A Dialogue with the Future: Design Thinking and the 21st Century Imagination

I gave my inaugural lecture at Brighton University in December 2015. It draws on a few of the blog posts I’ve written in this blog* and sums up my current thinking about the idea of Design.

Here is the blurb:

Design, the ‘D’ in TED*, has well and truly broken out of the Design School. In fact it made its escape some decades ago but still retains its potential to develop our collective imagination and enrich interdisciplinary dialogue.

In this lecture Professor Lloyd will draw on over 20 years of research and teaching to trace a journey from the cognitive activity of the brain to the architecture and politics of democracy, and from Bitcoin to football to education. The linking thread is design thinking and he will argue that understanding design as a process of dialogue is not only fundamental to an ethical engagement with the world, but vital to securing an equitable future for all.

*Technology Entertainment Design: Ideas Worth Spreading (https://www.ted.com) When one considers the sheer range of talks that fit under these three words, you realise how important the idea of design has become.

Here is the Video (42 minutes):
Here is the Transcript (opens in a new window):


*And here are some references:

1. The story of Aaron Swartz is a compelling one. You can see the documentary about his life here: How to Kill a Designer (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2015/02/23/how-to-kill-a-designer/)

2. The mystery surrounding the inventor/designer of Bitcoin has been going for some years. I talk about it in Nakamoto’s Last Theorem (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2014/07/29/nakamotos-last-theorem/). However, in the past six months the story has developed considerably. The Australian computer scientist and cryptographer Craig Wright has claimed convincingly to be the originator of Bitcoin and his ‘coming out’ tale is excellently told in an extended piece in the London Review of Books (http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n13/andrew-ohagan/the-satoshi-affair) by Andrew O’Hagen.

3. I talk about how Design relates to football here: Dolphin or Shark? Designing the Beautiful Game (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2015/09/28/dolphin-or-shark-designing-the-beautiful-game/)

4. Design Education in the Wired Weird World (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2014/09/26/design-education-in-the-wired-weird-world/) starts with architectural education but moves on to talk about the possibilities of Design
Education more generally, it also discusses The India Report by Charles and Ray Eames which I touch on briefly in the lecture.

**Studio Practice: Nostalgia Revisited**

I was recently on a panel at London’s Victoria & Albert Museum exploring the idea of studio-based practice as part of Guy Julier’s excellent Design Culture Salon (http://designculturesalon.org/about/) series. The discussion followed from a newly-launched book called Studio Studies: Operations, Topologies and Displacements by Ignacio Farias and Alex Wilkie [1].

Theorising studio practice is always going to be a complicated read, but there are some real moments of lucidity and insight. One quote that appears in the book, from William James (the psychologist brother of novelist Henry James) summed up the book nicely for me:

>“what really exists is not things made”, James says, “but things in the making” [2].

Process is where it’s at, in other words.

Working out what exactly happens in a studio is evidently a difficult business. It’s easy to revert to William James era psychology and look for those ‘ah ha’ moments delivered from on high, but really the whole time in the studio is one long, extended, playful, social, accidental, ah ha. More of an aaaaahhhhh than an ah ha. What we think of as creativity – if that’s what we think happens in a studio – seems to slip through our fingers when we try and point to it. Where is the creativity exactly? Is it cognitive or social or spatial or temporal? The book argues that it is the process that matters, not the atoms that make up the process. It is the materials and practices of the studio – human and non-human – that help to construct that process, however wide we might care to define what a studio is.

David Bowie, talking on one of the many recent radio programmes following his death, sums up this idea well. Working in Berlin in the late 1970s he reflects that:

>“I was starting to use the studio itself as an instrument, little accidents would happen with the notes and things would go wrong and the notes sounded so good wrong that I’d make four instruments play the same wrong note and then it sounds like an arrangement, and it becomes an integral part of the composition.” [3](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06z5pts) (48:20)

For my introduction as member of the discussion panel, and to link the idea of process, outcome, and how to describe them, I gave two examples.
The first was Artangel’s 2015 installation *Recording in Progress* ([link](https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/recording-in-progress/)) at Somerset House in London, featuring the musician PJ Harvey working in her studio with other musicians in full public view. People could book a slot to watch and hear whatever was happening through sound-proofed, one-way glass. A transparent version of the creative black box.

![Recording in Progress by Artangel featuring the musician PJ Harvey recording in public.](https://iprofessdesign.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/workinprogress.jpg)

For visitors, a lot of the time there was a lot of nothing happening. One reviewer noted:

“Thursday evening they were having trouble with a chorus, “Near all the memorials to Vietnam and Lincoln”. It sounded turgid. “Could you all sing like you’re somebody else?” PJ suggests.” ([link](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jan/16/pj-harvey-somerset-house-recording-in-progress))

Let’s leave aside that ‘turgid’ remark – the aesthetics comes later – and try and summarise the experience of the studio as incremental: adding and combining – sometimes subtracting – elements; trying stuff out to see what happens and what might be the next thing to happen. Building stuff up bit by bit. Looking back It’s easy to romanticise and mythologise the activity; identify the ‘key’ points, narrate the process as logical, inevitable, even mystical, if a little haphazard.
My second example was from the painter George Shaw, whose work records everyday scenes of housing estates – underpasses, dead ends, untended scrubland, paths next to fences, edgelands. The mundane brought to attention through art. One of Shaw’s etchings, Untitled 07; 12 Short Walks (above), appears in a current exhibition called Recording Britain at the Towner art gallery in Eastbourne, Sussex. It was the description on the caption accompanying the work that attracted my attention:

“Since 1996 Shaw has focused on the unremarkable landscapes of the Tile Hill estate in Coventry, where he grew up. He imbues his meticulous records with a melancholy nostalgia which encompasses the place itself, and the spirit of post-war idealism and ideas of community which shaped it.”

With the idea of studio practice in the back of my mind It was that phrase ‘he imbues his meticulous records with a melancholy nostalgia’ that got me. It is essentially a process-based description but one, when you think about it, that is wholly inaccurate. The implication is that George Shaw has something like an imbuing machine in his studio, Something that he can programme with ‘melancholy nostalgia’ (or perhaps ‘rueful wistfulness’ or ‘sorrowful yearning’) and apply it or inject it into his image. Of course George is that machine, the person who is able to take paint and canvas and produce melancholy nostalgia. But if we imagine for a second that George has made his studio transparent, like PJ Harvey, then when would we be able to point to
the bits where the ‘imbuing with melancholy nostalgia’ was taking place? Quick, don’t blink, he’s just about to start imbuing! Ah, there he goes, you can see that nostalgia imbuing itself there now…

There is a problem of aesthetics here; of getting from the practices that take place in the studio – putting sound onto hard disk, paint onto a canvas, sitting around, talking about what else is needed or something else entirely, instructing people about what to do – to the qualities of the outcome. Aesthetic value results from the process, but the process doesn’t seem to be about aesthetic value in any nuanced way; beyond the ‘that’s good’ or ‘that works’ comments, anyway.

The Studio Studies book refers to this problem as ‘the elephant in the studio’ (p.152), the problem for social science disciplines like sociology or ethnography or ethnomethodology to ascribe aesthetic value to empirical processes and outcomes and to account for something like ‘style’ originating from particular studios.

That’s not quite the case with the PJ Harvey example. Presented as an artwork, the process of working in a recording studio is itself given aesthetic value, independent of the outcome arising. The black box as transparent box turns out to be a bit murkier than we expected though. The boredom or excitement or interest that is felt when watching and listening to the process reveals to us the aesthetic nature of our experience; the process of production thus becomes our object:

“what really exists is not things made, but things in the making” to repeat the William James quote with a dash of melancholy nostalgia.


Posted in Behaviour, Cognition, Ideas, Installation and tagged Collaboration, Experience, Ideas, Meaning, Representation, Storytelling on February 21, 2016 by shornbare. 1 Comment ›
Plato, the first User-Centred Design Theorist

Last week I was an external opponent for the PhD thesis defence of Sigrun Lurås (http://designresearch.no/projects/situation-awareness-on-the-vessel-bridge/news?post_id=4083) at Oslo’s increasingly impressive School of Architecture and Design (http://designresearch.no). Sigrun’s thesis was part of the Ulstein Bridge Vision, Ulstein being one of the more innovative ship makers and based in Norway, the Bridge being that bit of the ship where the captain and others guide operations, and the Vision being a rethinking of the way that the interior and interactions of the bridge take place. The project, now finished, has proved a great success for Ulstein in a conservative industry, triggering a new organizational ‘design-driven approach’ to ship design.

Have a look and see for yourself what a 21st Century Ship’s Bridge looks like – more the celestial ocean around Alpha Centuri than the North Sea off the coast of Norway:

Sigrun’s research consisted of days of fieldwork spent on board offshore vessels documenting the behavior on the bridge and studying the ‘users’ of the ship’s bridge. The knowledge gleaned there formed the basis for the new design of the ship’s bridge and as an Opponent in the PhD exam, I was interested in exploring how ‘what is’ – the existing practices on board the old ship’s bridge – turned into ‘what is to come’ – the future design of the ship’s bridge.
It’s not a new question, of course. As designers have increasingly turned to the methods of ethnography to elicit the needs of users, the question of just how that translation is made has become more pressing. Is the new design about supporting the practices of existing users or getting rid of existing users and practices? Is it about saving or selling?

While ethnographers might reveal the subtle use and structures of artefacts, communication, ritual, and power – leaving the reader to work out their own meanings – the design researcher looks for those things that might form the meaningful basis of a new solution – observations as the seeds of future form. One might argue that this is method maligned; theory bent out of shape in order to neaten and change. The context for a pretext to impose a political sub-text. The designers, with the financial muscle, have the upper hand; the knowledge that wins. The users are the losers. The beast that is a design ethnographer, some might say, is a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

It was not always this way.

In 360BC – 2376 years ago – Plato was writing the dialogues that would form The Republic [1], a book featuring Socrates and a cast of other characters, to discuss the ideal state. The Republic covers education, justice, the position of women, philosophy, the immortality of the soul, and… art.

Plato, in the voice of Socrates, was suspicious of artists (and we might include the modern day designer as a kind of artist in the Platonic sense). He thought they were people that could represent the truth without knowing the truth, and that made them dangerous.

He also wrote about the design of vehicle guidance systems and just who one should turn to to know what the suitable form and function should be. In the following excerpt Socrates discusses with Glaucon the bridle and bit of a horse’s harness. Think of the painter in the discussion that follows as a designer.

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**Socrates:** The painter may paint a picture of bridle and bit

**Glaucion:** Yes

**Socrates:** But aren’t they *made* by the harness-maker and smith?

**Glaucion:** Yes

**Socrates:** Then does the painter *know* what the bridle and bit *ought* to be like? Isn’t this something that even the makers – the harness-maker and the smith – don’t know, but only the horseman who knows how to use them?

**Glaucion:** True.

**Socrates:** Isn’t the same thing always true?

**Glaucion:** Your meaning?

**Socrates:** You always have the three techniques – use, manufacture, and representation.

**Glaucion:** Yes.

**Socrates:** And isn’t the quality, beauty and fitness of any implement or creature or action judged by reference to the use for which man or nature produced it?

**Glaucion:** Yes.

**Socrates:** It must follow, then, that the user of a thing has the widest experience of it and must tell the maker how well it has performed its function in the use to which he puts it.
It is *use* that determines quality, beauty, and fitness for purpose, and only *users* are properly positioned to judge and communicate those things, Socrates argues.

If Plato were to watch the film of the Ulstein Bridge Vision, as well as other design visualisations I have written about previously [2](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2014/04/01/hs2-and-the-dutch-golden-age/), he would be sceptical. The high production values, filmic details, and the surging music are all techniques the artist uses to represent, manipulate, and persuade, but not to really know. That knowledge is left out at sea on all the existing Ship’s bridges.

Plato’s account of user-centred design suggests creativity in a tight coupling of maker and user – the maker proposing, the user assessing. Innovation happens organically, incrementally, as a tree slowly bows in a constant wind or a cliff is shaped by an angry sea; as a careful dialogue between what is and what might be. But what if we consider designers as users too? What is it that designers use?

Designers use tools and methods of course, and computers and cardboard, pens and PVA; prototypes, negotiotypes, and just plain old type as they steer the process of design from idea to thing. They know what designing is, so it is the design methodologist that becomes the villain of this piece; the person who represents but doesn’t know. The person that takes something like the slow digestive process of ethnography and packages it up like fast food.

Perhaps in this context it is the designers who are the real losers though, the real pretext for a political or organisational sub-text. Plato mistrusted the artists because he knew that they could foment opinion and upset the balance his ideal State. The aim of design, he might have said, is always political, whether designers know it or not. As Plato’s philosopher successor Aristotle aphoristically puts it: “man is, by nature, a political animal” [3].

**References**


Posted in [Behaviour](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Future Vision](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Ideas](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Research](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Uncategorized](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/) and tagged [Design Methods](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Experience](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Forms](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Ideas](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Intuition](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Making](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/), [Representation](https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/) on January 26, 2016 by shornbare. Leave a comment  

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**Dolphin or Shark? Designing the Beautiful Game**
Arsene Wenger, manager of Arsenal Football Club, thinks one of his star signings of 2013, Mesut Özil, is now ready to perform at the highest level. Here’s what a recent article (http://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2015/aug/01/mesut-ozil-arsene-wenger-arsenal) said of him:

“Wenger thinks the player he bought for a club record £42.5m from Real Madrid two summers ago is readier than he has ever been to excel, to design the game, consistently and decisively.” [1]

It is time for Mesut Özil to ‘design the game’ according to his Arsenal manager, Arsene Wenger.

That’s a funny phrase there, right at the end: ‘to design the game’. I’ve come across players as ‘architects’ of a football match, or ‘play makers’, but not heard of a footballer described as a designer before.

It sort of makes sense. Football has long been a source of good metaphors about the process of design – there is teamwork, strategy, star individuals, a manager with a plan, and people that perform to that plan, as the game is crafted and made. Below is a 1975 photo of my colleague and design methods guru Nigel Cross, explaining the design process with football props for an early Open University television programme.
Ozil might be a designer in the classic sense – an individual, intuitively shaping the form of something; someone exploring, trying things out and, in being consistent and decisive, retaining (more-or-less) overall control.

That might be where Wenger is wrong, though, because nowadays there are other candidates for the designer of a game of football; indeed many other types of sporting contest too.

The way that performance data can now be captured and used in real-time is changing the nature of sport into a battle of data acquisition and interpretation. The team car following Chris Frome up L’Alpe Duez in the Tour de France is doing more than just waiting for him to puncture. It is acting as his brain, processing his ‘numbers’ on a laptop. Data about his heart rate, effort, and power tell the team just how much energy he has left to give, which means they can communicate to him exactly what he has the capacity to do. They can tell him to raise the pace because his numbers are looking good, they can tell him to slow down because he’s touching the red zone; they can tell him he needs some food, or something to drink. He is, in effect, their machine. They know what his body can do in extremis better than he does.

Knowing your numbers is not just something for elite sportspeople. The proliferation of the smartphone and associated devices has heralded what philosopher Julian Baggini has termed ‘the quantified self’. The Apple iWatch, with it’s ability to constantly monitor our physiological makeup has the potential to change how we understand what our lives are about:

“The Apple Watch will make mainstream the hitherto minority obsession with the “quantified self”. This is an approach to living which encourages the relentless gathering of data about everything related to our wellbeing, from health and fitness indicators like heart rate and cholesterol levels, to time spent on social media or learning new skills. All this data is supposedly used to make us leaner, fitter, happier, more efficient.” [2]

To design our lives, in other words. Anyone that has ever used Sleepcycle (see pic below), which monitors sleeping patterns and wakes us when we are ready to be awoken, will understand this design intervention in our lives. The ‘quantified self’ means that we become the agents of a
faraway designer, not the designers of our own lives, free to learn from our mistakes (freewill notwithstanding).

That makes the freedom that Arsene Wenger implies that Mesut Özil has, in designing the game, sound both attractive and old fashioned; like a craftsman from a bygone era.

Football has, for quite a while, collected increasingly more detailed information on what happens during a game. It started, like baseball before it, by counting tackles made, passes completed, distance run, etc. but that was only ever half the story:

“Until recently, it was very much about collecting data on what had happened, without looking at why it had happened,” says Paul Power, a data scientist at Prozone. Power cites the great Italian defender Paolo Maldini as an example of a player who might be marked down by a system that values tackling and intercepting; because his positional play was so good he had less need to do these things.” [3]

As sensors and electronics have shrunk, and with physiological and other data being added to the data mix, the analysis of data has got more sophisticated and can now be used during a game. That means the game can be designed from the touchline using a dashboard of indicators and drawing in theories about complexity to model emergent forms of play and plan how interventions might work:

“Power used a video clip of a shoal of sardines reacting to the presence of sharks to illustrate the more sophisticated approach rapidly gaining ground in football. ‘We’re reconceptualising football as a complex dynamic system’ [he says]”. [3]

The implication is that our plans and intuition aren’t working, or aren’t working well enough.
That’s not to say, though, that we won’t at some point be able to monitor cognition and thought process, and by implication look at the quality of design thinking that someone like Özil is demonstrating. The intelligence that someone like Paolo Maldini uses, to do more with less, could then be factored into dynamic performance data.

Until that day Wenger’s touchline impotence means he has to rely on someone on the pitch to design the game on his behalf, someone with intelligence and vision and swiftness of thought and foot. Someone like Mesut Özil, in fact. But Mesut is an unpredictable and sometimes fragile soul. So on his off days, Wenger might do well to swap his dolphin for a shark.

References

[1](http://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2015/aug/01/mesut-ozil-arsene-wenger-arsenal) Amy Lawrence (2nd August, 2015) Mesut Özil becomes central to Arsène Wenger’s way of thinking at Arsenal, The Observer


[3](http://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/aug/02/science-fine-tuning-elite-footballers) Nic Fleming (2nd August, 2015) How science is fine-tuning our elite footballers, The Observer

Posted in Behaviour, Cognition, Computing, Future Vision, Sport and tagged Design Methods, Experience, Football, Intuition, Metaphor on September 28, 2015 by shornbare. 1 Comment

2 Cars, 5 Mobile Phones, and 38 Pairs of Underpants: On 10 Years of Consumption

“Enormous weight is attached to all the objects that Robinson Crusoe saves from the wrecked ship or makes with his own hands. I would say that the moment an object appears in a narrative, it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field, a knot in the network of invisible relationships. The symbolism of an object may be more or less explicit, but it is always there. We might even say that in a narrative any object is always magic”

Italo Calvino, Quickness, Six Memos for the Next Millennium [1]

For just over 10 years, from 2000 to 2011, I kept a public list of every consumer item that I bought. You can see the list on the website Shornbare.com (http://www.shornbare.com/lists_of_stuff/consumer_goods.htm), which I built in 1999, back in what seems like now the early days of the web.
My intentions for the website were hazy at the time but they were part of an urge to both examine and expose my life and in so doing to create a persona that, although related to me, also allowed some form of creative freedom; a blurring between documentary and fictional documentary. I never attempted to publicise the site in any way, apart from occasionally sending a link to someone who I thought might be interested – mainly work colleagues or friends – and there were no contact details. Instead I imagined someone stumbling across it accidentally and attempting, from the lists and work recorded there, to figure out the kind of person behind it all. And I include myself in that category of people that accidently stumbled across the site.

The examining and exposing of my life had a kind of moral purpose as well. On the one hand I felt that I’d got into a cycle of consuming too much, but on the other I was intrigued about what that consumption did for me in terms of my activity and life more generally. I conceptualised my consumption as input; a necessary part of transforming my life into new things of value, and I imagined my life as a machine, fuelled by the things I bought and finely-tuned in operation to produce energy, and motion, and forward travel. That’s easy to express for something like music, for example, where one can beat a path between what one listens to and what one produces. It’s not so clear for something like a pair of jeans or a mobile phone. What I was also interested in, of course, was whether these things of value were, in fact, valuable. That is to say, was all the consumption worth it? Was I a stuttering machine rather than a finely-tuned one? A machine with borderline affluenza [2].

I was also interested in another kind of life, and that was the life that ‘things’ have, from their birth (into my life) through to their death (thrown away, lost, given away, or sold). The period in between birth and death, during which the thing becomes part of your life, spawned a series of sub-questions; how often are useful things used? how do things become valuable things? It has always struck me that by far the largest proportion of a thing’s life is spent not being actively used. Chairs just mainly abide, waiting for someone to come along and sit on them; a kettle waits to be called into brief, powerful, service before being left neglected on the kitchen counter-top again. I set out wanting to document all the lives of all the things that came into my life; to map the magnetism and magic in Calvino’s terms.

So this was an inquiry both into the lives of inanimate things, but also into how those lives affected my life. These concerns, of cause and effect, were, and still are, echoed in my professional research where I’ve always been interested in how the intentions of a designer, in forming a design, affect the lives of those who go on to use the design and who may know nothing of the designer and her intentions.

What I decided I needed was to make myself objective both to other people, who could judge for themselves what it all meant, but also to myself, to allow me to experience myself analytically, as someone separate from me; someone other. I needed to create a distance between myself as a consuming machine and myself as a functioning person. Essentially to be able to ask myself the existential question: who is this person and how do the things around them allow them to exist?

So this is what I found.

Between November 2000 and January 2012 I bought and listed 878 things.
What counts as a thing?

Initially, I thought of the list as being solely about products – coffee machines, iPods, telephones, etc. – but that was way too narrow a definition – lots of meaningful stuff like clothes, cars, houses, and bicycles had to be there. Fairly early on I decided to set a minimum price, something like £4, with anything costing less than that, like light bulbs, not making the list. There was no upper limit.

Books, music, and films it seemed to me to belong to a different category of thing – more like delivery mechanisms for changing content – and that play a slightly different, perhaps more cerebral, role in life. I listed those separately on my website [3] as well as adding one photo a month from all those I was taking [4].

Then there are odd things that crop up. What about gifts? I decided they didn’t count, either things given to me, since I had not chosen them as something I needed, or things that I’d given to others which, although in a sense needed by me, didn’t play an active part in my own life other than the initial giving. What about things that were bought for me at work, like an Apple laptop? I decided not to list these, although I used them outside of my working life they were mainly used for work activity. And things that deplete – like aftershave or paint? I decided they could make the list as long as there was potential for them to be loved, though throwing away an empty bottle of aftershave or tin of paint is obviously different from throwing away a desk lamp that you no longer want. But that discounted, for example, petrol or washing powder. It seems to me to be the brand (Shell, Persil, Heinz) that is doing the sole work there to inveigle the raw stuff into your affections. Then there is software – what to do about that? I started off putting it down, but it just didn’t feel right, and when Apps came along with smart phones, they didn’t seem right as ‘things’ either. So they didn’t get listed.

Then there were things that were parts of other things, usually as replacement or routine maintenance; bike and car tyres for example, which I listed. I also listed things that functioned as raw material for other things, like wooden planks for example. And there were overlaps between types of things, mainly between sports clothing and clothing, for example, though they seem to me to be doing slightly different things.

There were times when I forgot to list things for one reason or another, or where inconsistency crept in over the years. But hey, I’m not claiming this as science, I just wanted to get a better understanding of the shape of my life and its relation to stuff.

So, 878 things in just over 10 years.

That number was smaller than I was expecting. Worked through as one thing every four days, though, it seems like a lot. The paradox is right there. In large numbers there is only quantity; in small numbers there is quality. In amongst these things were 2 cars (both German), 4 cameras, 5 mobile phones, 3 computers, 2 houses, and 5 fountain pens.

Most of the 878 things were items of clothing – 30% of them in fact, or one item of clothing every 14 days. Over those ten years I bought 24 pairs of jeans, 19 pairs of shoes, 30 T-shirts, 55 pairs of socks and 38 pairs of underpants.
250 of the items, or just less than 30%, were sports related, although 129, just over half of those sport things, were items of clothing. 130 things related to cycling, 27 to golf, 27 to squash, 19 to running, and 15 to swimming. And that gives a pretty good reading of my sporting life in those 10 years – cycling and running throughout, giving up squash with an arthritic big toe, and taking up golf (there is a nice symmetry to that number 27). 20 bike tyres does seem kind of excessive though.

198 things related to the house, either things to situate within the house or to use for decorating and arrangement. And then, of course, there are the two houses themselves. Two houses and two cars in 10 years seems pretty modest to me.

Of the remaining things 20 of them (2%) relate to playing music in some form or other – pianos, effects, recording devices, software; and 44 (5%) are what I called personal (6 bottles of aftershave, though I’m sure I’ve bought more, 5 fountain pens, and 3 pairs of sunglasses).

So that’s the stuff; just over 10 years collapsed into 5 paragraphs. What’s happened to it?

Of those 878 items I no longer have 593 of them. Of the things that have gone I have given away 127 (mainly items of clothing to charity shops), I’ve lost 17 things, sold 96, had 5 things stolen – including Stumpy, a much-loved mountain bike – and thrown away 322 things. That’s right, 322 (or 37%) of items that I’ve had in the last 10 years have gone in the bin. A few will have been things that were simply used up, but not many.

The good news is I still have 285 of the 878 things I bought!

And some of them I’ve kept for a long time. Of 67 things I bought in 2001, 14 years ago, I still have 16 – almost 25% of them, 5 of which I consider highly valued. Three of those highly valued things relate to cycle touring – panniers and a handlebar pack – one is Philippe Starck’s lemon squeezer (below) that always finds a prominent position in the places I’ve lived, and the final thing is a Cambridge hi-fi amplifier, still pumping out the tunes, although recently developing a frustrating buzz (perhaps time for a new one?).
Philippe Starck Lemon Squeezer, an item I value highly, bought in 2001.

At the other end of the scale, of the 87 things I bought in 2011, 4 years ago, I still have 56 (65%), 25 of which are ‘high value’ items. 18 of those things are items of clothing, 5 are things relating to cycling, and the remaining 2 are things relating to golf.

The oldest thing in my list that I still have (and value highly) is an Ikea dining table (below), solid and simple, bought in 2000.
The oldest ‘high value’ thing in my list – an Ikea table, bought in 2000.

Really it is the things that I’ve rated as ‘high value’ that I’m interested in and that, on the surface, hold the key to uncovering how things have become meaningful in my life. ‘High value’ is just a subjective measure; a feeling that, when I read the name of the thing on a list, I like the thing. It conjures up its image, it makes me smile, I can call it to mind easily, and re-experience the pleasure and quality the thing gave me in its use.

So of the 878 original things, I’ve rated 161 of them (18%), as having high value. The largest proportion of these things are 59 items of clothing closely followed by 51 items of sport, 23 ‘house’ items, and 17 electronic items.

If I look down the list of high value items 25 of them I have used in the last month, 6 I have used today, and I am currently using 3 – my Wacom graphics tablet (13 years old), my Bosch washing machine (12 years old), and my Carhartt leather belt (4 years old).
Wacom Graphics Tablet, an item I consider as ‘high value’ and that I am using at this moment, bought in 2002.

That’s it! The raw stats about all the things I’ve bought and used over a 10 year period. I can’t help feeling disappointed – is 18% all I have to show in terms of value in 10 years?

Where I failed was in fully documenting the life of each thing. At the beginning it seemed simple enough, recording the narrative arc of a thing’s life. The expectations at birth, the early difficulties, the later years of declining use and usefulness. The inevitable end. Of those 878 possible stories I only actually recorded 24 of these and I realise now that this mainly happened when something out of a normal narrative happened – the product failed or broke (a Canondale mountain bike (http://www.shornbare.com/lists_of_stuff/remarks/cannondale_f500.htm)), or I lost it (a Nokia 6510 mobile phone (http://www.shornbare.com/lists_of_stuff/remarks/nokia_6510.htm), a Sony portable CD player (http://www.shornbare.com/lists_of_stuff/remarks/sony_cd_player.htm)), or I got it repaired or replaced (a Parker fountain pen (http://www.shornbare.com/lists_of_stuff/remarks/sonnet.html)). Most of the stuff just abided with me for a length of time and then got thrown away; that’s the normal narrative, hardly worth recording.

I did notice that there were clusters of things that supported certain activities. Golf clubs, bags, shoes, shirts, and trousers for golf; computers, software, keyboards, mixers, and cables for music recording. It wasn’t necessarily the things in themselves that I valued but their combination, providing a scaffold for entertainment, enjoyment and a feeling of progress and development somehow. My investment in these things was also an investment in a certain activity, though I
realised after a while that it is a fine balance; the need to have the thing that is smaller, operates faster, is more responsive and efficient can quickly become the focus of your activity rather than the activity itself. Buying a new mountain bike might make big improvements to comfort and performance but it is still the feeling of being out in the middle of the countryside and turning the pedals that I value most.

Unexpectedly, the clothes category contains the highest number of ‘high value’ items. Clothes, it seems to me, become you in a way that other things don’t. They lie close to your skin, they take on your scent, they construct and project your identity – in colour, in form, in detail – and provide a level of comfort and reassurance; a structure to exist in. Clothes adapt themselves to us and they, as we, change through the years, both as fashion changes, but also through continual cleaning. Jeans get looser, T-shirts fade, underpants slowly grow bigger. You grow into them as much as they grow into you; it’s a symbiotic relationship. One thing I have learned is that wear can be a source of value; scratches that accumulate on a plate or surface, marks and dents that record events and interactions (Figure 4). Things can capture a shared history, so no wonder clothes set-off positive memories.

Sports are the next largest proportion of highest value items and (apart from the sports clothes, see above) represent the possibility of a Heideggerian sense of connection; the piece of sports equipment becomes invisible to your consciousness in becoming part of the wholeness of your performance. When you connect with a squash ball, tennis ball, golf ball so well that it seems like something metaphysical happens; when you flow down a hill on a bike (http://www.shornbake.com/stuff/descent.html) as if floating on air. Sports equipment is intimately involved in your triumphs (small though they sometimes are) and also your failures (large though they sometimes appear).
That description of high value items might be applied to other products too, though less often. When I use my iPhone, or drive a car, or play guitar it sometimes feels like me and the thing are thinking together. I just don’t get that with a printer, or a kettle, or a light; those things mainly just function, though obviously they have to fit the environment and get along with the other things.

So where things work the best is when their story becomes my story, when our narratives combine even just for a short time. That’s when the magnetism and magic works with me in a way that I don’t even notice; the supporting cast to my star-of-the-show. Actually, reviewing my list in its entirety I am amazed by the number of things that I can remember quite distinctly, whether I’ve valued them or not. I often remember where I bought a thing, though not usually where I parted with it. Things provoke memories and recall experiences; the more the thing becomes you, the more intense and emotional that memory is likely to be. Like music, things take you back, things help you out, but they don’t solve the vast majority of your problems.

So what kind of machine am I? I think a not too efficient one, though there have been moments of purring performance. It seems I have far more input than output [4]. I also have a nagging feeling that if I had input less then I would have output more; that I haven’t made best use of the machine or even misunderstood its basic operation. I can’t claim to dislike the person whose life I have examined through this inquiry, but I can’t claim any love either. The things, although constituting a significant part of life, don’t, in the final analysis, really matter that much.

The reason I don’t buy home insurance is that I hope that one day I’ll come home and all my things will be gone. Then I’ll have a blank sheet, to start all over again.


[4] Links to my various outputs on Shornbare.com are here: 10 years of one photo a month (http://www.shornbare.com/lists_of_stuff/previous_images.htm), other stuff (http://www.shornbare.com/stuff.htm)

Posted in Behaviour, Photography, Product Design, Research and tagged Consumption, Experience, Film, Meaning, Products, Psychology, Storytelling on August 19, 2015 by shornbare. 2 Comments ›

Unreal Realism #2: More Stories from Postcards (and some from Google Street View too)
Here are the results of combining a couple of imaging and imagination techniques I’ve developed in two blog posts. The first are my continuing close-up studies of ‘normal’ behavior (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2015/02/06/unreal-realism-the-stories-in-postcards/) taking place in the background of postcards. The second is the use of Google street view to capture distinct moments in time (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2014/08/15/respectability-and-indigence-in-the-urban-environment/). Here are two examples. The first is of Tintagel in Cornwall (sent in 1959). This is the original postcard:

![Postcard of Tintagel, Cornwall, with Fore Street shown in the bottom left frame (sent 1959).](https://iprofessdesign.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/postcard2.jpg)

In the bottom left frame of the postcard is a picture of Fore Street and within it, two men walking side by side – click on the image to see a close up. Here are the two men taken with a macro lens attached to an iPhone 5:
The rendering of the image with the shallow depth of field captures beautifully the historic ‘feel’ of the scene. It could easily be a carefully composed photo taken by a local photographer. At first sight I thought the two men were wearing overalls – perhaps walking home from working at a local tin mine, deep in conversation. Closer inspection reveals both in suits, however, so the interpretation of the conversation shifts to one of business being discussed (perhaps about the local tin mine?). They look like they are walking home, to lunch or dinner, relaxed in each other’s company.

It’s an interesting experiment comparing these images with modern day ones made from Google street view. In some ways the two processes – of making postcards and of producing street view images – are similar. The people that figure in the background are equally unaware that they are being captured, and each image is a public one – sent through the post or digitally referenced.

Here is the 2011 Street View image that most closely follows the frame of the original Fore Street image:
The town appears to have changed very little over the intervening years. The Hotels, both to the left and to the right in the original postcard image, are no longer hotels; pavements have been added, telegraph poles removed, and of course the cars are modern. But the rhythm of the built form; the mullioned windows, bay fronts, and roof angles – the essential structure of the place – remains.

Here is a close up of the people in that image:
The people, pixelated by the digital zoom and anonymised algorithmically by Google, are distinct only in their forward movement; some look like holiday-makers though there is a man in a dark jacket who looks purposeful and businesslike, a distant echo of the two side-by-side men in suits. He appears as a leader, the others following him either to be saved or led to their doom.

The second example is of Rye, in East Sussex (circa 1970). Here is the original postcard:

In the bottom right frame is a photo of East Street, the Union Inn prominent and with three people in the scene. Here is the close up of them:
(https://iprofessdesign.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/img_0013.jpg)

Close up of Postcard photo showing three people on East Street, Rye. Taken with a macro lens and iPhone.

In contrast to the Tintagel scene the shallow depth of field in the macro-shot doesn’t reveal a ‘photo-within-a-photo-within-a-postcard’ but a scene made impressionistic by revealing the pattern of colour making up a half-tone print. Outside of the area of focus the photo looks normal, but it takes on a painterly quality as the focus sharpens, abstracting the two figures in almost pointillist fashion, patterning the women’s skirt in the foreground.

The scene shows a couple walking towards the camera, while a younger man with teddy-boy hair and turned up trousers exits a door behind them. The couple have baggage with them. The woman holds a red handbag in her left hand while dragging a suitcase. The man, seemingly dressed in military fatigues, holds a bag in his left hand while gesturing with his right. Perhaps they are on their way to the station after a weekend away – did it go well? It’s difficult to tell, though there is a feeling of slight disconnection or unfamiliarity between them – the man and the woman don’t quite fit as a couple.

Here is the 2009 Google Street View version of East Street in Rye:
As with Tintagel the built form is largely unchanged. The Union Inn (sign just out of view) is still functioning and really the only difference is that an (ironic) ‘historic’ streetlamp and a few bollards have been added. The photo, with dynamic digital artefacts bottom left, also reveals a striking similarity in the people that are captured; a couple walk up the street while a person exits from the same doorway as before (the building now revealed as a dental surgery). The close up is shown here:
This time the man of the couple looks up at the camera (the Google car is a strange beast to behold) while arm-in-arm with his partner who carries a handbag. The woman exiting the dentist does so carefully, waiting on the top step before venturing further, perhaps slightly in pain from the dentist’s poking around; recalling where to go next.

There is a stability revealed in these various fragments and stories, of slow-changing environments with familiar rhythms and uses, and of age-old behaviours, interactions, and movements. The public facing camera that ostensibly documents and replicates place reveals all kinds of other things about the daily lives of people who populate those places. One only has to look with a magnifying glass (or digital zoom) to find that, in many English towns, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Posted in Architecture, Behaviour, Photography and tagged Architecture, Change, Experience, Representation, Storytelling, Urban Planning on August 12, 2015 by shornbare. Leave a comment

Gasoline Stations: Signifiers of Future’s Past

The artist Ed Ruscha loves a Gas Station. From Arizona to Oklahoma to Texas to LA, Ed recorded twenty six of them in his book Twenty Six Gasoline Stations (to go with Thirty Four Parking Lots). These roadside pavilions stand with their reassuring brand out front, beckoning to the long
distance motorist – modern forms in the face of wild nature – we’re here to keep you going, they say, why don’t you stop by?

Ruscha explains why he is interested in the gas station as a form:

“I would look at a building and disregard the purpose of that building (in this case a commercial outlet to sell gasoline). I was really more interested in this crazy little design that was repeated by all the gas companies to make stations with an overhang to create shade for their customers. It seemed to me a very beautiful statement.”[1]

Gas in the tank keeps the world economy going too and Standard Oil, shown in one of Ruscha’s Gasoline Station photos below, was once the world’s largest corporation.

Ruscha takes this image and stylises it in the drawing below (and subsequent painting), simplifying the form and accentuating the perspective so the viewer feels smaller and the building more dynamic; maybe even hubristic.
Ruscha likens the image he produced to railroad tracks, the camera down low:

“So [the train] appeared as though it was coming from nowhere, from a little point in the distance, to suddenly filling your total range of vision. In a sense, that’s what the Standard gas station is doing. It’s super drama.”

The gas station becomes abstract and generic too – the shop is blanked out to foreground the four pumps and the ‘Standard’ sign. We could be anywhere in America now, but it is a vision, or reflection, of modernity – in architecture, in service, and in the victory of the automobile and mobility. The artistic statement, of course, is ambiguous; the celebration, if it is there at all, carries undercurrents; of Hopper-like loneliness and alienation, of urban fragility, of corporate dominance, of Hollywood glamour.

Perhaps inspired by Ruscha’s inspiration (or the Hollywood glamour) I too have become a connoisseur of gas stations – the US and the UK variety – particularly gas stations that have closed down, leaving Ruscha-like abstractions of themselves; frozen at a time when the petroleum ran out (at least for the locality).

I came across a good example recently in West Sussex, an ex-Esso petrol station with the pumps still intact. Esso, coincidentally, were one of the off-shoots of Standard Oil when it was broken up for being a monopoly – the S and O of Standard Oil forming the phonetic Esso.
This time though, rather than a sense of modern design’s triumph over nature, there was a sense of nature beginning to re-take control. The spiders’ webs on the pump handles and weeds beginning to push through the concrete a testament to the first signs of ruin.
There was an eerie, pre-apocalyptic feel to the place, like the oil had run out not just in the locality, but in the rest of the country too, the pumps stuck at a time when unleaded cost 98.9 pence per litre. Less super drama, more like the end of the road.

(https://iprofessdesign.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/img_3506.jpg)
Today it is Apple who are the world’s largest company, with Google not too far behind. Tech companies have overtaken the oil giants but they need energy to function and fossil fuels are falling out of fashion. In 20 years there may be many more gas stations in ruins – signifiers, not of progress and modernity, as in the 1962 of Ruscha, but relics of a past when we took and took and took from the earth until there was no more.


[2] Ibid.

The End of Capitalism or Capitalism by Design?
There was an interesting article (http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/17/postcapitalism-end-of-capitalism-begun) [1] in The Observer this weekend by Paul Mason, the Economics editor for Channel 4, and author of a new book called Postcapitalism: A Guide to our Future. The article argues (as I assume the book does) that information can form the productive core of a world beyond capitalism – a freer, networked, more idea-driven world. A world where openness and collaboration will be key. To get to that world Mason points to both the creative and productive aspects of design thinking. Towards the end of the article he summarises:

“The power of imagination will become critical. In an information society, no thought, debate or dream is wasted – whether conceived in a tent camp, prison cell or the table football space of a startup company.

“As with virtual manufacturing, in the transition to postcapitalism the work done at the design stage can reduce mistakes in the implementation stage. And the design of the postcapitalist world, as with software, can be modular. Different people can work on it in different places, at different speeds, with relative autonomy from each other.”

He ends:

“We need more than just a bunch of utopian dreams and small-scale horizontal projects. We need a project based on reason, evidence and testable designs, that cuts with the grain of history and is sustainable by the planet. And we need to get on with it.”

On a first reading I nodded my head, connecting with what was said – the value of ideas from areas least expected, the need for imagination, the intrinsic relevance of design, and particularly the open-source nature of the postcapitalism project.

But rewind a bit and read about that modular design process again and it all begins to sound a bit, well, 1970s. Right down to the ‘post’ prefix of the book title.

In previous posts I’ve talked about the economics of intangible goods (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2014/05/15/whats-real-in-the-real-world-or-the-economics-of-intangibility/), about open-source design processes (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2014/09/26/design-education-in-the-wired-weird-world/) and about how design thinking can be appropriated for good or bad (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2015/02/16/designs-political-agnosticism/). Mason’s article does kind of add all those things up in a thought-provoking way, but I’m just wondering, now that governments around the world are on to design in a big way [2], if Postcapitalism might just be Capitalism by Design.

[2] See, for example, a recent gathering of government policy labs which use methods of design to develop policy. (http://www.nesta.org.uk/labworks-2015-programme)

Posted in Economics, Future Vision, Open Design and tagged Collaboration, Design Methods, GDP, Ideas on July 19, 2015 by shornbare. Leave a comment ›

Unpractical Londoners: Memory, Memorialisation, and Design Thinking

After something of an extended blog break, stuck on a long (and not-yet-finished) blog post, my attention was captured and diverted by a second-hand book purchase last weekend. Two Short Accounts of Psycho-Analysis by Sigmund Freud cost me 99 pence, although the original cost only 30 pence. Published in 1910, the elegant, Marber-grid-designed Pelican 1962 version I found had (so a blurred stamp on the first page told me) previously been part of the Maria Assumpta College Library in Kensington, London.

(https://iprofessdesign.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/freud1.jpg)
The book consists of five lectures that Freud gave at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts in 1909, summarising his work into the theory of the unconscious and the practice of psycho-analysis. One particular passage, drawing an analogy between how people and how cities experience and remember trauma, stood out:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, if I may be allowed to generalize I should like to formulate what we have learned so far as follows: our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are residues and mnemic [1] symbols of particular (traumatic) experiences.”

The markers of traumatic events, in other words, remain prominent in the memory of ‘hysterical’ people. Freud continues:

“We may perhaps obtain a deeper understanding of this kind of symbolism if we compare them with other mnemic symbols in other fields. The monuments and memorials with which large cities are adorned are also mnemic symbols. If you take a walk through the streets of London, you will find, in front of one of the great railway termini, a richly carved Gothic column – Charing Cross. One of the old Plantagenet kings of the thirteenth century ordered the body of his beloved Queen Eleanor to be carried to Westminster; and at every stage at which the coffin rested he erected a Gothic cross. Charing Cross is the last of the monuments that commemorate the funeral cortège.”

Freud gives a further example:

“At another point in the same town, not far from London Bridge, you will find a towering, and more modern, column, which is simply known as ‘The Monument’. It was designed as a memorial of the Great Fire, which broke out in that neighbourhood in 1666 and destroyed a large part of the city.”

These designed artefacts – the Gothic cross and the modern column – deliberately stand to mark particular traumatic events; moments in history that were upsetting or destructive [2]. Freud focuses us on our thoughts being symbols of prior experience; related things, but different things, where the representation and cause are only conceptually linked. The problems of hysteria come when we can’t let go of a particular symbol in our memory as Freud goes on to explain:

“These monuments, then, resemble hysterical symptoms in being mnemic symbols; up to that point the comparison seems justifiable. But what should we think of a Londoner who paused today in deep melancholy before the memorial of Queen Eleanor’s funeral instead of going about his business in the hurry that modern working conditions demand or instead of feeling joy over the youthful queen of his own heart? Or again what should we think of a Londoner who shed tears before the Monument that commemorates the reduction of his beloved metropolis to ashes although it has long since risen again in far greater brilliance? Yet every single hysterical and neurotic behaves like these two unpractical Londoners. Not only do they remember painful experiences of the remote past, but they still cling to them emotionally; they cannot get free of the past and for its sake they neglect what is real and immediate.”

The reason I was drawn to this passage was that it reveals the complexity of even the simplest of our thoughts. A thought can be thing, but it can also represent another thing, and the meanings can be very particular, not necessarily ‘rational’, sometimes uncomfortable, potentially debilitating.
My own design research started in the area of design thinking when design thinking meant design cognition and not the general-purpose creative tool it has now become. Central to design cognition, as indeed to all cognition, as indeed is all cognition, is thought. I spent a lot of time thinking about what goes on in the mind of a designer – what thoughts flick through their brain when they’re designing something – where do the memories come from? How does remembered experience feed into the pencil, sketching the new solution?

At the time I took a simple-minded approach to thought. If a person said they’d thought of a ship, I noted it down, and didn’t question why they’d thought of a ship. A ship is a ship is a ship, I thought (and that sketch does look like a ship, I thought). But over the years I’ve noticed that good designers share certain traits; an emotional connection with material and things; a fixation with small details. Getting it just right matters, and that ‘just right’ involves not just aesthetics, but an emotional connection, a feeling that can’t be reasoned away, sometimes a mild hysteria.

Freud touches on thinking at the deepest level, where the sources and the structures and the mechanisms are incalculable and often illusory; logical dead ends. Where symbols erupt seemingly from nowhere; standing for things long gone from conscious memory; an emotional residue [3].

So perhaps to be a designer you have to be just a little bit hysterical. Unable to walk away from a memorial cross without a feeling of melancholy, unable not to shed tears at the destruction of a fondly remembered building – the Macintosh library to fire at the Glasgow School of Art, for example, or the Tricorn Centre to demolition in Portsmouth.

“Memory”, the Enlightenment Philosopher John Locke wrote, “is the key to identity”, but it’s a difficult thing to nail, especially when you’re interested in design thinking.

[1] mnemonic – relating to the capacity for retaining the after-effects of a particular experience or stimulation.

[2] Compare this to the ‘speaking countenances’ of Thomas Hardy in another post (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2014/08/15/respectability-and-indigence-in-the-urban-environment/), where a point on a bridge develops a character formed by many troubled person’s contact with it, and thus where the environment intrinsically ‘remembers’ and represents what has happened there.

[3] One of the best portrayals of how the unconscious mind draws from prior experience, going back to childhood, is shown in the film The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, when a memory erasing device attempts to track down the source of every last memory relating to the traumatic experience of a relationship breakup.

How to Kill a Designer

https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/
In a past post I wrote about the mysterious design genius of Bitcoin creator Satoshi Nakamoto (https://iprofessdesign.wordpress.com/2014/07/29/nakamotos-last-theorem/) and on BBC television recently was a documentary about another internet shaper – Aaron Swartz, who played major parts in developing RSS feed technology, Creative Commons implementation, and the social news website Reddit. The documentary is called The Internet’s Own Boy and is available (courtesy of Creative Commons) through The Documentary Network.

I urge you to watch this to gain an account of how global politics is lumberingly, awkwardly, waking up to the democratic power of the web and how that, paradoxically, is threatening democracy, or at least what passes for democracy in the western world, post Wikileaks and Edward Snowden. It is a hopeful, then utterly heartbreaking, account of how someone with technical genius and political skill, someone devoted to democratic ideals of openness, and with the energy, creativity, and organisation to really achieve change, is slowly and deliberately brought down.

I hadn’t heard of Schwartz before I watched the film but it is clear how much hope was invested in him. What I was struck by was a T-Shirt he wears in a brief scene about half-way through the film (shown below):
“Design will save the world”, it says, and it’s easy to see why he might have seen design as a key force in the projects he was involved with: creating forums for knowledge exchange, making ‘private’ research information public, and allowing creative outputs to be used by all. But designing at this level is becoming a dangerous and political business, which probably means it is absolutely vital that we try to protect and support those people who know how to do it.


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