

Design for Story-making: Conceptual Exploration on Emotionally Sustainable Design

Min Jung Hong²

ABSTRACT

Exploring on two major questions: ‘Why do we feel more love for certain objects?’ and ‘How can design use this knowledge to realize design sustainability?’, this article presents an alternative way of approaching the problem of design sustainability from the perspective that our relationships with design objects are of an extended mode of social relations.

Recent discussions on design sustainability have transformed the notion of the problem by seeing it as a problem of our basic perception of design objects and our relationships with them. In this light, I propose that design sustainability could not be achieved solely by approaching from a mechanistic perspective, but by re-framing the way we see and relate things around us and by supporting our changes and actions to move forward a more sustainable notion of our relationships with the objects.

As a way to realize design sustainability, I propose that design should involve story-making quality that supports our initiatives to build more affectional relations with objects by seeing the objects as entities of communication that tell stories of us, thus reflect our identities and meanings of our lives. Proceeding on the exploration of the subject, I present some of conceptual outlines in forms of an image diary, an interplay-able furniture unit, and a performance instruction that suggest a way for a special story-making process and thus a stronger emotional tie with the objects.

Key words: Design, Emotion, design sustainability, affectional relations, story-making.

INTRODUCTION

Starting from an idea that the user’s emotional attachment-fellowship, friendship, and affection-for his own things could show an alternative approach to the problem of design sustainability, I have worked with the subject ‘Emotionally Sustainable Design’ since 2003. The issues of sustainability of design objects have been explored on a broad conceptual context, and as a designer, I have searched for ways of facilitating sustainable relationships between people and the objects through the design of material and the design of experience.

Received for publication: January 31, 2008.

1) Including the performance instruction “*All that You Need to Eternize the Very First Moment of Your Sitting on Your Chair(2003-2004)*” and other materialized concept outlines, this work was presented in an invited exhibition titled ‘ESD: Emotionally Sustainable Design’ at Galleri Cosmopolitan in Göteborg, Sweden from February 20 to March 13, 2004.

2) Department of Design & Craft, Graduate School, Hongik University, Seoul, 121-791, Republic of Korea (Email: miinhong@hotmail.com).

Current Issues and Formulation of Main Questions

Today's discussions on sustainable development in the field of design have transformed the notion of the problem of design sustainability to the one related more to our basic perception of design objects and our relationships with them. They assert that the approaches to sustainable design should start from re-placing the object's perspective in a wider sustainable context in which deeper aspects of value, meaning and use of the object could be explored. This implies that tomorrow's design for sustainable development should go beyond mechanistic or technological design approaches and support the initiatives for the local/private and global/public concerns on more sustainable relations that embrace a wider perspective of ecology between human, nature, and the things around us. In other words, the problem solving process of sustainable design should start from a deeper understanding of how we see and relate the things around us and support our changes and actions to move forward a more sustainable notion of relationship, so we reach a truly sustainable society (Falkheden 2004; Grout and Kajzer 2003).

This concept that highlights design's new way of approaching the problem finds support for in recent sociological researches that focus on new ways of seeing the relationship between people and their material possessions. They suggest that the meaning of material possessions in people's lives should be understood as an extended mode of social relations that goes beyond the extent of economic or productive perspectives (Appadurai 1986).

In this circumstance, my idea is that design should support the user's initiatives for building a more sustainable relationship with his things by means of supporting him to find a new way of seeing his things that is seeing them as objects of emotional communications. Then the relationship built and strengthened through this communicational process could lead the user's emotional attachment to his things, so the sustainability of the things at last.

Thus the challenges here are to explore design's communicational quality to evoke stronger emotive responses in the user's mind and to find out how this emotional communication could be easier and more efficient to support the user's emotional attachment leading to sustainability of the design object.

Method and Process

The exploration process comprises two major phases.

The earlier process is to make a ground investigation on the subject of (1) user's emotional attachment for object, (2) sustainability, and (3) design's role in this particular context from a wider perspective and to reach a more specified set of outlines of concepts to be applied to a design concept. For this, I use the reflective experience from different group activities that set out on a common interest in human relations, design, and design sustainability³. These group activities provide the major forum for the formative process of the concepts through discussions, workshops and presentations engaging a wide variety of perspectives from the joining members.

Reviews and references on a range of literature in and outside the design field mainly regarding design objects and their ecology within broader social contexts support the theoretical, objective ground of this process.

The second part is to present the findings from the earlier process in forms of materialized concept sketches, which can be compared to a blueprint for further actions in design development processes, and to involve reactions and reflections from a wider group of people outside the discussion group that I have interacted with for the earlier phase.

3) Mainly with the students workgroup 'It's all yours', a group of 15 students from the 2nd year of the master's degree program in design at HDK, Göteborg University, Sweden.

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Introspection: What does an affectional relation do?

Before starting investigations in a wider context, I have made introspection on my own case first. ‘How do I see and relate things around me?’, ‘In what practical way affectional relations support my relationship with objects to be more sustainable?’

When considering the traditional way of thinking in Korea, we find people often ascribed human attributes on their everyday objects, as if writers of imaginary stories do by means of personification, and looked at them as living companions and friends of their lives⁴. It could be understood as a ‘taught wisdom’ to use the objects with affections and friendships for a longer time in their situation where sufficient material properties were not available. Although this ‘practical role of overcoming (no matter whether it was consciously intended or not)’ of emotional attachment that enabled them to deal with the lack of material possessions may have faded away in today’s circumstances where people do not experience serious lack of material properties, I still find the influences from this particular way of seeing the objects. Combined with a mechanistic way of seeing from modern industrial surroundings, I recognize that there is another plane in our perception of things, which is rather of imagination and sometimes of fables.

In this way, I also regard some of my everyday objects as if they were living companions of my life. By this, most of the loved objects are kept with friendship and companionship regardless of their practical, mechanistic help. They are kept and loved for my emotional fulfilment by reminding me of some special memories of people and special events in my life. They also give me a sort of feeling that I am belonged to a certain union of a shared history.

Perhaps, affections for my own self, memories special to me, and the way I see the objects as living companions of a shared life experience are the sources of my affections for them and this affectional relation between my things and me, in turn, work for the sustaining value of the objects in my life.

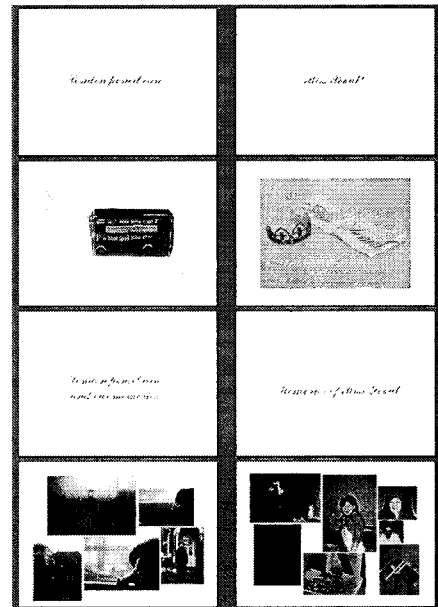


Fig.1. Objects as personal memory containers: *My Sweet Little Things* (part, 2003-2004), Slide show by Min Jung Hong.

Discussion & Readings: When and how do people find an affectional relation with an object?

With reflections on my own case, I suppose that an affectional relation between the user and the

4) Look at an example from an old lament written for ‘a broken needle’ by a widow from the 19th century of Korea, Jo-chim-mun(조침문): She expresses her deep sorrow before ‘the death’ of the needle that she used for 17 years. Her voice is not for a thing but for a friend of her, a surrogate of her missing part of social life in her life. She overlaps the life of needle together with her as a mirrored part of her own life and the deepest sorrow comes out from the loss of her another self that was projected to the existence of the small needle.

object derives from affections for one's own life, the life reflected on the being of the object, and this could lead a more sustainable relationship between two of them. Then how will it work in a wider context? Could my experience become a general case? When and how do people find these affectional relations with objects? Can I appropriate this process of building an affectional relation for the concept of emotional communication? What does design's communicational quality mean here?

Here we look at some basic condition points for the formative process of an affectional relation between the user and the object and its action for the object's sustainability; (1) Design's Communicational Quality, (2) characteristics of Emotional Communication between the user and the object, and (3) the relevance of Emotional Communication to an affectional relation and thereby the object's sustainability.

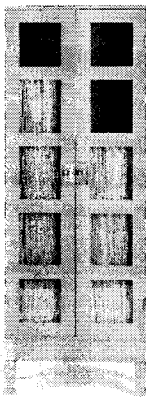


Fig.2. Design telling one's life (Bookcase suitable for collectors of National Geographic magazines, 1990: Each section stores 25 years of the magazines, Glass/stained yellow/brass details), Design by Mats Theselius for Källemo AB, Sweden.

Design and Design's Communicational quality: The basic idea that all design objects have communicational quality should be discussed from how I regard 'Design' today. Concerning culture as an agreement on how we live our lives in the society, design is to support this agreement to be activated in reality. Design objects in this sense project and signify the complex of our lives (agreed rules, expectations, beliefs, values). Beyond the traditional notion on the design's role to support economic, industrial strategies, design and design objects tell what our lives are like: they represent our lives. Our lives could be read and interpreted through what we design and use. In this, design's communicational quality is obvious (Forty 1986).

Emotional Communication: What I try to emphasize by 'Emotional Communication' is the quality of the user's experience from the communicational process occurring around a certain object. By any means, if the user experiences emotional fulfillment from emotive responses in the communicational process with the object, this communication could be regarded as 'Emotional Communication' and it could be the basis of an affectional relation between the user and the object.

The first investigation on Emotional Communication bases on a student discussion that took place around an old picture depicting a sailor from Göteborg.

In the picture that I found in an old book on the city, the sailor holds a saucer instead of a cup to drink coffee. The picture, with the sailor's special way of coffee drinking and the stories around it, was representing the old identity of the city. From the special coffee drinking custom that existed around the area and the cultural setting of the times, I recognized the old identity of Göteborg, 'the busiest harbor city in the Nordic countries with full of working class people.'



Fig.3. An old custom of coffee drinking, Göteborg, Sweden. 1948, Photo from *Göteborg-Hamnstaden* by Gullers, K.W.

I brought the picture to the student discussion, in which many of the students were from the Göteborg area, I expected to see whether this old identity of the city is still valid by the reactions from them. I asked the questions: Do you know this custom of coffee drinking? What impressions do you get from the image in the picture? Does it arouse any emotional interest?

The responses were ambivalent particularly about the working class culture that the picture conveyed by the sailor's way of coffee drinking; Some said that some people, especially who had such experience in their past, would not be very happy about recollecting the times when they had to wrestle with the weight of life out in the sea, while some said they would be proud of the picture and the story around it telling that that was their way of living: Working Hard.

It shows that even the same entity could draw out totally different responses. What does it imply when considering Emotional Communication? What made the difference in their responses here may be the experience and their different appreciation of the experience. The quality of the experience from communication taking place around the picture was dependent on whether the picture represents 'the subject (the user)'s desired way of being remembered'. I find here underlies the infinite variety of 'subjectiveness' that affect the responses and the quality of Emotional Communication.

For some more discussions on Emotional Communication, this time I discuss widely on what is happening in the design field around the issues of emotion. Nowadays more and more design objects are produced, advertised, and sold with enclosed imagery that appeals the user's emotion. Designers, advertisers, and entrepreneurs make use of the effect of Emotional Communication by means of presenting their design object along with dramatized, personalized messages. It is obvious there is increasing interest in designing to appeal the user's emotion. What do they tell us by this?

When considering today's practices of designing with emotional appeal in this kind, many of the cases still appear quite superficial since the personalized messages of those practices cannot overcome the connotation of commercialism that is to draw their market success. While steering up for more buying and discarding of the products - an unavoidable attribute of market products - they hardly show concerns on design sustainability. Additionally, this superficiality in this use of Emotional Communication in design, the stories or images are of anonymity, a false self that stand against the subjectiveness quality of one's own representation.

Resuming the first points, 'Emotional Communication' and 'Story-telling quality' with the object, which lead the user's emotive responses on the object from his own memories, experiences and desires, could be the strongest tools to facilitate more affectional relations between the user and the object. 'Then what would be the 'real' stories like in each person's individual sphere? Couldn't we find any general aspects of stories that the user would like to keep?' Recent findings of sociological researches suggest that objects are used as transmitters of personal identity and furthermore vehicles for formation of self-awareness, therefore, the meaning of objects and the relations to people's lives should be understood as an 'extended mode of social relations.' Objects are containers of meanings of one's life and the relation between the person and the objects represents his identity like his social life with other human companions does (Appadurai 1986; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Finnegan 1997).

Objects that Tell Stories of People's Lives: Hoskins (1998) explains in her anthropological study on *Biographical Objects* how certain objects used by people become special to them. Articulating her case studies in Kodi culture in eastern Indonesia, she deals with objects as important to people's biographies by the stories made around the objects, which provide distanced form of introspection: a form of reflection on the meaning of their own lives. She answers the question how we should understand the relations between objects and the people's understandings of themselves as individuals by showing how objects are remembered, hoarded, or used as objects of their fantasy,

desire and dream. She notes the stories are used to reify characteristics of a person and then to be 'narratively organized' into an 'identity'. The insight she encourages in this study is 'the narrative creation of the self' through 'the vehicle of an object'. She finally asserts that we should re-think the categories of possessions for in modern industrial societies the use that the Kodi people make of objects as vehicles for their identities is practiced parallel. This process of filling personal meanings in certain objects occurs in its simplest form whenever we become so attached to certain objects when they appear irreplaceable by "biographies" of those objects associated with certain life-transforming events thus they become filled with individual meanings, e.g. a wedding dress passed down to a girl by her mother on her wedding, a hat given as a present by one's deceased grandfather on his 20th birthday.

Inalienability of Personal Memories and Inalienable Objects: The specific characteristics of those biographical objects can be found by referring some notions of 'inalienability' of objects.

Moving the focus of discussion to the contemporary consumer environment, several consumer studies explain the course how an ordinary consumer commodity becomes an inalienable possession in people's lives. Wallendorf and Arnould's study, for instance, shows that an object's inalienability is derived from the object's associated memories of special people, events of the owner's life rather than from its physical attributes. How souvenirs and tourist photographs often become inalienable possessions is the usual example here. They also assert that the transformational process of ordinary consumer commodities to inalienable possessions, which stand for the owner's lifetime or sometimes for intergenerational span of time within a family, occurs when the object is invested with personal meanings that are usually from emotional links built on one's memories around the object. That is why we can find this "singularized" value even in mass-produced products like two identically looking hats can mean differently in lives of different owners of different sentiments by differently imagined and encoded values of memories of them (Curasi et al. 2001; Weiner 1992; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988).

Considering all, I note that the user finds an affectional relationship with the object by seeing the object as entity of communication that tells stories of his life, thus the stories made from his own life experience together with the object could be the generators of warm emotional attachment for the object. In the stories made from memories around the object, he finds himself, his identity, and his feelings of being connected to a wider web of the world. In other words, we understand this in the way that the user projects his 'self' to 'the meaning of the object' that he uses in the course of lifetime and the love of his own life and his capacity to care for what he loves could be the key to form this special relationship with the object and the object's sustaining value in his life.

Reflections: What can design do to support an affectional relationship between the user and the object?

Design for Story-making: Jensen (1999[2000]) in his book *the Dream Society* defines a dream as an emotional desire, a desire to get another or a better identity, a desire to find meaning in life, and a desire to escape from isolation and the meaningless. The dream is thus the beginning of a personal story of life and this personal story helps us to understand him.

Then what I have explored on to find the way of realizing the user's emotional attachment for the object could be about this dream and the personal story. Together with the meaning of stories as the generators of affection between the user and the object, I could say therefore, when approaching Emotionally Sustainable Design by supporting the user's affectional relation with the object, design should support the user's own Story-making process around the object: a story closely interwoven by the shared experiences of the user and the object in their lives, so that reflects his memories.

Designing to support the user's Story-making, regarding Jensen's reference, means to design things that reflect the user's dream. To know what his dream is and to work to support his dream reflected on the meaning of the object mean to help him to discover his identity, the meaning of life and his being interconnected into a wider system of the society (including the relation with things around him) and it should engage 'his own action'. This cannot be done by a passive recipient. Design should provoke his own initiatives to find himself in this relation building process by showing him how active and creative he could be and how important his role in this relationship through the experience of Story-making.

CONCEPTUAL OUTLINES

What I have drawn out from the earlier phase of the exploration as the concept of Emotionally Sustainable Design is designing to support the user's affectional relation with the object by means of engaging the user into the Story-making process around the object. To realize this, design should provide an open context for the user's own experience that is changing and evolving in reflecting his desires throughout his lifetime, so that the story around the object and the meaning of it could be closely interwoven by the user's own values. In other words, design should have distinct communicational property, which I emphasized as the basic condition to arouse emotive responses, so the user's experience could encourage further process of Story-making and the interactive experience with the object.

In this, I present some of conceptual outlines in forms of an image diary, interplay through a furniture unit, and a performance instruction, of which partly hold my own experience of Story-making to suggest the action of relationship building that can lead affections for the object by the meanings of the memories and to show a way for a special story-making process, so a stronger emotional tie with the objects.

Travelling PUMA and Me: A Story-telling object

The stories generated around objects provide a distanced form of introspection: a form of reflection on the meaning of one's own life. Inanimate things can sometimes become living beings fuelled by our imagination on them being witnesses of experiences, listeners of dreams and wishes and reminders of memories of the life. And they indeed work on our emotional plane.

'.....I, especially since became a long way off from my family and friends at home in Korea, often travel alone and it was a starting point of the story. Travelling alone wouldn't mean so much to some people, but having brought up in a society where the people's relationships is a basic texture of life for the whole life, I found it different from what I imagined before. I had to miss some feelings of being attached, linked, and belonged to somewhere or to somebody. Couldn't have it been enough with myself? Perhaps, it was not. Then I looked around myself. My things-bags, jackets,

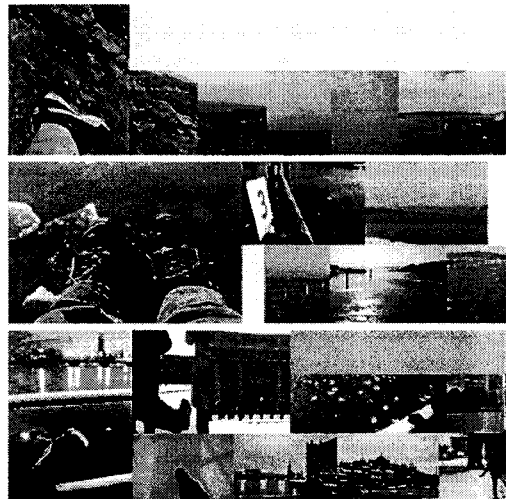


Fig.4. Everyday objects as transmitters of the user's memories: *Travelling PUMA and Me* (part): Story-making with everyday objects, Photo and illustration by Min Jung Hong.

jeans, and shoes-were still there remained attached to me even after a loss of companions from sight by my leaving from them. And I started looking at them with different eyes from before.

In my imagination, they became my companions, fellows, and friends of my journey as if my family and friends were at home. I started filling the missing link of relationship around me with them. Have I become too fetishistic? I believe not. It may be just an ordinary reaction of a social person when s/he missed a connection from her/his own circle of society. I found emotional safety in my relationship with my things that surrogated my missing relationships with people. I, of course, recovered this missing link between people and me as my life got into the new surroundings in Sweden later. I met new people who could replace the family and friends, but still the most exciting thing is that I became to have both human friends and the ones from different sphere within my life.....' (Hong (2003) In Travelling PUMA and Me: Image diary on shared memories with things)

Gong-Myung (Resonance): Cushions for the user-object-designer interplay

By setting an engaging context for experience of user-object–designer interplay and leaving the decision-making stage of the object’s use, shape, and composition to the user, design supports the user to reveal his active position in meaning & relationship building process with the objects.

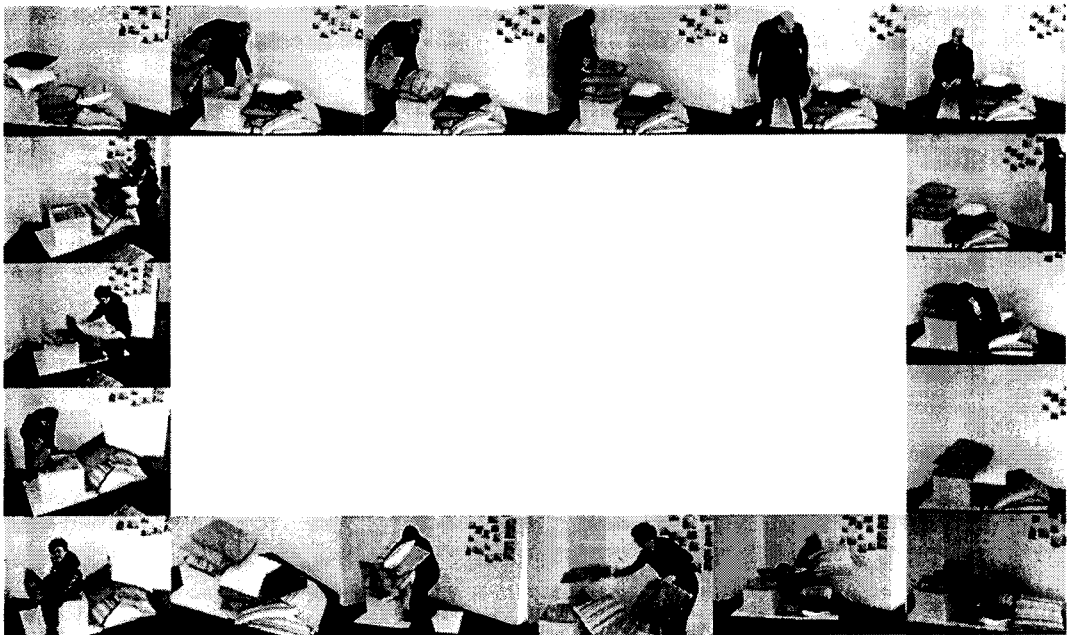


Fig.5. Open context for the user’s own contextualization: *Gong-Myung* (2003-2004), *Cushion+Box*, Exhibition Installation and Visitor Interaction, Photo by Min Jung Hong.

All That You Need to Eternize the Very First Moment of Your Sitting on Your New Chair: A performance instruction on 'Story-making' through the experience of self-marking on the object

Beyond producing an object to provide the user as the final format of the design process, the performance instruction tests the possibility for design to become a provider of an intangible product, an experience. The specific process of self-marking presents a way for a stronger tie

**All That You Need
to Eternize the Very First Moment of Your Sitting
on Your New Chair:**

A Chair..... White painted, so uncharacterized, normal, typical, neutral yet
An old pair of trousers and a shirt..... Those that you wouldn't mind spoiling...maybe you'd want to mark the moment on as well as on the chair
Color paint..... Of your favorites
A big paintbrush
A friend of yours..... somebody you want to share the extraordinary moment of your life
Your imagination and curiosity on a new way of building an affectional relationship between you and your things!

Fig.6. Design engaging the user's own story-making experience: *All That You Need to Eternize the Very First Moment of Your Sitting on Your New Chair* (2003-2004), Performance Instruction.

object to implement the object's sustainability, it will be possible to see more of design objects that are easier to cast the marks of their users, traces of being used by specific users of them, which may be opposed to our general idea of product durability in terms of the mechanistic view of design sustainability.

between the user and the object that is built by becoming parts of each other.

Together with one of my colleagues, I tested the instruction and found this experience gave me an extraordinary feeling of being linked with a chair. The meaning of the chair changed within the experience of some half an hour. Though it was a different kind of experience from having my marks on things through a long period of time, the emotional attachment arisen by leaving my marks on the chair was of a similar sort by my being a part of the object in touch with the chair.

This implied a possibility of a design object that could easily affect the user's emotional attachment to the object by exhibiting a mark of the user's own that reminds the user's being within the object's state. If we regard more the emotional fulfilment as the core importance of an

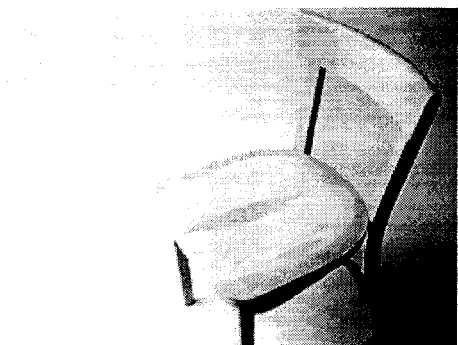


Fig.7. A way for a stronger tie between with the object by becoming parts of each other: *All that you need to eternize the very first moment of your sitting on your new chair* (2003-2004), Visual Instruction for Performance, Performance by Min Jung Hong, Photo by J.h. Jung.

CONCLUSION

On the very fundamental level of all this course of exploration, in conclusion, there always has been the idea of 'Re-Thinking': re-thinking what we really want from sustainable design and re-thinking what design can do and what users can do to finally help us to re-think our relationship with things around us. In this, my purpose has less point in producing new physical objects as a

final model of the concepts: instead, I would say that I aim as a designer more at finding a better way of building an affectional relationship between the user and the object as a sort of coordinator standing in between the user and the object.

If it seems not clear about what designers can do in this changing circumstance of design, why not designers thinking about being guides, escorts and conductors for a new direction that we believe to be better, that is in this case, a more sustainable relationship building process between the user and the object? The user may be waiting for our support from what we have learnt in our experience of creative thinking and different ways of seeing the problem. Do we designers really have to produce ‘a material object’? From this point of view, design means not only a mechanical help for a convenient life, but it is a support for our emotional fulfilment, so our mentality as well. ‘Design for Story-making’ will help us to see what we are searching for in our lives thus, ‘who we are.’ In this, design object that is closely interwoven in the texture of the story will remain filled with our individual meanings, so its relationship to our lives should sustain as our emotional desires to be ourselves sustain.

“The basis...is change which, however, does not affect the objects themselves, but the way in which we regard the objects... Any love is a metamorphosis and vice versa.”
(Michael Glasmeier (1996) In Apartment One)

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. 1986. *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Rochberg-Halton, E. 1981. *The Meaning of Things*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Curasi, C., Price, L., and Arnould, E. J. 2001. *Things That Should Be Kept: How Cherished Possessions Become Inalienable Wealth*. On http://www.cba.unl.edu/peopledocs/FamilyHeirlooms_993_160.pdf
- Finnegan, R. 1997. *Storying the Self: Personal Narratives and Identity*. In *Consumption and Everyday Life*, ed. Mackay, H. SAGE Publications Ltd., London.
- Falkheden, L. 2004. *Designed Links: Supporting Initiatives for Everyday Sustainable Development*. Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg (Under publication).
- Forty, A. 1986. *Objects of Desire: Design and Society since 1750-1980*. Thames and Hudson, London.
- Groot, I. and Kajzer, I. 2003. *Breaking Free from the Unsustainable Now*. In *Designjournalen Vol.10* (pp.36-46). Svensk Industridesign, Stockholm.
- Hoskins, J. 1998. *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People’s Lives*. Routledge, New York.
- Jensen, R. [1999] 2000. *The Dream Society: How the coming shift from information to imagination will transform your business* (드림 소사이어티: 꿈과 감성을 파는 사회), trans. Seo, Jeong-Hwan. Korea Management Association, Seoul.
- Jytte Høy eds. 1996. *Apartment One* (Exhibition catalogue). Apartment One Publications, Copenhagen.
- Munthe, G. and Gullers, K.W. 1948. *Göteborg-hamnstaden*. Kooperativa Förbundets Bokförlag, Stockholm.
- Wallendorf, M. and Arnould, E. J. 1988. “My Favorite Things”: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry into Object Attachment, Possessiveness, and Social Linkage. In *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol.14, No.4 (pp. 531-547).
- Weiner, A. B. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-while-giving*. University of California Press, California.