



The New Materialism

How our relationship with the material world
can change for the better

by Andrew Simms & Ruth Potts

*Material: c.1300, “material of thought,
speech, or expression,”
from Anglo-Fr. Materē.*

Mater: “origin, source, mother.”

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Built to last.

A De Sion 'Steam Runabout' that first took to the road in 1884, is thought to be the world's oldest working car.

There's hot competition for the title of Britain's oldest working fridge, thought to be a 94-year-old Frigidaire.

The world's oldest continuously working mechanical timepiece, the clock at Wells Cathedral was wound by hand every week for 600 years until the last of the 'Keepers of the Great Clock of Wells' retired in August 2010.

A ball-shaped pocket watch, made in 1505 by Peter Henlein, is thought to be the world's oldest working watch.

In June 2011, the City of Livermore, California, celebrated the 110th birthday of the 'centennial bulb', thought to be the world's oldest working light-bulb.

Twinings Tea has world's oldest continually-used company logo, and is London's most long-standing rate-payer, having occupied the same premises on the Strand since 1706.

The world's oldest surviving working computer is the 1951 Harwell Computer, also known as the WITCH (Wolverhampton Instrument for Teaching Computing from Harwell).

You might not want to eat it, but the 5,000-year-old bog butter discovered in County Offaly, Ireland, is still, technically, edible.

Introduction: Living in A New Material World

Like an abusive relationship with the real world, materialism has become synonymous with consumerism – wasteful, debt-fuelled and ultimately unsatisfying. Yet, inescapably, we are part of the material world. How, then, can we develop a healthy connection to it? This pamphlet argues for a ‘New Materialism,’ in which we grow a more deeply pleasurable, and also respectful relationship with the world of ‘things’. Not only do we think there is strong evidence to argue that this will significantly enhance our well-being, it is also an essential step forward if we are to thrive whilst living within our environmental means. We believe the New Materialism offers a better solution to key current economic challenges such as the need to generate ample, good-quality jobs – and a way of making daily goods and services available that escapes the consumer debt-trap.



1. Old materialism

Criticism of conspicuous consumption and consumerism is nothing new. Nor is it owned by any one political persuasion. Consumerism's foibles and often self-defeating character were pointed out by both Adam Smith and Karl Marx.

Adam Smith, author of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* and, ironically, in some senses the great, great grandfather of consumer culture, ridiculed lovers of novelty and luxury goods who, 'walk about loaded with a multitude of baubles . . . some of which may sometimes be of some little use, but all of which might at all times be very well spared, and of which the whole utility is certainly not worth the fatigue of bearing the burden.'

Following in these thematic footsteps around a century later, Karl Marx pinpointed a false promise at the heart of material accumulation that even today whole cultures remain largely in denial of. He described the mechanisms of dissatisfaction that drive the spiral of demand for baubles and palaces, suggesting that, 'A house may be large or small; as long as the neighbouring houses are equally small, it satisfies all social requirement for a dwelling. But let a palace arise beside the little house, and it shrinks the house to a hut.'¹⁸

Thorstein Veblen then coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' at the end of the 19th century to describe how a burgeoning economic elite, the early 1 percent, reassured themselves that they stood apart from the masses. They shopped for more and better of anything that took their fancy – from clothes and houses to holidays – in order to differentiate themselves from the crowd.

Marx and Smith intimated the reasons why we fail to find happiness by filling our pockets with baubles or buying a house that thinks it's a palace. Imagine your pay goes up, or you buy new clothes, a new phone or smarter car. For a brief while, you'll feel a buzz of raised satisfaction. But soon it wears off. Your 'background' level of satisfaction returns. This is something you will almost certainly know intuitively, even if you deny it. Academics describe the way that the shine quickly wears off a new thing as 'hedonic adaptation'.

The 'hedonic treadmill' is a description of what happens next, when, as a triumph of hope over experience, you head out to buy more, to feel again the sense of promise that your next acquisition will deliver lasting satisfaction. But all that happens is a cycle of endlessly underwhelming and dissatisfying passive consumption – a sense of lack, desire finding a focus, belief that it is the answer, and then a hard-to-fathom disappointment when reality doesn't quite live up to the promise and expectation.

Getting stuffed

The modern age has already been described as a 'story of stuff,' a time in which the human use and transformation of natural resources has created an age that future historians will term the 'anthropocene.'

Although Smith, Marx and Veblen saw the inner dynamics of a materialism that tends toward wasteful consumerism, even they would have been shocked by what transpired in the second half of the twentieth century.

After the Second World War, the major industrialized economies were left with a lot of spare productive capacity for making goods, a legacy of gearing up for the war effort. In the 1950s and 1960s, a swathe of new oil discoveries and glut of production created a product in search of a market.

The consumer debt bubble

According to the consumer body Credit Action, total UK consumer debt more than trebled between 1993 and 2012¹, passing £1 trillion for the first time in 2004.² By September 2008, as the implications of the global financial crisis began to become clear, debt averaged £9,740 per household excluding mortgages.³ In the year ending June 2012, the Citizens Advice Bureau in England and Wales dealt with 8,465 new debt problems every working day.⁴

There are major psychological impacts to our national indebtedness. Institute of Psychiatry research shows that the more indebted you are, the higher your chances of developing clinically significant anxiety and depression, largely irrespective of how much you earn,⁵ a finding largely substantiated by a wider systemic review in 2009⁶. The pressure meeting repayments is immense: in September 2012 the average percentage interest charge on a mainstream credit card is 18.35 per cent, 17.85 per cent above the Bank of England's base rate.⁷ Constant fear of default gives way to feelings of shame and inadequacy if things really go wrong.

Breakthroughs in synthesizing plastics from oil created a consumer boom for items to fill the homes built as part of the post-war housing boom and the promise of plenty. The spread of consumer financial services like hire purchase was the early glimmer of a debt-fuelled consumer culture that would grow beyond recognition in the coming decades. War time thrift, and households and communities pulling together to 'make, do and mend,' and ensure their needs were met, more or less collectively, gave way to the individualistic pursuit of stuff, often purchased on the 'never never.'

Global trade in manufactured goods has rocketed. In the 1960s, one planet would have sufficed – in terms of providing ecological resources to the economy and absorbing its waste

– for the whole world to enjoy the same levels of material consumption as people in Britain. Today, very conservatively, around three planets would be needed. Currently it takes the biosphere about 18 months to produce what humanity consumes in just 12 months, a situation that, logically, cannot continue. Neither, we argue, is it desirable. In Britain, it should be remembered, there has been no commensurate rise in life satisfaction to accompany owning all these extra things.

The amount of stuff we have, how we look after it and how long it is designed to last, matters. It matters especially when that stuff embodies a lot of energy use, and therefore carbon emissions. Homes account for nearly one third of UK greenhouse gas emissions. Between 1970 and 2009 the number of consumer electronic gadgets in a typical UK household increased by eleven times.⁸ Some of those new appliances will have used energy more efficiently than what they replaced, but many will have been wholly new, increasing the amount of energy used.

In the case of the UK, the sheer volume of new gadgets increased energy consumption over the period by 600 per cent. Particular product choices can increase energy consumption too – new isn't always better when it comes to environmental performance. The fashion for replacing traditional cathode ray tube television sets with plasma screens, for example, typically increased electricity use fourfold. From 1990 to 2009 the number of all household electrical appliances increased three and half times.

Materialistic behaviour might not be uniquely modern, but the sheer scale of contemporary consumerism and the trade in 'stuff' is unprecedented. Take just one example. In half a century from 1950 air freight went from being so small as to barely register on any scale, to notching up an amount measured as 100 billion tonne kilometres (that's the equivalent of one tonne of goods travelling 100 billion km). Among the many goods moved by sea, in 2006 the UK imported 50,000 tonnes of Christmas decorations alone from China.

Of course, this scale of consumption doesn't just happen as the result of an innately voracious human instinct to shop. Desires have to be manufactured, an approach recognised by the advertisers of the early twentieth century who described themselves as "consumption engineers."⁹ We are constantly cajoled by a vast, ubiquitous and increasingly invasive advertising industry. Vast amounts of money are spent and insidious psychological techniques are employed to keep us buying.

British business spent around £18 billion on advertising in 2009. Each year around 1.7 billion items of direct or 'junk' mail, just one tool in the advertiser's box, are delivered to UK homes. One county council alone, Cornwall, estimates that it disposes of 500 dustcarts worth of unwanted direct mail each year.

And what happens to all the extra stuff that we do buy? A lot ends up in landfill sites and an increasing amount simply ends up in storage. Yellow Box, the company that provides units for household storage, has been expanding by around 40 per cent a year in the UK. In 2012 it added storage space that was the equivalent of about 30 Tesco Metro stores. The rapid expansion of self-storage is more complex than it might at first seem. In the archly-titled article, "Golden Hoard: Why People are stupider than squirrels," *The Economist* concludes that our desire to keep stuff is, well, "stupid." According to economic theory 'free disposal'¹⁰ should mean that we get rid of spare possessions rather than pay to keep them in storage. Yet according to Big Yellow, 37 per cent of goods in storage have been there for three years or more¹¹. Data from the UK Self Storage Association suggests that the average length of stay increased from 22 weeks in 2007 to 37 weeks in 2011.¹²

"It's a story about us, people, being persuaded to spend money we don't have on things we don't need to create impressions that won't last on people we don't care about," says Professor Tim Jackson.

Another academic, Tim Kasser has made a lifetime study of the effects of the value system which underpins conventional materialism. In *The High Price of Materialism* he talks about two opposing value systems, extrinsic and intrinsic, that are self-reinforcing and do not co-exist, like trains heading to different destinations. Placing a high value on things like status, money and image is to be extrinsically oriented. If your values are more intrinsic you'll place importance on developing good relationships at home and with friends, a sense of extended responsibility for the world at large, self-acceptance and a sense of relative autonomy. To summarise, crudely, a long and detailed analysis based on both Kasser's own work and dozens of cross-cultural and demographic studies, if you take the extrinsic train, you are in for a fairly miserable journey to an unhappy place. The opposite is true if you put greater importance on intrinsic values. Influence on actual behaviour of the two different orientations is also strong and self-reinforcing to the values expressed.

In study after study, people who are more oriented to extrinsic, materialistic values are less likely to be satisfied with life. They experience fewer 'pleasant emotions,' more distress, anxiety and depression, are more prone to narcissism and substance abuse, and are more likely to experience negative emotions like being 'angry, scared and sad.' The damage is not just personal; it places a cost on the wider community too.

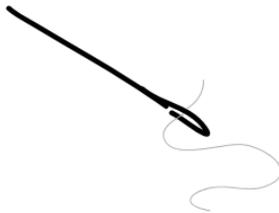
Materialistic values and behaviour also correlate with a long list of unpleasant characteristics: higher levels of aggression, stealing, cheating, being unethical in business, having lower empathy, manipulative behaviour, prejudice and authoritarianism. The more likely you are to hold extrinsic values, the less likely you are to recycle and conserve energy, and your overall lifestyle is more likely to include choices that are worse for the environment.

How can this depressing cycle be broken? We argue that it cannot, unless we can escape the old form of materialism,

in which materialism, our engagement with ‘things,’ is synonymous with consumerism: a wasteful, dissociated relationship with the material world. The cycle can be broken if, instead, we find ways to put intrinsic values at the heart of our relationship with the material world. Broadly speaking, placing importance on intrinsic values leads to outcomes that are diametrically opposite to the parade of the darker side of humanity that flourishes with materialism. The challenge, then, is to define a ‘New Materialism’ that has at its core the importance of relative autonomy, extended responsibility and good human relationships, and which allows us to take pleasure in the material world without destroying either ourselves or the environment we depend on.

The rest of this pamphlet looks at where and how this is already emerging and finishes with suggestions for a manifesto for the new materialism.

The good news is that everywhere there are signs of a healthier relationship with ‘stuff’, a New Materialism. At the end of this pamphlet we consider what might be a few guiding principles to encourage it to spread. At the heart of this new relationship, encoded in a different attitude toward making, owning, sharing and caring for things, lies both much greater potential human well being, and lifestyles that are far less damaging to our life-supporting biosphere.



2. New Materialism

If it's new, it must be good. It's a simplification, but that is the message constantly reinforced by the 500–3,000 messages we receive every day through advertising. The onslaught is not only constant; its roots are deeply embedded. It is the cultural spirit that dominates western culture, modernism. It is easily put and immensely powerful. Dare to find fault in the latest offerings of technology or consumer culture, and people will think you want to live in a cave. More sinisterly, they will suspect you of wanting to force others to shiver in the dark and cold by your miserable anti-modernist side.

To tilt against this tide – the shopping mall and parade of endless consumer upgrades – has become to define yourself as an enemy of progress. The accusation is repeated so often that environmentalists end up censoring themselves. If you appear to stand for a world drained of novelty and pleasure, is there not a danger that you might fall into George Osborne's calculatingly phrased category of 'environmental Taliban.' Such fears have forced confident claims about the benefits of living simply, and 'less being more' into the background. The whiff of austerity cannot be allowed to ruin the consumer party. The green movement, which works to save conditions for life on the planet, has perversely been made synonymous with a rejection of the material world.

Two huge ironies stalk this version of events. Nothing has driven actual austerity like the collapse of the model of debt-fuelled over-consumption. Secondly, in a green economy characterized by less passive consumerism and more active production, making, adapting, mending, sharing and all the

‘re-s’ such as: re-use, recycle, re-love, re-purpose... etc, there is far more potential for novelty and pleasure.

But, scared of their own shadows, many environmentalists instead took to preaching a green variant of consumerism – it was still about the glitz, and the label, but your Jimmy Choo shoes might have a percentage of recycled content in their soles.

When it comes to consumer issues, the green agenda has been distilled for decades. Instead of a ‘throwaway’ society (in every sense of the word), we know we should move to one in which value is created with more of a ‘closed-loop’ of material use in which we repair, reduce, reuse, recycle and all the other appropriate actions prefixed with ‘re’.

Ecological economist Herman Daly says the economy of the future needs to be a “subtle and complex economics of maintenance, qualitative improvements, sharing, frugality, and adaptation to natural limits. It is an economics of better, not bigger.”

Unambiguously, this describes a shift from a consumer society to more of a ‘producer society’. It suggests a world in which we roll back our gradual deskilling and the impoverishment of work, and where we all confidently know how to boil an egg, stitch a garment or paint a wall. This is a world where we don’t just consume collaboratively, we produce collaboratively too.

Erich Fromm wrote, in *To Have or to Be*: “Everything one owned was [once] cherished, taken care of, and used to the very limits of its utility. Buying was ‘keep-it’ buying.” To extend the life of an object, the owner would know how to polish, adjust, oil and repair it. With the advent of disposability, built-in obsolescence, the introduction of constant upgrades (a kind of re-branded obsolescence) and mass advertising, the market learned to earn more money by persuading people to throw things away. It came between the individual and the household and the human bonding and satisfaction that came from being

able to make, gift, share and repair everyday items, and objects both beautiful and useful, as William Morris would have it.

But the tide is turning. Economic necessity and a rejection of impoverished consumerism make re-skilling the rage. One tabloid newspaper called sharing ‘The new rock’n’roll’.¹³ Apart from deeper, more lasting satisfaction, learning new crafts and skills not only equips us for a world in transition, but also helps us connect to it. Understanding how to work with materials – from textiles to metal, wood and words – replaces old-style consumer materialism based on fleeting engagement, rapid boredom, dissatisfaction and quick disposal with a different kind of materialism.

Reclaiming the material world

“It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing; it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself in us.”

Baruch Spinoza, Short Treatise II

For Lucretius, Roman devotee of Epicurus, the world was not formed of lifeless stuff, but matter in motion. Without that, he thought, “all things would fall downwards through the deep void like drops of rain... so nature would never have brought anything into existence.”¹⁴ The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, in challenging the reductionism and mechanistic view of the world held by French philosopher, Rene Descartes, went further still. Not only was the world experienced in a web of complex relationships and interactions, but: “every non-human body shares with every human body a cognitive nature.”

The phenomenologist Marcel Merleau-Ponty re-iterated the collaborative nature of consciousness centuries later: “our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other ‘objects’ the miracle of expression.”¹⁵

This older appreciation of the vibrant nature of materials reflects more recent thinking from complexity science, and the extraordinary properties of matter revealed by material science, as it looks deep into the behaviour of sub-atomic particles. The transition metals niobium, vanadium and tantalum, also part of the group of so-called ‘rare earth’ minerals, for example, when ultra-cooled become super-conductors and no longer behave like metals, which astonished scientists when it was first observed. Structures form at the nanometer scale which fundamentally change the properties of the materials.

In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett, argues that, “so-called inanimate things have a life, that deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies: a kind of thing-power.”¹⁶ Greater awareness of this sense of the strangeness of things, and how they relate to us, says Bennett, may encourage us “to treat nonhumans – animals, plants, earth, even artefacts and commodities – more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically.”

According to the historian of science Cyril Smith, it was craftsmen and not scientists who first understood the properties of metals, “it was the human metalworkers’ intense intimacy with their material that enabled them, rather than (the less hands-on) scientists, to be the ones to first discover the polycrystalline structure of non-organic matter.”



Intelligent work – knowing and understanding by doing

“The satisfaction comes through the use of every part of oneself, hand and eye, brain and intuition, and through being always in contact with natural materials and the power of earth, air, fire and water. ... It is, in fact, a voyage of discovery into the very heart of things. How lucky we are.”

Dartington ceramicist, Marianne de Trey¹⁷

In the Iliad, Homer uses the word Sophia (wisdom) to refer to the skill of the carpenter.¹⁸ By making and mending objects we enter into a different kind of relationship with the material world. Made objects communicate across cultures and through the ages. In caring for them we say something about existence, engaging in a practice of care that connects us to the world and one another.

It is a deeper kind of knowing compared to the mere receipt and retention of information. Rather it is a kind of understanding earned through experience that has engaged more of our human senses. The intellectual who turned his hand to becoming a motorcycle mechanic, Matthew Crawford, explains it like this: “Some diagnostic situations contain so many variables, and symptoms can be so under-determining of causes, that explicit analytical reasoning comes up short. What is required then is the kind of judgement that arises only from experience; hunches rather than rules”.¹⁹

Stonemason Lida Kindersley, whose working life is absorbed in understanding materials through working with them, describes how much can be learned from something as simple as using a pencil: “If you want to define a letter the moment that you push on the pencil, or use it aggressively, it breaks. You learn to keep the point by not using force. Don’t force, let it be²⁰”. The secret to the stonemasons’ craft lies in understanding and working with the material, not dominating it. It leads to an acute understanding of both the limits and potential of the material world.

Using skills to make, do and mend brings engagement, allows expression and encourages this kind of growth through learning. It extends and helps both the doer and the done to endure. Action supersedes the short-lived and ultimately disappointing 'sugar highs' of passive consumerism.

A world in which we all hold a wider range of practical skills leaves us less at the mercy of disposable goods and built-in obsolescence, and more in a position to shape and fashion the world around us in satisfying ways. It gives us real freedom to replace the illusory version promised by the market. The attractiveness of a 'great reskilling' has been taken up by the Transition Town movement. As we've "lost many of the basic skills taken for granted by every previous generation - to grow, gather, preserve and cook local and seasonal food; to repair clothes and household goods; to make and mend rather than throw away", the Transition Town Movement proposes that we relearn these skills "to prepare for an energy-scarce and relocalised future". Courses on offer range from how to make your own radio programme to how to build your own house.

Such approaches offer some obvious environmental benefits, but they also suggest a different way of being in the world. And it is here, perhaps, that the environmental movement has been too shy of what it has to offer. The evidence suggests that doing more, and passively consuming less is the difference between a 99p processed meat burger soullessly consumed alone beneath fast food striplighting, and a meal lovingly prepared with low-cost fresh ingredients for friends around a dinner table.

The American sociologist Charles Wright Mills wrote during the birth of modern consumerism and at the height of industrial mechanisation built on the division of labour. Mills recognised both the value of skilled 'craft' work, and the broader implications of losing it:

"The laborer with a sense of craft becomes engaged in the work in and for itself; the satisfactions of working are their own reward; the details of daily labor are connected

in the worker's mind to the end product; the worker can control his or her own actions at work; skill develops within the work process; work is connected to the freedom to experiment; finally, family, community and politics are measured by the standards of inner satisfaction, coherence and experiment in craft labor.²¹"

In his book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett comments: "The slowness of craft time serves as a source of satisfaction; practice beds in, making the skill one's own. Slow craft time also enables the work of reflection and imagination - which the push for quick results cannot. Mature means long; one takes lasting ownership of the skill."

Brian Perkins renovates old bicycles. He specialises in Moultons: a small-wheeled revolution in cycling that began in the 1960s (one revolution, at least, that endured from that tumultuous decade). The designer of the bicycle, Alex Moulton, was also the engineer behind the suspension system on the Mini. Moulton was a self-confessed 'petrol head'. He loved big, thirsty cars like the discontinued Alvis marque that look like country houses on wheels. But when the Suez crisis struck, he glimpsed a petrol-dry future and used his skills to reinvent the bicycle with small wheels and built-in suspension. Something clever about the physics of small wheels means they accelerate fast from traffic lights, leaving the bigger, more macho bikes indignantly behind. Several cycling speed records were set on Moultons. Bicycle sales had been falling for years, but the launch of the Moulton was a turning point. Sales have edged up ever since.

With skill, greased fingers and patience, Brian keeps the older models on the road. He's not like a museum restorer, cautiously and precisely recreating originals. He brilliantly remakes them, not pedantically but true to the spirit. Some people think the Moulton is a shopping bike until they see one float past effortlessly. Then they look confused. To perform his craft, Brian has collected spare parts - lots of them - over two decades. "Have you ever watched candyfloss being made?" he asks. "The spun

sugar winds up in a mass on the stick, seemingly from nowhere, until it becomes enormous. At first you're delighted - until you try to deal with it. Old bike parts are a lot like that."

Sometimes Brian sounds like a barefoot doctor running a field clinic for those who cannot afford to pay, in a country where the health service has been starved of cash and equipment. He gives a fairly accurate description of the state of the green economy:

"Bicycles don't usually reject a transplant, so I feel compelled to save things for future use. And old bikes are cheap, because they are generally unwanted. For compact storage, collected machines are always reduced to their discrete components and gobbled up by the collection of cardboard boxes, margarine tubs, sauce jars and biscuit tins. It all comes in useful sooner or later. When you enjoy tinkering with old bikes, the value that even small things have makes you lavish disproportionate care and attention upon them."

At other times, the act of renovation comes across as if Brian were navigating a path through an appreciative reverie of the tangible world, all wide-eyed curiosity and meditation: "I knew there was a biscuit tin somewhere with a good selection of beautifully made clamps that could be polished to a sparkling finish. Or were they in an ice-cream tub? That rang a bell. Or perhaps it contained bells? I just wasn't sure," he says.

One thing is sure, if the great transition to a low-carbon, high-wellbeing future for all is to happen, it will arrive riding a bicycle. As H.G. Wells wrote: "When I see an adult on a bicycle, I do not despair for the future of the human race."

It is richly rewarding to see a society slowly remembering what it can do for itself, rather than being spoon-fed, at a price, by otherwise disinterested multinational corporations. To be reminded that we can make and repair for ourselves many day-to-day objects and feel good about doing so. More people are

Things we have loved that have lasted

What is thought to be the world's oldest working car, a De Sion 'Steam Runabout' was sold at auction in October 2011. Built in 1884, the car had only a handful of owners and was looked after by one family 81 years.²²

Polishing, and re-soling your shoes can significantly lengthen their lifespan. Timpson's one of Britain's best-known Shoe repair and Key cutters have reported increased turnover during the downturn. Grantham, the parent company of Cherry Blossom shoe polish, the world's first shoe polish, still made in Alfreton, Derbyshire reported a 32 per cent increase in sales in 2011.²³

Britain's oldest working fridge is thought to be a 94-year-old Frigidaire built by General Motors. It has never needed repair apart from the occasional replacement part but isn't the only long lasting household appliance. A seventy-seven year old Frigidaire in Edinburgh is still keeping food cold having been last repaired over 30 years ago.²⁴

The fashion chain All Saints has lined its store windows with Singer sewing machines. Simple and built to last, the machines could be liberated and put to use in schools and on high street making and mending hubs.²⁵

making and mending their own clothes, with a 500% rise in the sale of sewing machines seen in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. Haberdashery sales from the cooperatively owned John Lewis store rose by 30%. The sharing market, sometimes called 'pay-as-you-live' is estimated to be worth £22 billion in Britain and 80 percent of British people say that sharing makes them happier. In thinking about whether to hire or buy, the majority of people work out the likely cost per use of an item and around 1 in 6 people already opt to hire over buying.²⁶

The list of knitting clubs is getting longer and there is a vast (and active) network of guilds and societies. The Nottingham Craft Mafia is a network of amateur craftspeople who meet up to exchange skills and support. The group offers classes, social events and even a regular knitting circle. It's open to craftspeople at all levels. The Craft Mafia network started in Austin, Texas and there are groups in the UK from Manchester to Glasgow.

“The greatness of a craft”, wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, “consists firstly in how it brings comradeship to men.” Again, such an intuitive insight from a writer appears to be well underwritten. One of the many revelations from the rapidly growing field of neuroscience is that mutual cooperation is associated with enhanced neuronal responses in reward areas of the brain. This tends to suggest that social cooperation is intrinsically rewarding. For his book *Together*, Henry Hemmings carried out a nationwide survey of small groups, many of which were craft-based. He came across groups ranging from Knitting Hill and the Hadleigh Bobbin Lace-Making Class to allotment associations all over the country and the East London Advanced Motorcyclists.

It's easy to underestimate even something as seemingly prosaic as motorcycle maintenance. Matthew Crawford found it so fulfilling that he wrote the book, *The Case for Working with Your Hands: Or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good*. Not only did he find intrinsic, personal satisfaction from his work, but that his mechanical craft gave him membership of an appreciative community: “I try to be a good motorcycle mechanic. This effort connects me to others, in particular to those who exemplify good motorcycling, because it is they who can best judge how well I have realized the functional goods I am aiming at.”

Passing on knowledge directly evokes the relationship between the skilled and the apprentice, teacher and student: what Crawford calls “a kind of philosophic friendship, the sort that is natural between teacher and student: a community of those who desire to know”. Lifelong learning - the natural

Second hand: the new new?

The sale of second hand clothes is nothing new. In fact, until the turn of the twentieth century the great majority of people would have bought second hand clothes from traveling salesmen. From the middle ages, the peddling of clothes was often the preserve of Jewish communities, denied access to land ownership or membership of the guilds that governed professional trades. This continued up to the twentieth century, with successful traders owning shops in larger towns and cities. A large section of social reformer Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* was devoted to Jewish clothes selling in the East End. Now, as we face up the reality of a resource constrained future, the trend for vintage and pre-loved garments could again reach the scale of the past, generating new employment in collecting, renovating and then selling-on loved garments. You will still be able to buy new things, but it might be the exception rather than the rule. There could also be a creative explosion, leading to much greater variety as people adjust, create and alter garments to produce unique styles free from the blandness and pressures to conform from the mass-retailers.

Re-loved, re-greased, re-grown and re-employed – prosperity beyond old-style consumerism

Numerous furniture recycling projects are springing up across the country, providing training for young people not in employment, and affordable, good quality furniture for people on low incomes. The Furniture Recycling Project in Gloucestershire, for example provides an average of 12,000 items of furniture to families on low incomes each year, while providing training and experience for 60 young people.²⁷

The bicycle hub website lists 60 projects around the country that recycle and repair bikes, selling them at affordable prices and often incorporating training schemes for disadvantaged groups²⁸. Swindon-based Recycles is a social enterprise run by people who were once homeless and supported by the Salvation Army. Recycles repairs and services bikes, as well as selling refurbished cycles – providing development and training opportunities for staff. Grand Designs' Kevin McCloud is a fan, having bought three bikes from the Swindon shop: "As far as I could see they are able to repair/renovate all types of cycle from ancient to the very modern - sit up and begs, mountain bikes to ultra light road racers and for all ages."²⁹

Cultivate London takes over abandoned land, setting up urban farms that provide training for, and will eventually be run by, local young people aged 16-24 who are not in employment or education. The project has two farms in London, in Isleworth and at Brentford Lock and trains up to 30 young people each year. A small number of graduates from the trainee programme then go on to paid apprenticeships. OrganicLea, a workers co-operative, has brought growing back to the Lea Valley, the original 'bread basket' of London. Volunteers at their first allotment in 2001 could take home a share of the harvest in return for their labour. Now OrganicLea runs a local food hub, providing access to fresh, affordable locally grown organic food in the heart of the community, including an innovative 'cropshare' scheme that sells surplus from local allotments and gardens through the project's box scheme and market stall.³⁰

The 'Opportunity Shop': re-imagining the charity store

In 1890 founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth saw a way to harness wasted goods from well-to-do homes. Jobs for people trapped in Victorian poverty were created in collecting, renovating and then selling goods through 'salvage stores' in provincial centres.³¹ By 1914, such stores had opened throughout England and in the USA and Canada. A large warehouse at Battersea Wharf provided work for the unemployed, also providing exports to continental Europe and the USA. 'Thrift stores' flourished in the US during depression. The modern UK charity shop was born in December 1947 when the first Oxfam shop was established on Broad Street in Oxford.

The shops flourished in 1960s as a culture of conspicuous consumption replaced the make-do-and-mend ethos of the wartime. The real take-off, though, came in the 1980s: as the economy boomed surplus goods became plentiful while inequality denied to many the new goods that advertisers dangled in front of all. In a circular dynamic, the shops were one of the few ways in which charities could earn the unallocated income they needed to respond to social need as cuts in public services hit. It was this, according to historians of the Charity Shop, Suzanne Horne and Avril Madrell, that inspired a number of the big charities to invest in the expansion of their retail activities.³²

Perhaps now, as austerity takes hold, the UK's 9,500³³ charity shops could re-discover their radical social roots and act as centres of redistribution. And, perhaps they could go further, offering a high street re-making and mending service, providing much needed employment and training in a range of practical skills. In this way, charity shops could meet immediate needs and play an important role in preparing for a low-consumption, more socially-engaged future. They could even adopt the more positive name of their Australian cousins: 'Opportunity Shops'.

complement to a society relying more on mutual aid - also has multiple benefits: enhancing an individual's self-esteem, encouraging the development of social networks and a more active life. Being both active *and* social, doubly increases life satisfaction and life expectancy, so-called 'happy life years.'

Everywhere, people are beginning to make, do, share and get involved. A human response to the failure of markets is producing the opposite of the depressing phenomenon described by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*: the market's atomisation of family and community life and the withering of communal groups. For the last few decades a vast political project has seen the market rolling back the frontiers of the state. Now it is the turn of the good society to roll back the poaching grounds of the voracious market.

Some practical points on the economy – boosting demand without increasing consumption

To summarise: we're persuaded to buy vast amounts of stuff that doesn't make us happy and ends up either in a landfill dump or storage. Rationally, it seems so illogical that we should just stop. But there is a big economic problem raised by the the shift from a consumer economy. In simple terms it is this: in an economy dancing on the edge of recession and the spectre of rising unemployment, how do you boost demand – the one thing that most economists agree is needed – without increasing wasteful and unsatisfying consumption?

The lack of demand is a rare point of consensus about the current economic malaise. Yet, compared to what the biosphere can provide in terms of resources, and absorb in terms of waste, we are also overconsuming. At the global level conservative estimates based on the most recent ecological footprint data suggest we're overconsuming by around 52 per cent. The figure rises to much more where rich countries like the UK are concerned.

As intractable and contradictory as this problem seems, in the short to medium term, at least, it need not be. An economy based on much lower material consumption, and in which human well being is a primary objective of policy, will look very different from the one we have today. To get from here to there will require a great deal of change. Homes and work buildings, for example, need to be made energy efficient.

Investing a tiny fraction of the public resources already used for, and still being injected into, a banking system that refuses even now to lend sufficiently to the productive economy, could have transformative effects. According to the Green New Deal group, for example, £10 billion could train 1.5 million people to provide the low-carbon skills of the future, bringing 120,000 people back into the workforce, and increasing the earnings of those with a low income by a total of £15.4 billion.

There will have to be a rebalancing in the transport system, which for decades has been heavily biased toward the private car. New street layouts, cycle-friendly thoroughfares and clean, affordable mass transit systems all will have to be developed. Food and energy systems too, will change to consume fewer resources and better promote human well being.

In a recession danger stems from a kind of ‘reverse leverage’ kicking in. As less money circulates in the economy, less spending supports fewer jobs which leads to less spending. A downward spiral can lead to prolonged recession, or depression. That’s why encouraging spending assumes such importance. That said, in order to prevent other problems, certain conditions apply. Flooding an economy with cash merely to spend on consumption can be inflationary and wasteful of resources. Yet directing or targeting finance means, in effect, that governments must overcome their fear of intervening, constructively, in the direction of the economy. It means embracing an industrial policy and not merely leaving things to the market.

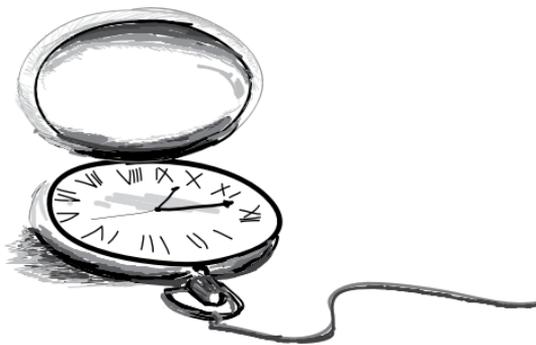
Some such assistance was given, for example, to car manufacturers at the height of the financial crisis in the so-called ‘cash for clunkers’ deal. But, from a new materialism perspective, that doesn’t help our cause. No special environmental criteria applied, and neither were such replacement vehicles designed to be easier for the average motorist to maintain themselves. If anything, modern cars with their complex electronics are the opposite. Similar inducements were offered for people to upgrade boilers in homes – which can be a good thing - and various schemes gave modest encouragement to spend on other domestic energy efficiency measures.

Such changes are good for jobs, improving homes, tackling global warming and tackling fears over the cost of energy and getting access to it.

But the new materialism helps us get there too. Why? If environmental constraints hit an economy that demands ever higher productivity, in other words, more stuff being produced by fewer people, you have a problem. The only way it can keep going, increasing productivity, is by making more people unemployed. But with new materialism – a world in which we make things last longer and endlessly re-use them and where there is a big shift to the services which keep things going – it takes a lot of hands, which creates a lot of employment. In this different economy, there is also greater emphasis in spending on the great joys of life, experiences rather than disposable goods – music, film, festivals, socialising, sports and more – incredibly appealing and also labour intensive activities. It follows on from a wave of television-inspired popular culture in which British people have rediscovered the joy of nurturing and displaying their own talents. Britain is famous for its cultural industries. It’s something we do well, and we could lead the world in setting an example of how to lead highly enjoyable lives that do not have to cost the earth.

J.M. Keynes, who wrestled with the challenge of keeping an economy going while reducing material consumption during the Second World War, imagined that by today, having solved the problems of basic material need, we would be pre-occupied with refining the ‘art of living.’ Recent growth in the popularity of public talks and courses, investing in our own personal development by learning more about everything from art, to mechanics, music, history, design or how to grow and conserve food, also squares the circle. It points towards the necessary shift from an economy based on material extraction, throughput and waste, to a circular economy of care and conservation.

An economy that needs to boost demand without raising consumption is one that calls for practical people and artists in equal measure – menders, makers and entertainers. It requires a huge growth in practical services that will boost the numbers of plumbers, electricians, builders, carpenters, farmers and engineers, as much as upholsterers, seamstresses, painters, sports coaches and storytellers. Maintenance, quality and entertainment may be the watchwords by which we boost the economy through a great transition to an economy that supports more with less.



A Way Ahead – the New Materialism as Living Manifesto

“If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution”³⁴

Emma Goldman

‘Greens’ have been painted as hair-shirted miserabilists. The reality couldn’t be further from the truth. Lacking confidence, to date, the green movement has either advocated ‘green consumption’ (a culture of more, but different) or abstinence. Instead, the need to learn to live within our environmental limits could be an invitation to fall in love again with the material world, this time in a healthier, more deeply satisfying relationship.

Far from eschewing materialism, a deeper understanding of humankind’s place in a living world of materials suggests the need and opportunity for a different kind of love affair with ‘stuff’ – a long-term relationship of appreciation, slow pleasures, care and respect. That invites re-writing the relationship manual for the objects we use. Far from suggesting abstinence and austerity, embracing a new materialism could have profoundly positive effects on our own well-being, that of the communities we live in and the Earth we are part of.

The purpose of the short manifesto below is to summarise the arguments we have made in a way that is easy to refer to and, hopefully, remember. There are so many ways and possible policies to promote a vibrant new materialism that, at this stage, we considered it best to outline instead some simple guiding principles. Greater detail on, for example, the prosaic but important specifics of retail leasehold reform to aid small enterprises, is readily available elsewhere. In writing the manifesto, it became helpfully apparent that it embraces the kinds of activities which an extensive literature on human well-being tells us are key to higher levels of life satisfaction. This is what **nef** (the new economics foundation) termed the ‘5 ways to

well being,' They are: being active, learning, taking notice of the world around you, sharing and connecting with other people.

In this light, we feel we have stumbled on something which is hopefully, and genuinely useful. However, these are just our short guidelines and, in keeping with the do-it-yourself ethos, we could encourage others to add to or adapt the list as they find useful. There is one additional recommendation we would like to make. In the run up to Christmas each year a 'Buy Nothing Day' is held. We would like to go one step further in reform of the month that has come to be synonymous with the old materialism. We would like to see the four weeks before Christmas become a 'Make, Mend and Share Month.' If this happens, we think there is a strong chance that we might arrive at Christmas Day feeling happier, more sociable, and considerably less in debt.

A short manifesto (less in more) for:
the New Materialism

1. **Liking 'stuff' is okay, healthy even** – we can learn to love and find pleasure in the material world
2. Wherever practical and possible **develop lasting relationships with things** by having and making nothing that is designed to last less than 10 years
3. **Get to know things** – before you acquire something, find out at least three things about it
4. **Love stuff** – mend, maintain and re-use things until it is no longer possible, then recycle them
5. **Get active** – only acquire something new if you are also learning a new, useful skill
6. **Share** - look at all your things, think about what your friends might need or could benefit from, and share at least one thing a week

Add your manifesto at thenewmaterialism.org

Places to make, mend and do:

There are a host of cafes and workshops around the country offering craft workshops: Craft Guerrilla operate in East London, Brighton and Edinburgh, Craft Cafes in Govan and Castlemilk, Glasgow provide a space to meet and make for the over 50's, Manchester has a 'Ministry of Craft' and London, The Make Lounge, Homemade London and the Paper Parlour to name but a few. Floodlight and Hot Courses list full and part time courses around the country: hotcourses.com

The **Transition Network** has groups around the country sharing skills, find a group near you at: transitionnetwork.org

Streetbank puts you in touch with people with things and skills to share where you are: streetbank.org

Time Banks are a nationwide network that enable you to share an hour of your time in return for an hour of someone else's: timebanking.org

Freecycle matches people with things they no longer need with people who want to use them. There are 540 groups across the UK with over 2 million members: uk.freecycle.org

The **Bike Hub** lists at least 60 places around the country where your bicycle can be repaired or recycled: bikehub.co.uk/featured-articles/recycling

The **National Allotment Society** provides advice on growing and how to find an allotment: nsalg.org.uk

Guerilla Gardening connects people who want to grow with unloved spaces: guerillagardening.org

Further reading:

The Case for Working With Your Hands: Or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good, Matthew Crawford

The Craftsman, Richard Sennett

Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things, Jane Bennett

Apprenticeship: The Importance of Learning By Doing, Lida Lopes Cardozo Kindersley and Martin Gay Ford

Endnotes

- 1 The challenge is, therefore, whether it is possible to boost demand to save the economy, while simultaneously reducing consumption to save the environment? It's a neat, if difficult, equation to wrestle with. But, also one perfectly suited to the New Materialism.
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- 28 See: <http://www.bikehub.co.uk/featured-articles/recycling/> for the full list of projects.
- 29 The shops site carries a range of testimonials from happy customers, see: <http://www.recycles-swinton.co.uk/customer-testimonials.php> for more.
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- 34 Although this quote is often attributed to Emma Goldman, it seems unlikely that she actually said exactly this. It is included here, because even if she didn't use exactly these words, she expressed similar sentiments, sentiments that resonate deeply with the New Materialism.



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Materialism has become synonymous with consumerism – wasteful, debt-fuelled and ultimately unsatisfying. Yet, inescapably, we are part of the material world. How, then, can we develop a healthy connection to it? This pamphlet argues for a ‘New Materialism,’ in which we grow a more deeply pleasurable, and also respectful relationship with the world of ‘things’. Not only do we think there is strong evidence to argue that this will significantly enhance our well-being, it is also an essential step forward if we are to thrive whilst living within our environmental means. We believe the New Materialism offers a better solution to key current economic challenges such as the need to generate ample, good-quality jobs – and a way of making daily goods and services available that escapes the consumer debt-trap.

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