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## Designing for Revaluing: From Grave to Cradle

### **Abstract**

*In this article I propose 'designing for revaluing' as a design research and practice framework. Designing for revaluing offers a way to address design responsibilities and explore the potential of intervening at the end of cycle of things, by challenging disposability and obsolescence and by interrogating the unsustainable consequences of the continual celebration of 'innovation' and 'brand new' design. I draw on a practice-based design research done from 2014-2018 at an op-shop (charity shop) in Melbourne (Australia), which was framed by a theoretical and practical approach combining Design Anthropology, Participatory Design and Everyday Design. In this second-hand context, I developed everyday practices of designing with volunteers oriented to revaluing things at positions of devaluation - beyond use and beyond design studios - for re-commercialization and reuse. Designing for revaluing uncovers socio-material values that divert used things from becoming waste, and a series of practices that contribute to circular economies. As a design practice design for revaluing is determined by conceptual principles of contingency, improvisation and ethnographic participation, and led by embedded design methods of open-ended prototyping, and video conversations as interventions. In summary, the paper illustrates how everyday designing for revaluing can position the idea of grave-to-cradle into the context of design for sustainability.*

### **Introduction**

I arrive at the shop on Saturday morning to open for business. At the gate I find scattered homewares that have been left after hours (Figure 1), and pack them into boxes (Figure 2) to bring them into the driveway, which is the sorting area of the op-shop. Sorting things out is the beginning of the designing for revaluing process: classifying things by categories to orient them towards further stages of pricing and displaying (Figure 5). At the end of the process, the homewares discarded that Saturday morning, would have gone through a series of everyday design procedures, and would have acquired not just a new value, but renewed functions, meanings and uses.



**Figures 1** – Scattered donations ‘dumped’ after hours. All photos by author.



**Figure 2** – Process of revaluing starting by pre-sorting things by categories.

I worked at this op-shop from 2014-2018 as part of my practice-based design research PhD and had roles of volunteer some days a week, and shop manager on the weekends. During these years I worked receiving donations and revaluing them through sorting, pricing, displaying, and selling them. It was a twofold process: as I learned the criteria for revaluing second-hand things, I brought my design training into the shop routines and the charity

context. The combination of roles and skills transformed my design practice, into a situated, emergent and collaborative approach that I call Everyday Designing for Revaluing (ED4R)<sup>1</sup>. Reframing my design practice, I approached the op-shop as a 'design studio', and op-shop staff and colleagues joined me as research participants. This meant that while we were processing donations for their re-commercialization, I maintained an analytical lens to understand our routines from a Design Anthropology, Participatory Design and Everyday Design perspective; and developed site specific design research methods to record and analyse our practices. In this article, I present two of these methods: video conversations as interventions, and open-ended prototyping. Before presenting the specificities of these practices of designing for revaluing, the next section introduces the broader conceptual framework where my argument situates.

### **Conceptual Framework: Everyday Designing for Revaluing**

To understand routines of revaluation at the op-shop I embedded myself as 'designer-practitioner-researcher'<sup>2</sup>, and attuned to the everyday both as site and as temporality of the unfolding present<sup>3</sup>. Being continually involved in the socio-material interactions of the op-shop led to the development of design interventions that resonated with the design anthropological notions of 'emergence' and 'possibility'<sup>4</sup>. The design interventions emerged and developed while I was processing donations with op-shop staff, these interventions then were possible only after examining their compliance with the charity's policies and upon staffs' agreement. The political and collaborative dimensions of these everyday acts of designing reflected principles of a Participatory Design practice<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, a shift in the understanding of design was central, not only as a domain exclusive to academically trained designers and professional design practitioners, but as a practice open to anyone<sup>6</sup> who actively engages in the transformation of meanings, forms, functions and values of things. To inform this shift Wakkary and Maestri's<sup>7</sup> framework of Everyday Design was instrumental in recognizing acts of appropriation and improvisation as forms of designing. And by zooming into the everyday acts of the op-shop staff, who through intentional and creative interventions transformed the value of used things, I recognized how designing was composed by sequences of artful acts<sup>8,9</sup>. Including, practices of care; creation of classification systems; cleaning, repairing and polishing; and in different ways beautifying things according to personal tastes and standards.

In ED4R, objects, things and matters are mutually constituted but are understood differently. In this article I use the term objects as the 'contained materiality determined by the pragmatic functions that donations can have as instrumental products'<sup>10</sup>. Things, refer to the relationality of these objects with their social spheres, as 'socio-material constructs'<sup>11</sup>. Matters, acknowledges furthermore the influence of both the social and material agencies in

constituting material-meaning entanglements<sup>12</sup>. Then, the materiality of objects, the political angle of Things, and the agency of all matters coming together when processing second-hand donations for their revaluing, provides a sensitivity to acknowledge these as active participants in the practice of ED4R.

As I will explain, this sensitivity supports a form of designing that extends the value and use of second-hand things, fostering practices and spaces for circular economies to flourish. As a design practice ED4R extends the conventional lifecycles that linear design process such as cradle-to-grave impose to objects and provides an alternative approach: grave-to-cradle, which finds existing products as resources. However, in contrast to other circular approaches such as 'cradle-to-cradle'<sup>13</sup>; grave-to-cradle is not oriented to designing 'brand new' products. Instead, it unfolds at liminal sites of use and reuse where forms of 'design-after-design'<sup>14</sup> emerge. The forms of everyday designing that emerge within a grave-to-cradle framework, challenge boundaries of value of obsolete design innovations in devaluing positions to orient these towards revaluing<sup>15</sup>. A shift in use and value that goes beyond the materiality of objects and their potential as resources; the sociality in which these used things become embedded in everyday designing routines and interactions, plays a central role in extending their lifecycles into meaningful futures of revaluation.

Overall, Designing for Revaluing is aimed at transforming things in unwanted positions, and more broadly it is a practice that proposes to transform design matters that are still complicit with unsustainable systems of planned obsolescence, over-production and disposability.

### **Research Context: The op-shop**

My research took place at a *Vinnies Shop* in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. *Vinnies*, is the retail brand of St Vincent de Paul Society, a well-established organization that provides social assistance in Australia since 1854, and runs 650 charity shops in Australia. The research involved 30 volunteers (16 women, 14 men) and was approved by *Vinnies Shop* managers and by the *RMIT Ethics Committee*.

In Australia, charities shops such as *Vinnies* play a key role in consolidating a second-hand economy around reuse, providing an alternative to 'brand new' consumerism<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, charities complement the local infrastructures of waste management. The geographical proximity and the social familiarity of charity shops give these sites a cultural relevance for people to trust their donated belongings, to work and to buy from them. In all, playing a key role in the circulation of things for reuse. As Lane and colleagues point out: '[charities] may currently be more significant than the commercial waste management sector in facilitating

circular economy within Australia<sup>17</sup>. This position of charities within the market has been referred to by Appelgren and Bohlin as a 'middle ground' that reveals ways in which second-hand things are 'managed, valued and desired in and through circulation, and how that circulation creates socially embedded objects that potentially engage people aesthetically, morally, socially, economically and ecologically'<sup>18</sup>. By analysing the ways in which things are processed at the op-shop, it is possible to identify aspects that prevail in revaluation such as: quality of materials, brand preferences, and historical value. It is also possible to witness how things are made meaningful again through acts of designing that transform and renew the value narratives for old and used things. This process involves what Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe call 'practices of divestment'<sup>19</sup> making reference to the role that past lives of things play as they are prepared for reuse.

The following sections introduce the practice-based design methods developed as part of my research at the Vinnies Shop, and present two examples of designing for revaluing interventions: sorting and pricing jewellery with Barbara and displaying homewares with Gina.

### **Design Methods: Video conversations and open-ended prototyping**

Designing for revaluing developed into a 'blended practice'<sup>20</sup>, by combining participatory design and design anthropology overlapping approaches. A key overlapping approach that I drew from was the interventionist character of my practice. While I was learning from the individual practices of staff, sometimes we worked together and other times I focused on my own shop responsibilities. This embedded practice was paired with a sensory ethnography methodology<sup>21</sup> to orient my gaze and inquiries towards the role of senses when revaluing. To record the sensory experiences of the everyday routines of the op-shop I used my mobile phone to take photographs of things, to audio and video record conversations with op-shop colleagues while we were working. I drew from Pink's 'video tours' and 'video walks' ethnographic methods, and incorporated the use of my mobile phone as a tool to record brief instances while talking and working with video to document my practice-based immersion and to build an archive of everyday experiences to come back at later stages of analysis. With this method we could continue working as usual while recording, however, when the camera was on, the attention to our routines was transformed in the sense that we were talking about our actions for the recording. In doing so, we made explicit value criteria and artful acts for revaluing that when we were not recording were not usually spoken about or noticed. So, while recording our activities became a familiar research method, video conversations did have an interventionist effect that helped unpack the granularity and sensoriality of revaluing acts and processes. These video conversations recorded the ongoing-ness of our routines, and the

ways in which practices were flexible to adapt to the contingency of everyday unexpected situations.

Furthermore, in my embedded work as staff and researcher I witnessed, sometimes recorded, and learned myself through practice; to improvise and appropriate uses and values of objects and of daily circumstances to keep the systems of revaluing donations in continual circulation. I came to understand this continual designing as an open-ended prototyping, which builds on notions of prototyping in participatory design as a situated design method 'moving from a project-based approach to long-term open-ended infrastructuring'<sup>22</sup>. In this view, prototyping involves an opening of production in which participants work together in processes of value creation<sup>23</sup>. Open-ended prototyping is a central method in ED4R because it is open to the unexpected diversity of donations in circulation, to the diversity of staff engaged in valuing these things, and it is continually changing as things are sold and shop shelves become renovated. This social and material open-ness fosters a flexibility that enables experimentation and that is unique to second-hand contexts. Which differs with the standardized processes of mainstream retail, and contrasts with other conventional prototyping from design professions that are instead oriented to the refinement of new product development for manufacturing. As a designing for revaluing process, open-ended prototyping is oriented to renewing values of second-hand products for their re-commercialization and reuse. In the following two examples I illustrate how video conversations as interventions and open-ended prototyping constitute an embedded research practice of designing for revaluing.

#### Designing jewellery on the spot

A week after I worked classifying the jewellery donations in the storage and working area, Barbara joined the op-shop as a volunteer dedicated to revaluing jewellery. When sorting and pricing odd pieces of jewellery, Barbara was explaining to me how she had been developing a routine that consisted in going through the piled and pre-sorted boxes of jewellery that she received from her colleagues working at the driveway. She classified objects with similar shape, function and colour to fit into the shop displays and created groups of earrings, necklaces, bracelets. However, when objects were found 'incomplete' opportunities to, as she says be 'inventive with what we've got', emerged. This inventiveness was characterized by improvising with the materials available to transform odd donations into 'complete' pieces. While video recording Barbara as she was revaluing bangles, I intervened to ask her about the potential of odd chains that I had gathered a week prior. Her response was not with words but with actions, she shifted briefly her attention from the bangles to the chains and a box of pendants. After she had put things together, I interrupted the silent act to ask: 'what just happened there?', and she exclaimed, 'I've just made a necklace!'. This one-minute

conversation illustrates the flexibility that this site enables to turn second-hand objects into resources for everyday designing and for revaluing design matters. Furthermore, it evidences video conversation as intervention, a design and ethnographic approach that was possible due to my design research practice and to my understanding of having worked with jewellery, which allowed me to point the conversation towards a space of design possibility that Barbara continued on the spot. An interaction that made me aware also of the role that everyday conversations had in initiating open-ended prototyping, and about my role as 'designer-practitioner-researcher'<sup>24</sup> engaged in doing participatory designing for revaluing in our shared routines.



**Figure 3** – Moment when Barbara joined a chain and pendant to make a necklace on the spot.

#### Displaying homewares on the move

On a Thursday morning I met with Gina, who is in charge of designing homewares displays at the shop. I did not have any previous experience in this area, so instead of asking questions to intervene Gina's routines (as I did with Barbara), I followed Gina around during the day to witness, ask and learn from her. The conversations we had happened on the move as she was pushing her trolley of cleaning and displaying tools and as she stopped at the different coloured themed shelves of homewares to 'fix' displays. Along these moves I witnessed how her practice contributed to the ongoing formation of the open-ended prototyping of shop displays.

In relation to her practice, she explained me that 'all the time you are changing, all the time, you have to, because, I mean, people come and buy things and leave gaps'. Her ability to adapt her actions and routines to the contingency of everyday circumstances demonstrates the improvisatory nature of designing in this second-hand context. Due to the diversity of things to work with, Gina explains how colour, epoch, and shape inform her practice to 'marry things together' until 'it just looks good together, it blends and it's easy on the eye'. Her sensory, embodied and emplaced ways of knowing<sup>25</sup>, made explicit how displaying second-hand products for their revaluing entailed a form of storytelling to enhance things tacit values. When we arrived to the shelf with green homewares, Gina explained,

'... see how this goes with that? Look at this little, tiny thing [heart shape in her hand] how nicely it would go here with that [vase with same pattern as heart]. Perfect, perfect, came from two different places, two different times... it's nice, it's fun to put things together... it's creative, it is very creative and it's good to do creative things' (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** – Gina shows her process of finding matching styles of things to create themed shop displays on the move.

In the case of the blue shelf, her designing involved a bigger scale intervention, not only bringing together similar things, but redoing the whole section. As she said:

'... it was good because I really had a good go from scratch, was fun, was very satisfying... all the blue has been redone, fixed up, all these shades are together... a lot of changing and shifting, redoing but to me it looks good...'. (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** – A section of the blue shelf where Gina found a place for the blue ceramics left after hours at the gate (see above Figures 1-2).

As Gina demonstrates, her practice of designing op-shop displays is an open-ended prototyping process that contributes to the revaluing of second-hand products. Through themed conformations she enhances values of design matters that defy forms of obsolescence. Objects that were once framed as product innovations, are made meaningful again through continually improvising artful acts.

In the next section, I reflect on these examples to elaborate further on a paradigm shift from innovation to improvisation and on its implications for revaluing design matters; a proposal for 'de-designing design from the myth of newness and increasing consumption by revaluing things as growing narratives'<sup>26</sup>.

### **Discussion: Revaluing design matters**

Designing for revaluing at the op-shop involves turning obsolete product innovations into resources for creative processes by improvising artful acts within everyday routines. In doing so, volunteers orient donated objects towards reuse, diverting them from paths of devaluation. This shift of renovating obsolete innovations through artful acts of improvisation, resonates with Ingold and Hallam work when they say that 'the difference between improvisation and innovation, then, is not that the one works within established convention while the other breaks

it, but that the former characterizes creativity by way of its processes, the latter by way of its products<sup>27</sup>. Pink, Salazar and Duque explain this paradigm shift by defining the difference further: 'Once something is defined as an innovation, this could imply that it has been closed off as an object - the finished object is the *innovation*'<sup>28</sup>. However, with the authors recent ethnographic analysis of banknotes, they point towards the potential of opening up the category of 'innovation as it occurs through the improvisatory modes of everyday repair and maintenance'<sup>29</sup>. By broadening the meanings of innovation, beyond 'newness', designing for revaluing becomes a form renewing once 'closed' innovations from 'grave-to-cradle'. The potential of dissolving these binaries is evident at the op-shop, where products are made meaningful again despite the 'ends' of their first lifecycles and value, and as these are re-circulated towards reuse, fostering the emergence of circular economies. In these spaces of re-circulation, narratives and materialities of innovation are revalued and imbued into open-ended processes of everyday designing. By acknowledging things as unfinished and in continual formation and valuation through the different stages, sites and by the many everyday designing practitioners who use and reuse things, I argue, some of the problematic aspects of unsustainability from linear and conventional design professions can be interrogated and revalued. This entails a shift from design frameworks that are still closed in orienting their products towards conventional innovation goals, to instead turning the gaze and practice towards opening designing for/by improvising. An ontological shift in which designing is a collaborative everyday practice and dealing with the wasteful consequences of the materiality we live with is a collective responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have presented Everyday Designing for Revaluing, a design research practice that is oriented to addressing world challenges of unsustainability resulting from innovation paradigms based on planned obsolescence. ED4R is a form of design engaged with making other futures possible, where design is processual, open-ended and collaborative. This openness fosters fertile spaces for design researchers to experiment with methodologies, which has implications for revaluing design matters, and for diversifying the roles that designers can have as embedded practitioners in multiple sites and with multiple stakeholders, beyond design studios and besides creating 'brand new' products. By combining approaches from Participatory Design, Design Anthropology and Everyday Design I have furthermore, offered two design research methods: video conversations as interventions and open-ended prototyping, which in their conceptual framing can be of value beyond the op-shop, for design researchers to appropriate and test in other sites where design matters can be revalued.

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