

How the Other Half Lives: Product Design, Sustainability, and the Human Spirit

Stuart Walker

Introduction

“Long ago it was said that ‘one-half of the world does not know how the other half lives.’”

Jacob A. Riis¹

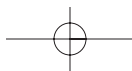
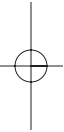
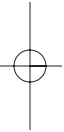
In the nineteenth century, Jacob Riis wrote about the other half of society—the weak and underrepresented. There exists a similar division in contemporary society and in the process of design—but, in this case, the “other half” is not to be found externally, as a particular sector of society, but internally, as a facet of ourselves. The other half of who we are—the creative, the imaginative, and the spiritual—also is weak and underrepresented, compared with our rational, instrumental side. The emphasis on utilitarianism, economic efficiency, competition, and progress in today’s societies and today’s world of design often has eliminated the poetry, elegance, and creative austerity of our other side.

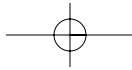
The suppression of this “other half” has led to a materially abundant but spiritually impoverished world. It is argued here that greater acknowledgment of this “other half” in industrial design can lead to products that are expressive of a more balanced understanding of human needs. Such a shift would not only contribute to a culturally richer material environment, it also would allow us to more effectively address the principles of sustainability.

This Half and the Other Half

There are numerous references to two sides of the human condition, which have been characterized as inner/outer, higher/lower, and physical/metaphysical.² These two facets also can be expressed as a distinction in our ways of thinking and knowing, such as subjective/objective and intuitive/rational. There also are dualisms recognized in traditions such as Taoism, where *yin* represents emotion and passivity, and *yang* reason and activity; *yin-yang* also represents our inner/outer or heavenly/earthly facets.³ Furthermore, distinctions have been made between “scientific experience” and “aesthetic experience,” the former being characterized as transparent, homogeneous, and specific; and the latter as opaque, heterogeneous, and totalized.⁴

- 1 J. A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 1.
- 2 E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (Abacus: Penguin, 1977), 47, 75 and 154.
- 3 Wing-tsit Chan (trans.) *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained by Ch'en Ch'un, 1159–1223* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 146.
- 4 R. A. Barilli, *Course on Aesthetics*, trans. by K. E. Pinkus (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 19.





The public school systems in North America effectively ignore our inner, spiritual side.⁵ Attention to our rational, scientific, and logical side prevails.⁶ This emphasis also is dominant in contemporary societies—overwhelmed as they are by advances in technology, utilitarianism, and economic rationalism.⁷

Traditional teachings tell us that inner attention leads to true happiness. However, this whole concept of inner and outer dimensions to our humanness has become increasingly foreign as utilitarian, rationalistic understandings have developed and expanded. When the inner dimension is neither recognized nor understood, then inevitably we seek fulfillment and happiness through other means—such as increasing comfort and pursuing physical or sensory pleasures. This links directly to products and product design. Television, VCRs, DVDs, computer games, and a host of other products are created to cater to outer pursuits by providing entertainment and transient satisfaction. The use of these products, in turn, occupies our minds so completely that they become highly effective diversions that steer us further away from an inner course. This emphasis on seeking pleasure through objects and acquisition also is closely associated with spiraling consumerism, waste production, and environmental degradation.

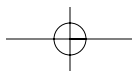
It is important to consider how things might be if more emphasis were given to that part of us that contemplates purpose and meaning. For the designer, this poses important questions about the relevance and nature of products. How would we live, what products would be important, and how should they be designed? How *would* this other half live?

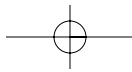
The Other Half, Art and Design

Our inner side, which can be cultivated to seek and appreciate the ethical, the spiritual, and the virtuous, also is the part of us that is imaginative, creative, aesthetically sensitive, and artistic. Murdoch has stated: “Art makes places and open spaces for reflection, it is a defense against materialism and against pseudoscientific attitudes to life.... Great art inspires because it is separate, it is for nothing, it is for itself. It is an image of virtue.”⁸ Similarly, Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* has, at its lower end, physiological needs, while, at the higher end, are the personal growth needs of aesthetics, self-actualization, and transcendence.⁹ Hence, metaphysical and psychological discussions point to an aspect of our being which, potentially, can lead us towards the “higher,” and which is associated with artistic endeavor and aesthetics. It is somewhat removed from everyday *outer* activities and, therefore, can provide a counterbalance to our more worldly, materialistic pursuits.

Design also calls upon our imagination, creativity, and aesthetic sensitivity. There are commonalities in techniques, processes, and thinking that bring the design process and the artistic process close together. But, design is not art. Kant defined art in

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- 5 N. Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools—An Alternative Approach to Education. Advances in Contemporary Educational Thought* Vol. 8 (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1992), 49, 83.
- 6 Sperry, in B. Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher Inc., 1979), 29.
- 7 C. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: Ansi, 1991), Chapter 1.
- 8 I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 8.
- 9 Quoted by Huit from W. G. Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* (Georgia: Dept. of Psychology, Valdosta State University, 1998) (at www.valdosta.peachnet.edu/~whuitt/psy702/regsyst/maslow.html, accessed 12:30 pm, Feb. 26, 1999).





terms of “purposiveness without purpose”¹⁰—it has no empirical, practical, or utilitarian intent. However, design is purposeful and does have utilitarian intent; it is driven by social and/or economic motivators, and products are designed to be purposeful. The utility of the object together with the purposeful intent behind its conception is what distinguishes design from art. Good design is neither art nor barren instrumental device, neither wholly artistic nor wholly utilitarian, but an inseparable union of the two. Therefore, design can be regarded as an activity which, potentially, bridges the two sides of our nature and, when it does so, becomes an holistic endeavor that looks towards our inner self to bring meaning and aesthetic sensitivity to the design of functional objects. When this inner aspect is developed and brought to the design process, it can have significant implications for how we go about designing, and how we think about the nature of objects.

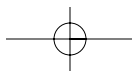
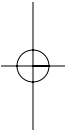
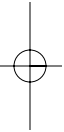
This more balanced approach allows us to consider the quantitative and qualitative aspects of material goods in relation to inner/outer accord. After basic needs have been met, the quantity of products an individual might see as desirable will be a function of many factors, including societal norms, but, beyond a certain point, further acquisition can start to detrimentally affect one’s ability to develop inwardly. Too many material things can distract us from inner attention—this is a teaching of many traditions.

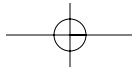
It also is important to reflect on what our “inner” side can tell us about how we might define the qualitative characteristics of material goods. This is not simply an issue of high or low quality, but one of *fitting* quality, such that the object is congruent with our inner nature. There is, it would seem, a level of “appropriate concern” to be found in the design of objects whereby the decisions pertinent to materials, form development, and detailing reflect an adequateness and avoid being immoderate, indulgent, or excessive. This notion of appropriate concern is critical if we are to take a more balanced approach—one that affords greater recognition of our inner selves, and that begins to address sustainable issues at a more fundamental level. To more fully appreciate this “appropriate concern,” it is necessary to look more closely at our inner or other half.

How the Other Half Lives

To help us understand something of how the “other half” lives, there are many sources from history and from around the world. These give an impression of how a life dedicated to inner development regards outer material culture. This is not to suggest that we should all seek the life of an ascetic, but it does allow us to see our contemporary lifestyles in the economically developed countries from a different perspective. Probably our most extensive sources are the texts and traditions of the world’s religions. While there are many examples of great opulence in religious artifacts, an important

10 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 21.





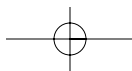
distinction can be made between objects of ceremony and objects for personal use. Moreover, if we look at the more ascetic traditions, where the pursuit of the inner life is, perhaps, more fully embraced, we see that possessions often are kept to a minimum. Many teachings suggest that material goods, and a mind that is preoccupied with such things, hamper inner development. We are told that the person seeking the inner path must seek it alone, free of possessions.¹¹ Buddhism regards possessions as a form of bondage that prevents enlightenment.¹² In Judeo-Christian texts, numerous passages declare the necessity of eschewing material possessions and personal wealth.¹³ The Islamic faith tells us, “It is difficult for a man laden with riches to climb the steep path that leadeth to bliss,”¹⁴ and Chinese traditions say that a fixation on fine clothes, foods and possessions places one far from the inner way.¹⁵ Monastic “rules” often are quite categorical about the dangers to spiritual progress of private ownership, preferring to share possessions.¹⁶ Similar views on sharing, simplicity, and material austerity are expressed by other intentional communities dedicated to the spiritual life, such as the Shakers,¹⁷ Amish,¹⁸ and Hutterites.¹⁹ Such communities also tend to reject decoration and embellishments, regarding unadorned objects more fitting to spiritual pursuits.²⁰

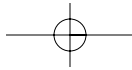
It becomes evident that inner development can have a direct bearing and influence on both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of material culture and, *ipso facto*, environmental stewardship and sustainability. From the designer’s perspective, the qualitative implications are particularly important.

Design and Appropriate Concern

There is no definitive “right way” to design products, but we can derive some impressions that encompass outer imperatives and inner potentials, and that might be helpful in our search for more sustainable ways forward. The notion of “appropriate concern,” introduced earlier, is an essential element for developing this more comprehensive approach. Wittgenstein considers a similar idea when he discusses inconsistencies among the four Gospels. He argues that these inconsistencies are preferable or even necessary and gives the following analogy: “...a mediocre stage set can be better than a sophisticated one, painted trees better than real ones—because these might distract attention from what matters.”²¹ What matters are the actors, the dialogue, and the ideas being conveyed. So, in this example, and in the Gospel stories, the details of the tangible (i.e., the physical or the historical) are not so important. The account or artifact is necessary, but only in a rough or approximate form that is sufficient to provide the setting or the basis for what really matters; in the case of the Gospels, “the putative transcendent reality” to which all sacred texts point.²² Schumacher, who pioneered appropriate-technology, with its inherent idea of adequateness, expresses a similar view: “To enhance our Level of Being, we

- 11 J. Mascaró, (trans.), *The Bhagavad Gita* (London: Penguin, 1962), verse 6.10.
- 12 J. Mascaró, (trans.), *The Dhammapada* (London: Penguin, 1973) verses 89, 355.
- 13 For examples: Proverbs 30, Acts 4:32, and Matthew 19:21.
- 14 A. S. Al-Suhrawardy, *The Sayings of Muhammad* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990), 110.
- 15 G. Feng and J. English (trans.), *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Random House, 1989), verse 53.
- 16 A. Miel and M. del Mastro (trans.), *The Rule of St. Benedict* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 10 and chapters 33 and 55.
- 17 J. Sprigg and D. Martin, *Shaker-Life, Work, and Art* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 22, 44.
- 18 W. M. Kephart, *Extraordinary Groups—The Sociology of Unconventional Lifestyles* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976), 15–16.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 253–256.
- 20 Sprigg and Larkin, *Shaker-Life, Work, and Art*, 33, 72. See also, J. G. Shea, *The American Shakers and their Furniture* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971), 33 and Kephart, *Extraordinary Groups*, 10 and 15.
- 21 L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. by Peter Winch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 31e–32e.
- 22 J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 10.





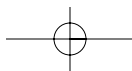
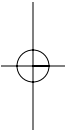
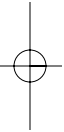
have to adopt a life-style conducive to such enhancement, which means one that grants our lower nature just the attention and care it requires and leaves us with plenty of time and free attention for the pursuit of our higher development.”²³

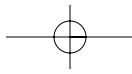
A shift toward appropriate concern or adequateness in the quantity of goods has the environmental benefits of reducing resource and energy use, reducing production of waste and pollution, and preserving habitats. A sense of adequateness in the qualitative characteristics of products has various implications for design, and for more sustainable ways of living. First, “adequateness” can be considered at a product’s inception—the conceptual framework of a product can be examined with regard to its potential in creating conditions that allow for inner attention and development. Secondly, “adequateness” can be applied to a product’s physical characteristics; that is, how the product is designed and defined. An “adequate” or “good enough” approach to product definition suggests a quite different set of priorities than we have come to expect in the fields of design and mass production. High precision, close tolerances, and perfect finishes are constantly strived for; but these are the priorities of a design and production system that is, by and large, unholistic—driven by economic rationalism, severely detrimental to natural systems, and often ethically questionable. Similarly, the notion of appropriate concern questions the approach of the Shakers, who sought precision and attention to detail through dedicated craftsmanship. Although emanating from a deep commitment to things inner, their approach could be criticized as reflecting an excessive attention to material goods and their definition. A counter argument here could be that the mode of work itself is a form of contemplation, and its product a manifestation of inner pursuits. It does, however, pose intriguing questions as to the relationship between inner development and outer expression; and it is, perhaps, a particular irony that products from a group dedicated to the inner life now command extremely high prices and often become objects of status. A similar example might be the products produced in the nineteenth century by William Morris, with the best socialist intentions. Here again, because of attention to detail, craft, and perfection, the products had to be sold at relatively high prices, thereby negating the egalitarian principles at the heart of their conception.

Hence, precision and perfection would appear to be, in many cases, contradictory to the evolution of conditions of adequateness so critical to inner development. In certain applications, precision is, of course, necessary to ensure that a product will properly function. However, it is frequently unnecessary and can impede inner development and sustainability.

A quite different approach to design and production is possible. The idea of “rough” products, imprecision, and adequateness would seem to be more in line with achieving an inner/outer

23 Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 153.





balance and sustainable ways of living. “Good enough” products can reduce “concern” in the making, use, and ownership of products to a level more conducive to inner development. Sustainability emphasizes local production and the provision of fulfilling, local employment. This contributes to environmental stewardship by evolving a locally-based industrial ecology, and to social equity which also is an essential element of *inner* teachings. Production that employs and values people rather than machines also implies a qualitatively different type of product. A machine aesthetic is obviously inappropriate. The human hand can produce items of beauty, but high tolerances and reproducibility are not its forte. Similarly, uniform finishes are well suited to automated production, while multifarious or even unfinished surfaces often are more appropriate and more achievable when using natural materials and human labor. Moreover, variegated, rough finishes allow the marks of use to be absorbed without spoiling the overall appearance—thereby contributing to product longevity and sustainability. Potentially, the production of such products at the local level, employing local people can be an economically viable alternative to today’s mass-produced, largely unsustainable products. The “adequate” product can, because of its nature, and should, because of its intent, be relatively easy and quick to produce, making it an economically feasible alternative. Its viability and acceptability are, however, crucially dependent on imaginative and innovative design. Some examples of such products are illustrated in Figures 1–3. These explorations, conducted by the author, attempt to embody some of the principles

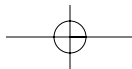
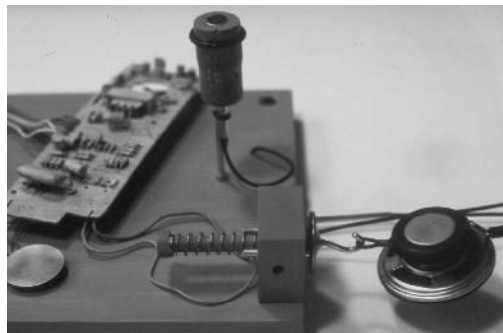


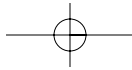
Figure 1 (top)
Low chair—rough finishes and reused materials.

Figure 2 (right)
Twig lamps—standard electrical parts plus “local” components.



Figure 3 (bottom right)
Wall telephone (detail)—standard circuit plus simple “local” product assembly.





discussed above. Figure 1 is a chair quickly and intuitively constructed from reused, unfinished materials. The triangulation in the geometry of the design ensures structural stability, and the “rough” nature of the finish results in a piece that is texturally rich, and which allows the object to absorb wear and tear without detracting from the overall aesthetic. The lack of traditional finish also allows speedy manufacturing utilizing reused materials and human labor. Figure 2 illustrates a pair of ephemeral lamps that combine off-the-shelf electrical components with a twig, a paper bag for the shade, and a small-cast concrete base. The electrical parts are simply “hung” on the forked twig—facilitating the reuse of these standard parts. Figure 3 is a detail of a wall mounted telephone. Standard electronic phone circuitry is painted and simply mounted on a board—design variations are infinite. This piece illustrates the potential for exploring low cost, locally produced design options for products that are normally capital intensive, mass produced objects.

Such a direction for design would acknowledge and foster our “other half” by redefining the nature of products; it would also make a fundamental contribution to the goals of sustainability. It has the potential of making our material world richer, multifaceted, locally appropriate, and culturally and spiritually significant which, compared to the global homogeneity arising from today’s mass produced objects, is a prospect to be welcomed.

