

Consumerism - a paradigm of contemporary design.

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Abstract: *Why did we start the design process with the object and not by looking at the system, first? Can design respond to challenges, or is it a victim of its own success, for serving industry, consumerism and global political agenda? How could design deliver more sustainable production and consumption concepts, together with improvements in the quality of human life and other co-existing life forms? How does the role of the designer evolve, since the expectations grow and take into consideration questions about the faith of the planet? Designers and all those who call their design efforts, need to question their role in the XXI century. This research tries to answer these questions, as "consumption has become a value that determines the individual way of being."*[1]
The goal of this project is to clarify the relationship between design and consumerism in order to find the best solutions for the problems caused by consumption, through design.

Key-words: *Consumption; Kitsch; Sustainable design; Slow design; Collaborative consumption;*

1. Introduction

This work shows what happens to us when changes caused by excessive consumption, intervening in our lives, overwhelm us. It deals with how we manage or not, to adapt to changes, and what the adjustment consists of. At the same time, it deals with the consequences of consumerism and proposes solutions to the problems caused by excessive consumption.

Nowadays, the relationship between design and consumption is closer and more complex than ever.

The contemporary design as an activity, profession and source of income, pose new questions, as societies and cultures face a globalized politics with issues related to industrial and environmental problems, including global warming, pollution, water and energy scarcity, poverty, social disease and health threats.

Consumerism is a movement of social and economic masses, which encourages the purchase of goods and services in increasingly large amounts, encourages the consumption having a singular interest: financial profit. "More and more" has consequences on all levels (economic, social, cultural, environmental, health, etc.); consequences, which eventually deteriorates the living conditions on Earth.

Based on these statements and the reports between consumerism and design, questions have been raised in order to identify and establish reports and establish if design is a trigger of the consumerism and the importance of consumption for design, all in the context of contemporary problems, given by the over population of the planet and the decrease of the natural resources, in the context of accelerating the pace of change.

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2. Objectives

The main hypothesis underlying this research is that ostentatious consumption, supported by marketing and mass-media and implicitly, designers, is a negative factor for the current generation, and even more for future generations. During this article, we see the evolution of design, on the consumption background, with the goal of establishing the facts behind the issues we face today, in order to prevent them in the future, with the proposed solutions from the perspective of sustainable design.

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3. Consumerism and Consequences

Beginning with the analysis of the relationship between humans and society on the kitsch background, the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, its consequences, the accelerating pace of change, the problems caused, this paper follows the cause-effect route of consumerism, through design, driven by fundamental developments and changes in western society and therefore the inherent changes in design.

Consumerism premises are pointed out through the relationship between the individual and the social environment through objects and products, consumer's possessive alienation through kitsch objects. Functionalism is as an anti-kitsch response, because for kitsch, function is just a pretext. Functionalism is, according to the architect L.H. Sullivan, defined by the axiom: "form follows function".

Further it is necessary to underline the machine era and the appearance of the professional designer, the evolution of consumerism in the engine era, from a psychologically point of view (bombarding the senses, overloaded information, the stress of decision making), and physical (the reaction to new and to adaptation), and the consequences of irrational consumption concerning the environment and the society in general. The rhythm of life has a constant tendency of acceleration, facilitated of the fact that the technique makes possible more technique, tendency that is hitting the ordinary and daily experience of the contemporary individual. The acceleration shortens the duration of many situations. This fact causes profound changes in human psychology. The invasion of new in our lives makes our adaptation to life become more difficult. The acceleration of the change radically changes the balance between the new and the ordinary situations.

The technical progress tends to reduce the production costs, faster than the cost of fixing. While the production automates, fixing things remains mostly a craft work. Then, the technical progress makes the improvement of items possible as we move forward in time. This means that it's often cheaper to replace an object than to fix it. From an economic point of view, it is more rational to produce irreparable cheap items, which are thrown away, even if these items are not as durable as repairable items.²

As the change accelerates and goes into the most far away corners of society, uncertainty concerning future needs, increases. Recognizing the inevitable change, but ignoring the requirements that it will impose, we do not dare to commit important resources for certain objects rigidly fixed and designed to serve unchanging purposes. Avoiding engagement in

² Moles, Abraham 1980, *The Psychology of kitsch, The art of happiness*, Meridiane Publisher, Bucharest, pg. 12.

fixed forms and functions, the design produces for short-term use or seeks to create adaptable products. The design must act with caution on a technical level.

Together with these factors that compromise the quality of interaction with the product, at social level, aging causes changes in people's social life.

One consequence of the acceleration is the appearance of the convenience store. The expansion of trade and contact with the wide world, meet the consumer's demand and need of beauty. The forms of this system materializes especially through the multitude stores that make retail selling and through the appearance of the convenience store, phenomenon whose social importance goes far beyond its quantitative importance.

The supermarket replaces the convenience store, generating a completely different value system. It provides average quality products, not excessively expensive, relying on an wide range of products, creating through light and color, the right context, the "shopping holiday" phrase debated by Tomas Kulka in his "Kitsch and Art" paper. The challenge of the designers and marketing people is creating a new state of mind, of an another version of the relationship between human and things.

The consumer maintains a possessive relationship with the concrete object, carrier of signs, object that will condition his way of life. We need beauty that is materialized in goods and objects. In this context the line between beauty and comfort is very soft. The convenience store is the one that apparently satisfies this need, according to a lifestyle adapted to the requirements of comfort.

During this context, designers and the design jobs, are positioned between the consumerist propaganda made by the mass-media and the consumer. The media changes the reality for corporation benefits. Media and marketing industry can be harmful especially for future generations, as children are transformed into consumers from a very early age and human relationships are reduced to market reports.

4. Results and Solutions

This chapter will search to solve the problems caused by consumerism, as a design paradigm, from an economic and ecologic point of view which brings up terms like green economy and conservation of natural capital, economic value of natural capital, natural capital - generating goods and services and energy savings.

One first proposed solution is sustainability and sustainable design, which deepens the concept of authentic experiences through practices of sustainable design, describes the cultural dimension of the practice of sustainable consumption, presenting the green architecture, which is based on renewable energy and intelligent construction. Sustainable design is an innovation that emphasizes a positive impact, by attaining high quality products that encourage consumers to make smart choices in respect with the environment. This means to innovate with the impact on consciousness of design over the life, to promote the act of thinking.

An other proposal for solving the problems caused by consumerism is slow design. Slow design is an agent who changes behaviors, where the necessity to act locally is underlined, taken into consideration, the globalization; The human-machine interaction is brought to the foreground, in terms of emotional involvement, it is discussed the role of design for self-consciousness - a soft line between guidance and personal reflection, which

involves the experience of a product and sustainable sensorial. For reasoning the principles of slow design are listed below:

Principle 1: REVEAL - Slow design reveals experiences in everyday life that are often missed or forgotten, including the materials and processes that can be easily overlooked in an artifact's existence or creation.

Principle 2: EXPAND - Slow design considers the real and potential "expressions" of artifacts and environments beyond their perceived functionalities, physical attributes and lifespans.

Principle 3: REFLECT - Slow Design artifacts/environments/experiences induce contemplation and what slowLab has coined 'reflective consumption.'

Principle 4: ENGAGE - Slow Design processes are open-source and collaborative, relying on sharing, cooperation and transparency of information so that designs may continue to evolve into the future.

Principle 5: PARTICIPATE - Slow Design encourages users to become active participants in the design process, embracing ideas of conviviality and exchange to foster social accountability and enhance communities.

Principle 6: EVOLVE - Slow Design recognizes that richer experiences can emerge from the dynamic maturation of artifacts, environments and systems over time. Looking beyond the needs and circumstances of the present day, slow designs are (behavioural) change agents.

The latest proposals we bring as solution for consumerism are the concepts of collaborative consumption of goods and products, online sharing (sharing of goods and services via the Internet and virtual environment), online sharing communities, the concept of crowdfunding (the collective effort of more individuals who cooperate in order to support efforts initiated by other people or organizations) and the reputation capital in the context of collaborative communities.

5. Conclusions

As a conclusion of this research paper, "consumption" is redefined in relation to design objects. Consumption is the practice of the industrial society, a relationship not only with objects, but also with the corporate world, a systematic and global activity which underpins our entire social, economic, cultural system.

Desires, projects, requirements, passions and relationships, translate into objects to be bought and consumed. As a result, not the objects are consumed, but the relationship with the objects. Because the objects become objects of consumption, they must first be signs, symbols of desire, passion, requirements, etc; In this context, human relationship suffers alterations, becoming a consumer relationship - in other words, tends to consume the double meaning of the word: to fulfill and abolish the objects that mediate, and ultimately become an excuse for the human relationship.

The entire media, encourages this kind of relationship in order to have material profit and design is supporting it. Needs, feelings, emotions, culture, science, all have become a good for production, with the goal to be sold.

As Baudrillard said, projects don't exist anymore, only objects do; a project is contented with its own achievement as the sign in the object. "The object of consumption

appears very accurate, as something in which the project is resigned³; and the ambitions, individual projects justify this desire to consume more and more.

The industrial and technological revolution, consecrated the object, through serial production, as a source of satisfying the needs and functionalism. Which means that the object is a result of a production process, the production of goods and objects is oriented first of all, by the existence of the basic needs, and consequently the production of useful objects (defined as functionalism utility), is valuable.

However, in the contemporary world, the productive mechanisms do not work, firstly, to ensure survival needs, but to create fidelity conditions for a future consumer, satisfying the needs of the moment appearing only as a secondary imperative, from the mass-media manipulation perspective.

As a response to the problems related to the industrial production, environment, society, and their relationship in the context of global policy, contemporary design provides sustainable concepts of production and consumption together with improvements of the quality of life for humans and other co-existing life forms. Preserving the natural capital is a priority for sustainable design in the context of the values awareness. We proposed sustainability of beauty, in terms of design, green architecture and intelligent construction, slow design and collaborative consumption, as solutions to the problem of consumerism. All the proposed solutions encourage a reduction in consumption and waste of resources, and emphasize that human welfare is based on the well-being of the Earth eco-systems. The design must take advantage of technology in order to improve life; as a result, intelligent buildings reduce waste: both non-renewable and the waste of goods and objects that may suffer from obsolescence.

"Yes, is more!" and *"Yes, we can!"*, may be the slogans that define our evolution.

The contribution of design is of great importance. It is known that the design describes processes, allows relationships, creates occasions for meetings and exchanges, develops and produces a new cycle. The design connects micro with macro, local with global, individual with community; it creates exchange platforms, produces cognitive tools and new rituals that affect our consciousness and our sensory knowledge. The design provides tools for understanding, helps cultural exchanges through its ability to tie discrete language and codes, and transforms the original size of experience in situations that may be shared; it facilitates the dialogue in diversity and works richer and fuller for a daily existence.

Consumerism, along with the overpopulation of the planet and the reduction of natural resources (the last two being considered major consequences of consumerism), are the most acute global problems, to the extent of the speed up of change. The relationship between design and consumer is today closer and more complex than ever. We established which are the reports between consumerism and design, and to what extent the design is a trigger of consumerism and the importance of consumption for design.

As we deepen the consumerism problem, we conclude that it is a major problem at all levels, but solutions exist. If we return to the values of community, family, friendship, all the problems will find a balance so that humanity to progress in harmony with the surrounding environment and with the whole universe, considering the generations that follow.

As an ending for the article we choose the quote from "The Little Prince", because in the context of this paper, the phrase "tame me!" has the meaning of "educate me ". The design

³ Baudrillard, Jean 1994, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Michigan Press, pg. 129.

has the potential to educate consumers so that consumerism no longer poses a problem. Design, "is a very complex thing, full of metaphysical subtleties"⁴, targeting consumers through objects, arouses emotion. This emotion, properly directed, through the mass-media, together with the consumer education, represents the solution of consumerism.

*"You don't know only the things you tame, said the fox. People don't have time to know anything anymore. They buy finished goods from merchants. But, as merchants cannot sell friends, people don't have friends anymore. If you want a friend, tame me!"*⁵

7. Bibliography

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⁴ Marx, Karl 1987, *Le Capital*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR, capitol 1, carta 4.

⁵ De Saint-Exupery, Antoine 2011, *The Little Prince*, Rao Publisher, Bucharest, pg.67.