

# Designing and Consuming: objects, practices and processes

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***Designing and Consuming* develops a new theoretical understanding of the ‘stuff’ of consumption. It focuses on use, rather than acquisition; on the material, rather than the symbolic; and on relations between artefacts and practices. Building on empirical research including case studies of digital photography and DIY, the project has generated new ways of thinking about material artefacts and the parts they play in the dynamics of everyday life. We show how complexes of things and practice co-evolve and how designers and consumers add value to the products with which they interact.**

## KEY FINDINGS

- The accomplishment of everyday life involves the active integration of meanings, competences and complex arrays of material objects.
- The competences required to accomplish specific tasks are often distributed between persons and things. These distributions matter for relations between people (for divisions of labour), and for the formulation of consumer projects and practices.
- Product innovations depend upon innovations in what people do, (i.e. innovations in practice), but not in ways that are easy to anticipate or to control.
- Consumers’ projects and practices have emergent

- consequences for the ‘careers’ and experiences of those involved. These are cumulatively and collectively important in shaping pathways of future development.
- Objects and the materials of which they are made are locked into relations of mutual influence. Concepts from science and technology studies and material culture can be combined in analysing the changing ‘materials’ of everyday life.
- Designers, manufacturers and policy makers could benefit from moving away from dominant product-centred or user-centred paradigms and adopting a practice-oriented approach which recognises the inseparability of innovations in product and in practice.

Photo: Elizabeth Shove



Will wanted to turn an attic space into a room for his two young children but was initially thwarted by the layout and by the need to move an existing radiator a metre or so to the left. Will had no experience of plumbing and the whole project would have been abandoned had he not learned about Speedfit, a relatively new product range based on plastic push-fit connections. Technologies such as Speedfit bring jobs like moving a radiator within the reach of those who lack traditional skills.

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Photo: Matt Watson



Donald illustrated the persistence of aesthetic convention with a striking shot of Durham cathedral taken in the first light of dawn. The challenging lighting would have prevented him from risking frames of film and in any event, he wouldn't normally have been out taking pictures on a freezing early spring morning. Donald's classically atmospheric image was only possible because digital photography had become so embedded in his life that he now carried the camera with him as a matter of course. His picture was the outcome of a conjunction not only of digital technology as such, but also of a re-defined habit and a re-interpretation of risk.

#### HIGHLIGHTS

How to go beyond the study of things as carriers of semiotic meaning? How to think about the agency not only of individual artefacts but of interrelated complexes of stuff? How might we conceptualise the materials of material culture and how do objects and practices co-evolve? In addressing these questions and investigating relations between a range of everyday artefacts and the practices of those who use them, we explored new intellectual ground between consumption studies, design theory and the field of material culture.

#### Product, project, practice and competence

We began with forms of consumption involved in DIY home improvement projects. Our respondents told us about the dynamic relation between things, skills and ambitions. Their consumption of tools and materials was inextricably related to the iterative formulation and accomplishment of projects and plans. Projects were in turn important for the accumulation and distribution of competence, confidence and disillusionment. Patterns of consumption changed as new products were developed and as people acquired experience.

Analysis of DIY projects allowed us to identify a provisional chain of relationships through which consumer goods are linked to competence; competence to practice; and practice to the acquisition and appropriation of consumer goods.

#### Innovations in practice: making configurations that work

Digital cameras have unsettled amateur photography.

New techniques are required, new possibilities arise and new routines have to be established. We used the arrival of digital technology as a means of analyzing both the 'careers' of amateur photographers and their cumulative consequences for the field as a whole. We observed patterns of radical transformation – in how images are managed, manipulated and shared – and of remarkable stability, for example, in norms and definitions of photogenic subjects and situations.

The careers of individual practitioners matter for the trajectories of the practices they carry. In addition, digital technologies are not simply 'domesticated' by different sorts of user. As Donald's experience indicates, they are drawn into a framework of expectation and convention defined by existing techniques and genres of popular film photography.

#### The materials of material culture

Sociological and anthropological studies of material culture generally focus on things, not on the 'materials' of which they are made. We studied the relation between plastic (as a substance) and plastic objects – plates and washing up bowls – in an attempt to extend the reach and range of material cultural analysis. We showed how stories of promise and potential travel between the conventionally separate worlds of production and consumption. For example, the properties of synthetic materials have been developed not in the abstract, but in relation to sometimes utopian visions of 'an age of plastics' and of a future lived 'free from moth and rust and full of colour.'<sup>1</sup> Attention to the interface between objects and materials, requires us to move between

1. Yarsley and Couzens, *Plastics*, 1941:158

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generic accounts of technological innovation and more culturally specific analyses of individual artefacts.

The identity of a material is strongly connected to the range and status of items into which it is made and to their positioning in an always dynamic culture of materials. For example, the 'silence' of the first plastic washing up bowls made the ceramic and enamel models they replaced seem noisy. Similarly, colourful melamine tea sets, capable of resisting breaking, chipping and cracking were valued in relation to 'ordinary' but fragile crockery. In studying cases like these we specified forms of cultural-material circuitry through which plastic 'makes' plastic products and through which plastic products 'make' plastic.

#### Practice oriented product design

Designers and producers have their own ideas about the relation between people and things. In reviewing these we considered three analytically distinct positions. The first most dominant view is that value resides in the object itself (product centred design). A second interpretation holds that value is constituted in the relation between consumers and the things they use (user centred design). Third, we argued the case for

practice oriented design and for an approach that fully recognizes the active, cumulative and sometimes generative part things play in the reproduction and transformation of everyday life.

In tying these observations together, *Designing and Consuming* identifies and exploits new possibilities for intellectual cross-fertilisation between technology studies, design and theories of material culture and consumption.

#### MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The logic of concentrating not on individual consumers or on products but on designers' and manufacturers' roles in fostering and facilitating the emergence of social practice caught the attention of the companies and design professionals with whom we worked.

The approach we developed – practice oriented product design, or POPD – recognizes that things acquire value when integrated in practice; that the process of making and breaking links between materials, images and meanings is never ending, and that users and consumers are actively involved in reproducing and transforming these essential relationships.

POPD goes beyond user centred design in concluding that consumer 'needs' arise from practice and in emphasizing the role of things in making the very 'doings' of which they are a part. By implication, companies would do well to follow and focus on the practices in which their products are integrated and in which they intervene. This insight challenges the intellectual foundations of research and advertising rooted in conservatively product-centric theories of markets and in correspondingly individualistic concepts of consumer choice.

Despite dealing with seemingly trivial things like photo albums, plastic plates and plumbing fittings, our research has wide ranging implications not only for manufacturers but also for resource consumption and for environmental policy makers. Our analysis suggests that public sector organizations should pay less attention to the ebb and flow of individual belief and commitment and concentrate instead on basic questions about how more and less sustainable complexes of practice emerge and disappear. This is a major challenge, but relevant clues and intellectual resources are to be found in suitably materialized theories of practice of the kind we have developed here.

#### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

*Designing and Consuming* was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme (grant number RES-154-25-0011) and ran from January 2005 to December 2006. The project team included Elizabeth Shove, Department of Sociology at Lancaster University; Matt Watson, now in the Department of Geography at Durham University and Jack Ingram of Birmingham Institute of Art and Design.

Photo: Elizabeth Shove



## Findings:

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#### PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Shove E., Watson M., Hand M. and Ingram J. *The Design of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

Ingram J., Shove, E. and Watson M. 'Products and Practices: Selected Concepts from Science and Technology Studies and from Social Theories of Consumption and Practice' *Design Issues*, 23(2) (2007), pp.3–16

Watson M. and Shove, E. *Materialising Consumption: Products, Projects and the Dynamics of Practice* (2006) Cultures of Consumption Working Papers Series, Birkbeck College, available via: [www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.html](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.html)

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## CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME



The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context.

The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website [www.consume.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk)

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