

The aesthetics of recycling is not in the product

The aesthetics of recycling is not where it is generally thought. It is not in straw-coloured recycled paper. It is not in the complex texture of re-used materials, nor in those natural-looking streaks in mixed plastics. Or rather, it is there too, but not only there, and not so much.

The aesthetics of recycling, if there is such a thing, is in the way a cap is separated from its bottle and deposited in the appropriate container. It is in the way the container is hoisted onto the garbage-collector's truck and the noise it makes as it is emptied. It is in the way a local bin-bank engages in dialogue with its surroundings. In short, the aesthetics of recycling is the aesthetics of the complex links between the life of human beings and that of their products.

In the brief space allotted to me I shall attempt to justify these assertions. This calls for a technical observation, based on my considerations: if, as we all maintain nowadays, recycling is a quality to be investigated, it cannot be regarded as an intrinsic property of material and products. Conversely, recyclability is a quality of systems: if materials and products are to be recycled, they will surely have to possess the appropriate characteristics (i.e. 'recyclability potential'). Also required, however, is another ensemble of technical, organizational and cultural factors to transform this recyclability potential into an actually implemented recycling operation.

What is the point of this banal observation? Well, it shows that a product can not express the aesthetics of recycling. The aesthetics of recycling, if there is such a thing, can only be the aesthetics of the system that renders it effectively practicable (and of which materials and products are merely a part).

The problem that arises is therefore this: is it possible to amend the purely technical and organizational connotation which characterizes today's activities of separating, collecting and processing discarded products? And above all: is it possible to bring these activities out of the dark corner of our cultural universe whose industrial society hunts down anything that smacks of garbage and tries to hide it?

Answering these questions involves themes far too complex to be dealt with in these few lines. Addressing designers, I have only this to add: if you want to

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exploit recycling, don't confine yourselves (exclusively) to the products. Bear in mind the services they fulfill and the technical and cultural systems they belong to: your objective is not a product but a complex artefact consisting of products and services, of material and immaterial components.

And the aesthetic will emerge, if and when it emerges, from a system of relationships: from its ability to link things and people, techniques and cultures, gestures and thoughts.

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