The Social Object

Apprehending Materiality for Industrial Design Practice

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Introduction

I approach the house, a small apartment on the ground floor. A man is cooking outside the apartment on a makeshift wood stove made of bricks. Smoke rises and hovers in the still air. Three small children sit on the steps looking at their father. The outside of the house is almost dark, lit faintly by the streetlamp. The inside of the house is bare, without furnishings or objects, save a metal trunk on the floor. A single tube-light provides illumination.

This home was in an apartment complex in a bustling city. The year was 1998. The visible comfort of someone cooking outdoors over a makeshift woodstove was an encounter with the re-enactment of a rural household, and the unelectrified rural village home. The interior, devoid of possessions, harkens back to the archetypal rural household common in North India.

Years later in Melbourne, grabbing a quick lunch at the local farmers market, I have a chance encounter with a vendor selling *The Big Issue* magazine.[1] He is a delicate, slender man; a former racing jockey. We begin a conversation that continues over the following weeks and months. Some days I would buy him a coffee. On other days I merely bought a copy of *The Big Issue*. Then one day he stood in my university classroom and spoke to the students about his life. He answered their questions about the possessions he carried with him, as he journeyed through his life as a homeless person. I too had grown up in a household that was bare. I had few clothes and for years lived in remote mining townships. I do not remember it being important that I had only one solitary pair of shorts that was not part of my school uniform.

It is a very different world I inhabit now. I have dragged across the seas a carefully curated collection of objects to Melbourne, Australia, where I now live. It is normal for people to have a very large number of possessions; products, stuff, things, objects. It is normal for people to have frequent and regular consumption events; to search for, to forage, to buy objects. These shopping events, with so many objects coming into the house, created crowded homes. Anticipating people's need to move objects on, charities slip pink plastic bags into home postboxes, inviting people to discard clothes.

Discarding, however, is hard. Municipal councils urge citizens to discard objects by organizing an annual day of amnesty – the hard rubbish day – when the council will pick up discards for no fee. Discarding is therefore seen to be a required and periodic activity. Discarding creates space: space for new objects, new narratives. For others, like manufacturers and producers of things, the home constitutes the destination of their produce. For objects that arrive at these homes, however, the home is often not a destination. The home is merely a pause in their biography. A place where the object enjoys a period of rest, for months, years and sometimes decades, before moving on. It is in the nature of the object to be in circulation, constantly.

Now, is it a problem that people have too many possessions? That people have a voracious appetite for products? That the manufacturing industry is considered the engine of the planet's prosperity, that we must have continuous growth, that economic prosperity is synonymous with the idea of a good life? These questions, these kinds of themes, attract people to the many sides of the debate. Some argue for growth and for economic prosperity as the correct way, or the essential and sustainable way, to maintain the lifestyles of the wealthy. Some argue for the frugal, for a focus upon the minimum living wage, or for the global project of reducing poverty. Those subscribing to altruism, or engaged in humanitarian work, argue for a collective global humanitarian project that diverts budgets earmarked for military hardware expenditure to policies and projects that realize improved living standards for all. To argue for a transformation, or a repurposing, of global defence budgets is a polemical artefact, even for an idealist. These positions – to preserve the way things are, or to change the way things are – are themselves things, artefacts and social constructs.

I grew up in India in its socialist period,[2] when American businesses had been expelled from the country, even as it maintained during the Cold War that it was neither in the American nor in the Soviet camp. In the India of my youth, government mandated *mission projects*, such as eradicating poverty, were the very visible engines of change. Later, as a typical student in a design school in this period, I was a passionate consumer of books that argued for a technological project to make the world a better place. Buckminster Fuller argued for a change away from an exclusive focus upon producing wealth (Pawley 1990). Texts such

as *The Limits to Growth* warned of the perils of relying on customary production and consumption (Meadows 1972). It is in the nature of youthful idealism to hunger for change; my critique of the world was accompanied by a dismissal of traditional culture, often accompanied by an adversarial attitude towards traditional customs and practices. However, my current view is that the young activist was way off the mark. This is especially significant when it comes to consumption, and to the role and meaning of objects in people's lives.

It would be two decades after finishing design school before I was to find the texts that would provide me with keys to unlocking the opaque world of traditional customs. I would find that customs are merely the visible signs of a sophisticated system at play. My emerging, and what was to become my enduring, interest in traditional customs was centred, at least initially, upon the objects and the performative gestures accompanying object handling. Activist discourses struggled to deal with people's narrative of objects, while the aesthetic impulse permitted a closer and an affectionate look at the ways of people.

A focus upon the object

People have products, people have objects. Independent of an alignment with any thematic, we could easily make the call that where you see people, you are quite likely to see objects. People and objects go together. I have been fascinated with the images in which photographers like Menzel have documented people with all the objects in their homes arranged around them (Menzel and Mann 1994). Some display the ability to buy a lot of possessions. Others display a severe frugality in the number of possessions they have. Now if you were to pour over the photographs and spend time looking at the possessions you could learn about, or speculate upon, their food practices, their economic status, or even about the land, the geography and the climate of the place where they live. Objects in these photographs tell a story. Objects in fact are very good storytellers. That is why archaeologists rely on them to gather information about the lives of people in ancient civilizations. From time immemorial, objects have been complicit in people's projects of living and doing. As an industrial designer, objects were of interest to me, though the opportunity to acquire a deep insight into

objects, that inhabit the lives and homes of people, emerged as a topic of research quite by chance.

In 1998 I began collecting waste from the households of a university campus where I lived. Each day the project team of the Campus Recycling Project[3] collected approximately two tonnes of waste from the homes of campus residents who, like me, were also employees of the University. A crucial proposition of this project was the notion that there was no substantial difference between products and waste; for example, the plastic packaging sleeve the bread came in was still the same plastic sleeve after all the bread had been used up. My project therefore involved recruiting the householders as willing participants in a programme of segregating the waste they generated. The recruitment process involved me visiting every single household on campus and, over tea and biscuits, having a conversation with the people in those homes. The smallest homes, of the lowest in the institutional hierarchy, were particularly intriguing. In these small spaces, where often three generations of a family lived together, there was a number of ways in which the families organized their homes and possessions. These homes, organized in distinct, codified and elegant ways, intrigued me.

The activity of going into the homes continued as part of a programme of campaigning on campus. However, I was soon curious about the homes. It was really only in the early days of the project that I was talking about ways of improving the rate at which different kinds of household wastes were separated, and about how to improve the residents' performance in appropriately separating the waste they put out. Most of the residents knew a lot about the project. They had their own opinion about what the project ought to be doing or how it ought to be changed. They were keen to let me know their suggestions. All I had to do was to listen. On these visits I would ask them if they were okay with me pulling out my camera and taking photographs of their homes. In time, I would also ask them if they were happy for my students to visit their homes, for I had made my students interested in the material culture of people.

While many objects in these homes were familiar, I was also encountering objects that made me stop to ponder. The designer in me was encountering a new category of artefacts, for the professional discourse of design does not include objects common within the economically weaker sections of society.[4] The kinds of objects

that can be found in these homes contradict the taste, and aesthetic sensibilities, of the elite. Yet a project to study the homes of the poor constitutes a particular framing, where the discourse, the object and the natural practices of people are viewed as a coherent systemic enterprise. That is, when you enter the homes of the poor you 'are entering a very different world'. It will 'seem familiar, and we may even get their jokes'. I have borrowed and paraphrased Davidson's cautionary words about the study of the ancient Greeks to create a space for a new narrative of materiality. As he crucially says: 'They are just different, just trying to be themselves' (Davidson 1997: xvi).

These homes contained objects that could be labelled as kitsch, or objects in marginal discourses. Is it okay that people snigger at those who have poor taste? Plastic flowers are considered to be in bad taste, though through this project I have discovered that what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, what is good and what is not good, constitute quite opaque classifications. What is considered acceptable is often a clue to the existence of a collective way of appreciating.

The book as a project

Objects do not distinguish between colour, race, class and wealth: people do. The idea for this book began as a project to construct a narrative that privileges the material culture of the poor, and the traditional. These are people who do not possess designer objects, or visit the museums and shops displaying iconic objects of modern design.

I began this project as a means of constructing an understanding of the ways people have of making meaning with the objects they own. My intention is to frame ways, and then to make accessible these ways of meaning making. Ways that differ from the ways manufacturers, retailers and museum curators speak about objects. I am seeking to point towards a way of appreciating objects irrespective of their branding, manufacturing quality or stylistic currency. I hope to reignite our connection to objects, to the past, to the other, and also crucially pave the way towards apprehending the truth about the circulation of objects.

I also began this work as a writing project, to be read aloud. To be read aloud to an audience like those I worked with in my waste project. An audience that was barely literate, but that understood

the nuances of cultural framings and nuances in their community and in the lives and homes of others. To be read aloud, disagreed with and debated within the community of Tamil Brahmins. This desire to make an oral account shaped the way language has been used in this book.

My intention is also to direct our focus away from wealthy populations in urban centres, and towards unique populations in other places. These populations have an acute sense of colour, form and placement, arrangement and thus a design sensibility. This book is my endeavour to say beauty practised by every citizen on the planet is only accessible to the theorist who privileges the methodology of meaning construction practised by that person, by that people, in that place, by that community and by that population. Much like TikTok and YouTube have democratized rural folk, made the village hearth and remote populations accessible and encounterable online, I hope this book serves a similar purpose of providing a way for people to access the design sensibility of the other. I hope it is a way of positively encountering a sensibility they may have previously been criticized, dismissed, denigrated, discarded or seen to cause a sense of shame.

So as to make the book accessible through translation into the vernacular, I have pondered over my written lines, in Hindi and in Tamil. Just like Masanobu Fukuoka's book, *The One Straw Revolution* (2009) has been translated and printed all over the world, it is my dream that production values for this book permit use of low-quality paper and printing processes that are not demanding or expensive. While it is a book, it is also for me a project of effective altruism: there is no desire to make profit from publishing this book by way of personal visibility and fame in the world's literate urban centres. There is instead an honest desire, at once grounded and idealistic, to reach a wide vernacular audience.

Chapters

> The crucial issue in relating to objects was to get to know them.
> (Mol 2002: 152)

The structural design of this book is derived from the metaphor of ecology, where the way to investigate a species, contains a privileging of the habitat, which in this instance is the privileging of the

context. The book began life from a nagging feeling that the way theory in design framed and constructed objects was a partial view. For example, this way of doing theory could account for objects found in a particular type of habitat, the cities and the postcodes of the wealthy. Past objects or the objects of the poor would be bracketed out. Curtailed, made partial, the ambit of theory, the scope of theoretical frameworks, seems designed to avoid giving accounts of objects that we may chance upon in discard sales and attics.

In recent years my research practice has been within hospitals. In cancer and in chronic care. Empirical and evidentiary, doing research in medical contexts has taught me, an outsider, to write in reflective rather than argumentative ways. In my writing, in this text, I draw on a variety of works of literature: anthropology, STS, sociology, engineering and design studies. To paraphrase Mol (2002), the importing of texts from other fields, with the accompanying blurring of disciplinary boundaries that is common, tends to be a good way to say new things. In the acknowledging of the present state of theoretical work, in the ethnographic stories that I tell throughout this book, I do not try to sum things up.

This work is significantly focused upon classificatory accounts. Yet every time I wrote the word ontology, I rubbed it out. To hide complex terminologies, I have used a string of words, where a single word may have sufficed. This is better for texts that aim to be translated, to be read in other languages. Or to be understood by the barely literate. Taking care in allowing the text to be translatable, taking care in imagining that I am giving access to the communities I am embedded in, has influenced the construction of the text.

The privileging of manufacturer and producer, the primacy accorded retail outlets, and the consumptions junctions that bring the buyer and sellers together periodically are valid as a particular way to construct an account of objects, a particular way to construct materiality.[5] There are, however, other approaches out there, that bracket out the cities, manufacturers and retailers. That give accounts of objects in different, more varied, habitats. Constructed then, as an intuition pump, as a technical rig for an experiment, this book explores some of these approaches that have found use in the medical empirical. I am in effect using a selected suite of framings to repeatedly apprehend and explore ways of framing and giving accounts of objects.

Decades ago, when I began teaching, when I began doing research, the 'social turn' in design, as those in the design profession refer to the interest in ethnography, was some years away. Industrial design itself was yet to manifest an interest in the material culture of the other, such as the marginalized, and the poor, in the urban contexts of the Global South. The photography of the homes of the poor, poverty porn as it is often referred to now, was not a phenomenon in the way it is today. When the poor did come into design discourse it would be within the context of development: they would be spoken of as customers of products aligned more to appropriate technology than to high technology. Victor Papanek's description of radios made out of tin cans, as the only appropriate product the rural poor in Africa ought to be expected to consume, was the established way of thinking about the material culture of economically weaker sections of society (Papanek 1985). The ability of mobile phones, electronic goods, made in China, to penetrate the consumption universes of the world's poor was still some years away.

I possessed a Trevor Bayliss radio and a Phillips hand-cranked radio (Kaiser 1999: 1811). These were examples of industrial products for the less-developed regions of the planet. The places with no electricity. Technology for the other 90 per cent would be different (Smith 2007). Less sophisticated, more appropriate. Til it was not. Til electronic payments in Africa showed the world an alternative (Islam and Muzi 2022).

In my teaching, I inveigled students to consider a pivot to activism. I provided readings from texts that did a similar urging (Bonsiepe 1977; Nadkarni 1977). I have climbed windmill towers to fix mechanical problems. I have cut myself on the metal edges of solar cookers that needed frequent tending to do even a simple cook. I too have believed in the small. Til I didn't. Til I had time to listen and accept that which was already there.

In Chapter 1, I describe a project on waste. I have made this project a pivot in my story, of how narrative and processual accounts of work, object and place are constructed. During this project, I was gaining exposure to new approaches, such as texts that dealt with waste as an inversion of the notion of goods. I frame a description of a form of work as waste-work, which I then contextualize as a particular way of constructing practice within the setting of research laboratories in a research university. Treating waste as a kind of

object leads me into a description of the other form of objects, that which may not be an obvious commodity, the bads. Such an inversion provides a theoretical location, outside of the producer–retailer framing of objects, for a point of view that can illuminate all the other forms of meaning construction that exist.

From within a waste project, the picture is less about a linear, or a circular, path available for waste to be channelled into. There are many more paths, many more metaphors that describe how waste moves. The metaphor of the rhizome, or a machine with pauses and movement, are often better descriptors of the rich ecology of agents and actors that move waste along. My quotidian events amid waste, discards and the texts examining these minutiae of the hidden universe of garbage churned up a dizzying array of speculations. A process of interrogation of material things fashioned by and for humans rewrote my framing of work, of practice in design. Dealing with the daily discards of a community, engaging with a community to modify their practices, and seeking out alternate ways, new and old, was a research project. This project shifted my locus; repositioned me within a universe of waste, brought me into intimate contact with people who enabled the circulation of waste, and changed my scripting of meanings. This chapter then is about ways to go about probing meaning. It has resulted in three constructions. That of waste, of practice and of the bads.

In the next two chapters, I describe two distinct forms of habitats, two distinct kinds of places for objects. These are two kinds of homes that I have an experience of; the first is a description of homes from the north of India. In this I begin with an account of the periurban self builds on land that is not legally marked for residential use, as a version of the common or normal way in which homes have been built for millennia. I then describe architect designed homes in a gated university campus, the homes for the staff working in the university. The second, is a description of a home in Chennai, the south of India. Situated in an Agraharam setting – a street leading up to a temple, where the homes are traditionally occupied by the priests, the brahmins, associated with the temple – this home draws its provenance from the archetypal home of the brahmin.

I open Chapter 2, with the description of the organic growth of a self-built village home or village homestead, as a setting up of the

description of the archetype of the home. I then describe the architect-designed layout of accommodation at a university campus. Both instances of homes were in Delhi, the north of India. I visited the campus apartments repeatedly, over many years, as I went about campaigning. My campaigning took the form of conversations in the homes of the residents, about my waste project. I was seeking the participation of the residents, in the project to recycle, to segregate their waste. The residents were however from all over the country. Each apartment, with identical or similar layouts had been designed as the minimal space needed by a family. Owned by the university, the occupation by the family was expected to be transient. I describe the spaces within the homes carefully, as sites. For the performance of activities, yes. But also as a container. Of objects, carefully sited.

The plan of the apartments is, for the architect, an instrument to visualize a stage for the performance of living, both as a continuance of the old and as an exploration of the new. In bringing their possessions, in configuring the uses and thus the meanings of spaces, the householders' author and script the material household, as a place allowing the family to live by articulating their beliefs and constructing their practices. This account of how the home is organized is articulated easily by the householder as their way, acknowledging the existence of a pre-ordered space and system of places at the level of the archetype or the model. This recoding of a unitary dwelling unit into a system of places and their categorization in terms of oppositions, gender and proximity is achieved effortlessly. There exists a right way, though not codified or rigid, that is shared with others, and is achieved in the construction of the idea of the home through a process of negotiation.

I speak of the adaptation of the campus accommodation using the binaries of the village home or the archetype. Some of the homes are multi-generational households, whereas others were homes of individual nuclear families. For some families the occupation involves the adaptation of past practices into a new space. For others the apartment spaces provide the opportunity to change practices. I thus use this chapter for setting up the home as; firstly, a system of places, and secondly a partial manifestation of the model or archetypal courtyard house, as a way to see the household as a social and a cultural artefact. Here the home is transformed into a system of places, in contrast to the next chapter, where the

focus is upon a cosmology informing the construction and design of a self-built home.

The text in Chapter 3 was previously published as a book chapter that looked at the food systems of the Iyengars of Tamil Nadu. I have repurposed that chapter to set up the house as the framing of a cosmology. I draw on Bourdieu's Kabyle house, and the structuralist binary to build a descriptive account of objects that enable practices (Bourdieu 1979). The example presented is of my grandfather's house, an example of the house of the Brahmins of Tamil Nadu. The significant framework that I privilege in this chapter is the binary of purity: pollution. As the defining element within the cosmology that informs the practices within the built envelope of the house, which itself is an enactment of the cosmology as revealed in the orientation of the house, the organization and the sites for activities and the related objects. I describe a house as a manifestation of a cosmology of beliefs.

My grandfather's home was set up completely differently from my parent's home. His was a home of a conservative, ultra-orthodox Brahmin, that was considered an anachronism, even four decades ago in a rapidly westernizing Chennai. I describe how the layout enables the enactment of ritual purity, through a programme of separation and seclusion of the inhabitants and various visitors to the house. The materiality of the house is implicated in the performance of social meaning construction within the Iyengar[6] household. I use food, its cooking and consumption, to demonstrate a category of materiality similarly subject to rules of permission and curtailment. What is allowed, and how what is allowed is performed, describes an intricate system of practices, the right way, that all inhabitants embody as members of this social grouping. Substantially written in 1997, this text began life as an essay, remembering the layout of the traditional house to describe how the practices within the Brahminical household intersected with the layout of the house. In a version submitted to an edited volume focused on Indo-Portuguese encounters in the sixteenth century, I reworked the essay to contain an account of the proscriptions encountered by vegetables from the Americas. In reworking the text for this book, I have shifted the focus to structuralism and the notion of binaries.

The next two chapters, Chapters 4 and 5, focus upon an ontology, a classificatory schema, of objects. In Chapter 4, I privilege the

temporal dimension where the object emerges as a focus in a social network, gradually progressing towards entering the household. Within the household the object traverses a journey of shifting valuations, till it leaves the home. In Chapter 5, I privilege the siting of objects and use value as the key aspect of how the household constructs the meaning of the object.

In Chapter 4, 'The Object Journey', I focus upon how objects get designed, developed and manufactured as a window into the temporal dimension in the life of an object. That the design of the object evolves through the history of its manufacture, marks instances in the evolution of the object, in the progression of negotiations among actors in a social network. I describe the evolution of the inverter, the electrical battery backup product, over the successive editions of the technology and the product. I then speculate upon the development journey of a particular technology, for these products were locally manufactured and in the early years the householders had a relationship with the contractor who supplied them the product. Over successive iterations the product would stop being a commissioned work, it would, in terms of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), attain closure (Law 1992b). Whereupon this object would begin to be sold through shops selling electronics goods. I highlight the existence of these houses in the minds and narratives of manufacturers and inventors, as a way to reframe processes of object development as complex processes, that need not be essentialized as temporal maps, but are better apprehended as dynamic networks.

I have also been keen to develop an overarching framework, a matrix into which I can locate any object that is apprehended within the household, so as to describe the processes at work that define what the object becomes, prior to a transfer of ownership. Such an autopsy, conducted through language, opens up a speculation upon the temporal, in how the object comes to be. Following on from this is how any object is open to modification or reimagining by the householder. Extending then to the speculation about the continuing journey of the object when it leaves the home. While the eventual siting of the object within the household has been significant within the development process, during the ownership period in the home there exists an opportunity for the household to have authorship to write a specific value or way of valuing the object.

I pick up the description of the siting of the object in Chapter 5, 'Sites for Objects'. I discuss spaces in the house as being open to discussion as special sites containing the specific object. The specificity of each object is its predominant feature as a commodity, an object embedded in the practices of the people, or a component of the collection of the unused. The excessive richness in the furniture of the front room is because this is the face of the household shown to the outside world. It is the formal space, the space for the men, for them to interact with the visitors. It is the outside in the inside–outside classifications present in the house. This is also the space, in the absence of a dining table, where the meal is eaten. It is the space from which women withdraw, secluding themselves in the kitchen or inner room when visitors arrive. Objects in this space attest to the emphasis on their commodity nature; their economic value is enhanced by the surface treatment. The TV occupies a corner of the room. This space forms the site of the commodity; it is the site for the display of the household's economic status. In addition to the site of the commodity, I also construct the site of use and the site of waste within an overarching classificatory framework that I refer to as a site-phase matrix, as a temporal and spatial classificatory schema.

The framework sets up the site as the first determinant in the description. Then each object has to be located in one or other site, and the meaning then emerges from the location. Each object is uniquely defined: an object may exist in more than one site. In the same way, spaces contain symbolic meanings and are locations for displaying objects, doing housework, or storing for future consideration. However, objects are not always distinctly in one or other phase, and it is the event – when they are apprehended – that may contain the meaning. The de-scripting of the household here shows the existence of a coherent system of relationships in which space, people and objects are all given significance.

In Chapter 6, 'Designed Objects', I look at three singular objects. Here I provide a description of three specific constructs of design, formulated to provide a portal, or an entry into a context of people, their thinking and their practices. In this instance I am leaving behind the embedded objects and using that language, that approach, to speak about how design is constructed as projects, as studio practice. I consider how design discourse engages with the materiality, and the ecologies, of the final use and resting place of artefacts. In all three objects, their commodity nature has served

as a minor aspect of their visualization. In fact, they expressly defy their commodification in diverse ways through the early part of their lifecycles, yet two of them end up in unique heterotopias and are excessively commoditized, albeit as financial investments. These are exquisitely beautiful objects and the ideology guiding their creation is singularly exotic and exquisite. These are designed objects, rigorously designed and beautifully made to survive the worst handling that chairs and lights may be subject to. Yet, only a select, very small population of people will ever see, touch or encounter any of these objects.

These objects are commissioned for specific individuals, they are not sold in shops, they are collector's pieces, exhibited in museums, and each object constitutes a manifest account or evidentiary account of an ideology or a creative practice. The object then is a heroic object, where I give it prominence as the central actant in a network. The context that it is embedded in is transient, arbitrary and evolving.

As an enterprise, the book was a journey to assemble the evidence – of places and objects – and observe the enactment of practices with the objects. It was also a project of speculation upon the possible ways in which objects come to be, as local collaborations of action. In the form of the tradition of inquiry, the hypothesis and the formulation of narrative accounts precede the experimental proof that these hypotheses are indeed valid. Such framing has also meant that I have a greater licence to travel using fewer references or acknowledging fewer precedents. The work draws upon a smorgasbord of literature. Social science predominates, largely anthropology, in the first three chapters. For the set-up of the second part, I have mixed in texts from management containing descriptions of practices of manufacturing.

The text is accompanied by drawings as a form of rendering exquisite the object of the study, allowing the text to be less critical and more descriptive, more appreciative. Illustrating things and places enhances the telling. The pen and ink drawings are accurate representations, essentializing what was previously captured in photographs. They are now rendered specific and point towards the significance of what is highlighted in the text. The designer is a visual person, and the drawing speaks louder than words. Writing then is a practice of description, just as the drawing is a practice of describing, a form of repeating in text what has been seen by the eye.

I have taught drawing as a skill of the hand, as a practice of seeing, and quite significantly as the way to appreciate the exquisite forms of objects. I sit down to draw a ceramic pickle jar. As I traverse the contours of the jar from the rim towards the neck, the pen I am holding pauses. I concentrate then pull it towards the flare, and then straight down one side. When I am done, I know I have captured the essence of the form of this jar. This practice of drawing, and the capture of just the essential details, is a form of visual practice that can be read alongside the text in the absence of the photographs. What I am particularly keen to capture, to serve as a reminder for myself, is the exquisite beauty of the hand gestures, the ways of sitting, the elegance of people as they use objects. It is possible that this or other similar objects have been designed, not just with consideration of materials and the processes of making, but with a keen sense and understanding of the practices and the ways of the people. It is equally possible that the ways of handling constitute their own ecology, a gestural system enabling people to use objects in elegant and graceful ways. In the holding of the ladle, in the carrying of the vessel, in the pouring, in the handing over, and in the receiving actions, objects can be appreciated for the beauty they enable. This text is deliberately in the service of beauty, which is partly visual beauty, and the exquisiteness of the cosmologies and the significances constructed for the explication of the way things are. For seeing the essential beauty in objects, in nature, in artefact, in forms, in things, is in the nature of design, and the designer is expected to embody a finely tuned sense of appreciation.

The industrial designer participates in the discourse of objects, industrial products, in ways appropriate within a commercial manufacturing and marketing enterprise. Outside the manufacturing enterprise, within an urban design studio, the notion of urban style and the sense of the consuming public's taste dominates the discourse of objects. With independent designer studios primarily located in cities, objects are assumed to be in their natural setting when set in an urban retail environment. Both these discourses, the producer perspective and the urban retail perspective, privilege the momentary consumption of artefacts. These discourses are not that useful in explaining, valuing and appreciating traditional or pre-existing objects. This book is specifically about bracketing out production discourse, or the marketing and style discourse, so as

to see objects, especially traditional objects, within traditional settings. In this way, an alternative ecology of discourse, a cosmology of the discourse of traditional practices, may be revealed.

Summary

The Introduction opens with an account of a bare house. But in another household in the same area the rooms were so full of objects and furniture that the entry into the living spaces had to be negotiated with care. Here was a situation where two families dealt with the same space and material culture in distinctly different ways. These differences, in my reading, serve as a nudge to design. That it needs to overcome its preoccupation with a narrow range of objects. Thus it needs to embrace a critical view of objects, where each object is then a black box that can be unpacked.

Social constructionist theory and ANT, primarily approaches for a study of the history of technology, can serve as a heuristic to be deployed to develop a critical narrative of the way common objects develop. Further, they can be used as a way to develop participatory perspectives on object design and development. This description of how products develop as explained by social constructionist theories is at variance with design's description of its role in the product development process. Through history, and in academic design writing, the design of a product has been portrayed as the work of a single designer in a way similar to a deterministic, heroic inventor explanation. The other actors contributing to the development process are simply ignored.

What I brought from social science into my understanding of design – about taste, about material culture, and about why people buy things – was a marginal discourse within the academy where I was teaching. In my reinterpretation and adaptation, I was exploring the formulation of a singular approach to imagining future artefacts in which I would describe design as a project of bringing meaningful objects into reality. I taught a studio titled 'Storytelling', invoking the notion that objects can speak, can have a voice.[7] This particular vocal agency I gave to objects was a project through which I would speak of the designer needing to listen carefully, to be able to hear the faint voices of objects. This notion of faint voice therefore becomes not just the privileging of the people at the margins,[8] which was the focus my work in the 1980s, but

acquires a new meaning in changing the privileging of artefacts. The object in this first narrative is being shifted from the notion of need, utility and commodity. The object shifts to become a container of meaning. The container pre-exists, but what is poured into it as meaning is something allowed to the people who possess the object or who are newly entering into a relationship with the object. That December in Jerusalem, I took the approach that the act of listening to the object is something everyone does, but to access the experience of having listened to the object one would have to go back historically in time to those moments where the object was enmeshed in a particular project of meaning making. Spending time together with other people huddled around an electric fire at a military outpost becomes a story of privileging the tiny object at the centre of a circle of military personnel. The clinking of ice cubes in a whiskey glass, remembered fondly as the signature audio of a father long since departed, finds form anew in a glass designed to produce the clunking sound even when empty. So already in these early days I am imagining the project of design as producing artefacts that are uniquely cherishable. Objects, therefore, are different from products.