

Repairing Australia's waste problem

1. Summary of impact

Australia has a growing waste problem which recycling cannot solve.

However, the role of designers in – and the community's attitudes towards – reusing and repairing objects rather than throwing them away remains largely unexplored.

The Repair Design team brought together design professionals, community organisations and the general public to discuss repair and reuse at a series of workshops and panel discussions around Sydney. They also garnered an impressive level of media coverage in support of the events.

Radio broadcasts, and mainstream web, magazine and newspaper articles deepened the debate and raised public awareness about repair and reuse. It also significantly contributed to the project team's research output.

"A lot of academics labour under the false pretense that research occurs in a hidden room somewhere and then communication happens in another disconnected sphere. But knowledge is given form as we attempt to express it. How we communicate our research is inextricably part of what that research is," says Thomas Lee, senior lecturer at UTS School of Design and project co-lead.

2. The problem

In 2016–2017, Australians produced 67 million tonnes of rubbish.

Since then, the situation has gone from bad to worse. China effectively banned Australian recycling in 2018 and the federal government is currently moving towards

barring waste export altogether – ultimately meaning more and more ‘recycling’ is ending up in landfill.

It’s increasingly obvious to all levels of government, commentators and industry players alike that we need to explore alternatives to dividing our garbage into different coloured bins (valuable as that may once have been).

3. Beneficiaries

The benefits of reducing waste are clear – less landfill, less use of natural resources and lower carbon emissions. Reusing and repairing rather than throwing objects away potentially benefits all Australians, and the planet. On a practical level it could save local councils – and their ratepayers – millions each year.

4. Approach to impact

One of Repair Design’s key aims was to kick-start informed and realistic conversation about what a healthy and visible repair culture might look like – to this end the team held workshops, panel discussions and even a reading group.

Through these events, they were able to tease out two distinct threads in repair culture. While ‘conspicuous repair’ deliberately stands out, is a way of signalling to others who we are – think Punk, the DIY movement or your local hipster café; inconspicuous repair is more circumspect – focused on simply returning objects to functional use, often as a way of saving money.

The team has also garnered considerable media attention, helping to raise public awareness and deepen the debate.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1 The outcomes

The project team hosted seven events (workshops, panel discussions and a reading group). They also gained considerable traction through the media – podcasts, articles, radio interviews and profiles with ABC Radio, Radio Adelaide, *The Conversation*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Vogue Australia* and *Medium*.

5.2 Impact

The conversation around repair and reuse in the Sydney community has expanded. Media coverage has raised awareness amongst people who might not otherwise have thought about the value of repair and reuse or the options available.

The insights gained from events will inform future research into the life cycle of everyday objects, particularly how the way objects are valued (or not) affects everyday behaviour.

“We’re keen to drill down further into the barriers to repair and how these can be overcome,” says Thomas.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

Connections with The Bower Reuse and Repair Centre in Marrickville and the E-Waste Watch Institute contributed significantly to various events’ success. It was also important to have faculty backing. Thomas is particularly grateful to the Design Research and Innovation Centre, which allowed the team to use their space for their events.

Without the Social Impact Grant, the project would have been considerably less effective.

“The grant broadened the impact of the event series and the scope of the research generally. We would’ve had to limit ourselves in terms of guest speakers without it, which would have detracted from the impact and quality of our events,” says Thomas.

7. Challenges

“Finding the time and headspace to work together in a strategic and focused way as a team on our objectives and strategy was sometimes hard,” says Thomas. “But we like working together so we find ways and we’ll continue to get better at finding time and bringing focus to the research in the future.”