

# NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

### FACULTY OF DESIGN

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Consumerism, Ethics and Our Society: The Case of Industrial Design. by Chris Blake

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Author's Note:

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Mr Lee is not a native English speaker and in some cases I have edited his remarks in order to clarify the point.

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## Introduction:

Pick up any publication on design published more than three years ago and see if ethics are mentioned. V. Papanek is the only industrial design author who has dealt with ethics at any length. When one speaks to lecturers or professional designers in Dublin, individuals within either group are reluctant to speak about ethics in design. Most of the designers will not go on the record about their own ethics. (Some will not even speak to you, if they know your intentions are to discuss ethics in design).

This thesis will deal with ethics in industrial design in Ireland and will examine the ethics of one consultant designer and two 'in-house' designers, one of whom is Korean. It will examine ethics as they are to-day for the three designers interviewed. It will challenge the issue whenever it is felt that there is a lacking of values within design environs. More importantly, it will try to suggest why we should have ethics in industrial design.

Industrial designers are primarily employed by two groups of people, inventors and manufacturers. Both have the same aim in mind - to gain material wealth. Manufacturers are in business to make money. An inventor who employs an industrial designer falls within the same category because essentially the designer's task will be to improve the idea into a manufacturable state so that the inventor can sell the finished design directly to a manufacturer.

Gernerally speaking, the kind of people who employ industrial designers are motivated to use their services for material gain. The designers are working to provide material gain for themselves.

If designers are not held accountable for their work, then situations may arise which the majority of society would find morally unacceptable. It is argued here that this has been happening and is happening, without our society's awareness of such behaviour. The time has come when something should be done to prevent the many injustices that are taking place as a direct result of industrial designers' work. To give an analogy: guns for children until recently were made as realistic as possible. Legislation has, unfortunately, not removed the guns, but has at least enforced the situation whereby if they are to be manufactured as toys for children, then they must now be in bright gaudy colours. We have institutions to keep an eye on the standards for products, employment rights and films to name but three. In the same vein, it is felt that there should be some kind of guidance for industrial designers.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the prevailing moral standards of industrial designers and to question these standards. Are they better or worse than one would expect? Are they socially acceptable? If not, why not? Finally I attempt to make a case for a greater impetus from (a) the academics within the educational environs of the vocational courses; and (b) from the S.D.I. (Society of Designers in Ireland).

### Methodology.

A chart was drawn up to illustrate the author's ideas of where it was felt designers have a responsibility. From this chart a number of questions emerged that could be asked of designers that would help to evaluate their awareness of ethics. Eighteen questions were initially compiled and eventually narrowed down to ten. It was felt that these ten remaining questions would cover all the desired areas. A list of these questions is illustrated below.

- 1. What do you feel are the responsibilities you have to yourself as a designer?
- 2. What are your responsibilities to your clients?
- 3. Do you have any responsibilities to the manufacturers of your designs?
- 4. Specifically, what are your responsibilities to the consumers of your designs?
- 5. Are you aware of the techniques used in the marketing of the products you design and do you feel you have any responsibility to the consumers of your designs, in the way in which the products are sold?
- 6. Are you aware of the manipulation of the market by the advertising medium? How do you feel about this?

- 7. When designing a product, what considerations do you bear in mind?
- 8. Do you consider what will happen to the product you designed when its useful life has finished?
- 9. Do you consider the people who will not buy your products, but who may be affected by its production, use or disposal?
- 10. Bearing in mind the title of my thesis, "Consumerism, ethics and our society", is there anything you might like to add?

The responses to these questions would then make for the basic material of the thesis.

### Synopsis.

Chapter I deals with background information and gives the reader a general overview of where the author is taking his initatives from and gives supporting facts and data. Chapter II deals with question No 1 which relates to the designer's own responsibilities for themselves. Chapter III deals with questions Nos 2 and 3 which relate to the designer's responibility to their client or manufacturer who are, more often than not one and the same. However there are occasions when they are two different parties, hence the two questions. Chapter IV deals with question No 4, which relates to the designer's responsibilities for the consumer. Chapter V deals with question No 7 which relates to the responsibility of the designer for the sourcing of raw materials in production and global interests in general. This chapter also deals with question No 8 which relates to the responsibility of looking after our environment. Chapter VI deals with question No 9 which relates to the designer's responsibility for consideration of everyone (society) when designing a product, not just looking after the interests of the client. Question No 10 was posed to give the opportunity to express any points that the interviewees may have felt I had overlooked and is dealt with wherever appropriate. The thesis concludes with an argument for the need for a greater awareness of the problems associated with industrial design, by designers and by society and suggests a way for its implementation.

## Chapter I. A History.

### PART I.

Industrial Design first came about, more by accident than intention, as a result of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. It was originally called Machine Art and later became known as Industrial Art. In the 1920's it became known as Industrial Design. It was born out of a necessity to improve the quality of mass-produced goods. This resulted from engineers trying to make machinery that imitated the dexterity of the human hand. This was an impossible feat at the time, primarily due to primitive technology and a lack of understanding on the engineers behalf. Consequently, the first mass-produced products were particularily inferior, 'cheap and nasty'.

In 1852 Gottfried Semper published a pamphlet entitled <u>Science, Industry</u> <u>and Art</u>, which was based on his observations of the Great Exhibition of the previous year. He noted that industry in general was trying to imitate the goods produced by the craft traditions.

"He acknowledged the divorce between art and industry but argued that the legacy of the past and specifically craft tradition, had to be swept away before it would be possible to create a new art, based on an acceptance and command of mechanisation" (10, p. 29.).

On the other hand there were people who were against artists playing a role in the production process. Zarah Colburn in 1871 said:

"none who aspire to become engineers should encourage any play of imagination involving the forms or proportions of mere mechanism, but (...) should apply themselves solely to the consideration of the best mechanical means" (10, p. 27).

As far as Colburn and many others of his ilk were concerned, only engineers were allowed to be involved with the design process. Semper was an architect, who tried to campaign for an aesthetic input into the products and so tried to introduce artists into the factories. However, the manufacturers wouldn't tolerate anyone who didn't have an understanding of the production processes involved with the production of their products. In the

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early 1920's the academics, particularly in Germany, felt it was time to do something about the situation.

The foundation of the Werkbund in 1907 resulted from contacts between a varied group of designers, industrialists, journalists and officials, united in their concern for standards of German design. Unfortunately, the Werkbund was a failure principally because of it's inability to resolve the breach within industry between the aspiring designers and the engineers. It was caused mainly by the engineers and also because it failed to develop a precise programme regarding form and the role of the designers. Still the Germans persevered.

In the early 1920's, the Bauhaus movement began and championed industrial design, but again failed, certainly in Europe. However, some founding members left for America and industrial design started to flourish in the late 1920's in the U.S. Among those to establish the profession there were Walter Gropius, Laslo Moholy - Nagy and Henry Dreyfuss. All of them and others were committed to establishing industrial design as a force to be reckoned with. Dreyfuss opened an office in 1929. Before the year was out, he was consultant designer to the Bell Telephone Company. This helped the profession gain recognition, but still, there was a lot of work to be done.

In the 1950's, there were still a great many engineers around who looked upon industrial designers with scorn, and some still do to-day. In 1959, Buckminster Fuller published an article, "<u>The Comprehensive Man</u>", in which he made a scathing attack on the industrial design profession as a whole. But, he admitted:

"An engineer is inclined to say, this bed will hold you up. Engineers are inclined to tolerate the crude but safely adequate" (15, p. 335).

In it's brief course of development, the role of industrial design has focused on making technology usable in forms that are accessible and comprehensible to the greatest possible number of people. However, the profession finds itself enmeshed in a complex web of problems. That it operates within organisational and institutional constraints, determined by people not always socially accountable for their actions, is a source of discontent. Technical progress with excellence of design can no longer be deemed beneficial in a world beset with problems of growing proportions, such as the depletion of finite material resources, environmental pollution and displacement of workers by automated industry. (10, p. 201-2).

### PART II.

In the mid 19th century Emerson stated that if a man could make a better mousetrap, the world would beat a path to the man's door in order to buy it. If Emerson were alive to-day, he would be confounded with 20th century consumerism. The essence of the good trap no longer holds, not in his sense anyway. There are many types available now, designer traps, Dior traps, electronic traps, pre-cheesed traps, each backed by promotional campaigns in various mediums, designed to entrap the discerning buyer.

Emerson was a champion of the importance of good design as the main selling point of a product. Todays society has moved far from Emerson's philosophy, to the extent that consumption has become an end in itself. No longer do we necessarily look for a good mousetrap, we merely look for the latest model, one which will enhance our status with our peers.

The mushrooming consumer society has reached the point where it might be more appropriate to call it the over-consuming society. There are so many competing products, that the buyer has almost unlimited choice in some lines of product. Ghetto blasters for example, or personal stereos.

> "If the point of contact between the product and the people becomes a point of friction, then the industrial designer has failed". (6, p. 54.)

Both ghetto blasters and personal stereos are good examples of this type of friction. Anyone who has ever sat on a bus or train, with someone beside them playing either of these electronic gadgets will be familiar with the infuriating noise they create. There are many other examples. The motor car

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is a classic example of indirect contact, emitting unburnt hydro-carbons and creating noise and congestion in our inner cities.

"... in Los Angeles, it was evident that exhaust emissions from vehicles were the most significant contributor to photochemical smog" (22, p. 60).

"... in Los Angeles, the air was injected daily with 2,500 tons of hydrocarbons, 8,000 tons of carbon monoxide and 700 tons of sulphur dioxide and 100 tons of solid particles" (8, p. 26).

"The University of California attributes the deaths of some 30,000 American citizens every year to vehicle pollution" (27, p. 26).

"The car makes more demands and inflicts more damage on our global habitat than any other commodity - but it is universally the most desired artifice in the whole history of humanity. It's grip on our culture, our economy and our environment is comprehensive - and comprehensively daunting" (3,p. 19).

Comprehensively daunting. Why? The answer is consumerism, the urge to have the latest model, brought about by the unscrupulous methods of the advertising industry. There are three groups who have a vested interest in fueling consumerism: Manufacturers, marketeers and industrial designers.

Since time began man has manipulated his environment to some degree, increasingly so over the last Millenium. However, since the industrial revolution two centuries ago, mans power to control and shape the surroundings he inhabits has been continually augmental, to the extent that it has become a truism to speak of a man-made world, particularily in our cities. Our whole environment has been designed but not as a whole, some of it by architects, some of it by engineers and some of it solely as products in their own context. The result is an environmental shambles. There is no thought for cohesion between all it's differing entities. As a consequence, we live highly stressful lives and much of the blame lies squarely on the industrial designers' shoulders.

"Industrial designers have a public trust that derives from the intimate utility of the goods they produce ... People hold a designers creation in their hands, take it into their homes and workplaces, depend on it to perform safely and well. And not just a few people but thousands, maybe millions... Who else can the public rely on to keep this trust? Cost accountants, marketeers, engineers and advertisers? Hardly. Industrial designers are the only people in the product-making process whose moral responsibility is to speak for those of us beneficiaries and victims of corporate enterprise" (7, p. 57).

It is mechanised industry which has given today's society so many man-made products, to the extent that they almost over-power us. It could be said that the time has come for designers, particularly industrial designers to reevaluate their position. Not just vis a vis those for whom they design their new wares, but also in regard to those who suffer as a consequence of their designs. The designers, simply by the position they hold in our society, are the ones who have the most power to be able to change this unfortunate state of affairs for the better, particularly the way in whch we manufacture our often frivolous products.

The illustration below is an example of the depths of depravity of an industrial designer, somewhere in America. The only thing it illustrates is that the person who thought it up, has a very good imagination. However, it also illustrates, what poor use that imagination has been put to. It is a golfing putter for the golfer who already has everything. It has additionally a tape measure, a horn, a candle and a rabbit's foot as a good luck charm.



### PLATE 1. Schmeckenbecker Putter.

"In an age of mass production when everything must be planned and designed, design has become the most powerful tool with which man shapes his tools and environments (and, by extension, society and himself). This demands high social and moral responsibility from the designer" (19, p. 9).



This responsibility that Papanek speaks of has not been shouldered and accepted by either the person who designed the 'gadget' above, or for example by Hood Associates of Dublin, in one of their recent projects. An article in the Sunday Business Post, Dec 8th 1991 congratulated one of Ireland's industrial designers. Illustrated below is a photograph of Oliver Hood with his latest design for an office telephone system. The market is already saturated with telephone systems and this latest design from Hood Associates brings nothing new to the world of office communication.



PLATE 2. Oliver Hood with model of his latest telephone design.

As can be seen from the photograph there is nothing particularly stunning about his telephone. In fact, it looks just like many others, straight out of an office equipment catalogue, like the one illustrated over-leaf.

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Plate 3. Office telephone from an office supplies catalogue.

Unfortunatley for Ireland's design business, Hood's design has been nominated for an EC - sponsored design competition. In being nominated to represent design for Ireland, it does us a great disservice, as it highlights the uncaring attitudes of one of our designers. As it represents Ireland, does it also represent the state of the design profession in Ireland? If our designs are seen to be lacking in moral values, perhaps they won't sell, in which case our designers will be forced to re-evaluate their principles.

The advertising industry is in precisely the same moral dilemma as the industrial design profession. In the last fifty years, a new profession has evolved. It is a branch of psychology used by advertisers, called motivational research, it's practicioners being psychologists and sociologists. It is used to determine what the buying public will buy: not what we need, but what we will buy. When this is determined the industrial designers are commissioned to create the determined product.

"Sharp employs sociologists to study how people live and behave and then plans products to fill the gaps they discover... new technology is used to create what consumers are discovered to want" (24, p. 20).

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When the design is being marketed, emphasis is placed on the individual buyers' achievements and the analysis in the adverts by the advertisers of the product, is focused on the products status. This is reinforced in the public mind, with exhibitions, design competitions, openings and museum collections. The consumers have been seduced into buying countless products they don't need.

"Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence to-day. Industrial design, by concocting the tawdry idiocies hawked by advertisers, comes a close second" (19, p. 9).

Because the advertisers have the psychologists to undertake motivational research, they have proved to the manufacturers, beyond doubt, that they can sell almost anything. This had led the manufacturers to ask; "what do we produce next?" So the roles have changed from a product-led development to an economic one founded on continuous growth, driven by the advertisers and aided and abetted by the designers.

"To date design has been fueled by an ideology that rests on the concept of continuous growth. Continuous growth has, as an economic concept, become equated with the very notion of freedom itself. To buy as much as possible, as often as possible, is regarded as a right, a necessity almost" (5, p. 33).

Because the orientation of product development has changed from being initiated by the manufacturers to one where they are initiated by the advertisers and economists, there is only one profession that can intervene. The designers by discriminating in their own minds between what is socially acceptable and what is not, are the only people who can have any influence in the production of products, if the products have been approved for production by the rest of the production team. But in order that this should happen, the industrial designers, have to be shown that they do have a moral responsibility, not just to their clients, but to society as a whole.

The best and easiest place for this to be done is at college when the students are being taught the skills necessary to be designers. Obviously the institutions, such as the SDI (Society of Designers in Ireland) also have a role

to play in helping this adjustment, in making designers aware of their responsibilities.

The aim of this thesis then, is to make a case for an ethics forum in colleges and also in society for those yet to be designers and for those already practising industrial design in Ireland and abroad.

# Chapter II: Laissez-faire?

In design offices, it is not unusual to hear conversations about colleagues' work. Such conversations are usually initiated by items of news, be they from the television, paper or trade journals or from a particular piece of work, seen or heard about, upon the "grape vine". Usually such conversations get around to analysing the various merits of the work and will conclude with comments about the designer concerned. Generally, there would be an evaluation of a job well done or perhaps poorly done, in which case, one might hear remarks such as: "He's let the profession/side down" or "he's done us proud". The point is that there is a sense of community within the profession and a sense of individual identity which is enhanced in Ireland by the small number of designers who practice here.

Most creatures have an instinctive source of self preservation when faced with adversity. This is particularly true of humans, since we have the power to reason, so our instinctive powers of self preservation are particularly active when faced with a list of questions seeking to examine our morals. Such was the case when I asked some designers for an interview and sent them a list of the questions that I intended to put to them, they adamantly refused such an interview. Why I wonder, did they refuse such a simple request?

We keep an eye on activities that go on around us, perhaps not consciously, but nevertheless, if anything untoward occurs, we start to question it. It is the observation of something amiss that is important, because that is our instinctive nature looking after our own welfare. Having registered or acknowledged this action or occurence, we have the reasoning capacity and intelligence to decide what is best done. How we react, is dependent on our upbringing. Some of us are activists and others are passivists. Some choose to sit back, wait and see what happens, while others decide what would be the best outcome and intervene, to attempt to guide the actions to their desired result. Regardless of whether we are activists or "passivists", all of us are being responsible for ourselves in our own individual ways. So it was with the designers who refused to be interviewed. It was with these thoughts in mind, that the first question evolved. **What do you feel are the responsibilities you have to yourself, as a designer?** 

Peter Dormer, in his book <u>The Meanings of Modern Design</u> says:

The post war period has in some respects seen a history of freedom through ephemera. Perhaps the next evolution is freedom through quality, through conservatism, conservation and a greater emphasis upon communal interests. Design will thus come of age as a profession if it can help the world's consumers, encourage these new communal (as distinct from individual) aspirations. (p. 43).

It's the designers who look to themselves and their work, who could encourage aspirations for conservatism, conservation and a greater awareness of communal aspirations, within the design profession. We need to look after our own welfare and need to be seen to do so, in order that we can start to look after communal interests and be seen to do so. If you cannot look after yourself, how can you be expected to look after others?

#### What do you feel are the responsibilities you have to yourself as a designer?

Lee:

"(...) I design my life. I design my work (...) I live design."

Morgan:

"(...) I suppose the best feeling of satisfaction you can get out of it (...) the more you exert yourself (...) the greater the satisfaction. (...) It's a product that's produceable and that's what matters (...) The no. 1 criteria is to satisfy the clients needs".

### Spollen:

"(...) First of all I feel that my career as a designer should fulfill my needs as a person or should give me a good life (...) I always want to improve what I'm doing (...) every project I view as a sort of challenge, I have to try and better what I've done in the last project .. (...) There is an economic side to it as well, I mean you have to consider what the client wants."

Interestingly, none of the designers mentioned their own consciences in response to the question. None mentioned preserving their reputation or a sense of responsibility in trying to gain one. None spoke of refusing work because the work was unworthy of their attention, because the product might have been questionable on moral grounds. Victor Papanek argues that a designer's social and moral judgement must be brought into play long before s/he begins to design since s/he has to make a judgement as to whether the products s/he is asked to design or re-design merit his/her attention. Will the design be on the side of social good or not? Both Morgan and Spollen spoke of improving on their previous work, but neither remarked on the actual status of the product they might have to work on.

I feel that the results of the question emphasise the lack of awareness of a designer's responsibility. Firstly to themselves, but also to society. More importantly though is the question, why? Ethics in design are rarely discussed in academic or professional circles, few designers acknowledge that they do have a moral responsibility regarding the consequences and results of their work. This state of affairs is one that should be rectified as soon as possible.

## Chapter III: Economics?

All working industrial designers have a client, whether or not they are in house or consultant designers, whether they are self-employed or not. The vast majority of the clients are manufacturers. Despite the nature of their clients business the clients have but one motivation for employing them: "money". However, there may be many different reasons for using a designer's services.

A manufacturer may have discovered some new technology through his research and development department and be unsure of how it could be used. He might employ a designer to draw up product concepts using the new technology. He might want a current product to be updated for various reasons, perhaps because sales of that product are falling. It could be to translate marketing research into a product his engineers can understand. Whatever the reason for the designers engagement s/he has an obligation to fulfill a contract, but does the designers moral obligation end there? If the designer creates a product that is socially unacceptable, for whatever reason, and the client produces that product, then surely the designer is responsible to some extent for the injustices that occur as a result of the production of that product.

I feel that the designer is responsible and should be held morally if not legally accountable if injustices happen to anyone as a result of the production of his work. For example, the materials a designer might specify may only be available from "Third World" countries, which may be exploited as a result of the extraction of the raw material. If the product has a short life-cycle, what happens to it when the consumer disposes of it? Is the product thrown out with the household waste eventually to go into a land-fill site, where it won't degrade? These are the kind of issues that designers should be examining when designing products, so let us see how our three measured up to the two questions.

# What are your responsibilities to your clients? Do you have any responsibility to the manufacturers of your designs?

Lee:

"Yes (...) industrial design is not art, industrial design is not craft, industrial design should be good productivity (...)"

### Morgan:

"(...) the first thing you have to do is to try to identify all the problems (...) when you have (...) that then becomes your brief, that's your definition for contract (...) you have to look out for the business, you musn't let clients move the goal posts to the extent that you are going to use twice as many resources as you originally agreed to use (...) We have a responsibility that what we design sells (...) there are lots of other responsibilities as well, for example you wouldn't want to design a product which would cut off the users fingers, so that's a responsibility (...) I feel that you should design products which are safe and relatively easy to use".

Spollen:

"(...) to design them a product they should be hapy with (...) it should fulfill all their requirements (...) I'm hired to actually do things that they can't do, to suggest and see options that they can't see. (...) I feel it would be my responsibility to try and convice the client to do what I think is best otherwise he's wasting his money hiring me (...) I think every design you do has to be manufactured otherwise you're just not fulfilling your role (...) try to use the manufacturer's skills and abilities in the best possible way to make the product".

It was unanimously agreed that the client and manufacturers requirements must be fulfilled. They must be happy at the end of the day with the work done by the designer. A further unanimous decision was that the design should be produceable and must sell. The responses were confined to economic issues with the exception of Morgan's assertion regarding safety and ease of use. If these designers are aware of such issues as the depleting levels of raw materials, why do they not equate this depletion with production from the factories? Are they unaware of the onus of responsibility on themselves? I feel they don't fully appreciate the responsibility that rests on their shoulders. Isn't it time somebody made designers aware of their responsibility regarding such issues?

### Chapter IV: Consumer Orientation.

If you were to ask a number of industrial designers what their main function is, I think most would agree that it is to look after the consumers interests in design terms. Prior to the inception of industrial design, engineers were the designers and as Buckminster Fuller said:

> "Engineers are inclined to tolerate the crude but safely adequate" (15, p. 335.)

Under such circumstances, it was inevitable that someone would take over the design task from the engineers. Part of the industrial designers task, is to familiarise himself with all the users problems prior to designing a product. This requires research work, outside of the research work possible already conducted by the marketeers. An argument used for the introduction of industrial designers into the product conception cycle of manufacturers goes some along the lines of this illustration.



PLATE 4. Mike Smiths secret weapon.



The point is that industrial designers have simply evolved as communicators between the consumer and the manufacturer, so that the consumer gets what he wants and so that the manufacturer doesn't produce products that won't sell.



PLATE 5. Sharp calculator designed by engineers.

This is one of the first electronic calculators Sharp produced. It is a large heavy piece of equipment and as can be seen from the photograph has row after row of buttons to carry out various functions, but all the functions this machine was capable of were simple arithmetic. Needless to say, it was designed by engineers. After the introduction of industrial designers into the company, the calculator's task amongst others, was assessed by the industrial designers. The designers pushed for smaller applicances, which forced the engineers into research of mechanical and electronic devices. Miniaturisation came about as a direct result of the introduction of industrial designers into the large Japanese electrical companies. The Japanese led the field in giving the consumer what he wanted because they took the industrial designers profession seriously. For Sharp, the result of the industrial designers work is shown overleaf.







This calculator has exactly the same functions as the first one illustrated. Unlike that one, though, it can be carried around in your pocket and doesn't need a mammoth instruction manual with it, as the first one did. This illustrates how industrial designers can improve both the creativity of the engineers, by forcing them into taking different approaches to their problems and at the same time improving the product for the benefit of the consumer.

However, there is the other side of the coin, where industrial designers bastardise technology into, gimicky products. When the engineers had perfected the technology used in the calculator and shown the designers what such technology was capable of, the industrial designers were asked to create new products using this technology. This illustration shows a Japanese/German electronic dictionary. Imagine the scene where such a product would be used. The tourist taps in his message three or fours times before eventually giving up in defeat because the buttons are set too close together. If s/he persevers with a pen or pencil then the unsuspecting victim who is asked the question posed by the tourist has to learn how to

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type on a non 'qwerty' keyboard if their response is in the negative to the one illustrated.



PLATE 7. Electronic dictionary.

Thankfully, such products died a quick death. Another example, this time American, also died a quick death. It is a putter for the golfer who has everything. It includes a candle mounted on the shaft, for looking for golf balls in the undergrowth. A tape measure, for measuring the distance to the hole, a rabbit's foot for luck and a horn.



PLATE 8. Schmeckenbecker putter.



What was the designer thinking of when that product came off his/her drawing board?

Because industrial designers are only given a general grounding in engineering principles, they generally don't have preconceived ideas about how mechanical and electronic devices should or shouldn't work. Designers are given training to assess the consumers requirements and are taught how to interview potential users to evaluate their requirements. Once these are known the designer can then sit down and draw up any number of concepts to solve the various problems, without knowing as an engineer would that a particular mechanical or electrical device has to be used. If an engineer is asked to design a product s/he will generally use technology already known to him/her and design around it. If however, s/he is presented with a design for a product, s/he may at first say that it isn't possible because it cannot be done. S/he simply says this because s/he doesn't know of any technology capable of doing the task. S/he is then forced to use his/her own creativity to create the necessary technology. In this way then, industrial designers make much better use of the engineers creative talents, than they would otherwise do themselves. The reason is because the designer's training, taught them to take the consumers requirements to heart and design with their (the consumers) interests and requirements to the fore.

How then, have our three designers measured up to the following question?

### Specifically, what are your responsibilites to the consumers of your designs?

Lee:

"That is the same as the clients"

# You don't feel that there is a difference between the consumer and the client?

Lee:

"No, there is no difference, it's the same. If when I make a client happy, that design will be [made] happy to the consumer".

#### Morgan:

"(,,,) Whatever we design, it should be safe (...) and reasonably easy to use. (...) I do try to make my products ergonomic and user-friendly and I'm all in favour of that (...)"

Spollen:

"I feel that all the design I do is ultimately aimed at the consumer. It's aimed to satisfy the consumer's needs, whatever they may be and to work well for the consumer (...) you must take into account safety and that there [are] always proper materials for the proper places, it should be electrically sound (...)"

Quite often, what the manufacturer wants is not what the consumer wants. This is borne out by the statment:

"about 1500 new products appear each year; more than 80% prove useles and unmarketable within a year" (12, p. 23).

It is therefore imperative that there is a very clear distinction between clients and consumers in the minds of the designers. Lee's remarks are therefore rather surprising.

Another area of concern to the author is in the marketing of products and the themes used. The reader may or may not be familiar with an advertisement on the television for Halls Throat Lozenges. The advert depicts a man on the underground railway system in London. His nose becomes blocked and he grows an elephant's trunk. His throat gets sore and he develops an enormous neck. As the train stops, he goes to the doors and sticks out his elephant's nose to pick up a packet of Halls from a vendor's counter. The nose retreats into the train just as the doors are closing.

The depiction of the man's symptoms is fine, what is not though, is his theft of the lozenges from the vendor. This advertisement may be an incitement to theft, particularly to children, showing the taking of products without payment to the vendor as normal, because of the childish nature in which the man's illness is depicted. It is socially unacceptable and therefore immoral.

It was with thoughts like this in mind that the next question evolved.

Are you aware of the techniques used in the marketing of the products you design and do you feel you have any responsibility to the consumers of your designs, in the way in which the products are sold?

Lee:

"That is for market promotion. When I design something (...) I'm supposed to explain [it] to them, market promotional idea (...)"

#### Morgan:

"Usually we don't have much to say on the matter (...)"

Spollen:

"(...) It's definitely the responsibility of the designer to not just do a facelift or create a new style but actually tackle the real problems that were with the last model of whatever. To give them a better product because it's very dishonest to sell somebody the exact same thing in a different package, just for sales which unfortunately happens a lot of the time".

None of the designers exhibited any awareness of the techniques used in the marketing of their products. I find, such an attitude disturbing. I, for one, will take an active interest in the way in which my designs are marketed and if I can influence the marketeers in any way at all, then I shall at least have tried, even if I don't approve of the methods used. This brings us to the area of manipulation in marketing.

"At one of the largest advertising agencies in America, psychologists on the staff are probing sample humans in an attempt to find how to identify, and beam messages to people of high anxiety, body consciousness, hostility, passiveness and so on" (17, p. 12).

While this statement is thirty-five years old, it is as true to-day as it was then, although the issues being researched now are far more complex than at that time. For example, Knorr are currently advertising their packet soups on the television. A supposedly French chef is shown cutting up the ingredients that go into the soup. He speaks of the exotic and exquisite nature of Knorr soups and finishes the advert implying that anyone using tomato soup is an old bore. The implication being that if you use tomato people will consider you to be a bore. If however you use these exotically named soups instead and you will be considered sophisticated.

Another company, Cow & Gate, have just launched a new baby food. The advert implies that it is the kind of food you would make at home for your baby. The underlying tone of the advert leads the viewer to think of it as being home-made, which of course it's not. But it's playing on the possibility that some mothers feel guilty about not preparing their baby's food, so this product can appease that guilt because it's as good as the mother would make herself.

The psychologically-aware viewer can usually identify the role play of products in consumers lives in most advertising, be it visual or oral. Unfortunately, only a small minority are psychologically aware of what is going on in the advertising media and are therefore the only ones who can put up barriers to questionable practices conducted by it. As industrial designers in Ireland are given the opportunity to study psychology on the industrial design courses, it seemed only natural to ask them if they did have any understanding of these manipulative practises.

### Are you aware of the manipulation of the market by the advertising medium? How do you feel about this?

Lee:

"Yes, advertising mean[s] to (...) explain, to introduce to the consumer, the functions, new things, quality (...) real meaning of that design. What [are] the good point[s] of this product? (...) It should be honest (...)"

### Morgan:

"Yes, it doesn't really affect the product. The advertising is there and there's nothing we can do to change it. We don't enter the advertising spectrum at all".

### Spollen:

"Yes, well the market has always been manipulated by advertising, that's really the job of advertising. Sometimes it's quite dishonest and people are tricked into believing images or whatever about products (...) there is nothing really that the designer can do to overcome that (...)"

As designers, our first responsibility must be to our consumers. After all, it is because of the dissatisfaction of the consumers that industrial design came

into being. Second on our list of priorities should be society and the effects our work will have upon it. Finally the manufacturer, who is presently top of the list or seems to be, from the responses given by the designers interviewed.

How then can these attitudes be changed for the better? The usual method is by education, be it in academic environs or in the profession's institute. Certainly, it will have to start somewhere, and why not in the colleges?

## Chapter V: Global Interests.

I feel that industrial designers have a great responsibility in regard to the materials used in the products they design. A large number of the materials being used in product design draw on limited reserves and are therefore going to expire in the not-too distant future. It is therefore imperative that the choice of materials available for any one design, should be considered very carefully, prior to specification.

Because of the U.S.A.'s gargantuan appetite for steel, they have now exhausted their own, once rich supplies of iron ore (18, p.170). What is left is a low grade ore, called taconite, which requires considerable processing before the iron ore can be extracted from it. All steels are manufactured from iron ore, then mixed with other minerals to create special steels, such as stainless steel. Because of the expense of the process, the USA is now importing the majority of their iron requirements from mines in countries like Venezuela. The USA has also exhausted its supplies of bauxite, the base material of aluminium and is now importing its supplies from countries like Zimbabwe. The same is true for copper. All of it is imported, because it is cheaper to import high grade ores with as much as 6% copper content, rather process the very lean (.5% copper content) grades remaining in the USA. (18, p.171).

All plastics are derived from oil and the USA is now dependent on the Middle East for its oil supplies. Plastics can be processed from vegetable oils, but the state of the technology is still at a very primitive stage of development and consequently too expensive. Only when the mineral oils become too expensive, will the USA turn its agri-busines into an oil producing factory.

As the underdeveloped countries start to industrialize, they will want to keep their own reserves of metal ores and other resources. What will happen then to the countries who have exhausted their own resources and can no longer purchase the raw materials to keep their factories operating? Only recently in the Middle East, we saw how the USA was prepared to spend billions of dollars supposedly defending the Kuwaitis, but as any political analyist knows, the US were protecting their oil supplies from getting into the wrong hands. Now that the Cold War is over and the Soviet Union has broken up, what will happen when the raw materials market of the Third World closes to the USA? Another Vietnam perhaps, but on a wider scale(?).

In the newspapers we read of legislation being prepared in Brussels for the EC to ensure all products are taken care of, from cradle to grave. Several German companies, notably BMW, VW and Bosch now have recycling plants, specifically to dismantle their own products, in order to recycle the materials. But what about Ireland, what is happening here? With the exception of paper and glass reclamation not very much, however we do not possess a large manufacturing base. What then, are the awareness levels of our designers?

### When designing a product, what considerations do you bear in mind?

Lee:

"(...) when I [started] with my design agency (...) my major consider[ation] was about function, about mechanical things (...) next five years all I think about was market[ing] (...) the next five years all I th[ought] about [was] styling (...) and now, (...)beginning last year my major consider[ation] is about [the] user (...)"

### Morgan:

"(...) you simply bear in mind all the specifications that have been laid down in the brief (...) certain areas will have more influence than others, and far more bearing so one will keep those, those areas at the top on one's head, so to speak(...)".

### Spollen:

"(...) it's quite important these days to actually think about not only the consumer who buys the product, but everybody else who would be affected by it; or come into contact with it. This goes right down the line, to materials you use, the way things are going to be manufacturered. The way they are going to be disposed of afterwards, can be quite important (...)"

It is refreshing to see that the youngest and most recently qualified is the most enlightened, in regard to global concerns. How then, did the designers measure up to the next question posed?

Do you consider what will happen to the product you designed, when its useful life has finished?

Lee:

"(...) I don't care (...) I don't want to look at again, I had it (...) I rarely think about this because I want to think about new things, new ones, just a new product. I never think about those kind of things (...)

Morgan:

"You mean ecology and the Green thing. Well, no we haven't. This has never ever to date come up with any of our clients, it's never been incorporated into any of our briefs. I have noticed that there are manufacturers now who are marking parts of their products so that the material can be recycled, so that there's no problem in identifying the materials. But as yet, nobody has asked us to do that. The time is going to come when we will have to recommend specific types of materials and we already do but not with the green thing in mind, it's always with some design term in mind. Certainly I feel it is going to come when we have to but clients aren't interested in it at the moment, certainly none of our clients are. It is getting to the stage where green issues are becoming a marketing ploy. The time is going to come when our own clients will be making demands of us in design terms as to the use of materials and marking the products, specifically marking pieces in the products, so that they are recyclable. The time will come when it happens, but it hasn't as yet. We don't think our clients are yet ready for it. I do accept that we do have a responsibility, but I find it hard to put it to the clients at the moment. Yes we do have that responsibility and it's more a long term thing in terms of resources and the materials that are used, and we're going to have to face that responsibility soon. Undoubtedly it is being seen, the green issues are being seen as commercially good and not because of the morality of the green issues, but because green products are now out-selling the other products which aren't necessarily so environmentally friendly "(...)" I think a good thing would be if a lot of the plastics were standardised, there are far too many around at the moment".

Spollen:

"Yes, I do feel that we have a responsibility but a lot of the time this is not taken into consideration at all. Basically you design a product for the consumer, when the consumer is finished with it, it's his responsibility to get rid of it, but as I said things are changing. I know for a fact myself, I am quite interested in some of the Spollen cont'd:

initiatives set up by a German washing machine company, Bosch. They follow right through from the very beginning to the very end of the products life, where they chose the mines which they are going to use, because they are the most efficient, less wasteful. It goes right through and recycles everything right through manufacturing and then at the end they give a guarantee to the consumer. When he buys the product, that when he's finished with it, he phones the company and no matter where it is in the world, it will be collected and recycled. This initiative is very good and it should be pursued more . (...) it's like an honest extra feature, it's a good reason, to buy something over another one."

Both Irish designers accept that they have a responsibility in the disposal of their products. Morgan also mentioned the standardization of plastics. I agree. If the food industry could get all food products wrapped in varying densities of one kind of plastic, then all the plastic in domestic household waste could be re-cycled. However, I believe it will take legislation to get the manufacturers to standardize. If the same were then done in other areas, then we could have perhaps five different plastics in common use and when disposed of they could be collected in a similiar manner to the bottle bank.

Changes are going to happen in the future, whether we like them or not, but if designers help to influence the correct changes, there need not be disastrous consequences. If however, the manufacturers are allowed to continue using fresh raw materials, then the finite source of these materials will be quickly exhausted. The effects of not making these changes could result in wars. With the correct preventative measures, there should be enough materials within the existing system to continue for Millennia, providing the world's population doesn't grow to unmanageable proportions.

How is it that the academic system cannot make its students aware of the potential influence or power they have when they graduate, particularly industrial designers? As a profession we are employed predominantly by manufacturers. We work alongside engineers and marketeers and are taught both of their 'languages', with the sole intention of acting as communicators between these two very diverse professions and the consumer. Industry functions on economics and by pursuing ecological and environmental policies as designers, we have the easy task of persuading the marketeers of the advantages of 'green' design because of increased sales. Increased sales create more revenue, so the production engineers can make the necessary changes to the plant and equipment, to go 'green'.

Some time ago, I read in one of the English Sunday papers of a German state sponsored company. It was launched approximately five years ago, and was set up in the same vein as the Irish governments Q symbol. The company agenda was to award a "Blue Angel" motif to particular products. Manufacturers who researched the source of their raw materials and how the product could eventually be disposed of; i.e. cradle to grave policies, were awarded the Blue Angel motif, which they were allowed to display on their products. It is only in the last two to three years, that the Blue Angel has been seen on the shelves of the shops and products bearing the motif are generally 10% to 15% more expensive than their rivals. However, the Blue Angel has increased the sales of the products bearing the motif, way past forecast targets and beyond the wildest dreams of the sceptics.

The Blue Angel motif, has encouraged sensible, friendly design and production. It is the way forward because it polices the unscrupulous. Those who don't carry the mark will eventually go out of business because they won't be able to compete with the economies of those companies who are recycling materials. As the raw material resources dry up, they will become exceedingly expensive, too expensive for the companies using them to compete.

So, while increased sales maybe the excuse for the added expense of going 'green' now, the economics of the equation make sense, even if the morals do not. The Blue Angel motif should be adopted internationally to identify products which are ecologically and environmentally sound.

# Chapter VI.

## Innocent bystanders.

Around the globe there are rivers which industries have polluted. Polluted to such horrifying levels, that no life can be sustained in them. Shown below is an illustration of the Mulde River in Germany. Overleaf is an illustration of the Yangtze River in China. Both rivers are literally open sewers to the industries lying on their banks.



PLATE 9. The Mulde River.





PLATE 10. The Yangtze River.

Even if one were to ignore the destruction of the fish habitats in these two rivers, what about the loss of fresh water supplies to the towns that lie on the two banks of each river? What about the seas that each flows into and the consequences of human consumption of contaminated fish from the seas?

Industry, particularly the petro-chemical industry, which makes plastics amongst other products, generates unquantifiable amounts of toxic wastes. Overleaf is an illustration showing these wastes being incinerated in the North Sea.

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The emissions from the chimneys at the rear of the boat are steam and hydrochloric acid, supposedly neutralised when it hits the salt water of the sea. Perhaps, but what if the winds carry it across land? Eventually it becomes acid rain, as do the emissions from the chimney stacks of the factories in the illustration below, in this case in China.



PLATE 12. Smog in the Yangtze basin.



The next illustration is of an electronic billboard in Tokyo. There are three readings given. Air pollution levels of sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide are the top two. The bottom reading is for decibels (noise levels).



### PLATE 13. Pollution monitor.

Industry is driven by consumerism and consumerism is driven by our desires to have material luxuries. Industries around the world are polluting our water and air. They are also polluting our ground. The illustration overleaf shows solid toxic waste, being buried in an old salt mine in Germany.



PLATE 14. Toxic wastes being buried in an old salt mine, Germany.



The next illustration shows liquid toxic waste being pumped into an old oil well in Texas, USA.



PLATE 15. Pumping station.

In 1988, 300,000 people (14, p.351) caught hepatitis from eating contaminated shellfish, harvested from the shellfish beds off Shanghai. This was not an isolated incident. Just one of the more severe ones. Do industrial designers ever think about issues like this when they sit down to design another plastic product?

Do you consider the people who won't use your products, but may be affected by it;'s production, use or proposal?

Lee:

"(...) This kind of thing is already reviewed by the marketing, by the planner (...) so I do not care about these things (...)".



Morgan:

"No, we don't, yes the time is going to come when we are going to have to change, it will be a consideration but at the moment no, we never think of that, I can't think of any manufacturer or designer who does (...)".

Spollen:

"Again its very hard for a designer to really control that, but these days that area is very important (...)".

All three designers displayed a lack of awareness of the waste produced in production. We need to educate, not just the designers but also the engineers. This education needs to be initiated now.

## **Conclusion**:

In chapter 1 we saw an introduction to each of the chapters. Chapter II dealt with the designers sense of responsibility to themselves, and highlighted the general lack of awareness of moral resonsibility for their work. It also suggested one or two ways of remedying this situation.

In Chapter III we saw how designers see their responsibilites towards their clients. They saw this responsibility almost exclusively as an economic one. The chapter finished by asking if the time had not arrived when we should make designers aware of their other responsibilites.

In Chapter IV, we saw how designers interpreted their responsibility to the consumer. The two Irish designers accepted a responsibility for their consumers, however the Korean designer did not, and equated the consumer with the client. However, it was clearly shown in Chapter III that there is a very clear distinction beteen the client and the consumer.

In Chapter IV we also saw how unaware the designers were of the manipulation of the advertising machine. They felt they had no control over it as they are not consulted about it. Consequently, they didn't accept any responsibility. The Chapter concluded by asking how we could change such attitudes and suggested the academic environment as a good place to start.

In Chapter V we sought to see what considerations the designers bore in mind when designing a new product. The two Irish designers were very aware of the problems associated with production methods but both found it difficult to face the responsibility of trying to change the current situation. A suggestion was put forward that the "Blue Angel" motif be adopted internationally, which would considerably strengthen the designers' position for radical change within industry.

In Chapter VI we saw how unaware the designers were of pollution created as a waste by-product of industry. The chapter concluded that the education programme needs to start now. The facts surely speak for themselves. We need to have a proper ethical code in industrial design. As industrial designers, we need to change our attitudes, but we also need to change the attitudes of our consumers.

Between the industrial designers and the marketeers, we have created a woefully wasteful consumptive society. We must accept our share of the responsibility for this predicament and we must try to turn it around before it is too late, if it isn't too late already.

Small organisations, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are trying to tackle this and other issues. However, I feel that their efforts are thwarted because they try to treat the symptons of our society rather than the cause. In effect, they are doomed to failure, because they try to educate Governments and Institutions, rather than trying to educate those who cause the problems in the first place, our consumer society. The marketeers could do this in a matter of months, given the right motivation. That unfortunately has to come from the manufacturers as they pay the marketeers.

It is not presently in the interests of the manufacturers to change their ways. If they start producing products that last a lifetime, rather than two or three years, their sales will eventually dwindle to uneconomic levels. This therefore puts us on the spot. How do we change the situation?

There appears to be only one practical solution and many ways that this solution could be implemented. Firstly the solution. It would be beneficial to increase the life expectancy of products, which is easily done, at little expense. When the products are then beyond repair, it should be obligatory for them to be returned to the manufacturer, who then recycles all the old materials. This way the manufacturer will become less dependent on fresh raw materials and more dependent on the materials that are presently being dumped. As a consequence there will be a reduction of the processing of raw materials as they become less needed by factories. Less processing of raw materials equals less industrial pollution. The time would eventually come, when only small quantities of raw materials would be needed. How then can we instigate this change?

One possible suggestion is to educate all the trades and professions allied to manufacturing. This is a practical solution, however it would take too long, twenty maybe thirty years. Or we could legislate and put 90% of the world's work-force on the dole overnight, an impractical solution. Or, we could introduce the Blue Angel motif world-wide, and let the manufacturers make the changes themselves. This solution as I spoke of it in Chapter V offers the one practical possibility. It would force some of the necessary changes without causing economic crisises, as legislation would, and it would be infinitely quicker than education through the normal channels of academia. That is not to say that the educational aspect should be ignored. On the contrary, the educationalists have an important role to play in bringing about the necessary changes. The most important is to make the industrial designers aware of the consequences of their work to our society and our world and the SDI could play an instrumental role in bringing it about in Ireland.

It is essential that we change our ways for the better, not just for our own welfare but for society. Once we have understood our mistakes we can begin to help society see that there are better ways. Once society understands this, as it is slowly beginning to, then it can make the necessary demands of the manufacturers. Only when the manufacturers are put under economic pressure will they have any incentive to change their wasteful processes. But first, society must change its consumptive nature and learn to live with products that are no longer <u>a la mode</u>. Industrial designers, amongst others, created styling for the sake of styling. The results of that wanton behaviour speak for themselves, now we must rectify the damage and grave injustice we committed against society.

## Appendix.

Interview Questionnaire for industrial designers.

- 1. What do you feel are the responsibilities you have to yourself as a designer?
- 2. What are your responsibilities to your clients?
- 3. Do you have any responsibilities to the manufacturers of your designs?
- 4. Specifically, what are your responsibilities to the consumers of your designs?
- 5. Are you aware of the techniques used in the marketing of the products you design and do you feel you have any responsibility to the consumers of yourdesigns, in the way in which the products are sold?
- 6. Are you aware of the manipulation of the market by the advertising medium? How do you feel about this?
- 7. When designing a product, what considerations do you bear in mind?
- 8. Do you consider what will happen to the product, you designed, when its useful life has finished?
- 9. Do you consider the people who will not buy your products, but who may be affected by its production, use or disposal?
- 10. Bearing in mind the title of my thesis, "Consumerism, ethics and our society", is there anything you might like to add?

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