GOWER

Design for Micro-Utopias

Making the Unthinkable Possible

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Preface

Concern for society has often been a theme amongst designers and craftsworkers. Indeed in the UK, Ruskin and Morris at the turn of the 20th century actively pursued design and production in the material world in a manner consistent with moral and ethical values for the benefit of the wider society. During that century the design profession grew, becoming divorced from both art and crafts and production, first with the commercial designer, then the product designer, interior designer and so on, whilst architecture continued to remain an independent profession outside the broader domains of design. During that period too, the economies of the West, consumption and the use of the world's resources continued to grow at an alarming rate, contributing to the ongoing fragility of society and planet earth.

By the 1960s designers began to actively consider the wider implications of design for society. Several approaches emerged, including green design and consumerism; responsible design and ethical consuming; ecodesign and sustainability; and feminist design. In the 1970s Papanek, amongst others, encouraged designers to abandon 'design for profit' in favour of a more compassionate approach. In the 1980s and 1990s profit and ethical issues were no longer considered mutually exclusive and more market-oriented approaches emerged, such as the 'green consumer' and ethical investment. The purchase of socially responsible, 'ethical' products and services was facilitated by the dissemination of research into sustainability in consumer publications and the emergence of retail entrepreneurs such as the late Anita Roddick of The Body Shop. Accessibility and inclusivity also saw a great deal of design interest and activity and, more recently, designers have turned to resolving issues related to crime.

At the same time governments, businesses and individuals have become increasingly aware of what we are doing, not only to the world, but also to each other. Human rights, sustainability and ethics are all issues of concern, whilst the relationship between national economies and poverty struggles to be resolved. Global businesses have recognized the changing environment

and are setting their own corporate social responsibility (CSR) agendas. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development proposes that 'CSR is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large' (Moir, 2001). If businesses and organizations are to turn these ideas into reality, 'design' is an essential ingredient.

Designers make daily decisions with regard to the use of resources, and to the lifestyle and use of products, places and communications. In order to achieve the needs of businesses, the desires of the consumer and improvement of the world, the designer in making decisions must embrace dimensions of social responsibility. However, there is now a need to shift from focusing on a single issue towards taking a more holistic approach to socially responsible design. This book is part of a series that brings together the leading authors and researchers to provide texts on each of the major socially responsible dimensions. Each book in the series provides a background to the history and emergence of the topic, provides case study exemplars and indicates where the reader can access further information and help.

This book in the series turns much of our traditional thinking in design upside down and inside out. It challenges designers and society to look at things in a different and holistic way. It addresses philosophy, politics, the economy and society and looks for a new way of imagining the world. It challenges designers to embrace the unattainable and to turn the unthinkable into the thinkable, to take dreams as micro-utopias and to translate them into global synergies. An ambitious text, this provides a context in which other books in the series can be used to push forward ideas on any of the socially responsible themes, to achieve more than the sum of the parts and to create a healthier, happy existence through using design skills and thinking.

The book contributes to a series and although it can be read in isolation, the sum of designers' responsibility to society can only be entirely understood by considering all the dimensions that this series covers. However, we are only too acutely aware that the domain changes and evolves, and that the major responsibilities of the designers will be to continue to redefine their role in society and the influence they can have in creating a better world. This book takes us in that direction.

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