Degrowth: Japan models design for steady state economies

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What if the design economy was based on the value of stasis (i.e. stability) not perpetual growth?

American essayist and environmentalist Edward Abbey provides the most provocative quote about the culture of perpetual economic growth:

> Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.

Sadly for the design community, we are deeply implicated in this cancerous ideology. The 2007 video the Story of Stuff shows how designers helped the post World War II United States Government create an economy of perpetual growth:

> So, I was reading quotes from industrial design journals from the 1950s when planned obsolescence was really catching on. These designers are so open about it. They actually discuss how fast they can make stuff break and still leaves the consumer with enough faith in the product to go buy another one. It was so intentional. But stuff cannot break fast enough to keep this arrow afloat, so there’s also “perceived obsolescence”.

> Now perceived obsolescence convinces us to throw away stuff that is still perfectly useful. How do they do that? Well, they change the way the stuff looks so if you bought your stuff a couple years ago, everyone can tell that you haven’t contributed to this arrow recently and since the way we demonstrate our value is by contributing to this arrow, it can be embarrassing.

The Story of Stuff video.

Those of you who have purchased an iPhone 6 know exactly how effective product obsolescence is, and how the ideology has metastasised around the world.

Based on my previous research on national design policies, the majority of the early design policies in Japan, England, and the rest of Europe were created to drive greater production and consumption of stuff.

It is interesting to note the US did not require a national design policy because the military industrial complex met the industrial growth needs of the country following the war.

While many governments and businesses create policies and business models based on perpetual growth, it seems that we have reached the point where we can no longer sustain it.

According to UNSW professor Bruce Henry and PhD candidate Isaac Donnelly’s 2013 Conversation article, more than 40 years ago it was predicted in the report The Limits of Growth that growth in population and the economy will continue until about 2030, after which there would be a decline.

Many economies are already in decline. This year the digital magazine the Long+Short released a themed series of articles on stagnation, which explained from multiple perspectives what it means when a national economy has prolonged slow or no economic growth.
The model for the stasis economy is Japan, but it aptly describes the current and future situation in Australia.

Reported in last month’s Australian Economy Snapshot, Australia’s economic growth is at 2.5%. Its population growth is at 1.5% annual. And its inflation is at 1.7%. With the slow-down in the mining sector due to the cooling of the Chinese economy, Australia is expected to find itself in a long stagnant economic cycle.

The alternative models to the growth economy are the degrowth economy and the steady state economy. Last year, Samuel Alexander wrote an article on The Conversation about the degrowth economy:

> Degrowth means a phase of planned and equitable economic contraction in the richest nations, eventually reaching a steady state that operates within Earth’s biophysical limits.

He offers a vision of what life would be like in the degrowth economy, including suburban and urban farming, recycling clothing, participatory democracy, and renewable energy. I am specifically interested in what it means for design.

Because of its focus on the creative industries, the Cool Japan Strategy proves instructive for the degrowth economy in principle, if not in practice. The 2012 Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) states the country’s main issues with its economy:

> Japan’s nominal GDP decreased by 55 trillion yen over the three years from 2008 to 2011. Japan’s real economic growth rate fell to 1% and below during the 2000s. In the future, the declining population of productive age is expected to lower growth potential.

The Cool Japan Strategy sought to address its economic issues by using its creative industries – manga and anime, food culture, express delivery services, Japanese-style inns, and traditional arts and crafts – to transform the Japanese economy. What is important about the language of the report is that it did not speak about increasing domestic or foreign demand. It uses the words “unearth” and “incorporate” demand.

Conference program from the 2010 Cool Japan Tokyo Conference. Danny Choo/ Flickr

METI shifts the language because it understands the differences between creative industries and conventional heavy industries. The report describes creative industries as having four characteristics:

- Being demand side that appeals to sensibilities rather than supply side,
- Consist of two phases creation and distribution, which require environments that bring out creativity and the rewarding of creators with profit;
- Are integrative industries that transcend industries and occupational categories, and thus foster collaboration and require sites for gathering; and
- Enlarge the size of the pie rather than fight over pieces of it, such that one creation brings out a chain of profits that requires rules to promote secondary usage.

The Cool Japan Strategy shows how a design industry based on stasis operates. The products and services possess deeper meaning by tapping into people’s sensibilities or drawing upon traditional heritage. Work happens collaborative and harmoniously among industries in order to find the synergies that generate multiple streams of profits that feed into each other.

It seems to be working. The US$450 million Cool Japan Fund that was rolled out in 2013 has made great headway in its goal of transforming industries. Roland Kelts, of The Japan Times recently reported on its effect on the anime industry:
Its administrative arm, J-LOP, which distributes “Japan content localization and promotional support grants,” has proven a worthy and well-structured buttress to producers and artists who wish to reach fast-growing consumer populations beyond Japan’s borders.

The reporting on the Cool Japan efforts shows just how difficult it is to get away from the mindset of growth. And of course, not all of the Cool Japan programs are environmentally sustainable.

As reported in Bloomberg Business last year, the Cool Japan Fund invested US$15 million in cold freight storage facilities for Vietnam, so that Vietnam’s growing middle class can purchase rice balls and bento boxes from Japanese-owned convenient stores.

Yet, the Cool Japan program models how a new approach to the design industry might work in the degrowth economy, which we face in Australia, whether it is planned or not.

To paraphrase designer and engineer Buckminster Fuller, the best way to predict the future is to design it. The brief of design anthropology is to co-create the conditions for a design industry built on the steady state of population and environment.