our behavior. Materialistic values harm those around us and they damage the planet. When interactions with others are based on materialistic values, less empathy and intimacy are present in the relationships, and materialistic values are more likely to be transmitted to the next generation. The broader community will also
be damaged when those in power objectify others in their pursuit of wealth and status. The relationship with the Earth, which must be considered as a meaningful and valuable relationship, for the health and wellbeing of the natural world and all it contains, is damaged by materialistic orientation. Additionally, Earth’s health suffers as these values lead individuals to consume at unsustainable and damaging rates.

In their book *Natural Capitalism*, Hawken, Lovins and Lovins state the current capitalistic economic model rewards use rather than efficiency. It treats natural resources like any other form of capital: to be owned, acquired, and consumed; since it is largely accepted that these are free and plentiful — often it is merely the cost of extraction that is a factor.58 Little to no value is placed on natural resources as a significant social construct to which we belong, and certainly there is little economic concern about the consequences of exhaustion: it is simply assumed that it is part of doing business.59

Over-indulgent, over-consuming, over-stimulating lifestyles have gotten us into a situation where we are not only living in a manner that currently cannot be sustained by everyone on earth, but one that is not healthy: emotionally, physically, spiritually, environmentally. The results of this manner of living have disastrous effects for the planet, and for the future of humans on this planet. For example, the current Western lifestyle of consumption and materialism cannot be supported with the Earth’s current resources, yet people around the world aspire to have the Western way of life. Increasingly this lifestyle is viewed as the lifestyle that will bring riches, and riches will bring happiness. As more and more people around the Earth, not only desire, but demand this lifestyle the toll on natural resources will be devastating. And this only considers those people currently living on the planet who wish to adopt the Western lifestyle; as the human population increases more and more people will learn this way of life, and they too will want more and more.
This ‘culture’ of consumption is fast becoming a monoculture, replacing the diversity of cultures and societies of the world. Loss of diversity is occurring in the natural environment too and it is a serious situation which could have far-reaching implications on our health and ability to eat.

“Monocultures are rare in nature, in part because they create paradises for plant diseases and insects — as science writer Janine Benyus puts it, they are like equipping a burglar with keys to every house in the neighborhood; they’re an all-you-can-eat restaurant for pests.” However, of the 200,000 species of wild plants, only a few thousand are eaten by humans with just a few having been — more or less — domesticated.60 The materialistic lifestyle has a conflicting message: it encourages, if not, rewards surplus and diversity as it pertains to the marketplace, yet promotes homogeneity for people and nature. In an address given at EnvironDesign 3, Daniel Quinn, states that the current lifestyle “works very well for products but very poor for people.” In contrast to the monoculture of the Western lifestyle which asserts that there is one right way to live, he continues: “It works well for products because it is well understood and accepted by all that there is no one right way to make a cigarette lighter, no one right way to make a camera, no one right way to make a chair, no one right way to make anything. Products are expected to evolve and allowed to evolve, it is a form of natural selection of the marketplace.”61


Impacts of materialistic lifestyle on the health of individuals

Through his research, Tim Kasser proved what people have speculated for centuries: that a lifestyle based on materialistic values leads to unhappiness and
lack of fulfillment. The two key features of the materialistic lifestyle: materialism generates unhappiness, and that unhappiness generates materialism. The quest for fulfillment through the promises of consumerism leads to a dissatisfaction (because this is a false promise) which leads people to consume. According to Kasser, people who are 'materialistic' tend to be more interested in 'extrinsic' values of wealth, financial success, fame, popularity, and less interested in 'intrinsic' values which he describes as self-acceptance (desires of psychological growth, autonomy, and self-esteem), affiliation (desires for a good family life and friendships), and community feeling (desires to make the world a better place through one's own actions). People with materialistic values also have more depression and anxiety, and less happiness and fulfillment in their lives. Being anxious, depressed, unhappy and unfulfilled leads to a materialistic lifestyle as people consume in an effort to cope with insecurities and low self-worth and esteem. Kasser cites there are four ways in which materialistic values detract from our well-being: they maintain deep-rooted feelings of insecurity, they lead us to run on never-ending treadmills trying to prove our competence, they interfere with relationships, and they diminish personal freedom.

Many psychologists believe that people’s emotional states are largely a function of how far they are from who, what, or where they ideally would like to be. Materialistic individuals’ difficulty in fulfilling their needs for esteem and competence derives from discrepancies: the discrepancies of how far they are from who, what, or where they ideally would like to be. Discrepancies can apply to almost any aspect of people’s lives, including their bodies, personalities, and relationships. Materialism undermines the satisfaction of needs for authenticity and autonomy. Kasser writes: “But how can this be? Freedom and capitalism go hand in hand, and consumer goods and our appearance are two primary means by which we can express our individual identities. This is a myth of materialism and consumerism because: if
every person expresses identity through consumer goods, no company could survive because profit margins rely on mass production and mass consumption. Ads may try to convince us that we are unique because we own or desire a particular product, but we must always remember that they target thousands or millions of people. Ads are designed to sell prepackaged individualities.”

Our lives unfold in a social matrix that is both deep and wide, and our interactions with other people and the culture at large affect our personalities and behavior in many ways. Good interpersonal relationships and involvement in one’s community form the two cornerstones of personal well-being; our psychological health depends on whether we feel close and connected with other people, and on whether we can give and receive love, care, and support.

Materialism works counter this. Materialistic values of wealth, status, and image work against close interpersonal relationships and connections to others, two hallmarks of psychological health and high quality of life. Valuing materialistic pursuits conflicts with valuing many characteristics of high-quality relationships. According to Kasser: “The sad truth is as people receive rel-
atively poor satisfaction of their needs and fail to correct the underlying psychological issues that lead them to such an empty pursuit in the first place, while ignoring other important psychological needs, they negatively impact their well-being."69

In a materialistic lifestyle, people often consume unconsciously. They find themselves in a terrible cycle: feeling unhappy and/or unfulfilled, an effort is made to find happiness and fulfillment through consumption. When the expectation of happiness and fulfillment does not manifest, it creates dissatisfaction and this begins the process over again as people use consumption to cope with the feelings of unhappiness and lack of fulfillment from their materialistic pursuits. Another feature of unconscious consumption is that people spend money they do not have for a lifestyle that they think they want or need. This often means using credit and going into debt which defers the pain of financial actualization while allowing immediate gratification. This increased debtload requires more hours working to earn more money, which then allows less time for meaningful engagement in their life: with family, friends, within their environment or simply having alone time. This disconnection from self, community and environment further contributes to feelings of isolation, depression and anxiety, and in an effort to cope, the whole process starts all over again. The activity described here does very little to connect people with others and the world around, unless the world is the world of capitalism and consumerism.

*Materialism and cycle of work and spend*

For more than three decades, there has been an increase in hours of work by Americans. In *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need*, Juliet Schor describes an activity that has the results of fracturing important and meaningful relationships necessary for people’s wellbeing. Essentially, productivity growth turns into longer hours of work which translates into higher incomes. People spend these incomes and then they need to spend more time working
in order to sustain their lifestyles, which then results in an increase in production. Schor calls this the cycle of work and spend (fig. 5.1). Why is it that people need to spend so much time working to sustain these lifestyles? People are not only living a materialistic consumerist lifestyle, they are conspicuously consuming. It becomes a competition to have more than the next guy. These lifestyles are based on upscale emulation, where the reference groups for the “Joneses” are no longer the folks down the street in the same neighborhood, rather they are the affluent upper 20% of the population seen in mediated experiences such as television, advertisements, and magazines. In turning more and more life activity to work in the service of capitalism, which promotes separation and isolation, there is little time left to connect with the larger world. The constructed world created by humans for humans as a reflection of their activity in their lifestyle results in products and a designed context which informs them that the meaning of life, the pursuit of happiness, is in consumption. People are not just living a materialistic lifestyle, they are bound to it.

Evaluation of Current Function of Design

When the role of designer is rooted in capitalist culture, focused on commodification, and confined to the market, the designer is defined by professional design practice. When the designer’s activity is reduced to shaping the form of the resulting product, the designer is no more than a passive player whose part in the design process is isolated from the whole. Designed products reflect this passivity and is absorbed by people who interact with designed products and then is reflected by people as they interact with their world. Often unaware of the influence exerted on them, or the results of the choices they make regarding consumption, they are left unfulfilled and unhappy. The myth of materialism is that fulfillment and happiness can be found in material possessions and the sirens call for more and more consumption. As people turn to consumption to fill needs, discrepancies arise when expectations and experience are not congru-
ent, and consequently, they are left dissatisfied and empty. Trying to satisfy interior conditions, states, and needs through consumption and materialism helps to fill homes, garages, and storage units while draining bank accounts, and consequently, spirits. Increasing bills and decreasing savings means more time working to make more money which results in less time for meaningful relationships with the self, community and environment. This kind of vicious cycle leads to a fracturing and fragmenting from the larger aspects of life: those found outside the market. Meanwhile, the materialistic lifestyle is destroying our relationship with our communities and the planet. As people consume the activity of life becomes commodified, the results are that everything then becomes objectified: even people and the natural environment. The care, consideration, and empathy reserved for meaningful interpersonal relationships is not available in relationships based on objectification. Treating the Earth as a commodity that can be bought, sold, and owned, necessarily means that it is not treated with respect or care; it is seen as something that can be used, even controlled, for human purposes and as a result, people no longer feel connected to the natural world. Longterm survival of the human species is greatly threatened as current consumption results have devastating implications for future generations. This lifestyle — with its dissatisfaction, empty promises, misplaced values and devastating results — is a function of design. When design is practiced and valued in the market economy its potential to contribute meaningfully to the world community is greatly diminished. Design activity — when fractured from the true context of human existence: the everyday world — becomes isolated from the realm of everyday life. Good design must mean more than ‘good business.’

A Crisis of Design

The myth of materialism and consumerism is that happiness and fulfillment can be found through material phenomena: material things such as cars, jewel-
ry as well as immaterial experiences such as fame and status. Believing that all of these conveniences of modern life will allow more time with family and friends, will allow an easy life, a good life, has created a crisis of values. The myth of design in the current lifestyle is that it makes life easier for people, that it serves people, that it is in the service of people. The reality is that the business of designing must serve the market first: profits before people. The significance of design activity and its results have been underestimated: within design and across other disciplines.73 According to Tony Fry, this is because “design’s acknowledged and celebrated forms have been attached to explicit economic functions and cultural appearances that lack any ability to engage in critical reflection, especially of design’s impact on the social and the environmental fabric of our world.”74 To illustrate this, Fry uses this example: “[M]any commentators have pointed out, it is not the mechanical function, machine performance, or styling of the motor car that needs to go on being redesigned, but the very basis of the systems of private and public transport, as well as the logistics that generate that need to travel.” He points out that “pollution, as well as the social and urban problems that the motor car has generated, evidence design’s limited, and often, myopic, view of the environmental impact of its own creations.” He continues, “Now, in this context, consider how many designers and design resources are employed designing those modes of transport, or transport technologies, that go on generating environment problems, versus the number of those working on their solutions.”75 The lack of critical self-inquiry by designers relating to the activity of designing in the market economy impairs designers abilities to offer meaningful alternatives, perhaps even impairs designers abilities to see what is truly there; so they continue on.

In the introduction to their book, Bright Minds, Beautiful Ideas: Parallel Thoughts in Different Times, Ed Annink and Ineke Schwartz address the crisis of design in an overcrowded market. As the design industry produces enormous amounts of products in many materials, colors, and qualities; as
more and more designers enter the design profession; and as more and more products are made by growing numbers of design enterprises; the mountain of products created demonstrates a devaluation of design with the results diminishing the quality of human life on a planet seriously damaged by this activity.76

The practice of design in the context of capitalism is limiting and isolating. The resulting lifestyle of materialism is unhealthy and unsustainable. The intentional activity of humans by humans has results that reach far beyond the resulting product. According to McDonough if the results or consequences of designing were not part of the intended plan, then they are, in fact, the de facto plan.77 The de facto plan of current human activity, of the materialistic lifestyle, is the crisis of design which reflects the larger crisis in the world and for our evolution as a species. The current lifestyle cannot be maintained longterm. We are living a life that has detrimental effects for the self, community, and the environment. In the constructed world we arrogantly function as though we are the only life on the planet. And of course, this could not be further from the truth. The constructed world is housed within the natural world and most, if not all, activity relies on natural resources found in the natural world, and all of its results effect the whole of the natural world and all that it contains: including humans. The quality of the planet determines the quality of human life, we are not just part of the natural world, we are the natural world. We are not just consumers, not just citizens, we are nature. And the degree to which we know and understand this is affected by our activity with design: it is a product of design. According to Quinn, how we ought to live is “the most important problem for mankind to solve.”78

Examining the current lifestyle reveals the power of the role of designer and the function of design in life, not just to shape products, but to shape human existence. We must accept the responsibility for the role of design in creating this lifestyle. We must realize that there is a choice: continue
with the current way and suffer the inevitable dire consequences or rethink, redesign and revive. People everywhere are feeling the spiritual, personal, financial, and environmental crises that exists as a result of this lifestyle. When will enough be enough?
What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true. We breathe, true. We walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Where? When? Why?

*Georges Perec*
Revealed in a critique situation is vital information about the intent of the designer and how well that intent is actualized. To speak of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ misses the point entirely, it is about the success (or failure) of the chosen direction in relation to the intent that matters most. Often a critique illuminates a fatal error in the design methodology and a new, alternate design strategy must be developed: an opportunity to begin anew. Design activity is dynamic and ever-evolving; even in a devastating critique, there is always hope, a chance to find the way that produces the best results for the given intention. When it comes to long-term survival of the human species, we must find a way of living that works best for humans to achieve this intention; this is the only design that matters. Chapter 6 is a call for change: to reflect, rethink, and reform.
We abuse the land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see the land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

*Aldo Leopold*
Wonder and Amazement: the Natural World

The kinds and types of experience of the natural world affects our quality of life. It can bring us closer to or disconnect us from the rhythms and harmonies of the natural world and ultimately the universe. A lifestyle where humans live harmoniously in and with the natural world is a lifestyle that will be sustainable. It will be a lifestyle based on the message of the context of human design activity. As humans value their relationship to the natural world, their actions will result in design activity that continues this relationship. The context of the natural world serves as the example of how design must function.

Evolutionary theory states that what works stays and what does not work, goes. A lifestyle that disconnects humans from the rhythms and harmonies of the natural world — or worse, a lifestyle that actually puts humans in opposition to the natural world — is a lifestyle than cannot be sustained. This lifestyle will not continue and the people living that way of life will be gone. If humans want to continue as part of this world, it requires that we find a way of living that works well for us — for the long term; it requires that we find an alternative lifestyle to the materialistic one created by the
context of capitalism. We need to develop a lifestyle and an experience of the natural world that works well for people — one that moves human activity into a harmonious relationship with the world. In the large, beautiful, immense, and amazing natural world the rhythms and harmonies abound sending a source of energy that draws us closer to it. In turn, we connect with the natural world and return to it our energy with the rhythms and harmonies it creates in us. The activity of designing in service to this lifestyle, will necessarily result in a happier, healthier planet, and this will affect every living thing that is part of the planet.

Think about the last time you watched the sun set, or the sun rise. Aside from seeing the sun lower beyond or rise above the horizon, what else did you experience? Moments like these, sunset and sunrise, are moments when we can truly think about and understand what it is our planet does: rotate and revolve around the sun. Sunsets and sunrises are evidence that the earth is turning away from or toward the sun. It affirms our connection to the sun, our participation within our galaxy. The universe and sun create energy and matter and we are of this matter. We grow with the energy of the sun and this makes us of the universe and of the sun.

The energy of the sun brings life to our planet. This world exists, continues, and thrives due to the energy of the sun as it gives life to all things. The rotation of the earth toward and away from the sun brings the cycle of days and nights. The movement around the sun and earth’s turning closer to or farther from the sun gives us our seasons. Within the cyclical nature of the days and nights and seasons exists the ebb and flow of life and death, of growth and decay, of change and of evolution. For us, the days turn into months, and months into years and we collect these years into centuries and millennia. For us time is essential but fleeting. Time is impermanent. And this affects us. In the natural world our brief lifetime as individuals and as a species is only a blip in the timeline of the evolution of the natural world.
Evolution means adaptability and change. Over the billions of years of evolution on this planet a great diversity of species has developed. Diversity is extremely important for the stability of our natural world. Systems and forces exist to promote diversity keeping the delicate balance within and among all the world's life energy. This diversity is linked to the strength of the ecosystem — to which all things belong. These systems are regulated by the Laws of Nature — which help to ensure the delicate balance of our natural world continues. Everything on this planet is subject to the natural laws that govern the way things work between and among all of us. The Laws of Nature must serve as a guide for designers and in the activity of designing. But how many of us know these laws?

Earth serves as the ultimate context for all of life as we know it: all creatures, all forces, all cultures, all lifestyles, keeping the community of life going: the wind, the seas, the land, all living creatures, no matter what size. This community — dynamic, ever-changing, amazing — is diverse, regenerative, and continuing. This ever-changing world we live in impacts all lives, all our lives, because all things — everything — is connected.

As varied as human culture is we all belong to this larger community of the natural world. Our constructed world is housed within the natural world. A shared relationship of interconnectedness must define this community. As part of a relationship of belonging to a community humans, must respect the obligations and responsibilities that come with such membership. We humans share in this relationship with the natural world. Increased and meaningful participation benefits us: it affects our perceptions and influences our actions, the quality of this interaction impacts awareness. We are nature and what we do to nature, we do to ourselves.

**Paradigm Shift: from Fixed to Infinite**

Our current way of life isn’t working well for people: longterm survival of our
species is in jeopardy. In his book, *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde looks at the results of
the market economy as he contrasts it with the gift economy. The gift econo-
my offers an alternative model for a meaningful way of life. In a market econo-
my, such as our capitalist consumer-driven, consumer-dependent marketplace,
there is a disconnect with that which makes a thing meaningful in the first
place. In a market economy the commodity serves as the focus of the exchange
between parties; it is deliberately impersonal, and must be neutral. He writes:
“A market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis: you pay to balance the scale.
But when you give a gift there is momentum, and the weight shifts from body
to body.”83 In a gift economy the significance of the object resides in its place
within the exchange. The exchange of the object, the gift, affirms a connection
to other people and in doing so defines the community.84 Hence, the object is
a device that allows the exchange to occur. Unlike a market economy where
goods are sold and purchased for possession, a gift cannot be owned; its mean-
ing is created and reinforced in its movement. It is this element of relationship
which leads Hyde to speak of gift exchange as ‘erotic’ commerce, opposing eros
(the principle of attraction, union, involvement which binds together) to logos
(reason and logic in general, the principle of differentiation in particular). A
market economy is an emanation of logos.85

Gifts circulate among the members of a community and as the gift is
given from person to person, its worth increases. This is contrary to a market
economy where the model is scarcity — capital is removed from circulation in
order to have it increase in value and the amount hoarded away determines a
person’s wealth and worth. In a gift economy, the model is abundance in giving
that create worth of an individual.

The gift must always move.86 According to Hyde “the way we treat a
thing can sometimes change its nature.” Stopping the flow of the gift exchange
redefines the object from gift to commodity; and it does so with dire conse-
quences. An old saying about a gift economy states: one man’s gift must not be
another man’s capital. But isn’t this the business of designing? When in service to the market, the activity of designing, a fundamental human activity, becomes appropriated for profit: the gift is converted to a commodity.

In communities where there is a clear understanding between gift economies and market economies there is an inherent understanding of the cycle, the motion that ensures the exchange. Often, these communities expand the circle beyond the people.

The Maori, the native tribes of New Zealand, provide [a fine example of the larger circle of a gift exchange] which…offers new detail and a hint of how gift exchange will feel if the circle expands beyond the body of the tribe. The Maori have a word, *hau*, which translates as “spirit,” particularly the spirit of the gift and the spirit of the forest that gives food. In these tribes, when hunters return from the forest with birds that they have killed, they give a portion of the kill to the priests, who, in turn, cook the birds at a sacred fire. The priests eat a few of them and then prepare a sort of talisman, the mauri, which is the physical embodiment of the forest hau. This mauri is a gift the priests give back to the forest, where, a Maori sage once explained to an Englishman, it “causes the birds to be abundant…, that they may be slain and taken by man.”

In the above excerpt about the Maori tribe there are three gifts in the story: the forest gives to the hunters, the hunters give to the priests, and the priests give to the forest. If the way we treat a thing can sometimes change its nature, how might the world change if we choose to see natural and human resources as part of a gift economy rather than that of a market? What happens when the relationship is redefined?

To move away from capitalism is not to change the form of ownership from the few to the many, but to cease turning so much surplus into capital, that is, to treat most everything as a gift. How different would the world be if everything were treated as a gift? How different would people’s relationships with each other, the world and the self be if the designed product reinforced a context reflective of an activity that is based in connection through the movement of designed products, rather than isolation and separation? This is
the fundamental shift required to bring about an alternate way of life. We need to treat things: ourselves, each other, the planet differently — as a gift — not to be owned but to be celebrated as a community of which we are a part. This, too, can and would have to be a function of design.

**Designers as Agents of Social Change.**

William McDonough calls for a new design. He asserts that designers must become leaders and leaders must become designers. He poses these questions: If design is a sign of human intention then what are our intentions? What is our intention as a species? The question that we must ask when we start designing is: how do we love all the children of all the species for all time?

There is a need for designers to take a more proactive role in shaping society, one that is in line with what works best for humans and not just the market place. Design must serve a greater purpose. It must function in a larger context allowing it to become woven into the fabric of humanity. Holistic design practice offers the potential for design to positively impact the world by serving to bring humans into a balanced and harmonious relationship with each other and the world community. This thesis provides a framework for design to function in a larger context serving to bring humans into a balanced and harmonious relationship with each other and the world community.

Tony Fry offers a particular objective for design activity: “the creation of material change that can increase the prospect of the continuity of the interconnected systems of life, including the maintenance of the social ecology upon which we depend and which we name as community.” Fry notes that the ongoing biodiversity of the planet includes humans.

It is time to return to the idea that what designers believe the origins of design to be influence how they practice design. Designing is truly an act of creation, a gift bestowed upon the designer, as the gift of life is bestowed upon
us all. The designed product is a manifestation of this gift to be given, to move into and join the community of life. This is holistic design activity. Unlike when design confined to the market economy where isolation and separation are reinforced, holistic design activity connects humans with each other, their environment and their reality in a meaningful and affirming way. The context for human interaction becomes a dynamic relationship between the man-made world and the natural world — the connection is made in a fluid and integrative manner. Human consciousness is a heightened awareness of the world and enables people a way of life where the intrinsic values of the interior self are met and fulfilled. When the activity of designing is integrated into the collective experience of being, the designed product reflects this activity by shaping and serving a way of living where people are connected with each other their environment. This is good design.

Reforming: Affecting Change
The way that design currently exists in the world denies the multifaceted activity that is designing. Expanding discourse offers an opportunity to consider the aspects of design and its relationship to or disjunction from the interconnectedness of all things. How might design work in the service of people? How might it help people wake up? How might it help educate, empower, heal people? As the world changes, attitudes about design and the processes that inform it force us to examine and question our methodologies.

The influence of design is great and because of this the responsibility of designers is even greater. It is necessary to get this message to as wide an audience as possible. In order for there to be change, we designers need to reflect, rethink, and reform the very thing it is that we do. We need to look at what it is that we currently do, how we wound up here and then we need to ask questions about how we are doing: what was the intent, what are the results, is there a de facto plan? The range and scope of introspection, reflection, rethinking,
and reforming will ultimately affect the way design is viewed, practiced, and used: regarding both the limitations and potential of design.

There is considerable potential for design to make a positive change in the world. Poet Ann Lauterbach writes: “The American Philosopher Richard Rorty speaks of a need for new vocabularies. He suggests that in order to come to the problems we confront, we need to find fresh names. I think that the old names are good enough; what we need are new questions, new frames of reference, new models. We need to reject dualistic absolutes and oppositions and find, in constellations and contingencies, aspects and relations, interpretive models that allow reciprocity, difference, and agency. We need to believe that our individual, private choices and decisions have public consequences.”93 Who better than designers, as agents of social influence, to effect change? As designers shift the focus of their activity, as they consciously engage in design activity and life in a meaningful way, as they make small, incremental changes in personal actions, these collectively can change the momentum of the current lifestyle. Holistic design is dynamic, infinite, ongoing, and pregnant with purpose and possibility, allowing us to interact with and to alter our everyday world in a fluid and integrative manner. In order to positively change our relationships with the world we must change the activity of designing to one that treats life as a gift. Designed products must function in a manner of a gift: to serve as that which makes the connection possible. Design can make life enjoyable and sustainable by bringing people into a greater understanding and awareness of the beauty of the world around.

Designers must take action and participate more fully and meaningfully in effecting positive change in the world. Individual choices and actions have global consequences. The future of the planet rests in the hands of designers and the survival of our species will be a function of design — our lives depend on good design.
There is absolutely no inevitability
as long as there is a willingness
to contemplate what is happening.

Marshall McLuhan
Endnotes


3. Ibid, x.


10. Ibid, 140.


22. Ibid, 3.


27. Ibid, 2.


29. Ibid, 77.

30. Ibid, 77.

32. Ibid, 217.

33. Ibid, 218.


* While Buchanan’s categories and interpretations serve as an excellent example for how beliefs, subjectivity, and interpretation, affect, impact and influence product; I argue that the number of categories are open to debate, as there is no mention of the impact of the agricultural revolution and its impact on design, where humans affected their way of living and their connection to the land as they moved from nomadic to settled. Nor is there sufficient mention of the role of the printing press in the dissemination of information, its affects on the acquisition of information and what and how people considered as information in their lifestyle. Additionally, I would contend that the equation of creation of the universe with the first act of God does not allow room for the ontological pursuits of humans as they strive to make sense of their very being.

37. Ibid, 28.


39. Ibid, 47.

40. Ibid, 47.

41. Ibid, 50.

42. Ibid, 53.

43. Ibid, 54.

45. Ibid, ix-x.

46. Ibid, xi.

47. www.visualthesaurus.com


51. Ibid, ix.

52. Ibid, ix-x.


54. Ibid, 2.

55. Ibid, 2.

56. Ibid, 3.

57. Ibid, 3.


63. Ibid, 7.

64. Ibid, 8.

65. Ibid, 42.

66. Ibid, 73.

67. Ibid, 51.

68. Ibid, 73.

69. Ibid, 59.


71. Ibid.


74. Ibid, 190.

75. Ibid, 191.


79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.


84. Ibid, xiv.

85. Ibid, xiv.

86. Ibid, 41.

87. Ibid, xiii, 4.

88. Ibid, 18-19.

89. Ibid, 37.


91. Ibid.


93. Ann Lauterbach, from her commencement address at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, given, May 2002.
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