TFRC/TED Lecture 2012

Perspectives on Sustainable Design
6 February 2012
Keynote Speaker: Dr Jonathan Chapman, University of Brighton

By Sian Weston for TED

The Textile Futures Research Centre began the New Year by hosting a series of presentations in the LVMH lecture theatre at Central Saint Martin's new building at King’s Cross.

Dr. Jonathan Chapman, author of ‘Emotionally Durable: Objects, Experiences & Empathy’ (Earthscan, 2005), gave the keynote lecture as part of the University of the Arts London’s Green Week activities and TFRC’s Open Lecture series.

A capacity crowd turned out to see presentations by Dr Chapman, and TFRC members Rebecca Earley, Carole Collet, Kate Goldsworthy, Jennifer Ballie, and Auralié Mossé, who delivered their research findings on key aspects of sustainable design.

TFRC is based across Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design (CSM) and Chelsea College of Art and Design (CCW) at the University of the Arts London (UAL). It comprises researchers who are engaged in a clearly focused range of practice-based textile-related research that explores the question:

‘How can more sustainable futures be enabled by textiles?’

Their approach to sustainable design is pursued through a strategy of science and technology, and society and wellbeing. Its principal concerns are to improve the textile product’s footprint through design, developing the interface between science and design, and exploring and facilitating technology, translation and convergence in order to improve future textile material applications.

TFRC researchers are also interested in how textile design can facilitate social change, often through using digital and social networking tools. Textiles as a subject leads to diverse interfaces with many other disciplines and design fields, and this is well reflected in members’ projects and outputs which include collaborative practice-based research, critical texts, exhibitions and commercially funded R&D for industry.
Dr Jonathan Chapman is a Reader in the School of Architecture & Design and Course Leader of the MA Sustainable Design at University of Brighton.

He is actively involved in teaching, research and consultancy, and is considered a key contributor to the current discourse on sustainability and design. He is the co-editor of Designers, Visionaries and Other Stories: A Collection of Sustainable Design Essays (Earthscan, 2007), and is currently writing a new book, Meaningful Stuff: Design, Ecology & the Human Condition (2013)

At this event, Dr Chapman delivered ‘Rethinking ‘Good Design’ in an Unsustainable Age’ where he argued that designers, and design thinking and processes, have a big role to play in creating more sustainable futures. He asserts that creative people see things slightly differently, have a different viewpoint – and have the capacity to be visionary.

Dr Chapman’s central argument is that we all need to move beyond the tired ‘doom and gloom’ rhetoric of sustainability, to reveal a more optimistic, inspirational and creative vision that places sustainability and innovation side-by-side. He argues that

’The sustainability crisis is a crisis of behaviour, and not one simply of energy and materials alone, as is often assumed.’

A Crisis in Perception
Dr Chapman started his presentation by going back in time to examine how some of our current thinking about sustainability was crystalized from the mid-1960s onwards. He dates this ‘doom and gloom’ aesthetic back to the moonshot image from 1966, when for the first time we were able to see the earth in its entirety, and which profoundly affected our thoughts about our fragile planet.

Chapman argues that this image has contributed to the hushed and reverential tones we sometimes use when we talk about sustainability, and that this awakening of our ecological existence proved to be a powerful trigger for discussion as our horizons were massively expanded. Conversely, this ‘world view’ has contributed to a feeling of hopelessness when we consider future generations and the plundering of resources, as it is often seen as too abstract.

Get Real
To counter this overly reverential tone to sustainability, Dr Chapman urged us to ‘get real’, arguing that the world does not need any more ‘green heroes’ and that an over-zealous position was profoundly counter-productive. He asked us not to adopt a polarized position, believing that ‘nothing less than utopia’ is sufficient, and that by buying into this mantra we actually do ourselves a disservice.

Dr Chapman maintains that you don’t necessarily have to care about the environment to design in a sustainable way - that it is better to be somewhat interested in sustainability, than to reject it wholesale.
Shades of Green
Dr Chapman asked the audience ‘Can anything be 100% sustainable?’ He argued that everything has some sort of impact. Instead, he asked us to consider ‘degrees of sustainability’.

Dr Chapman argued that not everyone in a design office will have a big commitment to sustainability: not everyone needs to have a ‘green layer’ running through them, and in many ways a more effective design team might be established if there are differing perspectives within the team. Chapman’s example was ‘how can we make shaving more sustainable?’ where one solution might be to stop shaving - a response that, though correct, is extreme and incompatible with social and fiscal systems, rendering it impractical.

Dr Chapman suggested we examine the issue more closely, asking questions - ‘how sustainable is it?’ and ‘how can we make it more sustainable?’ By adopting a ‘micro activity’ approach, we can manage the creative process more closely, so that our questions become more targeted and well thought through.

Unpacking
Macro tools including ‘The Living Principals’ of environment, people, economy, and culture, help us to ‘zoom in’ closer, unpack and consider the ecological performance of a given product from multiple perspectives.
Chapman argued that it is essential to understand the reader or viewer – if someone is not interested in sustainability, then we as creative people need to find a way to engage them.

**Opportunity, Not Risk**

Dr Chapman showed Kirsty McDougall’s ‘Dashing Tweeds’, which examine place, origin, authenticity, and the traditional value of craft, but places those ideals in a new context. After a move from the Hebrides to London, McDougall now uses an urban colour palette to reflect her new home.
Chapman argued that over the last 15 years, sustainable business – like McDougall’s, has changed beyond recognition, moving from risk to opportunity, from compliance to leadership, and where small entrepreneurial businesses have created viable business models that big business are eager to emulate.

**Mental Pollution**

Dr Chapman argues that the mind is habit-forming place, which might be handy when we’re driving a car, but less so when we’re being creative as it can block us in. Chapman described how we all construct brick walls around us that can lock down our assumptions; they are unseen but powerful, and in very much control.

To underline this theory, Dr Chapman conducted a live experiment in the lecture theatre – asking each of us to draw five objects, with ten seconds per drawing. He asked us to draw a microwave, some broccoli, a fridge, a television, and a spring onion. Lots of us conformed to stereotype and drew a fridge with a freezer compartment, and a television topped by a V–shaped aerial.

Chapman pointed out that when we re-design familiar objects, we tweak what we already know, but that in fact what we already know is flawed and unsustainable: we’re building on a flawed system. He urged us to locate the brick walls and temporarily dismantle them to get a clearer view before deciding which walls - if any, should be replaced.

**Confusion is Good**

Dr Chapman showed us the ‘Confusion Curve’ - which resembles a smile. He argued that to be confused is to combine things that were previously separate. To ‘confuse’ means, literally, to ‘pour together’ – ideas, paradigms, world views. We start our journey in the top left of the smile - with very little information or knowledge, but as we read more and more, we become less confused.
He argues that it is vital to keep this process in motion, because if we stay in one place - ‘knowledgeable’, then we are effectively denying all new information. It is a perpetual journey and lasts a lifetime.

**Scales of impact**

In Chapman's 'Scales of Impact' image, ‘personal action’ was at the centre – the bullseye of our aims, and the palest shade of blue. Further bands of colour showed business practice, public policy, culture, and finally ‘future generations’ in the darkest shade, furthest away from the centre.

Chapman aimed to show us that by far the most effective system of designing in a sustainable way is by putting the ‘personal’ at the centre, underlining the fact that we are the biggest agents of change. The more emphasis we put on the business or political community to lead the way, the less effective sustainability becomes, quoting Ghandi’s famous epithet ‘Be the change we want to see’
Adaptive Resilience and Emotional Durability

Tripp Trapp Chair, STOKKE (2002)

Stain Tea Cups, Laura Bethan Wood (2008)

In our throwaway society, where we have a voracious appetite for 'new', there is much to be said about the value of well-designed and well-made products that we want to keep. Some things improve, and increase their meaning through the passage of time; with others, it's downhill the moment you get them out of the box.

By being able to adapt and change over time, the product remains in service for longer, and accumulates meaning through time.

A Mass of Answers
Dr Chapman concluded his presentation by proposing that we continue to ask questions and work collaboratively, suggesting that

‘What we need are not mass answers, but a mass of answers’