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Commerce & Society

Introduction

We live in a world layered with consumerism, commercialization and extensive industrialization, where human desires for comfort and luxury aided with technology often tend to overlook the crisis point. Writer and philosopher Terence McKenna had once said that our civilization "*is a loaded gun pointed at the head of this planet*". Rightly so, with a world on the edge of depleting natural resources, throwing up debates on sustainability at the drop of the hat, this is exactly where the question of being 'ecologically mature' and 'socially responsible' comes in. This essay aims to reflect on the theories and practical approaches made to alternate, socially and environmentally responsible design of products.

The process of damage and decay started long back. The environment got dented with the advent of modernization and industrialization way back in the late nineteenth century, when the western world, especially Europe and the United States, witnessed fast population growth, unregulated business enterprise, huge profits, plenty of product manufacturing and sprawling cities, but failed to manage the physical fallouts of this industrial surge *(Fainstein)*.

Viennese-born designer and thinker Victor J. Papanek blamed damage to the shoddy, unsustainable design of products in his age and prior. In his 1971 book "*Design for the Real World*", he criticized his fellow designers for producing unusable designs that do not add any 'real' value to the people and ignore the social and moral responsibilities. For the purposes of this essay, this book has been chosen as the work of design which was thoughtfully written to influence the world of designs. The book itself demonstrated an example of social responsibility and is therefore, explored further to understand the relation between commerce and society in the paradigm of design criticism.

Victor Papanek's Design for the Real World

The opening line of Papanek's book, *"There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only very few of them"* sets the tone of his intent straight and simple right at the onset. He makes a strong call for responsible design, that takes into account the social, ecological and moral aspects of human living *(Cipolla & Bartholo, 2014)*. He disapproved the shoddy, unsustainable and stylized work of his contemporary designers who wasted irreplaceable natural resources to produce their designs.

Papanek's approach definitely stems from a social responsiveness, which he believed most contemporary designers lacked. He advocated a communication design where people mattered. He felt that designs should respond to people's needs and not their wants.

"Design must be an innovative, highly creative tool responsive to the true needs of men."

In the Chapter 'Do-It-Yourself Murder: The Social and Moral Responsibilities of the Designer', Papanek writes:

"It is unimportant what the mechanics of the situation are: four hours out of every forty, one working day out of every ten, or ideally, every tenth year to be spent as a sort of sabbatical designing for many instead of designing for money."

Papanek blames design schools for teaching design skills and philosophy (often antiquated), but neglecting to teach practical, present day application of these and other essential skills required to make designs for the 'social good'. In turn, he argues that designers graduate and begin to disseminate design solutions which only deal with the surface of any given problem. He observes:

"By designing criminally unsafe automobiles that kill or maim nearly one million people around the world each year, by creating whole new species of permanent garbage to clutter up the landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breathe, designers have become a dangerous breed and the skills needed in these activities are taught carefully to young people."

The Vietnam War had a role to play in shaping Papanek's design criticism. When he was writing his book '*Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change'* (1971), there was growing environmental pollution all around, with oil shortages and a remarkable amity from the developing countries, which made the world sit up and hugely criticize the industrialization, consumer-centric society and its political command *(Fineder & Geisler, 2011)*. Papanek wrote it through the 1960s, a period that stood witness to the Whole Earth Catalog , drop-out communities in North America and Europe and the hunt for a more socially reactive and ecologically mature life *(Fineder & Geisler, 2010)*. Naturally, therefore, Papanek's book, central to this essay, owed its sharp criticism to the times.

Papanek had a purpose. And that was not to make his book 'sell'. But to be able to positively impact the world of design that is environmentally responsible. So, he was happy that his book was translated in twenty-three languages since 1971, and he proudly writes in the

preface to the second edition that it is "*the most widely read book on design in the world*" *(Rawsthorn, 2011).* His intent was to condemn unsustainable, unusable designs, convey an alternative to contemporary designs and awaken environmental responsibility in every designer. He propagated designs that 'healed' the society from the evils of modernization, commercialization and industrialization. In that respect, his book was overtly non-commercial and more critical and social-minded. '*Design for the Real World*' was designed to mend the environment and society from the roots -- the approach of product designs. Apart from providing powerfully practical design advice to a fresh generation of socially-obligated designers, Papanek's own work of design, his book, offers them a good scope to carefully and ruthlessly self-assess their roles in the society as designers *(Hawthorne, 2012).*

Papanek's Work & The Theories