

# LOCATING DESIGN

## Rediscovering Value: The Second Lives of Secondhand Goods

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There is no longer an “away” to throw things to.

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Used goods can be bought in the US in small and large cities, in urban, suburban, and rural areas, in shopping malls, strip malls, garages, and people’s driveways. These transactions typically occur in the informal, unorganized economies of yard sales, garage sales, flea markets, and swap meets, as well as in more organized not-for-profit thrift stores like Goodwill and Salvation Army.<sup>1</sup> These sites of consumption attract the attention of consumers looking for good bargains and collectors searching for objects of their obsession, but also of anthropologists and sociologists interested in secondhand cultures. Several ethnographies of garage sales, swap meets, car-boot sales, and other used goods markets have been published in recent years (Sherry 1990; Herrmann 1997; Straw 2000; Gregson

and Crewe 2003; Palmer and Clark 2005), clearly establishing this as a significant and growing area of study.

My interest in used goods turned into weekly trips to thrift stores when I served as a guest curator for an exhibition called *Rewind Remix Replay: Design, Music and Everyday Experience*, at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona in 2010 (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> This exhibition showcased the role that design plays in shaping musical experience, and I wanted to display a variety of products used in the production and consumption of music. I spent several weekends rummaging through bins at thrift stores and yard sales looking for transistor radios, portable cassette players, MP3 players, boomboxes, record players, etc. Some of these were contemporary products still in use (MP3 players, for instance), while many were out of circulation and considered obsolete (like audio cassette players). My interest in them was curatorial. I would be displaying them in an environment far removed from where they were first used or where I had found them. And though many of them were carelessly thrown in piles and cost no more than a few dollars, I was asked (and I happily obliged) to don white museum gloves while handling them in the galleries. It was in these moments



**Figure 1**

*Rewind Remix Replay Walkmans*. Installation view, *Rewind Remix Replay: Design, Music and Everyday Experience*, at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Arizona, January 2–May 23, 2010.

Photograph: Mike Williams.

that the contextual significance of the value of these used goods became vividly apparent to me. Whether the Panasonic boombox I saw at Goodwill ended up in a vitrine in a museum swarming with security personnel, or at my house so I could play my last few audio cassettes, or left in the bin at the store, would place it within entirely different “regimes of value” (Appadurai 1988: 4). Moreover, each context gave each design an entirely different biography (Kopytoff 1986: 67). “Goods have both a use and exchange value that extends well beyond the first cycle” (Gregson and Crewe 2003: 2). In other words, once products are bought, used, and discarded, they enter a second life cycle in which value reemerges under a different set of circumstances.

In the introduction to their book *Second-hand Cultures*, Gregson and Crewe argue that while most of the literature lays emphasis on commodity chains and places of production of used goods, the concept of space needs examination because “particular sets of premises and principles of exchange are critical in understanding value” (2003: 3). To these authors, “geographies of location” are critical in understanding secondhand cultures. For design studies, spaces of secondhand commerce can offer lessons about the planned obsolescence of new goods and the sustained value of used goods.

### **The Fluidity of Value**

If design is value-making, i.e. if processes of design generate value, thrift stores regenerate value. Used goods found here undergo a value transformation as they transition from their first cycle of consumption when discarded by someone to the second cycle when acquired by someone else. As objects go through multiple life cycles, they accrue and shed several types of value (financial, utilitarian, emotional, symbolic, nostalgic, etc.). Therefore, any given object can be considered to be an *aggregate* of several value forms that gain or lose magnitude over time and space. “All value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of multiple, constantly changing, and continuously interacting variables ...” (Herrnstein Smith 1988: 30). Value is *fluid* rather than rigid, and it changes constantly over the life of the object, shaped by the contexts in which it exists. In one of the most influential discussions of commodities and the politics of value, Appadurai (1988) suggests that things, like people, have social lives and therefore their value is largely dependent upon relations between people. In other words, if value is constructed socially by human agency through exchange and interaction, it is a *relation*.

Value, therefore, can be conceived as a *fluid aggregate relation*, continuously in flux through processes of production, distribution, and consumption. The fluid aggregate value of things depends upon a large array of motivations and forces, many of which are socially,

economically, and politically constructed. Used goods go through various cycles of value accretion and erosion. Their biographies get written on their bodies as scratches, dents, chipped paint, discolorations, torn labels, etc. But these bodily defects do not necessarily decrease their financial value. Secondhand goods are expected to be imperfect, and their price and value in the first cycle may have no bearing in subsequent cycles of use. Value should not be imagined purely in financial terms as a fixed entity (though a price tag may suggest an established, non-negotiable amount), but as a fluid aggregate, constantly changing and built up over a series of events through processes of production, distribution, and consumption.

### **Planned Obsolescence and Unplanned Durability**

My search for (and joyful discoveries of) cassette players, turntables, and boomboxes revealed that technologies often dismissed as obsolete do not truly disappear; they age, change meaning, and are often merely pushed out of mainstream circulation into alternative object ecosystems. Collectors, hoarders, tinkerers, circuit-benders, and perhaps designers and curators like me find ways by which to keep these goods circulating through multiple life cycles. The things designers create are in constant movement – from assembly lines, through retail outlets, to homes and eventually to landfills, recycling centers, or thrift stores. “The paths and velocities through which cultural commodities move help to define the rhythms and the directionality of urban life” (Straw 2000: 3). The less durable these things, the higher their velocities and shorter their paths. Small electronic devices like mobile phones, clock radios, digital watches, calculators, and other portable things are notorious for their short lives and quick obsolescence. Where something ends up at the conclusion of its (first) life cycle is determined by its durability, value to the owner, materials it is made of, potential for resale, city waste management regulations, and so on.

The goods that end up in thrift stores express a durability of a unique kind. Clearly, these products have become obsolete in the first cycle of consumption, but they possess qualities that keep them valuable for additional cycles of use. Planned obsolescence takes several forms – technological, psychological, aesthetic, and others – and pushes objects out of primary circulation (Slade 2006; Chapman 2009; Boradkar 2010). Unplanned durability, on the other hand, defies all these forms of obsolescence, and redirects products towards garage sales and thrift stores, into additional cycles of consumption, and back into people’s lives. This form of durability is unplanned; it is not durability by design. Products are not designed a priori to have a second or third life cycle. While it is possible that something ends up in a thrift store because of its design, it is certainly not designed to be there.

## The Secondhand Experience

Thrift stores can be seen as antidotes to designed retail environments. The user experience in these spaces is not intensely curated (as it is in an Apple or Prada store, for instance); non-functional products are on sale alongside functional ones; goods are often abandoned to shelves rather than displayed with care; and there is a general sense of disorder in the environment. The chaos that may often reign in these spaces is not necessarily undesirable; in fact, as Sherry has noted, “the flea market provide[s] a ritual or ceremonial venue for the experience of disorder” (1990: 28). Unlike new products that are yet to enter the realm of consumption and gather stories of consumers, used goods are repositories not only of histories of their production, but in addition, histories of consumption as well.

Design and design research tend to focus primarily on the first cycle of the production and consumption of goods. But hidden meanings and little-known forms of value often emerge in subsequent cycles of consumption. If designing longer life spans into things is a principle of sustainable design, perhaps this form of unplanned durability needs to be closely examined, as it might yield insights into new forms of managing waste.

## Notes

1. In addition, many of these transactions also occur in such virtual sites as Craigslist, eBay, etc., but this article focuses primarily on the physical spaces where such goods are found.
2. This exhibition was held from January through May of 2010, and included a variety of products in addition to what is listed in this article. More information is available at <http://rewindremixreplay.org/>

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