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Essay Title

Exploring the differing levels of adaption and alteration in furniture, that lend themselves to become categorised as up-cycled.

Introduction

This essay shall look at five designers and how they each approach their method of design and making of furniture that is categorised as up-cycled. It will give accounts from designers Zoe Murphy, Ryan Frank, Jamie Ward and design duos Hendzel and Hunt and Jimmie Martin.

The essay shall be broken into sections whereby it will look at the relevance of up-cycling in today's culture and how it lends itself to being an adaptation of practices carried out in developing countries as a means of survival. It will look at how each practitioner works and the skill-set learnt to developing their collections. What is the inspiration behind the ethos of each practice and how does each designer take second hand items generally no longer regarded as aesthetically pleasing? Through their process of alteration the objects are taken into high end category lines of retail. Further research will ascertain why certain types of materials are used and why those choices are relevant.

Textual and visual evidence shall be produced around one piece of work by each practitioner and shall explain the relevance of choice purporting to a collaboration of furniture curated for a themed exhibition titled Up-cycled.

What is Up-cycling?

Not as yet registered in the Oxford Dictionary but recorded as a buzz word in the Macmillan Dictionary, it is defined as the process of taking something that would be thrown away and turning it into something useful. (Macmillan Dictionary. 2009.Unpaged).

It has also been acknowledged and broken down by Ani. S. Delmont for Colorado's North Forty News who states

“Not to a handful of local artists who "up-cycle." That's the buzzword for turning trash into higher-value items, rather than breaking it down into

lesser quality products, the fate of most recycled goods. With a twirl of inventiveness, they reincarnate rejected ephemera into eye-catching, usable art that spurns the landfill and wins back buyers' hearts, from bottle-cap jewellery to silverware wind chimes". (Delmont.2010.Unpaged).

Up-cycling is the process of converting waste materials or useless products into new materials or products of better quality or a higher environmental value.

The first recorded use of the term up-cycling was by Reiner Pilz of Pilz GmbH in an interview by Thornton Kay of Salvo in 1994.

"We talked about the impending EU Demolition Waste Streams directive." Recycling," he said, "I call it down-cycling. They smash bricks, they smash everything. What we need is up-cycling where old products are given more value not less."

He despairs of the German situation and recalls the supply of a large quantity of reclaimed woodblock from an English supplier for a contract in Nuremberg while just down the road a load of similar blocks was scrapped. In the road outside his premises, was the result of the Germans' demolition waste recycling. It was a pinky looking aggregate with pieces of handmade brick, old tiles and discernible parts of useful old items mixed with crushed concrete. Is this the future for Europe? (Kay.1994.14).

Collectives of designers are exploiting everything that the industrial society has produced, by collecting the rubbish generated by that society and transforming it. Even though the first publication of the term "Up-cycling" was in 1994, there were collections appearing in the early 1990's in Holland and Belgium as fashion designer Martin Margiela made pullovers from adapted army socks (Fig 1)



Martin Margiela
Top Made of Army socks
1991
Fig 1

and Tejo Remi's Chest of Drawers (1991). This piece is made up of other people's bulky rubbish held together by a belt to produce an abstract chest of drawers. (Fig2) (Klanten.2008:141).



Tejo Remy
Chest of Drawers
1991
Fig 2

Today's working class consumer is now no longer wholly reliant on hand me downs, as the availability of credit is more widespread than ever before. Along with specialist payment options, this gives the consumer the ability to buy new on a regular basis and have a 'no need to worry' ethos.

Some designers are taking full advantage of this scenario and through a variety of sources they are reclaiming furniture and giving it a make-over to become much more desirable and unique. There are varying degrees as to how much alteration

or change are put into a piece to consider it up-cycled, is the piece completely re-worked into another object or given limited customising to personalise it as a one off.

Designers and selected pieces

Henzel and Hunt is a newly established London based design studio, specialising in the manufacture and design of bespoke cabinets and furniture. Designed and built with sustainability in mind the 'MADE IN PECKHAM' range is constructed from reclaimed and waste materials sourced from the streets and yards of the SE15 postcode area of London; the pieces are both local and environmentally sound. These rough materials are up-cycled, transforming them into elegant and highly desirable pieces of furniture. The range uses traditional cabinetmakers jointing techniques without the use of metal fixings of any kind. This then allows each piece to have a more unique point of sale aspect and additional desirability factor.

The Kirkwood chairs are made from both reclaimed hardwood and Victorian floorboards. The main body of work is the construction of the jigs which enable many of the chairs to be made identical in their shape and size, whereby they showcase off the hand crafted joints. The finish is left raw and rustic; this is where each chair becomes an individual piece as it is allowed to show off unique characteristics from the wooden boards that have appeared naturally and also through general wear and tear. (Henzel and hunt. 2010. Unpaged)(Fig 3)



Hendzel and Hunt
Kirkwood Chair
2010
Hardwood floorboards
Made In Peckham
Fig 3

In similar fashion, designer Jamie Ward is based in Manchester and builds furniture exclusively from found second hand parts in and around his immediate local area. His designs are contemporary twists on classic forms. His recycled table for example is reworked by applying decoupage random coloured newsprint which highlights the line of the Queen Anne leg and defines its beautiful shape. The legs used are in good proportion to the tray and the sporadic placement of the decoupage covering compliments the stripped tray which reveals a series of knots and wood grain. Like Hendzel and Hunt, there is a limited amount of finish applied to the pieces that Jamie Ward creates which allows the natural beauty and history of each component to shine through.



Jamie Ward
Recycled Table
2008
Wood and Paper
£595
Fig 4

(Fig 4) The ethos surrounding the thinking and making of Jamie Ward is noted by the designer on his website whereby he states

“I am interested in producing unique, sustainable pieces that fit into a contemporary home as attractive hand-made furniture. I take a playful, inventive approach to designing and manufacturing work, which is all made from second hand furniture discarded around Manchester. The lack of value these materials have in a modern wasteful society I find surprising, the value for me has always been the individuality and character each piece of wood and metal has due to the weathering that rusts, warps and discolours the materials” .(Ward. 2010. Unpaged)



Ryan Frank
Hackney Shelf
2005
Fibreboard and spray-paint
Fig 5

In similar fashion to Jamie Ward, Designer Ryan Frank used wooden boards placed in the elements for "The Hackney Shelf" (Fig 5) which is one Ryan Frank's first designs.

Taking its inspiration from inner city London the shelves are constructed from publicly graffitied boards. To achieve this, the boards were installed in various graffiti hot spots in East London to mature and then given a second life line by transforming them into unique mobile shelving units. This is a clever solution to being able to get an otherwise frowned upon style of art into the home. There is an element of surprise attached to each piece as the surface design is left to chance by each passing spray can whereby a hybrid of furniture and artwork are fused together. Again, such as with the previous two designers cheap otherwise discarded materials are choice, which then lend themselves to becoming something extra special.

The Designer states that good design requires a thought process, a philosophy, especially when developing a 'green product'.

"For me a design philosophy creates a frame work to adhere to and a construct to implement sustainability principles." My philosophy therefore requires a holistic approach, as there is more than just considering the objects function. A study needs to be

made into the period before and after the function of the object comes into existence". (Frank. 2010. Unpaged)

For Ryan Frank there is a detailed understanding of the entire process leading up to the production of the product which includes the following criteria:

- What raw materials are used?
- Where they come from?
- What are the social implications of extracting the materials
- Its compatibility with other materials, and products
- Can they be reused?
- Re-cycled or biodegradeable?
- Quality, efficiency and socially responsible of the production process
- Overall carbon balance and logistics

Timeless – a vital part of this holistic approach is creating a timeless product, one with a technical and aesthetic durability that will last generations and not seasons.

Material & Craftsmanship – creating a product with high grade materials and craftsmanship greatly increases the value and therefore the willingness of the user to retain the product for a long period.

Up-cycle – once the product eventually reaches the end of its useful life, a truly green product can be up-cycled over and over again. An infinite loop of reuse where there is no loss in quality of the material, or the material has the ability to naturally biodegrading releasing its nutrients back in to the environment.

This philosophy requires honesty from the designer, where the products components and materials are easily accessible and identifiable so they can be disassembled and re-introduced back into the industrial loop as 'food' for more future products.

“I strive to apply this core philosophy to each product. It is not always possible, and is not easy to achieve, but if a design philosophy factors these ideals in from the very start and not at the end as an afterthought, then this is how we can work towards *‘true green’ design*”. (Frank. 2010. Unpaged)

Zoe Murphy reuses mid-twentieth century furniture with a nod to the 1950’s which her fun and colourful style embodies. Taking a mix of urban and coastal images from around her home town of Margate, Zoe uses these to recycle unloved furniture and textiles, she reuses Formicas, wood veneers and old wedding dresses to achieve such results as the Margate drawers from the Margate collection 2009 (Fig 6), whereby retro furniture has been restored and silk screen printed with drawings from Margate seaside.



Zoe Murphy
Margate Drawers
2009
Wood and Ink
The Margate Collection
£610
Fig 6

Dense patterns inspired by Formica café tables cover the front and linings with bespoke imagery. (Zoemurphy. 2010. Unpaged). Unlike the other designers previously mentioned, Zoe Murphy concentrates on the embellishment of the furniture piece and not its deconstruction or re-modification. Sympathetic application of colour and design are used to lift this piece of 50’s furniture into an area whereby it loses its mass produced feel and becomes unique with a bespoke twist.

Like Zoe Murphy, design duo Jimmie Martin focus on embellishment where they range their decorative applications from spraying, to hand painting. Each piece has an 'antique-meets-modern' aesthetic.

Wittily ostentatious, each one-off item is created by customising vintage pieces picked up at auctions and fairs. They combine the decadent and quirky with the nostalgic and urban. (Jimmie Martin.2010.Unpaged).

The "Orange Union Jack Cabinet" (Fig 7) is quite an iconic piece in that very little as regards to the form of each piece is changed but through clever choice of imagery, colour use and graphics the illusion of a totally unique concept is achieved. Although no two pieces are alike it is this well thought out concept that makes the individual become a cohesive collection. The piece chosen is an interesting play on the Union Jack, it utilises an alternative colour palette whereby it is reliant on the image being instantly recognisable and then placed on the antique furniture piece. From developing a successful unique style and theme, Jimmie Martin have opened up a new direction in the selling and placement of antiques to a contemporary audience without decreasing the value, only adding to its uniqueness and collectability. The designers generally opt for elaborate carved framework in each furniture piece and then embellish with bright colour, metallics, imagery and wit.



Jimmie Martin
Orange Union Jack Cabinet
2010
Wood and Paint
£3290
Fig 7

Conclusion

By reflecting back over each piece and the validity of the selection of choosing these selected pieces as a collective, it shows an audience a diverse representation of how designers and design practices interpret up-cycling.

There are a variety of techniques and ideas used that are unique to each designer. The collection is initially British in its orientation; this is amplified through the imagery used by Jimmie Martin and Zoe Murphy in that there is the play on the Union Jack and the seaside town of Margate. Location is also considered important as to the creation of certain pieces, without the exploitation of key areas used by each designer, their concepts may not have been born. The best example of this is by Ryan Frank and how he utilised graffiti in an area that was notorious for its application; it is of extra importance that this practice normally seen as a nuisance is turned around into an accepted positive aesthetic.

There are good examples of extremities used in individual practices, Ryan Frank will create pieces from scratch giving careful consideration to the materials used for each piece whereas Zoe Murphy has only considered 50's style furniture which is only to be embellished with a style based on one source of origination.

Hendzel and Hunt and Jamie Ward construct new unique pieces from old found objects but tend to shy away from embellishment, whereas the remaining designers find that surface pattern application is what makes their pieces up-cycled.

Generally the collection curated here is an excellent cross section of work produced by designers who at the time were based in England and who have become established within the last decade. They are relatively small practices which have concentrated on up-cycling as a means to creating a collection or have it as the main factor in creativity and the mission statement of their work.

As sourced, up-cycling is thought to be a new buzz word and a new way of thinking and working when considering materials and concepts, like the term organic, we are led to believe that this is all new and shiny but it is actually something like up-

cycling that has gone on throughout time, it has just been re-branded for marketing and public relations.

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