Sentiment:
For the Love of the Object

Table of Contents

Introduction

Humans are designed to create connections. It is in our nature to talk to people, to empathize with them, and build a bond. It is how humans developed into the collective society we live in today. These bonds are so integral to our way of being we do it regardless of who, or what, we are interacting with. We talk to our pets even though they can't understand us, we yell at the TV when it doesn't work, we beg the roulette table to land on red knowing logically we can't change the outcome. But it doesn't matter what logic decrees, our desire to build this bond with whatever we can is stronger than any rational thought running through our head.

Nowhere is this more true than in the objects that surround us. They represent everything we believe in, have experienced, or want to show the world. Or at least that is what we hope they do.

In the modern day, objects have new meanings, and new problems, that create a barrier to the connections we want to build. There is a culture of consumption that has become more pervasive than ever. The constant buying and abandoning of objects around us has distanced us from their significance while littering our planet with barely used items. There are nearly 8 billion people on this planet and that number continues to rise, with each of us in this race to use and abuse all the objects around us. The rate at which we extract, consume, and dispose of natural resources is simply unsustainable for any significant length of time. Something must change. Objects must be used, desired, and interacted with correctly, or they can move from an expression of the self, to a barrier of growth, becoming an all consuming master that limits our desired expression.

How can we as designers create outcomes that rebuild the intimate connections between humans and our material possessions, making us truly appreciate the objects around us in an effort to reduce overconsumption?

Consumerism

The Perversion of the Object

We live in a world of extreme consumption that has been slowly building since the industrial revolution. Material footprint, defined as the amount of material to meet societal demand, has gone up by over two tons per capita in just the past 20 years (Our World in Data, 2023). Simultaneously the world population has gone up by over a billion, making this figure even more significant (Our World in Data, 2023). Tangibly this has been enabled by technological advancements. Factories and assembly lines allow products to be produced faster, new materials ease production and reduce costs, improved transportation allows broader shipping, nonlocal production, and a global marketplace. All of these factors reveal how we have entered this age of consumption but not why. The aforementioned technological advancements created an economy of mass production, able to meet our material needs in increasingly less time. However, under capitalism, an economic system that solely prioritizes profit and growth, this satisfaction of needs was unacceptable. As Edward Bernays, a pioneer in the field of public relations, states in his 1928 book Propaganda, "Mass production is profitable only if its rhythm can be maintained—that is if it can continue to sell its product in steady or increasing quantity" (Bernays, 1928). This is a very simple concept, supply cannot surpass demand, but if supply has already passed demand and continues to grow, what is the solution?

The solution is to artificially increase demand by moving away from a history of buying just to fill needs and artificially imbuing the modern world with a desire for consumption. As the head of research at General Motors in the 1930s, Charles Kettering, put it, "If everyone were satisfied, no one would buy the new thing because no one would want it. (Kettering, 1929)" Companies utilizing mass production shifted their design process "from fulfilling basic human needs to creating new ones" (Kaplan, 2008). However to do this, companies had to do more than just change the products they made, a drastic change in the culture of material goods was needed to create the correct social landscape to maximize their profits. As the world moved deeper into the 20th century this culture, coined American capitalism, was on its way to becoming the dominant way of thinking. American society began to focus on individualism and personal satisfaction as the best way to live, pushing aside traditional values of community and cooperation. Advertising throughout this time used phrases like "new world", "new heaven on earth", "the land of comfort", the land of "innovative ways", pushing an atmosphere of limitless growth and opportunity (Leach, 1994). The description of this culture in noticeably religious terms is not an accident. Desire for material goods became the dominant religion of the time. As mentioned above advertisers capitalized on this connection, relating consumption with very basic human desires, "the pursuit of goods as the means to all 'good'" and "acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness" (Leach, 1994).

Academics studying this topic mirrored this sentiment with William Leach describing this way of thinking as “the cult of the new” (Leach, 1994) and Jeffery Kaplan using the term “gospel of consumption” (Kaplan, 2008). Corporate America more than succeeded in its goal of pushing consumption, it created a society where the driving force in every aspect of life from professional to personal was dominated by one idea, commodity as salvation.

Objects have transformed from something that we use as self expression, a physical representation of our past, our relationships, our stories, fears, and desires, to an innate need required to bring us happiness. Something that defines who we are in society. Something that we feel empty and lost without. Yet there is a dichotomy that exists where these needed objects are fleeting in their usefulness. The elation they provide is short lived, before they become nothing, worse than nothing, something that is old. Requiring replacement with the newest model, starting the cycle anew. This cycle uses natural resources at an incredible rate. Taking no care for the longevity and health of the planet and the other species we share it with. Each object we use and dispose of creates more pollution through manufacturing and disposal that we as a society are unprepared to effectively deal with. Objects now control us, taking all we hold dear and using it to generate profit and excess waste.

Something that encapsulates this transformation from design for use, to design for consumption, is the modern razor. Historically razors were well designed for long use. Early razors in the “modern era” were straight razors (Fig. 1). Simple folding blades that were a sturdy metal construction and could be easily sharpened and repaired. Even the early safety razors had this robust design (Fig. 2). Being primarily metal and having the only disposable part be a small and entirely metal blade, that could still even be sharpened to prolong use. However today, most razors are primarily made of cheap plastic, easily breakable, and intended to be thrown away after just a few uses. Even “modular razors” with replaceable heads have issues. The reusable part is still often plastic, and the disposable aspect of the head is mostly plastic as well (Fig. 3). We are sold this product under the guise of convenience. They are easy to use, and you don’t have to worry about any upkeep or cleaning. But in reality, they are cheaply made, short lifespan products that incentivize, or even require, constant purchases for use, which cost the user money and create mountains of unneeded waste.

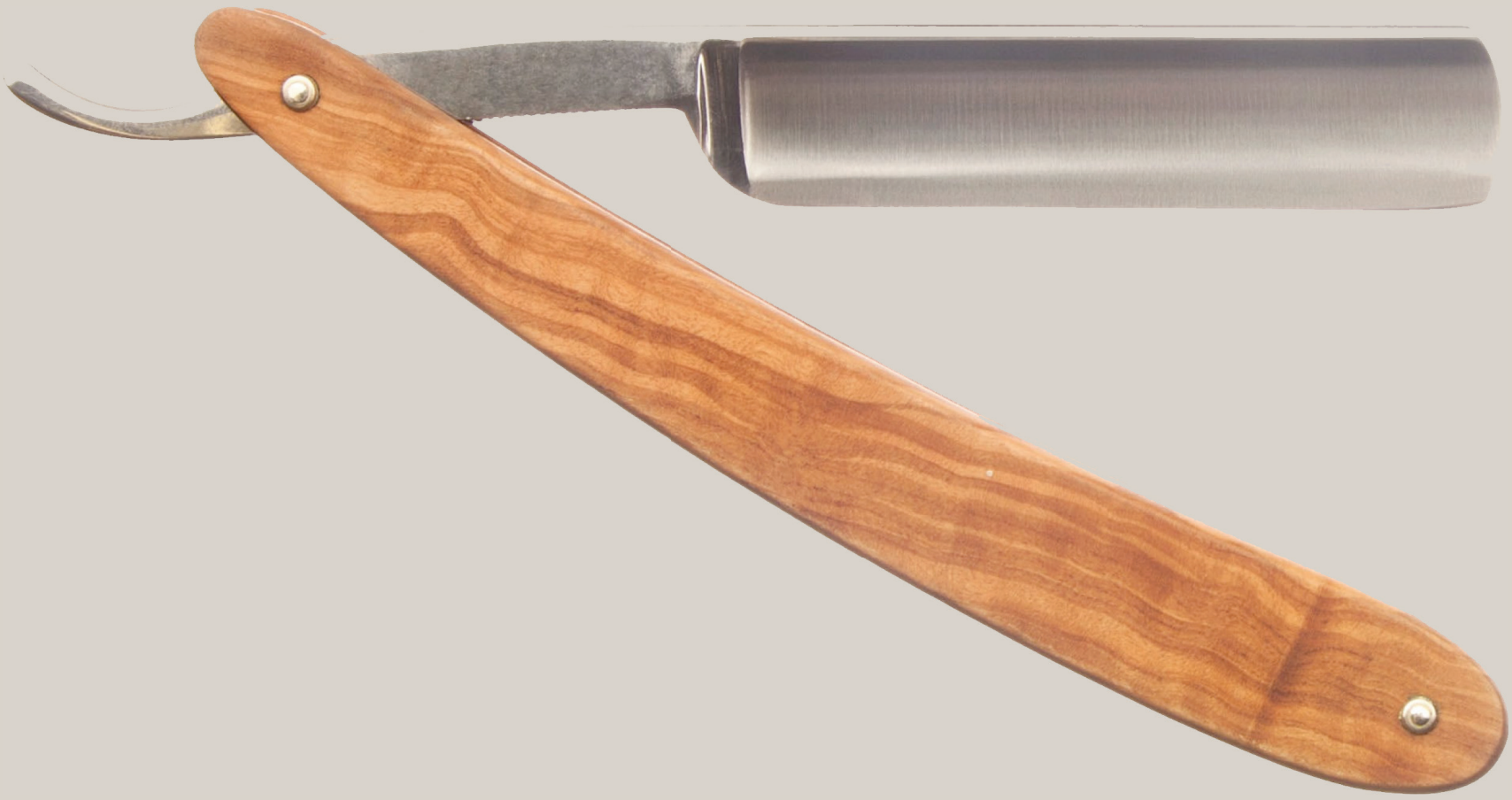

Figure 1 (Kost Kamm) Olive Wood Straight Razor

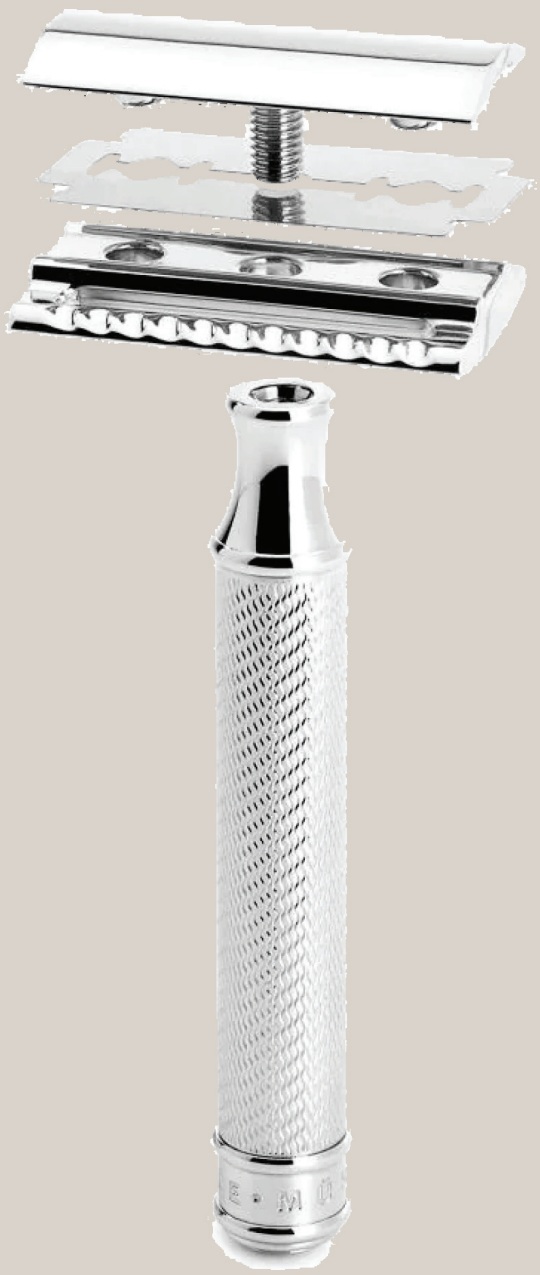

Figure 2 (MUHLE) Safety Razor

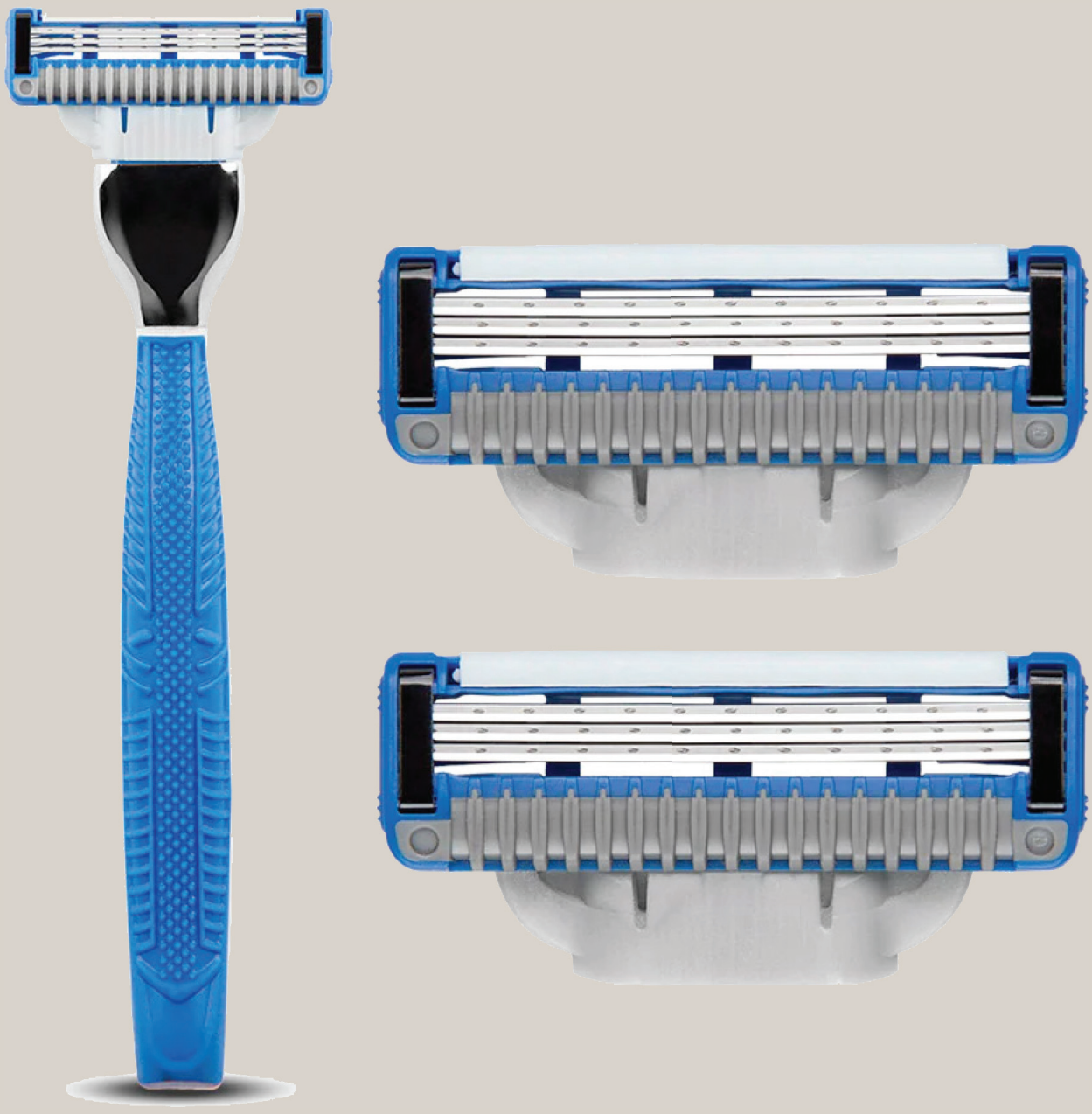

Figure 3 (King of Shaves) K3 Five Blade Razor

The Object
Personal and Societal Significance

The modern interpretation of objects is a new development, but we have always been a species defined by objects. From our use of tools to our desire to create art, human history has been driven and guided by our connection to objects. When you think of early human objects most people think of tools, stone axes and hammers, the technology that started us on the journey to the society we have today. And this is true, there is evidence of humans using tools from as far back as 2.6 million years ago, but humans don't just use objects for their utilitarian aspects (Smithsonian, 2022). For nearly 40,000 years humans have been creating objects to represent themselves and the world around them. From statues and paintings to jewelry and musical instruments, non-utilitarian objects have been an essential part of the human experience since the dawn of man (Smithsonian, 2022).

In their paper "My Favorite Things" Melanie Wallendorf and Eric Arnould discuss the idea of objects used for more than their basic utility, "We use objects as markers to denote our characters for others; we also use objects as markers to remind ourselves of who we are" (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). In this sense, objects are used for a utility, just not a physical one. We are complex creatures who live in a complex society. By connecting to the objects that surround us we are able to further understand ourselves, those around us, and all of the interpersonal relationships that connect the two.

A good example of objects as a link between people is the Japanese tradition of the princess tree. When a family has a daughter, they plant a princess tree, Paulownia, a type of very fast growing hardwood (Fig. 4). The tree then grows as the child grows, mirroring their aging and maturity. Then when the daughter is to be married, the family cuts her tree down and builds a dowry out of it, often a wooden marriage chest (Fig. 5). This chest creates a connection between this person's past, present, and future. It is a symbol of her growth, her marriage, and will come to represent the couple's future together (Roman, 2016).

Wallendorf and Arnould use a good metaphor to describe this complex relationship between humans and objects, "Objects serve as the set and props on the theatrical stage of our lives" (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). The objects are not the important part. The characters, their interactions, and their stories are the focus. Without them, the stage is just an empty recreation of the world. But the objects do have meaning, they exist to help us learn about each individual. Why this character would have this item, what is the personal significance? This is the importance of objects and why they mean so much to us, "Our attachment is really not to the thing, it is to the relationship, to the meanings and feelings the thing represents" (Norman, 2004). The object has fallen from this significance in modern times, becoming a shell of the personal and societal tool it once was, but that can change.

Figure 4 (MySeeds.co) Paulowina Tree

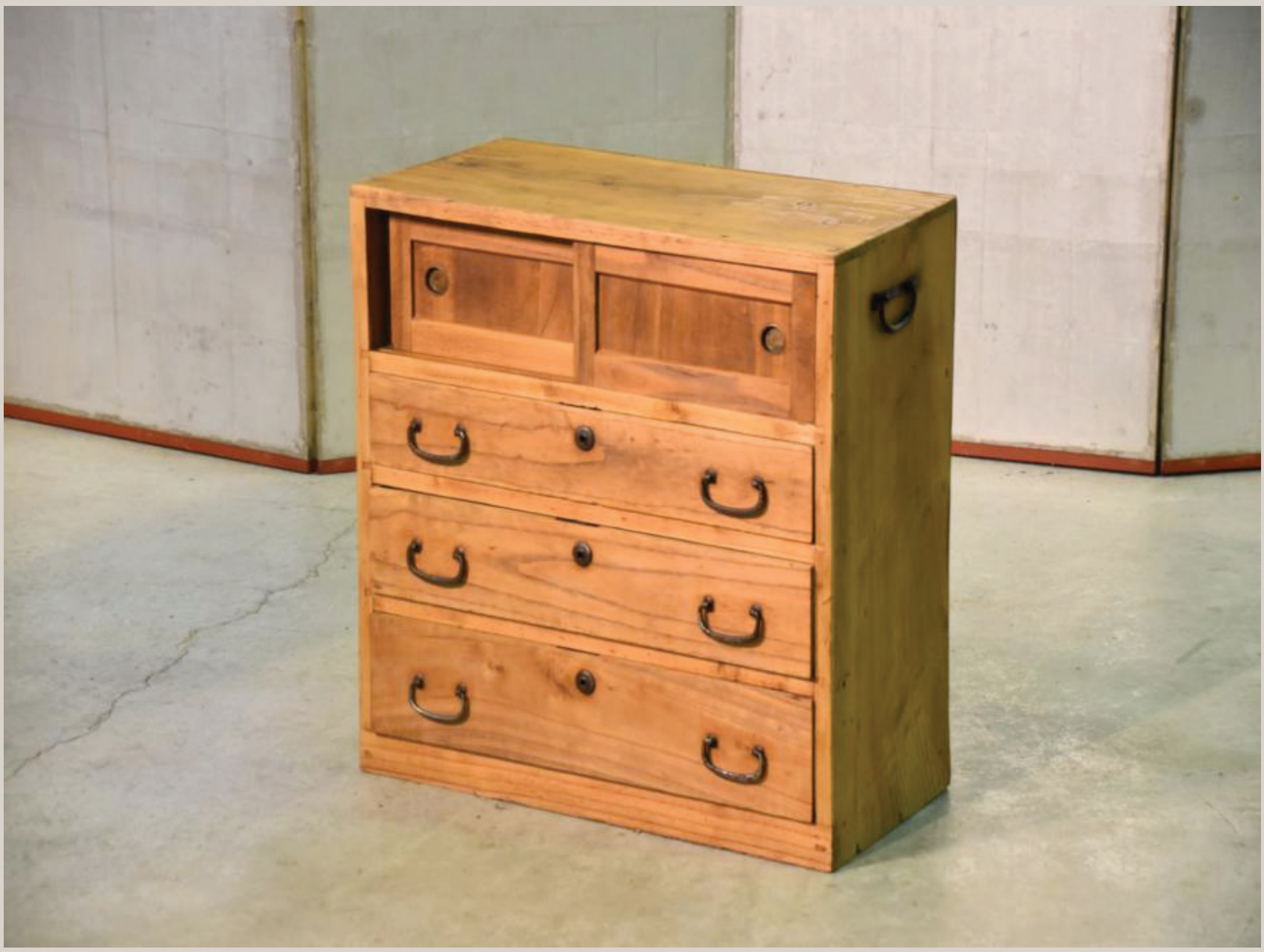

Figure 5 (Edo Arts) Paulowina Chest of Drawers

Sentiment

Love Without Reason

There is one holdout against this global culture of consumption, sentimental objects. This is a very broad category. There are no physical descriptions or signifiers that can allow us to pick a sentimental object out of a group. To be sentimental, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, "is to be related to feelings rather than reason" (Cambridge Dictionary). That is why it is impossible to define what exactly an object of sentiment is, the object does not matter, the emotional connections built between a person and an object are what categorize it. As Donald Norman explains in his book "Emotional Design", "Surface appearance and behavioral utility play relatively minor roles. Instead, what matters is the history of interaction, the associations that people have with the objects, and the memories they evoke. (Norman, 2004)" Prioritizing emotion and simply how we feel, over any sort of "higher level" rational thoughts enable objects of sentiment to disconnect the cycle of consumption that has become the norm and occupy a position that is reserved for the things we find truly special.

However, this point of view is often looked down upon. In an expanded definition from the Cambridge Dictionary, to be sentimental is said to be focused on emotional feeling "rather than by careful thought and judgment based on facts" (Cambridge Dictionary). This definition heavily implies that being sentimental is a bad thing and that tapping into your emotions is essentially lying to yourself, making rash and unfounded decisions based on whims. Sentiment is regarded negatively because it disorganizes the system of value we have in our current economic system. When describing the key tenets of the cult of the new, William Leach states, "money value (is) the predominant measure of all value in society" (Leach, 1994). This fits in with the narrative that mass production under capitalism creates. New is best, new is expensive, therefore expensive is best. Whereas sentiment doesn't care about "normal" values, any perceived societal value is superseded by the personal emotional value the object has. As Donald Norman puts it "A person's most beloved objects may well be inexpensive trinkets, frayed furniture, or photographs and books, often tattered, dirty, or faded" (Norman, 2004).

However, it is not just that inexpensive objects become valuable, sentiment also outweighs high monetary value, the consumerist value, of expensive objects. Beyond the obsession with high value, consumerist ideology requires constant turnover and replacement. As retail analysis Victor Lebow put it, "We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace" (Lebow, 1955). Instead of focusing on how much someone could get for this object or how its monetary value reflects on them, sentimental objects are cherished, repaired, and handed down. Their lifespan has no limit because their purpose isn't tied to a value.

Surrounding ourselves with sentimental objects will also have a positive effect on you personally. Not only will you remove yourself from the rat race of consumerism and all of the negative effects of which have been mentioned, but there are documented psychological benefits to the self representation and reflection sentimental objects provide. As mentioned above, sentimental objects allow you to tap into the past, recollecting past emotions and experiences. Social psychologist and professor of psychology at North Dakota State University Dr. Clay Routledge explains that this nostalgic feeling, "increases positive mood, self-esteem, feelings of social connectedness, optimism about the future, and perceptions of meaning in life. Furthermore, nostalgia motivates people to focus on cultivating meaningful relationships and pursue important life goals. (DiPrete, 2018)" When the objects around us have this sentimental nature, the positive, motivating atmosphere they bring will become a constant in one's life, even in the most everyday interactions.

Sentimental objects are the last stronghold of the true purpose of objects in our lives, to represent ourselves, our emotions, our relationships, and our past. By creating objects that have the capacity for sentiment we can improve the lives of individuals and society. For individuals, our mental and social positivity will be drastically improved and reassured, even in the smallest interactions. As a society, We can counter the effects of capitalist consumerism and slowly restore objects to their former reverence, reducing our society's waste and environmental impact.

Emotional Design

Sentiment with Intent

With all of this reasoning behind why sentiment is good and important, the question then becomes, how can all of this be applied within design? The answer comes from in the form of a field of design theory called emotional design. This field suggests that the broader design world is overly focused on tangible function. How things physically work and perform the duties they are designed to do. Though this mindset can create functional, and often times very useful outcomes, it fails to consider the importance of emotion in the human interpretation of the world. As Donald Norman puts it in "Emotional Design, "emotions are inseparable from and necessary part of cognition." As much as we like to think of ourselves as rational creatures elevated above the subconscious impulses that guide other animals, we are not. Every experience we have ever had is tied to an emotional response that guides our future thinking. Whenever we interact with an object, our emotions serve as the initial gut reaction we have. This is shown frequently in design when people simply like something, without being able to explain exactly why. In "The Meaning of Things", Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton interview a person about a personally special piece of art and why they chose to hang it in their home, "it's a picture of a ship, under water. There's a certain light effect, and color effect. There are rays of light coming down on the sunken ship. It's the first time we ever bought any art and I really enjoyed that, looking at it" (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 2002). This person tries to rationalize their decision, attempting to bring up artistic details about the piece. But this explanation seems shallow, almost unsure, Whereas at the end, their true reasoning comes out, they simply enjoy looking at it. You could attempt to explain this however you want but it doesn't matter, to them, to the user, the emotional response of happiness is their reason, and they need no other.

Emotional design can be used in regard to sentiment by going beyond just emotional reaction and into the emotional connections between humans and objects we discussed above. This can be achieved by creating objects that have physical traits which enable the possibility of sentiment. Two examples of that idea would be longevity and intentional bonding. Donald Norman describes the idea of longevity well, "True, long lasting emotional feelings take time to develop: they come from sustained interaction." Most of the objects we use today aren't even given the chance to be sentimental because of their intentionally short lifespan. Long length of life increases the amount of interactions, story, and emotional significance, as well as allowing the object to grow beyond one person. It could become an heirloom, a once sentimental object passed down to a person of significance, growing its sentimental value even more.

A specific example of this design principle in action are the Louise Carmen notebooks (Fig. 6). These notebooks are made with a leather

cover that can be switched between notebooks. The intention is that the cover will be on all your notebooks for the rest of your life, and will transform with use. leather's ability to degrade without losing its beauty or function creates a patina that reflects you alone. The scuffs, scratches, bends, and marks are all unique to your notebook, creating a catalog of your use, connecting you and your story to the object.

The second idea is an example of how intentional design can immediately improve emotional bonds between users and objects. Michael Norton, Daniel Mochon, and Dan Ariely coin the term the "Ikea effect" saying, "that labor alone can be sufficient to induce greater liking for the fruits of one's labor: Even constructing a standardized bureau, an arduous, solitary task, can lead people to overvalue their (often poorly constructed) creations" (Norton, Mochon and Ariely, 2011). When you take part in the construction process of an object, even in a superficial fashion, you build a connection with the object. That time and effort is used to build a base for emotional bonding.

This idea is used in The Handmaid Lamp, designed by Sergey Buldygin (Fig. 7). This is a simple and elegant table lamp that comes as a flat sheet of plastic and a few small parts. When received the user is supposed to bend and fold the sheet into shape, this process is reminiscent of paper toys children create and is supposed to encourage, "users to engage with the product on a more personal level, fostering a sense of connection and ownership. (Joshi, 2023)" This process is not long or difficult, it just takes a few seconds to set up, but this simple interaction creates a unique connection impossible to find in premade objects.

A final example of effective use of emotional design is the Alive Furniture series by Studio Osoh (Fig. 8). In this project they took furniture and without changing function at all, created a way to make the object multifunctional. Instead of the user just interacting with the object, the object can also feed back to the user, communicating in a way. Studio Osoh stated about their furniture, "By watching our project, someone might feel humor, someone might feel interaction and one may feel communion with the cabinet. Whatever they feel, we believe these moments make our lives richer" (studio_osoh, 2016). They realize it is not all about function, their intention is to make the user feel something, and believe that this will enhance the object and the user's life in general.

Though sentiment cannot be fabricated, it is unique between a user and an object, if a designer understands emotion within design they can create objects that, at a minimum, allow the potential of sentiment, and all of the benefits that come with it, benefiting the user and society as a whole.

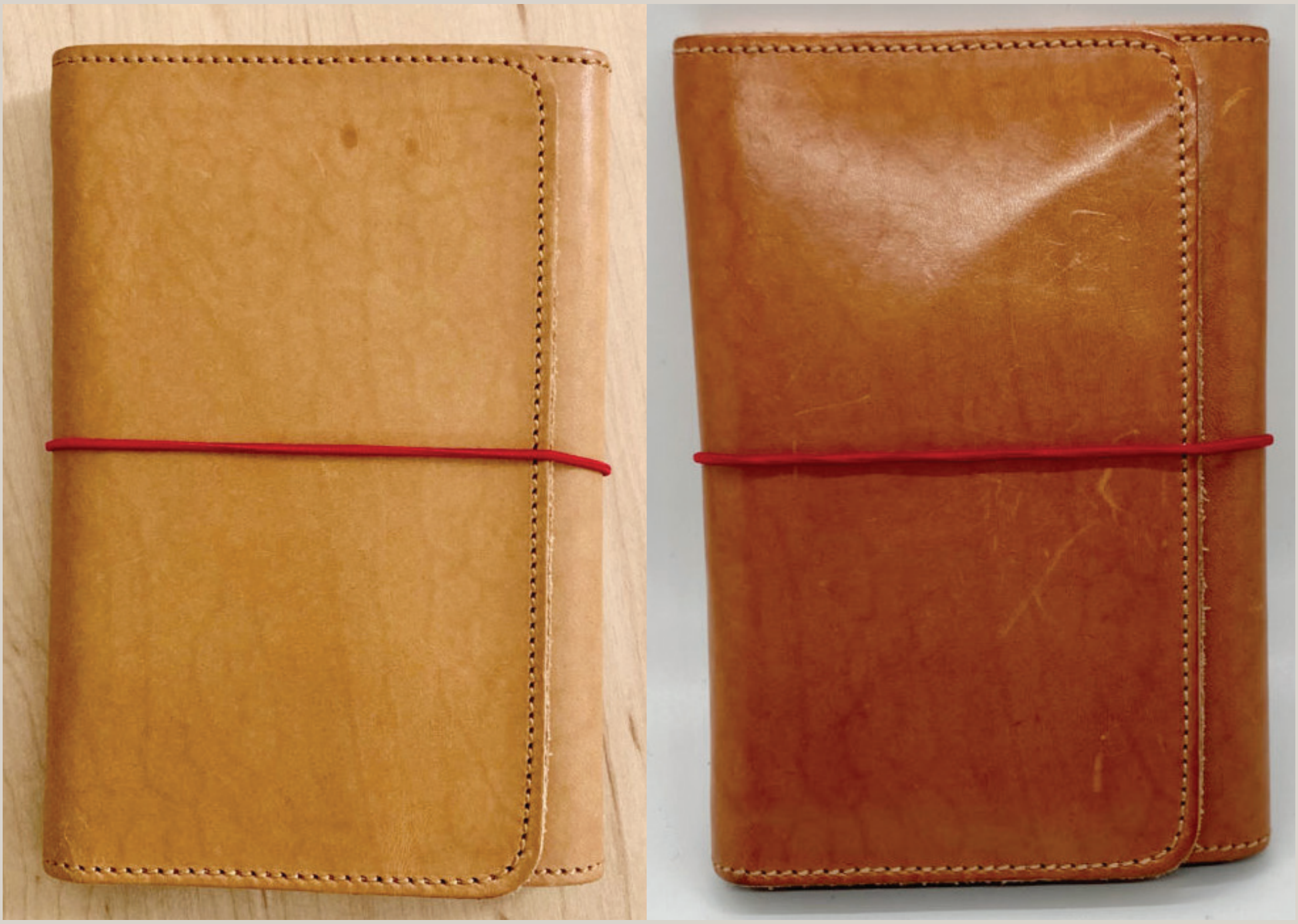

Figure 6 (Nifty Notebook) Louise Carmen Notebook: Before and After

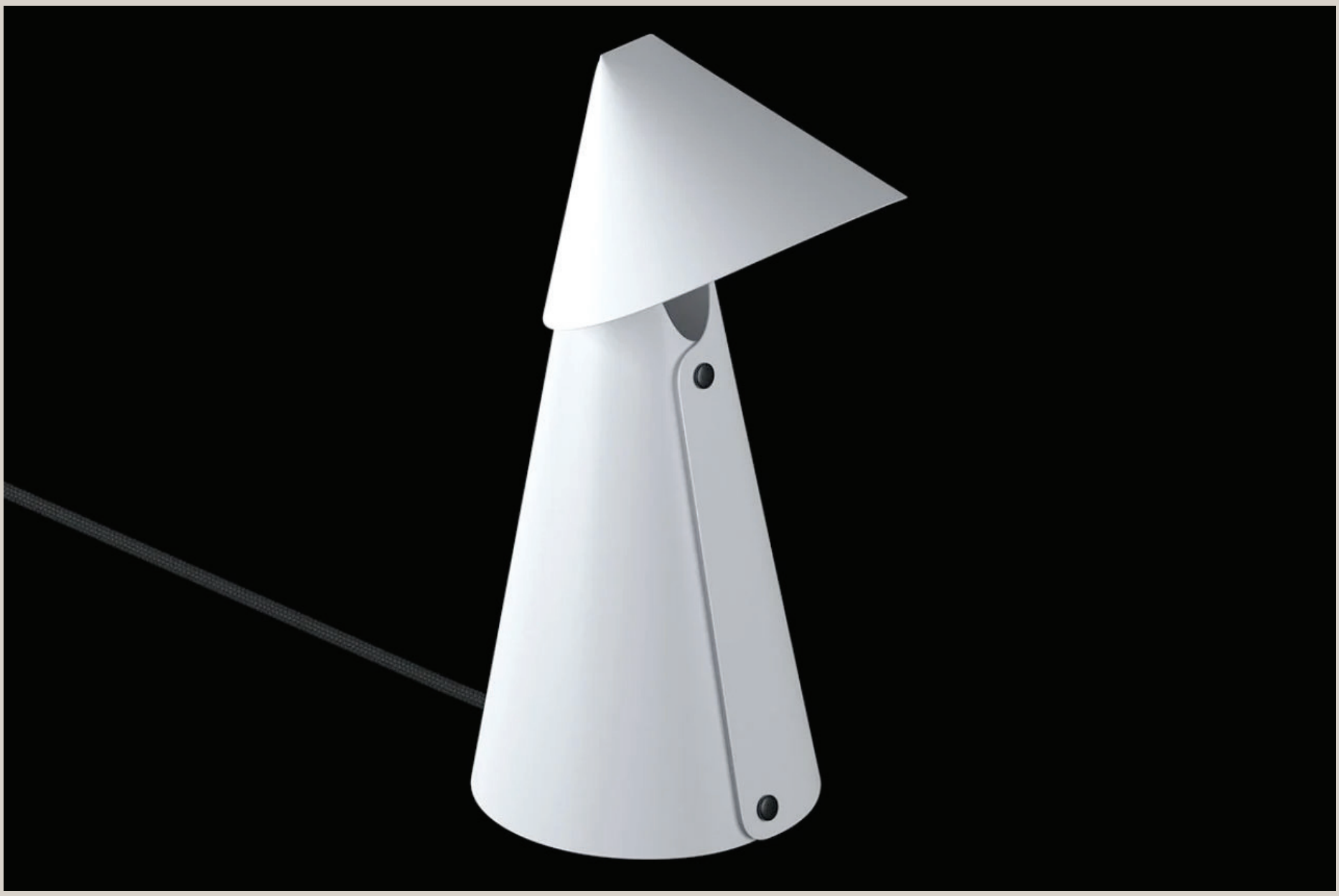

Figure 7 (Buldygin) Handmaid Lamp

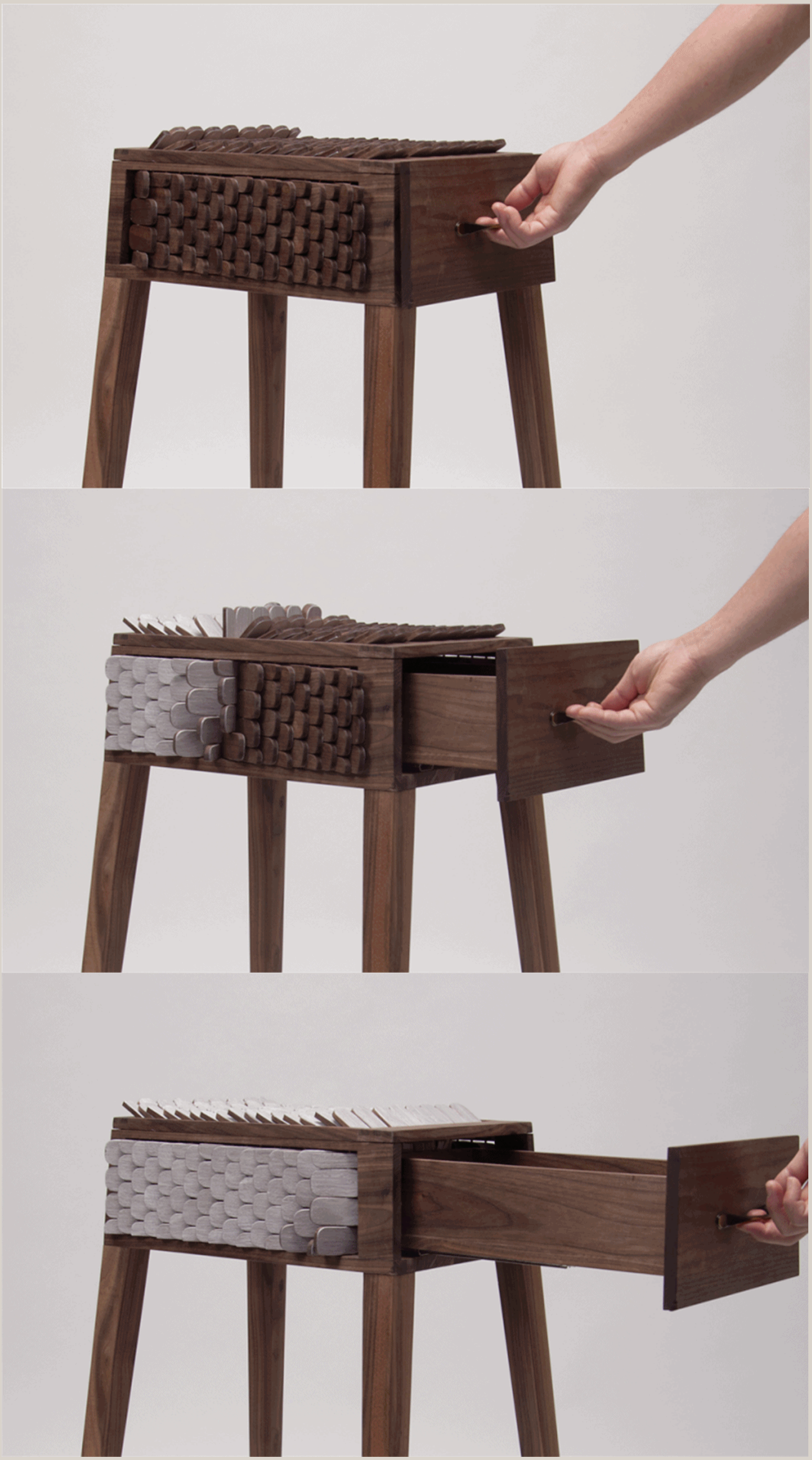

Figure 8 (Studio Osoh) Project Alive Furniture

Conclusion

The current relationship between humans and objects cannot continue. It actively hurts us as individuals, our relationships with others, and the planet as a whole. But we can change that, if those producing objects as well as those buying them commit to creating genuine bonds with the products they interact with. Users and producers need to adjust their perception of what an object is, both in our lives as well as in society, and truly understand the impact, both negative and positive, they can have. They need to revere their significance in our lives. Furthermore, Designers need to explore what makes an object important, how to create things we can cherish, and move away from designing with profit as the sole motivation. How can objects help our planet, our society, and the people within it to grow and become better?

Throughout the writing process for this paper, I have realized my own place in this culture. Growing up in the environment I have, I expected myself to be better at focusing the decisions I make in my life to improve sustainability and respect for objects. The city I grew up in, san Francisco, is one of the most sustainable cities in the world, and more personally my father is very environmentally focused and has pressed those ideas into my head since I was born. Reflecting on this has just made it clear to me how difficult even attempting to be anti-consumerist is. There are so many barriers that work against our ability to cherish objects, take them with us, and use them forever. No one person can make the changes required to truly have an impact, we as a society need to come together and demand real change.

Objects are not inherently bad, we have turned them into something unhealthy for us as humans, as well as unhealthy for the world as a whole. At their core objects can enhance our lives and enable our self expression and reflection. Sentimental objects are an example of objects that embody these positive ideas and show our material possessions can hold the same significance they once did. But we cannot expect everything around us to have that significance without tangible intention to make them that way. When a designer reads this paper, I hope they will begin to recognize the state of objects in the world, what effect that has on society, and work to create outcomes that work to reverse this transformation. Focusing on emotion, lifespan, and personal significance, in an effort to return objects to the beneficial place they originated from.

Bibliography
Text Based Sources

Bernays, E.L. (1928). Propaganda. New York: Horace Liveright.

DiPrete, J. (2018). The Benefits of Nostalgia. [online] Psych Central. Available at: https://psychcentral.com/blog/the-benefits-of-nostalgia#1.

Joshi, T. (2023). Reminisce Your Childhood Crafting Memories With This Night Lamp - Yanko Design. [online] www.yankodesign.com. Available at: https://www.yankodesign.com/2023/11/04/reminisce-your-childhood-crafting-memories-with-this-night-lamp/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=reminisce-your-childhood-crafting-memories-with-this-night-lamp [Accessed 8 Nov. 2023].

Kaplan, J. (2008). The Gospel of Consumption. Orion Magazine. [online] 1 May. Available at: https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-gospel-of-consumption/ [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Kettering, C. (1929). Keep the Consumer Dissatisfied. Nations Business. [online] Jan. Available at: https://wwnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch27_02.htm#:~:text=I%20told%20him%20I%20thought,with%20what%20they%20already%20have.%22 [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Leach, W. (1994). Land of desire : merchants, power, and the rise of a new American culture. New York: Vintage Books.

Lebow, V. (1955). Price Competition in 1955. Journal of retailing. [online] Available at: http://www.ablemesh.co.uk/PDFs/journal-of-retailing1955.pdf [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, E. (2002). The meaning of things : domestic symbols and the self. Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Norman, D.A. (2004). Emotional design : why we love (or hate) everyday things. New York: Basic Books.

Norton, M.I., Mochon, D. and Ariely, D. (2011). The 'IKEA Effect': When Labor Leads to Love. SSRN Electronic Journal, [online] 22(3). doi:https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1777100.

Bibliography
Text Based Sources Cont.

Ritchie, H., Rodés-Guirao, L., Mathieu, E., Gerber, M., Ortiz-Ospina, E., Hasell, J. and Roser, M. (2023). Population Growth. Our World in Data. [online] Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/population-growth.

Roman, M. (2016). The Princess Tree: Stories of Paulownia. [online] The Rikumo Journal. Available at: https://journal.rikumo.com/journal/the-secret-history-of-paulownia-wood [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Sentimental. (n.d.). In: Cambridge Dictionary. [online] Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sentimental [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Smithsonian (2022). Behavior | The Smithsonian Institution's Human Origins Program. [online] humanorigins.si.edu. Available at: https://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/behavior.

studio_osoh. (2016). Studio osoh_Alive furniture series. [online] Available at: https://www.studioosoh.com/alive-furniture [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Team, O.W. in D. and Roser, M. (2023). Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. Our World in Data. [online] Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/sdgs/responsible-consumption-production.

Wallendorf, M. and Arnould, E.J. (1988). 'My Favorite Things': A Cross-Cultural Inquiry into Object Attachment, Possessiveness, and Social Linkage. Journal of Consumer Research, [online] 14(4), pp.531–547. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2489159 [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Bibliography
Image Sources

Buldygin, Sergey. "Handmaid Lamp," Behance, 2021, www.behance.net/gallery/111383497/Handmaid-table-lamp-night-light. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

Edo Arts. "Small 1930'S Paulownia Chest of Drawers," Edo Arts, edoarts.com.au/product/small-1930s-paulownia-chest-of-drawers/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

King of Shaves. "K3 Five Blade Razor," King of Shaves, kingofshaves.com/products/k3-five-blade-razor-and-2-cartridges. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

Kost Kamm. "Olive Wood Straight Razor," Kost Kamm, kostkamm.de/produkt/steel-from-solingen-wooden-handle-olive-wood/?lang=en. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

MUHLE. "Safety Razor," MUHLE, muehle-shaving.co.uk/collections/safety-razors/products/r89-safety-razor. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

MySeeds.co. "Paulowina Tree," MySeeds.co, www.myseeds.co/products/paulownia-tomentosa-princesstree?variant=41914276708545. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

Nifty Notebook. "Louise Carmen Notebook: Before and After," Notebook Stories, www.notebookstories.com/2023/01/25/louise-carmen-notebook-review-part-1/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

Studio Osoh. "Project Alive Furnature," Studio Osoh, 2016, www.studioosoh.com/alive-furniture. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.