

# **S.E.A.T—The little stool that could**

The development of social innovation in product design

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### **Abstract**

*Based on the principles of socially responsible design this paper identifies criteria for converging the traditional 'market-led' model of product design practice with that of social innovation. The new model proposed aims to investigate the hypothesis that social initiatives and empowering design solutions can afford positive social change by enabling creativity and the design intent as the visceral agent for change.*

*In this paper we discuss the evolution of a final year graduating design student's project and how through collaboration with a range of stakeholders her project entitled S.E.A.T has been launched in the marketplace and is an active agent for social change and development.*

*Starting with the designers intent we will highlight how the different stakeholders have formed a relationship with the project and identify their roles in the design/manufacture/distribution/use of the product which is mutually beneficial to all involved. The project includes sustainable manufacturing in Vietnam, a national retailer, an educational program within Australian indigenous communities all synthesised and managed by the organisation Hands that Shape Humanity.*

*In this paper we discuss how S.E.A.T is acting as a driver for a collaborative process with aims that include testing whether social innovation and engagement can lead to positive social change and development for all stakeholders and their respective associations. The fundamental questions underpinning this project are firstly how can product design practice shift from a 'market-led' imperative to one of 'social need', without a compromise in quality and financial benefits? And secondly if so, how are such socially responsible sustainable practices formed and established as conventional?*

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S.E.A.T was designed in 2009 by emerging designer, Niki Banados, as her graduating design project within the School of Design Studies, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia. S.E.A.T is a small stool with a secret compartment, which is accessed by twisting the top. The stool is designed for construction in wood or bamboo and packs flat to fit inside an A3 box. S.E.A.T was Niki's response to a project brief conceived and developed by Virginia Bruce who is the CEO of 'The Hands that Shape Humanity'. This social enterprise was founded in South Africa in conjunction with the Desmond Tutu Peace Centre and developed from the responses of 76 international identities in response to the question "If you could leave one message for humanity what would it be?" 'The Hands that Shape Humanity' project brief called for students to design an ordinary object with an extraordinary message that could inspire human potential.

It was Niki's intention to create a 'sustainable product' that considered not only the material and manufacturing processes but also how the design engaged people. She achieved sustainability in her design for 'self assembly' where the user has to assemble the stool and 'personalization' through painting and decorating. The secret compartment also allows precious memories, letters or objects to be stored. In our opinion personal engagement on its own does not make a product sustainable but if the product is perceived as a valuable personal object it is potentially less likely to be thrown away. Niki also proposed that the stool be made in a third world country such as Vietnam, which would assist a small community with income generating opportunities.

Before we discuss in detail the case study of S.E.A.T, it is important to understand the field in which it is situated. We see S.E.A.T as situated in the context of socially responsible design, which has emerged through the ever-increasing discourse concerned with 'sustainability'. Such discourse reveals that global society<sup>9</sup> is in the midst of a sustainability crisis, where the concept of 'sustainable design' remains unresolved. Initially, sustainable design tended to be addressed via pragmatic concerns, such as, a product's materiality and manufacturing. However, these measures disregard a holistic concern with the interrelated ecological, sociological, economic, political, and psychological problems of our un-sustainable civilisation. Increasingly design research in Western economies is now acknowledging that sustainability must be understood as a multifaceted dilemma, where 'sustainable' can no longer be misconstrued as synonymous with 'green' (Pilloton, 2009: 15). This effort can be described as an endeavour to re-direct product design practice toward a discipline that positions itself as an active agent in the formation of a sustainable civilisation.

Design theorist Tony Fry defines this new terrain, as *re-directive practice* (2008); which aims to drive a new trajectory of sustainment, rather than simply making the unsustainable more sustainable through efficiency improvements. Situated within this discipline is the endeavour to re-position product design practice from a 'market-led' or 'consumer-led' methodology to a socially responsible model. Such a transition demands the reassessment of design values, where a focus upon the creation and constant stimulation of human *desires* must be abandoned for a discipline that places social impact and designing for human *needs* as paramount (Whiteley, 1993: 3). Furthermore, this 'social model' of product design practice discards excessive production, consumption and waste patterns for an overriding concern in *responsibility*. Within such a discipline a designer does not merely require talent but must also entail moral and ethical responsibility (Heller & Vienne, 2003: xi). Furthermore, progress within the field of socially responsible design based on re-directive practice has instigated the recognition and value of the relationships between design, philanthropy and altruism.

Interest in such an approach to design has led to several, valuable theoretical contributions. The late architect-designer, Victor Papanek, is often distinguished as the discipline's pioneer, who argued through his seminal book of 1972, *Design for the Real World*, that 'designers have become a dangerous breed' (p. ix). Although Papanek's assertions are almost 40 years old, they unfortunately remain relevant today, where the call for a practice that involves designing for people's *needs* rather than their *wants* persistently rings true (p. 219). Professor Nigel Whiteley continues such thinking within his book, entitled *Design For Society*, 1993. Whiteley argues that it is morally unacceptable to maintain 'consumer-led' design practice, due to its advocacy of materialism and rejection of altruistic values (p. 3). Furthermore, the proposition is made that if knowledge, of a product's environmental, social and political implications was available, consumers would begin to demand socially responsible products (p. 170). This concept is focused upon restructuring consumer culture towards a level of 'consciousness' where choices can be made to support products and services that are contributing to a level of sustainability which reflects more than

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<sup>9</sup> The description applies focus to the consumer-oriented characteristics of current society and consequently, phrases, such as, 'our society' and 'contemporary society' relate to this observation. However, it is acknowledged that not everyone encompassed under these terms exemplify such characteristics.

economic profits. However, professional product design practice in many respects is still in need of making such a paradigm shift.

Professor Victor Margolin recognises this omission within his influential book, *The Politics of the Artificial*, 2002. Margolin declares that 'design must now disengage itself from consumer culture ... and find a terrain where it can begin to rethink its role in the world' (p. 99). Furthermore, Margolin acknowledges that there exists a vast gap between rhetoric and action, through asserting that 'the world's design needs are evident, but the plan for reinventing the design profession is not' (p. 102). Although this need is identified, the text seems to fall short of providing a full-bodied prescription for a new vision of design practice. Nevertheless, such a discussion is initiated within the article entitled *A "Social Model" of Design: Issues of Practice and Research*, 2002, by Victor Margolin and Sylvia Margolin. This paper is a valuable addition to the discourse through its effort to present a "social model" of product design practice and a research agenda to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach. Margolin 2002, suggests that product design and social design are not mutually exclusive but rather should be seen as points on a continuum and that the differences between them are defined by the priorities of the commission. Further Margolin proposes that a social model of design requires a level of collaboration across the range of stakeholders in order to create an opportunity of mutual benefit.

Authors Steven Heller and Veronique Vienne make their contribution through aligning citizenship with design in their book, entitled *Citizen designer: Perspectives on design responsibility*, 2003. The book presents the concept of a 'citizen designer', who must contain a 'moral standard' and 'be professionally, culturally, and socially responsible for the impact his or her design has on citizenry' (p. x). Such design thinking relates to the concept that all actions have reactions. Therefore, the text recognises the designer's responsibility to acknowledge the real consequences of their designs as a key element of socially responsible design. David Stairs, executive director of *Designers Without Borders*, engages in this moral aspect of socially responsible design through his article, entitled *Altruism as Design Methodology*, 2005. Stairs argues that 'market-led design' has encouraged individualism, rather than philanthropy and that it is time to reconcile design practice with more altruistic values. In this manner, design is encouraged to address problem solving from a social perspective in order to become an agent of social development (p. 10).

Emily Pilloton, executive director of *Project H Design*, is another eminent author within the discourse of socially responsible design. She argues the case for user-centered, humanitarian design within her book, entitled *Design Revolution: 100 Products That Empower People*, 2009. Based on her analysis of recent design debate Pilloton is optimistic in declaring that design can change the world through a revolution that puts social impact and human needs first (p. 11). Furthermore, the discussion is extended to relate 'design for social impact' to both social entrepreneurship<sup>10</sup> and design thinking. Social entrepreneurship expands the financial 'bottom line' to a 'triple bottom line: people, planet and profit' (p. 17). Such a model considers how a product's design, manufacturing and distribution can be both financially and socially beneficial. Pilloton then goes on to describe design thinking as 'the use of design sensibilities in business strategies and innovation models' (p. 21). This concept is seen as mutually beneficial to both businesses and designers, who can achieve their goals of social impact through their collaboration.

Extreme change demands extreme change. Accordingly, although perhaps sluggishly, design is changing as a result of current widespread concerns regarding current environmental and social degradation. The above analysis of current progress within the field of socially responsible design verifies this statement. Nevertheless, the question remains as to how can product design practice shift from a 'market-led' imperative to one of 'social need', without a compromise in quality and

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<sup>10</sup> Social entrepreneurship is 'the application of entrepreneurial business practices and principles to organise, create, and manage a venture that both incites social change and makes a profit for some or all stakeholders' (Pilloton, 2009:16).

financial benefits? Furthermore, how are such socially responsible sustainable practices formed and established? Discourse concerned with the identification of this need progressively inflates the growing field, however, as Pilloton states ‘it’s time to stop talking and start walking’ (2009: 28). What is now needed is research focused on the development and evaluation of socially responsible products to test their effectiveness in actual situations (Margolin & Margolin, 2002: 28). Such research appears fundamentally concerned with the investigation of the widespread, multiple consequences brought about by a singular product, commonly referred to as ‘the butterfly effect’<sup>11</sup>.

Tony Fry (2008) has pitched consumption against sustainable practice where the notion of human desire should be abandoned so that we can address designing for human needs. We believe, like Margolin & Margolin (2002) and Pilloton (2010), that a sustainable design practice is not “a them or us scenario” but rather a convergence of interests and benefits for all the different stakeholders. For many of us in the developed world we are becoming more conscious of our choices and desires and are looking for ways to make a difference in the way we consume. We are only able to do this because we have evolved beyond the base level of human needs and can be selective in our choices. We believe that if you remove the imperative in ‘market-led’ design practice and replace it with ‘choice’ and ‘intent’ you are empowering consumers with knowledge about the real value of a product and the impact their choices can have in the world.

### S.E.A.T Case Study

In our case study we will outline how S.E.A.T has evolved as a socially sustainable product by positioning the designers intention in the “drivers seat” which has led to a number of positive actions for the stakeholders and the community at large.

Virginia Bruce and her organization ‘The Hands that Shape Humanity’ investigate new ways to inspire human potential. She is particularly interested in design as a platform for social change. Her background is in product development, branding and marketing and she has extensive experience with the traditional approaches to developing products to meet consumer needs. However as the CEO for The Hands that Shape Humanity her approach to consumer needs and product development has evolved and is outlined in her consumer product manifesto.<sup>12</sup> Virginia’s

<sup>11</sup> The ‘Butterfly Effect’ is the popular name for Edward Lorenz’s concept of sensitivity which emphasizes that extremely small differences can lead to major consequences that are perceived as random changes.

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## OUR CONSUMER PRODUCT MANIFESTO

<p><b>01</b> <b>PASSION</b> PURPOSE, INSPIRATION</p> <p>We choose to work with brands and individuals who are passionate and inspired and bring purpose to what they do.</p> <p>Every hand can and must participate in the shaping of humanity. Our hope is to inspire, facilitate, engage and assist as many people as we can to do this in a way that pays it forward towards a positive social outcome.</p>	<p><b>02</b> <b>CREATIVITY</b> POSSIBILITY &amp; EVOLUTION</p> <p>Infinite possibilities exist within each and every one of us. Creativity is the use of imagination to form original ideas.</p> <p>Evolution is the way we grow and apply these ideas. Nothing is constant. Everything is changing. Anything is possible. We know the human spirit will always find a way—that is the essence of creativity.</p>	<p><b>03</b> <b>INTEGRITY</b> SOCIAL, ETHICAL &amp; ENVIRONMENTAL</p> <p>We care about the social, ethical and environmental origins of our products. In particular the energy and intent with which they are made.</p> <p>When someone loves what they do, that is the energy they place into their work. We seek to add value to our world without depleting it, but just as important we seek to add value to humanity</p>	<p><b>04</b> <b>CONNECTION</b> LOCAL &amp; GLOBAL</p> <p>We are all connected. We value community both local and global. We understand cause and effect and exchange.</p> <p>We believe in the butterfly effect, one small act can create great impact. This is the platform we look to provide for like minded individuals and companies. Our continuum is self—other—society—humanity—beyond. Always full circle.</p>
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proposition is that if you meet the desire and needs of all stakeholders, from design to altruism to profit, then the motivation for collaboration to create a positive social outcome becomes more heightened. By engaging people and businesses throughout the life span of a product, from a design, educational, business and altruistic position Virginia and her organizations manifesto helps guide the development of a product with authentic value. If people are able to see how the product is benefiting a community, and themselves, then it is proposed that they will be more likely to want to engage with it. The proposition from Hands follows the intent of a product from self, to other, to society, to humanity and beyond, and thus infusing into the DNA of a product a level of sustainability not yet demonstrated. Virginia is working from the premise that sustainability is not merely an aspect that is 'nice to have' but is instead becoming a fundamental shift and convention within our society.

### **The Stakeholders**

Margolin's model for social design relies on a range of stakeholders collaborating together, believing in a common goal or intent but also having their individual needs met. This is a critical point if the project/product is to be successful and have a sense of longevity and thus sustainment. Therefore the process is one of transparency where each of the collaborators agrees to be involved because they believe in the designer's intention. Connected to this, the collaborators can see how they can make a contribution and how that contribution can benefit their own position and also pay it forward to the other stakeholders ( fig.1.).

Virginia's main aim with the Hands that Shape Humanity project brief for the final year design students was to orchestrate an opportunity within a real world context for a young designer's intention for positive social change to be realized, using an integrated framework to the 'consumer-led' model. Students were asked to consider the impact their design would have from the consequences of material choices, where it was manufactured and what contribution their design could make to its intended audience.

Niki's response to the project brief considered how and where S.E.A.T could be made but also her intention was for people to share stories and keep personal objects and letters within the hidden compartment thus making the design an object to be treasured. Virginia saw great potential in Niki's final year project in particular the level of personal engagement and sustainability that responded to the Hands' consumer product manifesto. Thus Virginia mentored Niki in refining the design and developed a number of relationships, that went beyond the designer, that would enable S.E.A.T to reach a range of audiences with the intention of bringing about a level of social change. The product design lent itself to be used as a children's reading seat, an object that if assembled in multiples created a 'pop-up reading circle', and through the process of assembly created a series of other 'learnings' for children. This process of collaboration is ongoing, with the S.E.A.T Project being launched to primary schools through out Australia in June 2012, and as such will require further analysis and reflection to ascertain the actual impact and level of social change over time.

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Need</b>	<b>Benefit</b>
School of Design Studies, COFA	Supporting the Hands project as a viable consideration for 4 <sup>th</sup> Year Design Graduates	Client brief Real projects for students	Learning/ Community engagement
Designer	Product design	Experience, opportunity,	Recognition, design royalty
Hands That Shape Humanity	Mentor/Inspiration, project management	Product and project	Proven business model, revenue, brand awareness
ALNF (Australian Literacy and Numeracy foundation)	Charity partner	Address literacy issues in Aust. Indigenous children	Fundraising & social awareness positive social change
The r.e.a.l store (retailer)	Distribution to end-users via retail outlets	Corporate social responsibility program in sustainability	Public Relations, content, revenue
Manufacturer	Manufacture of SEAT	Work for their factory, business opportunity	Income
End Users (children, educators, parents)	Purchase the product and use it.	Education tool, gift, activity	education in team building, sustainability, social values, art
Community	Participation in the butterfly effect	Opportunity to participate, education of issues	Feeling of contribution. Positive social change
Marketing partner / School Aid	Marketing to educators in primary schools	Demonstration of their corporate ethos. Kids helping kids.	Awareness to School Aid, income, credibility through association

Fig. 1

#### School of Design Studies, COFA (Educator)

The School of Design Studies utilizes the Hands that Shape Humanity project brief for their final year design students as it offers a real world project and the possibility of student works actually being manufactured. There is a mutual opportunity and benefit for the University being able to offer a project brief whose intentions are to bring about social change and engage in making the world a better place.

#### The Designer (Creator)

As a stakeholder in the project Niki gets both a royalty and public recognition for designing S.E.A.T. She has been responsible for all further design adjustments required to meet manufacturing standards for the retail market, and has been actively involved in the marketing and promotion of S.E.A.T.

#### The Hands that Shape Humanity (HTSH) (Architect/Facilitator)

HTSH offer the student designer an opportunity to be mentored and assisted in the development of projects that can manifest social change. HTSH works to facilitate this opportunity and in turn develops their profile and brand as an organization leading the consumer led market towards social design and change.

#### The Manufacturer (Community engagement—Vietnam)

S.E.A.T is currently being manufactured in Vietnam by a small village 4 hours south of Hanoi , which specialize in Bamboo products. Bamboo is a very sustainable material and the processes used in the production of the sheet material have a low impact on the environment as there is no waste or byproducts. The factory generates its own energy through burning the bamboo sawdust. After Virginia visited this community she saw an opportunity to engage them in the manufacture of the stool. Machinery and mentoring were given to this community in order to help them produce the product. By working with craftspeople in this small village and providing them with revenue it allows for a level of financial sustainment for the community and can help indirectly by giving their children the opportunity to go to school. The factory also employs women on a flexible basis so that they can look after their families and the seasonal agricultural commitments they have given that they are still 70% agricultural dependent.

#### The Australian Numeracy and Literacy Foundation (Community engagement—An Australian perspective)

Connections were made with The Australian Numeracy and Literacy Foundation (ALNF) who do award winning work in Indigenous Literacy. In Australia we still have 4 out of 5 children in Indigenous communities who are illiterate. ALNF endorsed the SEAT project as they saw it as a catalyst for community engagement. SEAT facilitates children's engagement with reading in particular among indigenous youth<sup>13</sup> by creating pop up reading circles. In order to facilitate this process a children's book was created that outlined how S.E.A.T was made and produced with the intention of informing young children about the concept of sustainability and that their actions and choices have far reaching consequences. At its core the Foundation looks to educate children on the value of who they are.

A pilot program has been set up where S.E.A.T. has gone out into a range of schools of various demographic backgrounds and in each case was perceived by the students and staff to be a worthwhile exercise. Funding is currently being sourced in order to follow up with further research to ascertain from staff the ongoing impact SEAT has within the classroom.

#### The Retailer

Another major stakeholder in S.E.A.T is the Australian national retailer Officeworks. They saw the opportunity to associate their brand with a product that was altruistic in the way it was assisting others through educational/community engagement. It enabled them to communicate with customers the fact that by purchasing S.E.A.T the buyer was assisting a community in Vietnam, and supporting the ANLF program for Indigenous youth literacy skills while also giving their own child a product to engage with.

#### The Marketing Partner

School Aid has joined forces with S.E.A.T to assist with getting the project's awareness into the education sector, schools, government, philanthropic sector. School Aid is a national schools-based philanthropy network empowering kids to help kids in crisis. School Aid's purpose is to promote a world where Australian children live the values of care and compassion and so develop a lifelong sense of moral and social responsibility.

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<sup>13</sup> ALNF have a reputation for doing award winning literacy programs in the area of indigenous literacy and presently run a program called 'Hand up who cares' which is about informing the general public about the plight of indigenous literacy skills where 4 out of 5 indigenous kids in rural and remote Australia are unable to read to Australian education standards

## Conclusion

The roll out of S.E.A.T is still in the very early stages and further research will be required over a longer period of time to test the impact S.E.A.T has on the range of stakeholders. However at this time we believe that the level of integration across design, education, and community enables this ordinary product to engage and potentially improve people's lives through the 'butterfly effect'. This model of socially responsible design is much more complex than that of 'market-led' design and in many ways reflects the level of interconnectedness of our society.

By positioning S.E.A.T. within a framework of sustainable design, and educational community engagement, Virginia and the Hands that Shape Humanity organization are developing a model for design and designers to be engaged in social need, where human needs no longer are juxtaposed against 'the sale of goods' but rather work together as a continuum for social change and development (Margolin 2002).

There now seems an urgent mandate to 'design for good', rather than simply practice 'good design' (Chochinov, 2009). Product design should no longer merely concern itself with just industry, economics and private affluence but rather integrate a focus on design, ethics and social responsibility.

Society has always been in a constant state of change, however the speed of the change that we are experiencing given the advancements in technology and communication is reminiscent of the industrial revolution. A drastic rejection of current norms is required. Such change, however, seems yet to be made, where current discourse formations within Western societies seem dislodged from a *particular* attitude. To borrow from theorist Terry Smith there is a need to stand 'at once *within* and *against* the times' (Smith, 2008: 8). Design today is not merely about function or aesthetics but about changing the world. Unfortunately, this mandate is often misunderstood as involving a decline in quality, aesthetics, and financial benefit. Conversely, S.E.A.T aims to present and evaluate a practice which is both socially and financially beneficial to its numerous associated stakeholders, without a compromise in quality or design.

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