MATERIALISM: THE SEARCH FOR SOMETHING MORE

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“Part of our troubles results from the tendency to ascribe to architects – or, for that matter, to all specialists – exceptional insight into problems of living when, in truth, most of them are concerned with problems of business and prestige. Besides, the art of living is neither taught nor encouraged in this country. We look at it as a form of debauch. Little aware that its tenets are frugality, cleanliness, and a general respect for creation, not to mention Creation.”

– Bernard Rudofsky (Rudofsky, 1964)

– Life is complicated – because of this, specialists derive narratives as readings for the living. Too often, these narratives are simplified to guide erroneous expectations of conformity within the collective. Ironically, those who adopt these influenced experiences put the very collective they are a part of at risk. They devalue the well-being of community by privileging a singular expression of reality. Materialism is one of those readings. The product of an enterprise culture, materialism as a narrative for living ignores the complexities entailed by reality. In spite of the infinite number of readings that exist, simplified narratives attempt to claim that life is simple – they try to be maps for living. And like most maps, they inevitably become unreliable for their original purpose. Living is not a matter of business and prestige. Materialism is a matter of business and prestige. The modern states’ preference for simplified narratives endangers the individual’s sense of self. By diverting attention from the art of living, the modern state has overused materialism as a form of governance. This thesis intends to discover if a new reading of materialism can be found as a form of liberation. The work found within this document is the culmination put forth over the last three years. Consisting of three major sections, the first section is critical as it grounds the entire discussion by defining materialism through the review of literature.
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MATERIALISM: THE SEARCH FOR SOMETHING MORE

i  Design Problem

This thesis is examining the relationship that exists between creativity and innovation in an effort to find out if a new reading of materialism can be found by reengineering the understanding of its very nature. The value systems used when assessing innovation and creativity in a design solution is often viewed as subjective and undermines the credibility of design as a profession. A new reading of materialism could provide a meaningfully new way to value design that neutralizes the influence of business and prestige therefore enhancing the collective well-being.

ii  Justification of the Problem

“We are in a time now where universal vocabularies don’t work anymore. We are in a period of great variety and complexity in terms of different kinds of cultures. All of these different kinds of cultures are, if anything being more differentiated because of a heightened means of communication that we have. This is a period where we like to emphasize the differences among people in a hopefully harmonious way. And architecture should reflect these differences in cultures.”

– Robert Venturi (Blackwood, 1984)

The contemporary understanding of materialism should create concern within the design professions because it undermines the value of design in the eyes of the consumer. Experience of reality and narrative in design influences how individuals value creativity and innovation, resulting in a subjective view of the role of design. Fully comprehending materialism is a tall task because the term is ambiguous. It must be understood, materialism is the product of an enterprise culture, yet it does not benefit the targeted demographic of the enterprise culture’s. If design is meant to be used as a tool for understanding reality, a clear and succinct reading of materialism is necessary. Professor of Architecture at the Pratt Institute, Catherine Ingraham
stated, “Space is, for the most part, completely indifferent to what fills it.” ¹ (Blackwood, 2003)
To paraphrase Ingraham, in terms of experience, design, itself, is not indifferent to how space is filled because the problem of life takes on the activity of relentlessly producing meaning. The ambiguity that surrounds materialism is due to the subjectivity that exists when assessing creativity versus innovation in design. This subjectivity is what causes the notion that design is not important when compared to objective fields of study like math and science. This thesis is the search for something more in how materialism is understood.
iii  Development of the Research Idea

This project technically began in December of 2013 as an undergraduate research proposal focused on the question of whether a narrative could be derived from the modifications made by occupants to suburban households as their needs changed. Many of the ideas present in the undergraduate work paid close attention to the lack of appreciation mass residential design received from the academic and professional realms. Examining factors such as, design, construction techniques, community planning, politics, regional variation, cultural influences, and idiosyncratic history, the work quickly became unreasonably complicated and hard to digest; however, the effort put forth was not in vain. What became clear was the importance of narrative in design and the impact of materialism on the value systems of the consumer. These two factors ultimately became the focus of this thesis.

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for their original purpose. Living is not a matter of business and prestige. Materialism is a matter of business and prestige. The modern states’ preference for simplified narratives endangers the individual’s sense of self. By diverting attention from the art of living, the modern state has overused materialism as a form of governance. This thesis intends to discover if a new reading of materialism can be found as a form of liberation. The work found within this document is the culmination put forth over the last three years. Consisting of three major sections, the first section is critical as it grounds the entire discussion by defining materialism through the review of literature.

Section 1 Defining Materialism: The Self, Being, and Phenomenology

When we look around at contemporary consumer culture it is clear that people are constantly bombarded with messages that needs can be satisfied by having the right products. Feel unsafe on the road or in your home? Buy the right tire or lock. Worried that you will die young? Eat this cereal and take out insurance from that company just in case. Lawn look bad in comparison with your neighbor’s? Buy this lawnmower and fertilizer. Can’t get a date? Buy these clothes, this shampoo, and that deodorant. No adventure in your life? Take this vacation, buy that sport utility vehicle, or subscribe to these magazines. (Kasser, 2002)

How does one define materialism? One could try to describe it as the essence of consumer culture. But this description leaves numerous loose ends. What is meant by consumer? How does one explain the culture of consumption? Can the essence of a topic be understood without more information? Looking strictly at an observational reading, materialism could be seen as over valuation in the acquisition and/or possession of material objects. To this end, numerous questions still remain about what causes this fixation and multiple plausible explanations exist. The argument could be made that materialism represents the difference between needs and desires reflecting the motives of the individual who seeks out the latter. This description gets closer to a hedonistic understanding, yet it fails to discuss the intangible value of what desired objects provide the individual. These understandings work at a surface level but do
not describe materialism fully, or provide a succinct outline to begin an academic dialogue. To better understand materialism it would be smart to first consider it from a human perspective.

**A Priori Materialism**

“Almost all of us place at least some importance on possessions, money, and image, but materialism takes hold of the center of some people’s value systems. As a consequence, their experiences will be changed.” (Kasser, 2002) Through the use of the term, experience, Kasser directs the reader to focus on the human perspective when describing materialism. Experience is a point of commonality where associations are made between materialism and the “American Dream” without fully unpacking either term. This section, then, should be read as a review of literature on how materialism is perceived theoretically as opposed to how it is understood through observation.

Much like materialism, the “American Dream” is a platitude regularly treated as if its understanding were proceeded by a theoretical understanding, or *a priori*. This is not acceptable when multiple interpretations exist to describe its very essence. The assumption of meaning for this platitude, by those who choose to use it as such, disallow the scientific process to provide disclosure. How does one succinctly define this topic then? Even the Library of Congress struggles to provide a definitive answer. A major reason is that defining a dream is essentially defining a singularity determined by the individual and not the collective. Here, dream is referring to the individual expectations of an experience to be found in America. Since America is not perceived solely by the individual, but instead by the collective, an interpretation or reading of a dream must be defined through the reading itself.

In his book, *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams states “America has always been a land of dreams, ‘the land of promise.’ …If one man built a house in the woods, the Indians
would probably soon tomahawk him and his family, but if a dozen families settled in a group, there might be comparative safety.” (Adams, 1931) This is a prime example of the singularity of the “American Dream” (and a bit of political incorrectness). The notion that one individual’s dream could infringe upon the dream of another highlights the interpretive nature that everyone, not just the Library of Congress, grapples with when defining the “American Dream.” It must be noted that an Adams quote is used on the Library of Congress’ website which fails to point out Adams’ opinion the Native Americans were not equal experience holders with respect to their “Anglo American neonative” counterparts, a term associated with the late Hal Rothman. The Adams quote used here and the one used by the Library of Congress, come from the same text, yet two very different pictures are painted of what the “American Dream” looks and feels like to different individuals. This is noteworthy because it points out the potential discrepancy existing in the different readings of an experience. The quote chosen for this work from *The Epic of America* begins to address a non-monetary valuation of material objects. In this particular instance, the household is not being discussed as shelter from the elements, something that is a fundamental human need for survival. It is instead being discussed as a writ of proprietorship.

The subtext of Adams’ quote raises the notion that one type of individual has actual power over another individual without explanation of why. In other words, a discussion of perceived inequality between two individuals is being overlooked: the native and the neonative. The suggestion is one party has superiority or supreme ability to influence experience. Adams’ description unapologetically states, the neonative experience of reality holds priority over the native. Based solely on the context, Adams claims that experience is a matter of the proprietorship of reality itself. By suggesting there is a difference between two individuals with different perspectives, a reading could be found where the souls of two individuals are not equal. The term “soul” can be understood as the philosophically immaterial aspect of being a conscious individual. While this reading may appear to be off topic, it can be understood in this manner
because both the native and the neonative, alike, have similar physical needs for survival (e.g., air, water, food, and shelter). This reading is, in fact, a discussion about materialism. If two individuals appear to have identical physical needs, yet a supposition of difference is being found, it becomes clear a comparison is being made analyzing incorporeal aspects of existence; providing a reading where reality, as an experience, is owned entirely by the soul.

An issue arises when the assumption is made that reality can be a soul-proprietorship because it is a blatant misrepresentation of the truth. Reality is an operationalized construct. Under constant influence from the physical and metaphysical, reality is an environment existing due to an infinite set of arbitrary perceptions of itself. It is everything and nothing at one moment: depending on the perspective, the observer or the observed. For this very reason, reality as an environment cannot be owned by the soul; it owns the soul. To assume the perception of an environment is or should be homogeneous, as suggested by Adams, is to assume the soul owns reality. How can this be if the soul is the very thing that influences the experience of reality itself? Answering this question deserves an exploration this work does not intend to unpack; however, raising the question is meant to emphasize how access to reality for survival of the physical being is necessary for the soul to be realized. Contrary to what Adams’ description of the “American Dream” states, no one soul is superior or inferior to another and deserves equal consideration. A conversation of this depth is necessary to fully understand materialism because it exposes a psychological component.

“Although no one disagrees that all people have certain physical needs (e.g., air, water, and food) that must be met to ensure survival, some social scientists stop there, saying psychological needs are either impossible to prove scientifically or do not exist.” (Kasser, 2002) While proving or disproving the necessity of psychological needs can be daunting, explaining how they can begin to influence behavior shines a light on how these needs shape experience.
Ultimately, a risk is taken when aspects of an experience are read as necessary or unnecessary to the understanding of what constitutes a need versus a desire. This critical reading of Adams’ explanation of the “American Dream” is pertinent because it explains why a priori assumptions about any topic are helpful in providing a point of reference when navigating an experience, as well as, requiring further knowledge for a more accurate reading. The differences between the expectations of experience for the individual and collective neonative Americans, described by James Truslow Adams, makes clear the expectations of experience can change based on behavioral factors like grouping.

In his work, *Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change*, Psychologist Albert Bandura discusses the individual’s cognitive position of expectations of experience and the methods used to influence and alter said expectations of experience. He describes self-efficacy in terms of individual motivations and behaviors and how they are derived from the cognitive activities. The process of making behavioral decisions, like grouping, offers clues to the motivations of the individual and how they perceive the future. “The capacity to represent future consequences in thought provides one cognitively based source of motivation. Through cognitive representation of future outcomes individuals can generate current motivators of behavior.” (Bandura, 1977) Behavior like grouping can then be seen as an aid to assist the individual in processing information.

Bandura lays out basic elements involved in the processing of information when the individual is determining the potential of their own self-efficacy. These elements frame an understanding of how the individual can be influenced socially, positively and negatively, ultimately changing the outcome of their future experiences, a critical element being vicarious experience. “People do not rely on experienced mastery as the sole source of information concerning their level of self-efficacy. Many expectations are derived from vicarious
experience.” (Bandura, 1977) One begins to understand that the socialization and observation help shape an individual’s behavioral decisions without experiencing an observed scenario first hand. Furthermore, “Vicarious experience, relying as it does on inferences from social comparison, is a less dependable source of information about one’s capabilities than is direct evidence of personal accomplishments.” (Bandura, 1977)

A dichotomy is exposed regarding reality and the differences between environmental and individually processed influences on the behavioral decisions of individuals. These influences could more easily be explained as the differences between physical reality and mental reality. To exist in physical reality, the individual requires physical needs, as stated by Kasser. To exist in mental reality, the needs of the individual are understood by way of the needs of the soul (e.g. internal, emotional, and social stimulation). In explaining self-efficacy, Bandura navigates this dichotomy of needs between physical and mental reality through understanding what influences human behavior. The actions observed by an individual influences their perception of what they stand to accomplish. This point touches on the intangible value of what desired objects provide the individual. When read with the same critical eye used to read Adams, one grasps Bandura makes clear this “less dependable” value cannot be omitted entirely when formulating a perception of experience. From here the a priori definition of materialism can be formed as the motivations that drive the self-efficacy of an individual and their value system used to achieve a perceptual expectation of reality. As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis aims to address whether a new reading of materialism could be found – to do this, multiple perspectives must be considered for a term’s understanding to be reengineered, transforming its very nature.
A *Posteriori* Materialism

“Every region of objects, according to its subject matter and the mode of Being of its objects has its own mode of possible disclosure, evidence founding and its own conceptual formation of knowledge.”

– Martin Heidegger (Heiddeger, 1976)

Heidegger uses this understanding of how knowledge of objects are formulated to explain the difference between Ontic sciences and Ontological sciences; a working definition of Ontic sciences is offered where a theme is made “of any given being, which in a certain manner is already disclosed prior to the scientific disclosure.” (Heiddeger, 1976) Ontological sciences should be understood as different from Ontic sciences because the former “demands a fundamental shift of view: from whatever is to Being. And this shift nevertheless keeps whatever is in view, but for a modified attitude.” (Heiddeger, 1976) Ontic sciences have a tendency of objectification yielding a prescientific attitude toward being. Considering materialism as a construct of objectification, it is assumed to be substantiated with real facts and figures that can be quantified, tested, and analyzed with results capable of leading into modifications to physical reality. Certainty is assumed the acquisition of an object will change the experience of the individual acquiring the object. Unfortunately, individuals who use this construct when navigating reality do not wait for scientific disclosure to prove or disprove the benefit of acquisition. This impatience results in a misreading of the value of objects in general. By looking at materialism ontologically, the attempt is being made to understand the phenomenological structure omitted in the *a priori* definition, which as a reminder is, the motivations that drive the self-efficacy of an individual and their value system used to achieve a perceptual expectation of reality. The goal herein is to derive an *a posteriori* definition of materialism. To address the phenomenon that is materialism and any impact therein on the modern state of society, scientific disclosure is necessary to frame the phenomenological discussion.
Tim Kasser is a research psychologist studying the role of materialism on well-being. In his book, *The High Price of Materialism*, Kasser discusses at great depth the constructs and structures comprising materialism from an ontological standpoint that is grounded in scientific method. “Kasser reviews a formidable body of research that highlights what for most of us is a quite counter-intuitive fact: even when people obtain more money and material goods, they do not become more satisfied with their lives, or more psychologically healthy because of it.” (Ryan, 2002) Much of the work discussed in his book, uses an assessment tool Kasser refers to as the “Aspiration Index.”

First used in 1993, the purpose of the Aspiration Index is meant to determine the type of goals an individual might have for their future. This assessment tool came in the form of a questionnaire where participants were “presented with many different types of goals and asked to rate each one in terms of whether it is not at all important, somewhat important, extremely important, and so on.” (Kasser, 2002) Participants were gauged on how they rated the importance of financial success, self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling. The assessment analyzed feelings of positive well-being and negative sense of distress. The analysis of the results would then be used to determine “how important, or central, the value of financial success was for each person relative to the other three values. The results from two different studies, one looking at 300 college students and the other looking at 140 eighteen-year-olds, suggested: “Individuals who were focused on financial success, compared with nonmaterialistic values, were not adapting to society well and were acting in rather destructive ways.” (Kasser, 2002) The work conducted in 1993, raised further questions about what factors impact the psychological health of the participants. Revisions were made to the Aspiration Index to include other factors influenced by consumer culture.
The revised assessment tool was then used in a 1996 study. Using a random sampling of 100 adults from a “diverse neighborhood” in Rochester, New York, the study aimed to determine if the “results would be the same in adults as they were in college students and teenagers.” (Kasser, 2002) The findings of the new study appeared to substantiate those found in the original.

“Existing scientific research on the value of materialism yields clear and consistent findings. People who are highly focused on materialistic values have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic pursuits are relatively unimportant. These relationships have been documented in samples of people ranging from the wealthy to the poor, from teenagers to the elderly, and from Australians to South Koreans. Several investigators have reported similar results using a variety of ways of measuring materialism. The studies document that strong materialistic values are associated with the pervasive undermining of people’s well-being, from low life satisfaction and happiness, to depression and anxiety, to physical problems such as headaches, and to personality disorders, narcissism, and antisocial behavior.”

– Tim Kasser (Kasser, 2002)

These findings suggest the current perception of materialism is harmful physically, but also mentally. The expectations of narcissists, then tend to be self-serving and can be viewed as the product of consumer culture. “Social critics and psychologists have often suggested that consumer culture breeds a narcissistic personality by focusing individuals on the glorification of consumption (e.g., ‘Have it your way’; ‘Want it? Get it!’)”. (Kasser, 2002) If materialism impacts the well-being of individuals, can correlations be made to the collective well-being? Rather than strictly analyzing the personality of narcissists, the focus should be broadened to include the role of culture.

In his work, Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology, Phillip Cushman states, “The Self embodies what the culture believes is humankind’s place in the cosmos; its limits, talents, expectations, and prohibitions.” (Cushman, 1990) While the work of Cushman does not explicitly use the term, materialism, it consistently alludes to the essence of the a priori definition of materialism put forth in the previous section.
"The material objects we create, the ideas we hold and the actions we take are the consequences or ‘products’ of the social construction of each particular era. They are cultural artifacts. However, these artifacts are not only the expression of an era. They are also the immediate ‘stuff’ of daily life, and as such they shape and mold the community’s generalized reality orientation in subtle unseen ways. Consequently they inevitably reinforce and reproduce the constellations of power, wealth, and influence within their respective societies."

– Phillip Cushman (Cushman, 1990)

The role of culture on the perception of self becomes clear; the individual is no longer seeking physical needs that offer survival. The individual is influenced by the collective culture to seek out desires, not as a means of satisfaction, as a means of orientation for a sense of self providing a purpose for survival. Kasser breaks down the line existing between survival and satisfaction of a person in a succinct way describing the research used to identify said needs. By asking the question “what happens to the quality of our lives when we value materialism?” (Kasser, 2002) Kasser found, “the more materialistic values are at the center of our lives, the more our quality of life is diminished.” (Kasser, 2002) Therefore, the materialism being referred to here should be considered by the reader as the ideology of an enterprise culture with materialistic values – fame, money, and image. 

“Broad historical forces such as industrialization, urbanization, and secularism have shaped the modern era. They have influenced predominant psychological philosophy of our time …” (Cushman, 1990) The term “psychological philosophy” can be read as the idolization of fame, money, and image by which attaining of specific level of ideal existence in society stands to improve the physical and mental well-being of mankind; but actually results in diminished physical and mental well-being. The idolization described ultimately redirects the attention of the individual towards understanding how they fit into the culture instead of how their sense of self is perceived through culture. Heidegger describes culture as what, ‘‘completes’ humans by explaining and interpreting the world, helping them to focus their attention on or ignore certain
aspects of their environment, and instructing and forbidding them to think and act in certain ways.” (Heidegger, 1977)

The *a posteriori* definition of Materialism can then be understood as a decontextualized collective power structure yielding a culture of individuals with a destabilized sense of self. Cushman can be cited in substantiating this definition through the main thesis from *Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a historically situated psychology*, “the current self is constructed as empty, and as a result the state controls its population not be restricting the impulses of its citizens, as in Victorian Times, but by creating and manipulating their wish to be soothed, organized, and made cohesive by momentarily filling them up.” (Cushman, 1990) By framing a historical understanding of Post-World War II America, Cushman describes the self as empty because the change in “terrain has shaped a self that experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning. It experiences these social absences and their consequences ‘interiorly’ as a lack of personal conviction and worth, and it embodies the absences as a chronic undifferentiated emotional hunger. The post-World War II self thus yearns to acquire and consume as an unconscious way of compensating for what has been lost: It is empty.” (Cushman, 1990)

The importance of this section is twofold, and consists of establishing the phenomenological understanding of materialism as a construct with two alternate definitions equally correct in their own right but unresolved comparatively. A dichotomy between a singular and collective expression of materialism is exposed by finding common ground in the need for being and the self to fully realize both expressions. Unfortunately, these two expressions require a new “coexpression” that cannot be derived by simply merging the two terms. Deriving the *a priori* and *a posteriori* definitions require the use of separate fields of study, research, and terms to engineer materialism as a construct. The *a priori* definition of materialism, focused on a
singular expression as the motivations that drive the self-efficacy of an individual and the value system used to achieve a perceptual expectation of reality. A broadened understanding of materialism, the *a posteriori* definition is found to be a collective expression understood as a decontextualized collective power structure yielding a culture of individuals with a destabilized sense of self. The process known as Reontologization represents the path to reconciling this duality of materialism.

Reontologization is a term associated with the philosopher, Dr. Luciano Floridi, an Oxford Philosopher of human and computer studies. This neologism is defined as a “a very radical from of reengineering, one that not only designs, constructs, or structures a system anew, but that fundamentally transforms its intrinsic nature.” (Floridi, 2007) Based on Floridi’s work, this concept seems well-suited for reengining a new understanding of materialism. He describes our experience of objects and reality as failing to resolve the rapid growth found in the field of information technology (IT). “Our view of the world (our metaphysics) is still modern or Newtonian: It is made of “dead” cars, buildings, furniture, clothes, which are noninteractive, irresponsible, and incapable of communicating, learning, or memorizing.” (Floridi, 2007) These “dead” objects have an inability to convey the knowledge used in their own creation to the very individuals attempting to understand Creation itself. With the coining of reontology, Floridi provides a means to interpreting concepts like experience and narrative in an entirely new way.
Section 2  The Role of Experience and Narrative in Materialism

“Thinking about architecture as part of our social and economic environment brings us to think about opinion-shaping, power, identity, and experiencing the world. Examined in a socioeconomic context, architecture today no longer constitutes merely a part of marketing our environment; it has become the essence of it. If architecture is a business produced under economic conditions very similar to the ones governing much of mass culture, then the principles of branding, when applied to architecture, entail the expansion of architecture’s potential as a strategic tool in today’s competitive marketplace.”

– Anna Klingmann (Klingmann, 2007)

In the early 2000’s, the United Kingdom was wading through less than favorable economic conditions. A solution needed to be found in order to move their economy forward. Sir George Cox, the former Chairman of the British Design Council, wrote a review about building upon the strengths of the UK through valuing design. The work stated, for every £1 spent on design a small business had the potential to increase revenue over £20 and increase profit up to £4.(Cox, 2005) This created a view of design with tangible value appealing to the British Government; however, design possesses intangible value equally significant in impacting the an individual’s experience, a fact which is explored in this section. While there is no one universal definition of design, due to the broad spectrum of the term, Sir George Cox, gave this powerfully simple definition which has finger prints that cross disciplinary boundaries:

“‘Design’ is what links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Design may be described as creativity deployed to a specific end.” (Cox, 2005)

Individuals use design, according to Cox, as a means to an end, or solutions to a problem needing to be overcome. His definition gets at something deeper than fetishized products by suggesting design has a direct relationship between creativity and innovation. This relationship can more easily be explained as an ideometric relationship.

Ideometry is a term coined by Dr. Luciano Floridi, defined as “the morphological study of such significant patterns resulting from a comparative and quantitative analysis of the field of
knowledge.” (Floridi, 1995) Therefore, ideometric relationships are connections between two separate ideas that then express a new kind of significance. Objects created with a strict focus on creativity represent what one could consider subjective design solutions. Objects that are strictly concerned with matters of innovation represent objective design solutions. When married, creativity and innovation yield objects that exist somewhere between objective and subjective design solutions and are dependent on the purpose or function. The function of an object provides a way to read the design’s balance of creativity and innovation where one can be critical of it based on levels of practicality and attractiveness.

Consider the example of a scale. On one side of the scale is creativity and on the other is innovation; the pivot point of the scale being an individual’s design process. The creator of a product can add or subtract as much innovation and/or creativity as they want, but it is crucial for attention to be given as to how the two sides balance one another. Being cognizant of this balance point, and manipulating the pivot accordingly, informs how one experiences a design in reality. Is it good design or bad design? Is it valuable? The point being made – design responds to the evolving needs of society, which is made up of many different cultures and even more unique individuals. The variation in value of a design solution is dependent on how it is ultimately experienced by users.

Within this discussion exists a subtext about the perceived value of design. Design possesses tangible value and intangible value, both of which have the ability to significantly improve experiences of reality. One example of the intangible value of design comes from the principal designer for GE Healthcare, Doug Dietz. Creating diagnostic imaging equipment for more than 20 years, Dietz had continually pushed the envelope of innovation to make better more sophisticated diagnostic imaging equipment. However, after witnessing the anxiety and tears of a child, due to the experience had when interacting with one of his MRI machines, he realized the
need to focus on more than design innovation. Dietz described a statistic about the sedation of children, because of the visual appearance of the MRI machines, children going through them had to be sedated about 80% of time just to be scanned. This added to the insurance costs of the scan due to the necessity of an anesthesiologist being present for the procedure. (Dietz, 2012)

Dietz was impacted so greatly by what he learned that he assembled a team of experts to figure out how the diagnostic imaging equipment could be less traumatizing in hopes of reducing the amount of children needing sedation for a scan. Rather than completely redesigning the equipment Dietz had spent years creating, the team came up with a design solution focusing on the experience in route to and during the procedure. Children at a local daycare were consulted and treated as equals in the “re-design process” with a significant voice and meaningful insight. By empathizing with the target demographic, the team came up with the idea of applying decals to the equipment and adding murals to the walls of the scanning room to create a themed experience for the children. Creating a narrative that detracted from the serious nature of the medical procedure taking place, a less traumatizing experience for the small patients was created. The seemingly insignificant change to the experience reduced the number of patients needing sedation in one hospital to only two patients over a two year period. (Dietz, 2012) This is a simple example of the impact of narrative in a design solution being deployed in the hopes of finding intangible results, decreasing the fear and trauma of a medical procedure; although, tangible results were found by decreasing the need for anesthesia to perform the procedure. Reassessing the task at hand from neutral positions provided the team new insights. While this is a positive example of how narrative influences the perception of design, there are instances where narrative is less-than-positive. Design is responsible for what surrounds us in the highly tangible built environment and also the highly intangible experience of reality that is dependent upon the self.
Architect and author of the book Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy, Anna Klingmann discusses what can be learned from passive experiences found in the Disney model of totally pre-determined environmental experiences. Some examples of these environments include Disney cruise liners, Disney World, and the Disney owned and operated planning experiment of Celebration, Florida. These Disney models represent completely scripted narratives where participation is very much passive. The importance of an individual experience disappears in favor of uniform collective experience. While this may be acceptable for environments one chooses to interact with, it becomes problematic for environments that one interacts with out of necessity. Completely scripted experiences of reality offer very little active participation.

“Rather than regarding the inherent multiplicity of lifestyles, attitudes, and social practices as an impediment to a community-adhering context, architectural practice ought to capitalize on these diverse qualities by creating open-source scenarios that provoke rather than prevent the active engagement of people in the scripting of their own narratives.”

– Anna Klingmann (Klingmann, 2007)

Viewing architecture and design as a matter of business and prestige, the use of narrative becomes a key factor in manipulating the economy through experience. Benefiting the creators of the narrative, this experience becomes problematic for the collective because their voice is reduced down to a matter of how one chooses to spend their money. This experience becomes an adulterated version of Bernard Tschumi’s description of narrative in architecture as “an attempt to look at architecture not as a knowledge of form but rather as a form of knowledge. Use architecture just as writers use literature, movie makers use cinema, that is as a tool in order to understand the world that we live in.” (Tschumi, 1982) Tschumi’s description is adulterated, in this instance, because architecture is not being used as a tool for understanding reality – it is being used as a means of governing reality for profit and prestige. Design is being legitimized through an experience economy and is being viewed through a business-oriented frame of mind, as
Bernard Rudofsky stated, using universal vocabularies which are no longer viable, just as Robert Venturi stated. Having lost concern with the art of living in exchange for the art of entrepreneurship, design finds itself in the shadow of materialism. Benefiting from an enterprise culture, the success found in business-oriented architecture and design is devoid of substance because the user occupying this type of built environment is, in fact, empty themselves. How is this the hallmark of success?

To conclude, the contemporary understanding of materialism should create concern within the design professions because it undermines the value of design in the eyes of the consumer. The experience of reality and narrative in design influences how individuals value creativity and innovation, resulting in subjective views of design as a profession. Understanding materialism as a priori knowledge versus a posteriori knowledge becomes a glaring issue that cannot go unresolved. The enterprise culture that produces materialism is not benefiting the very demographic it depends on to exist. Reontologizing materialism becomes necessary if design is going to be used ethically as a tool for understanding reality. Reconciling the points made about materialism in this thesis stand to liberate the individual and collective experience of reality.
Design Issues

An issue likely to be raised with the ideas put forth in the first two sections of this manuscript has to deal with whether or not reontologizing materialism reconciles the ambiguous nature of materialism. Two working definitions were provided, a priori and a posteriori. The potential exists for a new reading of materialism to be found that does not completely rewrite the history of the term; although, determining how to reengineer materialism could easily be viewed as an attempt to abandon the idiosyncratic history making up the enterprise culture that produced materialism. The purpose of this thesis is to merely determine if a new reading of materialism could be found, not determine the new reading itself. Parallels exist between the ideas presented in this thesis and the ideas discussed by deconstructivists.

“Far from abandoning history, deconstructive thinking is all about unearthing old ghosts tracing the way that systems are inhabited by the very things they appear to have left behind. It seems to me that it is a long time since architects tried to appeal to radical newness with a straight face…How could architects speak a language that they do not already share with people they are talking to?”

– Mark Wigley (Eisenman & Krier, 2004)

Additionally, the analysis of materialism found in this work could be critiqued as having an anti-establishment agenda. For comparison, Phillip Cushman’s work, Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology, calls into question the motives and foundation of contemporary Psychology. There are numerous works that attempt to refute the ideas put forth in this specific work by Cushman because it challenged the practices of psychology as a profession. The backlash against Cushman for contesting the motives of his profession is yet again similar to criticism of the deconstructionist movement. Frank Gehry, a notable deconstructivist, was and is criticized for creating “self-indulgent” work. “There is this backlash that this is not architecture, this (is) self-indulgence, which is disgusting to me. I’m sure every action is going to get that kind
of backlash in a reaction.” (Blackwood, 1984) Being hyper-critical of one’s field of study is not necessarily anti-establishment. Provocative statements have to be made from time to time to bring others to the discussion.

Lastly, the issue could be raised as to whether materialism can or should be influenced by the concepts of ideometry and reontologization, considering they are derived from a field less concerned with physical reality than digital reality. The case was made to explain how materialism goes beyond physical reality bleeding into mental reality. Floridi’s neologisms are focused on taking on new perspectives when understanding old forms of knowledge. “The radical change brought about by the third age of IT and the Internet is that an ideometric approach is now becoming an increasingly easy option for any researcher.” (Floridi, 1995) Considering materialism is propagated through the digital world of social media, online shopping, and news/entertainment media a connection can be found suggesting materialism could benefit from reontology. This connection does not guarantee that accurate reengineering will occur. Simply put, looking does not hurt. “The new patterns that emerge from the application of quantitative and comparative queries may turn out to be meaningful and interesting for reasons that are completely extraneous to the initial ordering principle.” (Floridi, 1995)
Restatement of the Research Problem

IF: Design can be described as “creativity deployed to a specific end” and the resulting design solution should be viewed as something more than a fetishized object based on the criteria of innovation.

THEN: the relationship existing between creativity and innovation should be malleable providing different levels of practicality and attractiveness in objects. A new reading of materialism could then be used to guide design solutions which tease out the subjectivity that results in materialism.

PROBLEM: The value system used when assessing innovation and creativity in a design solution can be viewed as subjective and undermines the credibility of design as a field of study. This subjectivity is often influenced by materialism, the product of an enterprise culture. Existing in an experience economy, the individual’s sense of self has become empty through the consumption of design. This is the result of materialism being used as a form of governance. An objective system of valuation for design is needed to reontologize the understanding of materialism in a way that does not undermine the value of design.
Research and Design Implementation

The commentary about materialism in the first two sections of this manuscript are meant to become more than mere thoughts. The creation of an object or product becomes the means of implementing these ideas in a visible way. A national furniture design competition was used as justification to physically explore ideometric relationships through design and the possible reontologization of materialism. The competition was seeking out original chair designs capable of mass production. Sir George Cox’s understanding of design as, “what links creativity and innovation,” (Cox, 2005) was used an underlying principle influencing the competition submission. As stated, the function of an object provides a way to read a design’s balance of creativity and innovation where one can be critical of it based on levels of practicality and attractiveness. The following section is documentation of the built chair submitted to the competition. The attempt was made to look at this project as more than creation of a fetishized object. As a furniture piece, the submitted chair aimed to be affordable to a broad demographic and exist as a high quality well-crafted product worth maintaining. While the finished product is a fully realized chair capable of mass production for the retail market, its influences encourage that a new reading of materialism be considered by the consumer that is not restricted to furniture pieces alone.
Section 3    The Skiff Side Chair

This project was born out of the intention to produce a furniture piece with respect for maker and user alike. Clean lines and frugal appearance were pursued to create a piece equally aware of its surroundings as it is of itself. Heavily influenced by the ideas found in this manuscript, the Skiff side chair became a made-to-order product. Made-to-order products strip away the issues of instant gratification, a the calling card of the enterprise culture. The very nature of made-to-order products can be found embedded in the ability for consumer customization found in the design of the “Skiff.” The production process of each component was streamlined to the point where a completed unit could be ready for shipment within a week of an order being placed. Decisions to reduce the number of machine processing steps makes modifying material selections feasible, providing the consumer options for customization while simultaneously preventing the producer from having to incur the overhead of storing materials, un-finished pieces, and finished pieces. The decisions affecting the production process were focused on maintaining a small-scale by limiting production runs. Additionally, consumers have the potential to specify material preferences to be used in each individual unit providing a moment of active participation. Completely intentional, these choices are meant to offer the consumer a sense of connection to their piece of furniture, as it would be made per their request. The Skiff is a modest design with numerous influences. Establishing ideometric relationships between wooden boat building, skateboard deck production, and furniture making, the product’s design drew off of these influences’ attention to craftsmanship, material honesty, and ability to be mass produced.
The gesture of the Skiff began with its prominent “S” shaped leg (referred to as the Spar herein). The impetus for the Spar was to reduce the machine processing steps needed to produce individual components. A leg should be able to act as a backrest support and vice versa creating a form that has no incorrect orientation. After determining the formal gesture of the Spar, an initial handmade prototype was made featuring a teardrop section-profile. This yielded an unnecessarily complex horizontal support. This teardrop shape went against the desire to reduce machining process and was ultimately omitted. In the early sketches, the seat and rear leg (Sail) was precisely coped to receive a Spar on both sides. The best way to utilize the coping method was to simplify the Spar section profile to be a parallelogram.

This simplification was validated through the use of a 3d printed model. The scale model was designed with a Sail that featured arbitrarily derived compound curves meant to evoke a sense of movement present in the original sketch. Confidence in the feasibility of making a full-scale wooden Sail was taken from knowledge of veneer lamination used in skateboard deck production. While compound curves are common place in skateboard industry, the concaves found in skateboards are not as severe as those called for in the design of the initial Sail. For this reason, the
need to prototype a full-size wooden Sail became necessary. The arbitrary compound curves of the initial 3d printed Sail shape proved to be too severe for the lamination process.

The final iteration of the Sail features a single sharp curve. This new shape yielded a structurally sound Sail design with clean lines. It became clear to realize the full potential of the original design concept, production of an actual Sail would be most effective. To that end, the design decision was made to eliminate the coped structural connection point between Spar and Sail in exchange for an iteration of a one piece stretcher (Stay). The two Spars are married to the Stays using a traditional mortise and tenon joint. The resulting assembly is referred to as the Rigging that supports the Sail and backrest (Jib). The three components are fastened together with six machine screws and six furniture screw inserts.

The proportions of the Skiff were informed by traditional Shaker furniture which often features smaller than standard dimensions. This influence established an understated proportion that lends itself nicely to individuals who are shorter than the design standard 6’-0” tall. The Sail and Jib feature rounded edges, a standard detail in the skateboard deck production, resulting in a seat edge that does not cut into the users’ leg when seated.
Image 5: Top: Axonometric Drawing, Bottom: Elevation Drawings.
Image 6: Top: Spar Joint Type Drawings, Bottom: Rigging and Sail Detail Photo.
Image 7: Top: Stay Production Process Drawing, Bottom: Rigging and Jib Detail Photo.
Image 8: Front Profile Photo.
Image 9: Side Profile Photo.
Image 10: Rear Profile Photo.
Image 11: Front Perspective Photo.
Image 12: Front Perspective Leather and Polished Aluminum Chair.
Image 13: Top View Leather and Polished Aluminum Chair.
vii Terms

*A Posteriori* materialism - The decontextualized collective power structure yielding a culture of individuals with a destabilized sense of self.

*A Priori* materialism - The motivations that drive the self-efficacy of an individual and their value system used to achieve a perceptual expectation of reality.

Deconstruction - A theory used in the study of literature or philosophy which says that a piece of writing does not have just one meaning and that the meaning depends on the reader. (Merriam-Webster, 2015)

Deconstructivism – A postmodern architectural style influenced by the theory of deconstruction

Enterprise Culture – A blanket term representing a capitalist society in which entrepreneurship is encouraged.

Ideometry – The morphological study of such significant patterns resulting from a comparative and quantitative analysis of the field of knowledge. (Floridi, 1995)

Ideometric relationship – Connection between two separate ideas that express a new kind of significance by being associated together for comparative purposes. (Floridi, 1995)

Ontic Science – Any given being, which in a certain manner is already disclosed prior to the scientific disclosure. (Heiddeger, 1976)


Reontologizing – a very radical from of reengineering, one that not only designs, constructs, or structures a system anew, but that fundamentally transforms its intrinsic nature. (Floridi, 2007)

Self-efficacy – a term associated with psychologist, Albert Bandura, it refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments. (Bandura, 1977)
1. This quotation is taken from a conference at Columbia University in 2003. (Blackwood, 2003)

2. The library of congress uses this Adams quote on their website "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

3. Accessed in February of 2015

4. Rothman died in 2007. He was a well-respected author, historian, and professor of American West History (Rothman, 1998)

5. This is not to be confused with a sole-proprietorship which deals with the simplest form of an enterprise.

6. Bandura cites four key elements to processing information for self-efficacy: Enactive, Vicarious, Exhortive, and Emotive. (Bandura, 1977)

7. With regard to sources of self-efficacy this reference was used to explain how modeled behavior can influence change in behavioral patterns.

8. This sentence is a paraphrasing of Kassers words about materialism (Kasser, 2002)

9. Cushman continues this thought to explain how the modern era saw the development of professions that perpetuate the idea that the self is incomplete in some way.

10. Klingmann is speaking directly about why the association of architecture with commerce does not degrade the profession. She is making reference to Umberto Eco’s work Mass Appeal in Architecture.

11. In this specific citation, Klingmann is discussing the challenges of providing an “active engagement, social inclusion, and self-realization” for users of the built world without over determining experiences and being as exclusive as the Disney Model. (Klingmann, 2007)

12. The second half of this definition is a paraphrasing of Heidegger defining the word ontology.
References


  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jajduxPD6H4


