



## De/re/materialisation

Anne-Marie Willis

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## EDITORIAL

# De/re/materialisation

**Anne-Marie Willis**

The theme of this issue, once again, connects back to the previous one – the inescapable question of design ethics. In the opening and conclusion of his paper in that issue, Cameron Tonkinwise cited philosopher of technology, Albert Borgmann’s arguments for a materialised ethics.<sup>1</sup>

As I was preparing that issue, **Albert Borgmann**, quite out of the blue, happened to submit a paper, which we are delighted to include in this issue, especially as it extends the examination of the relation between design, materiality and the ethical, as do the other two papers here by **Cameron Tonkinwise** and **Tony Fry**.

To set the context for this issue, here is a reminder of how the theme of de/re/materialisation was posed to prospective contributors:

How can the need to reduce impacts of products, production processes and services be reconciled with an ever expanding global consumer economy? When first put forward, dematerialisation and immaterialisation seemed like enlightened design strategies for reducing the environmental impacts of industrial cultures. Now, more than a decade later,

a more complex picture is evident, as the environmental benefits and cultural transformation of many of the favoured scenarios have failed to arrive (e.g., ‘the paperless office’). While the ‘per unit’ impact of many products has been reduced, frequently this is cancelled out by increases in the volume of production combined with a constantly expanding market. Other limitations have also been noted, such as ‘the rebound effect’ where savings are ‘spent’ elsewhere and ‘add-on’ rather than ‘substitution’ patterns of consumption. Then there are separate questions about the desirability (indeed, the sustaining qualities) of a good deal of ‘materiality’ for we embodied human beings – perhaps some things that have been dematerialised, need now to be rematerialised – including skills that sustain. Lastly, and most importantly, there are issues of social justice and cultural difference in any consideration of the provision of goods and services – sustainment cannot advance on the back of inequity.

It would seem that my brief has been well and truly exceeded. None of the three contributors are under any illusion that dematerialisation is some kind of ecological panacea. Quite the contrary, they seem to suggest that it is more likely to deliver impoverishment rather than enrichment and call for many things to be re-materialised.

Their contributions traverse three inter-connected aspects of de/re/materialisation: *environments*, *things* and *bodies*. Put over-simply, **Borgmann** focuses on environments of dwelling; **Tonkinwise** on the designed things with which we dwell, while Tony **Fry** is concerned about bodies in environments.

**Cameron Tonkinwise’s** paper demonstrates why an understanding of certain fundamental philosophical ideas is essential to comprehending the deeply rooted nature of what might at first appear as a straightforward symptom of the unsustainable – affluent people having too much ‘stuff’ and churning through it at a too rapid rate. He shows why earlier sociological accounts of ‘consumer society’ are inadequate and invites us to go back to Aristotle’s categories of matter, making and things, and to Heidegger’s reworking of these concepts. By unpicking these fundamental ideas, our world of instrumental technologies, perfectly manufactured finished objects and gadgets is *made strange* (something, I assert, that needs to keep on happening for increasing numbers of thoughtful people, especially designers, if change towards Sustainment is to occur). He argues that instrumentalism alone is not so much of a problem, for if it ruled totally, we would by now be well on our way to immaterialised environments, reducing impacts by substituting services for products and so on.

The problem, Tonkinwise argues, lies with *poiesis* (human making) and *techne* – the propensity to make finished and permanent things, things that aspire to stand outside and against time, even if their reason for being (made) is to satisfy fleeting purposes. The accretions of *techne* overlay and obscure, but do not displace *phusis* – that which is just there, which is marked by time, but which also has no completion. Could this become the basis of an entirely different kind of designing and making? Would we accept unfinished things? And, as Hannah Arendt and many other philosophers have acknowledged, if it is by making that human beings have made themselves as human (*homo faber*), is it possible to abandon making as we understand it? These are the important questions the paper deals with - the ideas are complex (more than I can indicate here) but really worth taking time over.

What the paper does very usefully, is to give a sense of the weight of ideas materialising over time to shape our dispositions towards our worlds of things, in a way that makes very convincing its conclusion, that “consumerism emerges as a fundamental inability to sustain things.”

**Albert Borgmann** deals with building as that which encloses body and soul, and which discloses meaning. He puts the hype about the dematerialisation of architecture (such as William Mitchell’s *City of Bits*) in a longer historical context in which the relationship between built form and information as a way of appropriating, ordering and disclosing ‘worlds’ has undergone major shifts, which certainly cannot be thought of in terms of evolutionary progress. In fact, his analysis suggests the reverse and he argues:

“Perhaps for the first time in the history of culture, the distinctive cultural accomplishment of an era, viz., information technology, cannot be located at the centre but must serve as a backdrop for what matters in our lives today.”

**Borgmann** is critical of “the opaque brilliance of virtuality” contrasting it with the “depth of texture” of natural and worked materials like wood, stone and cloth. Similarly, Fry evokes the varied textures of materials that still have contiguity with their sources (“leaves, timber, ash, the machined surfaces of metals, soil, rock, concrete, paper, seeds, flour”) in contrast to what children today are inducted into, “the sensory deprivation of a constantly expanding urban synthetic, mono-materiality.”

For both **Fry and Borgmann**, the relationship between human beings and materiality is not just about making things and built environments, it is as much about the making of the nature of human beings, physically and spiritually. And while neither, I imagine, would see the human as a fixed, unchanging entity, both have a sense of those valuable qualities and experiences that are under threat from a naïve embracement of immaterialisation.

**Fry's** 'Voice of Sustainment' essay draws attention to the skills, knowledge's and pleasures that are being erased by technologies of supposed disburdenment. He argues for design-led rematerialisation based around active physical and mental engagement with both given and made materiality. He ends with a series of hypothetical examples, put forward in the following spirit, which is an invitation to all DPP readers:

Rematerialisation is not an original idea, yet it is one that is still massively underdeveloped. Like a good deal of what is written in this journal, especially under the heading of 'the Sustainment' what is said is an invitation to thinking, appropriation and action across many practices. Always hopeful that responses will occur and that some will flow back to the journal the overwhelming realisation is that for anything to happen the ecology of ideas has to be continually nourished. In many ways this realisation, and the invitations associated with it, is at the core of DDP and its understanding of the importance of philosophy. So while accessing the accumulation of thought embedded in the history of philosophy is highly valued, the invitation to, and the sharing of, (new) thinking is viewed as an absolute imperative. Without question, rematerialisation is an idea that will take on a life of its own, in many forms, and to which DPP will return in the future for further conceptual elaboration and hopefully reporting examples of its enactment.

Anne-Marie Willis

**Note**

1. Cameron Tonkinwise, 'Ethics by design or the ethos of things' *DPP* 2/2004 citing: A. Borgmann 'The Moral Significance of Material Culture' in A. Feenberg and A.Hannay eds *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995; 'The Depth of Design' in R. Buchanan and V. Margolin (eds) *Discovering Design*, and Borgmann's *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.