The narrow door to sustainability – from practically useful to spiritually useful artefacts

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Abstract: Beginning with a rationale for extending design’s ambit beyond materialist and consumerist values in order to address today’s pressing sustainability concerns, the contributions and limitations of eco-technologies and service solutions are discussed. The case is made that a less consumptive path requires a more fundamental systemic shift in priorities and values, and the basis of this must be rooted in deeper understandings of human meaning. The difficulties of including traditional, primarily religious, expressions of ‘inner’ values in the public realm are identified. However, emerging trans-religious and/or supra-religious forms offer an opportunity for restoring notions of profound meaning and wisdom in our workaday endeavours. This provides grounding for design development and the creation of a supra-religious ‘spiritually useful’ artefact, which offers a tangible, creative example of a post-materialist direction for design. In the process, contemporary sustainability concerns are embraced.

Keywords: product design; religion; inner values; spiritually useful design; symbolism; sustainability.


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1 Introduction

"the thing to me is of greater importance than the words"
[Hermann Hesse, (1951), p.119]

The Light of the World by 19th century artist William Holman Hunt portrays Christ knocking on a closed, long unused, weed strewn door (Keble College, 2012). It was completed in 1853, just two years after The Great Exhibition – that flamboyant celebration of Britain’s dominance over international affairs, which it had achieved through trade, empire and industrial supremacy [Hobsbawn, (1962), p.229; Raymond, (1986), pp.187–188]. In contrast to these ‘worldly’ preoccupations, Hunt’s painting is concerned with the inner, spiritual realm, which the world’s major religions and longest standing philosophical systems have traditionally regarded as the source of ultimate meaning. Through the use of allegory, the painting suggests that, in the pursuit of innovation, production and wealth, these ‘inner’ aspects of human concern had become neglected.

Some 60 years later, another London-based artist became known for a very different painting, but one that is not unrelated to the theme of Hunt’s. Walter Sickert’s Ennui (c.1914) depicts a middle-aged couple in a graceless parlour. The man sits smoking in the foreground while, in the background, the woman leans on a chest of drawers staring blankly at the wall (Tate Britain, 2012). It is a powerful portrayal of boredom, apathy and vapidity, of lives without meaning. Here, there is no door, no apparent way out.

Hunt’s painting can be seen as representing the decline of the traditional worldview, along with its conception of a hierarchical order to the universe; an order that was reproduced in human society [Hobsbawn, (1962), p.229]. While this ordering restricted social movement and individual freedom because one’s place in society was more or less fixed, it also gave a sense of meaning to individual lives, to societal endeavours and to the world itself. Indeed, within the traditional view, the constituents of the natural environment, because they occupied a place in the great chain of being, were regarded not merely as ‘resources’ but as meaningful and significant [Taylor, (1991), p.3]. The replacement of traditional understandings with modern and subsequently early postmodern perspectives eroded and albeit eradicated this perspective. The modern worldview allowed more freedom but in the process there arose disenchantment and a loss of meaning (Ibid, 4); a state that is vividly captured by Sickert.

Prominent features of the modern/postmodern era have been materialism and instrumental reason. These are interrelated in that instrumental approaches to meaning-seeking through physical investigations and material productions and their link to consumerism are key ingredients not only of a loss of meaning and ennui but also of the devastating environmental consequences of contemporary lifestyles [Eagleton, (2007), pp.20–22; Porritt, (2002), p.1465].

Here, a brief overview of design’s relationship to modernity/postmodernity provides a basis for exploring a more sustainable direction centred on the design of spiritually useful, rather than practically useful objects. Such objects offer a tangible basis for reflecting on design’s purpose for a post-materialist, post-consumerist and trans- and/or supra-religious time. An exemplar object, developed by the author, provides a means for transforming general principles into the specificities of a particular artefact. The inclusion of the creative process in the approach allows experience-based, tacit knowledge, which
is so vital to the creative arts, to become an active element of the inquiry. The discussion concludes with a reflection on the implications and contribution of the theory-based propositional object for our developing understandings of design for sustainability.

2 Extending design’s ambit

For a century or more design has focussed its efforts on creating artefacts that serve a practical or ‘worldly’ function. This emphasis is entirely in accord with materialism, the dominant ideology of this period [Hick, (1999), p.1]. During this time in design’s development, and more broadly western society’s development, less attention has been paid to matters which recognise that individuals require not just physical causes, practical benefits and rationalisations but also deeper meanings (Ibid).

2.1 The next big thing

While inextricably associated with modernity, the ideology of materialism nevertheless prevails in late- or post-modernity. Under its auspices, instrumental reason, systematic investigation of the natural world and data acquisition to advance factual information and empirical knowledge are put to human purpose through the continual advancement of applications derived from scientific discovery, i.e., technologies. In a nutshell, this is the contemporary understanding of progress, within which technological innovation is a key asset. It is an interpretation of progress that is physically-based and directed towards material benefits. It is also in a constant state of evolution and has a future-facing trajectory [Walker, (2012b), p.152]. Consequently, ‘the next big thing’ has become a prominent feature within the milieu of contemporary design. Coupled to an economics of growth and globalised capitalism these progress-based endeavours and understandings of human purpose, which are so closely tied to the mass-production of material goods, have contributed to a system of ever-increasing consumption [Jackson, (2009), pp.96–97]. Furthermore, due to the immense quantities of materials and energy supplies required to support rising consumption levels, along with the associated habitat losses and production of waste and pollution, it is no accident that unprecedented, global scale environmental devastation has arisen during this period of human history [Northcott, (2007), p.7]. Design, and industrial design in particular, has been part of this system, developing propositions for a host of mass-produced consumer products; products that are made from the materials of the earth, used, discarded and replaced. Mass-manufacturing strips these products of any substantive relationship to cultural or geographical context; they become global commodities that, in the digital age are ever more short-lived, thereby adding to the mounting problems associated with materials acquisition, energy use and toxic waste.

2.2 Direction change

A fundamentally different direction, and a turning away from growth-based economics centred on consumption is advocated by economists such as Jackson (2009, p.200) and Daly (2007, pp.117–124), and by philosophers such as Gorz, who has called for a different economy and a different lifestyle to avoid environmental collapse. He suggests that our current capitalist system will have to end one way or another, either in a measured, civilised fashion or in a barbarous fashion (2010, pp.26–27). Here, Gorz’s
arguments echo the warnings of Plato, from the 3rd century BCE, that striving for a way of life based on immoderate consumption leads to conflict (Republic, 372e–373e).

Hence, it would seem to be true that, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9); at least there is nothing profoundly new, which is what this quotation signifies. Of course, there are an infinite number of ways of creating material novelties and in growth-based economies they tend to be granted disproportionate attention. This is because it is in the interests of business agendas to promote and encourage such attention in order to continually boost consumption. It is also important to recognise that the value ascribed to such novelties is subjective and has little to do with the costs of the labour and physical materials required to create them [Daly, (2007), p.119; Gorz, (2010), p.30]. Moreover, this kind of ‘newness’ only attains significance when seen through the reductionist frame of materialism. This restricted ideology, which privileges scientific positivism and where meaning is sought via outer, worldly endeavours, has been a major influence on design’s development [Swann, (2002), p.50], and even though more human-centred design approaches have arisen in recent years, its overarching authority is still a powerful influence. Today, however, the true costs of so many fleeting products and amusements have become far too high because we are paying for them with the ecological systems on which we all depend.

2.3 Reducing consumption and examining options

Some estimates suggest that per capita emissions in the affluent nations must be reduced by up to 97%, compared to 1990 levels, over the next two to three decades if dangerous rises in global temperatures are to be avoided (Harrison, 2012). Similarly, Sulston et al. (2012) recognise the need for dramatic reductions in consumption, especially in the wealthy and emerging nations, and argue convincingly for alternatives to growth-based economic models. However, the ways being advocated to achieve consumption reduction are generally incommensurate with the magnitude of change required. The sheer scale of the reductions being proposed implies a fundamental shift in outlook, behaviours and ways of living. Despite this, most approaches to consumption reduction tend to promote a transition to eco-technologies and service solutions:

- **Eco-technologies**: many argue for the adoption of greener technologies. Sulston et al. (2012, p.8, p.87) assert that eco-technologies and techno-efficiencies will be of “the greatest importance” in achieving reduced consumption. However, while eco-technologies may be a beneficial development compared to current alternatives, reliance on eco-technologies and seeing them as a major contribution to change simply reinforces an eco-modernist approach to sustainability [Davison, (2001), pp.27–30] and is regarded by some as naive [Senge et al., (2008), p.41]. A transformation to eco-technologies might reduce some of the negative effects, but it does not confront the heart of the consumption issue. Capra (2012, pp.42–43) calls this a crisis of perception, arguing that most people in western society and its large social institutions adhere to ideas that are integral to an outdated worldview.

- **Service solutions**: others advocate a transformation from a product-based to a service-based economy and the selling of performance instead of tangible goods [Stahel, (2010), pp.175–176; Peattie, (2010), pp.267–268]. These directions undoubtedly offer benefits, but we must be circumspect about simply transferring our consumption habits from one form to another. Firstly, services are not
necessarily any more sustainable than conventional products [Simon, (2010), p.361]. Online services such as banking, education, social networking and entertainment, as well as cloud-based data storage and e-books often rely on a host of constantly changing, energy-hungry consumer electronics and they create enormous data storage requirements that are also highly demanding in terms of energy. Emissions from IT use are rising much faster than those from other sectors and are predicted to double in the coming decade to 6% of total global emissions [Uddin and Rahman, (2012), p.4080]. Secondly, use of such services can be time-consuming, intrusive and distracting, and can encourage behaviours that isolate individuals and atomise society [Turkle, (2011), p.157]. Thirdly, there can be rebound effects that offset the anticipated benefits of moving from products to services [Fuad-Luke, (2009), p.49]. Fourthly, and most significantly because it underpins the other three, the key issue of consumption-based values and behaviours is not being addressed. Indeed, appealing to values associated with consumption and self-interest, such as prestige, status and image, can be counterproductive. This is because it serves to suppress those intrinsic and self-transcendent values that correlate with systemic concerns about ‘bigger-than-self’ problems, which include social equity and environmental care [Crompton, (2010), pp.33–34].

Major reductions in consumption imply significant lifestyle changes. Instead of constantly looking for the next big thing, which could be a product including an ‘eco-product’, a service or an experience, we must ask ourselves how our priorities and values might develop if we were to set aside such ‘externally acquired’ things. Capra (2012, pp.42–43) argues that a more profound shift is required based in spiritual awareness which, he says, is deeply connected to ecological awareness. His position is supported by many others from various fields, including psychology, philosophy, education and design [e.g., Crompton, (2010), pp.82–85; Scharmer, (2009), pp.92–95; Mathews, 2006; Orr, 2003; Borgmann, (2003), pp.81–94; Day, (2002), p.9]. It is appropriate and, given the evident consequences, vitally important to consider what a significantly different direction, with far less consumption and greater emphasis on spiritual values and environmental care, might mean for the nature of our material culture and our ways of living. Such questions, and the assumptions they challenge, are not merely hypothetical. To substantially reduce consumption, along with a shift away from the tenets of materialism, an entirely different notion of material culture and ‘goods’ will be needed; one that is not only far more stable, enduring, and environmentally benign but also more conducive to human flourishing.

2.4 A less consumptive path

Clearly, compared to today’s state of affairs, far less emphasis will have to be placed on the putative merits of technological products, especially those that are in a state of rapid development and change. Such products become quickly outmoded and this, in turn, drives consumption, resource depletion, waste and pollution. Ways of life that are significantly less consumptive would mean: far fewer products and products would need to last and be upgradable; far fewer journeys by plane and car, for both business and pleasure; fewer material expectations; and a turning away from the destructive interpretations of progress and growth that have characterised recent times. Instead of regarding such a direction as detrimental, potentially, it could be seen as a very positive
development, heralding: a higher quality of life in terms of social and personal considerations; an improved sense of community, civic society, cooperation and the common good; a cleaner, healthier environment; and a turning towards ‘inner’ fulfilment and more profound notions of wellbeing, rather than looking towards ‘outer’ accoutrements, amusements and consumerism.

3 Beyond the prosaic

To acknowledge deeper aspects of human meaning, which extend beyond the practical and the prosaic, people have always created artefacts that have higher or spiritual purpose. These are artefacts that point, however nominally or inadequately, to the ultimate, impenetrable ‘why’ that lies beyond the scope of evidence-based justifications and logical arguments, and beyond what the poet Shelley (1818) called ‘the painted veil’ of everyday life. Scruton (2012, p.68) refers to this as the why of understanding, which seeks meanings, in contrast to the why of science that seeks causes and explanations, and the why of reason that seeks arguments. In recent times, design has concentrated its efforts virtually exclusively on the latter two but has assiduously avoided the why of understanding (Woodhead, 2012a). This why of understanding is encountered through philosophy, art, religion and the inner, spiritual path that can lead to a clarity of awareness; these are the things that distinguish us from other living creatures and ensure due consideration of other people and the planet itself [Scruton, (2012), pp.68–72, p.117]. They can generate within us a sense of right judgement and right action; that is, a basis for how we volitionally act towards others and the world – not merely in relation to externally imparted societal norms or moral codes, but in ways that are in accord with a deeper awareness of reality that is inherently meaningful [Watts, (1957), p.72]. If we are to raise our concerns above mundane functionalities and ‘progress’ narrowly interpreted in terms of prosaic practicalities, and above short term financial growth, political expediencies, competitiveness and self-interest, we must look to these more profound areas of endeavour. They represent aspects of being human that acknowledge individuals as meaning-seeking subjects, not objects that can be explained in terms of scientific phenomena and rational argument or exploited as units of production and consumption.

In moving towards post-materialist, post-consumerist ways of living, artefacts that are spiritually symbolic rather than practically useful would serve as a tangible reminder of, and focus for, the ‘inner’ path, long understood as the path of transformation, liberation and virtue [e.g., Cottingham, (2005), p.5, p.140; King, (2009), p.4; Watts, (1957), p.58]. Hence, they would be conducive to those very aspects of our humanness that have been given short shrift by materialism. We might think of these as spiritually useful artefacts. Their presence would contribute to the creation of physical conditions, as well as to modes of expression, that facilitate single-pointed attention, reflection and an awareness of the present. Such conditions and ways of being, long associated inner development, are increasingly thwarted in our contemporary world, in which technologies, particularly mobile communication technologies, intrude into every aspect of our lives, providing conduits not only for distraction but also for persuasion and the promotion of consumption.

Extending design’s ambit to include the development of a material culture that is commensurate with inner development and antithetical to consumerism may seem idealistic and impractical. However, it is vital that the discipline of design contributes to
the current debate by exploring and visualising more sustainable, creative propositions based on systemically different pathways.

4 The inner path and sustainability

We have already referred to Ecclesiastes, which Wolfe regarded as the wisest and most lasting and powerful expression of humankind’s life on earth [Christianson, (2007), p.70]. Perspectives from the world’s wisdom literature generally agree that concern for ‘outer’ things and novelty hinders the path to fulfilment and true happiness (e.g., Phaedo, 64d-67b). Yet such concerns preoccupy consumer societies. There is a stark difference here between the directions advocated by contemporary corporations and governments, and implicit in many research agendas, and what might be termed humanity’s wisdom heritage (Walker, 2012a). This divergence is not only an obstacle to human flourishing but also a critical consideration in our developing understandings of sustainability [Hawken, (2007), pp.184–188].

4.1 Knowledge via praxis

The kinds of knowledge that can be acquired through observation, systematic inquiry, intellectual activity and reasoned argument are generally explicit and additive in nature and so can be passed on from one generation to the next; hence, scientific knowledge accumulates and advances over time. However, there are other facets of human knowing that have to be learned anew by each individual. This kind of knowledge, which includes tacit knowledge and holistic understandings, is acquired through the direct experience afforded by praxis (Walker, 2012a). As Cottingham (2005, pp.150–151) explains, such knowledge must be attained through adherence to habituated, self-disciplined practices that progressively foster a capacity for discernment and ‘right’ judgement, prior to theoretical or intellectual understanding. It is this form of knowledge that pertains to each individual’s spiritual and ethical development, it correlates with virtue and compassion and is inherently related to notions of social justice and ecological awareness [Scruton, (2012), p.73, p.136].

4.2 Traditional and emerging paths in the ‘globalised’ public square

It is important to mention three factors that are impeding change towards post-materialism and post-consumerism.

- Marginalisation of the spiritual: those aspects of human apprehension traditionally associated with religious practice have become diminished and marginalised in the modern/early-postmodern era. Martin Palmer (2012), Secretary General of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, suggests that the UK – the first country to embrace industrialisation - has become cut off from its spiritual past. He contends that it has become a utilitarian and consumerist culture. The UK is not alone in this – similar traits are present in many of the economically developed countries of the West; advanced capitalism within liberal democracies being inherently atheistic [Eagleton, (2009), p.39]. Anglican and Catholic Church attendances plummeted in the UK during the second half of the twentieth century, and belief in a personal God
dropped from 57% of the population in 1961 to 26% by 2000. However, in the same period, belief in a spiritual aspect of life rose from 22% to 44% (Woodhead, 2012b). Furthermore, and as might be expected in a world in which global travel and communication has become normalised, distinctions between the major world religions have broken down and spiritual paths have become more complex and more individual (Ibid). Hence, whilst adherence to traditional religious forms has waned, along with their public presence and significance, the spiritual side of our humanity has not disappeared; rather, it has been transferred to the private domain and its forms of expression have evolved. However, if, as many have argued, spirituality is an essential ingredient in tackling sustainability (i.e., Capra, 2012; Mathews, 2006, etc. – see above), it has to become a recognised and valued part of public debate and cognisance. If it is to do so it has to get beyond those traditional religious configurations that can be so controversial and divisive within western democracies. Forms of expression are needed that not only rise above such contention but also respond to contemporary and emerging trans-religious, supra-religious and non-religious modes of spiritual development.

- **Ineffability of the spiritual:** these ‘inner’ ways of knowing, attained through practice, are ultimately ineffable and therefore have to be expressed and referred to indirectly. Conventionally, this has been through the use of symbolism, both in texts and objects (see below).

- **Division over the Spiritual:** Related to the foregoing, from a modern/postmodern perspective permeated by philosophical materialism the complex, anagogical meanings of traditional sacred texts are often interpreted literally, as if they were conveying explanatory knowledge. Consequently, they often tend to be dismissed as fallacious and their presence in the public realm, along with their associated symbolism, seen as inappropriate and unwelcome. Examples include controversies surrounding the display of religious symbols in the UK and France (e.g., Carey, 2011; Jouanneau, 2011) and the display of religious texts in the USA (BBC, 2005). In a globalised culture, such controversies can cause factionalism and division. It becomes evident that the development of a fundamentally different direction – one that de-emphasises materialism and consumerism and embraces a broader and deeper vista – will require significant changes in priorities and values, and different forms of human endeavour. For this reason, some prominent thinkers, including religious leaders, are suggesting new ways of recognising these profound aspects of human knowing – by reaching past the boundaries and divisions of traditional religion. In his book *Beyond Religion*, the Dalai Lama (2011, p.4) acknowledges that science has undermined certain aspects of religion but sees no conflict between scientific advancement and the development of inner or spiritual values. Theological philosopher John Hick says that neither traditional religious beliefs nor materialistic accounts are, in themselves, sufficient. He argues for a new path that recognises the truth of modern science along with the non-literal truths contained within the great traditions – especially those associated with allegory, symbolism and spirituality (1999, p.2). This recognition of the unifying themes of spiritual paths, which transcend religious differences, is reinforced by Frithoff Schuon’s (1984) studies in comparative religion.

Lynch (2007, pp.86–87) sees signs that such a shift is already underway, with emerging trans-religious developments that draw together human rights and social
justice, environmentalism, and post-materialist values with issues of meaning, identity and progressive forms of spirituality. The inherent relationship of these directions to social justice and environmental care makes them especially important for sustainability, and their trans-religious or supra-religious nature would seem entirely appropriate for today’s globalised, interconnected world.

5 Design shift

In advancing this shift, design can make significant contributions not only by creating alternative possibilities but also by manifesting these possibilities in tangible, visual formats.

It behoves us to consider what these directions imply for design and the creation of a world not of consumption but of meanings, and objects that acknowledge the sanctity of person-hood and of the earth itself.

Developing contemporary design approaches that pay greater heed to deeper meanings and ‘inner’ values can help cultivate a renewed appreciation for, and public recognition of, wisdom and spiritual wellbeing. Such understandings would enable us to better recognise the limitations of conventional perspectives and in so doing impart a greater humility. With such humility would come the realisation that we cannot add anything significantly new to humanity’s traditional knowledge of substantive values, sagacity and discernment. However, this kind of design can provide new forms of expression that give this knowledge contemporary relevance and acceptability. While this is a never-ending project, today it is critically important for advancing our ideas of design for sustainability.

Design endeavours directed towards these inner facets of human knowing would not be concerned with the kinds of outer, worldly utility with which we normally associate the discipline; the purpose of this kind of design work would be quite different. Moreover, because the inner path correlates strongly with ethics, social justice and environmental awareness, as discussed above, this direction for design can be a force for the good - not because the products of design would offer utilitarian benefits but because their presence as objects would be tangible reminders of ideas and understandings associated with deeper purpose, virtue and compassion.

6 From theory to practice

Based on the foregoing, an appropriate direction for design today would be to explore the possibilities of what might be referred to as spiritually useful, rather than practically useful, artefacts. Designers have the opportunity to creatively explore what such a direction might mean for the nature of material culture.

The task of design in this circumstance would be to probe directions that could help redress the imbalances associated with materialism and consumerism. Consequently, any emerging design propositions would pertain to inner values rather than outer utility – their purpose being to:

1 acknowledge and give prominence to the importance of deeper, more meaningful concerns
through such recognition, facilitate their inclusion in our workaday endeavours and sensibilities.

In addition, design articulation must reach beyond familiar, primarily religious, associations that, as we have seen, are often regarded as inappropriate today in anything but the private sphere.

6.1 The role of symbol

The fact that inner ways of knowing are praxis-based, experiential and largely ineffable means that modes of expression have conventionally been symbolic rather than explicit. This is why, in all cultures, these understandings have always been conveyed via allegory, metaphor, poetry and parable. For example, in the Sufi tradition, Attar’s 12th century *Conference of the Birds* employs the allegory of birds seeking a king to convey the idea of the individual’s spiritual journey. Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* from the Christian tradition and Bashō’s *Narrow Road to the Interior* from the Japanese Buddhist tradition, both written in the 17th century, are also allegories that take the form of a physical journey.

These symbolic modes allude to that which cannot be expressed in the precise language of logical statement. Instead, the symbol is analogical, i.e., it ‘leads up’ to metaphysical meaning (Scott, 2000). Hence, the purpose of a designed artefact would be to provide a physical expression that helps direct one’s thoughts away from outer, worldly preoccupations towards ‘inner’ or ‘higher’ notions of meaning and understanding. We see these forms of symbolism in traditional religious contexts. The physical and spiritual realms are represented respectively in the horizontal and vertical beams of the Christian cross, which together are indicative of the unity achieved through synthesis of outer/earthly and inner/heavenly meanings. The same idea is found in the upward- and downward-pointing triangles that intersect in the hexagram or Jewish Star of David. These complementary, inseparable opposites are also represented in the interflowing forms of the yin and yang of Eastern tradition. These symbols denote a comprehensive understanding of human apprehension, a union of temporal and timeless, physical and spiritual, ego and non-ego. Achieving this unity is the ultimate aim of spiritual development and of all religions [Chevalier and Gheerbrant, (1992), p.248, p.504].

6.2 The basis for a spiritually useful object

This notion of *spiritually useful*, as distinct from *practically useful*, design can be seen as an important ingredient in reconceiving the discipline to better align it with understandings of sustainability. It provides a creative path for bringing to the fore meanings and understandings associated with inner values, ethics, virtue and compassion, which many now recognise as critical to any comprehensive, deeper understanding of the term *sustainability*. Spiritually useful design can generate artefacts that draw upon tradition, that are more stable, and whose appeal is not dependent on originality or newness, or technological progress. As such, they represent a radical departure from much of today’s consumer-driven product design – a departure that is urgently required if current, evidently unsustainable priorities are to be challenged and redirected, and if consumption is to be dramatically reduced. They are also in accord with age-old wisdom
teachings and as such they are representative of unchanging notions of meaning, unity and deeper human purpose.

The following considerations are relevant to the development of the spiritually useful object:

- A designed artefact that aims to be spiritually useful will not be consequential or profound as a physical thing. It can only ever be an indicator or pointer – a symbol of significance, but not significant in itself.

- Being indicative rather than substantive, the physical artefact can and arguably should be inconsequential and somewhat cursory in its physical manifestation – requiring just enough to convey its meaning. Greater attention to detail or ‘preciousness’ could be seen as misplaced because it would inappropriately focus effort and attention on physical, ‘worldly’ concerns (however, given the history of lavishness that is often accorded such artefacts, opinions clearly differ on ‘appropriateness’ in this domain.)

- Any claim to newness or originality will be in interpreting and presenting these long standing ideas in forms that are relevant to our own time. There is nothing new to be added in terms of that to which the artefact points.

- For wider recognition of inner values in our workaday endeavours, designs that are expressive of inclusiveness and pluralism would seem appropriate in the globalised culture in which we participate; i.e. expressions that embrace diversity, respect difference and foster conciliation and harmony.

With these aspirations in mind, the creative design process can be employed to explore how such encompassing ideas might be transmuted into tangible form. This would allow the discipline of design to develop routes and concepts for material artefacts that address notions of the profound and the spiritual in ways that are pertinent to today’s sensibilities, as a step towards discovering new directions for design.

6.3 An appropriate symbolic form

Religious symbols such as those mentioned above, are specific to, and identified with, one particular tradition. However, returning for a moment to William Holman Hunt’s painting, a recurrent motif that is present in very many traditions is that of the door, gateway, or threshold – the opening to the path of inner development and realisation. Symbolically, it represents the connection between notions of external ‘reality’ and ‘self’, between physical and spiritual, outer and inner, lower and higher. Hence it represents the possibility of at-one-ment [Evans-Wentz, (2008), p.21] or unity [Comte-Sponville, (2009), p.168]. It is commonly found among the spiritual traditions of Europe, North America, the Middle East, Asia and Australia [Eliade, (1964), p.340].

The Hebrew Bible contains many references to gates, gateways and thresholds that give access to the spiritual or higher realm (e.g., Genesis 28:17; 1 Samuel 9:18–19; Ezekiel 46:1–3). The New Testament refers variously to the strait gate or narrow door, making it clear that entering this path requires individual effort; one must strive to pass through (Matthew 7:13; Luke 13:24). In Islam, the mihrab, located on the qibla wall of a mosque to indicate the direction of prayer, often takes the form of an entranceway and for this reason it is said to symbolise a door through which grace descends to earth
Herrington et al., (2002), p.32]. The Sufi tradition teaches, ‘When the door has been opened throw away the key’, making the point that the outward symbol is not a necessity but merely a support (Scott, 2000). The Hindu Upanishads refer to the door of Truth (i.e., the true nature of reality) and the door to the World of Brahman, [Nikhilananda, (1949), p.21, p.185] and, similarly, Buddhism refers to the Path of Perfection [Mascaró, (1973), p.42]. In Shintoism, the torii or gate marks the entrance to a sacred place, representing the transition between the physical, temporal and finite and the spiritual, eternal and infinite [see Paine and Soper, (1981), p.285]. Furthermore, there are a wide variety of references to doorways in the world’s shamanic traditions where the spiritual path is conveyed as an entrance that is difficult to negotiate. Commonly, the narrow gate or door is depicted as opening only momentarily and then only for those who are worthy [Eliade, (1964), pp.292–295]. Crossing the threshold traditionally requires purification and purity of mind – symbolised by the removal of shoes before entering a mosque or, in many cultures, before entering a home [Chevalier and Gheerbrant, (1992), p.997].

Hence, we see that the narrow door or gate has long been used as a metaphor for the connection between the physical/external and spiritual/internal sides of our humanness. In turn, these two facets of human apprehension are associated with different modes of thinking. Analytic, rational, linear and numeric modes, linked to the left brain [Oflaz, (2011), p.1508], tend to characterise the scientific method and physical investigation of the natural world whereas synthetic, intuitive, holistic and spatial modes, linked to the right brain (Ibid), are closely related to spiritual understandings. The narrow physical connection between the brain’s hemispheres, the corpus callosum, has itself been referred to as a neural gatekeeper [Mikels and Reuter-Lorenz, (2004), p.328]. Edwards (1979, pp.25–43) explicitly relates these left-right modes to the yin-yang of Taoism; left-mode equating broadly to Yang, which is rational, active and convergent, and right-mode to Yin which is emotional, passive and divergent. In Taoism, these two are said to spring from the same source, and again the analogy of a gate is evoked as the link between them, and thus between the physical and the spiritual (Tao Te Ching, 1). It is, therefore, perfectly fitting that, according to legend, the writing of the Tao Te Ching was prompted by a request from a gatekeeper as its author, Lao Tsu, was about to leave the realm of worldly society [Needleman, in Feng and English, (1989), p.vii].

The universal presence of the door, gate or threshold as a symbol of the link between outer, worldly concerns and inner values, priorities and understandings makes it an appropriate motif for use in a trans-religious and supra-religious artefact whose purpose is to acknowledge and bring to the fore those concerns that have been largely eschewed from public discourse in the modern/early postmodern era.

7 A spiritually useful, post-materialist, trans-religious object

An important part of this present study is the transmutation of the above ideas into physical form. The creation of an object provides a basis for synthesis and creative expression. In the process, it serves to demonstrate how conceptions of material culture, innovation and design for sustainability can be significantly different when the ethos by which we design is informed by broader apprehensions of human meaning. In addition, while intention is conveyed through the object, as with other kinds of artefacts its ‘use’ can benefit from supplementary information, which helps ensure that the intention is
understood. This can take the form of instruction booklets or manuals; here this discussion serves a similar role.

7.1 Reflections on the making process

As would be expected, the approach taken in creating the object prioritised considerations that are quite different from those found in industrial-scale, mass-production processes, i.e., those processes that have been so strongly linked to notions of unsustainability (e.g., Leonard, 2010). Here, all the materials were acquired locally, and most of them were selected from re-used materials that had been discarded. The process of object-making was slow and considered. Time and care took priority over any concern for economic efficiency. The artefact was not precisely defined prior to making, but rather a way forward was found through the ‘doing’; a process that enables the maker to respond to the nature of the materials, their particular character and idiosyncrasies, and to reflect on the emerging form, to make adjustments, and to respond to chance occurrences in finishes and detail. The emphasis here was on making it ‘right’, in terms of intentions and aesthetics, rather than making it quickly. A further consideration was for the artefact to have a certain robustness to it, so that it could be handled and accumulate the marks and grime of use – as all transient things do – but without fear of its ‘newness’ quickly fading, thereby creating a sense of dissatisfaction. These factors would allow the artefact to age gracefully or, from time to time, to be easily ‘freshened up’ through cleaning or re-finishing. In this way, the thinking and manner steering the process of making become aligned with notions of *design for sustainability* and related ideas such as ‘slow design’ (Strauss and Fuad-Luke, 2008). Moreover, re-using and re-dignifying rejected, seemingly value-less materials by incorporating them into new objects not only prevents those materials from becoming an eyesore on the landscape or the shoreline but infers an approach that challenges the idea and acceptability of ‘waste’.

7.2 The spiritually useful object

The object, entitled ‘Oriel Triptych’ (Figure 1) is rudimentary in its construction, being created from plywood jetsam, re-used leather, glass and flour-based paste. Its overall form is akin to the wooden panel paintings, icons, altar triptychs, and small domestic shrines found in many spiritual traditions around the world.

The use of discarded, aged materials allows its non-pristine outer surfaces to absorb wear and tear without detracting from its appearance. The hinged side panels not only protect the whitened inner surfaces when the object is not in use but also allow it to stand independently when opened. The inner surfaces were created by pouring a solution of flour and water into the recessed panels, carved out to a depth of c.4 mm. On drying, the mixture forms a hard, irregularly fissured texture that is unique to that particular piece. Water-based whitener applied to the inner panels creates a bright, pristine inner aspect that contrasts markedly with the worn outer surfaces and helps create a sense of purity and inviolability. Moreover, because the inner surfaces will inevitably become marred with the passage of time, pure white can be easily matched when periodic renewal is required. The hinges are created from cotton thread, (Figure 2); a simple configuration that can be readily repaired or renewed.
Figure 1  ‘Oriel triptych’ – a spiritually useful object

Re-used plywood jetsam, leather, glass and flour-based paste. H: 196 mm; W: 125/240 mm (closed/open); D: 36 mm.

Figure 2  Hinge detail

Panels hinged with cotton thread bindings.

The motif that is the central focus is a characteristic arched form – a minimal allusion to door, gate or threshold, (Figure 3). When placed at a window, light can pass through from behind via golden-coloured translucent glass; a mild reference to the golden disc said to cover the door of Truth in Hinduism [Nikhilananda, (1949), p.185].
The glass is kept in place with a piece of discarded leather that has been fashioned into a frame and attached to the back of the panel with re-used screws (Figure 4).

Thus, the only strong colour in the piece occurs at its bright centre, which helps focus the viewer’s gaze on the most significant part - the ‘narrow door’. This crudely fashioned, asymmetric aperture, the shape of which was developed through gestural expression (Figure 5), is resonant with what has been called the art of artlessness whereby the image emerges without ‘sensibility’ or style, where directness of emotion is expressed without ornament, and the image is “as much felt as perceived” [Hamill, (1998), p.xi].

Figure 4  Leather frame attached with re-used screws, to hold glass in place
As discussed above, the symbol’s purpose is anagogical and what is required is ‘just enough’ to provide a presence and reminder of that door which we can all individually strive to pass through, whether of a particular faith or none. Its intentionally rudimentary nature allows it to reference a variety of forms found in the world’s great spiritual traditions without being distinctly attributable to any. These include, for example:

- the Gothic arches and prayer niches of Christian architecture, based on sacred geometry and the *vesica piscis* (Havemann and Fellner, 2004); similar arches are found in Buddhism
- the rounded Roman arch often used in Jewish sacred architecture as well as in Buddhist and Hindu temples
- the Moorish arch and the *mihrab* in the Islamic mosque.

Instead of creating a crisp geometric form for the ‘door’, the intentional ambiguities of this looser design allow the viewer to bring their own (subjective) perspective to it and to layer onto it that which is relevant to their own worldview and beliefs. This approach is in keeping with the conciliatory, inclusive teachings of figures such as Gandhi (1982, p.75) and the Dalai Lama.

Through interpretation of the physical appearance of an object we are able to use it, if it has practical purpose, or we can contemplate it as a thing. In this case, the object is intended to serve as a catalyst and focus for giving time and thought to spiritual matters, through reflection and contemplation. This anagogical intention differentiates it from a work of art, even though objects from the past created with similar purpose are, today, often placed in galleries and presented as art [Walker, (2011), p.112]. However, it has been argued that it is a mistake to treat such objects as artworks (Murphy-O’Connor, 2008) because this deeper metaphysical purpose may be missed. Drawing on the work of Hegel, Scruton (2012, p.171) points out that the manner in which we approach this kind of object involves two ‘moments’ – communion and gift. In its intention this object addresses ‘communion’ by acting as a reminder of the need for focused attention on
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8 Conclusions

The gross social inequities between and within nations and the vast environmental destruction occurring in the world today have to be tackled in new ways that reach beyond the utilitarian, eco-modernist approaches that still dominate discussions around sustainability. Design can contribute to this debate by challenging industry conventions and contextualising material culture within a broader and deeper frame of consideration. This involves being far more sensitive to the nature of human work that the making of our material culture connotes, as well as to the kinds of materials used, where and how those materials are acquired, and the processes employed to transform those materials into objects. It also includes the nature of the objects themselves – their purpose, the manner of their use, the implications of their use in terms of materials and energy, their longevity, their legacy and the consequences of their disposal. All these things can violate people and planet through objectification and exploitation or they can be enriching and meaning-making. As the Japanese poet Bashō demonstrated in his linked prose and poetry, the spiritual and the timeless can be found, or at least striven towards, through our encounters in the physical, transient world [Yuasa, (1966), p.37].

This discussion and the accompanying object represent one attempt to probe a different path for design – one that not only localises and contextualises the making of the physical thing, but which also addresses aspects of material culture rarely discussed in design and design education. However, as we have seen, it is these very aspects that are critically related to ethics, virtue, and compassion and which many today are regarding as vital ingredients of sustainability. As such, they must become significant elements of design discourse and of wider public debate.

References


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Notes

1 Particularly the contemplative and mystical traditions within the major religions, such as Sufism in Islam and Kabbalah in Judaism as well as quasi-religions such as the ethical and philosophical system of Confucianism and the disciplines of Zen.

2 Philosophical materialism asserts that nothing exists except matter. A similar idea is encompassed by the term ‘ontological naturalism’, which is the belief that the natural universe is all that there is, in contrast to methodological naturalism. Both are ideologies and fall outside the realm of science [Cottingham, (2005), pp.109–110; Walker, (2012b), pp.151–153; OED Online, 2012]. In common usage, materialism is also associated with providing for human fulfilment and well-being through material goods that offer pragmatic, but entirely mundane, ‘benefits’ [Taylor, (2007), p.399].