Chapter 10
Designing for Meaning: The Designer's Ethical Responsibility

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10.1 Introduction: The Crisis in Contemporary Culture[1]

Our contemporary "first" world societies seem to be drifting in a state of cultural crisis. This has been notable for the past several decades. As planning theorist John Friedmann (1993, p. 482) put it sometime ago:

> What we are living through in the final decades of this [20th] century is something altogether different. It is nothing less than the collapse of the Euclidean world order of stable entities and common sense assumptions that have governed our understanding of the world for the past two hundred years.

Rather than abating, this crisis seems to have become chronic and perennial, though often ignored. It relates to profound changes in how we see the world (our conceptual frameworks or paradigms), in how we come to know (epistemology), in how we decide what we ought to do (morality or normative ethics), and in how we find meaning in our lives.

The first wave of change came from the modernist replacement of religious faith by science as foundational source of knowledge and justification. This led to scientism – the claim that the scientific method was the only source of knowledge – and the dominance of a mechanistic and instrumental mode of thinking. The second wave[1] was the postmodernist questioning of the very possibility of any sure foundation for knowledge, leading to a loss of the modernistic faith in science (Harper and Stein 2006). The result of this challenge was an erroneous[2] (but widespread) view that there is no longer any way to justify our beliefs and values. Our contemporary (economically) advanced societies seem to be under the sway of a confused combination of modernist "instrumental reason" and postmodernist "soft relativism," leading to a narrow and self-absorbed search for "authentic identity" and a loss of vigor in political culture (Taylor 1991).

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These changes were accompanied by dramatic shifts in the way objects are designed, made, sold, and consumed, which in turn has altered the way we live our lives. Handmade, locally, regionally, or nationally produced objects which were connected to our "place" once added meaning to our lives. They have been largely replaced by mass-produced machine-made objects designed for global markets. Disconnected from place or culture, they no longer contribute any significant meaning to our lives.

Our technologically sophisticated "first" world which has eventuated fails to provide artifacts, buildings, and environments which facilitate human flourishing. We believe that the design professions (e.g., industrial/product design, architecture, urban planning/design, regional/environmental planning) have played a significant role in creating or exacerbating this crisis of meaning; the results of their work have contributed significantly to alienation. While designers cannot resolve this crisis alone, we believe that they do have the potential to add meaning to our artifacts and environments and the ethical responsibility to do so.

The first section (10.2) traces the alienation and loss of meaning in our artifacts and environments, with changes in the technology of production and the ascendancy of the mechanistic world view. The second section (10.3) traces the roots of the instrumentalist, scientistic world view to the scientific aspect of the Enlightenment. The third (10.4) presents the humanistic view, also rooted in the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the authentic experience of the autonomous person. It explains how this view is not in conflict with the scientific view, and advocates a new emphasis on designing and planning for meaning. The fourth and final section (10.5) gives some ideas regarding designing and planning for meaning at different scales, ranging from the house to the natural environment.

10.2 Contemporary Culture and Alienation

The meaning of a designed object or environment to its user can be considered on a *continuum*. At one end is an object handcrafted by its user or designer. In 1800, most consumer products – vehicles (horse-drawn), tools, hardware, houses, furniture, furnishings, clothes, and linens – were made locally or regionally or within the consumer's own country. Particularly outside large cities, many products (including homes) were handmade by the user, or by someone known to them. At the other end of the continuum is an object designed and produced in a completely mechanized process (as described below).

10.2.1 The Mechanistic Shift

A great shift began with the introduction of the factory c.1800 and the development of the industrial city by c.1850. (This shift came later in North America.) In the

early 1900s, the shift was accelerated by the mechanized assembly line. Over the next 50–60 years, production was progressively more mechanized. Products were still designed by persons but more and more were mass produced. An increasing number of products came from further away, as transportation, communication, and refrigeration technologies enabled goods to be shipped over much longer distances.

Over the subsequent 50–60 years, the ever-increasing speed and sophistication of computers introduced, and then broadened the scope of, computerized design and computerized production. Thus, not only production but also the design process itself become more and more mechanized. In addition, information and communication technology, abetted by low transport costs (particularly inexpensive oil), allowed production to be globally dispersed. Today, few of our products come from our locale, region, or country. A large proportion are imported, often assembled from components manufactured in several different countries. Almost *none* of our products are handmade or self-made: handcrafted goods are now high-status luxury goods. Over time, as the chain linking designer and user lengthened, the once-intimate link between them has been weakened or completely sundered.

On our continuum of meaning, the opposite end to handcrafted would be reached when the product is designed by a computer algorithm. Then the user experience is the antithesis of the experience of a handcrafted object. Only slightly less disconnected is a design by a person using a computer. Just as disconnected to those affected are government policies, plans, and decisions made by faceless functionaries following rigid sets of rules, which is more common as organizations become larger, more bureaucratized, and more mechanistic (Hummel 2008).

10.2.2   Mass Production and Consumerism[3]

Fashionable mass-produced consumer products are slick, sleek, shiny, bright, and perfect. But the illusory nature of their perfection rapidly becomes apparent as their colors and styles go out of fashion. Clothing (particularly "fashion") is probably the epitome of transient perfection. Close behind are electronic products and appliances – computers and peripherals, cell phones and tablets, TVs, stereos, video and music players, radios, and household appliances. These products offer no opportunity for users to feel any sense of participation in their creation, nor to experience any authentic identification with them.

With mass production, the maximization of shareholder profit requires large customer bases for the same (or similar) product sold in world markets; they generally cannot have any qualities connecting them to place or culture. While they have extrinsic value because they are useful, and perhaps in style, these products have no *intrinsic meaning* to us.

Within this production system, designers are far removed, both physically and culturally, from users. Their designs reflect neither cultural nor local differences (Badke and Walker 2007). Product designers are largely oblivious to the dehumanizing

effects their designs have on users. In any event, when roles in the design, production, and marketing process are specialized and divided, no one feels responsible. Each person thinks "It's not *my job* to give the consumer a sense of meaning."

Manufactured products are increasingly disposable; so-called consumer durables become technologically or stylistically obsolete even before they wear out. Few are cost-effective to repair. When they cease to function, we replace them. And we have little compunction about discarding them, because the product *is* out of style and we don't want to be seen as "dated." These types of products are the ones we feel no authentic relation to and dispose of most readily. Although recycling has improved, landfills are filled with these objects which objectify us.

10.2.3   Alienation and Dehumanization

Badke and Walker (2007) assert that

> Western societies are hooked on consumption*,* and this exhibits similar traits to other addictions such as alcohol and nicotine. As consumers, we seem never to be satisfied. We make a purchase and "get our hit", but the thrill soon wears off, and we return, again and again, to consumer more… we are constantly told that the latest product will bring us satisfaction, happiness, and fulfillment. (*ibid*)

They argue that both consumers and designers need an examination of their values and lifestyle akin to 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous.

In general, the search for meaning has been preempted by a search for efficiency – for "the one best way" (Ellul 1967). This reification of "efficiency" has altered the way we see ourselves, our relationships, our artifacts, and our environments. The resulting products and environments do not contribute to meaningful and authentic lives, lives where we feel in control. When a mechanistic, reductionistic approach is taken to design or planning, the likely outcome is an environment that is alienating. When a person is surrounded by such environments, "finding himself [sic] nowhere outside himself, he can find himself nowhere within" (Scruton 1979, p. 245). Users/occupants are in danger of becoming alienated persons whose "activity is that of a body in the grip of a machine, not of a rational agent acting out of a sense of value. In his [sic] own eyes he is what he conceives himself to be in the eyes of the world – a means, not an end, an organism, not a man" (*ibid*).

Once we might have thought of ourselves as being in control of our physical world, using products and inhabiting buildings and environments which express our values. Now we are in danger of losing our full humanity, becoming objects expressing the mechanistic worldview of modernism/scientism.

Design, according to styles, or fads, or abstract universal principles (e.g., modernism or other "universal" design approaches, single-use zoning, sustained yield), does not establish any connection with users. The modernist International Style deliberately sought to divorce the building from any connection to its context – physical or cultural. The ideal of modernism was a building which functioned like a machine; Le Corbusier (1923) famously declared that "a house is a machine for living."

Designers should ask themselves: Is a life lived inside a machine a meaningful life? Or is it more like the nightmare that Chaplin visualized literally in the movie "Modern Times" when his character is enmeshed in the gears of a giant machine? Most people desire experiences that are genuine/authentic (the opposite of Nozick's experience machine discussed in 10.4.6).

In the early 1950s, Levittown (the first "mass-produced" or "corporate" suburb) extended this lack of meaning and identity to the family home in order to minimize the production cost and thus increase the potential market. This new technology rapidly spread across North America during the 1950s. Along with other factors (government mortgage guarantees, government-funded urban highways, cheap gasoline), it widened the availability of the "American Dream."

10.2.4   Trivial Identity and Meaning

Many North Americans do not seem to identify strongly with categories which carried significant meaning to previous generations (e.g., religious affiliation, race, ethnicity, service club, bowling league). Instead, they often attach greater meaning to their physical environments, and the ownership and consumption of artifacts and products. This increases the impact of design on their lives.

A major goal of *marketing* is to exploit the need for meaning by manipulating potential buyers into feeling a superficial sense of meaning and identity from their purchase of products. Increasingly, we derive our identity from the products we buy, the spaces we inhabit, and the activities in which we participate (Sparke 2006). Advertising invites buyers to acquire an identity by consuming a *brand name* product: wearing Calvin Klein or Nike, driving a BMW or a Mustang, drinking a whiskey that is "handcrafted," etc. And we are invited to share the supposed taste of our favorite athlete or celebrity by using a product endorsed by them. Motor vehicles were among the earliest sources of ersatz identity. In the 1950s, North American males often viewed themselves as "Ford men" or "Chevy men." Each vehicle's advertising strove mightily to convince buyers (who were then mostly male) that their car would attract the most beautiful woman.

Marketing also attempts to lure consumers into competitive consumption, in which products are purchased in order to position them favorably in comparison to others in their social group (Lansley 1994). Marketing often suggests that certain products are associated with an exclusive lifestyle – purchasing them expresses good taste and aligns you with an elite lifestyle. This is rather ironic, considering the necessity of blandness for mass-produced products, but the "higher-end" products are distinguished by additional features and an appearance of higher quality.

The idea of consumerism in general is promoted by the concept that each of life's problems can be solved by purchasing the appropriate product. In fact our existence would be satisfying and complete "if only we bought the right things" (Oskamp 2001). Another irony is that fashion cycles are intended to ensure that any such satisfaction will be transitory by creating *dissatisfaction* with the things we already own.

Charles Taylor views the satisfaction of self-absorbed forms of individual expression by the "consumption of quick, shoddy, replaceable commodities" (Taylor 1991, p. 6) as a "loss or decline, even as our civilization develops" (*ibid*, p.1). Our conceptions of progress and innovation become shallow and unreflective. Our modernist technical focus has made us expert at doing things well but uncertain about why we are doing them. Perhaps we should stop and reflect on questions like "What is the point?" Are we adding any real value to our lives with all our consumption?

In order to understand what is happening here, we need to look at where our culture has been, why it is in a perennial crisis, what are the factors contributing to the crisis, where it might be headed, and what is the designers' responsibility in this situation.

10.3   The Instrumental and Mechanistic Worldview

10.3.1   The Origins of the Crisis[4]

The various professions which practice design arose in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the development of modernist ideas in the eighteenth century. The "Enlightenment project" challenged the old premodern order, where religion provided an absolute foundation for certain knowledge (truth) and justification of all kinds – empirical, moral, aesthetic, and religious. This single foundation gave the premodern worldview unity and coherence. Everything and everyone had a fixed place (defined by birth) within the divine order: "This hierarchical order in the universe was reflected in the hierarchies of human society…at the same time as they restricted us, these orders gave meaning to the world and to the activities of social life" (Taylor 1991, p. 3).

For premodern persons,

> the great cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris was…not simply an object, a pile of stone and glass artfully arranged. It…was an extension of their collective existence as humans, or perhaps a projection of their being, a reaching up to God by man and a simultaneous reaching down to man by God, as in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel. Men and women wore it…like a cloak…and it exalted their existence, in ways most of us can no longer even imagine. (Rowland 1999, p. 59)

Their shared worldview gave a unified *meaning* to their existence, their experience, their artifacts, and their world.

By the end of the seventeenth century, skepticism and the questioning of tradition, custom, and authority were shaking this foundation, with the claim that science could provide an alternative unshakable foundation for knowledge. This augmented the effects of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, which challenged the doctrines, rituals, and ecclesiastical power of the Roman Catholic Church and its claim to be the only path to God. By the end of the eighteenth century, advances in scientific knowledge were being applied to technology (leading to the

"Industrial Revolution"). The entire social, political, and religious order was challenged by radical ideas, disseminated by a new technology – the printing press. The unity of the premodern view became more and more eroded.

Two key aspects of modernism[5] led us to the contemporary situation: science and humanism. These two aspects point in directions which are often seen as being in conflict.

10.3.2 Science and Scientism

Science replaced religion as the foundation of knowledge about the world. Science claimed to produce an *objective understanding* through the observation of regularities. The *scientific method* provided a procedure for determining which regularities are *causal.* This method specifies a sequence of activities[6] that *legitimize* or establish empirical knowledge. Scientific explanations were very successful in serving human purposes, by enabling the manipulation and (apparent) control of the physical world.

The success of science led many modernists to inappropriately expand what they believed the role of the scientific method should be. They proclaimed the scientific method to be th*e only* method for determining what is true. Their claim that all claims to knowledge (religious, social, moral, aesthetic) must be translated and *reduced* to hypotheses that can be tested using this method. Language that cannot be translated into scientific language (so that its claims can be falsified empirically) is held to be meaningless. Habermas (1984) has called this misapplication of the scientific method "the fallacy of scientism": the claim that science and its method is the *only* source of knowledge.

Adherents to scientism applied the Newtonian idea of the "clockwork universe" (Dolnick 2010) to the analysis of society, seeking to develop "metanarratives" – universal theories that explain social reality in a universalizable and deterministic way.[7] The study of persons, their interactions, and their societies became known as "social science." Over time, ordinary people (nonexperts) started to accept the reductionistic *assumptions* made by social sciences as accurate descriptions of reality.

Over more time, many people come to view the assumptions as *normative*. For example, empirical economics assumes the "economic man," one who maximizes his own self-interest, generally (long-term net) happiness, by the consumption of goods and services which satisfy his desires. Initially, no claim was made that this was an accurate or holistic description. Now it is taken as normative in several ways. One is the use of benefit-cost analysis to make government decisions. The other is more pernicious: the critique of behavior which does not fit the assumption. If your actions do not fit this "model," there is something wrong with you. You are "irrational." This subtle slide from the descriptive into the normative is often completely unrecognized.

10.3.3 Scientism and Design Professions

One result of applying scientism to practical decision making is a sharp distinction between fact and value and between means and ends. Rationality is limited to *instrumental* rationality: finding the best means to given ends. This narrow stipulative definition of rationality has had a pervasive impact on all realms of life:

> Ethically, modernism is *utilitarian* – the most scientist approach to morality, that reduces it to a cost-benefit calculation… Politically, the modernist form is *representative democracy*, with its sharp bifurcation of politics and administration. Organizationally, the modernist form is *bureaucracy,* with its emphasis on hierarchical structure, routine and instrumental rationality. All of these taken together form a fairly consistent and coherent world-view… This world-view still dominates a good deal of institutional planning practice, and is increasingly influential in the "third world" as various "first-world" (or western or northern) agencies assist it to "modernize" at a frenetic rate. (Harper and Stein 2006, p. 5)

Professionals arose as the *experts* who used the best scientific knowledge (not available to the ordinary person) to select the best means, without regard to the ends. Because rationality (evaluation or critique) of ends or values is ruled out, professional design education has been primarily a matter of conveying *technical expertise* (constrained by codes of professional ethics).

10.4 The Humanistic View

In order to understand the potential for designers to contribute to meaning, we need to understand the importance of artifacts, buildings, and environments to the authentic meaning of persons' lives. This requires an understanding of the humanistic view, which is in sharp contrast to the scientistic view. The "liberal" or humanistic aspect of the Enlightenment can be traced back to the ideas of John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Jefferson. The core belief is that the *autonomous* individual person is the source of value and the appropriate object of moral (ethical) and political concern. This is the aspect of modernism that society and the design professions lost with the growing dominance of instrumental scientism. We believe it is worth preserving, and that designers and planners have an ethical responsibility to assert its importance against the dominance of the mechanistic view.

10.4.1 Particular Event, Many Descriptions

The scientistic view creates much confusion when it tries to *reduce* all accounts of a particular event to a scientific one. For example, thinking is "nothing but" brain function, and thus displaces humanistic accounts of intentions and choices. Descriptions are general, not particular. There can be a variety of different, consistent descriptions of a particular event. Thus, we may provide a set of descriptions

from what we will call a humanistic perspective (the perspective of a "person" as defined below). These may be called "social constructions," if you like. There is a common scientistic misconception that a social construction cannot have an independent existence, nor be real, nor authentic. We argue that this is not true. The existence of nature or wilderness, for example, is real and authentic, even though its existence depends on the character of certain relations with persons. An object or an environment may have both a character in relation to persons and an independent physical existence. Recognizing the truth of both descriptions in no way denies their identity nor their reality.

A particular *event* can be legitimately *described* in *many* different ways (using different conceptual frameworks). For example, humans can be described in a humanistic way as persons (with intentions) or in one of many scientific ways as animals (behaviorally or physiologically) or as collections of molecules, atoms, particles, etc. One account (e.g., intentional) is not reducible to another (e.g., behavioral). Nor is one account (e.g., scientific) superior to (more objective, more real than) others. The *choice* of appropriate account is contingent on purpose or *interest.* Why are we describing the human being(s)? What is the problem we want to address? What kind of intervention are we contemplating? The question of which account is appropriate depends on how well it serves our interest or purpose. The question is *not* how well the concepts represent, or correspond to, the "real world" (Rorty 1981).

A shift to a new description is *not* the result of induction or empirical generalization. It requires a *conceptual* shift (a new conceptual framework). So, my arm going up (a particular event, under a particular description) can be described in a causal way as a physiological activity. Or it can be viewed as supporting the election of a president, because my arm going up can be described as "a vote" using the *conceptual frame*, not of physiology, but of political democracy, which is humanistic, intentional, and relational. If your interest is in the election, then you should think of the behavior as that of a being having intentions, beliefs, hopes, and ideas, that is, a person who is fully human (in the sense just discussed).

Other ways of describing this key distinction are internal vs. external, or intrinsic vs. extrinsic, or meaningful vs. empirical, or intentional vs. causal. A relation is *internal/intrinsic* if that relation requires an intellectual act. That is, we must *know or understand* that with which we have an internal relation (Scruton 1979). This kind of relation is *meaningful, value laden.* The relation is *not* merely an *empirical* one, which can be captured by *causal* explanation. When a relation is merely *causal/extrinsic,* that relation is one between things: object and object. When a relation is *intrinsic,* it is one between subject and subject or between subject and *meaningful object* (i.e., meaningful to the subject).

Again, this is not to deny that there are two-way causal relations between ourselves (as members of the species Homo sapiens) and the natural environment. We affect the natural world and it affects us. We emit particulates and gases into the atmosphere, which in turn cause innumerable effects on our lives, such as smog, acid rain, and global warming. These impacts are appropriately described in the causal language of science (biology and ecology). But our relation to that natural world is

more than causal; it is also *meaningful* and, as such, is *value laden,* including moral and aesthetic (and for some, religious and spiritual). It involves how we think about, or conceive of, our environments and objects in them (Stein et al. 1999) and has implications for the way we treat them. Furthermore, internal relations are *normative,* in that they imply *standards*; we appeal to these standards in order both to under-stand that to which we relate and to evaluate it. Thus, we are using a normative framework if we describe our emissions as "pollution" or their effects as "negative." The term *authenticity* is used to evaluate the nature of this kind of a relation (10.4.5). To be authentic in our sense, a relation must be (at least in part) internal (*ibid*).

10.4.2 The Person

According to Kant (1785), the value of the individual person is a "transcendental deduction" from the fact that knowledge requires the ability to (i) make *judgments,* via the application of disparate concepts to experience (empirical reality) and (ii) *reflect* on the object (our self) which engages in the process of judgment making.

This ability, to reflect on our own process of judgment, leads to self-awareness – knowledge of our "self" as distinct from all else and as an enduring entity through time. This self is not the object of perception, but the *subject* of perception, judgment, and action. This awareness of the subjective self allows us to (i) form a concept of ourselves through time as something of *value*; (ii) generate a long-term, enduring *concept* of our *own life* as *meaningful*; and (iii) formulate *plans* which are intended to implement this concept of our own life.

A necessary condition of formulating this concept is that the self must endure through time. *Memory* of the past and some sense of the future are essential. A meaningful self-concept is rooted in the past and extends into the future. It is radically different from an empiricist concept of the self that behaves on impulse or in reaction to its environment. The reason that persons are the source of value and the objects of moral concern is that a choice of a means to achieve a goal *matters*; it makes a difference. The idea of a choice being valued is intelligible only if the choice is consistent with our own self-concept; the choice must be reflective and critical. Thus, the Kantian conception of a person is a being[8] which (i) is thinking, aware, and *self-conscious* over time; (ii) *intentionally* formulates goals and acts to attain them; (iii) is capable of appreciating the *attainment* of goals; and (iv) is capable of experiencing *happiness* and *suffering.*

10.4.3 The Autonomous Person

This valuing of individual autonomy relates to the core underlying moral belief that each person matters and *matters equally.* Kant expressed this in his dictum: each person should be treated "never simply as a means, but always at the same time as

an end" (*ibid*). This ethical duty places (negative) side constraints on our behavior, that is, we should not interfere with another person's pursuit of their own goals, without a justification for this interference. These side constraints express the inviolability of *each* person: "there is no justified sacrifice of some of us for others…" (Nozick 1974, p. 33). There is no moral balancing act which can weigh one individual's worth against another's. In other words, no appeal to utility or social good[9] or the "public interest" can justify using any individual as a *mere means* to our own ends. Each of us leads separate lives. We each want more than just experiences and emotions; we want to do things within the context of a conception of life that has *meaning* to us. Thus, value is placed on the autonomous individual person: one who is free, rational and reasonable, capable of making choices, of formulating a conception of a good and meaningful life, and of critically evaluating and modifying this concept.[10] Such a person is not just free, but free to pursue what they decide is *worth doing* – free to lead a worthwhile, *meaningful* life.

10.4.4   Identity

Our self-concept forms the core of our identity. But it cannot be formed in isolation. To know your "self" (to be aware that *you are*), you must understand that there is a world. And you come to understand your relationship to it, as you learn to communicate with other persons about their understanding of the world and their relation to it. Our identity essentially arises out of this relational process. We do not create ourselves out of nothing. The person we become presupposes a social framework and a world, in a process that Donald Davidson calls triangulation.

The argument for *triangulation* is a logical one. As Donald Davidson points out, "the ultimate source of both objectivity and communication is the triangle that, by relating the speaker the community and the world, determines the content of thought and speech" (Rorty 2000, p.15).

The core notion is that our concept of "self" arises simultaneously with our concepts of others (persons) and of the world. And this relation arises simultaneously with our ability to communicate (i.e., with our learning a language). In order to have an understanding of the world and to know when we are right, we need another person to correct us when we are wrong. It follows that my ideas of (i) who I am and (ii) of being right, requires a world and an understanding of it; and in order to understand it, I need a relation with another person. Then I have concepts of (i) myself, (ii) other selves, and (iii) the world. These are *necessary conditions* for literal meaning (Fig. 10.1).

This is an inherently *dialogical* process: "…the selves that arise out of that process are dialogical all the way down…there is no private core on which to build …" (*ibid*, p.16). And the way to evaluate our thoughts and actions (with regard to other persons, to objects, and to our natural and built environments) is *relational.* As Taylor argues, a fully human life has a "fundamentally dialogical character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of

Fig. 10.1 Triangulation
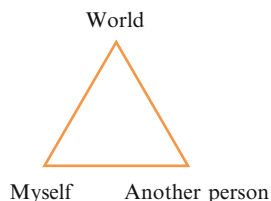
defining an identity, through our rich languages of [all forms of] human expression" (Taylor 1991, p. 33).

These relations are dynamic. Each person's identity is strongly influenced by their relationships and the meaning that these relations have for them. Their relation to each of their environments is shaped by their conception of that environment, which is a social construction. As already discussed, this is not a denial of physical causality. Nor does it mean that the physical objects in the environment would not exist without us, but that what gives them *meaning* to us is our conception of them.

10.4.5 *Authenticity*

Our relations with each other, as well as the world, have a normative character, a character that is communicated through the use of "thick concepts" (Murdoch 1970; Williams 1985)*.* These are concepts that are descriptive but also have a component that express our normative and evaluative interests. In other words, they are essentially *value laden.* Examples are concepts such as "wilderness," "nature," "environmental," "urbane," "civil," and "professional." Thick concepts express qualities and relationships that are not merely causal/external but humanistic/internal. *Authenticity* is a prime example of such a thick concept: it refers to the normative quality of relationships. Our *authentic* identity essentially arises out of a *relational* process of triangulation. In order to assess the authenticity of objects or environment and our relation to them, we need to share our reflections with another person.

This conception of authentic identity contrasts sharply with a view which has developed within modernist thought. In this view, which Taylor (1991, p. 14) calls "the individualism of self-fulfilment," authentic identity is developed by my "self" in isolation, by listening to my own unique inner voice, which tells me "what is really important or of value." The ideal is to be true to myself, which "means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself" (p. 29). This shallow individualism involves "a centering on the self and a concomitant shutting out, or even an unawareness of, the greater issues or concerns that transcend the self…" (p. 14). This self-defined "authenticity" may be used to justify "rejecting our past as irrelevant, or denying the demands of citizenship, or the duties of solidarity or the needs of the environment" (p. 22). Centering on the self "both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others…" (p. 4). It can lead

to viewing all our relations as instrumental, treating other people and environments as mere means to satisfaction of our own ends.

It is important to remember that the relations we are discussing are intrinsic and internal, not extrinsic or instrumental. Culture is a means of expressing this meaning morally and aesthetically. If individuals are not active participants in creating meaning within our culture, the culture fails us. When our relations with the world are not authentic, we become passive victims of outside forces, social and environmental. Individuals lose an active role in creating meaning when powerful interests engage in manipulation, deception, or misrepresentation in order to achieve someone else's illegitimate end. When people are manipulated, they become objects, rather than subjects of their lives. When we lack meaningful contact with the other, we lose contact with ourselves. In eschewing authentic relationships, we become alienated people – alienated from ourselves, others, and the world we live in (Stein et al. 1999). We become more machinelike and less human.

10.4.6   Authentic Experience

What makes an experience authentic? For the answer to this question, we turn to an example of the opposite experience: a thought experiment first described by Robert Nozick (1974, p. 35). He imagined a device that could be programmed to simulate any experience we wanted. Once plugged in to the "experience machine," we have only experiences we want – in other words we don't *do* the things we desire, such as write a book, have sex, or be an architect, we just have the *experience* of doing them.

Why not plug in? No effort, no failure, no hardwork, and no awkward moments – only happiness, achievement, excitement, etc. Why do we not choose to plug in? Because, if the experience machine is the source of what we do, the source of what happens to us, we are an object and not a subject. We are not autonomous persons but *objects* that are acted upon and have a series of *causal reactions,* pleasant though they may be. In Nozick's words, "it is a kind of death" (*ibid*). The idea of plugging into to the experience machine is anathema to us, since to do so is to commit a kind of suicide. Remember that the "I" (the self) is *reflective:* able to judge right from wrong and able to *act* accordingly. On the machine, there would be no right or wrong, and there would be no action. We would be without qualities in the machine. Are we wise, clever, nasty? There is no answer to these questions since everything is simulated. A life "led" in the machine has *no meaning.* All relations between us and the machine are causal/external and not internal in the sense discussed above. On the machine there can be no triangulation because there is no "I," nor are there other persons to whom I can relate. The blob in the machine has no authentic existence.

At the time Nozick postulated the experience machine, it seemed like a science fiction fantasy. The possibility it envisions seems more realistic now. The last time we suggested it to a class, several students said they would consider plugging in – a frightening generational change!

10.4.7 Designing for Meaning: An Ethical Responsibility

We have given a rather simple account of our cultural crisis of meaning, worldviews, economic transformation, and alienation. In focusing on factors relevant to our topic, we have omitted many important factors and forces. A number of books have been written examining the effects of some of these factors and forces from different disciplinary perspectives – for example, in architecture Scruton (1979), in planning Friedmann (1987), in education Bloom (1987), in philosophy Taylor (1991), in sociology Putnam (2000), and in environmental ethics Scruton (2011). However, we believe that the design professions (e.g., industrial/product design, architecture, urban planning/design, regional/environmental planning), having played a role in creating or exacerbating this crisis of meaning in our material world, do have a moral responsibility to address it.

The design professions generally recognize a number of ethical duties inherent in the concept of "professional," and most have recently added a duty related to environmental sustainability. What we are proposing is an addition to, not a replacement for, these responsibilities. This *additional* strong ethical element is inherent in the role of the designer. This element involves designing to give meaning to the individual, to other persons, and to their shared world. Ethics is concerned with doing the right thing in our relationships to each other and to our environments. A prime concern of ethics is the autonomous person. It is not that conditions or states of the person (like their well-being or happiness) are not ethically relevant, but that they alone are not sufficient to fulfill our ethical duty. We argue that the most important ethical aspect of design relates not merely to the functional (utilitarian) purpose of the object designed but to its reflection of the individual person – to its contribution to *their autonomy and to their identity*. The objects and environments we design or plan play a role beyond the functional. They have the potential to enhance (or to inhibit) human flourishing, to contribute to (or detract from) the meaning of the users' lives, to humanize (or dehumanize) them, and to increase their alienation or help them feel "at home" in the world. The design process can raise the level of an object to one with intrinsic aesthetic and ethical value.[11] This potential adds another strong ethical dimension to the design process.

This aesthetic and ethical point is analogous to the logical one made previously regarding triangulation. Our connection to the world around us is enriched and made more meaningful by our connections to other persons. When there is a clear and direct connection between the designer and their work, then it is an expression of the designer. The user of the object experiences the connection and thus experiences a connection to the designer. This connection infuses the object with *meaning* for the user. Particularly when the designer and the user are acquainted (or even have a shared cultural context), the object will have meaning to the user and will more likely support and enhance their identity, their personhood, and their humanity. All three sides of the triangle are completed: the designer expresses themselves in the object, the user experiences this expression in the object, and they also come to understand something of the creator in this experience (Fig. 10.2). The goal is to understand our own identity morally and aesthetically and to feel at home in the world.

Fig. 10.2 Triangulation with a designed object

Designed Object

Myself   Designer
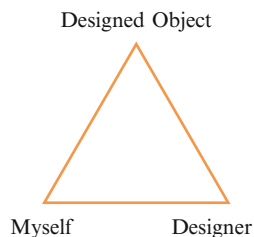
10.4.8   Social Sustainability

We will refer to the creation of conditions which facilitate meaningful lives as *"social sustainability."* The goal is to understand our own identity morally and aesthetically and to feel at home in the world. Recent social/political movements have forced producers of some products to pay attention to environmental sustainability. Caring for the environment requires some empathy with other persons and with the physical world (i.e., a relation to them). Therefore, we believe that "social sustainability," as well as being good in itself, probably happens to be a prerequisite for environmental sustainability. The influence also goes the other way. Many of the ideas touted as environmentally sustainable may in fact be more supportive of *social* sustainability. For example, shopping at farmer's markets or adhering to a "100-mile diet" may be dubious with regard to conserving resources but definitely increases interaction between local producer/sellers and buyers and among like-minded buyers. The result can be a sense of community and added meaning to the buyers' experience.

Something we have created ourselves*,* or that a loved one has created or given us as a gift, or something associated with our personal history, or with the history of our place has a special (nonmonetary) value for us. Such an object may not be valued for its beautiful appearance, nor for the skill evidenced in its creation, nor for its functional utility. It will be valued for its *inherent* qualities: for its personal or cultural association or for the *expression of its creator* with whom we have some personal experience. Its value and beauty are *inherent* rather than instrumental and *intrinsic* rather than extrinsic. When such an object becomes damaged or ceases to function, we are much more likely to attempt to repair it, rather than simply discarding it. Of course, if we had a role in its design or creation, we would likely be more able to affect a repair because we already have *an understanding* of the object, what it is made from, how it is made, and how it works (Walker 2002).

Our knowledge of an artifact influences our conception of it, our experience of it, and our response to it. For example, we might admire the beauty of a work of art by an artist we admire, but if we discover it is a *fake,* this will *diminish* our view of it. We now see it differently, because a fake is completely inauthentic; it represents deception, a lack of honesty. Its appearance has not changed, but it has lost its intrinsic value for us.

Industrial designer Stuart Walker argues that a material culture that is *meaningful* would, in turn, help alleviate the damaging social (and environmental) consequences

of contemporary consumerism. A reframing of our view of physical products and environments is required, together with a creative reengagement with "objects," if we are to find any authentic *meaning* and value in our material world. Walker points to Gandhi's *dhoti* (loin cloth) as an example: "the *dhoti* was much more than a simple article of clothing; the spinning wheel and homespun clothing had social, political, economic and even spiritual importance" (Rühe 2001). "The *dhoti* was a distinct and conscious breaking-away from the 'western' business suit, which he had previously worn during his early career as a young barrister, and as such it was *deeply symbolic*. The *dhoti*…represented self-determination, self-respect, creativity, cultural restoration, independence, and a political and economic statement against colonial rule. Seen in these terms, the *dhoti* [becomes]…a physical embodiment of a philosophy and a set of values" (Walker 2002).

Here again, recognition of this meaning rests on our knowledge about the object, its intrinsic qualities, and the relationship of these qualities to our understanding.

10.5   Designing for Meaning at Different Scales

In this section, we will point to a few ways in which design and planning could enhance the meaning of our buildings and environments.[12]

10.5.1   Housing Design

Except for the wealthy few who can afford the services of an architect, houses in North America are not designed by people who have been educated in design (except perhaps for the technical aspects) or have much conception of the potential for communicating meaning through design.

Contemporary corporate suburbs do offer more choice than they did 50 years ago: buyers may often choose from a number of floor plans, from façade styles like Tudor, Cape Cod, or craftsman and from a wider range of materials and finishes. It is possible, but seems dubious, that the buyer gets a strong sense of personal meaning from these rather superficial choices.

However, when we look at older suburbs, it is clear that many occupants do have a strong interest in adding meaning to their homes by personalizing them through modifications. A tour of "wartime"[13] housing communities (originally very homogeneous in style) in most Canadian cities reveals an amazing array of exterior modifications: covered porches, modified rooflines, additions, a much wider range of finishes, etc. Many innovative adaptations were already noticeable 35 years ago (Galloway 1978). The ubiquity of home improvement stores further attests to a widespread desire to personalize the family home.

In recent decades, some builders have exploited this desire, widening the ability of buyers to modify the product. Under the headline "Express Yourself," one local builder

promises the "beginning of a wonderful relationship" via using their "Expression Design Studio," with its staff of interior designers (Shane Homes 2012).

While such choices may still seem superficial, a local "green manufacturer" of movable walls, doors, and floors for offices and homes, who has moved into factory production of houses, attempts to be much more responsive by "producing something in modules that…responds to the design criteria, the functional criteria, the cost criteria and the environmental criteria." In addition to a claimed waste reduction of 99 %, his aim is that "each house…be distinctive…to reflect the family that lives inside it." He uses technology (computer software) to enable clients to "design their own floor plan" and give them "a total experience of what it is they're going to get" (Smed 2012).

10.5.2 Building Design

A major challenge facing architects is that most buildings they design have multiple users – builders, owners, occupants, neighbors, and people in adjacent public spaces – who are all affected by their designs. Although a few clients will pay for a signature building (which will likely have intrinsic value because the signature architect is often successful in their communicating meaning), and a growing number want to minimize energy use (applying criteria like LEED standards), many want nothing more than to maximize their "bottom line." However, the apparent futility of urging clients to fund designing for meaning does not relieve the designer from the moral obligation to do so. One area where designers should vigorously advocate for design which better incorporates meaning, is in the design of public buildings, other facilities, and transportation infrastructure, which sometimes seem to express a deliberate lack of character or meaning.

Historic buildings can also carry a lot of meaning for those users who value tradition, the past, or associate a building with particular historical persons or events. A small group of architects specialize in preservation, conservation, restoration, and adaptive reuse, aiming to retain the meaning of buildings, for present and future generations. This can be a very significant part of a meaningful environment. Although there are notable unsubsidized exceptions, success of conservation efforts generally requires substantial support from all levels of government (in the form of zoning, property, and income tax policies).

10.5.3 Urban Environments

Cities are the center of life for more and more of humanity. Urban planners, urban designers, and architects have a crucial role to play in creating environments (and the processes used to design them) which provide meaning and which express shared public values. Designers should advocate environmentally and socially

sustainable environments which not only preserve "natural capital" but also nurture the development of autonomous persons, that is, provide environments which nurture human flourishing by representing meaning to the inhabitants.

Functionalist designers and planners have too often thought of urban environment in terms of traffic generation, mobility, circulation, access and egress, density, land use, and infrastructure. These are necessary. But our urban places are not merely tools for satisfying our basic needs. Rather, our urban environments should be rich receptacles of meaning, value, and tradition, which form part of our framework for autonomous self-determination.

Our buildings and our cities are much more than instruments of need satisfaction; they are imbued with meaning. Our conceptions of our urban environments involve more than brick and mortar, houses and streets. The physical artifacts found in urban spaces have meaning beyond their physical functions. Our descriptions of them often involve thick terms that give them value and meaning. We speak, for example, of "cold and sterile" streets, "congenial" town squares, "formal" gardens, "proud and stately" or "imposing" or "dominating" buildings, and "warm and welcoming" houses. For a person's process of self-determination to be successful, they need a meaningful relationship with their urban environments at all scales.

Our urban environments reflect our conceptions of our collective identities, and our conceptions of what is valuable. Our public artifacts reflect values that are, at least to some degree, shared. Our freeways reflect the value we place on mobility, speed, and convenience; our parks and greenways, the value we place on experiences of nature; and our pathways, the value we place on exercise and fitness. Scruton argues that "Only by transforming the world into the visible and tangible record of things rationally pursued, can a man [sic] find a place for himself there; without that place there will be no self to furnish it" (*ibid*). Such is the importance of *place*.

We believe that an urban environment which nurtures human development, by giving a sense of meaningful relationship, should include (i) a sense of community (including opportunities for social interaction); (ii) access to a range of opportunities for work, education, and recreation; (iii) personal security and safety; (iv) freedom from alienation; and (v) expressions of identity.

The latter two are closely tied to Rawls' (2001, p. 59) fifth *primary good*: "The social bases of self-respect, understood as those aspects of basic institutions normally essential if citizens are to have a lively sense of their worth as persons and to be able to advance their ends with self-confidence."

An urban environment which expresses who we are will have more substance in a unicultural society than in a multicultural society. However, each place does have a shared geography as well as some shared history and heritage, stemming from our liberal democratic traditions. Many immigrants, from other cultures, do come because they are attracted by our societal values and may relate to symbols of this tradition more than we expect. And parts of a city can certainly express other subcultural and ethnic identities (e.g., Chinatown, little Italy) or lifestyles (e.g., hip inner city or middle-class suburb).

10.5.4   *Natural Environments*

Each person clearly has a right to common natural resources, for example, clean air, water, uncontaminated food, and to a supportive nontoxic environment, in which to have autonomy to be able to pursue their private goals. These rights lead to a concern for environmental sustainability. But our concern here is with the *meaning* that many people find in relation to their conception of a natural environment. Numerous urbanites relate to nature incorporated into the city in the form of trees, greenery, natural parks, greenways, and even streetlighting which allows stars to be visible at night. Others find more meaning in getting "back to nature" by leaving the city.

As a social construction, the concept of "nature" has different meanings for different cultures: aboriginal and nonaboriginal peoples understand and view the natural world in radically different ways (Willems-Braun 1997); third world cultures and first world cultures often have mutually exclusive conceptions of the natural environment (Guha 1999). Even within the Anglo-European tradition, the myth of ancient forest has different associations within German and English mental landscapes (Schama 1995).

The concept of nature also changes over time in the same culture. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the Western Judeo-Christian conceptualizations of wilderness saw it as deserted, savage, dangerous, and desolate in the Anglo-European mind. The Romantic Movement created a great shift in the Western cultural attitude toward wilderness, from the place where one would most likely encounter darkness and despair to the notion of landscape as sacred and sublime: "those rare places on earth where one had more chance…to glimpse the face of God" (Cronon 1999, p. 373). There are also class-based and urban/rural differences in conceptions of nature.

Today, many subcultures (social groups) in North America attach different meanings to widely differing encounters with nature as they conceive of it. These include a vast range of activities, for example, parking an RV in a fully serviced campground, hiking groomed trails in the mountains, climbing mountains, snowshoeing, cross-country or downhill skiing, skidooing, trekking through uncharted "wilderness," bird-watching, nature photography, hunting, fishing, kayaking, sailing, speedboating or sea-dooing on rivers or lakes, and even driving trucks across muddy landscapes. One of the tensions of planning for natural environments is that people who engage in some of these activities consider others of these activities to be a desecration of their conception of nature.

Even more difficult for regional planners is that exploitation of natural resources for economic benefit – petroleum exploration and production, mining, logging, and even agriculture – is often in direct conflict with the types of meaningful "recreational" activities just listed. And these economic activities are frequently incompatible with each other. In making such trade-offs, the fact that nature has significant meaning to these many different users must be taken seriously.

10.5.5   *Participation in Planning*

Public participation in planning and public design offers great potential for creating more meaningful environments. Two benefits are usually claimed: (i) better planning outcomes and (ii) strengthened democratic institutions. To this we would add (iii) making community or natural environments more meaningful to residents or users by providing opportunities to be involved in planning them. User participation can help overcome some of the alienation we have discussed by giving the occupant/resident a sense of connection to both the designer and the object of design. Participation also enables the planner or designer to get a better sense of what is valued by users and to express it in the design or plan.

Although modernist land-use planning (at least in England) began c.1850 as a political response to the unhealthy conditions of the mechanizing Victorian industrial city, there was always some focus on the meaning of environment to its inhabitants. For example, Howard's Garden City (1902) aimed to bring the countryside (nature) into the city; industrial philanthropists such as Owen and Cadbury built their new towns in the countryside, believing that people would be more human if they regularly encountered nature.

When planning began as a profession (1914 in England), it sought to be more scientific, to develop normative necessary conditions for a "good city." However, planning was by no means completely dominated by scientism, for example, Mumford's (1938) vision was definitely not. He defined community as "people united by common feeling for landscape, literature, language, folkways." He stressed the importance of individual autonomy in that people acting "out of self-respect and respect for other regions, contribute to planning." The value of their contribution came "out of [the] authority of own understanding" (*ibid*), in sharp contrast to the modernist stress on the instrumentalist authority of expertise.

It was only after the success of logistics planning in World War II that the profession became really scientific, with the "Rational Comprehensive Planning Model" (Harper and Stein 2006, c. 2) dominating theory until the mid-1970s, and practice well into the 1980s, with a continuing influence, particularly outside the "first world."

At least partly inspired by Jane Jacobs' successful opposition to a Robert Moses-planned inner-city New York expressway (1961), planning theorists began advocating some form of public participation in the 1970s. (Advocacy planning, transactive planning, progressive planning, equity planning, and communicative planning all involve some degree of public participation.) Information technology can increase the efficacy of participation by providing better information and the opportunity to visualize different outcomes (Levy 2011).

With various reservations, public engagement in some form has become entrenched in much of North American planning. Although engagement has often been tokenistic or manipulative, its widespread acceptance offers urban and regional planners some scope in making environments more meaningful.

10.5.6 Community

The experience of simply belonging to (feeling part of) a community can really help to overcome individual alienation as well as building social networks (Innes and Booher 2002) and rebuilding "social capital" (Putnam 2000). This can be an additional (fourth) value added to the benefits of participation, when communities of interest and geographic communities are meaningfully involved in planning, design, and other civic affairs. For example, in our home city, 136 community associations (most run by volunteers) are a primary vehicle for citizen engagement in city planning and development processes, supported by a Federation with two full-time professional planners. These associations help to develop a sense of community and of place. At the regional and provincial or state levels, many volunteer interest groups (e.g., fish and game, wilderness preservationists, various environmentalists) participate, although some provinces and states have much better developed formal processes for involving these stakeholders. In some provinces and states, many different forms of public participation have been tried at the regional level, with varying degrees of success (Innes et al. 1994; Innes and Booher 2010; Margerum 2002).

10.6 Conclusions

Perhaps more than we realize, what we experience today still represents the unfolding of the ideas of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The humanistic strand asserted the moral standing of the autonomous person and has stressed the importance of authentic identity. The scientific strand led to an enormously improvement in the material well-being of people in advanced (first world) societies. Unfortunately, it also spawned scientism, with its claim that the scientific method is the only source of knowledge and that rationality is limited to the instrumental – the best means to ends (which are seen as nonrational).

The dominance of an instrumental view of people and environments has often resulted in their being treated as objects. As technology has made a wider range of goods available to increasing numbers of consumers, and as they become further separated from the design and production of consumer goods, people have lost their feeling of *connection* to their material environments. This separation has lessened feelings of *meaningful relationship* to their artifacts and their environments, making them feel objectivized as manipulated consumers, that is, less fully human.

With minimal awareness of it, designers and planners have played a significant role in this process of dehumanization. We have argued that there is an ethical responsibility to resist the process and to reassert the value of persons, by designing and planning in ways that increase the meaning of artifacts and environments to users. We have pointed to a few possibilities of doing this at different scales of design.

Notes

1. Some writers, for example, Taylor (1991), consider this second change to be the outworking of modernism.
2. Pragmatism shows that distinctions such as reality/appearance, truth/opinion, objectivity/subjectivity, and fact/value can still be used, when seen as end points of continua, rather than absolute dichotomies
3. Parts of this section (and the next two sections) are based on Badke and Walker (2007). Walker was a colleague in the Faculty of Environmental Design in Calgary for many years and taught design theory with Stein.
4. On the Enlightenment influence, see Friedmann (1987). He views the dominance of "market rationality" as another key aspect.
5. Parts of this section (and the next two sections) are based on Harper and Stein (2006, c.2).
6. Steps of the scientific method: observation of regularities, generalization, theorizing, hypothesis-testing, establishing scientific laws, and uniting theories under general theories. Kuhn (1970) demonstrated that the actual process was more complex than the simple textbook representation.
7. For example, Marxism claims that social structures and moral beliefs are determined solely by economic forces. Reflecting the influence of modernism, the investigation of human and social phenomena eventually came to be known as "social science." In the social sciences, approaches which seek to develop metanarratives are sometimes called "structuralist."
8. Creatures fulfilling these criteria do not necessarily have to be Homo sapiens.
9. A person's initial formulation of a good and meaningful life is largely socially determined. We can concede such communitarian claims, without in any way weakening the moral and political conception of the "autonomous person." But it doesn't follow from any social origin of our goals that we should switch from the individual to the community as the proper object of moral concern.
10. This is the core belief of liberalism, used in a broad sense which encompasses most of the political spectrum in many societies with Anglo-European roots. Liberalism and its notion of the individual have been widely criticized. For an extended explication and defense of liberal ideals, see Rawls (1993; 2001).
11. This same point can be used to demonstrate why a work of art can have intrinsic value.
12. We have not included a discussion of the responsibilities of product/industrial designers because it was beyond the scope of this book. For an excellent treatment of this topic, see Walker (2011) or Badke and Walker (2007).
13. The federal Wartime Housing Corporation built housing units in areas with shortages due to war efforts. Over 45,000 units were constructed from 1941 to 1949. They were noted for the homogeneity of their original appearance (CMHC, n.d.).

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