

The Ecology of Eco-branding

ADRIAN PARR

University of Cincinnati

At the turn of the twenty-first century sustainability rapidly became the buzzword on everyone's lips, so much so that architects, educators, green activists, and scientists were no longer leading the movement. Put simply, it was not ideology that turned sustainability into a cultural hegemonic in America; it was the enthusiasm of the social field as it actively started to invest in green products, environmentally sound consumer activities, and socially sustainable ways of life. A case in point would have to be the monumental rise of Toyota's hybrid line. In the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks the military vehicle was domesticized and renamed 'Hummer'. Acquired by General Motors in December 1999, the Hummer flexed its fuel inefficient muscles in defiance against the rest of world with sales almost doubling between July 2002 and November of the same year.¹ Entering the U.S. on the heels of the Hummer, which gets thirteen miles to the gallon, sales figures for the Toyota Hybrid Prius, which in comparison gets fifty miles to the gallon, increased 82% from January 2003 to January 2004. By November 2003 twice as many Prius's were sold as compared to the H1 Hummer. Although these sales reflect market trends occurring at the margins (in America, at the time, cars such as the Honda Accord and other SUV models were the most popular) it still caught the attention of economists. The reason being, changes on the market's periphery has the power to influence the market overall because it can unmask new investment trends starting to gather steam throughout the social field.

On the whole hybrids continued to enjoy robust sales, with *Green Car Congress* reporting a 43.8% rise in sales between 2005 and 2006 alone.² In response General Motors developed their new green Hummer, which was showcased in the Los Angeles

Design Challenge. In concept the new Hummer O₂ was:

a fuel-cell powered vehicle with a phototropic body shell that produces oxygen (O₂) even while parked. The concept features algae-filled body panels that consume atmospheric CO₂ and produce oxygen that is released back into the environment. The O₂'s construction specifies the use of 100% post-consumer materials like aluminum for the frame and VOC-free finishes.³

What we have here is a fascinating hybrid formed out of an unlikely marriage between militarism (the Hummer was originally a military vehicle) and environmentalism.

This enthusiasm for all things green, has gradually woven itself throughout the fabric of social, economic, military and cultural life. Some might decry the response of General Motors, claiming it is simply a good example of the corporate world riding the wave of sustainability to the limit; others might hail the change as exemplary of corporations becoming more publicly accountable and using their own funds to invest in new green technologies. Regardless of the different conclusions reached by both sides, the evidence they lean upon uses branding as its premise. So, what is a brand? It is a product such as the Hummer; it can be a person like the former basketball player Michael Jordan; it is a place, for instance Champagne in France; stores such as Wal-Mart or Harrods in London; a city like New York with its slogan of 'The Big Apple'; a service, as is the case with United Parcel Service better known by its acronym 'UPS'; or even a company like BP. More succinctly, the American Marketing Association (AMA) defines a brand as the 'name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good

or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for the firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name.⁴

Predominantly, there are two branding positions: idealist or realist. The first maintains that the value of a brand is grounded in consumer perception such as the psychology and emotions of the individual consumer. Idealist's, like Theodore Levitt, hold that the value of a product is external to the product itself. Branding strategies that take this position as their point of departure set out to influence consumer perception.⁵ Evidently, the utility of the brand is not as important as the image or associations that the product conjures up in a person's mind (social status, style and so on). Carrying on from brand idealism, integrative branding presupposes the value of social networks in building brand loyalty and a sustainable brand image. In this context, the brand carries a social function, setting out to create a long lasting bond with the customer by promoting a set of values and attitudes that it shares with its customers. What is more is this public image of the company is supported by the activities of the company in the public sector. Integrated branding sets out to create a consistent customer experience of a company, whether this is communicated in the story, the media, or in the store itself. The idea here is that social capital is experienced differently to how goods and services are. According to this view, the clarity and trustworthiness of a brand is crucial to its success on market. Following on from here, integrative branding tries to engage the emotional and physical experiences of consumers in an effort to create a 'unique and compelling customer experience' as branding strategists LePla, Davis and Parker explain.⁶ What is important are not just the values, principles and stated mission of the company, or even its identity and the associations these form in the customer's perception, but also the story of the company, for instance the tales a company tells about where it has been and where it is headed to.⁷

At the other end of the spectrum brand realists, such as Kevin Keller, claim a brand is the property of a product.⁸ Furthermore the branding process is largely concerned with emergent products. That is, the image of a brand is not definitive, as an

idealist would posit, rather it is embedded in the product's characteristics. What this means is the brand constitutes brand image, not vice versa. For the realist, the brand comes into existence only once it finds a niche within object space, which is not to say that it is reducible to the space in which products exist only that it exists by virtue of the presence of other products in the same set. According to this view a brand is ontologically dependent upon other brands that together constitute object space; the success of any given brand comes from how integrated and unified the various brand elements are.

Whether we argue that branding originates in the image (idealist), or the product space in which the brand exists (realist), neither sufficiently address the positive power of branding because they all attend to power as a negative concept, one that constrains, manipulates and influences consumers. Branding can also be considered as a social network that empowers and is empowered by the social field. Taking such a position owes a great deal to the concept of power Michel Foucault developed and Gilles Deleuze expanded upon. For Foucault power is both positive and negative, it can be creative and coercive. Adding to this and leaning upon Baruch Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche for guidance, Deleuze suggests there is a difference between the systems of power Foucault's genealogy documents and the quality of power enhancement that comes about as a result of bodies affecting one another in their connection. What is a disciplinary and normalizing series of power relations (schools, hospitals, prisons) for Foucault becomes a power to affect and be affected in the hands of Deleuze. In what way then might branding increase the power of a body?

To borrow the formula Pritzker Prize-winning architect Rem Koolhaas uses 'shopping = ecology' because consumption has penetrated our collective psyche, morphing how we live in the world and perceive our environment. The *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (part of the Harvard Project on the city) an initiative of Koolhaas, displays a series of photographs, diagrams, charts, compiled facts and figures that together document how shopping has dramatically changed the city and the way in which we live in it. The equation 'shopping = ecology' defines the current state of the urban environment, which

polemically Koolhaas purports has become one big urban mall, as shopping has come to define how we experience the museum, hotel, airport, and even library – a case in point is Koolhaas's own appropriation of library technology for the shelves in the new 23,500 square foot Prada store in SoHo, New York. Whether it be the introduction of air conditioning, escalators, mail ordering, or more recently the Internet, technology has had an obvious role to play in promoting the telos of late capitalism (which Koolhaas argues is consumption). Instead of rejecting this phenomenon though, Koolhaas enthusiastically embraces it. His design for the Prada store in SoHo provides perfect testimony to this.

In effect, Koolhaas forged a new vision and experience not just of the high-end fashion store but the experience of shopping in general. The spectacular features of the store aside – which include a dramatic entrance made in a circular glass elevator on a single stainless-steel piston, zebrawood waves, surfaces clad with translucent cellular polycarbonate, and changing rooms where shoppers see a video image of themselves in the mirror – the new Prada is much more than the sum of its architectural and interior design elements, or even the overall experience of these which Koolhaas and Miuccia Prada exclaim will 'redefine the experience of shopping.'⁹ In reality what Prada spent \$40 million on was a clever branding initiative that reinvented the perception of the store and label in terms of the Koolhaas trademark. In fact, when hired to design the new store, Prada was not just asking for Koolhaas to simply revamp the image of Prada or revitalize the label through innovative store design, in effect Koolhaas signed on to be the new Prada brand.

Sarah Williams Goldhagen explains Koolhaas enjoys an almost cult-like status amongst young architects and architecture students, and we could certainly add to this mix the design world as a whole.¹⁰ Since the publication of his quasi-surrealist manifesto – *Delirious New York* – in 1978, Koolhaas has influenced the design world at the level of theory, criticism, pedagogy (most notably Harvard University) and his built projects which include an array of contributions to culture worldwide, such as the Dutch Embassy in Berlin, the Seattle Library, the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) McCormick Tribune Campus Center, and sig-

nificant additions to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The Koolhaas phenomenon is a brand in and of itself and as Hal Foster explains in *Design and Crime*, where once the mass product equated with the loss of the subject and an overall feeling of alienation, which together epitomize the age of anxiety, in the post-industrial age of late capitalism the commodity has been subjectified. In other words, the product we purchase is no longer merely an object anymore it is a 'datum to be manipulated – that is, to be designed and re-designed, consumed and reconsumed' and herein lies its productive power.¹¹ Put simply, it was the power of the Koolhaas trademark that defined the new SoHo Prada. This power was not simply a possibility it was implied in the potential connection between the Koolhaas trademark and the Prada label. What Prada paid for was to have this potential actualized. The power of the brand does not subjugate consumers it is enhanced in connection with other sensations, affects, and things. According to this schema when Koolhaas defines consumption according to the equation 'shopping = ecology' he is right on the pulse (although perhaps inadvertently so). Shopping = ecology because consumption is a process of affectivity.

We do need to heed some caution here though, because the connection between branding and subjectivity is not to suggest that today human subjects are obsessed with wearing designer clothes or driving the latest sports car, it goes much deeper than this. It has to do with the way in which branding is a molar subjective formation of what might otherwise be described as molecular experiences (which for Deleuze and Guattari are partial investments of desire). Prior to there being a subject who perceives the meaning of a brand, there are a variety of prepersonal images, textures, products, environments, partial histories, and stock market values that connect with one another gradually forming more and more regular connections. This performance of different molecular experiences are neither representative of the differences constitutive of life, nor are they grounded in a fully coherent subject. Rather, they create difference. If we adopt the approach Deleuze and Guattari take in *Anti-Oedipus* in our analysis of branding, the brand doesn't produce representations that regulate life; it is life that produces the brand. In this view, branding is nei-

ther purely realist nor idealist in outlook; it is an experience that arises out of a variety of experiences that are in turn irreducible to the experience of a human subject.

Although the brand idealist may posit that it is the individual's perception or psyche that is the focus of branding efforts, the point being made here is that branding is also complicit in defining subjectivity as a mass consumer. This is because branding taps into the affective charge of the social field working with, as Deleuze and Guattari might describe it, the productive potential of social desire. Desire in this context does not refer to the needs and wants of an individual subject, for Deleuze and Guattari desire is a process rather than a given entity or a subject who desires. Desire is collective because it engages and connects energies, affects and forces; all of which are prior to the fully constituted subject, animal, or plant. In this manner it is in desiring-production where the potential for change lies. Desire unravels the edges and configurations of bodies in its movement, connecting with other bodies and in so doing changing both. Accordingly, unlike Foucault who was to posit that power produces the social, they argue desire does. Any given social field consists of a multiplicity of affects, energies, and forces and these find investment in either open systems – which they call schizoid – or closed paranoid social relations – otherwise defined as fascistic. When the social field begins to invest its energies in buying and supporting sustainable initiatives, as the exemplary rise of the hybrid automobile demonstrates, then this energy is a very real resource that can be exploited and reterritorialized (when power plugs into the largely deterritorializing movement of desire) onto the production-consumption model defining the axiomatic of capital. This is how eco-branding works. Basically it plugs into the lines of flight operating throughout the social field, reterritorializing these as it codifies desire.

The real equity of a brand consists in how perceptions, associations, emotions, feelings, and memories align to produce what Foster has described as a 'branded subjectivity'.¹² In addition, what may superficially seem to be an ideological issue, whereby social affects are manipulated by the company (as greenwashing advocates argue), all eco-branding does is recognize that these

largely productive social energies and affects, that find investment in the sustainability cause, can be tapped into and strengthened (as opposed to controlled) in a way that benefits the bottom line of the company. The distinction may be subtle but it is critical for how we understand the difference between the theory of greenwashing and the more nuanced assemblage of desire happening in 'eco-branding'.

The U.S. group Corporate Watch defines greenwashing as 'the phenomenon of socially and environmentally destructive corporations attempting to preserve and expand their markets or power by posing as friends of the earth.'¹³ Greenwashing aspires to change the public's perception of a corporation by promoting a new sustainable corporate image and this image has an asymmetrical relationship to the way an organization does business. A case in point would be the multinational oil company, originally registered as British Petroleum (BP), which later took on the name BP Amoco after merging with Amoco in 1999. BP set out to redefine itself as an environmental company in 1997 when it withdrew its support from the Global Climate Coalition that fought hard against regulating greenhouse gas emissions, an industry organization established in opposition to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

BP re-entered the market with a fresh logo, a name change, and an aggressive marketing campaign under the guidance of renowned advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather. In 2000 the connection between environmentalism and BP was further reinforced with the slogan 'Beyond Petroleum', a catchy way to repeat the old association all the while producing it differently. The slogan quickly helped situate BP in the object space of other environmental brands such as the Rainforest Action Network whose slogan for its alternative energy campaign was 'Beyond Oil'. The strategy is a common one for those involved in realist branding initiatives – the equity of the brand is the result of how it finds its own niche within object space alongside other similar products that are used to both legitimate the credibility of the brand and which the new brand also differentiates itself from.

In BP's 'Environmental and Social Review', it was clearly stated from the outset that 'Financial per-

formance must be accompanied by high standards of environmental and social performance.¹⁴ Some examples include a new service station concept for Madrid, that includes solar power, wind energy and the recycling of car wash water; the creation of a habitat reserve in downtown Calgary; financial support for a mentoring and tutoring program in Singapore for young offenders; as well as BP employees from Houston volunteering their time and labor to repaint and renovate the houses of older residents. How well does the new green face of BP hold up over time?

Working back in time and starting in July 2007, the *Chicago Tribune* reported the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the state of Indiana had given BP an exemption from the provisions outlined in the *Clean Water Act*, allowing the company to dump approximately 4,925 pounds of sludge and 1,584 pounds of ammonia into Lake Michigan. Then, there is the lawsuit Colombian farmers waged against the company after they had been forcibly removed from their farms to make way for a 450-mile BP pipeline. The farmers had been intimidated by Colombian paramilitary groups to relocate to nearby towns where they lived in slum conditions. After taking their case to the High Court in London where BP faced a charge of human rights abuses, the two sides came to a mutual agreement prior to the case going to trial. Moving slightly further back in time to March 24, 2005 when the U.S. Texas refinery exploded, killing fifteen people and injuring over one hundred and seventy others, BP was fined \$21,361,500 dollars by the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for violating safety regulations that resulted in the explosion.¹⁵ Not far behind, was the leakage from a corroded Alaskan pipeline that saw approximately 270,000 gallons of crude oil spill throughout the North Slope.¹⁶

Assessing the eco-effectiveness of a corporation does not merely entail listing a series of environmental abuses, which is not to say these are not important, however, it is critical we understand that the underlying problem of how the corporate sector is using sustainability ultimately concerns relations of power and this cannot be turned into an exercise in accounting, a simple tally of credits and debits and the inconsistencies these create. We need to ask the difficult question of how

the affect and sense of sustainability as it moves through the social field reconstitutes the site where power lies (capitalism and militarism); then from here, we need to flesh out the real effects of this reconfiguration by asking what kinds of sustainability these have produced. For instance, how is eco-branding a form of subject production? What subjects does it participate in the production of? Examples include the militarized subject, branded subjects, gendered subjects, and the colonized subject, all of whom are in some way configured through cultural constructions of sustainability that together shape the material conditions of our lives.

To add to Foster, although the subject is the effect of concrete branding experiences it also projects beyond what is given, imagining an unforeseeable dimension that will come to be in the future. The power of eco-branding lies here in its ability to extend concrete experiences without necessarily starting out with the experiences of a fully coherent subject, but nevertheless forming connections that creatively traverse experience in general to generate new affects – an eco-branded subjectivity. This position is certainly at odds with the arguments put forward by critics of greenwashing, who presuppose that the greenwash is effective because it relies upon misusing a representation of what we already know or are familiar with. Undeniably, it is in their inability to recognize the productive, not simply coercive power of branding where the theory of greenwashing ultimately fails. To simply focus on the way in which sustainability is fetishized as it enters a capitalist system of exchange and consumption leaves the productive aspect of eco-branding, which embodies a whole series of social relations, unaddressed. Instead of commencing from the position that the brand is real, to put the Deleuzian concept of desire to work in our analysis invites us to historicize a brand and in so doing we also unmask its material and dialectical conditions.

Following the historical lines of branding inscription and construction and the ways in which these are entangled in the simultaneity of militarism and late capitalism is crucial to understanding the affective dimension of branding. Hence, although we have put Koolhaas' formula of 'shopping = ecology' to idiosyncratic use the formula invites us to consider the activity of shopping and its con-

nection to branding as an important mode of historical analysis. It also helps us understand more current eco-branding efforts as part of a process of continual process of construction and reconstruction. Equally important, the power to affect and be affected indicative of this process is not metaphorical it is a concrete condition none different to ecological processes whose dynamism emanates out of a material affection.

ENDNOTES

1. According to statistics compiled by *Autodata*, sales figures for the Hummer H1 and H2 in July 2002 were 1,922 and in November 2002 this figure escalated to 3,933. http://www.motorintelligence.com/m_frameset.html. Accessed July 18, 2007.
2. 'GM's Design Concept HUMMER O2: Fuel Cell HUMMER That Breathes', *Green Car Congress*, July 18, 2007, http://www.greencarcongress.com/2006/03/february_2006_u.html. Accessed July 18, 2007.
3. 'February 2006 US Hybrid Sales Up 44% from Prior Year; Prius Down 7.5%', *Green Car Congress*, March 7, 2006, http://www.greencarcongress.com/2006/11/gms_design_conc.html. Accessed July 18, 2007.
4. 'Brand', *American Marketing Association*, <http://www.marketingpower.com/mg-dictionary-view329.php>. Accessed August 2, 2007.
5. See Levitt, Theodore. *The Marketing Mode* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).
6. LePla, Joseph, Susan Voeller Davis and Lynne M. Parker. *Brand Driven: The Route to Integrated Branding Through Great Leadership* (London: Kogan Page, 2003), 38.
7. *Ibid.*, 41.
8. See Keller, Kevin L. *Strategic Brand Management* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).
9. Cited in Williams Goldhagen, Sarah. 'Kool Houses, Kold Cities', *American Prospect*, Vol. 13, No. 11, June 17, 2002, 29.
10. *Ibid.*, 30.
11. Foster, Hal. *Design and Crime (and other diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2002), 21.
12. *Ibid.*, 18.
13. *Friends of the Earth*, http://www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/corporates/news/earth_summit/23_august.html. Accessed August 21, 2007
14. 'BP Annual Report and Accounts 2000', (London: BP Amoco, 2001), 20.
15. 'National News Release: USDL 05-1740', *OSHA National News Release*, September 22, 2005, http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_table=NEWS_RELEASES&p_id=11589. Accessed on July 17, 2007.
16. Stupak, Bart. 'Stupak BP Hearing Statement', *News from Congressman Bart Stupak*, September 7, 2006, http://www.house.gov/list/press/mi01_stupak/090706BPHearingStatement.html, Accessed on July 17, 2007. At the time, Bart Stupak was the Michigan Democrat and Chairman of the House Energy Committees subcommittee.