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**Author:**

Mate, Kirsty

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**Champions, Conformists, and Challengers: Attitudes of Interior Designers as Expressions of  
Sustainability through Materials Selection**

Kirsty Máté

*Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia*

**Abstract**

Whilst the uptake of sustainable interior design has increased recently, material selection has improved only slightly since the mid-1990s. This is probably because human values and attitudes have not changed significantly, despite the prominence of sustainability in government policy. This paper describes the results of a research project that investigated the sustainability values of interior designers and examined how those values shape designers' behaviour, particularly the selection of materials for design briefs involving sustainability. The project categorised designers into three groups according to their sustainability values: champions, conformists or challengers. A set questionnaire was used in interviews with 20 interior designers in Sydney, Australia to determine how they perceived their own sustainability values. They were categorised into the three value groups, and the relationship between their perceived values and behaviour was analysed. Analysis showed that the designers' perceived values were not necessarily transformed into behaviour; that the value groups took up ecomaterials at different rates; and that the groups had different levels of knowledge about sustainability. These results help to explain the disappointing uptake of sustainability in interior design and might suggest possibilities for effecting change in this area.

Keywords: Interior Design; materials; sustainability; Designers behaviours; perception values

**Background**

In the commercial world, sustainable interior design depends heavily on the selection of appropriate materials. The selection of inappropriate materials can result in considerable waste

of resources, as interiors are renewed—or “churned”—every five to seven years. Indeed, Treloar et al. (1999) suggest that, because of churning, the embodied energy of all of the furniture, fixtures and fittings can outweigh the operational energy costs of an office building in a 40-year life span. Clearly, then, there are heavy costs associated with the selection of unsustainable materials. Despite this, the selection of sustainable materials for commercial interiors seems to have improved only slightly since the mid-1990s. Sustainability depends largely on changing human values, attitudes and behaviours; (Mabogunje, 2004) however, when it comes to interior design, little is known about these changes, their effects, and how to influence them.

In 2000, a survey was completed in the United States for the International Interior Design Association (Coleman 2000) to determine why so few designers design sustainable projects. One hundred interior designers were interviewed, and the results showed that although 83 percent of the respondents understood the ethical responsibility to offer sustainable design options to clients, only 37 percent actually did so. This was because they lacked information, the client gave sustainability low priority, and/or both they and the client had reservations about ecomaterials (Coleman, 2000). This paper offers some further insight into this area based on new Australian research into the relationship between values and behaviours of interior designers.

Recent research by Nordlund and Garvill (2002) and Dunphy, Griffiths, and Benn (2003) provides a starting point for the analysis of sustainability values among interior designers who can be grouped into the following categories: champions, conformists or challengers.

### ***Champions***

Champions are leaders and initiate change in relation to sustainability. Their personal values are generally self-transcendent and incorporate equality, peace, unity with nature, social justice, loyalty, honesty, cooperation, and responsibility. They have “a stronger moral obligation to act to protect the environment” (Nordlund & Garvill, 2002, p. #) and would do so “even if these actions required the individual to sacrifice some material quality of life” (Norlund, 2002, p. 744). For example, champions might catch public transport instead of driving a car.

Professionally, champions are generally of two types (Dunphy et al. 2003). Some see sustainability as a strategic issue, which offers “potential competitive advantage” to their leadership positions, but they are still “motivated by intelligent corporate self interest” (Dunphy et al 2003 p. 16). Others have a fundamental commitment to sustainability and to the emergence of a society that supports ecological viability and to just and equitable social practices. (Dunphy et al 2003).

### ***Conformists***

Conformists accommodate themselves to the sustainability requirements of clients or legislation but do not initiate change. They could be described as “fence-sitters” or “swingers”. They are less willing to take risks that involve personal sacrifice but will follow regulations that require minimal self-sacrifice—for example, home recycling—because this is socially acceptable. The personal values of conformists can be both self-transcendent but also self-enhancing and might be in conflict—for example, they might publicly espouse certain socially acceptable ideals but might not act on these ideals privately.

Professionally, conformists also fall into two types: those with compliance values and those with efficiency values (Dunphy et al. 2003). The former group focuses on reducing risk to meet minimum standards and avoiding environmental issues, litigation/community action through

compliance (Dunphy et al. 2003). They are usually seen as good corporate citizens. The latter has a growing awareness of advantages to proactivity (and start) instituting sustainable practices (Dunphy et al. 2003).

### ***Challengers***

Challengers question the benefits of and remain sceptical about the advantages of sustainable practices. They have strong self-enhancement values such as social power, wealth, social recognition, ambition, and success. They believe in serving the individual rather than society (Nordlund & Garvill, 2002).

They are “less likely to protect the environment if other human centred values, such as material quality of life, interfered” (Thompson & Barton ,1994 in Norlund, 2002, p. 744). Even if they consider themselves environmentalists, challengers “do not translate their attitudes into pro-environmental behaviour” (Nordlund, 2002, p. 741). This is because they privilege the short-term individual benefits of behaviour over longer-term environmental consequences.

Like champions and conformists, challengers fall into two corporate categories—rejection and non-responsiveness (Dunphy et al., 2003). Individuals in the first category reject sustainability. They are hostile towards environmental activists, governments, and other corporations or community groups trying to achieve sustainability. Challengers in the second category have a “business-as-usual” attitude: they are non-responsive to sustainability either because they lack awareness or are ignorant of it. Financial and technological factors, rather than environmental ones, dominate their business decision-making.

This paper describes emerging results from a research project that uses these categories to investigate the relationship between slow progress in sustainable interior design and the values and behaviours of interior designers.

### **Methodology**

The project began with an interview survey of 20 interior designers from leading interior architecture and architecture firms in Sydney, Australia in early 2006. The interviews were conducted using a set questionnaire, which combined closed, open-ended, and true–false questions designed to investigate how designers:

- research and select materials in general
- research and select materials for projects involving ecomaterials
- perceive ecomaterial
- perceive sustainable design, with particular attention to their values.

These in-depth interviews, which took about 75 minutes, serve as a pilot study for a larger state-wide and nation-wide survey, to be completed at a later date.

Interviewees were asked to rank the following six statements (which were randomly interspersed among a total of 22 questions) using a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *strongly agree*; 5 = *strongly disagree*):

- *I feel personally accountable for the impact my designs have on the environment*
- *My firm has a proactive approach to sustainable design*
- *Sustainable design is the way of the future*
- *Sustainable design is not compatible with my design philosophy*
- *Sustainable design is not compatible with my firm's design philosophy*
- *Ecomaterials will only be selected if there is a demand from the client.*

These questions allowed interviewees to articulate their *perceptions of their values*. According to their answers, they were sorted into the three value groups outlined above. Subsequently, these perceptions were compared to responses to ranking-type and true–false questions that elicited descriptions of the designers’ *behaviour and knowledge* in relation to selecting sustainable interior design materials.

## **Results**

### ***Are Sydney Designers Champions, Conformists, or Challengers?***

Analysis of the interviewees’ answers to the six questions revealed that:

- 45 percent were champions
- 40 percent were challengers
- 15 percent were conformists.

The champions worked for firms that shared their design philosophy on sustainability and saw sustainable design as the way of the future. They also believed that they acted according to their own values, and took initiative in using sustainable materials in their designs.

The conformists all agreed that sustainable design was the way of the future, but were not prepared to accept responsibility for achieving it.

Generally, the challengers did not accept responsibility for their own or their firms’ roles in advancing sustainable design. Their personal values were often at odds with their firms’ values, and they only pursued sustainable design when required to do so.

### ***The relationship between value groups and material selection***

The results show significant inconsistencies between designers' *perceptions* of their sustainability values and their *behaviour*. The champions are of particular interest here.

For example, all but one (who remained neutral) of the champions disagreed with the statement *Ecomaterials will only be selected for a project if there is a demand from the client*. On the other hand, when asked the open-ended question *Why/when would you select ecomaterials for a commercial project?*, all the champions indicated that they would do so following a client request. These findings largely correlate with the research undertaken in the US, where it was found that 83 percent of designers surveyed prefer clients to specify sustainable design in the brief (Coleman, 2000). (See Figure 1, which shows the results for this question for all three value groups compared to the results for the whole group.)

Many of the champions also gave additional reasons for selecting ecomaterials:

- 67 percent said they would instigate the use of ecomaterials themselves
- 44 percent nominated personal values
- 22 percent said their firm's office policy would require it.

Moreover, 89 percent of the champions said clients had inhibited the use of ecomaterials in their office; 67 percent said clients (rather than designers) had increased the use of ecomaterials in their office; and 78 percent said education of clients and designers had positively influenced the use of ecomaterials.

These results reveal significant contradictions. Although the champions clearly believe *they* initiate the use of ecomaterials, their responses to the behavioural questions indicate that *clients*



are in fact the chief drivers; at the same time, many champions *blame* clients for inhibiting use of these materials.

The survey did find a strong correlation between the values of the designers and an increased use or specification of ecomaterials, as Figure 2 shows. As expected, the champions consistently showed the largest increases in use and the conformists and challengers the least. When these results are compared to designers' perceptions of ecomaterial qualities (Figure 3), it becomes clear that the challengers are more concerned about cost, sceptical about environmental claims made by suppliers, and suspicious about inferior quality and performance than are champions. The champions, who have increased their use of ecomaterials, predominately perceive ecomaterials to be of an equal or higher standard compared to other materials, but they are more concerned about the limited range of ecomaterials than are the challengers. The conformists, who like the challengers have not increased their use of ecomaterials as much, generally perceive ecomaterials positively but have the highest concern about the authenticity of supplier claims. These results thus suggest a positive correlation between use of ecomaterials and a more positive perception of their qualities.

Only marginal correlations were found between values and knowledge. To identify knowledge about ecomaterials, the survey asked designers to answer a series of true–false statements. These statements concerned both common and technical terms in sustainable design. On average, the group answered 64 percent of the questions correctly and 16 percent incorrectly, and did not know the answer to 20 percent. Figure 4 gives the breakdown for the different value groups.

On the basis of the results shown in Figures 2 and 4, it appears that champions have both increased their use and also possess greater knowledge of ecomaterials. Conformists know less about ecomaterials and have increased their use less. Challengers, however, know almost as

much as champions but have not increased their use, perhaps because they are more sceptical of environmental claims. It cannot therefore be said that there is a causal relationship between value group, knowledge, and increased use, but as more survey results are analysed, the meaning of this data might become clearer.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

The value group framework used in this research project has proved a useful way to identify contemporary sustainability values among interior designers. The project's results suggest that the slow uptake of sustainability in interior design in Australia might stem as much from lack of knowledge of sustainable materials and negative perceptions created through lack of use as from anti-sustainability values. As more results emerge from this research, the patterns and anomalies are likely to become clearer, suggesting possibilities for improvement in sustainable interior design, chief among which might be education and awareness campaigns.

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Figure 1: Designers' reasons for selecting ecomaterials

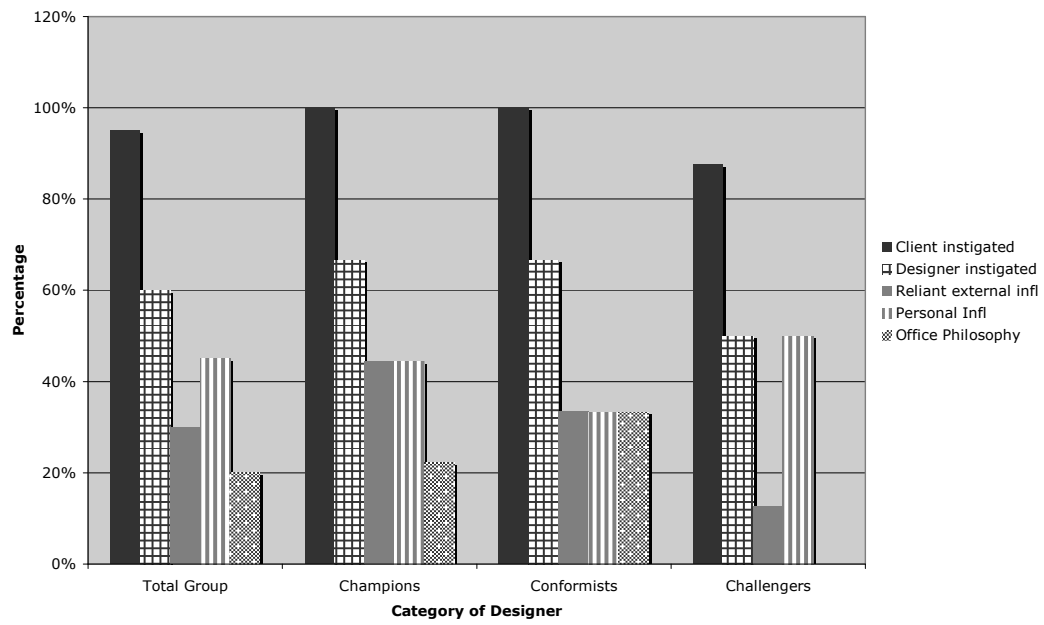


Figure 2: Increases in use of ecomaterials over five years

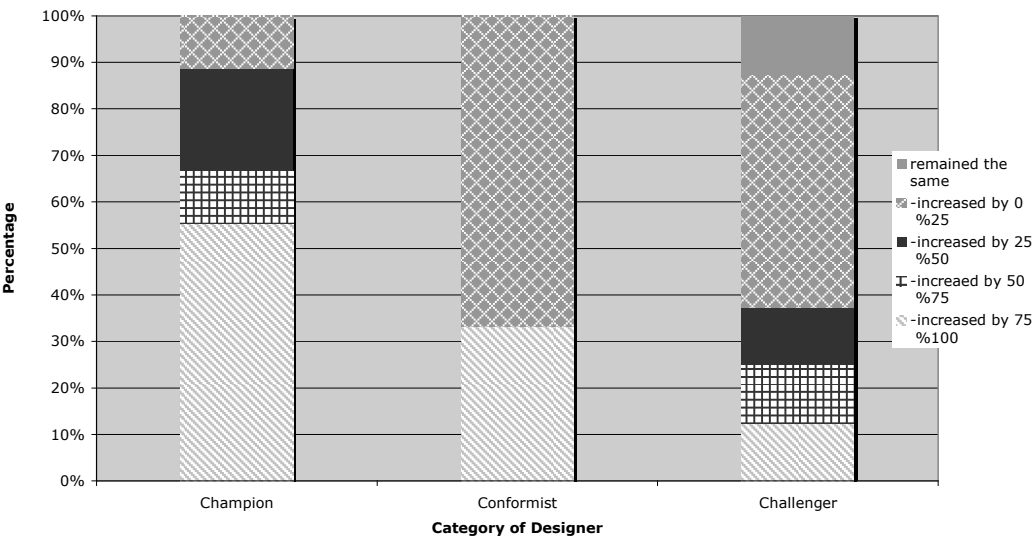


Figure 3: Designers' perceptions of ecomaterial qualities

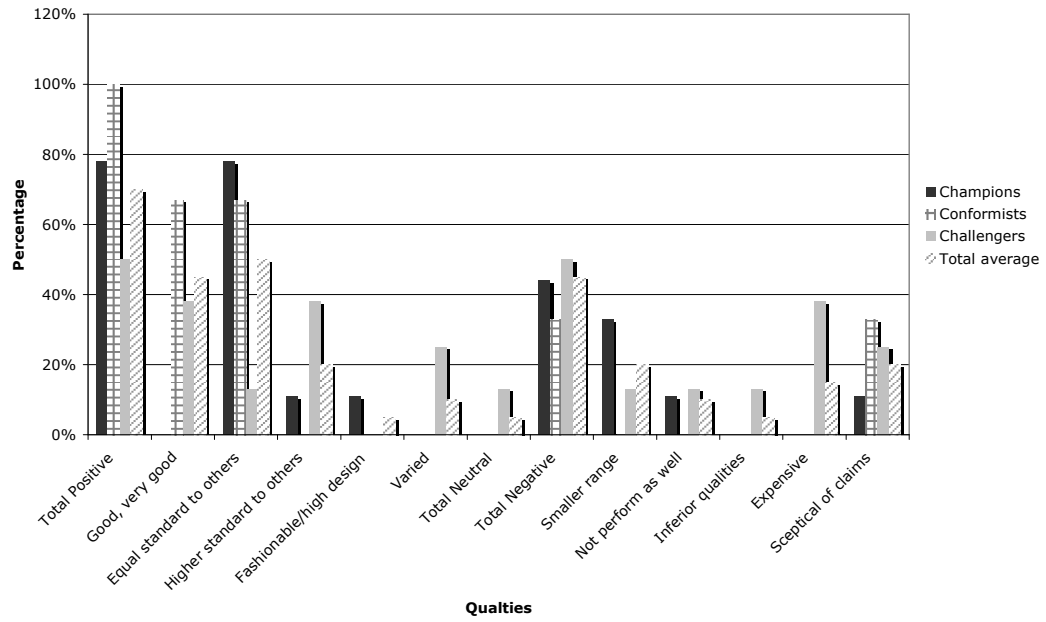
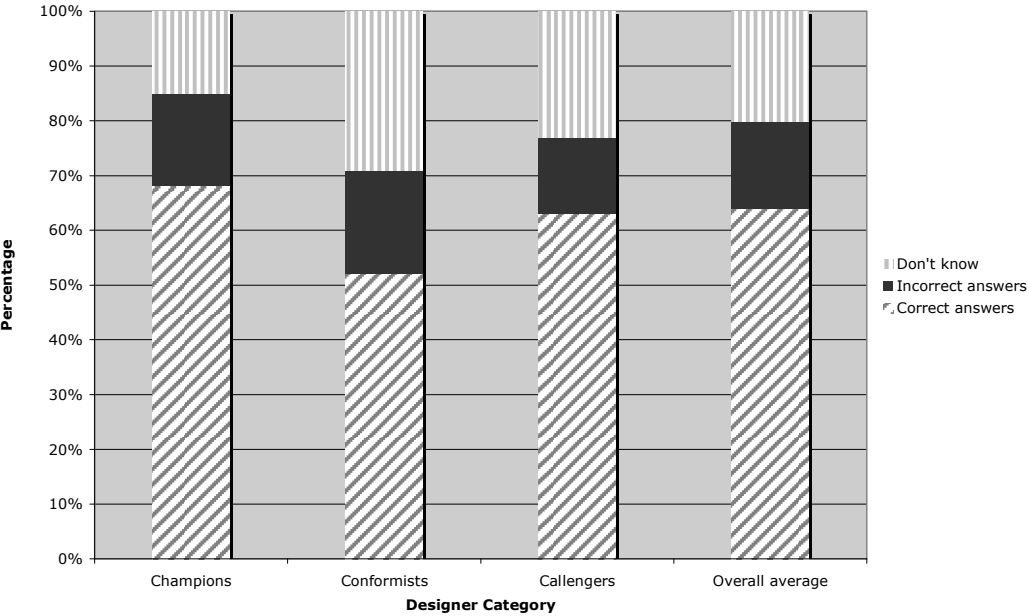


Figure 4: Designers' knowledge of ecomaterials



***Corresponding Author***

Kirsty Máté

Interior Architecture Program

Faculty of the Built Environment

University of New South Wales

Sydney NSW 2052 Australia

Ph : + 61 2 9385 4740

Fax : + 61 2 9385 4507

E-mail: [KirstyM@fbe.unsw.edu.au](mailto:KirstyM@fbe.unsw.edu.au)