



designing and consuming objects, practices and processes



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Report of workshops held at Durham University, January 2006

The second and third workshops of the *Designing and Consuming* workshop series took place on 11th-13th of January, 2006. Together they attracted 30 design scholars, social scientists and professionals involved in design, from across the UK and from other European countries. [Biographies of participants](#)>

The workshop series aims to generate conversation between design and social sciences - particularly sociology of consumption, material culture and science and technology studies - to develop understanding of the role of objects in everyday life. The workshop series is a central part of *Designing and Consuming: objects, practices and processes*, a two year project funded under the Cultures of Consumption programme by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.¹

Links in the text will take you to pdf versions of speakers' notes, circulated in advance of the workshops.

¹ Award no. RES-154-25-0011. Further details of the project, including of the first workshop in the series, can be found at www.durham.ac.uk/designing.consuming.

Workshop 2, *Designing and Consuming* 11th January 2006

For all the energy invested in developing theories of consumption, relatively little attention has been paid to the design and use of the material artefacts involved. This one-day workshop aimed to provide an opportunity to consider the agency and value of products in everyday life from different points of view, particularly drawing on concepts developed within science and technology studies, material culture, design theory and theories of practice. Six speakers addressed a wide range of themes and concepts, from the practicalities of DIY projects and the development of Nordic Walking to conceptualisations of consumption as experience and notions of material civilisation.

Session 1 Design, material culture and consumption

The day started with brief introductions around the table, followed by the first formal session. This was kicked off by **Jack Ingram** who talked about *design theory and concepts of the consumer-user*. Jack reported on initial findings from a systematic survey of design literature, conducted with Louise Annable. Ingram introduced the scheme he has used to map developments in design theory as represented in articles published in *Design Studies* between 1979 and 2005. This work was complemented by a 'latitudinal' study of articles published in a broader range of design journals in a single year. Having sketched the relative and shifting popularity of different themes over time, Ingram went on to consider the place of the 'user' in design theory, from the central but narrow framing of ergonomics to the emergence of user-centred design.

[Jack Ingram: design theory and concepts of the consumer-user](#)>

Next, **Gordon Hush** set out an argument challenging accepted definitions of consumption, consumer and consumerism, drawing on insights from the social theory of Tarde, Simmel and Latour. With an historical sweep from the 18th century, through the Great Exhibition and emergence of the department store to contemporary malls, Hush argued for approaching consumption as a process of interaction and experience that revolves around the human subject. Rejecting conventional notions of consumption as a process of externalising personality or identity through preference and choice, Hush argued that being is inseparable from having.

[Gordon Hush: The haves and have-nots: Simmel, Tarde, Latour and Consumption](#)>

Finally in the morning session, **Matt Watson** used empirical material from a current study of Do It Yourself home improvement and maintenance to explore the pragmatic consumption of mundane commodities and ongoing processes of use. In the context of DIY, Watson used the analytical unit of the 'project', arguing that particular acts of acquisition only make sense as part of larger programmes of active integration and transformation. After developing ideas about

the emergent, iterative character of DIY projects, Watson reflected on the extent to which insights generated from the study of DIY could be translated to other fields of consumption.

[*Matt Watson: DIY projects: active consumers, tools and materials*](#)>

Frank Trentmann acted as first discussant in response to the three papers. He began with the fundamental question, 'what use is theory?', suggesting that it was difficult to see the connection between the grand sweep of historical trends and of big ideas in Hush's talk, with the mundane particularities of Watson's. However, he went on to consider common questions of agency, concentrating, in particular on its decentring from the human subject and its treatment as a more distributed quality of the relation between humans and non-humans. He related this theme, evident in both Hush's and Watson's papers, to the multiplicity of ways in which people are positioned, for example, as users, consumers, collectors, practitioners, performers, etc.

Dale Southerton, second discussant for this session, also picked up on matters of terminology. Whilst the problems of talking about the 'consumer' might lead commentators to favour 'user' this label obscures the importance of non-use as part of consumption – whether through passive possession of an unused commodity, through to lack of access or active resistance.

Session 2 Product and practice

Following lunch in Collingwood College, the afternoon session got underway with **Tim Dant**, speaking about the intersection of materiality and civilization, using this as a basis for establishing a sociology of objects. Dant rapidly contextualised, and minimised, the role of consumption in relation to material culture by reference to the example of visiting the toilet – an act thoroughly embedded in social but also material structures. While involving consumption – of durables, consumables and services – this practice rarely figures as an act of 'consumption'. Dant went on to use Braudel's concept of material civilization as a way of approaching the generally neglected sociological significance of social relations with the material world. He sought to complement Braudel's concept with Elias's understanding of the relation between 'technization' and 'civilization'. From this, Dant considered what might be the distinctive features of contemporary material civilization, including the rapidly increasing volume of distinctive objects, their increasing functional complexity and their material specificity. He concluded by considering the potential 'civilizing' effects of this particular moment in the history of material culture.

[*Tim Dant: Material civilization*](#)>

Next, **Mika Pantzar** sought to develop theorisation of innovations in practice through a detailed analysis of the production and reproduction of Nordic Walking – a form of fitness walking using two sticks. The basis of Pantzar's argument was that innovation in practice depended on the iterative development of associations between the material artefacts of the sticks, the symbolic properties with which the sticks and the practice of Nordic Walking could be invested, including fitness, well-being, eccentricity or normality; and the competence of practitioners who do, and who thereby reproduce Nordic Walking.

[*Mika Pantzar: Towards a theory of practice innovation*](#)

Elizabeth Shove presented last in the session, developing ideas introduced by Pantzar. She suggested that innovations in practice arise as a result of dynamic and interdependent relations between the key elements of material (stuff), symbolic meaning (image) and competence (skill). These ideas have important affinities with design discourse and social scientific approaches that address technologies as components in 'configurations that work'. Shove went on to consider the ways in which the three constitutive elements of practice might be travel or circulate between practices before underlining their ultimate inseparability from one another.

[*Elizabeth Shove: Stuff, image and skill: towards an integrative theory of practice*](#)

Rebecca Leach acted as initial discussant in response to the three papers, focusing particularly on questions of human agency and the difficult normative implications of decentring agency and intentionality from human subjects – a move she identified in phenomenological and in Latourian/actor network based approaches. Leach also wondered why Nordic Walking, popular in several northern European countries, has not taken off in the UK. This opened up a more general discussion of innovations in sport and what these mean in terms of gendered understandings of the body.

Subsequent discussion challenged Pantzar and Shove's ambitious analytical framework of practice innovation. Key questions were about how an 'integrative theory of practice' relates to Bourdieu's concept of taste, to social inequality, or to major cultural dynamics such as time space compression and the circulation of goods.

Designing concepts (working groups)

Following afternoon tea, groups of participants were invited to work together to tackle a couple of given tasks.

Two groups were given a collection of images which might say something about the relations between people and things, with the instruction that:

“Your task is to use the images to elucidate relations between people and things and relate them to concepts – whether existing concepts from any discipline or, better still, come up with some new ones.”

Each group selected a number of images from those available and used them to elaborate on themes such as affordance, assembly, appropriation and competence.



Discussing images



Demonstrating an innovation

A further two groups were supplied with a selection of mundane artefacts and some modelling materials such as plasticine, cardboard and double sided sticky tape, along with the instruction that:

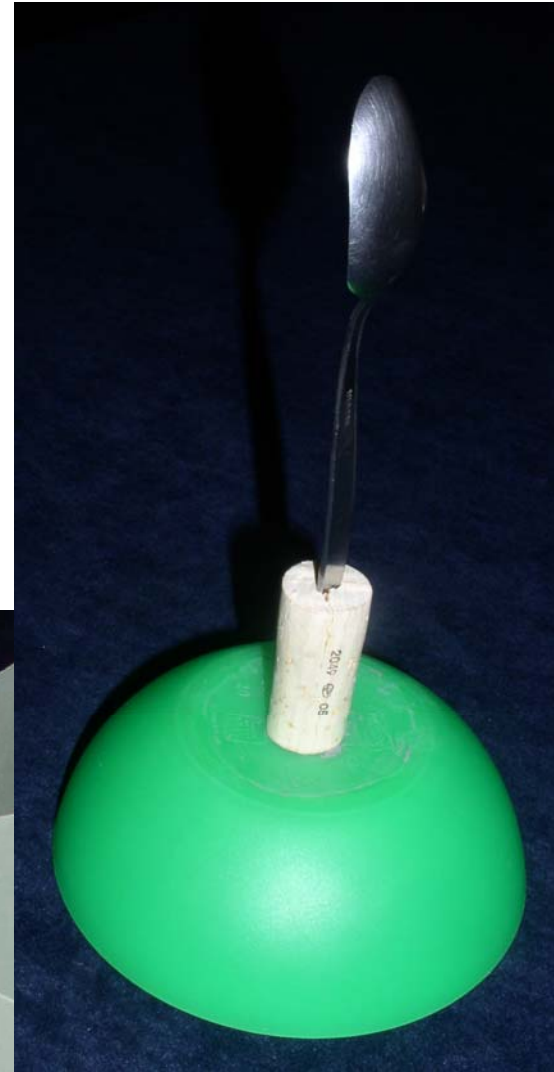
“Your task is to create (at least) one new thing for a specified context (e.g., the kitchen). The new thing should be comprised of two or more existing objects, in a novel relationship (though not necessarily physically joined). By the end of discussion and making, be prepared to explain the new thing and its role in its intended context.”

The making groups evidently had more fun messing with objects than the image groups had contemplating pictures. A range of new product ideas emerged, with one group producing prototypes and models of new car-based innovations including an excessive tilt indicator and clothing for the car; the other group produced a low energy animation-based entertainment technology and a folding chopping board, amongst other innovations. Concerns about intellectual property rights and opportunities for commercial exploitation of these innovations were selflessly set aside as the novice inventor-participants returned to scholarly reflection on the experience. A key insight was the extent to which individuals reverted to personal experience and relied on simplistic and tacit understandings of ‘user’

needs when confronted with practical design exercises. For all the talk, it was difficult to act on the theories of consumption and practice that had been so important during the formal sessions of the day. Contributors appreciated the iterative process of developing ideas through active interaction with the materials at hand; and the ease of coming up with innovative but useless products.

The closing roundtable discussion covered a range of issues from the day, including critical reflection on the difficulties of empirically investigating practices and the apparent limitations of practice as an explanatory concept.

The day's proceedings drew to a close, though with the majority of participants staying for the two-day workshop that followed, it did not feel like an end. Some 13 participants, some from the one day workshop, others arriving early for the next event, gathered for dinner in Collingwood College before retiring to the college bar.



Workshop 3, Design and Consumption: ideas at the interface 12th-13th January 2006

The two-day workshop was organised around five themes that appeared to cross over between social science and design. The following summary is organised around these same five headings.

Session 1 Product evolution:

It is difficult to understand trajectories of product development without reference to the ways in which things are implicated in the reproduction of practice. Processes of normalisation and obsolescence are associated with shifting 'ecologies' of objects, uses, infrastructures and meanings. While this observation makes sense within design and social science it does so for rather different reasons.

Mika Pantzar spoke first to the theme of product evolution. He did so in a way that broadened critical analysis of consumption by relating it to dynamic technological and social systems; and deepened it by considering the interrelation between new products and shifting configurations of consumption. Using images from Dubai shopping malls to illustrate processes of rapid product diversification, Pantzar appropriated various metaphors of biological evolution and explored their relevance and value, for example, viewing product design as a matter of managing and creating diversity. Taking an historical perspective he demonstrated the rapidly increasing rate of product diversification, and the decreasing average time it takes for significant innovations to be normalised in domestic contexts.

[Mika Pantzar: Product speciation and diversity](#)>

Next in the session, **Barend van der Meulen** explored the value of science and technology studies for understanding the design and use of technological artefacts in relation to real or imagined contexts. He considered the case of ambient intelligence – and associated scenarios of ubiquitous IT technology within buildings or other environments. In these and other scenarios, users are de-socialised and individualised with the result that collective or political implications are abstracted and marginalised. Scenario makers and designers are necessarily involved in a process of reduction (highlighting some but not other aspects of society) whilst also making wide-ranging assumptions about what else the social-technical world is or will be like when their proposals and visions are materialised and made real.

[Barend van der Meulen: Designing ambient intelligence: from use to practice; from users to networks](#)>



In subsequent discussion, it was suggested that design is essentially informed guesswork, that scenarios as discussed by van der Meulen are primarily tools for developing ideas and for selling those ideas within the design institution or company; and that such scenarios are usually little more than bad science fiction.

The dynamics of product diversification were also given further consideration. In particular, we wondered about the role of commercial crises in spurring innovation; and about counter trends of de-diversification, for example, as some supermarkets cut the range of options within product types; and some corporations rationalise the range of products and brands that they produce. The metaphor of biological evolution also throws into relief the evolutionary blind alleys of product development, and the extinction of products. The role of the designer in managing diversity was also problematised – has the relatively new profession of designer made much difference to the processes involved? And exactly where and when does mutation and selection take place in the lifecycle of specific products?

Session 2 The political economy of design:

After lunch, the second session sought to investigate the political economy of design. The nature and flow of industrial design work has to do with the commercial imperatives of contemporary production. What is being made, where, how and by what sorts of organisations is important for design professionals, for the types of products with which they are involved, and for those who use and consume them.

Nina Wakeford and **Michele Chang** provided a joint presentation reflecting on attempts to bring social science and design into useful communication. Wakeford emphasised the political economies of UK social science research – the interests of grant making bodies and the effects of institutional methods performance measurement – seeing these as a source of tension in bringing social science and design into useful communication. The dominant model of social science's relation to design – as providing research for designers as end-users – is profoundly limited. For social science to be relevant to design the relationship has to be somewhat more mutual, for example, by starting with questions generated within design, or by making design use of extensive social science research. Such engagement generates basic questions about commonalities and contrasts between social scientific and design methodologies and about the limits and possibilities of applying design methods, particularly creative approaches to data handling and analysis, to social scientific questions. From a designer's point of view, Chang used the metaphor of captive pandas mating – desirable but difficult to arrange, slow and awkward to witness – to describe interaction between social science and design. Collaborations of this kind generate awkward questions of power and ownership – of knowledge and methods – that have to be tackled, for instance, by establishing who and what the collaboration is for and by what means its objectives are to be attained.

Simon Blyth addressed the central role of brands in structuring the commercial environment of product design. Key concepts from brand gurus inform a range of strategies for developing, cultivating and managing brands. For example, while some organisations jump to meet consumer 'needs', others take a more single-minded approach, promoting values and beliefs embodied in a beacon or 'lighthouse' brand, and supposing that consumer interest will follow. For global companies, brands provide an organising structure, *stabilising* product development and innovation and providing a means of performance measurement, internal control and pricing strategy. Simon argued that brands shape the materiality of products – not only their symbolic positioning – and suggested that the construction and maintenance of brands can and sometimes does depend upon the sensual experience of using/consuming specific products.

Session 3 Humans, non humans and man-machine systems:

Following afternoon tea, we turned to the relation between humans and products, paying attention to perspectives from ergonomic and man-machine systems through to Latourian ideas of human-nonhuman hybrids and delegated programs of action.

Thomas Binder talked about his own engagement with STS insights and concepts in his work as a systems designer and as a design scholar. He suggested that early work in STS, such as ethnographies of the laboratory, gave useful concepts and insights to the design process. What are the parallels between knowledge production in a scientific laboratory and the production of artefacts in a design studio? In addressing this question, Binder explored ways in which concepts and approaches from STS could be applied to understanding of the design process.

[Thomas Binder: Understanding designing from within: Towards a practice perspective of design](#)>

Next **Jack Ingram** surveyed a number of points of contact between STS and design theory, starting with simple examples of the person-stick hybrid and wondering if the concept of hybrid could be stretched to encompass assemblages of technologies. Jack identified parallels with man-machine systems perspectives of the 1960s-70s and went on to consider how notions of scripting and of affordance have been appropriated in design literature. As he explained, design is a practical activity and one in which theoretical positions are only rarely articulated.

[Jack Ingram: Concepts and design practice, words and objects](#)>

Tim Dant concluded the session by talking about the morality of materiality, drawing on literatures, particularly from Latourian perspectives, which consider the role of artefacts in constraining and shaping the actions of individuals. Dant argued, essentially in opposition to ANT inspired approaches, that whilst artefacts undeniably shape human action, they only do so as a consequence of explicit delegation by human actors. As a result, moral responsibility remains with the institution or individual who delegates action to the artefact. So, for example, a speed bump slowing traffic represents a delegation of action by an institution that has the power and responsibility to control traffic, and it is with the delegating institution that the morality of behavioural modification lies.

[Tim Dant: Morality and materiality](#)>

Working groups

At the end of the day, participants were again divided into working groups.

Two groups were invited to **add some value** to a selection of existing objects "through what ever means seem most appropriate." These groups employed a wide range of strategies to add value, including singularisation and status (by adding signatures to a golden bauble); assembling objects into a kit by putting them in a case; investing objects with significance and heritage (through associated text); and through packaging. Some examples are given below:



The value of a bauble was hugely enhanced with signatures of an eminent anthropologist, a renowned theorist of material culture, the designer of the Eurostar, and co-organiser of the soon to be historic 'Durham Workshops'.

Despite appearing to be a tyre lever, this tool is in fact a SpickSpanner (copyrighted brand name) for ritual cleansing and working on souls. This one had been previously used by Sir Roger Cranbourne, the famous philanthropist and his family for cleaning their souls and its patina is evidence of much effective use (especially on the straight end).

The two ends of the SpickSpanner are used for different types of transgression. The flat end touches gently on the forehead while the incantation 'out bad thoughts, leave this mind, go forever and don't come back' is spoken.

The hooked end is applied in a similar manner above the heart to rid the soul of bad feelings. The prayer for this ritual is 'all feelings of hate, viciousness and inappropriate desire, soften in this heart so that you lie dormant. Until needed.' The hook is both a sighthole for the eye of God and extremely useful for catching wayward emotions.



Two more groups were enlisted to the new discipline of ***resurrection studies*** and given the following instructions:

Your group has been given some dead objects – objects which in the appropriate temporal, cultural, material and practical location have had life and utility. Your group's task is to imagine current or future temporal, cultural and practical locations where they can again live.

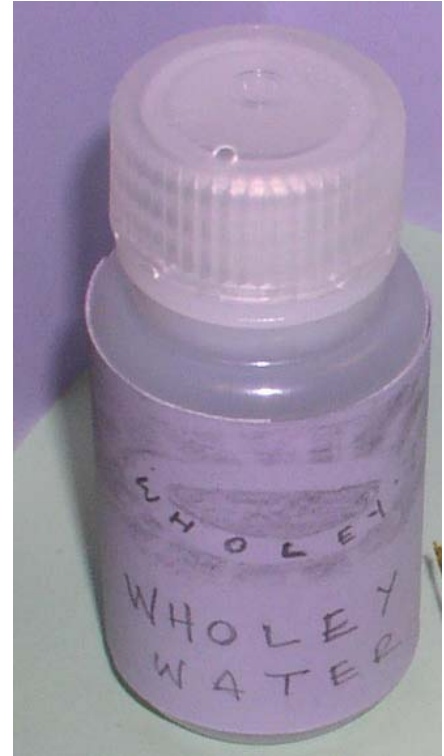
Objects included a pair of double-headed hog pliers, a cobbler's fudge, an empty printer cartridge and some anonymous plastic fittings. A range of new uses and settings were imagined: the double-headed hog pliers were to live on as part of the heritage industry; the cobbler's fudge had a new future in finishing silver staples while the cartridge was expected to replace the apple as a classic item for study and analysis in art education.

Finally, two more groups were asked to ***explain an existing object as if it didn't exist*** with the instructions:

Your group has been given a handful of mundane objects. Contrary to popular belief, these are in fact new inventions which do not presently exist in the world. Your task as a group is to sell one or two of these new inventions to dubious investors. These investors are particularly keen to know how the invention will enable new patterns in everyday life.

One group concentrated on a Christmas bauble, explaining to the assembled investors the potential for reawakening pagan rituals of bringing trees into the home and decorating them. But the innovation of the bauble had much more extensive potential, forming the basis of a modular home decoration system for year round use. The bauble has low production costs, low transportation and packaging costs, high profit returns. No additional infrastructure is required, yet it offers instantly accessible and inclusive, lucrative merchandising opportunities, product after sales support and community structures leading to heightened and intensified consumer experience. This group went on and on... The product lends itself to a variety of cost structures across markets, it is highly customisable, ideally suited for the gift market, affordable yet personal, fashion responsive, seasonal, open to 'designer' limited editions, natural international market expansion. The other group presented a range of innovations, including a 'fork' which amongst other uses could be used as a practical and portable hair accoutrement, being carried in the hair and because of this being always to hand for its secondary use as a comb.

Following dinner in the College, most participants headed towards the centre of town, to end up spread between the small rooms in a fine Durham pub, the Victoria.



Friday 13th January

Session 4 Domestication

The final day of the workshops got off to an early start with consideration of domestication and related concepts, including appropriation and assembly. These concepts refer to processes through which products are assimilated into patterns of everyday life. Recognition of the different forms of work involved in taming and incorporating material artefacts has arguably moved from the social sciences to design. What impact have these ideas had on the theory and practice of design?

Iipo Koskinen started the session off with a critical approach to the standard formulation of domestication as set out by Silverstone. He commented in particular, on the practical difficulty of distinguishing between the component elements of domestication (appropriation, objectification, etc) in empirical contexts. Even so, he concluded that the notion of domestication is particularly valuable in that it attends to what happens to a product after it has left the shop. Iipo went on to describe a current research project examining the significance of product and interior design for a selection of householders. This work illustrated some of the difficulties involved in operationalising the concept of domestication, and of understanding and specifying the individual and collective dynamics at stake.

[*Iipo Koskinen: Design and Domestication*](#)>

Heike Weber continued the critical take on domestication this time with reference to the recent history of portable personal entertainment. The notion that users domesticate a technology and insert it into an existing way of life fails to capture the dynamics of development over time. For example, social norms regarding the use of headphones also have a cultural, collective and cumulative history. Historical analysis of portable entertainment technologies demonstrates the mutual shaping of the technology by users, non-users and producers, raising the question of Weber's title 'Who is domesticating what, or whom?'

[*Heike Weber: On "DOMESTICATION" or: Who is domesticating what or whom?*](#)>

Concluding the session, **Matt Watson** used the growing dominance of digital technology in amateur photography to consider the relation between theories of domestication and of practice. Digital technology has enormous potential to transform photography, freeing the release of a shutter from the costs and implications of film processing, giving freedom to sort and manipulate images, and requiring new ways of storing, sharing and displaying images. Watson

suggested that elements of (ordinary) photography were being consistently reproduced despite these new possibilities. Initial interviews suggest that digital cameras are being used in an established range of social contexts and technical aspirations and aesthetic standards are grounded in the history of analogue photography and in prior traditions of painting. This material demonstrated the relatively limited impact of new technology on the reproduction of a practice that is shaped by other (more stable?) elements including norms, competencies and aesthetic ideals.

[Matt Watson: Domesticating digital photography>](#)

Irene Cieraad acted as initial discussant and began by commenting on the metaphor of domestication. As she pointed out, most of the speakers' reservations about the notion of domestication had to do with the implicitly passive status of objects that are more and less effectively incorporated into daily life. As Irene noticed, taming animals is a two-way enterprise and one that does not always succeed.

Cieraad identified new practices and possibilities generated by digital technology but missing from Watson's talk. These included new forms of intimacy, as when people gather around the camera or phone display to see the image just taken. In more general discussion, James Stewart commented that Silverstone's concepts of domestication have been taken forward and developed in ways that address some of the reservations and tensions highlighted by the speakers.

Session 5 Constructing Value

After coffee, **Elizabeth Shove** introduced the last of the five workshop themes. She did so by considering the 'slippery concept' of value, focusing in particular on how different interpretations of value reflect different ways of theorising relations between people and things. Four alternative understandings of the value of things were set out, each associated with a somewhat different interpretation of the role and contribution of product design. One view is that value is an absolute quality and is, as such, something that can be endowed – for example, by designers. Another is that that value is (largely) symbolic. This kind of value is attributed by a whole range of actors (consumers, users, retailers, producers..), it can vary widely and it is not strongly associated with any absolute quality of the object in question. A third view is that value is much more actively co-produced through the interplay of artefacts, meanings and uses. One implication is that designers must seek to understand contexts of use if they are to contribute to this process. A final view is that artefacts actively configure experiences of need and desire. If this is so, designers have a potentially important role in the reproduction of practice. Shove concluded by reflecting on the implications both of product evolution and the political economy of design practice for contemporary understandings of what designers do and specifically of what kinds of value they add.

[Elizabeth Shove: The value of design and the design of value>](#)

Discussion focused on alternative understandings and locations of value. The example of adding value in the form of reduced environmental impact, without any apparent implications for either exchange value at point of purchase or in contexts of use was provided as one example. Roger Jones, a professional designer, suggested that designers seek to add value above and beyond functional considerations, seeing this as a realisation and expression of their professional and personal creativity.

Closing roundtable

In the last half hour, each participant was asked to identify terms, concepts or issues that had been missing or relatively neglected in the workshop as a whole.

Some participants called for more micro studies and case-based examples. Others wanted more interaction with designed objects or more emphasis on the practicalities and tactility of designing and consuming. For a few, the focus on product design was a limitation given the importance of institutional, public and service design. A number of participants wanted to talk more about user involvement in design, the practical significance of user studies and the potential relevance of predictive work and future user-oriented scenario building. Another missed reference to the elegance of good design solutions.

More broadly, several commented on the diversity of design and the need to distinguish between different types of design involvement, the multitude of design-related roles in process of production and consumption, and the multiple ways in which design work is located in commercial networks and structures and framed by national political interests. Finally, some wanted to focus on such substantive issues as citizenship, particularly in relation to urban space; authenticity; sustainability, the consumption and waste of resources and themes of durability, quality and reparability. Other observations fell more squarely within the remit of the workshop and the designing and consuming project. It was, for instance, clear that new theoretical challenges arise when thinking about the dynamics of product, practice and performance and about the collective (rather than individualistic) appropriation or domestication of goods.

The relation between social science and design was a matter of much reflection. Can social science research feed in to design practice? What part might social science play in the creative process? Does design generate new questions for social science? What are the possibilities for social science enhancing understanding of design processes and methods, for example by analysing design work and design studios as 'laboratories' of knowledge production? Was this workshop laying the foundations for a new sub-discipline that might in time become known as Sociodesology, De-so(cio)logy or some other novel configuration?

