A New Kind of War

A comparative analysis of the sustainability of the wartime agenda of the 1940s and the contemporary war on climate change.

Figure 1 - Photographs by Proprofs.com & Hermes Riveria on Unsplash, Image created by Clara McGinnes

Clara McGinnes

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Supervised by Harriet McKay

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Contents

Introduction

The ideas discussed in this dissertation are inspired by a whirlwind of discoveries stemming from my studio project to redesign Stockwell Bus Garage. Built in the Borough of Lambeth in 1952, the building is a prime example of post-war brutalist architecture that embodies a pivotal moment in British history surrounding the change from socialist policy to capitalist endeavours. As the building is a key site for the transportation industry, research was conducted into London Transport and its evolution. A prominent aspect of London Transport's history is the advertising used in the 1930s to encourage the use of the Underground. Specifically, the advertising posters appeared uniquely familiar because of the similar print-work style used in the propaganda campaign posters of World War II. While conducting research into the wartime advertising campaigns, a trend of sustainability began to emerge, and my intrigue began to peak.

Most significantly I highlighted a connection between the year 1952, when the Bus Garage was built, and the beginnings of a new post-war world following the re-election of the Conservative government the previous year. Turning away from the austerity and social-minded programming of Clement Atlee's Labour government (1945-1951), a new era of privileging consumerism began - particularly upon the cessation of rationing in 1952. The ideals of the sustainable programmes around war-time initiatives, such as the Utility Scheme and the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign (discussed further below), were jettisoned in favour of a period of 'fast' production and excessive consumption trends that are problematic nowadays.

Climate change is one of the largest threats faced by the planet today. The effects of climate change are broad, but the most prominent consequences are 'intense droughts, water scarcity, severe fires, rising sea levels, flooding, melting polar ice, catastrophic storms and declining biodiversity' (United Nations , n.d.) which will continue to have a lasting impact on lives across the world. With members of the UN arguing that 'we are the last generation that can prevent irreparable damage to our planet' (United Nations, 2019) it is vital that changes are made. One of the largest contributors to the destruction of the planet is the furniture industry which accounts for approximately 12% of CO_2 emissions (PEFC, 2022). Over the decades the furniture industry has grown exponentially, continually aiming to keep up with fashion trends and encouraging consumers to buy more frequently. It has reached the point where 12 million tons of furniture are thrown out each year (EPA , 2018). With the furniture industry causing such destruction to the environment, parallels can be drawn between the World War and the ever-more important war on climate change. This dissertation will discuss the change in perspectives towards furniture consumption, sustainability across generations and potential solutions to the threats posed by the furniture industry in light of the strategies of conservation used during the war.

The dissertation will consist of a literary review, sourcing information from journal articles, consumer reports, case studies and relevant websites to provide a well-rounded analysis into the topics discussed throughout each chapter. Chapter One will highlight a series of approaches that were enforced by the British Government to lessen the strain on resources caused by World War II, discussing their strengths, weaknesses and potential applications in the modern world. Chapter Two will highlight the change in consumerist ideals amongst the British public in the post-war period, particularly focusing on the influences that led to these changes and the effects they are having today. Chapter Three will discuss a further shift in ideals demonstrated by the current youngest generation of users, and practical approaches to facilitate the war on climate change. Chapter Four will describe my approach to the issues at hand, with direct reference to my studio project and the redesign of Stockwell Bus Garage. By researching furniture approaches during the war, opinions about furniture sustainability through the decades and their impact on today's furniture industry, I aim to gain useful insight that can be used in my current project and throughout my practice as a designer.

Chapter One: The Wartime Situation and its Unintentionally Sustainable Schemes

This chapter will highlight campaigns and strategies used throughout the wartime period that were in their own way sustainable. Examining the practices, their successes and consequences may allow insight into methods for developing new sustainable practices in the modern world. Particularly focusing on wartime propaganda schemes and the Utility Scheme, the discussion aims to draw inspiration and parallels between the needs of a wartime nation and one in a battle with climate change.

During The Second World War, the government used a series of approaches to encourage individuals to 'play their part'. It utilised a selection of propaganda, including 'posters, leaflets, film and radio broadcasts to get their message over to the public' (NationalArchives, n.d.). The country was in a state of fear and insecurity from the ever-expanding war. The schemes gave the public a sense of purpose through practical contributions to the war effort and instilled an understanding of shared responsibility. Posters were used, not only to raise morale through their colourful imagery but also to enforce a set of ideals and values on the British public.

Figure 2- Wartime Propaganda Posters, (IWM, n.d.)

The messages issued by the government came from a place of necessity. Food imports and production were limited during wartime due to the lack of safety for shipments, the unpredictability of delivery and the resources required by the troops. These circumstances, for example, led to the 'Grow Your Own' and 'Dig For Victory' campaigns which grew to be two of the strongest wartime propaganda campaigns with over 50% of British citizens actively partaking in the schemes (Smith, 2013). Textiles and fabrics were required for uniforms and weapons, creating the need to 'make do and mend'. Equally, fuel was limited and required for machinery facilitating the 'Is your journey really necessary?' campaign, discouraging individuals from travelling without good reason.

Each of these approaches were a direct response to wartime expediency and, of course, were not intended to battle climate change, which had not yet become an active concern. They were, however, sustainable approaches adopted long before the term was coined, approaches that have since been lost and replaced by a culture of the temporary, of throwaway consumption and of 'fast' production. This section seeks to investigate the idea that raising awareness and re-educating the public with the skills required to facilitate these wartime campaigns might be a way for individuals to actively contribute to the war on climate change. With motor transport and shopping facilities being as advanced and favourable as they are in the 21st Century, convincing the public to sacrifice convenience for the sake of the planet may be easier said than done. Nonetheless, placing more power and personal responsibility on individuals, in the same way the wartime campaigns did, could encourage people to make more conscious decisions in their everyday lives.

The Utility Scheme was Introduced by the Board of Trade in 1942 as a response to the 'commodity shortages that emerged from the immediate collapse of imports as well as the diversion of wood and metal from domestic to wartime production' (Pinch & Reimer, 2015, p. 86). Initiated to ensure optimal efficiency within the furniture industry, the Scheme outlined a limited selection of standardised designs for 'cloth and clothing, furniture and fabrics, bedding, household textiles, glass, pottery, footwear and hosiery' (Pinch & Reimer, 2015) which would be the only items available to the British public. The Scheme 'sought to manage acute shortages of raw materials such as timber, metal, cotton and rubber as well as to facilitate the equitable distribution and consumption of finished consumer goods' (Pinch & Reimer, 2015, p. 85). Each item was quantified as a number of units, determined by the amount of material used in its production. Buyer permits were given out to households depending on their priority. Newlyweds and those who lost their homes to the bombs were granted 60-unit permits to furnish their homes; this would equate to a dining table with four chairs, a bed, a wardrobe and a dressing table (Rental, 2022). Around 700 furniture manufacturers were utilised and given a set of strict guidelines to work upon. Spread among 38 'production zones' (Board of Trade, 1943) each manufacturer was only permitted to provide furniture to households within a 15-mile radius (Pinch & Reimer, 2015). This allowed the government to limit the amount of fuel consumption in the transportation process. By enforcing this strict regime, the government was able to control each step of furniture production, from material source, design style and manufacturing techniques to distribution.
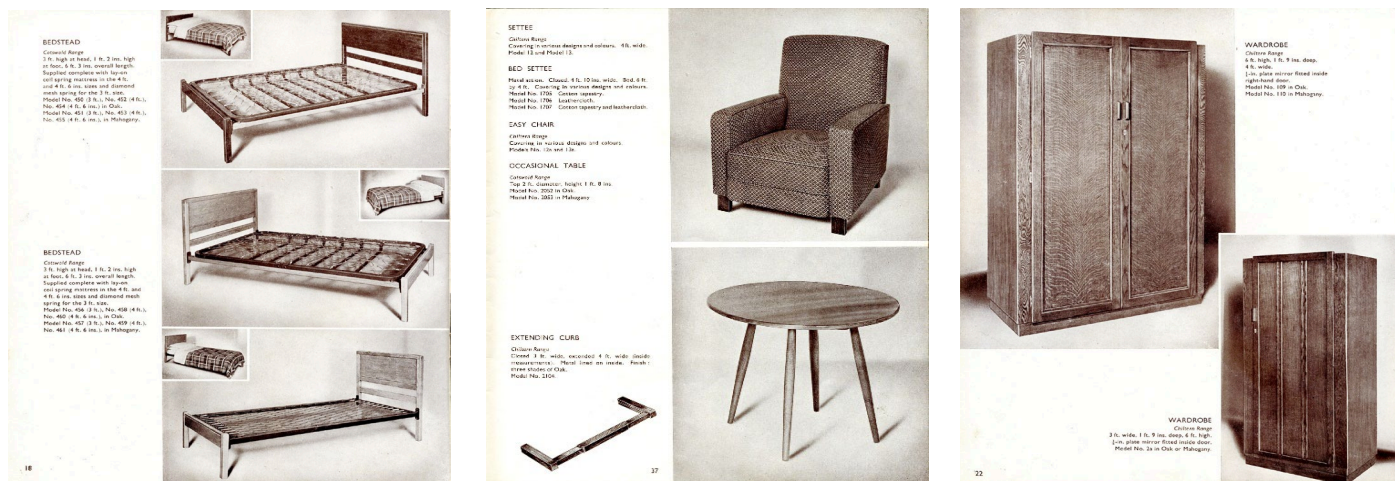

Figure 3 – 'Utility' Catalogue Pages, (BIFMO, 2020)

Although it seems to me that the British public would likely be in uproar if these limitations were enforced today, the Scheme produced a variety of positive and unintentionally sustainable outcomes. The strict regulation of production and smaller variety of items ensured 'that furniture was built in a resource-efficient manner' (Pinch & Reimer, 2015, p. 90). In addition to minimising resource requirements, the Scheme also effectively facilitated the concept of 'buy local'. By restricting buyers and manufacturers geographically the government sought to effectively 'limit the lengthy road transport of bulky goods for retail distribution' (Pinch & Reimer, 2015, p. 90) therefore minimising the demand for petrol and other fossil fuels. The concept of buying goods only close to home has diminished in recent years, with delivery services evolving exponentially. The transportation sector now accounts for 20% of the world's emissions and 11% of these come from the shipping industry (SINAY, 2023). Over 63% of EU consumers were found to use online delivery in 2019 (European Commission , 2020) and for clear reason. Consumers have access to a vast selection of items, with the option of immediate delivery at low cost, but with minimal education on the environmental Impact of these deliveries. Pure convenience alone makes it understandable why consumers opt for these services over limited local suppliers. Although the idea might be considered idealistic in the modern world, if a stronger infrastructure were in place for local manufacturers to supply high-quality, desirable pieces, as in the 'Utility' Scheme, statistics mentioned above might shift in the direction of sustainability.

Despite its advantages, the 'Utility' Scheme did fall short in a few areas. The unavailability of pre-war timber sources increased the use of new sources and led to significant deforestation in those areas (Tucker, 2004). The integration of the Scheme required increased resources from British colonies and 'contributed to an increase in the exploitation of tropical hardwoods' (Pinch & Reimer, 2015, p. 91) which continued into the postwar period (Whiteley N. , 2006). This may, however, be a product of the war-time period, more so than the 'Utility' Scheme itself. Additionally, most of the pieces outlined in the Scheme were crafted from low-level plywood and finished with extremely thin veneer. The furniture was structurally reliable but was limited in its aesthetic durability. This, along with the Scheme's prescriptive nature, may have influenced its decline once the Scheme ended in 1952.

Chapter Two: Design Evolution

This chapter aims to highlight the change in perspectives and consumption patterns in the post-war period. A significant change emerged from the early 1950s that has had a significant impact on the furniture industry today. Understanding the reasons behind these patterns of behaviour may allow deeper insight into strategies for preventing their recurrence and promoting a more sustainable approach today. The chapter will focus on the initial history following the war, the changes in public opinion and youth culture, and how this led to the rise in the production and consumption of fast furniture.

Utility rationing continued after the war for a short period while materials were still scarce. In 1948 the regulations were relaxed until the Scheme drew to a close in 1952. During this intermediate period, 'the British furniture industry was poorly equipped to supply the increasing demand at the time' (Davies, 1997, p. 42). The British consumer market was beginning to grow but the number of furniture manufacturers had reduced to around 10% of the pre-war companies. The manufacturers who did have the infrastructure and workforce were faced with limited raw materials and restrictions imposed by the government. For the majority of the industry, these difficulties continued until the mid-1960s (Davies, 1997) which allowed the opportunity for Scandinavian manufacturers to expand into the British market.

Scandinavian furniture had begun to creep into the high-end furniture market in the 1930s but was quickly halted following wartime restrictions. The ideals expressed by Scandinavian design, however, had already begun to work their way into the minds of the British public and, more influentially, the British government. Leading design proponents such as Gordon Russell and Ernest Race, who were members of government organisations that designed Utility furniture, worked under the principle of 'good design' (Gordon Russell Design Museum , n.d.). 'Good design' is a functionalist movement that emphasised the use of an object over its aesthetic qualities, believing that for an object to be of appropriate quality its form must follow its function. The essential principles involve designs with clean lines, clear function and minimal ornamentation. These principles were prescribed to the British public, both during the war in the form of Utility design, and post-war through government-sponsored events such as the 'Festival of Britain' and the 'Britain Can Make it Exhibition'. Here examples of what is held to be good design were highlighted and idealised to the public to promote a 'specifically British view of the future' (Davies, 1997, p. 45). Some examples include Ernest Race's DA1 armchair and Robin Days's 658 chairs (see figure 4) which went on to be iconic pieces of British design at the time.

Figure 4 - Chair design at the Festival of Britain, Ernest Race DA1 and Springbok chair, Robin Day 658 armchair

Following the principles of function-focused design these pieces, both native and imported, used relatively good quality material and construction which left them inherently sustainable in their durability and longevity. With this high quality, however, came a higher price point than working-class consumers could afford which inevitably placed the target market in the well-off middle classes. It was discovered that although these designerly products were coveted by the media and design annuals of the time, most of them did not make it into the homes of the average public (Whiteley N. , 1987). Though the furniture, according to Russell and other commentators' advice, was not produced economically enough to become available to the masses, their simple design style influenced the development of more widespread but less sustainable alternatives.

Throughout the 1950s the mindset of the public was beginning to change. Following the years of necessity and austerity the public was now entering a place of affluence and desire (Whiteley N. , 1987). Individual wages were increasing at a rapid pace of around 34% while retail prices grew at only 15% each year (Whiteley N. , 1987, p. 108). The average consumer was now in a position to purchase in a way they had not experienced before and consumption was quickly playing an 'increasingly large part of everyday life' (Sparke, 2020, p. 108). With increased wages the ability to influence one's own social status began to emerge and 'people wanted to better themselves to carve out a niche in the next social group' (Whiteley N. , 1987, p. 108). Design became an important part of this process by allowing an individual to 'communicate to others how you saw your place in the world and position in society' (Whiteley N. , 1987, p. 109). 'By the late 1940s and 1950s, consumption was becoming a key form of self and group identification for people across a broad social spectrum' (Sparke, 2020, p. 107).

Although the influences of the government's design preferences were still trickling in, by the 1960s the rising youth culture predominantly rejected 'many traditional aspects of British culture' (Walters, 2011, p. 159) and the notions expressed by the government. The so-called 'baby boom' following the war increased Britain's young population, particularly fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds, by 20% between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s (Whiteley N. , 1987, p. 111). This allowed their influence over popular culture to have a stronger impact on the changing world. This influence was exploited by advertisers and retail companies who began tailoring their approaches to accommodate the ideals of the young by beginning 'to shift their marketing techniques to more modern practices, in particular, focusing attention on encouraging younger people to spend money' (Walters, 2011, p. 173).

The youths of the late 1950s and 1960s were striving for a sense of individuality that had not been possible in the pre-war period. The younger generation found that 'self-identification came to be formed through consumption and participation in the fashion cycle' (Sparke, 2020, p. 110) as presented to them by the media. Across fashion and furniture retail, the desire for affordable, low-quality items was rooting its place in the minds of the public. Fashionable brands like Biba, an affordable and desirable clothing producer, promoted a philosophy of 'knock down, throw away and buy another' (Bernard, 1978, p. 15). With the constant advertising, promotion and social pressure to keep up with new trends, national consumer spending rose by 115% over the decade (Quinn, 2014).

One key influence in the changing youth market was Terance Conran who founded Habitat in 1964. Although Habitat's original products were made of quality materials with sound design, the company introduced an ease of fashionable consumer purchase in a way that had not been experienced before and this heavily influenced the development of disposable flat-packed design that Is sold today. Much of Habitat's furniture was sold in 'knockdown form' (flat-packed) for its lowered manufacturing costs, increased storage capabilities and convenience of delivery. It is argued that Habitat 'exploited the aspirations of young, upwardly mobile buyers for moderately cheap, reasonably fashionable furniture and design displayed in a lively and 'young' manner' (Whiteley N. , 1987). Here I do not wish to argue that Habitat was providing the nation with low-quality goods, but to highlight the way in which their items were used by the public. With low price points & easy access, their items encouraged the trend of disposable purchasing by allowed the option for the public to buy and replace quickly.

Figure 5 - Habitat Advertisement from 1963 displaying the desirable 'New Look Kitchen'. The Advertising Archives

This notion was continued across the British market with designers such as Bernard Holdaway, a furniture designer featured at The Ideal Home Show in 1966, proudly claiming his aim to create 'exciting design at the lowest possible price' and arguing that 'the whole concept of people buying things to last a lifetime is ended' (Drew Pritchard, n.d.). With designers and the media portraying the ideals of the throwaway society the consumer market quickly became dominated by these low-cost, disposable goods.

Since the 1960s this ideal of low-cost, disposable design has evolved into what would now be known as fast furniture. IKEA, a Swedish company known globally for its affordable, easily accessible furniture and homeware products, entered the scene in 1978 and has since provided the nation with low-cost, low-quality items that fit the fashionable aesthetics of the consumer public. In 1992 Habitat was purchased by IKEA further facilitating its integration into the British furniture market and paving the way for a range of companies with similar mass-market business models. With the desire for fast furniture cemented within British culture, the rate of new design and production has risen, thus increasing the turnover for new fashion trends and accelerating the rate at which new pieces are being purchased and old pieces are discarded. This process has continued to grow, particularly over the last 10 years, due to an increase in next-day delivery services and online retailers offering increased ease of purchase. With such an easy and cost-effective way of buying, these items hold little to no sentiment or inherent worth to the consumer, further facilitating the guiltless disregard for disposing of an item when it is no longer wanted.

Designed to be created as fast as possible at the lowest possible cost the majority of these designs follow less-than-ideal material procurement processes. Although the dimensions of flatpack furniture make it more efficient to transport, which reduces fuel emissions, much of the furniture manufacture is outsourced to different countries therefore counteracting these lowered emissions. In addition, how 'knockdown furniture' (flat-packed) is produced typically lends itself to less sustainable practices. The majority of flat-packed furniture is constructed of low-quality MDF (medium-density fibreboard) which, when made using formaldehyde-based glue, can be toxic to humans and only has an average life span of 4-6 years compared with solid wood which can last upward of a century with sufficient upkeep. The way in which MDF is manufactured from glued wood fibres makes it difficult to recycle or repair, resulting in an estimated 22 million pieces of small furniture being thrown away because of cosmetic damage in 2018 in the UK alone (Sharps, 2023). Much of the wood used comes from illegal logging which has been shown to increase the risk of deforestation and reduce biodiversity by destroying habitats for local wildlife (WWF, 2024).

The amount of furniture thrown out has increased by 10 million tons per year since 1960 and 80% of the waste ends up in landfill (EPA , 2018). It is clear that a change needs to be made by furniture manufacturers, but perhaps more importantly by the individuals who are consuming the products and therefore facilitating this continued increase in low-quality product production.

Chapter Three: The Return of 'Made to Last'

This chapter aims to highlight the change in perspectives among modern-day youths in a shift towards sustainability and ecological consumer patterns. The chapter will discuss current trends and opinions while offering potential solutions to the ecological harm caused by the furniture industry.

Since the growth of consumerism in the 1960s, the values of young people have retained their importance in the evolution of design and manufacturing decisions. However, with the effects of climate change having a stronger impact on the lives of 12-17 year olds in the 21st century, their ideals and philosophy have begun to shift in the direction of a more sustainable future. This chapter will highlight the importance of the change in youth opinion and the value that can be added by youth participation in the war on climate change, as well as existing approaches beginning to emerge, both small and large scale.

Recognition of global climate change increased in 1968 when 'environmental issues received serious attention by major UN organs' (Jackson, n.d.). Over the next twenty years environmental issues gradually gained traction internationally. A variety of schemes were put in place but, due to their low-impact strategies, had a minor influence on sustainability. It was not until 1988 that climate change was highlighted as an urgent issue, which led to more significant changes in policy. In 1992 'education, public awareness, and training were collectively recognised as crucial means of implementing sustainable development' (York University, n.d.). Government organisations have since implemented various strategies to raise awareness of the importance of education on climate change. This awareness has spread internationally and led to 'The National Curriculum making direct reference to climate change in science and geography at Key Stage 3' (Paul Howard-Jones, n.d.).

From a young age, youth are influenced by teachings on the importance of sustainable development; they understand that they will be most affected by the effects of climate change throughout their lives (Janet Currie, 2016). With an increase in knowledge about the importance of climate change, a more eco-conscious generation has begun to form. Although research is in its early stages, studies are beginning to be conducted into the perceived importance for Generations Z (aged 12-27) and Y (aged 28-43) of climate change, to determine their understanding and actions in response to the issues faced. In a study examining Generation Z students in an Australian university, Rodrigo, Bardales and Salguero (2024) found that 'climate change stands out as the top apprehension among members of Gen Z' (p.7). Mintel (2020)
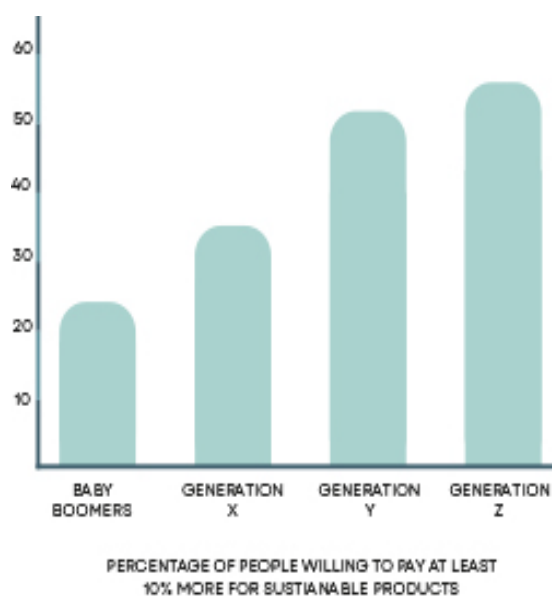

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WILLING TO PAY AT LEAST
10% MORE FOR SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS

Figure 6- Bar chart based on the research conducted by (NIQ, 2024)

found that 71% of Generation Z customers highlight the importance of sustainability when considering purchases and NIQ (2024) found that 54% of Generation Z and 50% of Generation Y are willing to pay 10% more for sustainable products, compared with just 27% of baby boomers (aged 60-78).

The influences of youth opinion on the cultivation of sustainable practices have also been noted by global governing bodies such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and UN DESA (United Nations Department of Social Affairs). With Generation Z and Y together accounting for 52% of the global population in 2021 (World Economic Forum , 2021), it is understood that their values and voices will have a significant impact on the planet as they continue to grow into adults and working professionals. A variety of researchers have found similar trends, arguing that 'youth have been at the forefront of efforts to demand urgent action of sustainable peace and addressing climate change' (Roesch, 2021, p. 2) and that 'young people are the core of our present and the key to determining if there will be a future' (Mouchrek, 2018, p. 90). In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UN DESA highlighted 'the critical role young people have in the implementation of sustainable development efforts at all levels' (United Nations, 2015). In 2022 UN DESA appointed a series of young leaders to aid with critical thinking, making change, innovation, communication and leading the charge for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). Spread across a variety of sectors, such as product design, media creation and scientific research, these young leaders will continue to strive for positive change.

Youths are a key demographic for brands market-wide and pressures from these young consumers are beginning to influence brands to follow more sustainable practices. Research shows that 'companies are known to benefit from including environmental responsibility as a core element of their business strategy' (Wilson, 2016, p. 2). One of the largest brands to adapt their practices in the direction of sustainability is IKEA, which was mentioned earlier in the dissertation for its influence in the creation of fast furniture. In 2012 IKEA introduced their first sustainability strategy, 'People and Planet Positive'. The strategy aims to help customers reduce energy and water usage, to use more renewable energy sources and to improve the lives and working conditions of those in their supply chain (IKEA, 2012). Since then, IKEA has increased their renewable sourcing to 55.8%, recycled materials usage to 17.3% and 51% of their deliveries now produce zero emissions (IKEA, 2024). In 2021 IKEA announced their second sustainability strategy with impressive aspirations of becoming carbon positive (meaning they will remove more CO_2 from the atmosphere than they produce) and ensuring 100% of their deliveries are zero-emission. Based on their success in recent years it would be unsurprising if they reach their goals of becoming a sustainably-based manufacturer.

On the surface, it would appear to an average consumer that purchasing products from companies with sustainability strategies in place is a harm-free option. Although sourcing from brands with an eco-conscious approach is more positive than brands without a sustainability strategy, these sustainable practices do not actually tackle the largest issues faced by the furniture market which are overproduction and overconsumption. Even if the products are now being created with natural resources, the sheer scale of the industry still leaves IKEA consuming 530 million cubic feet of wood per year (Roeder, 2016) and has little impact on the number of products that are being disposed of before their lifetime is complete. It may be argued in this case that greater education is required on the importance of buying for quality and durability over fashion trends and advertising. These concepts have been highlighted by governing bodies such as UNESCO who stated that 'lifestyle changes will need to be accompanied by a new ethical awareness' (UNESCO, 1997) and the EU who are 'currently exploring options into product lifetime labelling' (Tim Cooper, 2021, p. 3). Fortunately, it appears that a shift in consumer approach is taking place, with a survey conducted by THREDUP (2022) finding that 51% of college students say they would like to 'quit fast fashion products' in the coming year.

Figure 7 - Image representing the scale of deforestation caused by the furniture industry (Hussain, 2022).

Much research into the purchase of consumer behaviours suggests that 'young consumers are more likely to be motivated by economic than environmental reasons' (Tim Cooper, 2021). Ideally, they would like to make purchasing choices based on environmental concerns, but the cost of sustainable purchases can often deter them from making the eco-conscious choice. A study conducted by Kearney (2020) found that 'the prices of sustainable products are higher by 75-80% on average' than unsustainable products on the new purchase market. This is understandable given that the price of quality raw materials is typically significantly higher than that of the low-quality materials used in fast furniture products. Given that the regulation of furniture pricing from governmental bodies is currently unrealistic, purchasing second-hand items can be an effective way for the consumer to access high-quality, sustainable pieces at a reduced cost.

Second-hand products are advantageous to the furniture market because they do not rely on consumers not consuming. This re-use of products is beneficial because no new resources are required for a product's purchase and furniture waste is reduced by prolonging the lifespan of the product (Schibsted, 2021). As well as traditional thrift shops, a range of online second-hand shopping platforms has emerged in recent years, such as Facebook Marketplace, Olio and Freecycle, that are growing in popularity. The concept of resale has been encouraged by seasoned designers such as Tom Dixon who started the '2nd Cycle project' which involved 'buying back old stools and chairs from schools, libraries and individuals to be resold to new owners' and finding that 'the more patina they have, the dirtier they look, the more people seem to love them' (Rawsthorn, 2007). Although today's youths still follow fashion cycles, current trends mostly focus on uniqueness and individuality which is easier to obtain through second-hand products than commercial replicas found in the new purchase market. These trends have been noted in reports and sales statistics with findings indicating that 60% of online shoppers have purchased a second-hand item in the past year (Koutsou-Wehling, 2024). Emma Gullstrand Edbring (2016) found that '63% of respondents were very favourable towards buying tables and chairs second-hand'. UK charity shop sales rising 147% from 2022 to 2023 (Co-operative Bank, 2023). In addition to traditional thrifting methods, a variety of furniture retailers, such as IKEA, Toast and MAIE have begun to offer buy-back and second-hand purchasing schemes to encourage a circular purchasing pattern.

Another practice that is growing in popularity is the purchase of upcycled items. Upcycling is the process of taking an otherwise unused item and refinishing or repurposing it for further use. This differs from the process of recycling waste materials which requires the 'destruction of waste in order to create something new'. In contrast, 'upcycling takes waste and creates something new from it in its current state' (Diversitech, 2022). Upcycling has increased in popularity through social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where creators are sharing their upcycling processes. Missoma (2023) found that around a quarter of people in the UK have upcycled (or purchased upcycled) furniture in the last year, and PCIAW (2022) found that 59% of Generation Z and 57% of Generation Y are buying upcycled products. Due to its reliance on reused furniture, upcycling is usually done by individuals to create a piece that fits their particular needs and tastes, or it is done by independent companies. For this reason, upcycling is not suitable for mass-market production. The technique does however provide the consumer with sustainably produced one-of-a-kind pieces made of higher-quality materials than their mass-produced counterparts. The inability for the products to be mass-produced, however, has not deterred a handful of eco-conscious designers from creating timeless designs through upcycled means. For example, Lucas Muñoz (figure 7) designed an entire restaurant interior with upcycled products (Aouf, 2021).
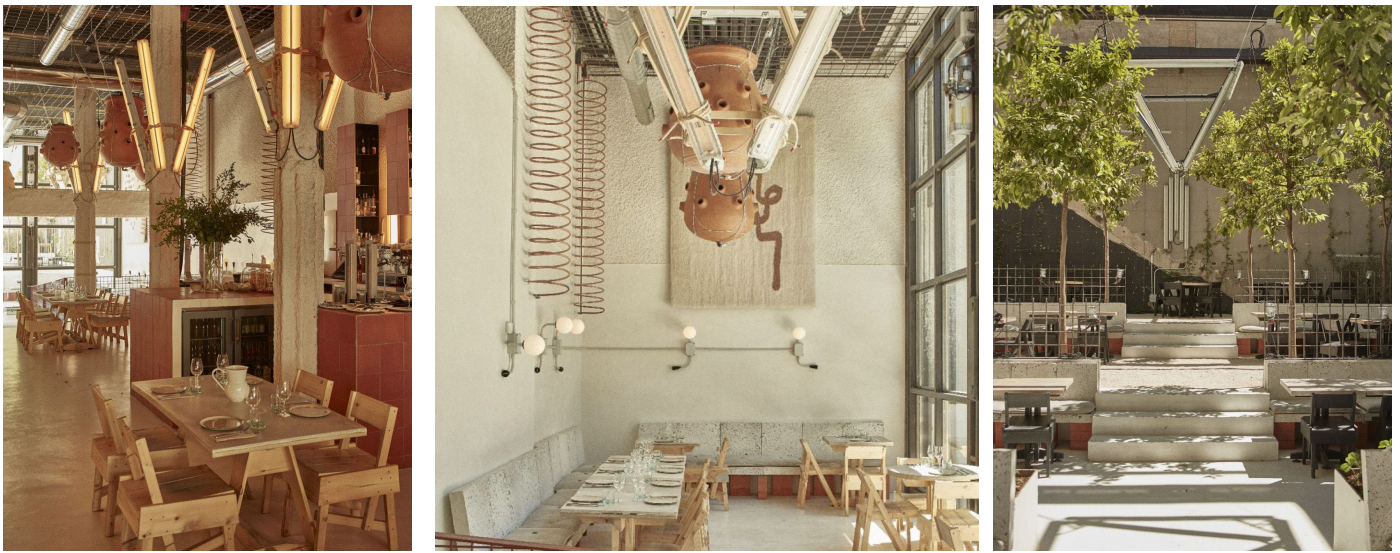
Figure 8- Lucas Muñoz design for Mo de Movimiento restaurant interior using only upcycled products and waste materials.

There is still a long way to go before the furniture industry becomes truly sustainable. However, although the furniture industry continues to place pressures on the planet's resources, it does appear that consumer patterns and increased awareness into the dangers of climate change are beginning to alter the way that furniture products are made and used. Individual purchasers can make choices that have an impact, for example buying second-hand where possible, sourcing items from reputable companies, ignoring fashion trends in favour of timeless pieces and checking the materials and chemicals that have been used in the creation of a product. More sustainable options may seem impractical for some individuals due to the high price point and lack of convenience. However, buying more sustainable furniture is likely to be more cost-effective long term than buying short-lived fast furniture products.

Chapter Four: My Proposal

As mentioned in the introduction, the inspiration for this dissertation stems from my portfolio project to redesign Stockwell Bus Garage with a community-centred approach. This chapter will explore my proposal for a community-scale project designed as a response to some of the sustainability issues faced by the world today. We will particularly focus on the project programme, as opposed to the interior design of the building, as this is most relevant to the dissertation.

At the time that the bus garage was built, the nation was in a state of transition following the recent decline of the Labour government and their somewhat socialist policies. With the rise of the Conservative government, restrictive policies like rationing were removed and the country entered a period of capitalist consumerism. Since this time, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, the increase in consumerist ideals and overproduction have expanded to a point of almost irreparable damage. My project aims to create a community within the bus garage who are driven by ideals similar to those which prevailed during the wartime period. To create a new generation of users who thrive on sustainability and community, drawing inspiration from the practices used during the wartime period.

The project, named 'Regrow Together', will feature a series of workshop programmes for the young people, aged 12-34, of Stockwell Ward and the larger Lambeth Borough. Much like global populations, Lambeth has a youth-heavy population with 53% of its residents below the age of 34 (Office for National Statistics, 2021). With limited resources for vocational learning in the area, there is a need for programmes that teach meaningful skills and allow the young residents' creativity to thrive. While empowering young people with new skills, the project hopes to forge lasting connections between community members. The workshops are influenced by the unintentionally sustainable campaigns run throughout the war and aim to create useful sustainable products for the wider community. Three main workshops will be run as part of the programme, 'Upcycle Your Life' (loosely inspired by the principles of the Utility Scheme), 'Grow Together' (inspired by the 'Grow Your Own campaign') and 'Sew and Share' (inspired by the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign).

Figure 9- Visual representations of the workshop programmes - Created by Clara McGinnes

The basis of inspiration from the wartime initiatives comes from a variety of avenues. The first and most obvious link stems from the need for sustainable practices in the modern world. By selecting the most effective and ecological aspects of wartime practice we are able to design a scheme with sustainability at its core. The key elements that will be directly brought forward are the recycling and reuse of disused materials as expressed in the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign, the growth of local produce as facilitated by the 'Grow Your Own' or 'Dig for Victory' campaigns and the practice of local purchase to reduce transportation emissions which was a key element of the Utility Scheme.

Aside from their sustainable attributes, the wartime initiatives offer social benefits as discussed in Chapter One. One key advantage of the propaganda campaigns was their ability to place responsibility onto individual members of the public by allowing them to feel actively involved in the war effort. A similar approach will be drawn by initiating accessible schemes for the residents of Lambeth Borough. By providing them with a realistic and accessible means to participate in the war against climate change they may feel more personally involved with the battle and therefore further adapt their practices to benefit the planet. In a study conducted by Oates (2006, P.157) it was found that 'respondents are concerned about the environment, they are unlikely to be proactive unless they have the belief that individuals can be effective'. It was also found that individuals are most likely to participate in sustainable activities that they perceive to create the largest difference with the lowest effort (Oates, 2006, p. 168). To ensure that the residents are active participants in the programme it will be important to provide ease of use throughout the programme and design of the building. To this end, the site will be particularly designed to facilitate a range of uses that appeal to the desired demographic and to create a dynamic space for them to take advantage of. The site should be a centre for Stockwell's youth to enjoy and relax from the pressures of their lives; to accommodate, this the site will offer a selection of activities such as study spaces and recreational areas (see figure 10). By ensuring that the workshops aid in the cultivation of lasting friendships and creativity, it is hoped that the programme's innate ecological basis will be perceived as positive.
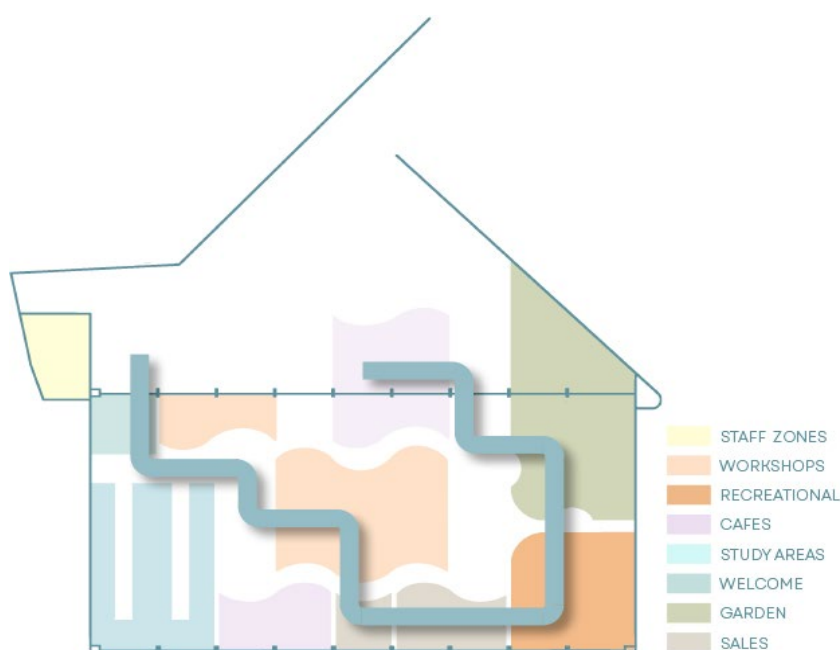

STAFF ZONES
WORKSHOPS
RECREATIONAL
CAFES
STUDY AREAS
WELCOME
GARDEN
SALES

Figure 10 - Proposed Plan of Stockwell Bus Garage to highlight the activities avalible to the young users.

The two mending workshops, 'Upcycle your Life' and 'Sew and Share', will follow the same procedures. The 'Upcycle your Life' workshop will teach users practical skills centred around the restoration and upcycling of unused furniture items and the 'Sew and Share' workshop will teach upcycling and regeneration of unwanted textile items. The products created in both workshops will be available for purchase and rent by the local community. By providing high-quality, sustainable, affordable items to the residents of the borough, it is hoped that they will feel less inclined to turn to fast furniture/fashion outlets for their buying needs. If successful, this would reduce the number of new products being purchased unnecessarily, therefore reducing the CO_2 emissions required to create and transport those items while extending the lifespan of disused products.

Furniture rental has been around for generations but has become increasingly popular in the last 10 years for its convenience and lower upfront costs (Patel, 2020). With more and more people moving to new locations regularly, renting furniture provides a simple solution for individuals who would otherwise have to sell and repurchase or transport their owned goods across the country. Rental services are also a great option for individuals who enjoy changing their surroundings regularly without the high prices and ecological effects. Emma Gulstrand Edbring (2016, p.10) found that '62% of respondents would consider renting home furnishings for a short time' and '38% of the survey respondents were positive to subscribing to a service that would change home Décor on a seasonal basis'. The nature of the up-cycling workshops would easily facilitate rental and subscription schemes, as any items returned damaged or in need of updating would be redesigned before being placed back on sale.

The 'Grow Together' workshop is somewhat less relevant to this dissertation but still promotes a sustainable structure. The workshop will teach locals how to grow their own produce while educating on the importance of using locally sourced food. The programme aims to educate the users with the skills required to provide for themselves therefore lessening the desire to purchase produce from unsustainable brands. The plants grown within the space will be of native origin wherever possible to increase biodiversity and species enrichment in the local ecosystem. By offering a variety of sustainable workshops the project is more likely to appeal to a larger selection of the local community and therefore increase the likelihood of the programme's success.

Each stage of the programme will follow the principles of Circular Economy. The Circular Economy is a model of design and consumption 'where materials never become waste and nature is regenerated' through a continual process of recycling and reuse (Ellen Macarthur Foundation, n.d.). In the 'Upcycle Your Life' scheme, for example, the unused furniture items will be donated for redesign and upcycling, purchased or rented by its new user then returned to the center for further upcycling or on-selling when it is no longer required. A similar process will be followed with the users of the center in that they will first learn new skills, then practice and make products using those skills and (if they would like to) go on to teach their skills to the next generation of users (see figure 10).

Figure 11- Visual representations of the circular programme - Created by Clara McGinnes

This approach aims to ensure that both the products created in the space and the programme itself, create a lasting impact and are not disregarded before their viable lifetime is complete. With '80% of a product's environmental impacts determined during the design phase' (Commission, 2020) relying on a model that minimises the resources required for this portion of a product's sale should increase the overall sustainability of the project.

In all the project aims to provide quality sustainable items to the residents of the borough while allowing them a creative outlet and education on the importance of sustainable practices. The hope is to set a precedent for other communities to follow similar initiatives within their local area. In an ideal world, if each British borough were able to provide its residents with affordable, sustainable purchase solutions, then the need and desire for fast fashion and furniture outlets would be significantly reduced. Furthermore, continued education on all things sustainable might encourage the residents to make more eco-conscious purchasing decisions.

The Conclusion: Final Thoughts

This dissertation has discussed a range of topics relating to sustainability surrounding the furniture industry, from economic practices during the wartime period and the nation's evolution into modern-day approaches. Chapter One discussed a range of approaches used throughout the war, finding that although their efforts were not intended to be environmentally sustainable, their basis promoted many of the same principles that would aid the current world in the battle against climate change. Chapter Two explored the development of fast furniture and the change in consumerist values held by the British public. Chapter Three highlighted the growing concern for climate change in the 21st century, the importance of youth participation in the fight against climate change, and existing practices, such as second-hand purchase and upcycling practices, that may be used to lessen the effects of the furniture industry on the planet's resources. Chapter Four described my proposed approach to elicit generational change in a London borough by drawing direct inspiration from the sustainable practices used throughout the war.

It appears that there is a lot to learn from historic practices, discussed throughout this dissertation, to minimise waste and use materials efficiently for their entire lifetime. Indeed, as has been suggested, we have much to learn from the thinking behind the programmes highlighted in this dissertation that were so important in the period up to the building of the Stockwell Bus Garage in 1952. It is important, however, to ensure that we effectively learn from our history so that damage, such as that caused by consumerist culture, does not repeat itself. Based on current statistics, discussed earlier in the dissertation, it is evident that further intervention I needed to improve the state of the furniture industry and its impacts on the planet. It appears that a large selection of existing furniture companies are looking for innovative, modern solutions to reduce their impact on the planet. Based on the findings however, it may be argued that the effective fight against climate change is not through innovation but through individuals taking responsibility for their actions and making a conscious effort to change the way in which they consume. Even with every intervention imaginable, without a reduction in the use and destruction of valuable resources, damage will continue. As the fundamental cause of climate change, responsibility falls to humans to mend what has been damaged and win the war against unsustainable consumption. Continued promotion and education on the detrimental effects of climate change and the way in which individuals can have a lasting impact may be the most beneficial technique to discourage unsustainable behaviours.

This dissertation has allowed me to gain insight into the evolution of consumer ideals and practices while developing an understanding of the basis of sustainable design. This knowledge will be used throughout my studio project and continued practice as a designer to ensure that I am participating in ecological design and reducing the effects of unsustainable furniture practices. Whilst it was erected in 1952, just at the period that might be characterised as the inception of a consumer society that has nowadays become uncontrollable, Stockwell Bus Garage stands as a reminder of a more equitable, socially minded period in British history. I want

my ideas for its development to stand as testimony to the very relevant values of wartime and immediate post-war production for today and point the way to winning this new kind of war in the fight against the global climate crisis.

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