

# Here by Design

James Boyd-Brent and Lindsay Shen



Here by Design,

# Recycling as a Design Aesthetic

**R**ecycling reflects a more integrated way of thinking about our passage through the world. In the process of recycling we re-appraise the value of things—we take a closer look at what's of value, and consider how to avoid throwing it away. Designers might embrace recycling in order to acquire an interesting material, or one that's too expensive to produce. Recycling is also part of the design process: designers reuse concepts, methods, styles, meanings, and values by constantly drawing on, and reacting to, a vast array of sensibilities. In effect, design recycles itself.

In reality though, neither the world nor design is self-regenerating. Plato's description of the world as a self-sustaining Ouroborus<sup>1</sup> is a little out of step with a central impetus behind recycling—a sense that the world is composed of a multiplicity of interdependent physical, geographical, mental, social and spiritual layers of existence. For many people the question is: how do we make sense of all of this complexity? This essay is about how designers, reflecting this sensibility, enthusiastically employ recycling as a design aesthetic, and create new meanings from old materials.

For Stanley Shetka, the owner of All Paper Recycling, Inc. in New Prague, recycling is a practical necessity, stemming the flow of waste in modern consumerism—material resources are precious, and *any* waste of materials is excessive. Involvement in the “local” is also central in his design thinking. Referring to himself as “community artist” he states that “the impetus for my evolving aesthetically comes from involvement in community.”<sup>2</sup> While he brings economic vitality and a certain desirable fame to the community (New Prague is periodically visited by international television crews who have come to interview him about recycling), it in turn provides him with materials to recycle (mostly paper by-product), a workable location (factory space for a provisional three-year start up period), and local investment from a consortium of community investors.

According to Shetka, twenty-six lbs. of recyclable material per day per family living in the New Prague area is put in a landfill—it simply goes to waste. In mainstream recycling, he says, “they have the consciousness there, but the converters of the waste are not there yet. This is what I do.” His business is thriving because his building materials made from recycled



Stanley Shetka, Aveda Soap Dish, 1998.

Photograph: Stanley Shetka.

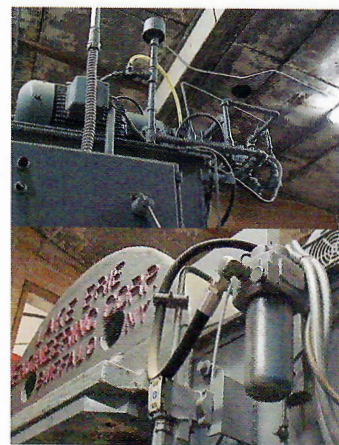


All Paper Recycling, Inc.

paper are cheaper to produce than regular materials, and their production does not entail the use of toxins or the wasting of water. Normally, virgin pulp has to be added to recycled paper pulp in order to make paper. It can be recycled possibly six or seven times before it deteriorates and has to be discarded. Shetka however, has developed patent processes that allow him to make, break down, and reconstitute paper pulp into furniture, building materials, and a wide range of objects, up to twenty-five times. "It's an entirely self-contained, non-toxic manufacturing process," he says.

He has recently finished a nine month product development contract with Herman Miller which will enable the company to use a wide range of their waste materials—fabrics, paper, plastics, sawdust, acrylic, wood chips, and so on—in the making of their own furniture. "When you mix materials like this it opens up millions of possibilities,"<sup>3</sup> he says enthusiastically. These products reflect at their very core the material as well as the artistic substance of the company.

Shetka sees All Paper Recycling, Inc. "more as a conceptual work of art than as a business"; apart from making products and filling orders, his business communicates an *idea* about how we should use materials in a consumer society. In all his activities—art, design, business, and as a teacher (he coordinates public school workshops and teaches at college)—he promotes the idea that design, local community, use of materials, and the global economy are intertwined. He believes it is increasingly important for a designer to be aware of the entire production process, from its financing to how the finished product will eventually be consumed.



Hydraulic Press at All Paper Recycling, Inc.

