

**BPD126B**  
**CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL STUDIES 1B**

The increased use of plastics in the late 1960s gave rise to an environmental awareness within the field of product design. Why was Victor Papanek's work considered to be representative of this new design trend, and do you think his ideas are still relevant today? Select a contemporary designer and evaluate the ways in which his/her practice revitalises Papanek's vision of a more sustainable approach to design.

COURSE ESSAY

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I certify that the work being submitted for examination is my own account of my own research, which has been conducted ethically. The data and results presented are the genuine data and results actually obtained by me during the conduct of the research. Where I have drawn on the work, ideas and results of others, this has been appropriately acknowledged in the essay. The greater portion of the work described in the essay has been undertaken subsequent to my registration for the degree for which I am submitting this document.

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## I. ESSAY

Plastics increasing popularity in the 1960s created a shift in the world of product design, leading to thoughts of environmental awareness once again (Mastro). Victor Papanek was a pivotal figure in the movement of sustainability and in this essay we will take a look at his works, ideologies and how he paved the way for sustainable designers today.



**Fig 1 : Apparatus used to discover polyethylene, 1933**

Let us first look into the history of plastics. Ironically, the material was first created as a means to protect the natural world (Geyer, A Brief History of Plastics). It was to serve as an alternative to nature and animal exploited elements. In fact, plastic was invented when a British philanthropist offered a prize to create something that would replace Ivory (Naylor 274). It was revolutionary as plastic was the first time



manufacturing of goods was not dependent on nature, making this invention a highly applauded one (Meikle, American Plastic).



**Fig 2 : Advert for plastics**

After the invention of injection moulding and the thermopress, plastic manufacturing was made much faster and cost efficient (Cao et. al ). The new manufacturing methods allowed for plastic to be mass produced which led to greater consumerism and waste production (Marsh). Plastic debris was found in the oceans in the 1960s (Cressey, the struggle to track ocean plastics), the time when people were starting to be aware of environmental problems, raising concerns for nature once again. This prompted designers to reconsider their role and inspired many to emphasise on sustainability.

Plastic goods were originally luxury items (Clarke, Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America). However, the optimism about plastics didn't last too long. In the postwar years, a shift in American perceptions was observed as plastics were no longer seen as something positive (Meikle, American Plastic). Its mass production also allowed it to be something easily accessible, reducing its value. Gradually, plastic turned into a word used to describe something that is cheap, flimsy, or fake (Meikle, American Plastic).



**Fig 3 : Victor Papanek, pioneer of sustainability**

Victor Josef Papanek, an Austrian-American designer, played a crucial role in the growth of environmental awareness. Often referred to as the “pioneer of sustainability”, he advocated for sustainable design based on political and social awareness. "There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a few... by creating whole new species of permanent garbage to clutter up the

landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breathe, designers have become a dangerous breed." (Victor Papanek, Design for the Real World)



**Fig 4 : Victor Papanek's popular book**

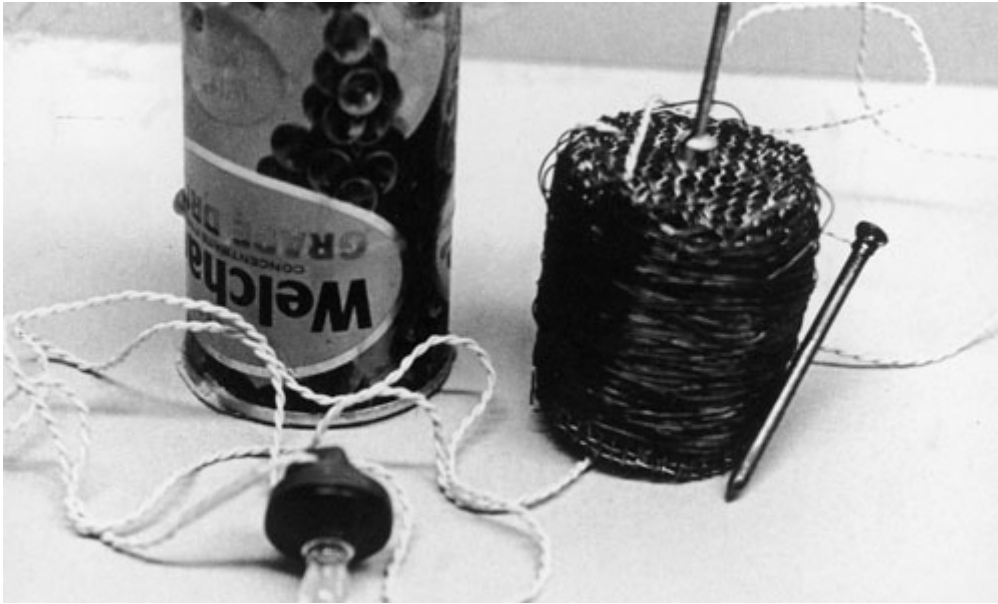
Victor Papanek's seminal work, "Design for the Real World," published in 1971, challenged traditional design norms and advocated for socially responsible and environmentally sustainable design practices. His emphasis on human-centred design, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity laid the foundation for a new approach to design that prioritised people and the planet over profit.



**Fig 5 : Victor Papanek's popular book**

Papanek often worked with students or collaborators and his projects backed his stance on social responsibility. For example, Papanek designed electric vehicles, radios and television for African countries, the Fingermajig (a touch sense simulator) and Living Cubes series which is furniture that can be assembled by users and modified based on their needs.

A few examples of his work include:



**Fig 6 : Victor Papanek's 9 cent radio**

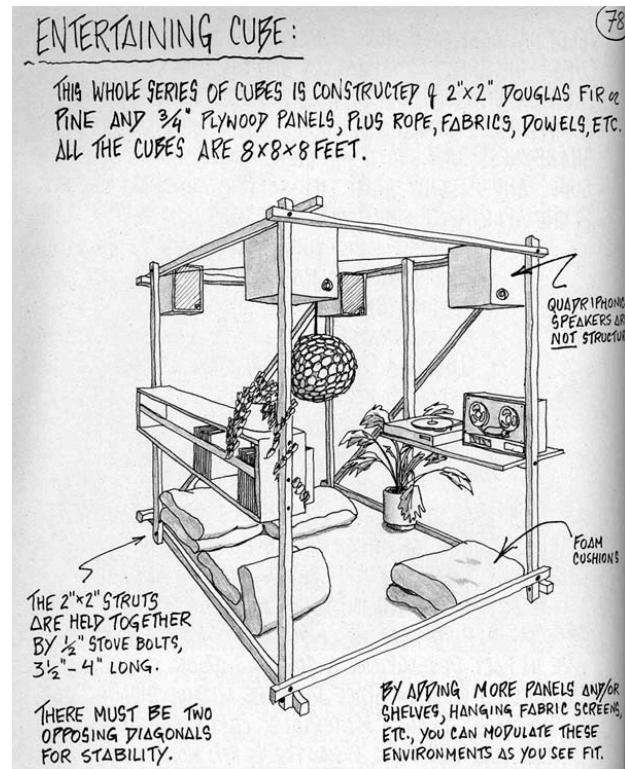
1. Radios : Victor designed many radios and televisions for different countries.

In 1962, he along with his former student, George Seegers began working on creating an accessible radio. The "Tin-Can" radio was designed for Bali natives. He designed it using abandoned tin from tourists and used burnable rubbish as a power source. His design is also often referred to as the 9 cent radio as that was the total spent on making it. By modern standards, it would not work as it didn't have any sort of tuner and would pick up every frequency at once. However, that was not a hurdle because the places where it was meant to be deployed only had a single, state broadcaster. The body of the radio was a used food tin and the earth wire terminated with a used nail. The most unusual part of the design was its power source; a candle. The wax and thermocouple provided just enough power to work a single transistor. A copper antenna was hand woven and stored inside the food can for delivery.



**Fig 7 : Victor Papanek and Jorma Vennola's Fingermajig**

2. Fingermajig : a fingermajig is a toy that provides stimulation to one's sense of touch. It is an object designed by Jorma Vennola under Papanek's guidance and aimed to help kids with autism and cerebral palsy in their everyday life. This helps solidify his views on social equality as in a time where such mental health issues and disabilities were not talked about much, he was fulfilling his role as a designer providing them with products to help make their lives easier.



**Fig 8 : Victor Papanek's Living Cubes Design**

### 3. Living Cubes : Papanek's Living cube series of spatially efficient furniture

further highlights his vision of multifunctional and space-saving designs ideal for compact urban living. The series features furniture pieces that serve various purposes including seating, storage and workspace. This optimises limited living spaces to their full potential. Victor's innovative designs show a focus on functionality and multipurposeness without compromising aesthetics. Its multiple uses also help tackle consumerism and strengthen his ideologies of reducing waste (Scarzella, Victor Papanek)

Papanek's ideas remain highly relevant in today's age and the modern design world.

Issues such as climate change and social inequality are an important matter in

recent times and his principles of sustainability, inclusivity, and ethical

responsibility provide a timeless framework for addressing contemporary challenges

in design, They continue to be prevalent in today's designs for the following reasons:

Papanek emphasised on designing with a focus on social and environmental impacts. In today's world, climate change, discrimination and sustainability are issues at focus and his ideas for designing for the greater good keep resonating strongly with tackling these factors. Victor Papanek was an advocate for user centric design by prioritising the needs and experiences of users catering to their different needs. He vouched for accessibility regardless of social norms such as their age, disabilities and economic statuses (Papanek, Design for the real world)

This approach is central in contemporary design as designers aim to create products which truly satisfy the various needs of their target audience (Keinonen 19). Designers are continuing to increase the incorporation of social responsibility into their works to make them more accessible to a broader audience (Clark, Victor Papanek).

Minimising the effects of design on our natural surroundings by following principles of sustainability and reusability are also pivotal points of Papanek's beliefs that are popular till date (Keitsch, Sustainable Design). Designers are slowly incorporating sustainability into their works by explorations of materials, manufacturing methods and reusability. (Vezzoli et. al, Design for Environmental Sustainability).





**Fig 9 : Catherine Sarah Young**

Of the many designers who follow in Victor Papanek's footsteps, we will be talking about Catherine Sarah Young. A dynamic and innovative interdisciplinary artist, designer, and writer, Young's works can be considered the fine conjunction of art, science and sustainability. Her approach to her works bridges the gap between art and science and challenges conventional boundaries by fostering new thought processes about sustainability.

Young's work encompasses a wide range of media, including installations, performances, interactive experiences, and community-based projects. Through her diverse works, she explores crucial issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental justice, and sustainable futures. They invite audiences to reflect on the complex interplay between human activities and the natural world. She is

also an advocate for sustainability in design and consumption and emphasises on the need for a collective action to fight global environmental changes (Bulotano) Young's work both visually and intellectually captures the viewer's attention. They are unique aesthetically but also encourage people to question assumptions, rethink paradigms and envision alternate futures. Her works are often interactive which invited her audience to engage with her artwork and become "co creators" of change.

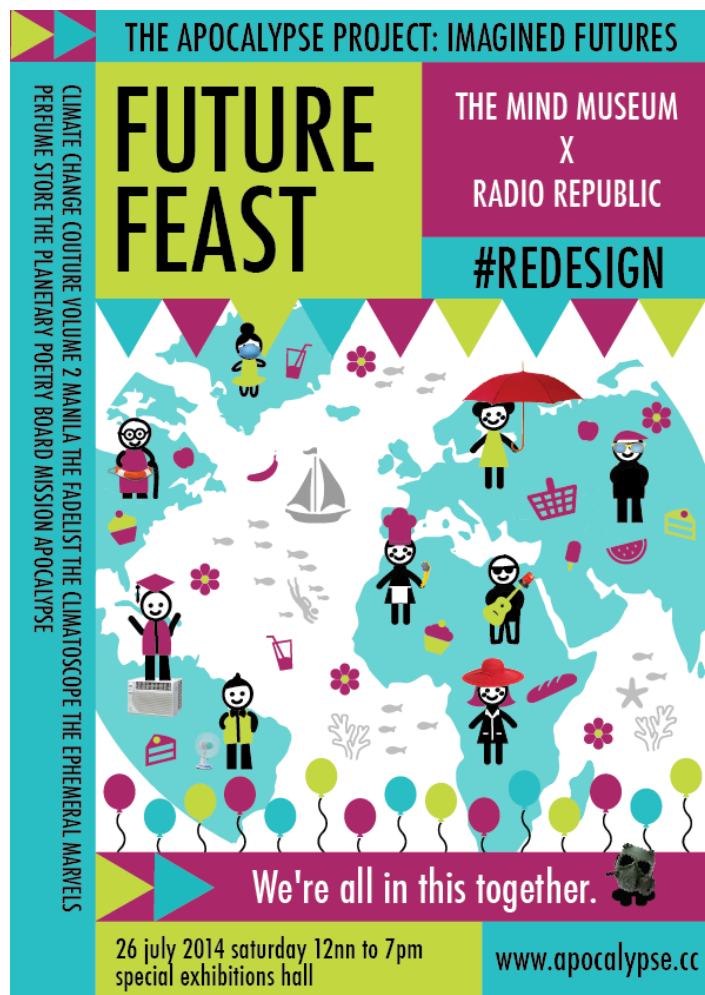
Through her innovative work, Young inspires her audience to rethink and improve their relationship with their surrounding environment and explore new possibilities for sustainable living. Her commitment to change pushes her to break free beyond the traditional boundaries of art by providing them greater meaning.

Some examples of Catherine Sarah Young's works include:



**Fig 10 : A work from Catherine Sarah Young's Apocalypse Project**

1. The Apocalypse Project : Young's series, The Apocalypse Project, explores the potential futures of our world caused by the ongoing climate change issues and environmental degradation. Through her various artworks across media, which include installations and performances , she encourages her audience to rethink and contemplate alternate scenarios of that which is displayed and question their roles in shaping the future of our planet (Young, The Apocalypse Project).



**Fig 11 : Catherine Sarah Young's Future Feast**

2. Future Feast : Youngs Future Feast gatherings is an artwork that features an interactive dining experience that combines sustainability with the arts.

Participants in these immersive gatherings are encouraged to investigate the complex relationships among food security, ecological resilience and different cultural practices. Catherine Young fosters meaningful conversations on sustainable food systems and inspires her participants to ideate more regenerative approaches to nourishment by incorporating elements like experimental cuisine storytelling and various hands-on activities. In addition to indulging in the senses, Future Feast offers building on skills such as communication and teamwork, which helps spark new creative answers to the problems faced by our Earth's food systems (Young)

Catherine Young's approach to sustainable design is one that aligns closely with that of Victor Papanek by focusing on social and environmental responsibility. Her practice embodies several key principles that resonate with that of Papanek's :

1. Social and Environmental responsibility : Young's work is centred on exploring and bringing light to the various social discriminations and environmental issues caused by humans. She critically examines global challenges such as climate change, pollution and the loss of biodiversity in her artworks represented in various media. By addressing these issues, she voices Papanek's original call for designers to reconsider their impact on the world they live in. By following in his path, the two designers shine light on critical topics of their surroundings and advocate for sustainable and ethical design. One of Young's works, "The Ephemeral Marvels Perfume Store" from her "The Apocalypse Project" was displayed at the "Victor Papanek: The Politics of Design" exhibition at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein,

Germany (Young, The Apocalypse Project”). This shows how the two designer’s thought processes in design are closely aligned,

2. User Centric Design : Young’s projects are very often interactive and are designed to engage with communities and stakeholders, which incorporated their perspectives and experiences into the design process. They are inclusive to those of various races, age groups, sexes, languages and physical abilities (Dekker and Young, Bridging the Gap). She collaborates with scientists, policymakers and even local communities to co-create solutions for the challenges faced by different communities of the world. This approach reflects Victor Papanek's continued emphasis on designing for the needs of the end users. The two ensure their works are inclusive, allowing them to be accessible, relevant, and help them address and impact a wider spectrum of audience.
3. Sustainability : Most importantly, Young strictly prioritises the use of sustainable materials and processes in all of her projects. She explores new and innovative materials such as bioplastics which are derived from algae. Young uses her background in molecular biology, fine art, and interaction design to create works that are interactive and experimental artworks on the environment. Her knowledge in biology aids her understanding of the current global issues faced by the environment and her works aim to spread knowledge and awareness about these issues in hopes to better tackle them (Young, My Own Words). Her commitment to sustainability aligns with that of

Papanek's. He is regarded to be a pioneer of sustainability as he was one of the first few who shed light on its importance in the design world.

Catherine Sarah Young's works exemplify and represent a contemporary interpretation of Victor Papanek's principles and vision of sustainable design. Her integration of art, design, science and social engagement is truly one of a kind and echoes Papanek's beliefs and ideologies. Through her innovative projects and her efforts, she inspires and educates her audiences to delve deeper into the matter of sustainability and environmental injustices.

In conclusion, the relevance of Victor Papanek's ideas highlight the sheer importance of sustainable design and its crucial role in addressing and tackling environmental challenges. Embracing principles of social and ethical responsibility,, he believed that designers are a key factor in shaping a sustainable future that is beneficial to all (Vezzoli et. al, Design for Environmental Sustainability).

Papanek's thoughts and ideas are resonated by various designers in the world who follow his path and advocate his ideologies. His emphasis of designing for the well being of all people without destroying and exploiting their surroundings is strongly reflected in Catherine Sarah Young's art works as well. The worsening climate change, increasing loss of biodiversity and the depletion of resources are matters that are strongly addressed by both designers. The two uniquely expressed the dire need for every individual to be socially and environmentally responsible and their works will continue to inspire designers to reflect and include ethical practices into their own works for years to come (Wakkary et. al, Green practices).

## II. RESEARCH

I first made a list of what to cover in the essay:

1. Introduction
  - Introduce the topic
2. Historical Context
  - Discuss the rise of plastics
  - What WERE its environmental implications ?
3. Victor Papanek's Work
  - Explore Papanek's key ideas and principles regarding socially and environmentally responsible design
  - Analyze why Papanek's work was considered representative of the new design trend emerging in response to the environmental impacts of plastics.
4. Relevance of Papanek's Ideas Today
  - Evaluate the continued relevance of Papanek's ideas in the contemporary design landscape.
  - Discuss how his principles address current environmental challenges and shape sustainable design practices today.
5. Designer: Catherine Sarah Young (found from a website that listed designers with principles similar to papanek)
  - Introduce Young and her approach to sustainable design.
  - Analyze how Young's practice aligns with Papanek's vision of a more sustainable approach to design.
  - Provide examples of Young's work and its impact on promoting sustainability in design.
6. Conclusion
  - Summarize the main arguments presented in the essay.
  - Reflect on the enduring relevance of Papanek's ideas and the importance of sustainable design in addressing contemporary environmental challenges.

I then read books, articles and academic papers on Plastics, Victor Papanek and Catherine Sarah Young and began to write my essay.

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