



Unmaking waste in our suburbs and days

Session 21

Grave to Cradle Design: Creative Practices of revalorization in suburban opportunity shops – Melisa DUQUE

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Grave to Cradle Design: Creative Practices of revalorization in suburban opportunity shops

Melisa DUQUE

RMIT University, Australia

Design Ethnography

Recent approaches to sustainability from the perspective of Design are still based on the production and consumption of 'brand new' things (McDonough and Braungart 2002). Although these approaches have made significant contributions, it is necessary to explore other approaches based on reuse. This paper develops the concept of 'grave to cradle' presenting a case study of an opportunity shops in Melbourne. Grave to cradle is proposed as a design approach aimed at intervening ways to reduce waste through the re-valuation of things at liminal stages in their lifecycles (Reno 2014). Grave to cradle is a response to recent approaches to Sustainable Design that are based on the production of 'brand new' designs and lifestyles revolving around consumption of new products. The grave to cradle approach is developed through a study of a Vinnies (St. Vincent de Paul Society) store located in a Melbourne suburb. This case study has been developed through ethnographic fieldwork of the everyday routines of these places, which has involved the participation in collaborative activities of sorting, pricing, rotating, exhibiting, selling, and discarding. The paper will propose to consider creative collaborative practices of re-valorisation that have taken place as part of this fieldwork between designer-researcher and non-designers (volunteers, store managers, donors, customers) (Hallam and Ingold 2007) as ways by which design can harness reuse as alternatives to 'brand new' consumerism (Walker 2011).

Keywords: *Grave to cradle, second-hand, revalorization, design for reuse*

Introduction

Proposals for 'closing the loop', 'cradle to cradle' design (McDonough and Braungart 2002) upcycle design (McDonough and Braungart 2013), and life cycle analysis (Fiksel 2009) have been introduced as approaches to sustainability based on 'brand new' products. These are often proposed for professionally trained designers using traditional design methods and are developed at design studios. Although these approaches to 'brand new' 'sustainable design' represent great innovation, they are still based on industrial modes of production, and have strong links to values and cycles of unlimited commercial growth and fashion obsolescence.

This paper presents advances of a practice-based research based on a design ethnography methodology (Pink 2014, Akama and Prendiville 2013) at a second-hand shop in Melbourne. This project is part of my doctoral research at RMIT University and uses the concept of 'grave to cradle' to consider the processes of revalorisation that occur in second-hand shops as approaches to sustainability emerging from the everyday life. The project is in its second year and has counted with the participation of store managers, day coordinators and volunteers experts in their own fields. Based on preliminary results of these process, this paper will present some insights of how the second-hand retail area may work as a channel for designers to learn and practice ways to revaluing things in liminal stages of their lifecycle. Not only by briefly slowing the fast rhythms and amounts of waste making, but giving more visibility to alternatives to 'brand new' consumption. This case has allowed for the reflection of material and technical possibilities for reuse, as well as given insight of the benefits and dynamics of local collaborative work.

As such 'grave to cradle'¹ appears in many contexts and can be related to various concepts in the literature, involving practices of bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1966, 17), vernacular design (Walker 2006), product lifetime optimisation (Manzini and Vezzoli 2008), creative reuse (Johnson 2009) or 'trashion' (Emgin 2012). A common element of all these concepts and implied in the concept of 'grave to cradle' is to make/do using what is already available as resources. As a process 'grave to cradle' can be associated too with Do It Yourself (DIY) practices (Shove et al. 2007), with thrifty practices (Podkalicka and Potts 2013) and with the popularisation of second-hand markets (Parsons 2002, Crewe and Gregson 2003, Palmer and Hazel 2005), where goods have continual cycles of being renovated as commodities (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986). Representing a phenomenon of 'unplanned durability' that extends uses and cycles of things by exploring 'hidden meanings and little-known forms of value' not conceived by the initial designers, but that emerge at second-hand cycles (Boradkar 2012, 224-225).

As a design approach, 'grave to cradle' is a creative collaborative multidisciplinary process that can happen at many scales. From domestic everyday reuse and garage sales. To suburban cases, including scavenging through hard rubbish, organized waste transfer shops, second-hand/charity shops, repair and recycle initiatives. To offline and online secondhand markets such as eBay or Sunday flea markets. Including also cases of Freecycle and swapping exchanges. 'Grave to cradle' becomes a useful framework to locate planned and improvisory creative practices, processes and platforms where people meet for the revalue of things coming from 'cradle to grave' processes. A previous step from 'cradle to cradle', and a parallel framework for co-design approaches to experiment alternatives for the positive transformation of value of objects entering into liminal phases.

¹ For another way of interpreting 'grave to cradle' see the industrial ecology perspective proposed by Valero and Valero (2013).

Practices of reuse² have been recognized as the main entry point for analysis of value creation within the waste hierarchy (Gregson et al. 2013). Complementary Daniel Miller has proposed the context of second-hand exchange as a site for the creation of value that is not only linked to the market but which becomes a reflection of culture as well, where meanings of value extend to non-economic ones. In his analysis he points to the social practices of these second-hand places as sites where 'we can still see something of the raw creativity of social actors in inventing the conditions for the 'birth of value'' (Miller 2000, 82).

This paper examines the ways in which the 'grave to cradle' approach appears in a 'Vinnies' store in Melbourne. Vinnies is the commercial branch of St Vincent de Paul Society, a catholic charity that works in 140 countries. In Australia, there are 627 Vinnies shops, of which 104 are located across Victoria. Vinnies raise funds from the sale of donated goods including clothing, furniture, books, bric-a-brac, toys and nearly anything coming as donation from the local area. The shops are operated by paid store managers who work with the support of volunteers. Among the volunteers there are school teenagers, who work there as part of their community service programs, unemployed people of various ages, and pensioned people with different professional backgrounds.

In these shops, practices of revalorisation occur through everyday routines that include: receiving and sorting donations, pricing and tagging, packaging and exhibiting, and selling. These routines evolve in spontaneous ways when volunteers adjust organically to processing the everyday donations. And although there are systematic procedures, these are open for improvisation (Barber 2007). These routines are key in the processes of revaluing and devaluing things. In the context of my research, routines of sorting, pricing and exhibiting are key moments in the process of 'grave to cradle' and are seen as entrance for developing design tactics for reuse.

In the case presented here, benefit is considered in terms of value created. And value is understood in an open sense: from productive volunteer time, to the increase of sales, waste reduction, material creative transformation, to the moments of social sharing. Parallel, sustainability is in a corresponding manner (Ingold and Gatt 2013), understood as a fourth bottom line approach (Inayatullah, Walker 2013, 2011, 2014) and as the result of interrelated work in the spheres of the social, political, economic, environmental, technological and spiritual (Yoko et al, 2014).

Discussion

This section presents an example of grave to cradle through an intervention into the routines of sorting, pricing and exhibiting toys. In Vinnies, toys are received in large quantities, which results in considerable amount of them going to landfill. When criteria of hygiene, condition and safety are not met then toys are considered unsaleable. To minimise the amount of unsaleable toys received, and make the most value of the ones accepted the charity has to implement a series of tactics. These not only facilitate the work of volunteers, bring awareness to donors about the optimal conditions of future donations, but also reduces the waste and with that the costs the charity has to spend in rubbish removal. These strategies for revalorizing toys involve processes of sorting, pricing and exhibiting.

Sorting

² 'Reuse suggests we substitute new things with those that have already been used by someone else or for something else, again obviating the need to buy new.' (Lane, Horne, and Bicknell 2009, 152)

To tackle the challenges mentioned above, the first moment of intervention is at the receiving and sorting area. This is where donors arrive with their donations. After donations are accepted, the volunteer starts the sorting process. At this moment, criteria for keeping donations and for identifying value consists of looking for clean condition, complete pieces, functionality and safety regulations (e.g. children prams, electronic devices, etc). However, since this initial stage is done by the same person and involves many types of donations, it is a fast process with little time for detailed inspection.

At this initial stage of sorting, it is also when toys have an initial classification by size, material, and gender. Bigger toys are accommodated in boxes (reused from other donations), small toys are divided in containers for 'boys' and 'girls', and for 'small soft toys' (see figure 1). These are often bagged if part of a set, to avoid loosing pieces and correspondingly, value. This stage of classification defines the next route for the toys, big toys in boxes are moved to the specialized pricing area, small toys are kept in the driveway until the containers are full (approximately three weeks) and deteriorated toys (partially incomplete, broken or dirty) are given a chance for bargain prices at the entrance street path.



Figure 1: Pre-sorting of small toys

This is also the moment when 'treasures' are identified. This process is difficult because it requires specialized knowledge in relation to their rarity, shape, material, made in labels and age. Then, if the 'treasure' is an old piece, it may be broken, dirty or incomplete. And as these are the first filtering criteria, then they have to be considered as very special by the person sorting them not to dispose them. The 'treasures' kept are then taken to the manager for further investigation in the process of revalorization.

The sorting process at this shop, includes the stages of initial inspection, classification, and distribution to specialised areas and people from the team. These are some key tactics to deal with the difficulties of rotating the great amounts of donations received. Sorting is the first moment in this case of grave to cradle, where criteria of order, cleanness and functionality become useful insights for designers to find ways of collaborating in facilitating this complex and ambiguous initial process stage. This moment not only classifies between saleable donations from unseleable (to become

waste), but as a result exemplifies cases of ‘symbolic rejection’, ‘social relativities’ and ‘regimes of value’ (Reno 2014, 5).

Pricing

Since toys are considered in many cases disposable, assigning a price for a second-hand item that makes them attractive is a subjective decision. Not only it has to keep a balance in relation to their original economic value (considering already a devalue by being in a second-hand context, even if ‘brand new’), but it also has to consider the complexity of valuing volunteers work and time involved in the process of revalorization. Pricing is a stage in the process that is based on personal knowledge and judgment, experience and skills of the volunteer in charge. To gain a better understanding of the kind of lay knowledge that enabled this process in the area of toys, I worked in a design intervention with two volunteers experts in the area. With the use of sticky notes, we registered some of the key criteria for identifying qualities and value in the toys (see figure 2), and with photography we registered the process of selecting, classifying and packaging. Donated toys worked as probes and triggered our conversations and actions (Madden et al. 2014, Akama and Ivanka 2010). These notes collected were organized in the form of a ‘toy guide for sorting, pricing and displaying’ and in a ‘toys price schedule’. This isolated moment of working together and the method of taking notes facilitated our reflection in action (Schön 1983). Furthermore, the resulting documents made visible volunteers’ specialized skills and tacit knowledge, and became useful tools for sharing with new volunteers.

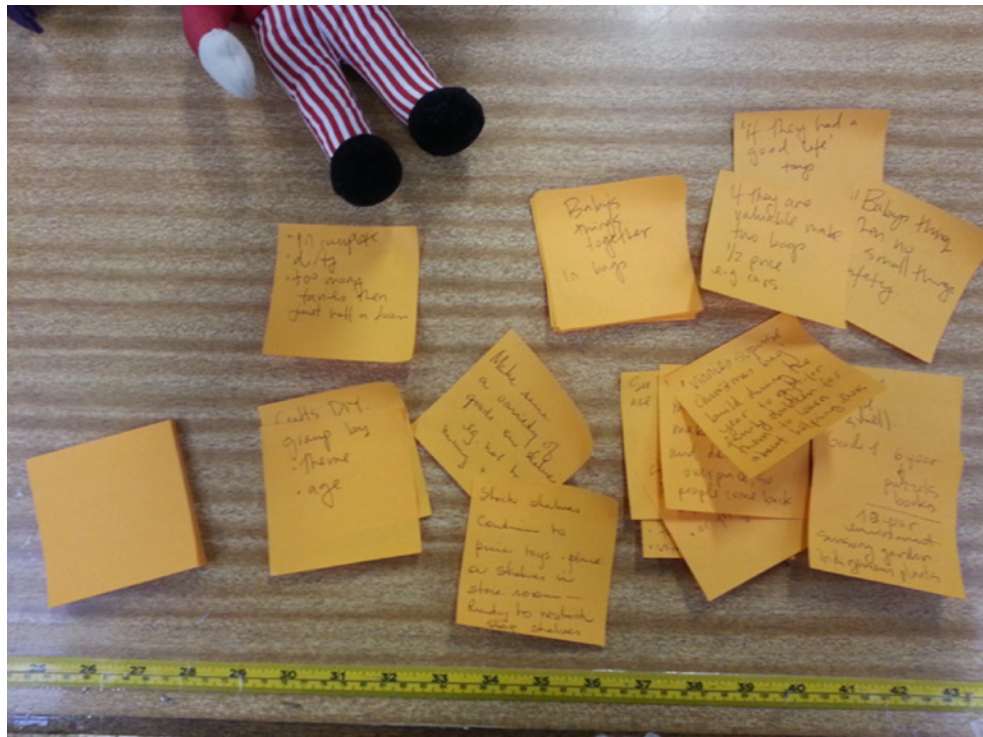


Figure 2: Method for registering

During this activity, small toys were classified and packaged in plastic bags for their sale. On the one hand, this bagging strategy facilitates not only the sale of toys that would be difficult to sell individually (e.g. advertising ones), it also enables the rotation of more toys to keep up with the rapid rhythm of donations arrival. In addition, to helping keep the display area organised and safe. On the other hand, from a design perspective, this bagging process highlights cultural narratives such as gender, brands,

and popular/unpopular characters. While evidencing the usefulness of categories such as size, shape, material, colour, and theme, when defining the contents and prices of the packages. Key characteristics in the revalorization process.

During this process of sorting, organising and classifying toys to be bagged and priced, it is common to find more 'treasures'. These toys with additional value can be generally of two types: 'new' with original package and price, or toys that can be considered 'vintage' or 'antique'. The subsequent process of pricing is different. Those new toys are priced according to a charity's rule of assigning the third of the original price. The pricing of the 'vintage' toys requires a specialised search, usually in second-hand online markets such as eBay. For this latter products, the labels used for pricing are different and include additional information of their value. Words such as 'vintage', 'retro', 'old fashioned' are used and details of the year, brand and material are included to create a short story that informs the customer about the piece. The toy then, changes its route of being displayed as a toy, and is transformed into a 'collectable' object. During this process the functional and cultural meanings and values of the object are transformed.

The pricing process makes visible lay knowledge of volunteers for revalue and reuse, as well as their creative skills for packaging and labelling (see figure 3). This is also the moment that sets the commercial value for second-hand goods, one that is often open for negotiation (Gregson and Crewe 1997) between manager and customers.



Figure 3: Bagging and labelling design

The pricing process suggests that the relationship between waste and value is ever changing according to cultural and economic transactions that define possibilities to transform 'negative' value into various alternatives to re-value (Strasser 1999, Hawkins and Muecke 2003, O'Brien 2008, Thompson 1979, Hawkins 2006). The definition of the

price of donations represents then in this case, a key moment of value transformation from liminal objects into revalorised products.

Displaying

Although the shop has shelves and objects for display provided by the charity and standard to all the Vinnies shops, often donations are kept for shop use and display. The shop exhibition is organised by typology of products, by colors and themes. In the case of toys there is a main section for their display, but as mentioned before, 'treasures' and deteriorated toys are exceptions presented for sale in other sections. The former ones moving to bric-a-brac sections and the latter to the street path for bargain prices. Display at this second-hand place, where there is not much certainty of the products to be received, requires from volunteers to constantly adapt and creatively adjust the space according to the changing stock.

The display at the toy section consists of three shelves (see figure 4). The bottom one is where the small toys previously bagged are placed within baskets to keep them contained. The middle shelf is for medium size toys and the top shelf for bigger toys. Toys are not only organised by size, but volunteers working in this area also recommend to organise them by similarity (e.g. board games together, Barbie and similar dolls together), as a strategy for visual merchandising and order. Despite this strategies, the toys section becomes messy rapidly. This messiness, however, at some level contributes to an important part of the feel of these second-hand places, and triggers a 'hunting' attitude that some customers enjoy as part of their secondhand shopping experience.



Figure 4: Shop display area

Sometimes, toys are organised in special displays. Either because there are much donations of the type (which happens regularly with board games (see figure 5)), but it can also be a collection for a themed display (see figure 6). Both strategies require team work from identifying those selected items to the creative collaboration in their exhibition. These working routines, moments of transition and movements of people and things, become sites to look for creative collaborative imagination and improvisational practices (Pink and Leder Mackley 2014).



Figure 5: Board games promoted together



Figure 6: Tigers for special display

These processes of assigning donations value through its pricing and appropriate display become evidence of how the ‘individuation of rubbish thus involves determining what it might yet be... most evident, in acts of reuse which demonstrate forms of ‘know how’ (Reno 2009, 34). That results in the transforming of materials with the crafting production skills available (Rossi 2013). This processes remind us how Miller’s proposal of ‘raw creativity’ enters into practice when reusing; making evident tacit knowledge and everyday design interventions, which have been further pointed to ‘require even more creativity than original production’ (Strasser 1999, 10). Practices of extending the use of liminal objects in second-hand charity shops become a creative entry point that represents grassroots processes of value transformation.

Conclusion

Overall, the challenges related to revaluing waste in the second-hand context are faced with a blend of tacit knowledge and specialized skill from volunteers and workers, a process in which donors and customers also intervene in the redefinition of value with their stories and experiences about the things and with a common want for a bargain. In the particular case presented in this paper, the process of grave to cradle is a combination of systematic activities with creative practices, which not only involve the careful attention to safety regulations, but it is a process open for creative collaborative

improvisation. From the speculative conversations about the possible value of donations, to the practice of designing the appropriate way of displaying to reintroduce the once liminal objects into another cycle. This paper presented this case of a second-hand charity shop as an example of how these places represent an area of opportunity where designers can harness everyday design strategies for designing for reuse in collaboration with a local multidisciplinary community of experts who do it already in various empirical and sophisticated ways. This research considers these places have the potential to enable the development and testing of sustainable ideas. Ideas for which not only design can contribute with its creative and technical skill, but also learn and enjoy from working together with people from various ages, backgrounds and expertise. A place where the revalorization of material things happens, but where an additional social, environmental and spiritual awareness is possible.

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Melisa Duque is a PhD Candidate in the School of Media and Communication of RMIT. Her research proposes the notion of 'grave to cradle' as a way of engaging in co-design processes based on the revalorization of 'liminal' objects. As part of her research she is currently conducting fieldwork in opportunity/charity shops in Melbourne using a Design Ethnography approach.