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Origins of Unsustainable Luxury Becoming Slaves to Objects

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The success of sustainable design is dependent upon overcoming the enduring legacy of the early eighteenth century. This is the moment that design in the guise of luxury is served by the shift from craftsmanship to the increasingly standardized production of goods in the proto-industrial terrain of France and Britain. It is an era of what historian Michael Kwass labels “progressive consumptionism,” which is the foundation for expanded production and consumption that will give rise to the first Industrial Revolution, and the concomitant reconfiguration of non-elite possessions from signifiers of avarice, covetousness and envy to symbols of one’s relative participation in the growth and greatness of State. The coordinating term was “luxury”, valorised in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* and associated Enlightenment writings of Hume, Voltaire, Mandeville and others. Such writings structure later foundational design histories including Nikolaus Pevsner’s codification of national accomplishment at the Great Exhibition, Siegfried Giedion’s privileging of mechanization in the economic growth of the American West, and popular media that

introduces designers in the role of genius once reserved for Renaissance masters. The dramatic changes in the spheres of production, consumption and social behavior that flow out of this moment mark, in sum, the initiation of unsustainable design. Further, the celebratory Enlightenment promotion of proto-industrial works and designers is perpetuated in contemporary design histories, in terms of both received knowledge and underlying methodology.

There is a vast multidisciplinary literature on luxury and its design offshoots, comfort and convenience. Counted within it is Kwass' thesis of progressive consumptionism, which provides a particularly cogent summary of Voltaire, David Hume, Bernard Mandeville and other French and English philosophers, economists and social commentators. Kwass identifies within the Enlightenment two "powerful and strikingly modern arguments." The first holds that

consumption of luxury goods, although fueled by sinful desires and selfish fantasies, had unintended positive consequences for society as a whole; luxury consumption spurred the economy by keeping legions of artisans gainfully employed; it strengthened the state by expanding the base of wealth upon which state finances rested; and it redistributed wealth from rich to poor by inducing elites to spend money that might otherwise have been hoarded.¹

The second argument suggests "that the consumption of luxury goods was a benign manifestation of long-term social progress. In this schema, the growth of luxury consumption went hand-in-hand with the refinement of taste, the development of the arts and sciences, and the expansion of happiness."² Consumptionists deliberately reversed "religious, social and classical injunctions against material excess" to advance "the scandalous theory that, far from being an evil, luxury consumption was a social good."³ Despite their differences, both sides sought to overcome the hardships of industry denied, the severity of which is noted in Louis de Jaucourt's *Encyclopédie* essay, "France." Jaucourt writes,

Until the time of Philip Augustus the people were slaves in France. ... Thus, for nine hundred years the French remained without industry, in disorder and ignorance. This is why they participated neither in the great discoveries nor in the beautiful inventions of other peoples. Printing, gunpowder, mirrors, telescopes, compasses, the circulation of the blood, the pneumatic machine, the true system of the universe are not their discoveries.⁴

The *Encyclopédie* and the Age of Practical Luxury

The landmark of eighteenth-century French thought is Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751–1756). This massive catalogue of Enlightenment thought is predicated on reason as the new authority, and philosophy is central to the dissemination of its points. As Diderot explains, "Philosophy, which is concerned with the nature of man, with morals and politics, strives to shed useful light on all branches of administration [and] to enlighten men on their principle duties."⁵ It is logical to expect *Encyclopédie* discussions to reflect these concerns. What is perhaps less logical, especially from today's perspective, is the prominence of Luxury as one of the work's major coordinating terms. "Luxury," the *Encyclopédie* notes in the entry of the same name, "contributes to the greatness and strength of states and ... must be encouraged, enlightened, and directed." The discourse on luxury extends into virtually every catalogued sphere of French endeavor, where it operates as agent and indicator of progress. That luxury itself signifies economic strength is reinforced throughout by correlations between economic and physical condition, and an overview of this one aspect alone illuminates the scope of its discourse: luxury is no simple thing. Selections of the *Encyclopédie* maintain wealth as directly proportional to the condition of health, and vice versa. The consistent connection between sections dedicated to luxury and to health as a form of luxury serves to create an integral connection between industry, scientific progress, patriotism, and the well-governed society. In this view, to have Luxury is literally to craft economic triumph from the raw stuff of nation.

The *Encyclopédie* elaboration of luxury contributed to a new built environment equipped with suites of equally new social and personal behaviors. This was especially true in Paris, where by 1800 the affluent home was potential site of one or more of over fifty new spaces. Among them were the *cabinet de bain*, *salle de bain*, *garde-robe*, *garde-robe à l'anglaise*, *cabinet de garde-robe*, *cabinet d'aisance*, *lieux d'aisance* and *lieux à l'anglaise*, rooms wherein one could bathe, dress, primp, groom and otherwise prepare oneself for the judgment of civil society, as well as rooms that lent their names to the new intimate habits they fostered.⁶ Taken collectively, these spaces, behaviors and linguistic additions signify the level at which the French public normalized non-elite luxury; extending the functional demands prompted by these interior designs led indirectly to the installation of civic water and sewerage systems. In post-Revolutionary France, of course, luxury no longer signified aristocratic adherence to economic growth of nation. The *philosophe* of this age was the often-satirical Mandeville, for whom, "as for Hume and Adam Smith, luxury was by definition subject to display, its very purpose in contemporary society to draw the regard of others."⁷ Mandeville

famously defined luxury as everything above simple necessity. He also noted the pursuit of luxury and the performance that gave proof of its acquisition as essential to the modern self. As he wrote in *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1725) “The Greediness we have after the Esteem of others, and the Raptures we enjoy in the Thoughts of being liked, and perhaps admired, are Equivalentents that overpay the Conquests of the strongest Passions.”⁸

Clearly luxury did facilitate real social and economic change in the eighteenth century. Further, resources were not entirely at issue in an age of absolutism. While Quesnay and Turgot were among those who promoted large-scale farming over factories as a means of increasing national wealth, the greatest backing went to the conversion of abundant natural materials into mass-produced goods. This is made clear in the “Detailed System of Human Knowledge: Understanding” an *Encyclopédie* genealogy whose first division separates History into the Sacred Civil and the Natural. The Natural is divided into three subcategories, the “Uniformity of Nature” (celestial bodies, the earth and the sea and everything contained within them); “Irregularities of Nature” (“wonders” and “monstrous” things suitable for cabinets of curiosity); and “Uses of Nature” a classification defined simply as “Arts, Crafts, Manufactures.” The result is a utilitarian Nature slotted into a broad hierarchy of precious metals, gemstones, iron, glass and finally skin, each matched with its respective phalanx of specialized craftsmen.⁹ The task of defining and elevating the mechanical arts resumes in Diderot’s essay “Art,” which clarifies the separation of concept, manufacturing and production activities and reassesses “products of the hand.” In the past, Diderot explains, liberal arts anchored systems of aesthetic merit, and “to practice or even to study the *mechanical arts* means to lower oneself to things whose investigation is laborious, contemplation ignoble, explanation difficult, pursuit discreditable, number inexhaustible, and value minute.” One now must reconsider “Art in general” and extricate industry from “the force of prejudice.”¹⁰ Diderot proposes a new mode for judging the manufactured object and its *ensemble* creator, writing, “What will be the superiority of one manufacturing process over another will be principally the excellence of the materials employed, joined to the rapidity of the work and the perfection of the product. As for the excellence of the materials, it is a matter of inspection....”¹¹ Visible form is given to this discourse by a profusion of *Encyclopédie* copperplate engravings illustrating the varieties, methods and materials of industrial production. Barriers to the aesthetic regard and discourse of the manufactured object are thus removed, and design itself emerges as a field worthy of all the markers of aesthetic regard.

That luxury remained wholly unattainable for many urban workers and former peasants, and failed as a mechanism for promoting social advancement nationwide is manifest in Eugen Weber's documentation of rural French forms and habits in 1914. Even this late date saw the continued existence of rudimentary country houses comprised of a single large room divided by plank partitions and shared intermittently with the family's livestock. To continue the example of hygiene as a practical luxury, here domestic water was associated not with porcelain vessels ensconced within elegant *cabinets de bain*, but rather with daily visits to brackish ponds or frequently contaminated communal wells. The hardship of acquiring household water affected urban workers also and each group, none too surprisingly, persisted in ingrained habits of infrequent bathing and of laundering clothes two to at most four times a year. These factors, in combination with underlying hardships inherent to poorly paid wage labor and outright poverty, contributed greatly to the spread of body vermin, contamination, and infectious disease. That modernization in France was delayed in the poorer and more remote districts until as late as the 1910s perpetuated the apparent correlation between luxury and economic vigor.¹²

Where England and France promoted luxury as a means of economic growth, the Germanic countries largely spurned the seductive appeal of fashionable luxury goods in favor of cultural solutions.¹³ Rejecting the celebration of things, luxurious and not, that industry provided gave rise to an equally oppositional philosophy. A typical counterpoint is expressed in Goethe's "On Art and Handicraft" (1797), which notes "the work of a true artist" imparts to material "an inner, eternally lasting value, whereas the form given to the costly metal by a mechanical craftsman always has, even in the best work, something insignificant and indifferent in it that can please only as long as it is new."¹⁴ The passage at once echoes Pliny the Elder and the *Encyclopédie* to make clear that what is at stake far exceeds the materials and methods of mass-produced items. It is a concern evident in Goethe's praise of Schiller's exemplary character. Schiller is "in complete possession of his noble nature, ... as great at the tea-table as he would have been in parliament," a phrase that means differently than one might first suppose. Where Schiller is at ease at tea, Goethe writes, we "on the other hand always feel limited."

Persons, objects that surround us have their influence on us; the teaspoon embarrasses us if it is made of gold, because it should be made of silver, and paralyzed in this way by thousands of considerations we never get around to expressing freely what is great within our natures. *We are the slaves of objects* and appear petty or significant according to whether these constrain us or give us room to expand freely.¹⁵ [emphasis added]

As mere humans lacking the “noble nature” of a Schiller, our interaction with the unnecessarily luxurious object is self-conscious. Our abashment is not entirely due to a continuation of earlier restrictions, lack of the cosmopolitan grasp of a constellation of social ideas surrounding objects and their use, or the *tension differential* that accompanies aspirations of upward socioeconomic mobility. Rather, it is explicitly the golden teaspoon that confounds our relation to form, and prompts Goethe’s call for a “remedy to luxury” in a world awash with “pretty, precious, pleasing things.”¹⁶

A valuable aspect of design history is revealed in Goethe’s critique of his admired contemporary: our subject position relative to the designed object. Its discursive author is Plato, who argued roughly that the soul participates in the realm of Form, and it is equally active in the *Encyclopédie* “Preliminary Discourse,” where d’Alembert writes of “all the objects that affect us by their presence,” and in Jean Baudrillard’s assertion that “people define themselves in relation to objects.”¹⁷ Subjectivity is elaborated on in the work of sociologist Georg Simmel, for whom interactions with consumer goods constituted an important, even essential component of the modern self. As Simmel argues in “Subjective Culture” (1908) “when one speaks of the cultivation of things, of the subjective contents of life, one reverses the order of the actual cultural process that takes place in man.”¹⁸ In short, man’s cultivation – his freedom – is complicated by his interactions with objects. Simmel’s inquiry contrasted the modern era with histories of Medieval and Renaissance intimate space and its predominantly immovable furniture. It found that “into the early nineteenth century, furnishings were of such simplicity and stability that human ‘personalities “grew together” with the objects in their surroundings’.”¹⁹ Simmel further maintained objects made by individual craftspeople are fundamentally different in kind from those produced under a specialized division of labor. His is not a simple matter of liberal versus mechanical art, nor is it fully a reflection of Ruskin or William Morris’ socialist engagement with labor. Simmel writes,

The feeling of being stifled by the externals with which modern life surrounds us is not only the consequence but also the cause of their encountering us as autonomous objects. What is distressing is that these multitudinous things crowding around us are at bottom indifferent to us, and indeed on account of the impersonal origins and easy replaceability specific to the money economy.²⁰

Simmel’s conclusion, in Elizabeth Goodstein’s analysis, is just “as ‘the unity of an object’ comes about through the projection of a sense of self – we ‘form it in our image, in which the multiplicity of determinations grows into the unity of the “I”’ – so also does

'the unity of the object that we make, and its lack, affect the corresponding formation of our personality'."21 Possessions no longer reflect one's self; rather, the autonomous and impersonal objects of Luxury threaten its very stability. Baudrillard similarly forgoes the structures of Enlightenment philosophy in his own inquiry into designed objects. For him, the "reign of the object" offers a "festival of supply and demand whose effervescence can provide the illusion of culture."

But let us not be fooled: objects are *categories of objects* which quite tyrannically induce *categories of persons*. They undertake the policing of social meanings, and the significations they engender are controlled. Their proliferation, simultaneously arbitrary and coherent, is the best vehicle for a social order, equally arbitrary and coherent, to materialize itself effectively under the sign of affluence.²²

The Multiple Legacies of the Enlightenment and The History of Design

For Enlightenment thinker David Hume, history is "the great mistress of wisdom," and she "furnishes examples of all kinds; and every prudential, as well as moral precept, may be authorized by those events which her enlarged mirror is able to present to us." Per Hume, history "improves the understanding" and "strengthens virtue." Histories of design continue to be important means of clarifying intent and securing the reception of designed products. That design history as a whole often perpetuates embedded, often outmoded, attitudes toward production and consumption is the dilemma presented to the current era.

The writing of history is itself a historical act, and often one that selectively preserves the expedient terms of its chroniclers. Given the promotion of mass-produced objects through an expansion of traditional noble control, it is not surprising to find foundational design histories reflective of the aristocratic. Alexis de Toqueville, writing in *Democracy in America* (1835), noted,

When the historian of the aristocratic ages surveys the theater of the world, he at once perceives a very small number of prominent actors who manage the whole piece. These great personages, who occupy the front of the stage, arrest attention and fix it upon themselves; and while the historian is bent on penetrating the secret motives which make these people speak and act, the others escape his memory.²³

Emphasis on what de Toqueville identifies as a "very small number of prominent actors" and "great personages" is evident in design publications from their first appearance. A productive case study is presented by Thomas Chippendale, the mid-eighteenth century

furniture-maker whose elevated reputation extends into the present age. Chippendale shrewdly promoted himself through a series of pattern books. The earliest is *The Gentleman and Cab'net-Maker's Director* (1754, reissued 1756 and 1759–1762), a lavishly illustrated work initially self-published to fulfill a lengthy subscriber list across Britain and America, where it found especial favor in Newport, Rhode Island, and later reissued, as were subsequent titles, by an Act of Parliament. It was but the most prominent of similar European and American publications produced during this era.²⁴

Chippendale's first publication presents the hallmarks of future histories of design: it provides an overview of the designer's technical abilities; elucidates the designer's mastery over materials; draws parallels to other, more widely known creators of art and applied art; uses these parallels to announce the designer's singular genius over what Diderot identified merely as "a great number of workers"; and evinces an overall force of purpose that one 1910 biographer categorized as "virility." Instruction is provided for mastering the five orders of architecture and related rules of perspectival draughtsmanship, and 160 copper engravings offer over 300 designs that "may be executed with advantage by the hands of a skilful workman." The book is also rightly cited for its role in domesticating luxury for everyday use. Prior to the mid-1700s, attention focused on minor items, "chiefly mirrors, pier tables, and stands, all very richly ornamented." Chippendale's *Director* presented "for the first time 'Proper Directions for Executing the most difficult Pieces, the Mouldings being exhibited at large, and the Dimensions of each design specified.' Simple pieces were included as well as ornate, so as to suit 'the Fancy and Circumstances of Persons in all Degrees of Life'."²⁵

The Gentleman and Cab'net-Maker's Director marked more than the relinquishing of ownership from noble hands. It was explicitly intended to educate taste, and as set forth in its Preface, "'The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director' [is] calculated to assist the one in the choice, and the other in the execution of the designs." The work, as well as furniture resulting from its instruction, allows for the free operation of taste that in an earlier age would have been directed to a select few masterworks of art, and correlated new luxury furnishings with those works that had long anchored Continental aesthetics. Indeed, twentieth-century commentators continued to herald Chippendale's "books of design" as being "as valuable as the drawings of the old masters."²⁶ In this its text approximates the *Encyclopédie* essay on "Taste," wherein Voltaire explains that possession of taste is dependent upon the ability to see and know what is beautiful. The *Director* is progressive but not unique, for it is part of the eighteenth-century recalibration of art, craft and aesthetic judgment that allowed

Voltaire to pronounce, “Good taste becomes an heirloom.”²⁷ It is if anything the expected outcome of promoting Luxury, for shifting value from the object to its newly construed regard allows well-conserved possessions from prior eras to be supplanted by the potentially endless acquisition of new and fashionable goods.

The *Director* also announces the demise of prior modes of actual aristocratic consumption. Compare the 1601 inventories of Bess of Hardwick, which tally the sum profusion of Chatsworth House items amassed through marriage and inheritance, acquired through trade and travel, and produced by the glaziers, chandlers, smiths and other craftsmen of the great house of Chatsworth itself. Textiles dominate, and attention given to these relatively ephemeral items stands as a measure of the expected longevity of more solidly constructed furniture. Bess charged heirs of her linens, “Bedding hanginges and other furniture” to take “speciall care and regard to preserve the same from all manner of wett mothe and other hurte or spoyle therofe and to leave them so preserved” to so to ensure their ongoing use.²⁸

The terms of the will preserve the material import of objects as markers of prestige as well as the not insubstantial capital investment they represent, and the value of many items is drawn precisely on an enduring, privileged recognition of appearances and the names of objects and their materials. The will, in short, reflects an attitude toward possessions that Goethe sought to revitalize in 1797, as he wrote,

Luxury, to my mind, does not consist in the rich man’s possession of many costly things, but rather in his possession of things of a shape he must frequently change to procure for himself a momentary pleasure and, above all, a certain respect. True wealth would then consist in the possession of such goods as are kept for a lifetime, which are enjoyed for a lifetime and whose enjoyment is more pleasurable the more knowledgeable one becomes.

Goethe summarized his attitude toward (French) luxury via a legitimizing Classical history. “As Homer said of a certain belt: it was so splendid that the artist who had fashioned it could rejoice his whole life long; likewise the belt’s owner could delight in it his whole life long.”²⁹ Goethe explicitly advocates an enduring, even lifelong attachment to individual objects, a stance in marked contrast to the fashionable acquisition promoted by Chippendale’s *Director*.

One additional aspect of the transition from aristocratic stewardship and inheritance to the broader arena of consumer desire and industrially fabricated goods is presented by Hume’s “Discourse on Luxury” (1758). While Hume is famously unaffected by the French concept of Luxury, he does allow that “the increase

and consumption of all commodities, which serve to the ornament and pleasure of life, are advantageous to society; because, at the same time that they multiply those innocent gratifications to individuals, they are a kind of *storehouse* of labour, which in the exigencies of the state, may be turned to public service.”³⁰ Industry is acknowledged as the work of countless anonymous hands, for even the case of Chippendale illuminates the spreading constellation of subcontracting of manual dexterity, mechanical proficiency, scientific knowledge, practical craftsmanship and other “expert” skills required for securing dyed fabric for upholstery work, glass for bookcases, and components for clocks.³¹ The *Director* is thus a means of introducing new designed works, preparing for the dictates of future fashions, and accommodating the anonymous labor that realized the estimated 30 million items produced during Chippendale’s lifetime from his illustrated plates of chairs alone.

Modern Histories of Design

Thomas Chippendale’s publications made fully realized collections of new and newly practical design both attainable and knowable. Chippendale himself emerged as a “genius,” in part because of his deliberate alignment with the *Encyclopédie* observance that the person of genius imagines more than he has seen, produces more than he discovers, and causes brilliant systems to be developed.³² Fully resonant with de Toqueville’s notion of “great personages,” the designer of genius remains a familiar structuring device for design histories and especially their popular culture offshoots. It appears in heroic epics as diverse as those represented by the 1949 *Time* cover story on Raymond Loewy through to the 2001–2004 televised advertising campaign for Buick. The former illustrated Loewy backed by a glowing cloud of inspiration and a gentle orbit of his consumer goods. The latter featured the dashing ghost of Harley Earl whispering styling tips into the ears of contemporary GM design team members. “The soul of Harley Earl, in the body of an SUV,” concluded the voiceover on a Buick Ranier commercial. Adulatory accounts similarly conflate Norman Bel Geddes’ work with his outsized personality, and find in Bel Geddes’ Broadway stage sets a ready metaphor for his later work in transportation design. His 1933 Chrysler Airflow was promoted as a composite of “design-style-art,” and the innovative double-page advertising format created for Cromwell-Collier in 1939 was hailed by Bel Geddes himself as “Heroic Advertising.”³³ As in Chippendale’s *cosmopolite* demurrals to Gentlemen of Taste, the designer is invoked as visionary and possession of his cars stands as marker and entry into this and other desired qualities: consumer desire as the gateway to Humes’ expansion of happiness.

Many design historians de-emphasize or omit the singular genius but preserve the economic underpinning of their eighteenth-century progenitors. An example is Nikolaus Pevsner's codification of national accomplishment at the Great Exhibition in which he

acknowledged international comparisons of manufactures and technologies showcased at London's Great Exhibition of 1851 as the watershed between nineteenth and twentieth century design.³⁴ Products presented in direct, decontextualized comparison with one another allowed for a potent demonstration of beauty drawn on technological lines. That the Exhibition was held in Joseph Paxton's unprecedented iron and glass Crystal Palace further heralded a new type of cultural production with possibilities beyond mere industrial capability.

A third historiographic model is presented by Siegfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948).³⁵ Giedion's explication of the role of design in Midwest American economic growth is only part of what this magisterial study accomplishes. Issued at the start of the postwar industrial boom, the book provides a thorough examination of the economic and historical ramifications of industrialization.

Giedion's account is insistent on its objectivity, and dense with interwoven facts and dates. Ptolemy, Voltaire, Adam Smith and Alvar Aalto rank no higher than the unknown and now-anonymous designers who perfected the cast iron process, the thresher, and the automated slaughterhouse sequences that allowed a post-war packinghouse to meet its daily quota of 60,000 head of hogs or cattle (246). It is in his description of live animals converted into meat that Giedion most intimately engages design as it transforms natural resources into consumer goods.

Design as a function of resources is the focus of "Mechanization and Death: Meat," a chapter dedicated to the American meat industry. Characteristic of Giedion's exacting research, the account begins with an overview of Haussmann's Central Slaughterhouse at La Villette and ends with a diagrammed discussion of artificial insemination as a means of ensuring a constant, uniform supply of cattle. In between are the incremental steps of transforming handicraft meat production into a continuous butcher's assembly line for processing livestock brought in via railroad and taken out as uniform packages under refrigeration. "How are the unpredictable contingencies that nature produces to be overcome by mechanical devices?" the chapter queries, a hypothetical question addressed through a mounting series of advances detailed over fifteen pages of text, illustration and diagrams. Industry may triumph over the natural

world, but consumption of that world remains immediate, literal, visceral. Each patented invention and its implementation is tempered by acknowledgement of its role within a complex process of consumption. Thus half a chapter describes how settled land put to grain created sufficient surplus to justify large-scale speculation in livestock, and the contributing factors that determined yield ratios of meat to be more favorable than that of alcohol. Multiple passages detail the short-term animal husbandry of transport and feedlots, seven photo-illustrated pages demonstrate precisely how an animal is killed as part of its entry into the realm of design, one describes a patented device from 1882 that slid carcasses “automatically, lying on their backs, one after another down an inclined plane, to be sawed into halves by a rotary cutter,” and six detail the challenges of removing hair, feathers and bones. The chapter periodically breaks its objective detachment to note the “crimson carpet of blood” that forms beneath suspended “naked carcasses.”³⁶ Giedion’s is the rare account that acknowledges resources transformed by design, and that engages the full impact of choices made in the social, economical, and technological life of designed products. In giving voice to the total costs and consequences of industrialization, it points toward a necessary undoing of triumphalist tales of technological and economic progress. It suggests a design history that might contribute to a turn toward sustainability.

Conclusion

Nearly three hundred years separate us from the initial Enlightenment narratives that prepared for industrial production and encouraged new habits of consumption. We are now at the brink of a third industrial revolution, the characteristics of which are yet to be determined. What is clear is industrial activity and consumption cannot be responsibly separated from their role in the depletion of fossil fuels, greenhouse emissions, and climate change. In the current crisis of insustainability, design can no longer be viewed solely in terms of luxury, comfort, aesthetics or the glorification of nation or individual designers. Nor are modes of design historiography epistemologically connected to European absolutism entirely appropriate for addressing global sustainability, especially in regard to the meteoric rise of consumption in China and India. The need for a new type of design history is clear.

And sustainability can be addressed through new modes of design history. Certainly the single word “Luxury” proved extremely effective in coordinating the massive changes of progressive consumerism for nearly three generations, and in instilling remarkably enduring attitudes toward consumer goods. Desire for an equivalent coordinating principle is at the heart of the Brundtland

Commission call for the creation of “new values to help individuals and nations cope with rapidly changing social, environmental, and development realities.” Much like the eighteenth-century *philosophes* who prepared for the first industrial age, prospective discursive authors of sustainability seek to change attitudes toward production, consumption and possession. What is at stake is the large-scale reconfiguration of global industrialism such that it is understood as the sum interaction between materials, systems, environments and users. While print media has lost its prior monolithic status in conveying information, and a heterogeneous readership can no longer be assumed, narrative remains a powerful means of fostering real change. An example is provided by Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and Hunter L. Lovins’ *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution* (1999). This work addresses sustainability through the socioeconomic underpinnings of global industrialism, and calls for economies based not on “the lifeless abstractions of neoclassical economics and accountancy but around the biological realities of nature.”³⁷ The authors use “nature” much as their predecessors used Luxury, and it serves as an especially apt model for structuring the interpenetrating complexities of sustainability. “Nature” also makes immediately comprehensible the concept of biomimicry, the fundamental re-imagining of “industrial systems on biological lines that change the nature of industrial processes and materials, enabling the constant reuse of materials in continuous closed cycles.”³⁸

Works such as *Natural Capitalism* and Giedion’s *Mechanization* explain design through a complex of decisions, processes, and consequences, critical factors often obscured by a focus on the gleaming newness of designed objects or the ingenuity of their makers. Incorporating their approaches into traditional modes of design historiography would follow Enlightenment goals of making the new understandable and thus broadly acceptable: Design history makes design process knowable. Here we recall Nietzsche’s call to the historian, for historiography is that rare thing that can insist on its factual objectivity as well as its temporal subjectivity. The “genuine historian must have the strength to recast the well known into something never heard before and to proclaim the general so simply and profoundly one overlooks its simplicity because of its profundity and its profundity because of its simplicity,” he writes.³⁹ It may well be possible, even necessary to embed not just information about but also the values of sustainability in our writing of design accomplishments, and to make sustainable design the new luxury.

Notes

1. Michael Kwass, ‘Ordering the World of Goods: Consumer Revolution and the Classification of Objects in Eighteenth-Century France’ *Representations*, no. 82, Spring 2003, p. 90.

2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. Jaucourt, 'France' in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, 1st ed., s.v. Reprinted in Denis Diderot, *Encyclopedia; selections [by] Diderot, D'Alembert and a society of men of letters*, trans., with an introd. and notes, by Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer, The Library of Liberal Arts Series, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965, pp. 119–121: 120.
5. Diderot, *Encyclopédia; selections [by] Diderot, D'Alembert and a society of men of letters*, 227–228. While the essay is usually attributed to Diderot, the translators note Saint-Lambert as its likely author.
6. Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *Harvard Historical Studies* 130, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 640.
7. Kwass, 'Ordering the World of Goods' p. 94, fn. 29.
8. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, 6th ed. London: J. Tonson, 1732, p. 68. Facsimile with commentary by F. B. Kaye printed by Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924, 1966.
9. Diderot, 'Detailed System of Human Knowledge: Understanding' from 'Preliminary Discourse' in *Encyclopédie*, reprint. in *The Encyclopédia: Selections*, ed. and trans. by Stephen J. Gendzier, New York, Evanston, and London: Harper Torchbooks, 1967, pp. 42–43.
10. Diderot, 'Art' reprint. in *Encyclopédia*, ed. Gendzier, pp. 58–66: 59; 66; 63.
11. *ibid.*, p. 65.
12. Eugen Weber, 'From 'Subsistance' to 'Habitat'' *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976, pp. 146–166. Weber notes the goal of improved *habitat* was not hygienic gain but social advancement, adding, "progress meant access to upper-class facilities—*embourgeoisement*" p. 160.
13. Beverly K. Grindstaff, 'Designing the *Mensch als Kunstwerk*: Kant, Hygiene and the Aesthetics of Health in Wilhelmine Germany' University of California, Los Angeles, 2004, pp. 89–92.
14. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 'On Art and Handicraft' (1797), reprint in *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader*, ed. and with an introd. by Daniel Leonhard Purdy, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, pp. 140–141: 140.
15. Goethe qtd. in Siegfried Unseld, *Goethe and His Publishers*, trans. Kenneth J. Northcott, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 170, no source citation. Original from Goethe's correspondence with Johann Peter Eckermann, Donnerstag,

- den 11. September 1828; citing own letter from 1801. See Hermann Friedrich Wilhelm Hinrichs, *Schillers Dichtungen nach ihren historischen Beziehungen und nach ihrem inneren Zusammenhänge: Und nach ihrem inneren Zusammenhänge*, vol. 1, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1837, viii.
16. Goethe, 'On Art and Handicraft' p. 140.
 17. See Mark Gelernter, *Sources of Architectural Form: A Critical History of Western Design Theory* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995, pp. 49–52; D'Alembert, 'Preliminary Discourse' reprint. in *Encyclopædia*, ed. Gendzier, 1–43: 3, and Jean Baudrillard, 'A System of Objects' *Selected Writings*, 2nd ed., Mark Poster, ed. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 16. Originally published in *Le Système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).
 18. Georg Simmel, 'Subjective Culture' (1908), reprinted in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. and with intro. by Donald N. Levine. The Heritage of Sociology series, ed. Morris Janowitz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, pp. 233–234. See also translator's note in fn. 1.
 19. Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6, pp. 710; 637; Elizabeth Goodstein, 'Style As Substance: Georg Simmel's Phenomenology of Culture' *Cultural Critique* 52 (2002), pp. 209–234. Unless otherwise noted, all research, translation and analysis in this section are from Goodstein.
 20. Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6, 638.
 21. Goodstein, 'Style As Substance': p. 224; Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6, p. 629.
 22. Baudrillard, 'A System of Objects' pp. 16–17.
 23. Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, rev. by Francis Bowen, ed. Phillips Bradley, New York: Vintage Books, 1945, p. 90. See also Hayden White, 'Toqueville: Historical Realism as Tragedy' chapter in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century* Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, pp. 191–229, esp. pp. 200–205.
 24. See Fiske Kimball, 'The Sources of the 'Philadelphia Chippendale'' *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum*, vol. 21, no. 104, June 1926, pp.183–193. "Besides Chippendale's, which reached a third edition in 1759–1762, there were those of [Robert] Manwaring, of Thomas Johnson, 1758–1761, of Ince and Mayhew 1759–1761, and of the Society of Upholsterers, 1760, in which all co-operated" (p. 185).
 25. Fiske Kimball and Edna Donnell, 'The Creators of the Chippendale Style.' In *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, May 1929, pp. 123; 124.
 26. Arthur Hayden, 'Introduction to Thomas Chippendale' *The Furniture Designs of Thomas Chippendale* London: Gibbings and Company, Limited, 1910, vi.

27. Voltaire, 'Taste' reprinted in Diderot, *Encyclopedia*, trans. Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer, pp. 335–340: 337; 340.
28. *Of Household Stuff: The 1601 Inventories of Bess of Hardwick* (London: The National Trust, 2001) 10–11.
29. Goethe, 'On Art and Handicraft' (1797), reprinted in *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader*, ed. and with an introd. by Daniel Leonhard Purdy, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, pp. 140–141.
30. Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts' in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, pp. 302–303.
31. Giorgio Riello, 'Strategies and Boundaries: Subcontracting and the London Trades in the Long Eighteenth Century' *Enterprise & Society*, vol. 9, no. 2 (June 2008): 268, fn. 103. See entire for discussion of subcontracting and the expanding consumer market. "In a world in which goods physically took shape through productive processes carried out in disparate places, through exchange and geographical transactions, the elaboration of a shared language and a vocabulary describing product specifications had fully developed long before the application of technology provided the physical capacity to create identical goods in the hundreds, thousands, and even hundred of thousands" (p. 260).
32. Saint-Lambert, 'Genius' reprint. in *The Encyclopedia*, ed. Gendzier, pp. 118–124: 122–123. See also Hayden, Introduction to *The Furniture Designs of Thomas Chippendale*, viii.
33. Christopher Innes, *Designing Modern America: Broadway to Main Street* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 163; 268–270.
34. Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Sources of Modern Architecture and Design*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1968, 1985.
35. Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* New York: Oxford University Press, 1948.
36. *ibid.*, pp. 235; 236.
37. Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution* Boston, New York and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1999, p. 9.
38. *ibid.*, p. 10. See also pp. 14–16.
39. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, p. 37.