The Spontaneous Re-use of Packaging: Designing for Creative Consumption and Dispossession

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Abstract
This paper describes the initial results of an enquiry into the re-use of packaging. It reports on selected aspects of a wider programme of research that seeks through empirical methods and design activity to propose a conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon of spontaneous packaging re-use in the UK. The study's long-term aim is to identify strategies that allow designers to build opportunities for re-use into packaging design. While much research studies consumers attitudes to branding strategy and packaging design to sell more product, there is little evidence to show that work has been carried out into looking at the way user's interact, re-appropriate, re-use and dispossess packaging within their domestic environment.

The paper will describe the studies combination of ethnographical research and design based testing and evaluation, based on a user centered design approach.

Recognised in this study is the fact that consumers and users of packaging, although not recognised as designers are involved in the process of invention and design constantly without persuasion of reward.

The research is concerned with the way consumers decode the meanings designed into objects differently and re-appropriate them to suit their own needs whether born out of necessity, playfulness or thrift.

One of the significant themes already emerging from the initial research programme that may affect packaging re-use activity is the material that packaging is made from.

Other themes include the classification of packaging, the context in which it exists and our attitudes to disposability and the second hand. These themes are explained in more detail through case studies and references to relevant literature from amongst others Katz, Lucas, Campbell and Whitely.

Introduction
Imagine you are standing in a queue at an English tourist attraction in the middle of summer. You are wearing only your summer clothes and it's raining! You have no umbrella, but you do have a thin plastic carrier bag with you. After considering the lightweight waterproof properties of the bag you decide that it would make an effective piece of waterproof headwear. Within minutes the humble plastic bag is transformed into a waterproof turban, see ‘figure 1’.

This wonderful example of spontaneous creative, packaging re-appropriation was witnessed at the Eden Centre, Cornwall, England in the summer of 2001.
Although perhaps not quite as creative, most of us can think of packaging we re-use in one way or another. It may be glass jam jars to hold dirty paintbrushes, an empty biscuit tin to contain a first aid kit or perhaps an empty cardboard cereal box cut up and used as a stencil.

Through this research I have observed many different types and stages of packaging re-use and disaquisition, this has required looking into various domestic spaces such as garden sheds, medicine cabinets, sewing boxes and food cupboards. It has also taken me to the dark regions of rarely used drinks cabinets, shoe cleaning kits and dark, damp cellars.

The resulting discoveries prove that packaging which has outlived its intended primary function lives on almost everywhere. But why do some packaging objects have a life span of five days and others have a life span of 20 years? What is it about some types of packaging that allow us to form relationships and attachments with them? These questions are discussed and examined using visual evidence of various re-appropriation and re-use activities.

This paper describes the initial stage of my longer-term research project that tries to answer some of these questions. The ultimate aim being to propose a framework to enable designers to design packaging suitable for customer interaction, re-appropriation and creative re-use.

Figure 1. Examples of packaging re-use.

Literature

"While so much scholarship across the disciplines has been examining the concept of consumption in more positive terms, no similar impetus has ever been directed to the concept of waste”.

"Waste has become and continues to be ‘a problem’ more than a concept for social or cultural analysis”. (Lucas 2001: 6)

There is little evidence of work examining the phenomena of consumer interaction and packaging re-use. Literature does exist that reviews methods and design case studies for designing re-usable and recycled packaging solutions such as Mackenzie and King, 1991. However it does not explore the complex relationships we have with inanimate products and packaging in our daily lives and how that affects our creativity and willingness to re-use. Similarly there is much literature concerning the quantitative data of packaging waste disposal and recycling, such as Soroka and Hunt, but there is a lack of information concerning the qualitative, anthropological aspects of consumer practice.
Useful existing literature concerned with related topics such as consumption and dispossession theory include Hawkins 2001, Lucas 2002, Thompson 1979 and Whately 1993.

The underpinning theme of my research is to understand how individuals can be persuaded to re-use through design not instruction. Both Hawkins and Lucas review the command moralities associated with previous waste initiatives and discuss their shortcomings through various case studies. They both suggest that other more creative solutions should be sought to solve the waste issues and Lucas asks if it is enough to simply see recycling and particularly reuse as a counter – ideology to wastefulness (Lucas 2002:15).

To understand the material associations we subconsciously have is to start to appreciate the design factors responsible for encouraging re-use. Anderson and Hawkins both make raise significant issues in this area of study. Anderson describes his material associations and the stigmas that may be attached to certain synthetic materials:

“When I was little, plastic objects were cheap and crummy. Nobody wanted plastic anything – even plastic toys were kind of suspect and low rent.”

Also significant to my study are the insights Lucas gives to the domestic environment that packaging and waste exists. He describes kitchens and bathrooms as systems or economies through which objects flow, waste being that that is ejected from the system as unused and inessential. He also recognises places where packaging is stored in limbo between regular use and disposal as ‘Twilight Zones’. Both these ideas form the basis of an enquiry into their relevance to the domestic space in which packaging exists and its effect on re-use.

It is widely accepted that there are different types of consumers, but their desire for new and their acceptance of disposability and replacement is likely to affect the success of any design strategy to encourage re-use. Campbell, Riesman and Pantzer all use different methods of classification. These help to inform the process of understanding the consumer types through their consumption requirements, and provide the foundations for a new method of classification based on an individual’s ability to re-use.

Methodology

This study combines ethnographical research and design based testing and evaluation. It is based on a user centered design approach, as described in Margolin’s “Getting to Know the User”, 1997.

Surveys, questionnaires, interviews and observation have been carried out in order to gain understanding as to how packaging is incorporated into everyday activities. This research includes an initial survey involving 30 participants, 25 posted questionnaires and two stages of interviews with a participant base of 6 individuals.

The first stage interview was designed to gain evidence of re-use activity and relevant life experiences of the participants. Through an inquiry into the interviewee’s acceptance of second hand goods, insights were gained as to individuals acceptance of disposability. The second interview stage builds on this initial information enquiring about the interviewees behaviour within their domestic environment and their engagement and process of disacquiring packaging.

Design based testing is used in this study to allow frequent testing and analysis of the findings from the various research exercises. These theories and ideas are represented in 2D and 3D pack design format and evaluated using interviews, surveys and focus groups. Physical and visually accurate prototype pack designs are being used to ensure that consumer feedback is an accurate assessment of their instinctive response to the design features.
For the purpose of this study the term ‘creative’ is used to describe consumer inventiveness and willingness to interact with packaging beyond its designed use. The term re-use is used to describe the act of using a packaging item again for the same or different purpose.

**Classification**

The data resulting from the surveys, questionnaires, interviews and observation proves that many people re-use packaging. However it seems that before a decision can be made regarding the value of an item, the consumer needs to categorise it. To understand this in the context of this study interviewees were asked to describe the process of groceries entering the house, how they are used and then disposed of.

The resulting data shows that waste sorted by type is given a specific name other than rubbish, examples include **kitchen waste, plastic bottles, kitchen scraps, recycling stuff**, and that this can affect the status of an object, giving it extended life.

Thompson describes the plastic bag as an example of a transient object, **within his rubbish theory**, whose value is negotiable by action (Thompson in Lucas. 2000.15).^2^  

An extract from an interview with a 47-year-old female seems to demonstrate the transient nature of packaging in relation to its context of use and aesthetic qualities:

“No carrier bags - from IKEA I’ve got my little carrier bag storage thing – I shove them in that. If it’s clothes shopping with posh carrier bags I put them in a different place. I’m quite sad with carrier bags – I keep the nice carrier bags. So the normal flimsy supermarket bags I put them in the storage thing where you just pull them out and you can use them for cleaning out the rabbits or whatever. The flimsy one’s I’ll reuse for whatever and the nice carrier bags I’ll keep in a different basket and they get used for when you want a bag to go out with or whatever, I keep those.

Hawkins and Lucas also discuss the phenomenon of the plastic bag. Hawkins explains that “rather than defend the plastic bag, I just wish to acknowledge the variety of relations we have with them in order to show that their status is not fixed”. (2001: 6,7)

This is evidenced by other interviewees who describe their mechanisms for saving carrier bags and the variety of creative uses they have for them including: Bin liners, ‘clean-up’ bags for dog walks, protection for garden tool blades, general storage, weed collection and bird scarers.

**Material Values**

The classification of an item is influenced significantly by its associated material values. To gain further understanding of this idea interviewees were asked to list artefacts that they associated with wood, metal, plastic, paper/board and glass.

The results showed that all non-synthetic materials, even non-permanent ones such as paper and board, were mainly associated with products with a certain permanence, quality and display value.
Wood was associated with furniture and fittings, picture frames and garden fences. Glass with crystal, coffee jars, glass ornaments, drinking glasses, and lighting. Paper and board with books, wallpaper and newspapers. Metal was associated with cars, cookers, fridge's, machinery and cutlery, yet synthetic plastics were primarily associated with commodity/ utility items, packaging and storage such as bags, containers, jars/ bottles, Tupperware and sandwich boxes.

Interview extracts revealed strong feelings towards packaging materials and design aesthetics:

“Things like jars and that, because it's a glass product – I think I should re-use it in someway rather than chuck it away. I think it’s because it seems more substantial and you feel it's not a disposable thing”

“I've got a passion for glass – I think of crystal straight away. Anything that's glass I can think of is eating, drinking looking at”. (Extracts from interview with 64-year-old female)

In contrast is an extract from an interview with a 37-year old male when discussing plastic seems to prove Hawkin's theory regarding certain materials and their inability to create sensual attachments:

“I always have problems with plastic with food even with cheese and all that. I still think there's a health scare out there waiting to come on. I think plastics do leach into food, like into cheese and all that stuff…..”

“They’ve started wrapping cheese in plastic that's been designed to look like paper. I mean at one time cheese came in this plastic film that you used to cut yourself to death opening and now it comes in plastic with a matt finish to try and say you've got it from a deli counter – fantastic – fooling nobody…..”

In the second stage of interviews, participants were asked to place in order of preference a range of packaging items. The items varied in material, original contents and size.

Virtually all the participants placed the crisp bag and soft drinks carton at the bottom end of both their orders of preference and costliness.

The metal gift packaging for chocolate and the glass bottles were normally at the top end. With the novelty aerosol and chocolate gift carton being transient depending on the participants taste, values and awareness of recycling. Extracts from an interview with a 47-year-old female give insights into her rating of the packaging items, particularly the metal milk churn gift pack:

“I put the milk churn first because there's something appealing about the material. There's something a bit quirky about it – a milk churn for chocolate, it appeals to me, it's a bit different.

Her response regarding the miniature olive oil bottle, explaining that it reminded her of a traditional sort of holiday bottle seems to prove Lucas’s point that the stronger the investment in the original appropriation, the harder it can be to dispossess ourselves of an object. This also seems evident when observing the number of old spirit and liquor glass bottles stored within drinks cabinets. The nostalgia and memories these holiday purchases hold increase in value, whilst the sticky contents crystallise and reduce in value.

As well as material type, the aesthetics of a piece of packaging seem to be highly significant to its potential to be re-used. This was evident when a 63-year-old male explained that:
“Barbara never throws away a brown paper bag cause she knows I’ll save seeds in it. Whereas if it’s a white paper bag I could still save seeds in it but she wouldn’t save them – it’s just brown bags there’s an association”

Other evidence of this point was observed whilst conducting the interviews were blue glass wine bottles conspicuously displayed in interviewees houses, two examples of the same wine bottle but independently assigned to the role of decorative object.

**Design Features**

In order to gain a greater understanding of how design features can promote re-use and reduce immediate disposal, an initial survey was carried out to determine what packaging is being re-used and for what purpose. This survey enabled a hierarchy of design features to be compiled. Re-closability, wide openings and durability were features positioned highest on the list. Others included no graphics or appropriate branding, and being airtight.

From these initial results a design brief was written and two design projects carried out.

The garden was chosen as the first environment to identify and test design strategies, and the first design exercise was to take a traditional garden consumable product and re-package it into a more re-usable format.

The product currently on the market consists of a carton containing a non-resealable plastic bag holding the granules.

The new design concept ‘figure 2’ is a plastic transparent base container with an air vent located in the base recess (sealed until used) and a reclosable plastic slip lid. The graphics are contained on a peelable paper label.

Interviewees were asked to compare and comment on the two pack styles.

One 63-year-old male preferred the new design:

“The one with the re-usable retail container would be an immediate seller to the gardener. The beauty about that one is that it’s got a re-sealable top and forget the secondary use. These bags once you open them the contents go solid. In that they wouldn’t go solid and the fact that you could use it as a miniature cloche is very appealing”.

He explained he would pay possibly twenty pence more for the re-usable pack.

A 43 year old female interviewee had a similar response:

“The only one I’ve ever bought is the carton, but I like the other one because it’s good for keeping it in and re-using it, and the slugs won’t eat the carton. I like it because it looks substantial, you can take the top off and use it and put the top back on, and it’s obviously got a bit of an additional use for cultivating your plants hasn’t it.” I wouldn’t pay twice the price, but if it was a small amount, yes.”

However a 37-year-old male interviewee when examining the two pack designs was much more concerned with the material type:

“For some reason whilst it’s probably very well designed I have problems with it in the fact that one is kind of like slightly more organic for me – carboardy and I’d expect things in gardens to be carboardy.”
I actually wouldn’t buy it because it is plastic. I know that by designing it the way you have with the vent at the bottom you want people to re-use it as a little greenhouse for seedlings and all that but I’m still not certain of it’s ecological soundness. No I just think for me buying plastic containers for the garden – see I try to be an organic gardener”.

It seems the engrained doctrines regarding materials and the environment prevent this individual from valuing different approaches to ‘green’ design.

The second design exercise was to develop a much less prescriptive re-usable opportunity requiring more creativity from the consumer.

This design was an alternative to the clear plastic hanging clam pack, traditionally used to contain and display small garden products. The solution provided the opportunity for the individual packs to be linked together to form edging or boarders within the garden.

This design had a less positive response from many of the interviewees. However a 64-year old male keen gardener had the following comments:

“I would say that the idea of using it as an edging wouldn’t necessarily appeal to me but what I do like about this is that I could perhaps put instructions in there. You could get a fair sized piece of paper in there for things like instructions and using it as a form of plant identification – that would appeal to me.

I’d make use of it, but I wouldn’t necessarily want to pay anymore for it.”

From this exercise it does seem that some individuals are willing to exploit creative opportunities, whilst others rely on instruction and direction.

**Figure 2. New design for plant food product. The secondary use is demonstrated in the right hand image.**

**Beyond command moralities**

An issue with simply instructive tactics from governments and environmental bodies is that information can become confused and misunderstood, as demonstrated here in an extract from an interview with a 37 year old male when discussing recycling symbols:

“I still don’t know what they mean but I still look for the three arrows and the triangle and basically think right I can throw that in Sainbury’s and let someone else sort it out,”

“I might not condone or like excessive packaging, but basically you very rarely have the choice to actually buy products in a different way so you buy it and just go well I’ll recycle the plastic and do my little bit for the environment”
The symbols the interviewee described identify the material type if separation and recycling facilities are available, but do not mean it is recyclable.

Some individuals seem more willing to engage in typical ‘green’ behaviour, keeping and re-use packaging more than others, but the initial research suggests that in order for the typical consumer to engage in re-use and recycling activity there must be something in it for the individual.

A 47–year-old interviewee discussing her motivations to compost:

“I do feel quite good about it actually yeah, but it’s my one little bit that I do – I’m rubbish on everything else but – I suppose it’s because it’s providing something for me – which is a really bad attitude I know it is but I get something out of it”.

**Consumer Typologies**

The different consumer groups as described by Campbell and Riesman are likely to respond to different strategies if they are to be encouraged to re-use packaging.

These groups differ in their willingness to be associated with a ‘green’ ethic. For many ‘Green’ is not an aspirational term. There are examples in the research where interviewees have been embarrassed and reluctant to expose their re-use behaviour. A mature female seemed to disavow her re-use activity:

“This may sound silly, but I use little make-up pots sometimes. I keep them to put cream in, to take them on holiday”.

The same phenomenon appears in an interview with a woman in her thirties:

“I’ve been known to use tissue boxes to keep things in (but don’t tell anybody) it drives my husband mad”

These and other examples seem to indicate a certain stigma is attached to thrift and re-use. However there are others who are proud of their ‘green’ activity. One of the interviewees, a male in his thirties, initially seemed to fit the profile of a typical Riesman’s Inner-directed person who buys environmental products and recycles much of his waste packaging because of his strong ethical beliefs. However closer reading of the interview suggests that he also fits the description of an ‘Outer-directed’ person in the way he buys and displays products. He wants the products he consumes to conspicuously reflect his ethical position and personal image.

Both categorisations of consumers are relevant to this study, but it seems likely that a new method of describing consumer typologies specifically relating to re-use characteristics will be required as a tool to enable design for re-use.

**Context**

This is perhaps the most generalised of the themes affecting re-use and creativity. The evidence collected so far suggests that re-use and re-appropriation occurs in the following environments:

Domestic storage, non-display; domestic display; garden/DIY; craft; children's play.

The research suggests that certain design factors do affect consumers decisions whether to re-use packaging or not in these different environments. For instance, branding, logos and aesthetics seem to have little impact on a
decision to re-use an item within the garden, but when a product is on display within the home, aesthetic qualities and branding become more significant.

The idea that individuals adopt different behaviour in the ‘front stage’ as opposed to the back stage’ (Goffman 159) of their lives, suggests there might be a greater acceptance of second hand or re-used products in certain places and certain times.

This became evident when a 30-year old female remarked:

“I would use a nice bath decanter and top it up with cheaper stuff that doesn’t look as nice in its own bottle – I’m a cheapskate!”

In order for packaging to remain within the domestic environment it must satisfy either an emotional or practical criteria. It must also be able to fit within the domestic processing system or ‘factory’.

**Processing**

The process of packaging use, classification and dispossession is complex, and is determined by many factors. One of these factors is the environment the packaging enters and how it can be processed within that space. The Interviews included a question asking interviewees to describe the process that produce goes though from initially entering the house through to the disposal and how it moves through different domestic systems.

A 47-year-old interviewee discusses the methods of collecting and storing waste that is collected for composting:

“Cause I have a little compost bin – all the fruit and veg stuff goes into that. In the kitchen I have a little bin which confuses the kids’ friends cause I find all sorts of things in there. So there’s a big bin, which is just normal rubbish, and there’s a little bin in front of it which is for fruit a vegetable waste and then that goes into the compost bin in the garden.

“If I didn’t have a little bin in the kitchen I wouldn’t do it I don’t think – I wouldn’t go out to the compost bin every time with little bits and pieces so I have the bin in the kitchen. It’s just easier, I just chuck it straight in there and then it goes out”.

Lucas recognises the importance of the objects that contain rubbish and how we can gain understanding of our willingness to engage with different types of waste depending on how we store and dispose of it. See examples in figure 3.

Perhaps a whole material culture will need to develop to provide attractive, practical solutions for the processing of waste.
Summary and Conclusions

Creative, spontaneous packaging re-use does occur, but it is limited by certain factors. These factors include:

- Classification - our need to classify objects and apply status to them depending on material type and aesthetics.
- Material associations – our feelings, taste and ability to create sensual attachments to certain materials.
- Design features – two-dimensional and three-dimensional design features that provide varied practical and aesthetic reasons to keep and re-use packaging.
- Consumer Types – our acceptance of second-hand and re-used items, combined with our ethical viewpoint.
- Context – the shifting focus between practicalities and aesthetics and how ‘front stage/ back stage’ behaviour affects our willingness to re-use in different environments.
- Processing – how we manage the processing of waste within our domestic environment. Does this processing allow for re-use?

These factors should not inhibit design for creative re-use, however they do need to be researched further if we are to effectively alter the approach to sustainable packaging design.

Writing about ethical design issues Sylvia Katz suggests that the designer’s responsibility does not stop at the counter. She continues:

"Before any new packaging is designed it is vital that the two main issues – recycling techniques and second-hand markets are developed. I’ve never understood why most packaging, no matter how tastefully devised, produces such a quantity of paper, card, plastics and metal with no further purpose in the home. If the consumers can’t think of a second use for it, then it is the designer’s or manufacturers responsibility to tell them". (Katz in Whitely 1993: 83)

I agree with this sentiment, and this study aims to result in a body of work that will enable designers to achieve this long-term goal of truly sustainable packaging design.
Notes

1 Anderson continues to explain his associations with plastic: "Nothing any grown up cared about was plastic (except telephones.). I may be a member of the last generation to remember when a plastic object was by definition an inferior object". (Anderson in Kennedy and Grunenberg: 2001)

2 Thompson’s Rubbish Theory defines rubbish as objects with zero value that mediate between objects whose value decreases over time (transient objects) and those which increase (durable objects). Thompson’s whole discussion of rubbish is predicated on the concept of value, with rubbish being of zero value, acting as a catalyst able to create or transform objects with low or negative values into highly valued objects. (Thompson 1979)

3 “The aggregate of characteristics that the user initially engages with in order to make use of the product”. (Margolin, 1997, p. 228)
Biography
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Janet Shipton has worked within the packaging design and development industry since 1991. A Packaging Design Graduate, she has combined the roles of Project Leader for Sheffield Hallam’s commercial Design Consultancy with that of Principle Lecturer in Packaging Design at Sheffield Hallam University since 2000. Her research interests lie in the social relationships we have with packaging and how this can affect ethical consumption and disposal practice. She describes this research study as a shift in the conventional design mindset, whereas designers are accustomed to commanding and specifying the form of the material world, this research requires that the prosaic processes of consumption are witnessed, but from a design perspective.