Designing Sustainability via *Progressive Design Praxis*

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Introduction

Design can be understood as a discipline that seeks to improve the existing condition by synthesizing practical needs with human values. However, a form of design that is truly capable of offering improvement and benefit – as typically claimed by designers – demands careful consideration of the ideas and values that inform design judgements. Moreover, it is important to recognize that these judgements *cannot* be sufficiently informed by deductive and/or inductive methods. There is also a need for interpretation and imagination, both of which are not only fundamental to creative activities and but also associated with our values. For sustainability, such values-based judgements have to be grounded in a culture's philosophical and spiritual traditions because these traditions typically prioritize those things that are critical for sustainable futures including concern for others and community, ideas about appropriateness and sufficiency, and ideas about inner fulfilment and meaningfulness.

I begin by considering values in the context of modern society and how they influence our attempts to address the social good and the environmental crisis. Importantly, when our activities lead to outcomes that are divisive or that exacerbate existing problems, which often seems to be the case, it becomes necessary to challenge our assumptions and our values. This is an important step in developing a different approach, one capable of balancing the opportunities offered by techno-scientific innovation with the wisdom contained in our philosophical and spiritual traditions. Attaining such a balance can help cultivate an outlook in which concern for others and the natural environment plays a far more prominent role. This is essential if we are to develop more meaningful and lasting ideas of 'improvement'.

These concerns are made relevant to the designer through the articulation of an interpretive, imaginative process that combines practical needs with enduring human values. Based on a hermeneutical circle of interpretation and the writings of Gadamer, among others, this approach integrates multifarious considerations within a simultaneous act of interpretation, understanding and imaginative application. I refer to this values-based process that strives towards virtue as *Progressive Design Praxis*.

A QUESTION OF VALUES

To delineate the potential role of designers in contributing to positive, meaningful change, it will be useful to briefly review some of the most prominent values and priorities evident in modern society.

Human development from the mid-18th century to the present is characterized by major developments in science, industry, urbanization and secularization. This period of human history has emphasized philosophical materialism, individualism and, especially since the early 20th century, an economic system based on consumption and growth.[1,2] Fuelled to a large extent by the advent of mass production and corporate marketing, it has been a period in which there has been a major expansion in the acquisition of material goods. This includes 'positional products', which are promoted by emphasizing self-enhancement values.[3,4,5] These developments are closely associated with the emergence of unsustainable ways of living. They are also related to the so-called disenchantment of the world and an erosion in our sense of meaning and significance.[6,7] Additionally, since the deregulation of the markets in the 1980s and the rise of neoliberalism,[8] economic inequity and social disparity have increased not only between rich and poor countries but also within those richer countries that have well-developed consumption-based economies.[9]

This trajectory is fundamentally tied to current debates about public sector services and the common good, environmental destruction and sustainability. Emphasis on individualism and egocentric values has a negative effect on our concern both for the welfare of others and for the natural environment.[10] Moreover, the worldview that has arisen during the modern period has eroded the relevance and contribution of those traditional routes to meaning-seeking and virtue that emphasized compassion and care for others and the importance of moderation; values that are far more attuned to the principles and priorities of sustainability.[11] Here, it is worth noting that contemporary understandings of sustainability are not restricted to environmental factors but embrace social concerns as well as issues related to the individual, such as personal fulfilment and spiritual well-being.[12,13]

Misguided design for the environment: As might be expected, these developments are affecting the ways in which our approaches to the environmental crisis are being tackled. Perhaps the most prominent route is based on the production and implementation of innovative, technological solutions. Known as eco-modernism, this approach is incremental, pragmatic and fits smoothly into our current system. Corporations and politicians tend to be enthusiastic about it because it supports rather than challenges the current system. However,

its potential to contribute to significant and lasting change is limited and it can be counter-productive, for the reasons indicated in Table 1:

Table 1: The inadequacies of eco-modernist, technological routes to sustainability

EFFECT	DESCRIPTION
Perpetuation of Consumerism	It maintains the technological optimism and consumption-based models of economic growth associated with unsustainability and perpetuates trajectories that require neither net reductions in resource use nor critique of the social character of consumer products.[14]
Values that Conflict with Sustainability	Its technology-based solutions are promoted in terms of benefits to individuals, reinforcing self-enhancement values. For change to sustainable living, 'beyond self' values must become prominent.[15,16]
Blurring of Knowledge, Understanding & Instrumentalism	Acquisition of scientific knowledge is conflated with resource exploitation for human use. For example, a recent four-year, 10 M€ project funded by the European Commission to explore the North Atlantic specifically aims to not just strengthen the knowledge base of the area but also to improve innovation and industrial application and to sustainably exploit the ecosystems of the Atlantic.[17]
Perpetuation of Growth in Resource Use, Energy Use and Waste	It leads to production of more consumer products, which may be solar- or wind-powered, more efficient, more recyclable etc. But despite any incremental benefits such products may offer, their development and promotion maintains a growth-based economy that is heavily dependent on expanding markets, resource extraction, energy use and waste. Better efficiencies in energy- and materials-use may slow, but do not fundamentally change, this direction.
Top-down Solutions	Mass-produced, technological products and product-based services tend to be top-down solutions and lack sensitivity to people's needs and preferences at the local level (see below).
Limited Conceptual Vision	It is flawed by its limited conceptual vision, which suffers from the conceit that sustainability can be achieved while maintaining our current consumer lifestyles and material expectations; i.e. those lifestyles and expectations that actually contributed to the rise of 'sustainability' concerns in the first place.
Failure of the Imagination	Sustainable 'solutions' that centre on technological products are symptomatic of a philosophical outlook and a culture preoccupied with technological advancement and innovation, where nature is seen in terms of resources. The UK Government puts it this way, *"Environmental assets … provide benefits that enhance economic performance"*.[18] This mindset is exemplified by ill-conceived eco-city projects like Masdar, Dongtan and Huangbaiyu. Here, investors, master planners and architects, typically from the UK or US, take it upon themselves to design and build entire cities from scratch. However, lack of knowledge about local cultural and environmental conditions means these projects have ended in failure time and again. They are beset by problems because, conceptually, they are naïve. They reveal an inordinate faith in technological solutions and an unsophisticated view of reality, including: • a failure to consult with local people[19] • a failure to understand local conditions[20] • a failure to anticipate that conditions change over time[21] • a failure to comply with local government policy[22] • a failure to recognize the complexity involved[23] • a failure of the imagination.[24] As Geiger, co-founder and director of Masdar, says, *"At the beginning of the project, nobody really anticipated how difficult it is to build a city"*.[25]

In many ways, design and perhaps especially industrial design – that is, product design for mass production together with associated services – has been an integral part of these developments, along with transport design, architecture and urban planning. Much of the problem in the way many product designers have been tackling sustainability has to do with the values that have been fostered within the profession, which are closely tied to the values of consumer society in general. The Industrial Designer's Society of America describes the discipline as being concerned with designing products and services that *"optimize function, value and appearance"* and provide improvements that *"benefit"* manufacturers and users.[26] Notably, no basis is offered for judging what is meant by optimizing or benefiting. Another description suggests that design is concerned with *"the definition of the physical form of the product to best meet customer needs"*.[27] Computer scientist Herbert Simon suggests that, *"Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones"*.[28] Again, neither of these descriptions offer any basis for judging 'best' or 'preferred'. The World Design Organization claims that design can *"create a better world"* and defines industrial design as *"a strategic problem-solving process that drives innovation, builds business success and leads to a better quality of life through innovative products, systems, services and experiences"*.[29] This, of course, takes for granted that *"driving innovation"* and *"innovative products, systems, services and experiences"* are all essential factors in the creation of *"a better world"* and *"a better quality of life"*. However, given the cumulative effects of such methods, this is by no means self-evident. Significantly, the implicitly favourable view ascribed to innovation, originality and optimization in these descriptions is not a scientific fact but a value judgement – one firmly anchored in modernist philosophical principles.[30]

Today, the benefits of such directions are becoming increasingly doubtful, which behoves us to ask what basis we have for judging notions of better, preferred, improvement and optimization. The fact that the design profession's explanations take the answer for granted is problematic because doing so perpetuates the fallacious idea that ever more products, services and choices will automatically improve our lives and make us happier. These inferences are highly questionable because the directions they encourage focus exclusively on extrinsic goals and rewards. In the current context, this continued emphasis on technology, innovation and breaking new ground warrants further examination and critique. Indeed, more fundamental change is needed – change based in a deeper consideration of human values, the development of a rather different philosophical outlook, and the envisioning of lifestyles that tend towards post-consumerism. Such a direction suggests less

extravagant ways of life in terms of material acquisition and greater emphasis on more enduring notions of human fulfilment, characterized by self-transcendence values and intrinsic goals and rewards.

BALANCE

To advance the discipline of design, it is necessary to develop a clearer and more thoughtful basis for understanding notions of 'betterment' and 'improvement'. To do this, we have to look beyond familiar frames of reference, especially those ways of life in which technological prowess, consumption and waste have become so prevalent. A telling line from the American contemplative Thomas Merton suggests a way forward. He says, *"The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with their pragmatic individualism degraded and corrupted the psychological heritage of axial man"*. [31] The term 'axial' here refers to the period of human history that saw the rise of the great philosophies and spiritual traditions – in China, India and the West.[32] It is a period that represents the foundations of human development, the establishment of long-enduring philosophical and spiritual traditions, and the emergence of what have proved to be time-tested practices and ethical principles. But as Merton points out, the modern period represents a break with these traditions and, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, our newer 'tradition-less' lifestyles have resulted in a perilously imbalanced focus on individualism and self-enhancement values; a focus that consumerism both fuels and reifies.[33] How different this is from the priorities of even relatively recent times, as illustrated in this description of Mr. Penny's cobbler's shop in Thomas Hardy's novel *Under the Greenwood Tree*,

> *"No sign was over his door; in fact – as with old banks and mercantile houses – advertising in any shape was scorned, and it would have been felt as beneath his dignity to paint up, for the benefit of strangers, the name of an establishment whose trade came solely by connection based on personal respect".*[34]

It will be useful to consider the priorities, motivations and values that prevail in other ways of life, outside Western-style consumer culture. More particularly, ways of life that have endured over prolonged periods can provide us with some clues as to the types of changes we might consider if we are to develop more balanced, less damaging ways forward.

Many traditional ways of thinking and behaving differ markedly from the modern sensibility. They tend to embody a sense of duty and responsibility not just to others in their community but also to the teachings, knowledge, wisdom and practices of their cultural predecessors. A scene in Plato's *Phaedrus* reveals this very point. The young Phaedrus asks

Socrates to agree with him about the truth of a particular speech, to which Socrates replies, *"I can't go along with you, because the skilful men and women of old who have spoken and written about these matters will challenge me if I agree with you just to please you"*.[35] Other examples, which include making practices, can still be found today. In Victor de Sousa's film *Uma Lulik*, which documents the building of a traditional sacred house in East Timor, one of the villagers says, *"We didn't come up with the wish to build this house. It is a wish preserved from our ancestors"*.[36] In Sardinia, a woman continues the ancient practice of harvesting fibres from living sea clams, which she weaves into a golden fabric known as *byssus* or sea silk. She was taught the craft by her grandmother who had learned it from her mother, and she says her *daughter "will have to continue this tradition so humankind can benefit from it"*.[37] And in the UK, a Cumbrian shepherd expresses a similar sentiment, *"Some people's lives are entirely their own creation. Mine isn't. ... The flocks remain; the people change over time. Someday I will pass them on to someone else"*.[38] In these various examples we see practices that are continued not simply as a matter of individual choice. There is a sense that one has to sustain the traditions of one's forebears as a duty to one's culture, one's sense of identity, one's community, and even to humankind itself. This is quite different from the individualism and preoccupation with personal choice that so characterizes modern times.[40,41]

Of course, returning to a pre-modern era is neither possible nor desirable, and we should avoid romanticizing former and other ways of living. Nevertheless, we can learn from such practices and the enduring values they hold dear in order to see our current approaches within a large frame of reference and to help us develop a different, hopefully more balanced outlook; one that brings together some of the positive values and attributes of traditional approaches with the opportunities presented by our modern technological capabilities. By considering other kinds of practices we may be able to recognize and perhaps relearn some of the important understandings, wisdoms and responsibilities that may have jettisoned too readily in our eagerness to build a technological, labour-saving future. As Scheffler has said, traditions are *"human practices whose organizing purpose is to preserve what is valued beyond the lifespan of any single individual or generation. They are collaborative, multigenerational enterprises devised by human beings to satisfy the deep human impulse to preserve what is valued"*.[41] They result from generations of convention and consensus in which a 'fit' is achieved between human needs and place. There is a tone of sufficiency, waste is frowned upon and the pace of change tends to be slow. These features contrast markedly with the norms and values of contemporary innovation and production with its

accelerating pace of change and inordinate levels of waste. Other considerations, especially pertinent to design, are the aesthetic nature and fundamental character of modern products. They are clinically pristine, made from complex materials, and alienating. To the average person, they are incomprehensible and unrepairable – there is no clue to their provenance, no point of entry and no opportunity for understanding or dialogue.[42]

BEYOND INSTRUMENTAL REASON

Our long-standing philosophical and spiritual traditions are repositories of accumulated human knowledge and wisdom. They are often very ancient, their meanings are multi-layered and, because they are primarily metaphysical in nature and are concerned with values, spirituality and behaviour, we cannot apply the essentially values-free methods used in the natural sciences; to do so is to fail to grasp their nature.[43] We make a great error if we attempt to read traditional texts as if they were imparting the kinds of explanatory knowledge about the world that science provides. As Cottingham tells us, such texts should *"primarily be understood in the context of our urgent need to change our lives"*.[44] Heidegger distinguishes between scientific ways of knowing, which are concerned with prediction and control, and human and social knowing.[45] The natural sciences aim to objectify experience and, when the human sciences apply the historical-critical method as a way of analyzing traditional philosophical-spiritual texts, they are attempting to do the same thing. Both are seeking repeatability of experiences but, according to Gadamer, applying such methods in the human sciences is inappropriate because they take no account of the historical authenticity of human experience i.e., that in its quality or character it is historically situated.[46] Here, the term 'experience' does not refer simply to the experience of an individual, but to the accumulated heritage of experience of a particular culture and, more generally, of humanity. This recognition of the wisdom and contribution of those who came before us is, for instance, incorporated into the teachings of the Catholic Church.[47] It is for this very reason that Shortt argues that the spiritual tradition of the West, i.e. the Judeo-Christian tradition that is, itself, informed by Greek philosophy, offers a richer account of the human subject than that offered by secular modernity.[48] These traditions helped forge the ethical foundations of the West, and in many ways their teachings are not dissimilar to those of the other great philosophical and spiritual traditions of the world, which for millennia have collectively provided the bedrock for human behaviour, ethics and ideas about virtue and ultimate meaning.[49] In modern times, however, Western society's prioritization of scientific and economic rationalism has *"left humanity undeveloped in emotion, aesthetic ability, sentiment, and spirituality"*.[50] Over the

last hundred years or so, the Western spiritual tradition and its teachings have increasingly become ostracized, disdained and, in many spheres, all but irrelevant. Ethical understandings grounded in spiritual tradition are no longer accredited constituents of political or corporate discourse; indeed, the European Union has emphatically excluded references to its Judeo-Christian heritage in its draft constitution and its subsequent declarations.[51,52] But without this or some other generally agreed ethical underpinning, the moral expectations and ideas of right action in society remain nebulous and prone to neglect. When this occurs, there is the danger of a 'slippery slope' descent not only towards moral relativism but also towards a climate that lacks any higher vision of virtue and significance. Here I am referring to a notion of human purpose capable of offering a more profound sense of meaning than that presented by contemporary neoliberal democracies, with their predominantly instrumental focus on material comforts and extrinsic rewards. Without some firmer foundation, actions that may seem attractive or expedient in the short term may contribute, in the long term, to mounting social injustices and economic divisions, and ever more serious levels of environmental degradation. Indeed, the lack of such a foundation is regarded by some as a major deficiency in contemporary society. Merton was vehement in his criticism. Considering the teaching of early desert contemplatives, he said they *"distilled for themselves a very practical and unassuming wisdom that is at once primitive and timeless, and which enables us to reopen the sources that have been polluted or blocked up altogether by the accumulated mental and spiritual refuse of our technological barbarism"*.[53] While many might disagree with this view, there is clear evidence that current approaches are resulting in:

- major environmental calamities;[54]
- growing socio-economic disparities within the economically developed nations and between nations; and
- immoral and illegal practices among many of our institutions that were once regarded as pillars of society, see Table 2.

Table 2: Illegal, immoral or reprehensible practices among prominent institutions

SECTOR	EXAMPLES OF ILLEGAL, IMMORAL OR REPREHENSIBLE PRACTICES
Government	- Numerous UK Members of Parliament found guilty of abusing parliamentary expenses rules to supplement their income.[55]
Banking	- Banks manipulated interest rates for profit through illegal practices that came to be known as the Libor Scandal.[56]
Church	- Revelations of widespread child abuse among priests in the Catholic Church – in USA, Europe and Australia.[57]
Immigration	- A property management company in Cardiff, UK required asylum seekers at one of their residences to wear red wristbands, as a condition for receiving food.[58,59] - In Middlesborough, UK front doors of houses used by asylum seekers were painted red, resulting in residents being targets of abuse and attacks.[60] - In Denmark, MPs approved plan to confiscate money and valuables exceeding $1,450 of asylum seekers.[61] - In USA, a candidate running for President called for Muslims to be barred from entering the country.[62]
Sports	- Doping scandals in cycling.[63] - Doping, extortion and corruption in international athletics.[64] - Bribery in international football.[65] - Match-fixing in cricket.[66] - Match-fixing in tennis.[67] - Cheating in American football.[68]
Media	- Child abuse by well-regarded public figures in British broadcast media.[69]
Industry: Resources	- The Niger Delta has produced billions of dollars in profits for multi-national oil corporations and for governments who have ignored the well-being of their own people. The region has been left environmentally devastated and traditional livelihoods have been shattered.[70]
Industry: Design and Manufacturing	- A German car manufacturer fitted 'defeat devices' to their diesel cars so it would appear that emissions were lower than was actually the case.[71] - Forced labour and child labour in electronics factories.[72,73]

In a variety of ways, our current prioritization of consumerism goes against traditional beliefs about what constitutes a meaningful life. Through the ages, these have taught the importance of material simplicity and of putting our energies elsewhere. The Renaissance humanist Thomas More asked *"how any should value himself because his cloth is made of a finer thread"* and *"whether any outward thing can be called truly good"*.[74] He advocated the importance of virtue, conscience and self-transcendence values, saying *"we should consider ourselves as bound by the ties of good-nature and humanity to use our utmost endeavours to*

help forward the happiness of all other persons".[75] Critically, as Smith has said, these directions are not about 'giving things up' per se. They are concerned with *"renunciation and replacement ... You are giving up something physical in order to access something spiritual. You are giving up something that is superfluous in order to access something necessary".*[76]

The deductive and/or inductive reasoning methods of science are inappropriate here because these deeper ways of knowing incorporate values, beliefs and notions of meaning-seeking and meaning-making. More suitable approaches involve interpretative methods. When dealing with texts, and especially traditional spiritual texts, hermeneutical methods are used; these methods will be discussed further because they are also relevant to design. At this point, it is worth noting that 'traditions' do not simply preserve conventions, beliefs and practices in aspic; the aim is not to keep everything as it is. To remain relevant, traditions have to be continually adapted to meet the needs of the present; if they fail to do this, they tend to disappear. The current context can never be ignored because this is where traditions are enacted and where their truths and benefits are realized. Hence, it is inappropriate to think of tradition as simply 'harking back' to former times. Flourishing traditions are continually re-interpreted, continually 'made new'.

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE VALUES

In contrast to the self-enhancement values encouraged by consumer capitalism, which emphasize social status, wealth and personal image, self-transcendence values include:

- **universalism** – understanding and care of others and the natural world, equality, justice and wisdom;
- **benevolence** – concern and care for those we routinely encounter, including love, loyalty and forgiveness;
- **tradition** – commitment to and respect for customs and cultural or religious ideas, including moderation, detachment and humility;
- **security** – safety, stability and harmony in society, relationships and self, including a sense of belonging and reciprocity.[77]

As we shall see, the enactment of these 'beyond self' values is crucially important, not just for tackling sustainability but also because they can give our lives a sense of purpose and an enhanced sense of fulfilment.

Culture: Clearly, the values we live by will affect our actions in the world and contribute – for good or ill – to our cultural milieu. Barnwell suggests that culture is a reflection of shared values and meanings; it makes us who we are, moulding our patterns of thought and influencing our preferences and social norms.[78] For T. S. Eliot, culture was always more than we are conscious of because it constitutes the unnoticed background of our lives.[79] To some degree it is habit, but it is also reflective of what we are capable of and what we live for, including relationships, kinship and kindness; community and a sense of place; emotional and intellectual fulfilment; and a sense of ultimate purpose or meaning.[80] These two concepts – unconscious background and reflective existence – coexist while also being contradictory. Scruton distinguishes between them, calling the first common culture and the second high culture. He suggests that common culture can be understood as the *"defining essence of a nation"*, expressed in terms of its customs, practices and beliefs, whereas high culture is a product of individual growth, something that has to be cultivated, and it *"contains knowledge which is far more significant than anything that can be absorbed from the channels of popular communication"*.[81] At the heart of common culture are community, belonging, notions of the sacred and religion. These are vital aspects of human purpose, values, right behaviour and ethical vision[82] and it is these very factors that are strongly related to our notions of making the world a better place and our sense of personal well-being.[83] Indeed, recent studies demonstrate that attention to spiritual aspects of life, for example through religious service attendance, has a beneficial effect on health and well-being.[84]

These understandings of culture include allusions to ultimate meaning and to what life is about in terms of individual purpose and flourishing. There can be little doubt that it is these non-materialistic, spiritual aspects of our lives that have suffered most in modern times, due both to the demise of religion and the absence of any suitably elevating alternative. The reasons for this state of affairs are various but the result is that some of humanity's most profound paths to meaning have become culturally diminished and annexed to the private realm. Consequently, for many, their role in creating a common sense of culture has become all but irrelevant.[85]

Whether through religion or other paths, we strive to make sense of the world with respect to our own lives and we interpret the things around us in ways that are in keeping with our level of understanding. Examining and analyzing the world from a scientific perspective, while important, can never provide us with answers to these deeper questions of meaning and value. In the West especially, while traditional religious avenues to meaning may have declined, other avenues still exist – such as the making of art and music, writing

stories and creating rituals and routines.[86] These paths, however, are often more individualistic and therefore lack the shared themes, values and acts of communal ritual and fellowship found in religion. The vacuum thus created has been filled to a large extent by consumerism – the ground of shared meanings and purpose being commandeered by private agencies and vested interests. As a result, we are invited to look for meaning in entirely extrinsic goals and rewards, by purchasing material possessions and experiences. And through the psychological manoeuvrings of savvy marketing teams and the pervasive power of advertising we become preoccupied with trivia – endless newness in the form of brands, logos and product permutations.

In some ways, art has come to fill the void, with the contemporary gallery taking on the role once provided by religion. But instead of venerating the unknowable mystery of existence, we venerate the earthly gods of modern art. We speak in hushed tones and respectfully stand and stare – looking for something we cannot fully grasp. Just past the visible surface we look for depth. But even here the economic exigencies of modern society press in on us. Rather than lingering to appreciate art for its inspirational presence and intrinsic rewards, we are shuffled through to the final culminating ritual. As with religion, our visit ends with an act of communion – not the sacramental meal of bread and wine but, predictably, in an individualized, atomizing act of common consumption in the gallery shop – art's transcendence reduced to a fridge magnet (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Art's transcendence reduced to a fridge magnet

Despite the corrosive effects of economic instrumentalism entering virtually all walks of life, we can interpret the word 'culture' as referring broadly to human ideals that provide a foundation for mutual understanding and common purpose.[87,88] Bearing this in mind, it is self-evident that concern for others, reciprocity, justice, harmony, and other self-transcendence values are vital for maintaining a vibrant, meaningful culture. Here, notions such as charity and sufficiency are especially crucial.

Charity: Charity, charitable love or *agape* as it is referred to in the Christian tradition, can be understood as a disposition of concern and care towards one's fellow human beings. This relates to our personal well-being because, according to various spiritual traditions, we find meaning and fulfilment in life by transcending egocentric motives. The 14th-century theologian and philosopher Meister Eckhart maintained that, as we progress in terms of our spiritual development through such practices as contemplation, we are able to more effectively perform charitable works and actions that are selfless.[89] Obviously, charity also relates to social well-being because it is directly concerned with the welfare of others; this includes hospitality and refraining from judging others.[90] It can extend, too, to the welfare of other species, habitats and natural places, by regarding them as intrinsic goods, not because they have some instrumental value.[91] The philosopher and atheist Bertrand Russell wrote, *"the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached; whatever does not spring from this motive is harmful, or at best useless".*[92] Hence, the teachings to which Russell refers should never be interpreted narrowly, in an exclusivist and exclusionary manner, but always in a way that fosters tolerance, reconciliation and fellowship. These ideas represent the very opposite of self-enhancement values, which are universally rejected by the major spiritual traditions of the world.[93,94]

Sufficiency: Traditional Western philosophical and spiritual teachings advocate lifestyles of self-control and material modesty, and we can draw connections here between reducing consumption and waste and:

a) **Nurturing social justice and peace:** for example, in Plato's *Republic*, the pursuit of luxury, excess and unlimited wealth is linked to injustice and war;[95]
b) **Creating a fairer society**: by reducing social injustice. To refer again to Thomas More, who was writing in the early 1500s at the very cusp of modernity and whose philosophy was based in a devoutly spiritual life, he suggested that the perfect society

was one of modest living where each person was provided with the necessities of food, clothing, housing, health care and education, where working hours were relatively low, and the supply of consumer goods and frivolous pleasures was limited;[96]

c) **Developing a more inspiring and meaningful vision**: instead of being preoccupied with material comforts and questions of security, which dominate late-modern Western neoliberal political debate but lack any greater vision of meaning, significance and value;[97]

d) **Reducing pollution and environmental damage**: enabled by more modest lifestyles and lower levels of consumption.

Thus, ideas about moderation and sufficiency have been taught since earliest times, not least, as a way of ensuring peace and harmony. In our current context, contemporary forms of voluntary simplicity serve to both enhance personal happiness and well-being while also contributing to sustainability.[98]

Silence: This is a vital ingredient for leading a more contemplative, spiritual life; both external silence and internal silence.[99] The pervasive noise of contemporary life – much of it directly related to increased use of technology – can be seen as a barrier to contemplation and interiority. This is another reason why restraint is needed – to create space for silence; it is through a rejection of the excess driven by desire for pleasure[100] and through silence that we progress inwardly, spiritually.[101]

A sense of common purpose, charity and sufficiency are all critical factors in building a fairer, more responsible society. In this, there is a need to recognize the spiritual side of our nature and the important role of spiritual teachings and practices, which are often communal, in cultivating such values. This would seem a necessary condition for countering the relativism and societal fragmentation of modern society, which has been fomented by commercial interests and market logic. And it is here, too, that silence, reflection and contemplation can play an important role.

INTERPRETATION – for a more balanced, restorative way forward
Self-transcendence values, spiritual well-being and questions of goodness find expression in philosophy, religion and the arts. They are often related to place and they complement and provide balance to scientific ways of understanding the world. When pursued along with scientific endeavours they enable us to address detailed questions about the way the world

works while also raising broader questions about meaning and purpose and so help us find fulfilment in our endeavours.

These areas of knowledge require the use of interpretive methods, in which interpretation, understanding and application comprise one unified process.[102] Critically, application always involves the interpreter's own situation. As Godzieba has explained, *"The truth of any text, work of art, or musical work ...* [or any other creative form] *... can only be grasped when applied to the interpreter's own lived experience"*.[103] The temporal aspect of this means that the timeframe of a historically situated work, practice or tradition, and the timeframe of the interpreter come together. This fusion does not eliminate the time gap but it does yield a creative mix of continuity and difference, such that we become more aware of how the past has influenced our assumptions and expectations,[104] and this can spur new imaginative directions. This is why the process requires an openness to the claims of tradition. Significantly too, the validity of any such claim is not based on it being an historical artefact but on the fact that it speaks to the present.[105] As Godzieba puts it, *"any tradition is a 'history of effects' ... and ... all understanding is a consciousness effected by history"*.[106]

Through fresh understandings and applications that are relevant to people's lives in the present, traditional teachings are continually made new. Thus, because these teachings emphasize self-transcendence values, these interpretive approaches are critical to today's questions of individual purpose, social justice and environmental care and, therefore, are essential to designers who wish to address sustainability.

Hermeneutical circle: Before discussing how these interpretive approaches relate to design, we will look briefly at interpretative methods more generally. Hermeneutics refers to the interpretation of texts, speech and human actions, as well as to the study or analysis of interpretive methods. While the term was originally used to refer to the interpretation of sacred texts, it is now applied more generally. In the case of scripture, there are four basic interpretative steps: [107]

- **Literal** – the basic 'outer' or factual meaning
- **Moral** – the lessons to be learned in terms of our proper behaviour towards others
- **Allegorical** – symbolic meanings of characters, objects, or events
- **Anagogical** – spiritual meanings and lessons – that take us to a higher level of spiritual understanding.

As we proceed from the literal to the moral, allegorical and anagogical meanings, the further removed we become from specific outer details of behaviour and cultural convention and the closer we get to the deeper, contemplative traditions found in all the great philosophies and spiritual systems. And here we find common values – values that may be expressed through a host of different culture-specific practices.[108] Universally, these point to self-transcendence values.

These interpretive approaches involve a hermeneutical circle of understanding that circulates between the whole and the individual parts. In the case of a text, we have to understand the meaning of the individual parts in order to understand the whole, and we have to understand the whole in order to understand the meaning of the individual parts.[109] Interpretation is advanced by revolving between the two until a 'fit' is achieved that is capable of standing up to scrutiny.

Design and interpretation: Design is a creative process that similarly employs interpretation, understanding and application in a unified, inseparable process. It is this process that enables us to transform theoretical ideas and abstract concepts into tangible design outcomes. A similar hermeneutical circle describes this process. When designing, we consider the whole and the individual parts and we keep circulating between the two, responding to the emerging design ideas that we are externalizing and shaping.[110] And if we attempt to create work that is in accord with self-transcendence values this, too, will be part of the interpretative process.

However, when engaging in such processes, we should be wary of adhering to rigid frameworks. In recent times, as design has increasingly become a subject of academic research, there has been a tendency among researchers to produce all manner of frameworks, methods, systems and toolkits. Generally, however, their use is unsuited to processes that require creativity because they are too rigid and static. Designing involves imagination, serendipity, insight, and a mutually informing process of thinking and reflecting combined with performative actions. We are constantly interpreting, gaining understanding and applying ideas within a unified, flowing progression. This is why Godzieba makes the point that we must have ways of interpreting *during* a performative action. In his case, he is referring to musical performance but the point applies equally to designing – the process flows and flourishes when it is fluid and flexible and where the emerging work results from *"the encounter between a guiding structural form and personal freedom"*.[111] In design, the guiding structural form will be the design intention or brief as well as broader aims. What I

mean here is that, because of the severe and growing social and environmental consequences of consumerism, interpretation should not be conducted with respect only to the narrowly focussed, internal requirements of the project in hand, such as functionality, materials, manufacturability and economic viability. As we have been discussing, it should also take into account those broader ethical, symbolic and spiritual considerations found in the philosophical and spiritual traditions of one's culture. When the process of designing is informed by these meaning-laden cultural facets, then difference and newness will be interlaced with continuity. This more informed, reflective process can yield meaningful design outcomes because it recognizes tradition and collective, inter-generational wisdom while also allowing for fresh interpretations and originality. This notion of continuity combined with difference is also tied to personal design style, which is not purely subjective but is, in part, based in collective assent or verification,[112] a factor that also relates to broader cultural values.

Modernity, however, including the late-modernity of today, has failed to respect tradition, continuity and humanity's long heritage of wisdom teachings. While it may have produced many benefits, especially material, technological and economic, modernity also represents a rupture with the past – a rupture that has caused, and is still causing, untold harm.

PROGRESSIVE DESIGN PRAXIS

We will now consider a kind of design practice that is consistent with these values-based themes. More specifically we will look at how *progressive design praxis* can foster an approach that is better able to address critical contemporary concerns related to equity, justice and environmental care.

Praxis: This term refers to a form of practice characterized by: purposive actions based in theory, values and/or circumstance; respect for accustomed ways of doing; and a coalescing of means and ends. Hence, it recognizes inherent connections between theory and practice, and between the wise determination of ends and the means of attaining those ends.[113] In addition, it is concerned with the role of creative activities in fostering humanistic social principles through the ethical, economic and political dimensions of life.[114] Significantly, the 'end' to which praxis aims is *not* primarily an external object or extrinsic goal or benefit. Rather, it is the intrinsic goal of striving towards excellence and virtue. This inner goal

applies both to the process and the outcome of the process. Thus, there is no clear distinction between means and ends, knower and known.

Praxis is different from theory, making and using – it is a kind of practical wisdom that embodies ethical values and virtues such as justice, truthfulness and friendship, all of which are ends in themselves, not the means to some other end.[115] Summarizing this understanding, Godzieba describes praxis as *"action based on reflection that changes the situation for the better"*.[116] Furthermore, the notion of 'better' is here grounded in the traditional philosophical-spiritual teaching of Western culture. And Buchanan points out that while the term praxis is used to describe purposefulness in human activity, in Marxist theory, it can also refer to resistance against the hegemonic status quo.[117]

These understandings, which involve such notions as wisdom, betterment and resistance to a dominant, and implicitly unjust, system, distinguish praxis from more objective, scientific approaches because praxis integrates actions with values and beliefs and denotes a *"general capacity to act so that one's projects and beliefs are in harmony with the world represented through them"*.[118]

Hence, praxis refers to a form of practice in which 'doing' and 'reflecting on doing according to an internal set of values' form one integrated whole. Thus, praxis is concerned not just with our actions but also with our intentions and motivations and their relationship to virtue. Importantly, praxis is progressed by an internal standard of excellence that is guided by reflective critique and 'making relevant' well-established, time-tested philosophical and spiritual teachings about values and virtue. This contrasts starkly with the predominantly extrinsic goals promoted by the modern phenomenon of consumer capitalism.

Progressive design praxis: Criticizing modernity's approaches to design, Scruton argues that we should not be imposing a comprehensive vision that goes *"against the instincts and plans of ordinary people"*, to do so, he says, *"is simply to repeat the error of the modernists"*.[119] Instead, he advocates 'side-constraints', by which he means some basic rules about what is and what is not appropriate in a particular context, and which is less top-down and controlling. Considering in particular the design and production of material goods, these understandings suggest an approach that attempts to ensure the processes and outputs:

- are consistent with self-transcendence values, and are culturally sensitive, relevant and warranted – judged not simply in terms of utility or profit but also with respect to individual flourishing, social well-being and environmental care;

- adhere to a design sensibility rooted in the local through the provenance of materials, forms and modes of making. These can contribute to artefacts being repairable, adaptable and kept in use. Thus, people become accustomed to them, and products can grow old with grace and be passed on to the next generation. Accordingly, our material culture becomes less wasteful and more meaningful – because it is permitted to acquire a history and symbolic value.

- employ production methods that, where possible, are human-scale, are within or close to local housing and at a size that encourages a sense of community and familiarity. Rather than continually growing one facility, it becomes more appropriate to branch off to create another 'local' facility in another area. This allows operations to be maintained at a community level, reducing shipping and commuting, and enabling any unforeseen detrimental effects to be localized, recognized and remediated.

These kinds of basic rules or side-constraints would help ensure more responsible and thoughtful forms of design practice. Importantly, such approaches are consistent with tradition, convention and consensus while also offering opportunities for change, originality and vitality. Our material culture would be constantly evolving while also constantly remaining. And it would fit with context and the everyday needs of people rather than standing out as 'designer icons' that promote status-related feelings, self-enhancement values and selfishness. In these ways, *progressive design praxis* can offer ways of designing that enable positive, long-term benefits.

The aim of such design is to change the situation for the better, where 'better' is understood in broader terms than simply focussing on the internal requirements of a particular project. Through its embedding of culturally relevant values and notions of virtue it also takes into account people, community and the natural environment. This kind of design is, by necessity, more encompassing and more considered. And it is progressive in the sense of gradual advancement and improvement.

We are now in a position to offer a succinct description of this broader, reflective design process:

> **Progressive Design Praxis** is a form of design practice that aims to change the situation for the better by striving to interpret, understand and apply the ethical values and notions of virtue found in the philosophical and spiritual traditions of one's culture.

By inference, this is a process that resists and strives to overcome injustices in the dominant system. Also, by adapting the four modes of the hermeneutical process discussed earlier, we can now summarize the basic rules in a manner more suited to design. In this case, the four

modes of interpretation, equivalent to those employed for texts, can be expressed as: practical, ethical, symbolic and spiritual, as illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3:** Progressive Design Praxis
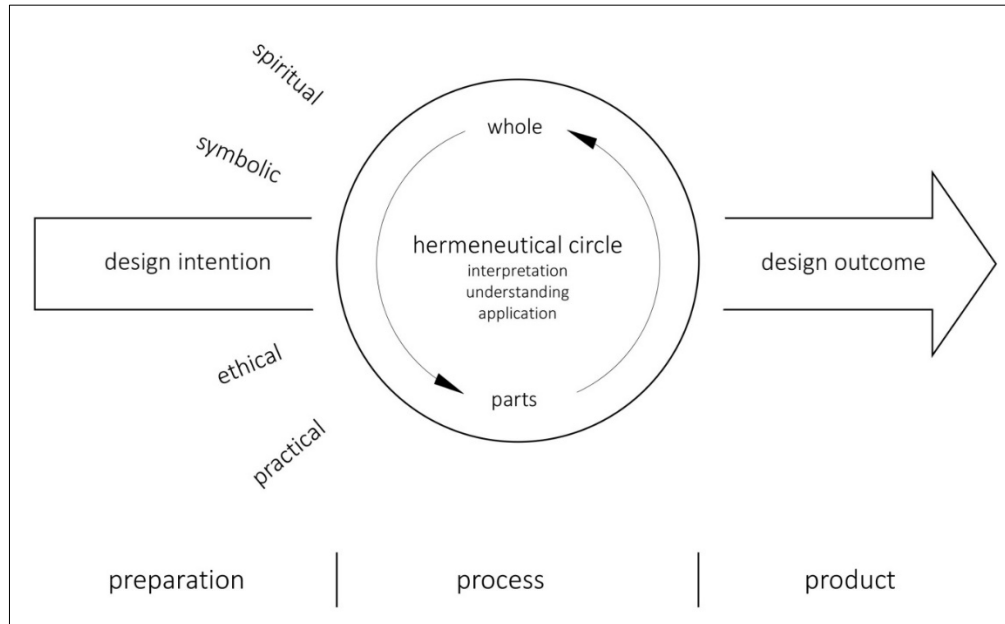
Progressive design praxis can be understood as:

- a values-based process informed by the self-transcendence values of one's culture, which stem from its philosophical and spiritual traditions;

- a process in which the designer strives to interpret, understand and apply these enduring values in ways that are appropriate to the present situation. In doing so, account is taken of the stylistic and aesthetic values of one's own time, both to make the design relevant and because, by necessity, we interpret and understand through our own, contemporary eyes;

- a process that links reflection with action. It is thoughtful, philosophical and concerned with depth of meaning and inner progression in and through human actions. Being motivated by intrinsic goals of excellence and virtue, it is less concerned with passing trends, market-led fashions and other extrinsic objectives;

- a process that – because of its emphasis on self-transcendence values – is sensitive to sustainable principles i.e. issues of personal and social well-being, community and environmental care;[120]

- a process that recognizes the interpretive, temporal aspects of design and respects the historical basis of knowledge, enduring values and human wisdom, all of which inform and influence contemporary perspectives and understandings.

Figure 4 illustrates the relationships between progressive design praxis, charity, sufficiency and critical elements of sustainability, namely personal well-being, social well-being and environmental care.

Figure 4: Progressive Design Praxis, Charity and Sufficiency
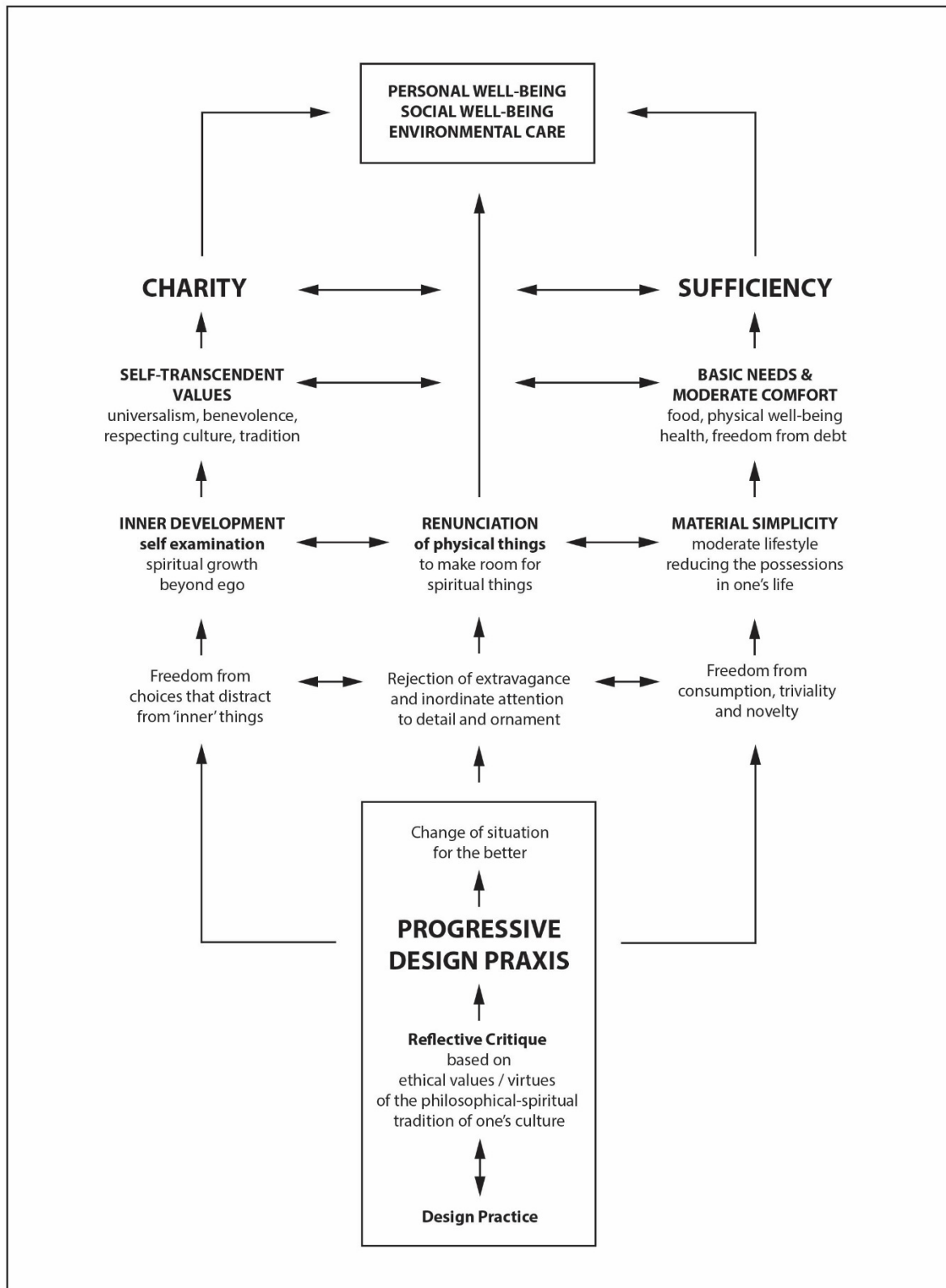
In developing design work within and for a particular culture there will be certain aspects that conform to, and others that differ from, expectations and conventions. These continuities and

departures are dependent on a number of interrelated factors including the designer's experience, background and breadth of knowledge. In turn, these will affect the interpretation of design considerations and priorities. However, when these considerations and priorities include wider implications, so that we see our activities as being connected to a greater whole, then design starts to move towards a more magnanimous form of practice i.e. *progressive design praxis.* Importantly, its foundation in self-transcendence values is important not just for ethical decision-making, with its tendency towards mere compliance, but also for proactively making positive contributions by aspiring to 'the good' in and through our design decisions and actions,. This broadens the designer's purview and demands a deeper consideration of one's actions and activities. In this process, the past is brought together and united with future possibilities in the here and now of the present – a present that is always changing, always different. And it is through this continual striving to enact and embody cultural, ethical and spiritual understandings and values that we are able to achieve meaningful human actions and meaningful design outputs.

CONCLUSIONS

The progressive, praxis-based understanding of design that has been developed in this final chapter transcends empiricist and reductionist theories of knowledge that have dominated Western thought throughout the modern period and still dominate it today. Drawing on insights offered by Blackburn,[121] *progressive design praxis* has a number of distinctive qualities and characteristics. First, it recognizes the limitations of reason and its inability to solve contradictions. We can have well-founded reasoned arguments on both sides of a design issue but never reach a mutually acceptable solution because each position can rest on quite different ideological foundations; we see similar differences in other areas of life, such as politics. Second, it challenges the prominence of theory, which by definition is abstract and generalized and therefore unable to address the particularized experiences, customs and details relevant to locale. Because social norms and ways of knowing vary from one culture to another, it follows that to a greater or lesser extent praxis will be culture-dependent. This means that values-based approaches are related to cultural norms, which supports greater localization in design. Third, it raises the significance of design practice, which is always specific – i.e. concrete, tangible, not theoretical – and can be adapted to context and, *ipso facto*, is capable of addressing the particularities of place, culture and social mores. In contrast to much commercial design practice over the past century or more, which has been

closely linked to human exploitation and environmental destruction, *progressive design praxis* can be understood as a purposive values- and virtue-based version of design practice.

Clearly, then, *progressive design praxis* is a form of design practice that seeks to distance itself from the destructive path of late-modern consumerism. An important element in this distancing is the restoration of the values and notions of virtue that emerge from a culture's philosophical and spiritual traditions. This, however, should not be construed as retrograde; to do so would be to misunderstand the intention and nature of praxis. Rather, *progressive design praxis* is concerned with reorienting our priorities so that they are in closer accord with our full humanity – the rational and the intuitive, the logical and the emotional, facts and values. It is this balance that is needed for personal well-being, social cohesion and environmental care. *Progressive design praxis*, therefore, is about developing more informed, more intelligent ways forward – so that, as a society, we begin to see excess, wastefulness and inequity as socially unacceptable and those who indulge in such activities as harmful to individual well-being, community and planet.

Finally, conventional design practice in the contemporary corporate setting is, essentially, a means to a primarily commercial end. Within the same milieu, marketing and advertising constantly encourage us to fixate on personal wants. They foster discontent, fuel yearnings for more than we already have, and promise fulfilment through the satisfaction of those very material desires they have been instrumental in cultivating. A major IT company names its laptops *Envy*; kitchenware is sold under the label *Prestige*; cosmetics and perfumes are marketed under names like *Esteem*, *Eminence*, *Obsession* and *Covet*. And at the unveiling of a new luxury concept car, a company spokesperson recently said, *"the powerful have always understood the symbols through which they express their standing"*.[122] Where these messages of consumerism urge self-regard, selfishness and worldly acclaim, traditional spiritual teachings advise the opposite. They tell us that a meaningful life and personal happiness are to be found through self-discipline, and that contemplation and self-reflection help counter our tendencies to be seduced by materialistic gratification. They lead us towards virtues like humility and charity[123] and encourage sufficiency, equality, respect for tradition, forgiveness, the spiritual life, and care for the natural environment.[124] A reorientation towards these understandings and activities will be essential for realizing significant, positive change towards sustainability and for a developing a more mature, wiser notion of 'progress'.

Author Bio

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Notes

An early, shorter version of this discussion, entitled *Spirituality and Design: creating a meaningful material culture through progressive design praxis*, appeared in Laszlo Zsolnai, L. and Flanagan, B. (eds) (2018) *The Routledge International Handbook of Spirituality and Society*, New York & London: Routledge. A more complete discussion appeared as Chapter 100 'Progressive Design Praxis' in Walker, S. (2019) *Design Realities: creativity, nature and the human spirit*, Routledge, Oxford, pps. 268-293.

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