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# Gender Politics within Art of the Harlem Renaissance

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# SUSTAINABILITY

## The New Industrial Revolution: From Green to Sustainable

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In 2006, more than 251 million tons of municipal solid waste was produced in the United States alone (Municipal 1). This stark statistic serves as proof that there is a need for dramatic change in human industry, a transformation William McDonough and Michael Braungart refer to as the New Industrial Revolution. The over abundance of waste is not a problem exclusive to the United States; it is a global issue that relies heavily on industrial design as a source for transformation. To effectively keep products from entering and/or remaining in landfills, we must begin by redesigning them. Hence, efforts must be made to produce things that go beyond merely referencing the problem and instead work independently towards amending ecological issues.

While a few decades ago the term “green” was used to define an environmentally conscious approach to design, it has more recently been replaced with the word “sustainable.” In her article, “Ecological Design: A New Critique,” Pauline Madge claims that the “transition from ‘green’ to ‘eco-’ to ‘sustainable’ represents a steady broadening of scope in theory and practice, and to a certain extent, an

increasingly critical perspective on ecology and design” (Madge 44). Although the change in terminology may at first seem arbitrary, the shift from “green” to “sustainable” denotes an entirely new approach to industrial design on both the part of the designer and the consumer.

In the 1980’s ecological issues began to materialize as topics that needed to be addressed by designers. At the time it was tagged, green design most simply represented the recognition of environmental issues. This recognition later led to provisional ‘solutions’ such as recycling and the reconstitution of materials. Yet, little was done in terms of changing the way products were designed as pressure was placed on consuming less rather than designing better (Madge 46).

Sustainable design, on the other hand, embodies a more sophisticated initiative to avert future ecological problems by making deliberate decisions throughout the design process. Because environmental issues have become increasingly pertinent, designers and consumers are beginning to consider the importance of sustainability. With an increasing demand for more sustainable products, designers are allotted a higher degree

of responsibility. They must consider not only whether the materials their product is composed of are recyclable, but also “the life cycle of the product through time.” For these reasons, “sustainable design” is more complex than “green” or “eco-” design as it “moves the interface of design outwards toward societal conditions, development and ethics” (Madge 52).

The “critical perspective on ecology and design” Madge alludes to is exemplified in Braungart and McDonough’s book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. The book stresses the need for a ‘New Industrial Revolution’ by delineating the ways past approaches to environmentally mindful design fail in meeting current needs. While green design embraced the three Rs --Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle-- and identified reduction as one of its main tenets, Braungart and McDonough advocate a different approach. It is their belief that past methods only make “the old, destructive system a bit less so” and offer only an illusion of efficiency (Braungart and McDonough 62). In fact, their proposed revolution abandons the idea of “less is more”

and promotes “a world of abundance” (Braungart and McDonough 91).

Because we live in a society obsessed with the accumulation of wealth and material goods, it would be futile to position a reformation within the relinquishment of products. Such a change would also prove detrimental to industrial design, as it would restrict creativity and limit diversity in future designs. In truth, as Braungart and McDonough advocate, the problem does not lie in the amount of goods that exist, but rather that they are constructed in ways that make them difficult to dispose of or safely reuse. For these reasons, instead of criticizing consumers for the things they own, focus should be shifted on encouraging designers to generate products that are completely sustainable.

Considering that the majority of goods are thrown into landfills after they have served their purpose, it seems a misnomer to call the intermediary between the store and the landfill a “consumer.” “They are the ultimate products of an industrial system that is designed on a linear, one-way cradle-to-grave model. Resources are extracted, shaped into products, sold, and eventually disposed of in a ‘grave’ of some kind, usually a landfill or incinerator” (Braungart and McDonough 27). These “cradle-to-grave” products govern current manufacturing

methods and are deliberately designed to be thrown away after serving their decided purpose (Braungart and McDonough 27). The re-evaluation of such a system raises the question: how much responsibility does the consumer have for an object they voluntarily introduced into their life?

While it seems absurd to require human beings to hold on to every thing they ever purchased, it is equally unreasonable to assume they have no obligations in the manner in which they get rid of these things. One available solution is to adopt a “cradle-to-cradle” system. While this method encompasses motives contrary to the Industrial Revolution, the system as a whole is not as foreign as it initially may seem. Braungart and McDonough suggest we look to nature for examples. According to their model, “To eliminate the concept of waste means to design things—products, packaging, and systems—from the very beginning on the understanding that waste does not exist” (Braungart and McDonough 104). Products that provide easy, guilt free disposal or, even better, could potentially dispose of themselves, are the ideal solution.

Many of the best examples of sustainable design are applauded for their self-sufficiency. One such example is Jurgen Bey’s Garden Bench made in 1999 for Droog Design

(Figure 1, Appendix I). Using high-pressure extrusion containers, Bey compresses natural waste such as hay, leaves, and wood chips into a bench form. The finished product does not attempt to disguise the identity of the materials, but rather features their organic nature by contrasting them with simple geometric form. Alastair Fuad-Luke’s *Eco-Design Handbook* commends Bey’s designs, claiming they may even “represent the current best practice in biodegradable furniture” (Fuad-Luke 25).

Although furniture is by no means the number one item constituting landfill waste, Bey’s bench signifies the endeavor to revolutionize all designed objects. Cradle-to-cradle design requires that thought be put into how every product is made so no valuable resources are wasted in the creation of objects that do not need them. In following this example, McDonough and Braungart’s book, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, is not made from a tree, but “synthetic ‘paper’ ... that can be broken down and circulated infinitely in industrial cycles—made and remade as ‘paper’ or other products” (Braungart and McDonough 5). Wood is an exhaustible resource necessitated for specific uses. This being said, using trees to create products that can be made from other materials is extremely improvident, especially when new materials have the potential to be “circulated infinitely.”

With its finite lifespan, Bey’s *Garden Bench* is unlike typical products which rely on the consumer for removal. Bey, in reference to his *Garden Bench* states, “It’s up to nature to decide when it’s reclamation time” (International 65). The context in which the bench is being used coupled with the strength of the raw materials it is composed of ultimately determines the length of its life. Therefore, while the consumer can act in ways to lengthen or shorten the bench’s existence, the duration of its lifespan is not entirely their decision. In a sense, Bey’s bench represents a product of the New Industrial Revolution as it takes a considerable degree of responsibility away from its user.



Figure 1. Jurgen Bey, Garden Bench, 1999. Photographer: Marsel Loermans

In *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, Braungart and McDonough promote the creation of “products that, when their useful life is over, do not become useless waste but can be tossed onto the grounds to decompose and become food for plants and animals and nutrients for soil” (Braungart and McDonough 91). Bey’s *Garden Bench* encapsulates this model, as it portrays a complete cradle-to-cradle manufacturing model. Moreover, there are no negative impacts to the environment by its disposal.

Because the original intended purpose of materials is often overlooked when they are being reconstituted, it is typical for products made from reprocessed materials to be used in ways that could potentially prove detrimental to the environment. Consequently, the modern conception of recycling, or ‘down-cycling,’ is not as advantageous as it may seem. Braungart and McDonough stress this idea claiming, “blindly adopting superficial environmental approaches without fully understanding their effects can be no better—and perhaps even worse—than doing nothing” (Braungart and McDonough 59).

However, this is not to say that effective modes of recycling do not exist. *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking The Way We Make Things* presents a system in which all products are made up entirely of materials that can be broken to supply either biological or technical cycles. In accordance to this structure, Bey’s bench is composed of “biological nutrients,” or “materials that can be tossed on the ground or compost heap to safely biodegrade after use—literally to be consumed” (Braungart and McDonough 104-5). Likewise, because it is made by compressing—a process that in itself enacts little to no negative effect on the environment—all natural materials, from start to finish the creation of the *Garden Bench* poses little to no inherent ecological threat. When the consumer is finished with it, the bench could either be left to decompose or the leftover materials could even be re-recycled into new benches.

In some ways, the cradle-to-cradle initiative symbolizes a return to pre-industrial conditions. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, nearly all goods were made from natural materials that, regardless of the consumer’s intent, would decay after a certain period of time. The ability for these objects to disappear was not premeditated, and in many instances their temporary existence was considered to be one of their principle weaknesses. Although it was not a consciously designed movement, one of the goals of the Industrial Revolution was to create products that were long lasting or, if they were not durable, at least easier to throw away. Paradoxically, the New Industrial Revolution is an endeavor to negate the results of the Industrial Revolution and in some ways recover the transitory nature products had previous to the 19th Century.

Braungart and McDonough view the Industrial Revolution, which is accountable for the majority of our modern environmental problems, as principally unplanned. At the time it took place, few people considered resources inexhaustible; little thought was put into the consequences that might occur from such rapid development of industry. Consequently, the “industrial infrastructure we have today is linear: it is focused on making a product and getting it to a customer quickly and cheaply without considering much else” (Braungart and McDonough 26).

Because we now have a better understanding of the limitations of our resources and the influence our actions have on the environment, it is inefficient to operate under the same standards that were used decades ago. “Green design” is no longer sufficient in addressing current environmental issues. However, more than just a change in terminology is required: it is necessary for industrial designers to embrace sustainable design as a significant effort to alter destructive consumption patterns.

Whereas the Industrial Revolution was unplanned, the New Industrial Revolution must be thought out. Designers must put considerable thought into the objects they

introduce into the world. Concurrently, a degree of responsibility must be taken away from the consumer by the creation of objects that are autonomously sustainable. Bey’s *Garden Bench* takes this initiative by offering a solution for furniture which represents full circle cradle-to-cradle design. Therefore, the *Garden Bench* not only signifies a shift towards sustainable design, but a move towards the New Industrial Revolution.

As Braungart and McDonough insist, a new design infrastructure does not require that humans lead lives of constraint. Yet, a conscious effort must be made to separate products into the two modes of production, biological cycles and technical cycles. Having done this, there will be no need for goods to be restricted as they will be either completely biodegradable or infinitely renewable (Braungart and McDonough 104-5).

The New Industrial Revolution is representative of an effort not only to reverse the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution, but also to regenerate the past short-lived nature of products with the use of new technology and innovative materials. The movement relies heavily on industrial designers who “have more potential to slow environmental degradation than economists, politicians, businesses and even environmentalists” (Fuad-Luke 15). This being said, the future of industrial design lies in the need for designers to surpass the mere acknowledgement of environmental problems by making a conscious effort to strive for sustainability.

by Danielle Palencar