

“Is capitalism fuelling an unsustainable and exploitative system within the interior design industry?”



Figure 1: (Lambourne, 2019).

Contextualising Practice Three (1B6Z9909)

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Key Terms

‘Rigid Instability’

Losing touch with what matters, for example, becoming greedy, materialistic, and money focused (Van der Ryn, 2014).

‘The Great Turning’

“The shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilisation” (Van der Ryn, 2014:xi).

‘Resource Efficiency’

“Using the Earth's limited resources in a sustainable manner while minimising impacts on the environment. It allows us to create more with less and to deliver greater value with less input” (European Commission, n.d.:online).

‘Circular Economy’ – Closed Loop

“A model of production and consumption, which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible. In this way, the life cycle of products is extended” (European Parliament, 2018:online).

Introduction.

In reference to the term devised by architect Sim Van der Ryn, it could be argued that modern-day interior design finds itself within a ‘rigid instability’, epitomising a society centralised around greed, materialism and money which inevitably, to some degree, is significantly influenced by capitalism (Van der Ryn, 2014). Brought to the forefront by philosopher Karl Marx, capitalism is a term which has resided within society for over two centuries, representing a system controlled by a higher power to benefit solely from profitable gain.

Though interior design remains present in relation to modern-day trends and innovations, the industry often falls absent concerning its focus on *natural* capitalism, and instead finds itself in this rigidity of consumerism.

When we consider the industrial revolution of the 18th Century, it is palpable that the way in which we consume material goods today has been inveigled by the initial industrial design and manufacturing methods of mass production and standardisation – fuelling the fast-paced, rapacious nature of today’s society, and consequently, compelling design to follow linear, wasteful trends to remain ‘current’.

With this onset of both the industrial and technological age that we know today, society has essentially been consumed itself by the disposable nature of design influenced by capitalism. Thus, imposing the need for designers to reconsider materials and techniques used in the process, to ensure a possibility for the future industry as well as the wider environment.

Referring to this as the ecological age, the integral prospect that this introduces is the consideration of *all* types of capital – introducing aspects such as resource efficiency and closed-loop design processes, which advocates a balance between both natural and financial wealth to ensure ethical, economic prosperity in a society which is under great environmental concern.

As interior designers, it could be argued that our responsibility in terms of this waste and material efficiency is much greater than any other, as it is us who makes and advises such decisions within the process. In line with this view is the work of Bre Group, a multi-disciplinary, building science centre which ensures buildings and communities follow an ethical approach, enforced through their assessment method of BREEAM (Bre Group, 2020). This sets out a moral example in accordance to what a sustainable interior design project should be – rating and awarding credits where there is evidence of ethical application within a building, project or community.

Using this model of BREEAM as a point of reference, this essay aims to explore whether the current stature of capitalist society has influenced the interior design industry, looking specifically at the hospitality and commercial sectors, and posing the question as to whether it has become an exploitative industry or one that is merely efficient. Subsequently, this would broaden the argument as to the urgency of the ecological age and how interior design can, and – in some circumstances – is, progressing towards a modern ethical approach.

1.0 The Industrial Age.

1.1 The Industrial Revolution & Rigid Instability.

Despite dating back to the 18th Century, the Communist Manifesto in which Karl Marx depicts a society consumed by a system of class hierarchies in a capitalist jurisdiction still mirrors a modern societal system that has yet to reform.

“The feudal system of industry in which industrial production was monopolised by closed guilds [...] no longer sufficed for the growing wants of the new markets. The manufacturing system took its place” (Marx, K., Engels, F., Harvey, D, 2008:35). Not only does this display the effects of a capitalist system, but Marx’s ideology also reflects how the industry had to adapt to a sudden growing consumerist market because of this system, introducing linear manufacturing methods later known as mass production and standardisation to be able to sustain, thus resulting in the industrial revolution. As a result of a continuing industrialised focus towards design, as well as the advancements of engineering and technology, two centuries later this consumerist market that Marx refers to has expanded even further – culminating towards this concept of a society in a ‘rigid instability’ (Van der Ryn, 2014) – whereby we find ourselves within a state of excess.

1.2 The Life Cycle of Interior Design.

In 2018, the waste from commercial and industrial sectors in the UK alone was 37.2 million tonnes, an increase from 36.1 million previously in 2017 (Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs, 2020). This statistic demonstrates how an ever-increasing consumerist market can stimulate society into inhabiting a disposable mindset due to consumers now *expecting* newer innovations more

frequently. Inevitably, deeming their previous assets worthless or old and replacing them with the ‘new’, thus contributing to this wasteful cycle from both a consumer and manufacturer perspective, as both attempt to keep up with the market.

This disposable outlook is not only damaging from a waste perspective, but also to the life cycle of both the commodities and space implicated by these methods of standardisation, adding only short-term value until the next new trend comes along – exhibiting a concept known as built-in obsolescence.

Considered a business strategy, the concept of built-in obsolescence is used in the manufacturing of products to essentially limit such items to a specific life cycle of only short-term value (Hadhazy, 2016), arguably acting as the driving force into people needing the latest trends rather than just wanting to acquire them.

“Interior design as a profession fuels consumption that runs counter to the aim of using Earth’s natural resources more carefully” (Country and Town House, 2020: online).

When we look at the interior design industry, the hospitality sector as an example exhibits design trends that are significantly influenced by a capitalist approach towards built-in obsolescence, which subsequently fuels consumption. This is because their success is judged solely on the life span of the space and the changing needs of the market, rather than quality or benefits.

For instance, the renovation cycle that is associated with hotels is said to be changed approximately every six or seven years, when hotel rooms or spaces start to appear ‘outdated’ due to details such as worn-out carpet or faded wallpaper (InterServ LP, 2020). Not only this, but

the development of the ‘Smart Hotel’ concept is even more so detrimental, as this encourages more frequent renovations as often as every three years, as its focus becomes concerned around the competitiveness of the market and the growing needs of its consumers.

Demonstrating this idea is the work of the hotel chain ‘CitizenM’, whose initial focus was to “disrupt the traditional hotel industry by creating a luxury hybrid hotel for today’s modern travellers...” (CitizenM, 2020).

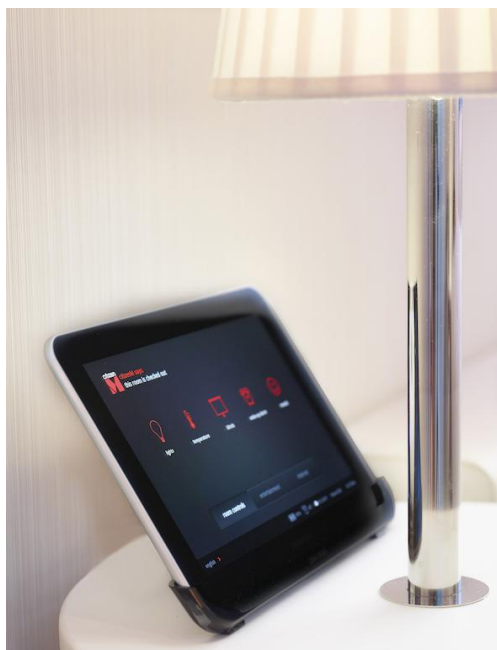


Figure 2: CitizenM New York Times Square (Hotelier Academy, 2019)

Their spaces provide a personalised experience for guests, utilising technology to make room adjustments and an overall experience that is considered more ‘at ease’. However, in using these methods, this implies that they could simultaneously be using these devices to monitor their guest’s preferences and behaviours. Monitoring this would determine what could be developed or changed in order to remain current and consistent concerning the attracting of customers, thus signifying how “we make more use of commercial services than before because economic growth favours converting as many goods

and services to commodities as possible” (Thorpe, 2012:38).

This quote indicates how adopting an expeditious approach in the design process like this, has devised a contrast to what hotel space was once considered to be. Before standardisation and efficient refurbishments, a hotel was once a space of luxurious nature. In today’s society, however, these spaces are being designed in a way that meets the guest’s needs and comforts through use of commodities. Because of this, hotel interiors have constituted into a concept of being a ‘home away from home’, which subsequently fuels this consumer-capitalist market by becoming more accessible and serviceable rather than indulgent.

Although personalisation and comfort are also essential aspects within an interior space, one might suggest that this particular mode of design is actually exploitative, as despite it being efficient for the consumer – it leads to adverse and inefficient decisions further down the line.

As exemplified by the renovation cycle, it is evident that there is a similar state of excess and greed within the hospitality sector of interior design to that of capitalism. Due to the fast turnover of these spaces and the urgency to meet demand, designers become induced to make unethical decisions regarding materials, waste and process. These decisions reflect the same system that followed the industrial revolution, thus amplifying the absence of change.



Figure 3: Another Solution for Diverting Furniture Waste from Landfill (Waste360, 2018).

1.3 The Interior Design Footprint.

Following this, we are led to question what impact these industry trends have on the environment, and how might they be measured alongside the standards of BREEAM.

Apace with the processes that materialise through interior and spatial design, is the different kinds of waste produced. In a report conducted by The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) which investigated the benchmarks of refurbishment waste, it can be interpreted by Figure 4 that the most consistent materials that become waste between the sectors of commercial and residential design are timber, packaging and metals.

Figure 1. Average EPI by product type related to refurbishment project types

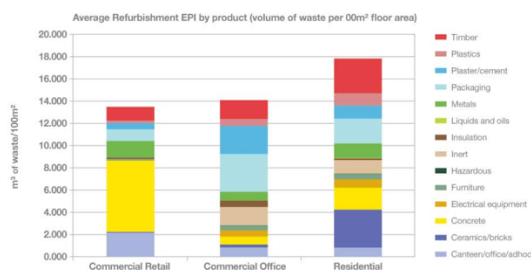


Figure 4: Average EPI by product type related to refurbishment project types (WRAP, n.d.:12)

The inference to be drawn from this graph is the knowledge that packaging waste is the most problematic throughout the renovation cycle, and therefore coherently throughout the interior design industry as a whole. In terms of the waste that goes to landfill, packaging waste makes up over 30% of this (Aliwest, 2011), which in turn contributes to the damaging effects these landfill sites have on the environment; such as increasing high levels of greenhouse gases and contamination in our waterways (Unisan, 2020).

These statistics amplify the significance of BREEAM within any interior design project, as one of the critical areas that they rate a building sustainable on, is materials and waste.

Linking back to earlier in this essay, the commercial and hospitality sectors specifically, exhibit a perspective of interior design that is current and thriving within a capitalist economy. However, it is identifiable that to be able to keep up, designers have been induced into thinking consistent re-design is the only method to contest the ever-changing market.

Although re-design is critical, it is the wasteful interpretation of this that has caused the need for sustainability to become more prevalent than ever within the industry. In relation to the regulations of BREEAM and the standards that they set, it is the process of reduce, reuse and recycle within re-design that is significant in achieving sustainability – but it is clear that interior design is lacking in *reduce*.

2.0 The Ecological Age.

2.1 'The Great Turning'.

Concerning the exploitation of resources, it could be argued that the advance of a society focused on this commitment towards sustainability has become increasingly more prevalent – shifting towards a 'life-sustaining' approach as portrayed by the 'Great Turning' (Van der Ryn, 2014). Despite the fact that capitalism has, and in some ways, still is consuming our natural wealth, there is evidence of designers shifting from these linear, wasteful processes towards more closed-loop cycles, and exhibiting the reduce, reuse, recycle process. Although it is evident that damage already done to the environment is irreversible, in the words of architect Sim Van der Ryn, "the question is can we re-design human life to restore the planets ability to sustain us?" (Van der Ryn, 2014:7). This question forms the foundations as to what this section of the essay will be exploring, focusing attention towards the opportunities that utilising natures model holds in increasing resource efficiency, and how this can direct us towards the *next* revolution – this one being ecological.

With reference to the topic of waste materials in section one, the reflection of more recent statistics could be implicating that the interior design industry is engaging in a more closed-loop design approach.

For example, in 2017, 70% of UK packaging waste was either recycled or recovered – this meant that 7.4 million tonnes out of 11.5 million was diverted from landfill. (Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs, 2020). Due to the fact that packaging is such an imperative component throughout all areas of interior design, this improvement poses great significance in the steps towards an ecological age, as it highlights the presence of ‘climate positive’ design within the industry and the broader environment.

2.2 Efficiency in Materials.

Evidencing an example of how said ‘climate positive’ design is being introduced within the interior design industry, is the work of Ecovative Design and their innovation concerning sustainable packaging. With a focus on adapting the linear packaging models found within the construction and design industry, Ecovative Design consequently challenged the norms of not only wasteful packaging but also the need for large scale industrial manufacturing in a closed-loop system. Their product, EcoCradle Packaging, is grown using agricultural by-products such as mushroom roots and seed-hulls, which uses very little energy in the creation process (Aliwest, 2011). Comparing to the traditional, synthetic materials that are usually employed – EcoCradle uses only one-tenth of energy used compared to manufacturing the likes of plastic or Styrofoam packaging (Aliwest, 2011).



Figure 5: Round Planter (Paradise Packaging, n.d.)

By utilising the efficiency of nature, this mushroom packaging is rapidly renewable – producing 90% less carbon emissions than plastic packaging manufacture – and is also 100% bio-degradable, through which the mycelium technology takes only one week to form and just a few weeks to decompose back into the Earth, which subsequently feeds the reduce, recycle and reuse cycle.

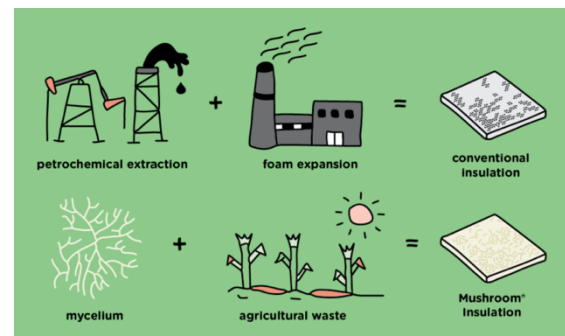


Figure 6: (Medium, 2018)

As presented by Figure 6, this diagram could lead us to the supposition that the closed-loop process used by EcoCradle, highlights the prospect that linear industrialised processes are not a fundamental part of large-scale manufacturing. Evidence of this is shown through the biomimetic approach adopted by EcoCradle – this being cradle to cradle design (CTC). The CTC approach essentially epitomises the process of reduce, reuse and recycle by utilising waste as an opportunity towards resource

efficiency, which in turn, mimics nature's life cycle and has a positive impact on the environment.

Previously, capitalism has compelled us to design with a sense of rigidity in order to adhere to the life cycle of built-in obsolescence. However, now with a growing need to design sustainably, “nature has evolved resilience and toughness” (Pawlyn, 2011:33). This view highlights the idea that as designers, we must dispute this ideal by utilising the natural resources that we still have to design with adaptation in mind, as this “allows buildings (and objects) to do what most living organisms do – modify their form or behaviour in response to changing conditions” (Pawlyn, 2011:31).

Contrary to the view that the fast-paced nature of society – induced by the capitalist market – was the cause of the need for the forthcoming ecological revolution, we may argue that without such consumption and influence of obsolescence – design may never have become as refined as it is in the modern-day. In regard to the concept of adaptation, one must consider the understanding of natural capitalism, as it is this declining element of wealth that we depend on for economic prosperity. Therefore, by mimicking nature's process of adaptation, one could suggest that we can respond efficiently to the changing conditions of a fast-paced society. This characteristic of society, pragmatically, will most likely never cease if we are wishing to prosper in *all* types of capital, which subsequently, further emphasises the importance of designing with the process of reduce, reuse and recycle at the forefront.

In a professional context, this concept of adaptation and longevity is evident within the work of the table manufacturers Southern Aluminium. Looking back at both the hospitality and commercial

sectors of the interior design industry anew, Southern Aluminium demonstrates a similar process to cradle to cradle design – creating “durable aluminium tables that adhere to their stringent guidelines of product innovation, consumer efficiency and green initiatives” (Southern Aluminium, 2020: online). In contrast to the typically wasteful nature of hotel and office spaces, their tables offer a modern outlook for sustainable interior design by being curated without linens. Employing this approach, a table that would once be considered 'expired' or at the end of its life cycle due to slight wear and tear or changing trends, can be sent back to the manufacturer and replaced. Consequently, this diverts the process of the table residing in landfill as the top and outer layers are replaced by the manufacturer as a result of being more flexible and adaptable.

With observation to the materials in Figure 4 earlier in this essay, metal is interpreted as one of three components considered the most wasteful in most commercial renovation projects – yet aluminium is one of the most recycled materials on the planet (Southern Aluminium, 2020). This utilisation of resources leads to the observation that they are adopting a closed-loop design process, as 70% of the aluminium in their products is recycled metal – which, consequently, also results in a fully recyclable final product (Southern Aluminium, 2020).



Figure 7: Westdrift Manhattan Beach, Autograph Collection (Southern Aluminium, n.d.)

2.3 Adaptive Space.

Considering the roles of flexibility and functionality towards an evolving sustainable interior design industry; we pose the question as to whether interior space can be considered sustainable through the literal adaptation of structure – exploring how the industry is starting to design space with these earlier waste statistics in mind.

“We need to think of budgets as environmental resource use and impact instead of money” (Thorpe, 2012:117). Viewing this ideal from an interior design perspective, the point being made here exemplifies further the need to challenge the life cycle of built-in obsolescence rather than prioritising capital gains. If we are to continue consuming our natural wealth to benefit this capitalist cycle, we will be left with no wealth at all – as we cannot consume the environment at the same pace as we do material goods.

With further focus around this concept of resource efficiency through adaptation, we consider the project ‘Adaptable House’ by architects GXN and Henning Larsen.



Figure 8: Adaptable House (Jesper Ray, 2013)

As part of a project known as ‘The MiniCO2 Houses’, the work of GXN and Larsen “focuses on flexibility and adaptability and examines how a flexible design can save materials and thereby CO2 as well as time and resources...” (Archdaily, 2013: online).

With nearly every aspect of the house exhibiting an adaptable nature, owners are able to dismantle and expand walls – creating the possibility for more or less rooms – partition walls are moveable, and new entrances can be established on the façade as well as numerous other features – allowing owners to shape the space to their needs (Archdaily, 2013).



Figure 9: Adaptable House (Jesper Ray, 2013)

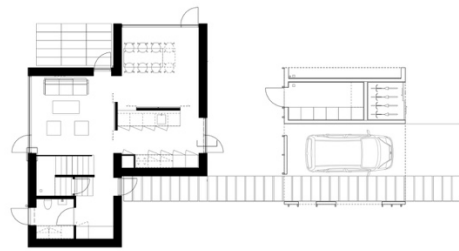


Figure 10: (Archdaily, 2013)

In utilising the efficiency of this design approach throughout any interior space, as well as residential, the volume of waste that would normally occur is significantly reduced.

When we consider the life cycle of a home for instance, more often than not as people’s lifestyles and needs change, their house also changes to meet these needs – commonly leading to home renovations, conversions or moving somewhere new completely – inevitably contributing to the global waste problem. What if, however, spaces were capable of adapting to such needs rather than completely designing anew?

The Adaptable House epitomises a sustainable approach to interior design in a sense of challenging the idea of this ‘rigid

instability' within society, through reducing and reusing. Rather than being in a state of excess in a sense of having too space and the like, this modular approach to space allows for adaptability when change arises rather than fuelling further consumption. Further, this relates back to the idea that we must learn to adapt to the rapacious nature of modern-day society in order to create this 'life-sustaining' economy as referenced by Van der Ryn, otherwise society will remain stuck in this capitalist influenced mindset.

3.0 The Role of the Designer.

3.1 Ethics in Interior Design.

Unlike industries such as Architecture – which is regulated by Architects Registration Board (ARB) – interior design remains an unregulated industry throughout design. Subsequently, this relies on ethical decisions being made by individuals themselves rather than ethicality being a mandatory component within a design or project.

In reference to the question of this essay, it could be argued that this unregulated nature of the interior design industry is the central reason for it becoming unsustainable and exploitative rather than solely a capitalist society, as designers are given free rein in regard to the decisions they make. Understandably, the whole meaning of being a designer is to think creatively and push the realms of innovation, however, there comes a point in time where this may lead to a state of overabundance – this being modern-day.

“A successful business in the new era of natural capitalism will respect and understand all four views. It will realise that solutions lie in understanding the interconnectedness of problems, not in confronting them in isolation” (Hawken, P., Lovins, B. A., Lovins, H. L., 2010:313). This belief conveys the idea that with the current changing climate of the natural economy, in order for design to now be

considered successful within the industry, it must remain current concerning the environment.

Comparably, one might argue that this sense of change does not reflect on the influence of capitalism, but rather as a normal development of society. When we consider the societal form of the 18th Century, the methods of production and advancements of the industrial age were detrimental of that time as society was going through change that enforced faster production and an increase in job opportunities.

Now, in the 21st Century, the demands of society have changed, consequently shifting innovation towards what is most important now – this being our natural wealth and the future of the biosphere rather than the economy.

Exemplifying this sense of change, is the development of 'B Corporation', an organisation which “enables businesses to meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose” (B Corporation, 2020: online). In a similar sense to BREEAM, B Corporation ensures that a business is following all aspects of ethicality in regard to sustainability, but further, in regard to the working environment and customers, thus challenging the unsustainable and exploitative characteristics within the industry.

The commercial architecture practice 'ClarkeHopkinsClarke' presents as an example of a business within the industry that has shifted towards this more ethical approach, as they became 'B Certified' in 2017 and now hold a B Impact Score of 117.4 – the qualifying number being 80 (B Corporation, 2020). Now, they are considered one of the largest B Corporations in the world, that are “seeking solutions that better address the

social, economic and environmental pressures that are increasingly affecting the urban environment” (B Corporation, 2020:online).

This can be demonstrated in their development to becoming carbon neutral in 2018, which highlights how it is still possible for larger businesses or corporations to make change. However, in the words of Victor Papanek, “the designer must analyse the past as well as the foreseeable future consequences of his acts” (Papanek, 2019:102).

The point that we draw from this idea, is that in order for a company to succeed from a sustainable perspective, one must look at their previous approach to a capitalist economy and understand what changes need to be made to shape it around *natural* capitalism.

Illustrating this sense of change, is the large-scale carpet manufactures Interface. Twenty-three years after being founded, in 1996 the company chose to work towards a carbon neutral outcome within all of their products to innovate the way towards a more sustainable future. Since this decision in 1996, some examples of their achievements include reducing their carpet carbon footprint by 69%, reducing their greenhouse emissions on site by 96%, and a 92% reduction in waste sent to landfill (Interface, 2019). In addition, with their products holding a fifteen-year warranty, they are able to challenge this sense of built-in obsolescence through durability which inevitably, is much more sustainable and one of the reasonings behind the improvement on landfill waste which still sees over four million pounds of carpet each year in the United States (Interface, 2020).

These major advancements towards a sustainable business model highlight how, contrary to the industrial age, it could be these larger corporations that innovate the concept of sustainability into the interior design industry. In reference back to the

responsibility that we as interior designers hold, one could argue that if all manufacturers were to adopt the same ethical approach as Interface and utilise their large-scale power to create change rather than profit, interior design as an industry would be much more sustainable – as more often than not, it is these manufacturers whom interior designers rely on.

3.2 The Future & Generation Z.

In the words of Interface’s founder Ray Anderson, “there was not an industrial company on Earth that is sustainable in the sense of meeting its current needs without, in some measure, depriving future generations of the means of meeting their needs” (Pawlyn, 2011:112).

Focusing on the idea of these ‘future generations’, this quote highlights the pressing nature of the need for environmental change. It is common knowledge throughout society that we have only just over a decade to act on sustainability before irreversible damage is made to the environment (United Nations, 2019), yet it could be these ‘future generations’ that are the driving force towards this change.

Generation Z – or Gen Z – represent a generation within society that want transparency and change. “93% of Gen Z believe brands have an obligation to take a stand on environmental issues. From developing company-wide environmental policies to making smart climate-related investments” (LoDuca, 2020: online). This statistic further highlights the view that Gen Z are the generation to lead the ecological age, whereby natural wealth and inclusivity are the priority over profitable gain. One could argue that the reason for this, is due to being a generation that has developed and grown alongside the rise of the technological age, whereby the most part of innovation and capitalist methods, such

as built-in obsolescence and standardisation arose.

Arguably, this implies that collectively Gen Z are more aware of the techniques and bad habits within a capitalist society as they have most often been at the forefront of such consumption. Therefore, they are most likely more inclined to challenge the system that is fuelling their own future, as it is those whom it will affect.

Inevitably, if designers and businesses are not to evidence their shift towards ethical design in the forthcoming years, it could be viewed that society will begin to discredit such companies as they do not exhibit any moral understanding regarding the future.

Conclusion.

“Global waste will increase by 70% on current levels by 2050, and is expected to jump 3.4 billion tonnes over the next thirty years...” (Country and Town House, 2020: online).

As signified by this statement, it is clear to conclude that capitalism has, in some way, shaped the interior design industry into one that is highly disposable due to the need to continually fuel a consumerist market that is in high demand. Although this statistic accounts for waste as a whole, when we consider the different sectors of where landfill arises, more often than not these items, materials or products will stem from some form of interior space that have reached the end of their life cycle of popularity or significance, thus been sent to waste.

Alongside the impact of generation Z, interior design must start to progress collectively towards a closed loop approach in order to sustain the new direction of society and the future environment. What was once a revolution focused around profits and the evolution of trends, is now a revolution whereby the main trends are a circular economy and resource efficiency. It is evident that there are interior designers who are approaching the life cycle of interior design in a more

sustainable way, consequently paving the way towards ‘the great turning’ – however, we pose the question as to whether the hierarchies of capitalism that still remain within society will exploit such methods in the same way they did the industrial, consequently rising to a new kind of rigid instability.

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