

Paradoxes of Design: Energy and Water Consumption and the Aestheticization of Norwegian Bathrooms 1990–2008

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Abstract

In this article we explore the widely held assumption that aestheticized consumption is bound to escalate. In our study of 20 years of representations of bathrooms in Norway's

most popular interior design magazine *Bonytt*, we found support for the hypothesis that since the early 1990s new uses of bathrooms as sites for the construction and expression of identity and social aspirations have become more salient. We also have reason to believe that these new uses may be related to increased energy and water consumption. However, we also encountered aspects that indicate a more contingent and paradoxical relation. First, *Bonytt* calls explicitly for reflexive consumerism, enabling readers to deliberate the degree of aestheticization of their bathrooms. Second, while mostly showing large bathrooms, 'aesthetic fixes' are proposed by *Bonytt*, which let small bathrooms appear larger – without increased energy consumption for space heating. Third, aesthetics is used to propagate new, energy saving technologies (e.g. LEDs). And fourth, water and energy wasting practices shown in newer *Bonytt* issues (e.g. large shower heads) have largely replaced wasteful practices present in older issues (e.g. whirlpools). Thus, at least in these cases the shifts in fashions promoted by *Bonytt* may only be surface phenomena, which leave more fundamental trends untouched. These four observations are examples of how a productive relation between design and sustainability can be achieved.

Introduction

Consumerism has been identified as one of the gravest threats to sustainability (Røpke, 1999; Sanne 2002; Dobers and Strannegård, 2005). An important role

within consumerism is ascribed to aestheticized consumption, where a good or service is acquired out of desires not directly connected to its use-value but for reasons of aesthetic preference (Maycroft, 2004). Such arguments hold that consumption when aiming at social distinction or identity formation instead of utility is characterized by inherent mechanisms that cause an escalating demand for ever more things and services, defying any attempt to achieve sustainability.

In this paper we study aestheticized energy and water consumption, which are usually held to be two important concerns within the broader and conceptually contested term sustainability (Williams and Dair, 2007). We do so by reconstructing the evolution of the Norwegian bathroom from a frugal space devoted to cleanliness to a potential marker of identity and how this may have affected energy and water consumption. Our aim is to contribute to the understanding of how questions of identity may be related to un/sustainable consumption.

Two unique features make consumption related to Norwegian homes between 1990 and today a perfect object of study of this kind of aestheticization.

First, most Norwegians have experienced a dramatic increase of purchasing power since the 1990s. A political culture that guarantees a relatively high degree of diffusion of wealth from extraordinarily profitable exports of oil and gas, and low interest rates on private loans, have generated a consumption rush that is known in the vernacular as the 'kjøpefest' (buying feast). Since 1987 consumption of furniture and household goods has almost doubled (Hille et al., 2007). Norwegians own more things than ever before, which they store in ever larger homes, with an average living space of 119 m² in 2006 compared with 101 m² in 1981 (SSB, 2006).

Second, ethnographic research has shown that the home plays an important role within Norwegian identity formation (Gullestad, 1992) and social participation (Garvey, 2003). These motives for 'home-making' go far beyond the motive of immediate utility; therefore, if combined with the overall increase in household purchasing power, Norwegian homes can be expected to have contracted a particularly high share of aestheticized consumption since the early 1990s. Indeed, according to a survey, Norwegians spent 36 billion kroner (ca 4 billion Euro) on home improvement in 2005, which was the highest in Europe (Varden, 2006).

Another unique property of Norway is an energy situation characterized by an extraordinary high share of electricity consumption. Norwegians use approximately ten times the world's average electricity consumption. This is mostly due to the fact that electricity is used for heating. Even though most of the electricity is produced from hydropower, there has been a growing concern about the sustainability of using high quality energy to provide thermal comfort. Extensive efforts to reduce electricity consumption in Norwegian households – as in other countries – have only achieved stabilization of average energy consumption of Norwegian households (SSB, 2006). With increasing energy demand from non-residential buildings (ENOVA, 2006) and a particularly electricity intensive industry sector electricity, consumption in Norway is on the rise (SSB, 2008).

Further development of hydropower is not desirable and is politically unfeasible for reasons of nature conservation. Hence an increasing part of Norway's electricity is imported from potentially non-renewable sources via the common Nordic electricity market Nordpool.

Given increased purchasing power and anticipations about aestheticized consumption as an identity marker as well as increased awareness about the need to harness unsustainable consumption patterns, we shall analyse one of the most central lifestyle and interior decoration magazines in Norway to look for changes in the relations between processes of aestheticization and energy/water consumption. Is aestheticization necessarily related to escalating resource use, and if so how? What role do lifestyle magazines play within these processes?

Aestheticized Consumption: Doomed to Escalate?

Aestheticization has been described as a fundamental driver of consumption (Røpke, 1999; Sanne, 2002; Dobers and Strannegård, 2005). These authors refer among others to Lash and Urry (1994) and Featherstone (1991) when they define aestheticized consumption as the process in which material objects are filled with symbolic value in order to make them (and their consumers) stand out in a world of abundance. This leads, they maintain, to a constant search for distinction through consumption of new things and services, which ultimately becomes a goal in itself. As long as this kind of consumerism is underproblematized, they argue, sustainability will remain a utopian condition.

The argument that links aestheticization to escalating consumption is based on two related theories about consumption, which both have a long tradition within consumption studies and consumption critique. They correspond to what Wilk (2002) calls the social and the cultural paradigm within consumption theory. First, it contains the notion of 'positional goods' (Hirsch, 1977), an idea that ultimately refers back to Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption'. In this theory, which draws a connection between social status and the display of commodities, consumption is expected to escalate because positional goods only can provide social distinction as long as they are sparse. This distinguishing function is lost soon after the commodity has appeared on the market and can be acquired by everyone, which leads to a new search for goods that can signal the consumer's uniqueness. The second assumption, which Wilk calls cultural, is that consumption is related to the creation and expression of the owner's identity. Within this approach, escalating consumption is expected to happen because the project of identity cultivation cannot be completed as long as it is based on the acquisition of ever more commodities instead of on 'real' social relations or unmediated experiences (Maycroft, 2004; Dittmar, 2008). Thus, consumers have to consume ever more, searching for themselves in the things surrounding

them – ultimately in vain, because this is based on ‘unrealistic beliefs about the psychological benefits of money and material possessions’ (Dittmar, 2008, p. 203).

The importance of social distinction and cultural identity formation within processes of consumption is well documented. However, whether these processes have to be problematic in terms of unsustainable escalation of demands is contested.

According to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) ‘social critique of taste’, aesthetic preferences represent an important locale where social position and aspirations are performed (i.e. expressed and stabilized). In order to become effective, aesthetic distinction may result in escalating and unsustainable consumption, but it does not have to. After all, being environmentally friendly with its associated aesthetic sensibilities can easily be part of social and symbolic distinctions, as for instance Strandbu and Krange (2003) showed in their analysis of environmentalism among highly educated young Norwegians.

The assumption that aestheticized consumption as a cultural phenomenon is prone to escalation is challenged by Wilk’s (2000, p. 180) insistence on the importance of ‘negative emotions, including a range from indifference through dislike to visceral disgust’ for human relations to goods and services. He found that presupposing the existence of ‘a full range of emotions’ gave him a much more nuanced understanding of the consumptive actions than just asking for what people needed and desired. In this sense the study by Cherrier and Murray (2007) of the role of deliberate dispossession within identity construction is instructive. As Cherrier (2009) shows, environmental concerns are important in the creation of anti-consumption identities.

The strongest argument against the escalation hypothesis is that aestheticized consumption as part of consumerist lifestyles is part of reflexive consumption. Reflexivity is already an important element in the discussion of the matter by Lash and Urry (1994, pp. 31–110) and has been elaborated further by Morton (2007, pp. 111–123). Within consumerism individual acts of consumption become objects of careful consideration – ‘[o]ne doesn’t just eat carrots, one styles oneself as a carrot eater’ (Morton, 2007, p. 111). In this way not to consume or to consume in environmentally friendly ways can also be a viable strategy in a world obsessed with social distinction and identity formation/expression through the acquisition of commodities.

Wilk (2000, p. 177) is motivated by his observation of deep-seated moralistic biases within consumption critique, which ‘bypass a whole complex terrain of less direct processes that entangle goods with emotions that are more equivocal, difficult, and sometimes dark’. In this sense the discussion of the connection between the concern for the environment and aestheticized consumption in this paper is not about whether aestheticized consumption as such is good or bad. The moral and aesthetic criteria of green consumerism are not stable and they are in complex interplay. There we rather aim for a better understanding of

how and under what circumstances which processes of aestheticization can have which consequences for the environment.

Approach and Methodology

Since the 1980s the bathroom in European homes has become the central node in the production of hitherto unthinkable levels of hygiene and personal well-being (Smith, 2007, pp. 335–344). The bathroom has become a showroom that reflects the identity of its owner, and this makes sense only if the room is visible to visitors (Quitza and Røpke, 2008). The bathroom as a place for aestheticized consumption also causes increased levels of energy consumption (Gram-Hanssen, 2007; Hand et al., 2004). These studies presuppose a correlation between escalation of consumption and aestheticization. We propose to rather focus on (a) how aestheticization can contribute to increased consumption of specific resources (energy and water) and (b) how aestheticization may co-exist with unchanged or even reduced levels of consumption informed by a lifestyle magazine.

We are still short on studies that effectively can measure the relation between available information and identity formation. Even more, we are short on studies that reliably can measure the relation between identity and choice of action (see e.g. Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2007). However, theories of buying behaviour assert that purchasing is preceded by information processing (Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2007). Individuals use media as sources of information to maintain, validate and reinforce identities (Vigorito and Curry, 1998). Further, there has been growing interest in informing consumers about the environmental aspects to consider when buying products (Young et al., 2010; Hurth, this issue). Leslie and Reimer (1999) argue that consumer research reflects a tendency to emphasize the power that retailers and advertisers exert over consumers. This is described as a hypodermic needle approach, where consumers are regarded as passive receivers injected with meanings derived from cultural texts (Morley, 1995).

Instead we concur with Moeran (2008), who analyses fashion magazines, that such magazines must be studied as both cultural product and commodity. As cultural product, magazines circulate in a cultural economy of collective meanings – shaping these meanings and being shaped by them. Magazine production is also characterized by the need to address multiple audiences such as different groups of readers and advertisers at the same time. Therefore, they are acting much more as intermediary than as independent actor with their own agenda. As intermediaries between producers, distributors and consumers, magazines nevertheless play a role within the aestheticization of everyday practices by demonstrating what an abstract aesthetic looks like when it is instantiated (Moeran, 2008). Magazines educate their multiple readership about what aesthetic trends are ‘in’ and ‘out’, giving consumers input to the work of reflexive

consumerism – but it is up to the readers to decide how to use the magazines in shaping their identity (Martínez, 2004).

Magazines clearly cannot be seen as representing the state of the Norwegian bathroom. Neither are magazines single-handedly aestheticizing Norwegian bathrooms by injecting aesthetic cravings into the Norwegian populace. Rather, we take as our point of departure that the magazine – in concert with a long series of other intermediaries (e.g. other media, salespeople etc) – offers taste standards and criteria of aesthetic value in relation to bathroom fashion, and that this may have implications for energy and water consumption in the bathroom.

Bonytt is the most sold magazine in Norway related to design and lifestyle, with nearly 400 000 readers, almost 10% of the population. It is the leading Norwegian magazine on the market, and for years it was the only one (Fallan, 2007). Today Bonytt releases 14 issues a year, offering inspiration and ideas for interior decoration, renovation and building of new dwellings.

Bonytt has been widely used as a source for data material in other Norwegian studies. Rolness (1995) describes and criticizes Bonytt's role as showcase for 'good' Norwegian design and architecture. Fallan (2007) studies the ideology/propaganda around the development of industrial design culture in Norway as it is debated in and mediated through Bonytt, and observes that Bonytt changed in the 1960s–1970s from a magazine for designers to become a magazine for ordinary people interested in design and home decorations, making it a good information source for our study. Like these former studies of Bonytt, and similar to Martínez (2004) in her study of identity building informed by a popular magazine, we have conducted textual analysis of the articles in Bonytt. Following Vigorito and Curry (1998) in their study of gender identity and popular magazines, we have coded the pictures as well as providing qualitative descriptions of the content of the magazine images, and hence have analysed Bonytt similar to qualitative interview information – as a primary source of subjective opinions and idealized representations rather than representations of a reality beyond the magazine.

We have searched the complete archives for articles showing or describing bathrooms from 1990 to 2008. In addition, we have paid extra attention to their special issues on bathrooms issued in 1990 and annually from 1997 to 2007. The analysis was complemented by six expert interviews with bathroom retailers and plumbers. These interviews are not analysed here, but served as background information in our analysis of Bonytt.

Despite increased awareness about energy and environmental problems Bonytt hardly ever focuses on energy and water consumption per se, which may be seen to constitute a methodological problem for the present study. How is something that is invisible to be analysed in a highly visual medium? In fact, this is a more general problem connected to research that seeks to connect cultural meanings with levels of consumption within basic infrastructures. Research

has to actively reconnect the level of meaningful practices (here aestheticized consumption) and levels of consumption (here energy and water use), which are routinely dissociated in everyday life.

Particularly in the social and cultural study of energy consumption, energy's general pervasiveness and intangibility has led to what Shove (1997) has called a sociology of energy's invisibility, which is mainly interested in making energy visible. Which physical structures and technologies make more energy and water consumption probable is well known; here, our expert interviews also provided valuable insight. It is important, however, to remember that in our contribution we are not dealing with actual bathrooms which are interesting for their actual energy consumption, but with stylized images and texts about activities that cause different levels of energy and water consumption. It is our interpretative work that connects the respective images and texts with their likely levels of consumption.

Empirical Findings

Becoming Visible

Initially we counted double pages on which a bathroom (or elements clearly belonging to the bathroom) is shown. With very few exceptions adverts for bathrooms were not included in the analysis. *Bonytt* has increased both its average page count and its issue count (from 11 to 14 per year) during the time span covered here. Even though this influences the significance of the numbers presented in the graph in Figure 1, a trend towards more visibility of bathrooms is obvious. Bathrooms have progressed from a marginal position with on average one appearance per issue in 1991 to a highly visible part of what *Bonytt* treats as the 'presentable' part of a home.

In the 1990s articles presenting exemplary homes almost always leave out the bathroom while proudly displaying living room and kitchen. Since the year 1990 represents an exception, we have checked samples from earlier volumes, which confirmed the overall trend: in earlier representations of homes the doors to the bathroom are shut. This changed towards the end of the 1990s. An additional boost for the visibility came with special sections solely devoted to bathrooms, which already appear in the 1990 special issue and are taken up again in 1997.

These first findings support the observations by Quitzau and Røpke (2008, p. 200) that bathrooms have 'emerged as a front-stage room: The bathroom door is, to a greater extent than earlier, left open for visitors to take a peek'. Within the theoretical frame of our paper, this means that the bathroom in this period in fact has become an object of consumerist reflexivity; i.e., it has become a potential object of conscious consumption and consequently part of Norwegians' identity formation.

‘I Have a Dream’

Typically the editorials of Bonytt’s special issues carry titles relating to the kind of wet bathroom dreams they are portraying, such as ‘I have a dream’ or ‘The spirit of the times in the bathroom’. The editorials of Bonytt also offer some interesting observations regarding (changes in) the prime functions of the bathroom.

To get neat and clean in a bathroom that makes the most of its space is most important in the 1990 special issue. Already in the early 1990s the bathroom was supposed to serve more purposes than hygiene. An article from a 1990 exhibition describes the bathroom as a living room, mainly because it is decorated with a huge oil painting. The text describes the bathroom as ‘an oasis for bubbly body joy and relaxation’. Another article from 1991 describes the bathroom as ‘tailor-made for well-being’.

The desire for making the bathroom a space for recreation exists unaltered throughout the whole period. An editorial of the special issue in 2003 stated that

The kitchen is still the room which best reflects people’s daily lifestyle, but if you want to measure the spirit of the times you have to look to the bathroom. That is where the new things happen, with a completely different weight than before placed on furnishing and design (2003 bathroom special).

However, the bathroom has to be filled with meaning:

I [the chief editor] have many ideas for the bathroom of my dreams [. . .] The bathroom can be everything from a room for tooth brushing to a dayroom for relaxation. Or both. Definitely it is a room where many want to realise their interior dreams (2005 bathroom special).

The bathroom is clearly not a place solely devoted to the production of hygiene. As Quitzau and Røpke (2008) observe, relaxation/well-being, being together as a family, and also to focus on a designed room deemed worthy of display is important. However, the development observed here has not been as linear and unequivocal as suggested by the Danish case. The dream served by Bonytt through these two decades is, if anything, to have an aesthetically perfect bathroom serving the basic needs of hygiene as well as showing your aesthetic preferences. The increased visibility of bathrooms has been used to create a space of possibilities, which has to be filled with meaning by reflexive consumers.

In the Sign of Aquarius

Williams and Dair (2007) propose eight sustainable behaviours that could be enabled by design features. Focusing on the first two aspects – use less energy

and water – we discovered that four material elements in different ways seem central for both aesthetic values and energy and water consumption in Bonytt. These elements – size, lighting, heating and water – will be described more thoroughly.

In most homes the bathroom is a tiny room we have extremely high expectations of. It must be delicate and comfortable – but functional and sensible too. Impractical rooms soon become a nuisance. If you go to the bathroom just to get clean, you may furnish it simply. But if you use it as storage, laundry room, and maybe even as a room for relaxation as well, then you need to fight for more space (1990 bathroom special).

In many Bonytt articles the size of the bathroom is not mentioned. On closer examination we find that Bonytt usually displays the large and luxurious bathrooms before they describe the smaller more ordinary ones. The bathrooms displayed in Bonytt vary in size from 2 to 24 square metres. One of the bathrooms even runs over three stories and includes a sauna, swimming pool and bathtub with ocean view.

We did not observe a linear and unequivocal development towards larger bathrooms in Bonytt. Generally Bonytt emphasizes that a bathroom must at least appear to be large. They explain how you can enlarge the bathroom by stealing space from other rooms, and focus on how to make bathrooms seem larger through applying visual elements such as colour, lighting, mirrors, storage and more tidy organizing of the bathroom functions.

In their regular column ‘ask the architect’ they state that the most frequently asked question from Bonytt’s readers is how to enlarge small bathrooms. In an article entitled ‘Can the bathroom become a huge luxury bathroom’ (1990) the architect describes how she would take space from other rooms to increase the size of the bathroom from 3.8 to 7.7 m², which would give room for a bathtub and other luxurious elements such as a separate shower and sofa.

Obviously the size of the bathroom affects the possibilities for furnishing. A small bathroom of 2 m² is described as ‘having room for the essentials – shower, toilet and sink’. Many bathrooms in Bonytt however have both showers and bathtubs, and double sinks as well. Even though one bathroom retailer we interviewed claimed that only 10% of Norwegians have bathtubs, the typical Bonytt bathroom contains shower, (washing machine), toilet, double sinks, whirlpool or bathtub, stereo, heating racks for towels, bidet and heater cables in the floor.

When a bathroom is small, for example 5.5 m², it is presented as ‘cosy and personal’. Bonytt adds that unfortunately the size imposed some limitations: they had to choose a shower instead of a bathtub. To compensate they chose a really big shower (2006 special). From these examples we see that the size of the bathroom not only may affect energy spent on heating up the room, but also energy spent on heating up water, since small bathrooms rarely find room for bathtubs. In this regard we may anticipate that smaller bathrooms per se

use less energy and water while luxurious bathrooms find many ways to waste energy and water.

One way of attaining a large bathroom is to integrate it more with other rooms (see Figure 2). The 2004 special issue describes a flat totally redesigned in order to expand the bathroom from 3 to 11 m² including a relaxation room with open access from the bathroom.

Integrating the bathroom more with other rooms may let more natural light in through huge glass surfaces (see Figure 3). On the other hand, using glass walls and doors in the warmest room in the house may be a nightmare for the electricity bill while serving the purpose of displaying the room.

Large bathrooms obviously require more energy for heating in a cold country such as Norway and also give more room for energy extravagance. So when it comes to aesthetic values and sustainability size is a dubious ally. On the other hand, we have also seen that *Bonytt* presents advice on how to achieve the aesthetic quality of spaciousness through thoughtful design. The reflexive consumers using the magazine to inform their aesthetic choices most likely will be unable to attain the huge bathrooms shown in the front of the issues. Norwegian bathrooms in urban apartments have actually become smaller on average since the 1980s (Manum, 2006). It is much more likely that readers will use the advice of *Bonytt* to make their bathroom appear bigger, which is achievable without necessarily increasing energy and water consumption.

Let There Be Light

Bonytt is constantly advising that the right use of lighting may do wonders for making small bathrooms appear larger. In an article from 2007 we are advised to let natural lighting flow across the room and/or use smart and tiny lamps, which by the way are energy friendly. ‘Good lighting makes grooming easier and the room bigger. Big wall mounted lamps may appear as visually disturbing elements. Smaller sources of lighting take up less space and provide equally good lighting. LED lights are both small and energy efficient’. The accompanying picture shows a mirror with 24 diodes integrated (see Figure 4).

In addition to saving energy this solution provides several aesthetic values such as good lighting, an impression of having a larger bathroom and also a visually tidy impression because there are neither lamps nor any electric cables drawn across the room. Tidiness is enhanced by replacing the light switch with a touch-screen on the mirror. Such examples demonstrate that the technological development may make lighting seem like a good ally for tying energy saving to aesthetic values. Another technological and aesthetic possibility is to use low voltage halogen lamps with dimmer functions in order to increase cosiness and save energy. On second thoughts, a bathroom that is only illusionary enlarged through lighting ‘saves’ energy because less space needs heating. However, energy saving lamps produce less heat. The energy saved on lighting might instead

have to be spent on increased heating in the most warm and snug room of the house. Even further, the snugness created through dimmer functions might entice us to splash even more hot water in cosy bathrooms with a candle-lit-like atmosphere. We may literally be throwing the energy savings out with the bath water.

Another more striking paradox is that technological development enabling energy saving (LED) lights also allows for an aesthetic development placing lighting in new and hitherto unthinkable places such as taps colouring cold water blue and warm water red. Even bathtubs are now lit, which must mean that the energy saved through more energy efficient lighting is spent on lighting up new and unnecessary places just out of aesthetic desire (see Figure 5).

Although lighting is of minor importance in terms of overall bathroom energy consumption, a closer look at lighting as it is presented by Bonytt reveals an important paradox of aestheticization. More energy efficient technologies (e.g. LED) inspire new aesthetic options – illuminating places left dark before. The bottom line may be that energy savings are left just the same – depending on the respective choices.

Warm and Snug

A comfortable bathroom must be warm. At first glance the aesthetically valuable and warm bathroom is presented directly in opposition to energy efficiency. Maybe no wonder, since Norway is a cold country.

Real wood feels fairly warm to step on with bare feet, but wooden floors do not seem to qualify as a serious aesthetic option. Very few articles display bathrooms with wooden floors. Given the amount of water splashed in the bathroom (and the fact that most Norwegian dwellings are made of wood) we would expect the preferred bathroom surface to be both warm and water tight, such as vinyl, which is presented as a bathroom surface functioning as a membrane in itself. Bathrooms with vinyl often have wall mounted electric heaters to create the wanted heat and comfort. Several articles state that vinyl and electric heaters are old fashioned and undesirable. Heating of the bathroom is rarely treated explicitly, but an article in 1992 argued for the aesthetic advantages of heater cables because the heating is hidden.

Even more, this hidden heating allows for the apparently most aesthetically valuable bathroom surface – tiles. While previous generations took a bath every Saturday, people today might be showering several times a day. This means that bathrooms must be water tight, which tiles are not. Thus, under Norwegian conditions with a cold and humid climate and houses mostly built of wood, tiles require that the floor has heater cables in order to dry out the moist underneath. Hence, the technological development of heater cables allows for the development of aesthetic values that then again require high energy use.

Nevertheless, technological development of heater cables may in fact reduce the energy consumption compared with electric heaters because a warm floor may allow the temperature in the bathroom to be somewhat lowered. It is the combination of a tiled surface, Norwegian climate, wooden buildings and extensive use of water that demands much energy. Further, hiding away the actual heating presents us with an interesting case of aesthetic choice, where invisibility of technology is the preferred option. Here, the question of how to heat is literally swept under the carpet. Warmth consequently becomes invisible, which will hardly support energy saving behaviour within a reflexive consumerism.

Water All Over

In Norway, with extensive access to water, massive use of water is no problem in itself at present, but the electricity used to heat water is. Bonytt offers few articles about saving water and energy and they are typically found at the beginning of the period studied here. An article from 1990 stated

By installing a water-saving showerhead costing NOK 200, a family which showers 10 minutes a day can save energy amounting to NOK 1000 a year – and a lot of water. [. . .] An old showerhead uses 20 litres a minute, a modern shower 12 litres, while the best water-saving showerheads can do with just 8 litres. And the less water, the less energy spent.

Generally arguments about saving energy are related to economy rather than aesthetics or sustainability. The arguments are usually found in small columns of text without pictures. Reading Bonytt we may also learn that it might be expensive to go for energy saving aesthetics. A collage from 1995 described ‘an elegant faucet which also saves energy and water’ at the cost of NOK 2700 (top left in Figure 6), and one with photoelectric detector – ‘It delivers ready-mixed water till you remove your fingers’ – at the price of NOK 3500 (in the lower middle of the picture). The cheapest tap in the collage can in comparison be bought for almost one-third of the price of the water and energy saving taps, which by no means are the most expensive ones either.

In the early 1990s well-being in the bathroom was closely tied to whirlpools. Bonytt offered a comprehensive coverage of whirlpools in 1990. One picture was titled: ‘undoubtedly whirlpools offer well-being and regenerated energy’ (sic!). The unspeakable consequences for the environment become clear from the article: whirlpools fitted for 1 person demand 100–200 litres of hot water. Larger whirlpools demand 300–500 litres for one person. Bonytt advises its readers that it hence may be useful to have a new, larger hot water container.

Interestingly, the whirlpool has almost disappeared from Bonytt since 2000. Instead showerheads appeared. An article entitled ‘Use your head’ in the 2000 special issue described new showerhead trends: ‘Today’s new showers provide

much well-being in pouring water from showerheads and nozzles with both massage systems and rain-shower. [. . .] The large showerhead Raindance Air from Hansgrohe is quite the opposite of water-saving showerheads'. In parallel with the increased focus on water-pouring showers we also notice an increased interest in 'designer showers and faucets' in the new millennium. The ordinary appearance of water-saving showerheads (second from the left in Figure 7) may fall short of the extraordinary aesthetics of rain-showerheads.

Even though some articles warn that many water-pipes are too small and do not have enough water-pressure for these new showers, the message is 'hidden' by the radiance of the design displayed in the pictures: the design award winning shower from Vola (bottom right in Figure 8) is parenthetically described as defeated in the environment awards since it uses 26 litres a minute (2006 special).

Paradoxically, technological developments are rarely used to the advantage of the environment, and the aesthetic values in Bonytt seem to favour extravagance and wasteful luxury. On the other hand the focus on showers nevertheless provides comparatively quick comfort and cleanliness while using less water and energy than bathtubs, a fact that may explain its persistent appeal (Hand et al., 2004).

Discussion

Our analysis of Bonytt from 1990 to 2008 identified four elements of the bathroom that were essential for both aesthetic values and energy/water consumption: size, lighting, heating and water. Within all these elements we saw a development towards placing more focus on aesthetic values that go beyond immediate utility, such as large bathrooms, cosy lighting, invisible heating and the convenience of abundant water. We can support that the bathroom has become a potential room of energy wasting identity expression and social distinction (Quitau and Røpke, 2008). However, the development has not been linear and unequivocal. Within all elements we have also seen tendencies where aesthetic values did support or at least did not obstruct sustainable energy/water consumption. These cases teach us how to relate aesthetics and sustainability in productive ways:

1. Bonytt argues for conceiving the bathroom as an arena for social distinction and identity expression in addition to utility. Thus, Bonytt not only presents different aesthetic options which can be used in conspicuous consumption or as markers of identity, but also includes reflections on utility within a busy everyday life. Thus, utility and aestheticization can be placed within a continuum of possibilities. Which aspect will prevail is subject to the consumers' reflexive interpretation.
2. A clear tendency to present larger bathrooms as more desirable and pre-

sentable prevails. While this, if realized, would potentially mean more energy/water consumption, we also found practical advice on making bathrooms appear bigger. This kind of aestheticization can be generalized as the production of illusions, which make life more pleasant without necessarily harming the planet. The design profession is already heavily involved in promoting sustainable products (Zafarmand et al., 2003). The environmentally conscious designer and consumer can learn here that there can in fact be aesthetic fixes for problems created through unsustainable aestheticization.

3. Our observations regarding lighting probably match best the expectation that aestheticization counteracts progress made through increased technological energy efficiency. As we have seen, new energy saving lighting technologies were used in new unsustainable ways to achieve aesthetic effects. However, this story can also demonstrate a less problematic co-existence between aestheticization and sustainability. After all, aestheticized uses may lead to faster adaptation of energy efficient technologies, which allow for additional benefits such as light embedded in bathtubs. This can, however, only be the first step towards a scenario where more sustainable technologies replace existing solutions.
4. With regard to heating of space and water we found a surprising stability in aesthetic images throughout the studied time period. Tiles with heater cables and the use of lots of hot water are unsustainable aesthetic elements that have been present at least since early 1990. Compared with this persistence, the shift in fashions, for instance from whirlpools to large showerheads, appears as a minor change, with ambiguous consequences for the environment. The hypothesis that we want to propose based on these observations is that aestheticization is operating on different levels. Fashions, which we see change during the 18 years studied here, and which are the main modus in which we have observed aestheticization, may be less important for energy consumption than aesthetic desires that are relatively stable and therefore much more inconspicuous. Based on our empirical data we can only speculate about the relation between these different aesthetic levels. It appears possible, however, that the relative stability of underlying aesthetic patterns (such as the persistence of wasting a lot of hot water) is due to their close bonds with non-aesthetic factors, such as socio-technical lock-ins and utilitarian motives.

Conclusions

The four observations discussed in the previous section are not meant to prove either that aestheticization per se is good for the environment or that it is bad. On the surface, Bonytt contains few reflections about energy or water saving. The environmentally conscious bathroom user is turning in vain to this maga-

zine when looking for advice on how to reconcile aesthetics and sustainability. Moreover, according to our analysis, where consequences of aesthetic choices presented by Bonytt were made visible, the newfound status of the bathroom as a marker of social and cultural identity in most cases was likely to contribute to unsustainable energy/water consumption. We found no signs of reduced or environmentally conscious consumption as part of social or cultural identities.

Despite these findings, in the discussion we have focused deliberately on aspects where the relation between aesthetics and sustainability is contingent, paradoxical and cannot be reduced to a simple formula: Bonytt's readers were encouraged to reflect and find their own balance between usefulness and aesthetics. They were supported in finding 'aesthetic fixes' that could reconcile unsustainable aesthetic ideals with modest energy use. New more energy efficient technologies were introduced as being aesthetically pleasing. Finally, we saw indications that new wasteful consumption practices promoted by Bonytt actually may be superficial reflections of underlying phenomena that have not changed within the time period studied here.

In order to live with the ecological consequences of aestheticized consumption we do not necessarily have to ban and punish aestheticization, resorting to demands for state intervention (e.g. ecological taxes and banning advertisement, as Røpke, 1999, pp. 417–418, suggests), to call for fundamental socio-cultural changes that make people less dependent on consumption as the main source of happiness (e.g. reduction of work hours, as Sanne, 2002, p. 285, proposes) or even to call into question capitalism itself (like the social psychologist Dittmar, 2008, p. 215). These are goals with which one may very well sympathize, but it seems unlikely that the consumerist links between consumption and identity – described convincingly by these authors – will be disentangled easily or any time soon.

In the meanwhile, aestheticized consumption does not have to be the enemy and may even prove to be an ally in the quest for more sustainable consumption. Mass media such as lifestyle magazines may play an important role as a source of information for consumers and as agenda setting agency for producers, but there is more to be gained.

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