Concept

Design for the real world

Victor Papanek's idea that design has a social responsibility: it should meet the real needs of people and the environment, not just create wants in order to sell.



In Spanish
Diseño para el mundo real

Origin
Papanek (1971)

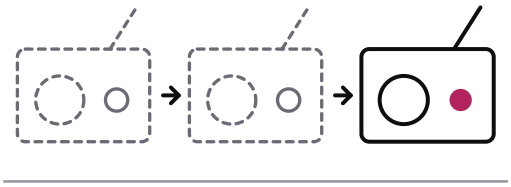
What problem it addresses

It was one of the first deep critiques of the profession. It left design with a question for every brief: who does it serve, and who does it leave out?

An example

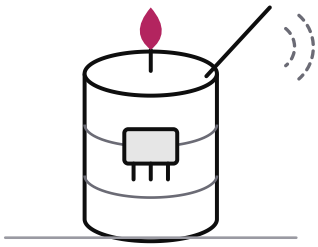
Two radios. The first is an illustrative example; the second was made by Victor Papanek and George Seeger in 1962.

For the market



A radio that gets a new casing every season. **It answers a want created by fashion.**

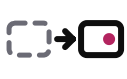
For a need



A transistor inside a used tin can, powered by paraffin and a wick. **Anyone can build it for very little money.**

Papanek wasn't asking for ugly radios: he was asking design to also work for people the market ignores.

Why it happens

1 

Much design serves fashion, with products replaced when there's no need to.

2 

Meanwhile, other needs are left out, such as aids for people with disabilities or devices against pollution.

3 

So he proposes sharing out time: part of every designer's work, for those needs.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Before taking on a brief, ask what need it meets and who is left out.

Avoid

Changing a product just so the previous one looks old.

Don't fall for it

Meeting needs isn't deciding for others: ask the people who have them.

1 in

What the research says

Papanek proposed that every designer give a tenth of their time and talent to social needs (Papanek, 1971).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** It is a proposal, not a measured result. Many at the time found it naive, yet the book has been translated into at least 23 languages (Twemlow, 2018).

Connections

Used in

- Inclusive design
- Sustainable design

Related to

- Form follows function
- Social model of design
- Planned obsolescence

Authors and works

1971	**Victor Papanek**	Accused industrial design of serving consumption and proposed that it also work for the needs the market ignores.
2018	**Alice Twemlow**	Reconstructed how the book was received, between critics who found it naive and rejection by the US industrial designers' society.

Sources

Original sources

- Papanek, V. (1971). Design for the real world: Human ecology and social change. Pantheon Books.
- Margolin, V., & Margolin, S. (2002). A “social model” of design: Issues of practice and research. Design Issues, 18(4), 24–30. View source (https://doi.org/10.1162/074793602320827406)

Secondary sources

- Twemlow, A. (2018). Design for the real world and its temporal slippages. In M. Kries, A. Klein, & A. J. Clarke (Eds.), Victor Papanek: The politics of design. Vitra Design Museum.
- MAK – Museum für angewandte Kunst (n.d.). Tin can radio. MAK Sammlung Online. Consultado el October 30, 2026. View source (https://sammlung.mak.at/en/collect/tin-can-radio-monoempfaenger_193040)

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