

SCORAI (Europe)/Kingston University Sustainable Consumption Workshop

London, 30 September and 1 October, 2014

Workshop Report by Audley Genus (workshop coordinator)

A two-day workshop on Sustainable Consumption was held at the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, convened by Audley Genus, YTL Professor of Innovation and Technology Management, Kingston University London. The workshop was the latest in a series of events organised by the research networks SCORAI Europe and SCORAI North America (SCORAI standing for Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative). It was funded by Kingston University from the YTL Corporation donation which endows the Chair held by Audley Genus (a member of SCORAI) and funds the salary of the research assistant Mara Iskandarova who helped to organise the workshop. SCORAI members Frances Fahy and Maurie Cohen assisted with chairing panel sessions and the review of abstracts submitted to the workshop (which was oversubscribed).

The London workshop was attended by a diverse mix of practitioners and academics and included researchers from the fields of innovation, science and technology studies, geography and sociology, and activist design. The 20 delegates came from the UK, EU, US and Japan (see Annex 1 below for a list of delegates; a picture of the group may be found on page 2 of this report). They shared and reflected upon research and practice relevant to themes suggested by participants in recent SCORAI Europe workshops. The workshop findings emphasised:

1. The myth of 'sustainable consumption'
2. The paradox of rebound effects associated with the adoption of measures to reduce consumption
3. The importance of understanding the relationship between consumption and production
4. The propensity of sustainable innovations to fail to live up to expectations
5. The potential contribution of DIY and 'slow' design and the sharing economy to reduce consumption though acknowledging the capacity for international capital to undermine or co-opt citizen action and modes of provisioning based on social solidarity.
6. The significance of combinations of social practices, institutional rules, entrepreneurial design activists (e.g. urban farmers) and supportive policy and social structures and material infrastructure to making 'real' transformations which have the potential to endure
7. The importance of historical perspectives to understanding innovation success and failure, the 'life course' of consumers' relationships with use (e.g. in relation to transportation or using energy in the home) or learning from the past exemplars such as the socially useful production movement of the 1970s.
8. Mutually productive and problem-centred engagement among practitioners, academic researchers, policy and business actors.

Format, participants and venue

The feedback during and after the workshop showed that delegates appreciated the small size and two-day duration of the workshop. This gave the workshop an intensity of delegate interaction and networking it might not otherwise have had. The diversity of participants was also noted. Delegates commented positively on the range of backgrounds and interests of other participants (junior/senior, academic/practitioner, various countries of origin and domicile, gender mix), which it seemed enriched their experience of the workshop. The venue of the Royal Society of the Arts was both convenient for its central London location and appropriate given the RSA's focus on social progress. The Romney room was functional, if not especially adapted for break-out, small group activities such as the open space work. The venue sources its food 'as locally as possible' and was able to cater for a range of dietary preferences including at the excellent workshop dinner at the end of Day 1.



Pictured left: delegates at the London workshop, with the SCORAI (Europe) banner

The format deviated from the SCORAI model of 'flash' presentations followed by extended discussion of papers in themed sessions (see the workshop programme in Annex 2 to this report). Instead of five-minute long presentations, fifteen minutes were allotted per paper, with the workshop comprising three sessions of four academic papers and a rapporteur summary and reflection each, plus practitioner-led presentations and an invited researcher presentation. In addition to this were 'open space' sessions (on Day 2). The space remaining for Q+A and discussion in the academic paper sessions had to be handled very carefully by the session chairs, which meant that discussion in a couple of sessions was somewhat curtailed. Overall, however, the absolute amount of discussion was extensive and the discussions (it seemed to me at least) were at a high level. One suggestion for organisers of future similar events is to make it explicit that delegates are expected to read each other's papers in preparation for the workshop to enable all delegates to contribute in an informed manner and get the most from the workshop. Further such an expectation would be more likely to be met if papers and presentations were submitted in a timely manner.

Content and future research agenda

The workshop call for papers was organised on the basis of the following themes:

1. Action: roles for researchers and practitioners in developing and diffusing sustainable practices
2. Integrating sustainable consumption and production
3. New perspectives and methods

Of these the papers for session 1 probably matched the advertised session title least well (or vice versa). Indeed papers from this session did not closely address roles for researchers; bearing in mind the

papers that were ultimately presented a better suited title for this session might have been something like 'The Potential and Limitations of DIY Design and the Sharing Economy'. Understood as such the session was placed well in the workshop timetable, following the practitioner Ann Thorpe's interesting presentation on design activism and its potential contribution to the reduction of consumption. For Ann, 'better' modes of consumption remain marginal and gains from efficiency and innovation are overtaken by growth in demand and are subject to rebound effects. She sees potential in the slow design movement to 'change modes of private consumption so that the meaning and "stimulation" attached to it come less from fast paced novelty and more from deeper, long term content'. Enhancing public spaces may reduce the need for private consumption. Ann saw an important role for narratives, public spaces and infrastructure (e.g. shopping bags designed into clothing) as bearers of social/shared consumption. The discussion of her presentation took in questions surrounding the prevalence of 'DIY urbanism', the scope and role of design/designers and their relationship to other spheres such as research and politics, what all this is design for (designing out neo-liberalism?), who is left out of DIY design?, how such processes are to be funded anyway (what is the role of corporations?), the persistence of 'consumer choice' perspectives, how to make hidden values visible through product rating or labelling, and how to evaluate or measure sustainability benefits or ecological gains.

The Session 1 presentations, rapporteur comments and discussion centred on, amongst other things, the drivers and diffusion of DIY design, the reality and myth of the sharing economy, the importance of values and trust in the latter, and the political economy of fair trade in which citizen responsibility is proscribed. Some aspects of the discussion concerned the need for a culturally sensitive perspective of sustainable consumption, the argument that some apparently innovative practices masked what was more in the nature of building more resilient capitalism, the recreation of the 'commons', and the key issue of 'upscaling', or more widespread diffusion of currently niche (possibly) sustainable practices. The need for context sensitivity in our work and for debate between policy-makers and other actors regarding emerging trends and the implications for sustainable consumption was emphasised.

Between Sessions 1 and 2 there were invited talks by Mandy Meikle, Tom Henfrey and Adrian Smith (Audley Genus knows Tom from their time in the North East of England, where they were both activists in local Transition Town groups and at the same time researchers at local universities interested in promoting and practising 'co-inquiry' forms of research. They both know Mandy from an Energy Security/Transition Research Network workshop they co-organised at Kingston upon Thames in 2012. Adrian Smith (SPRU, University of Sussex) is well known for his work on grassroots activism and environmental innovation.

Mandy and Tom spoke about issues connected with being environmental and community activists (e.g. in Transition Town groups). Mandy doesn't believe that society will 'choose to consume less' but that nature will impose change, and gives this as a reason for her moving away from environmental activism and towards community activism with which she had not previously seen herself as being involved. She emphasised that the actions of community groups must be relevant to 'the community' and that merely repeating messages about reducing consumption might not mean much to many people, who thus might not feel that they 'own' initiatives (such as the ones in which Mandy is involved in the South Lanarkshire area of Scotland). Academics can play an important role in such activities by providing case studies and examples to help people in communities 'see' how things can change for the better for them and in terms of realising more sustainable living. Key factors in why such initiatives fail were cited

as: unreasonable expectations, lack of support, burn-out of a key player, and ‘running before we can walk’.

Tom Henfrey spoke about transition as a cultural project, in which culture could be understood as shared beliefs about the world, the structure of relationships with the world, and a set of ideas about the world and institutions associated with them. Unsustainable culture is in need of fundamental transformation relating, for example, to: the way we do research; the boundary between activism and research; the way we produce and consume food, amongst other things. Tom has worked for a number of years to practice and diffuse permaculture. Tom sees permaculture as a design system, a method that seeks to emulate the sustainability, resilience and regenerative capacity of nature in self-organising systems of local food production and consumption. Tom was one of a number of workshop delegates to refer to the use of ‘pattern languages’, which is a design principle for (re) creating – in potentially democratic and transdisciplinary ways – how and where we live and work. In such a process the implicit values underpinning sustainable design are made explicit in the grammar of language. (See below a link to Dan Lockton’s work on this: <http://architectures.danlockton.co.uk/dan-lockton/>. Also refer to the permaculture website at: <https://www.permaculture.org.uk/knowledge-base/other-methods-and-processes> and to the work of Christopher Alexander and colleagues on pattern languages at: <http://www.jacana.org.uk/pattern/P14.htm>

Adrian Smith’s presentation focused on ‘grassroots prototypes’ such as fablabs, hackerspaces and makerspaces, in which anyone can enter if they wish to learn about making or repairing all kinds of products. He remarked on the commitment to openness and collaboration in such spaces, including collaboration among unlikely partners, and explored the implications of such phenomena in terms of the emergence of new meanings of production and consumption. Adrian was wary of ‘excited claims’ that such developments amounted to, for example, a third industrial revolution, while remaining hopeful about the prospects for socially useful production and human-centred design. He took an avowedly historical perspective, referring to previous experiments and technology networks such as the Lucas Plan in the 1970s and at the Greater London Council in the 1980s. Then and now it is not clear whether the object of such ventures is to promote the design of accessible technology prototypes, or something more wholeheartedly political and ideological such the democratisation of technology development.

Session 2 papers all addressed interactions between consumption and production, and included work on new sites and entrepreneurs connected with potentially sustainable consumption/production, such as urban farm(er)s and designers and wearers of slow fashion, and the multiple social practices which need to be understood in order to enable the diffusion of energy-efficient lighting. Attention was drawn to the work of philosopher Jacques Ellul and reminded us of: (a) that would-be sustainable innovations develop in unforeseeable ways; and (b) in any case innovations, which involve combinations of design, production and use, are intimately entwined with ‘technological society’ and culture in which efficiency and rationality are prized, whatever other arguments and expectations intrude on their development from time to time. The rapporteur’s comments and the ensuing discussion took in points relating to the multi-disciplinary nature of the session presentations (e.g. how do we combine different perspectives/knowledge in an effective way, which does not do a disservice to previously unfamiliar fields, or risk the employment of incompatible or incommensurate work?) They also considered the agency-structure problem, as certain presentations offered a view which could be interpreted as actor-centric. The

heterogeneity of actors involved in consumption and innovation, and the uncertainty of the processes involved were some of the other touchstones of the discussion.

The papers in [Session 3](#) offered emerging perspectives, including a blend of historical perspective with socio-technical analysis and social practice theory and an application of a 'values-practice' framework to the adoption of 'lifetime behaviours'. Empirically the focus of these papers included a study of book production and reading, the measurement of mobility practices over the life course, and consumer (dis)satisfaction with online clothing swapping and reselling (investigated using a 'netnographic' approach). The rapporteur's comments and subsequent discussion revolved around a number of issues, including: whether practice theory constitutes social science? Do social practice theories enable predictions to be made, or are they alternatively a lens for understanding social practices? What are the implications of this? Is encouraging consumer competence about product durability and reparability a lost cause? How does an historical perspective allow us to reflect on what really is a new social practice? Who is involved in novel practices and who is left out (e.g. of online clothes swapping and sharing)? Further, discussion of the session presentations included reflection on social practice theory and the extent to which it may over-emphasise individual level practice and underplay more general social and political phenomena implicated in consumption.

These findings will inform future meetings of the SCORAI networks, including the next SCORAI Europe workshop to be held in Lausanne in December, 2014, and publication and funding applications. A book based on the London workshop discussion and findings is in preparation. It has the working title of *Sustainable Consumption: Perspectives, Design and Practices* and will be edited by Audley Genus. It is due to be published by Springer in 2015.

Open Space Sessions and Future Work

The open space sessions on Day 2 (which we called 'Icebreaker', 'What's Itching?' and 'Scratching the Itch') generated a number of themes which could form points of departure for future SCORAI activities. Among these were:

1. Interdisciplinarity (barriers, limitations, academic culture/structure); problem-orientation; approaches to public engagement; production focus as well as consumption (see Annex 3);
2. Thinking innovatively about data and research focus – possibly moving attention from consumers to producing organisations, or to interactions among these two types of actors; employing non- or degrowth models; looking at the junctions (where consumption meets production);
3. 'Pracademics'; language use by researchers; the role of laypeople in drafting calls, bids, 'acaditioners'; and
4. Business models: how can we promote alternatives? How can business success be detached from a reliance on economic growth?

Annex 1

List of delegates

Name of delegate	Affiliation
Maurie Cohen	New Jersey Institute of Technology
Anne-Marie Coles	University of Greenwich
Karin Dobernig	University of Economics and Business, Vienna
Frances Fahy	National University of Ireland, Galway
Audley Genus	Kingston University, London
Mike Goodman	University of Reading
Mary Greene	National University of Ireland, Galway
Tom Henfrey	Schumacher Institute/activist
Claudia Henninger	University of Sheffield
Frances Hinton	Activist
Marfuga Iskandarova	Kingston University, London
Charlotte Jensen	Aalborg University
Steven R. McGreevy	Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, Kyoto
Mandy Meikle	Activist
Mariale Moreno	Nottingham Trent University
Sarah Netter	Copenhagen Business School
Athena Piterou	University of Greenwich
Giuseppe Salvia	Nottingham Trent University
Adrian Smith	SPRU, University of Sussex
Ann Thorpe	Activist

Annex 2

SCORAI (Europe)/Kingston University Sustainable Consumption Workshop

Workshop Programme

Day One (30/9/14)

Time	Activity
09.30-10.00	Arrival; registration; networking; refreshments
10.00-10.15	Introduction by Audley Genus
10.15-11.00	'Practitioner' keynote presentation ('Can the Practice of Design Reduce Consumption?', Ann Thorpe, ex-LUUM architecture and design activist); discussion
11.00-11.15	Break
11.15-12.45	<u>Theme 1:</u> Action: roles for researchers and practitioners in developing and diffusing sustainable practices: <u>Chair/Rapporteur: Frances Fahy</u> Giuseppe Salvia, Tim Cooper (Nottingham Trent University) - The role of design to catalyse sustainable DIY design Maurie Cohen (New Jersey Institute of Technology) – The Illusory Promises of the Sharing Economy Mike Goodman (University of Reading) - The fair trade consumer-citizen is dead! Long live the fair trade corporate-citizen! Steven R. McGreevy (Research Institute for Humanity and Nature) and Motoki Akitsu (Kyoto University) - Steering sustainable food consumption in Japan: trust, relationships, and ties that bind (4 x 15 minute presentations plus Rapporteur's comments and discussion)
12.45-13.30	Lunch and Networking
13.30-14.20	Practitioner-led case studies (Mandy Meikle; Tom Henfrey, Transition Research Network and Schumacher Institute); discussion
14.20-14.50	'Researcher' keynote ('Grassroots prototyping past and present' - Dr Adrian Smith, Senior Research Fellow, SPRU, University of Sussex); discussion
14.50-15.10	Break
15.10-16.40	<u>Theme 2:</u> Integrating sustainable consumption and production: <u>Chair/Rapporteur: Audley Genus</u> Charlotte Jensen (University of Aalborg) - What is energy efficient light? Claudia Henninger (University of Sheffield), Panayiota Alevizou, and Caroline J. Oates - Sustainable consumption and production: an insight into the slow-fashion industry and micro-organisations Karin Dobernig (WU - Vienna University of Economics and Business) - Urban farms as new sites of consumption Anne-Marie Coles (University of Greenwich) – The potential for sustainable production and consumption in a technological society (4 x 15 minute presentations; Rapporteur's comments and discussion)
16.40-17.00	Wrap up, next steps for Day 2; Close.
18.00 onwards	Workshop Dinner, in Romney room

Day Two (1/10/14)

9.45-10.00	Welcome; Introduction
10.00-10.15	<u>'Icebreaker' 10-15mins</u>
10.15-11.45	<u>Theme 3: New perspectives and methods: Chair/Rapporteur: Maurie Cohen</u> Mary Greene, Henrike Rau, Frances Fahy (National University of Ireland, Galway) - Mobilising memories: measuring mobility practices across the life course Mariale Moreno, Laura Piscicelli, Tim Cooper (Nottingham Trent University) - Using the values-practice framework to adopt lifetime optimising behaviours: the case of maintenance Athena Piterou (University of Greenwich) and Fred Steward (Policy Studies Institute, University of Westminster) - From print to digital: textual technologies and reading as a sociotechnical practice Sarah Netter (Copenhagen Business School): Satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the online sharing economy: an investigation into online clothing (4 x 15 minute presentations plus Rapporteur's comments and discussion)
11.45-12.00	Break
12.00-12.45	'What's itching?' Identification of issues to explore in future research and practice
12.45-13.30	Lunch and Networking
13.30-14.45	'Scratching the itch': prompting and selecting issues/coproducing future research and practice; small group work on research proposals and actions in practice – continued; small groups to make presentations; discussion of presentations (flip chart paper record of presentations to be collected and notes taken).
14.45-15.00	Break
15.00-16.00	Plenary discussion of research agenda/ proposals and action initiatives; content/tasks for edited book; feedback on workshop; delegate takeaways; next steps. Close.

Annex 3

Example of Open Space 'Post-its' (on Interdisciplinarity)

