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CONCEPTUAL DESIGN: PRACTICAL MEANINGS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS.

My work refers to a social context which comes from having grown up in a busy London suburb and the dense urban sprawl around Heathrow. According to the European Environment Agency approximately 75% of Europe's population now live in urban areas (EEA, 2009). The percentage is growing. As a result, overcrowding in many cities is reducing the quality of life for the inhabitants. Their dissatisfaction with the urban environment is partly due to a lack of both green and calm spaces for which there is an increased necessity, as stated by the EEA in a recent report: "If cities and towns can provide high quality environments, which fulfil the needs of citizens for safe area, green and other public spaces, as well as for short distances to facilities and services, then city centres can become sufficiently attractive to counter urban sprawl."¹

Personal awareness of the problems of densely populated environments presented me with a creative challenge in which my design research aimed to create a 'playful' private space that allowed a person to be calm and contemplative for a while. The social and environmental concepts involved took my ideas in directions that meant a balance needed to be struck between the practicalities of creating something on a large scale, whilst also ensuring experimentation with possible structures and materials. My research included exploring architectural forms, eco-shelters and elements typically associated with the urban counter-culture. I was intrigued by the contemporary designs of Sébastien Wierinck for the project On Site 00, in which the conceptual, contextual and practical are brought beautifully together. The project uses flexible tubes to create public and interior furniture pieces which can be adapted to different situations and environments, exploring what space in the contemporary environment means.

Postmodern pluralism has brought many new ways of combining materials, practices and expressions that were previously separate and, as Hinte and Ramakers describe, "product-designers now seek to strike off along new paths, spurred on by social and cultural evolution yet at the same time reacting against it."² In my case, the social context set the practical challenge and the design process itself became a way of offering a creative resistance to urban sprawl.

Above all, I am especially motivated by the process in which making and thinking are merged in the drive to become a maker for whom "...creativity is a kind of making marked by deliberative activity issuing in a particular product...creativity is, therefore, an elaborative process."³ But my work is also an expression of feelings about how we can improve the quality of urban life amidst the hard intensity of the city.

Perhaps it is the urban within my work that makes it contemporary; though for me it is also about how the conceptual nature of much contemporary work is a critique of society. I feel as though I have a social responsibility as a designer to think about what I am doing and why I do it. As Japanese designer Tokujin Yoshioka explains, "...in designing, the most important thing is meaning."⁴

I hope my response to urban space is expressed through the creation of purposeful, poetic designs, supported by the belief that "built space is also cultural space and a mirror of its time."⁵

Sarah Middleton

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