

Reaching beyond environmental history

In academia today we live in an ever increasingly fragmented world. Although there has been much emphasis on interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and even postdisciplinarity, there have also been tendencies to divide our work into smaller and smaller bits. The field of history, which in essence is the study of everything in the past, can be split into its many constituent parts, such as economic history, political history, cultural history, labour history, technological history and environmental history, just to name a few. The subfields tend to take different kinds of questions as their chief concern or look for answers with different sets of source material or approaches. Of course all of them also overlap.

Some of the subfield junctions have been hotbeds for environmental history scholarship. For example, the intersection of histories of technology and environment is well established within international scholarship, especially through the scholarly interest group Envirotech. Environmental justice work has often relied on both labour history and environmental history. These synergies between subfields means that environmental history does not just take place at environmental history conferences or in environmental history journals. For example the list of the winners of the American Society for Environmental History's best article prize outside of their own journal reveals a plethora of other subfields of history in which great environmental history is published.

It is therefore important that environmental historians actively search out connections with sibling fields. The workshop featured in this Notepad is one such activity, co-organised by an environmental historian and a design historian, to explore the potential of environmental histories of design. The exchanges at this type of event strengthen both environmental history and the other subfield – we have much to learn from each other. I encourage us all to continue the conversations.

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Environmental Histories of Design

Design and designers hold an ambiguous place in contemporary environmental discourse. They can easily be blamed for causing environmental problems, but also possess key competences for potentially solving those problems. Despite this longstanding centrality of design to environmental discourse, and vice versa, deep and systematic 'environmental histories of design' are few

and far between. While environmental historians have increasingly explored technology and material culture as active agents in discourses of environmental change, design is seldom explicitly addressed. At the same time, design history faces a major challenge in accounting for environmental concerns in the history of design discourse.

The workshop *Environmental Histories of Design*, hosted at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich in June 2015 and arranged by Professor Kjetil Fallan (University of Oslo) and Associate Professor Finn Arne Jørgensen (Umeå University), explored the common ground emerging at the intersection of these two fields of inquiry. The workshop brought together 15 international scholars from different fields, including design history, fashion studies, history of technology, environmental history, and science and technology studies. The resulting meeting between disciplines was productive in many ways. Eleven pre-circulated papers with ample time for discussion allowed us to historicise visions of sustainability, both within and without the design community.

Chronologically, a majority of papers focused on the period when modern environmentalism went mainstream, especially the 1960s and 1970s. This was not only a period when designers turned a critical eye towards their own profession, but also when other actors promoted new understandings of the design-environment relationship. Larry Busbea (University of Arizona, USA) presented a fascinating study of the development of Soft Control Material around 1970, an experimental material technology that combined insights from cybernetics and psychiatry with environmental awareness. While it was patented, SCM never made it to commercial applications – it remained more idea than substance. Elena Maria Formia (University of Bologna, Italy) took us deep into the meeting between the radical Italian design community and the environmental and countercultural movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Focusing on the reception of key international works such as *The Limits to Growth*, *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, *Silent Spring* and others, Formia explored the establishment of the Global Tools design group and the role of design magazines in building an ecological awareness in Italy. Michelle Labrague (Stockholm University, Sweden) examined the articulation of environmental values in the fashion industry through a study of the American sportswear brand Patagonia, in particular the company's early focus on 'clean climbing'. Using 'slow fashion' to reframe and contextualize sustainable design, Labrague argued that modernism's idealism as a social experiment was transported and recodified within the environmental movement of the 1960s. Ida Kamilla Lie (University of Oslo, Norway) examined Viktor Papanek's interaction with Scandinavian design students in the last half of the 1960s, and how this pushed Papanek to refine his thoughts on the social responsibility of designers. Gabriele Oropallo (University of Oslo, Norway) presented us with some insights into how the environmental crisis manifested itself in design culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, focusing in particular on the Ulm school of design and the International

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Council of Societies of Industrial Design. Oropallo argued for the importance of further historicisation of the interplay between historical trends in design culture, and the evolution of the environmental context.

Some of the papers extended the discussion of design and environment in a longer historical timespan. Livia Rezende (Royal College of Art, UK) directed our attention to the cultural politics of raw materials and rawness in natural resources through her study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century International Exhibitions and World Fairs. Using Latin American wood as an example, she argued that nature and raw materials have been devoid of agency within design discourse. Another set of papers explored the contemporary material cultures of recycling and e-waste, extending through the twentieth and even into the twenty-first century. Heike Weber (University of Wuppertal, Germany) questioned the by now well-established story about the life cycles and planned obsolescence of consumer goods, challenging the traditional story that the life cycle of consumer items has become shorter and shorter in the twentieth century. Arguing that product lifespans need to be in the foreground of any environmental history of design, Weber suggested venues for deep empirical research into this subject. Jennie Olofsson (Umeå University, Sweden) explored the intricate and sometimes contradictory relationship between design, repair/reuse and recycling in relation to digital technologies, offering us different ways of thinking about current consumption patterns, obsolescence and subsequent measurements of discarding.

A final set of papers explored the relationship between material objects and cultural representations. Margot Lystra (Cornell University, USA) looked at how the development of new representational techniques in freeway design led to a reimagining of freeways as living infrastructures – hybrid natural/technological complexes of interacting and unpredictable components. Here we returned to the idea of modernism, as Lystra demonstrated how 1960s environmental design gradually abandoned methods that engaged the agency of nature as something close at hand and intimate to the act of making. Christopher Neumaier (Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam, Germany) brought technological design into the discussion with his study of diverging design paths to ‘clean’ diesel exhaust emissions in the USA and in Europe in the 1970s–1980s. Neumaier demonstrated how ideas of the environmental performance of cars are thoroughly embedded in national cultures, as cars with similar technological solutions could be seen as ‘non-polluting’ in Germany but not in the USA. The design of environmental technologies is linked to very specific historical and national contexts. Finally, Ingrid Halland Rashidi (University of Oslo, Norway) provided us with a close reading of *The Green Designer* exhibition organized by the UK Design Council in 1986, and how the green designer embraced the idea of the green consumer shopping for environmentally friendly products. Halland Rashidi encouraged environmental

historians to use both exhibitions and designed objects as ways of studying and historicising the human-nature relationship.

The workshop had no ‘mainstream’ environmental historians as participants, although one of the organizers is an environmental historian, which we think demonstrates the lack of attention to design questions among environmental historians. The papers and rich discussions in the workshop certainly demonstrated a wealth of fruitful perspectives that environmental historians should take notice of. At the same time, design historians have a tendency to focus on the internal development of the design profession, which in this case led to a strong emphasis on the 1960s and 1970s in many papers.

Some key research questions arose during the workshop. How can design history engage with issues of environmental controversies and sustainable development and thereby move beyond its conventional societal significance? Can engagement with the environmental histories of design enable more resilient futures? We plan to continue to engage with these questions in two planned publications: select revised papers from the workshop will be submitted to a special issue of *Journal of Design History* and participants will contribute to a volume of *RCC Perspectives* (pending approval).

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