By Kalle Lasn
kalle@adbusters.org

Kalle Lasn is editor-in-chief of *Adbusters* magazine. His most recent book, *Design Anarchy*, will be published later this year.

I, DESIGNER

I am to the information age what engineers were to the age of steam, what scientists were to the age of reason. I set the mood of the mental environment, the look and lure of magazines, the tone and pull of TV, the give-and-take of the Net. I create the envy and desire that fuels the global economy and the cynicism that underlies our postmodern condition.

Psycho Design

In the 1920s, Earnest Elmo Calkins introduced the idea that no product—no coffee tin, no toaster, no automobile—should be left unchanged for long. No matter how well designed, every product must be redesigned at regular intervals. Why? Because people crave novelty: if you bring out a stylish new model, people will feel that their old model is obsolete and want to replace it. Even if it's perfectly functional.

what does design look like after all commercial pretensions have been stripped away?

The quiet destruction of the natural world is the all-embracing story of our time. But the design world is caught up in another story—the catch-the-eye, stimulate-desire, move-the-merchandize story.

Calkins's "style engineering" was one of the first examples of psycho design. Planned obsolescence became one of the most powerful marketing ploys ever invented—our consumer culture today would be unthinkable without it.

But psycho design doesn't have to be banal, relentless and destructive. It doesn't have to be one of the dirty little secrets behind the graphic and industrial designer's craft. In the right hands, it can be used to do something much more interesting than just speed up the consumer purchasing cycle.

Around the time that we came out with the First Things First 2000 Design Manifesto, some of us at the Adbusters Media Foundation engaged in a design exercise. First, we started mucking around with vodka glasses and TV cozies, then with hot water faucets, automobile dashboards and neighborhood tool sheds. It was exhilarating to let go of the product; to stop obsessing over the glitz, the salability and the cool; and to think only about the various psychological moods and states of mind they might induce in the user. Instead of increasing desire, we tried to reduce it. Instead of saving time, we s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-d it. Instead of celebrating individual ownership, we looked for ways to enhance communal sharing. We designed a chair that tells users to get off their butt; a hot water tap that inhibits usage; a tool shed that can be shared by a whole city block and a carbonometer that sits on a car's dashboard and tells the driver how much carbon he is spewing out of his tailpipe. We forgot about planned obsolescence and started designing products to last a hundred years. What a joy it was to break out of the commercial design box and start playing with the ecological, psychological and political dimensions of products in use.

Mystical Design

If you take a long, hard look at how the nature works, you'll doubtless experience some career changing epiphanies. Your first insight may be that it's hard to beat millions of years of design evolution. This can be a very humbling experience—good for your overblown design ego to have to admit that, in just about every way, nature is a far better designer than you are.

Then, if you persist, you may find your anthropocentric way of perceiving the world suddenly dissolving away. I clearly remember the moment when this happened to me. I was leafing through a coffee table book and Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Kauffman "Falling Water" house suddenly caught my eye. Of course, I'd seen it many times before—the bold, clean lines; the subdued colors; the elegant mystique. But this time, for some reason, instead of seeing the house, I saw the ferns, the shrubs, the trees, the rocks. I heard the sound of water. I felt the roots growing, the sap moving, the sunlight penetrating the leaves. And, as my imagination soared, I even saw the myriad patterns on the snowflakes that would fall there that night.

True Cost Design

The things you design don't disappear once you've created them and the client has paid the bill. For years, decades, even centuries, they endure. They will be shared, cursed, repaired. They will delight, ease, charm, and they will ultimately sit in a landfill long after you are food for worms.

So…a client asks you to design a leaf blower. The little two-stroke engine you plan to use probably has a life of a few thousand hours. Each one of those hours will pro-

If you are a TV addict, this hand-knitted cozy could change your life.

duce a bit of stress and annoyance and pollution for everyone who is forced to listen to the machine and to breathe its fumes. It will also contribute to global warming. Before you start designing, why don't you do the math. Decide how much per hour that aggravation and pollution and climate change costs society (for the sake of this argument, let's say it costs 10 cents per hour). You multiply that by the 3,000-hour life span of the tool. It comes to $300—that's a rough estimate of the ecological and psychological cost of your leaf blower.

Now you have a decision to make. Is $300 worth of harm per blower too high a price to pay? Can you design a blower that is quieter, cleaner, less polluting? Should you turn down the job? Or maybe talk the client into designing a line of better rakes or leaf composters.

Of course, this whole exercise is subjective right now. There are few concrete criteria for calculating true costs. But that does not mean you should simply throw up your hands and walk away. Bit by bit, we designers must learn how to calculate these costs and turn what is now a largely theoretical exercise into something more precise and scientific. If we don't, we are effectively calculating these costs as zero and possibly doing great harm with every product we create.

Design is a relatively new profession. We are in the unique position of still being able to shape our professional culture as it grows. We can carve out a soul for it beyond its current commercial masturbation. True cost is something we can develop and then live by, explain to our kids, put into our professional code of ethics. It is something we can hang our profession on.

As the Planet Degrades, A New Meaning, A New Aesthetic Emerges

The perspective—the aesthetic—of our sustainable future has yet to take form. But we can speculate: it's an honest, natural way of being. It follows organic cycles. It mimics nature's ways. It's not so much about being moral or good, as being a little wild and fiercely determined, like crabgrass or a seed growing in a crack of concrete. It's about living spontaneous lives of playful resistance— about being rather than having, process rather than form. As this new way seeing the world seeps into our imaginations, it begins to change our clothes, our houses, our shops, streets, food, music. . . ■