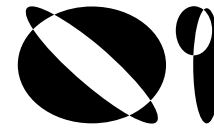


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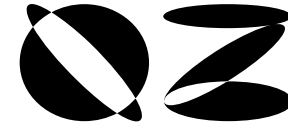
SPACE FOR NARRATIVES \_\_\_\_\_  
Narratives of Sustainability [EN]

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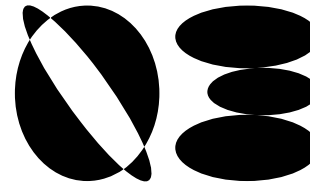
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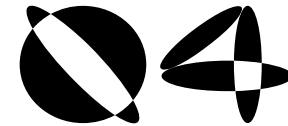
SBYD AND  
THE SPACE  
FOR NARRATIVES



THE CONTEXT



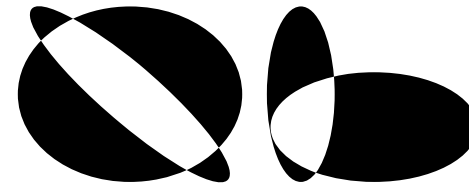
NARRATIVES:  
WHAT THEY ARE  
AND WHY  
THEY MATTER  
(AND TELL)



THE NATURE  
OF BROOMS



HOW  
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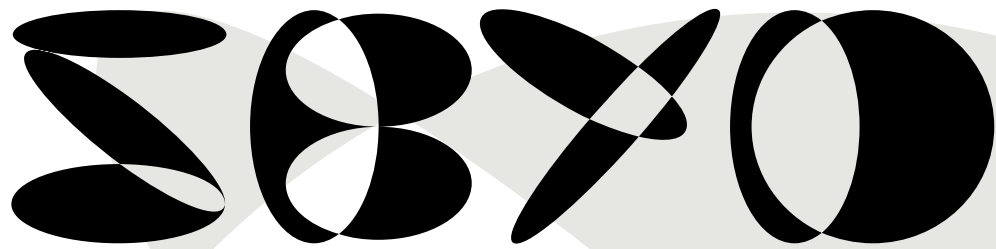
NARRATING  
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BROOMS  
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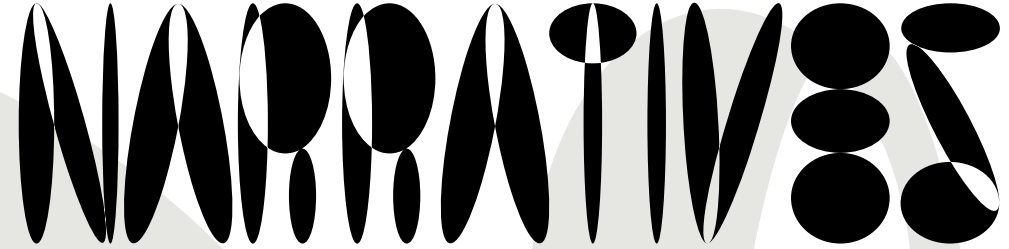


SBYD.SPACE explores climate-neutral and resource-conserving ways of living and producing. Through design, the space transfers knowledge from sustainability research into society and the economy. Design's capacity to render theories and abstract concepts tangible – and translate them into everyday life – is harnessed to study, debate, and test these ideas in practice.

SBYD.SPACE engages diverse target groups and partners across various formats, including workshops, international symposia, exhibitions, an »Artist/Designer in Residence« programme, and support for entrepreneurial ventures. It is located at Campus North of the Folkwang University of the Arts on the UNESCO World Heritage site Zollverein, a former colliery in the Ruhr area—a location that could not be more symbolic for the transformation of industries, lifestyles, and entire regions.



Through its SPACES, SBYD.SPACE creates opportunities to explore sustainable alternatives. Each SPACE comprises interdisciplinary team members, much like a dedicated working group. In diverse and continuously evolving SPACES—such as the SPACE FOR REPAIR, SPACE FOR BIOMATERIALS, SPACE FOR TEXTILES, and SPACE FOR NARRATIVES—room is provided for projects pursuing circular, resource-light, and regenerative design approaches. The SPACES form a thematic and conceptual framework within SBYD around which activities like interdisciplinary workshops, design projects, and exhibitions are clustered. Each space approaches sustainability from a distinct perspective, generating a multi-faceted framework within SBYD that makes diverse possibilities for sustainable lifestyles and production visible and tangible.



SPACE FOR NARRATIVES places narratives—overarching societal narrations as well as everyday assumptions, intentions, and practices—at the centre of design work. Which meta-narratives, such as progress, efficiency, individualisation, or sufficiency, frame current product and consumption logics? How are everyday ways of living interwoven with the complex narratives of sustainable transformation? And how can design help to make these narratives visible, question them, or productively shift them?

SPACE FOR NARRATIVES gathers, investigates, and develops narrative strategies that are translated into prototypes for concrete design concepts. The aim is to translate models and insights from sustainability research into tangible stories that do not merely describe more sustainable futures, but make them tangible, debatable, and actionable through design.

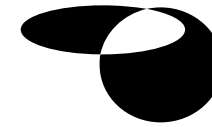
Here, narratives are not understood as downstream marketing tactics or communicative add-ons, but as a constitutive element of design itself: structurally embedded in design processes, usage scenarios, and value creation models. Product-related storytelling, in this sense, does not mean telling stories about products, but understanding products as carriers and expressions of narratives that shape societal notions of normality, value, and the future.

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## THE CONTEXT

This zine gathers texts, tools, and design projects from the SPACE FOR NARRATIVES. Rather than presenting final results, it serves as a catalyst for ongoing inquiry into how design actively shapes—rather than merely reproduces—narrative structures. In this context, sustainability<sup>1</sup> emerges as a challenge that connects technical, cultural, and semantic dimensions: It calls for alternative narratives of what constitutes a ›good‹ product and for design that materialises these narratives. The following contributions illustrate this perspective by delving deeper into distinct yet interconnected focal points.



<sup>1</sup> According to the so-called Brundtland Commission, sustainability refers to the principle of designing resources and systems in such a way that they remain viable in the long term and meet the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development is the concrete implementation of this principle in societal, ecological, and economic spheres, thereby integrating the three dimensions of the triple bottom line (UN, 1987).

PRODUCTS ARE NEVER JUST THINGS. THEY ARE MATERIALISED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HOW WE WANT TO LIVE. THEY EMBODY IDEAS OF PROGRESS AND EFFICIENCY, OF COMFORT, RESPONSIBILITY, OR SACRIFICE. THESE IDEAS ARE RARELY ARTICULATED EXPLICITLY—AND THAT IS PRECISELY WHY THEY HAVE SUCH A POWERFUL IMPACT. THEY SHAPE MARKETS, GUIDE EXPECTATIONS, AND INFLUENCE EVERYDAY ROUTINES. IN SHORT: PRODUCTS CAN TELL STORIES.

Engaging with narratives in product design therefore does not start with selecting the ›right‹ material or the optimal construction method, but with identifying underlying frameworks of interpretation. What meta-narratives—such as growth, individualisation, or sufficiency—frame contemporary product logics? What images of users, concepts of value, and visions of the future do they reinforce? And what alternatives might be conceived, narrated, and designed?

In chapter 03 we will clarify what narratives are and why they matter (and tell)—not only in language-based media, but also within forms, functions, and usage scenarios. Building on this, there will be an overview of narratives at the brand and product levels, as well as an introduction to the topic of »Narratives in Economic Models«. It becomes clear that products are always embedded in larger—sometimes consistent, sometimes fragmented—economic paradigms, which are themselves structured narratively.

In chapter 04 »The Nature of Brooms«, the discussion takes on a more concrete form. Can an object that is an often overlooked part of many people's everyday lives contain narrative elements? Using the broom as an example, the chapter demonstrates how even a seemingly ›simple‹ product can convey traditional meanings—ranging from care work and notions of order to questions of durability and repairability. Here, the everyday object proves to be a dense knot of cultural attributions.

In chapter 05, the Sustainable Narrative Canvas is introduced—a design tool created to systematically translate narrative logics into product architectures. Its goal is to empower designers<sup>2</sup> to thoughtfully and deliberately integrate sustainability narratives into their design process. Here, narratives are not treated as an afterthought, but as a core component of design and development architecture, usage concepts, value creation models, and operational frameworks that guide decisions and have material consequences.

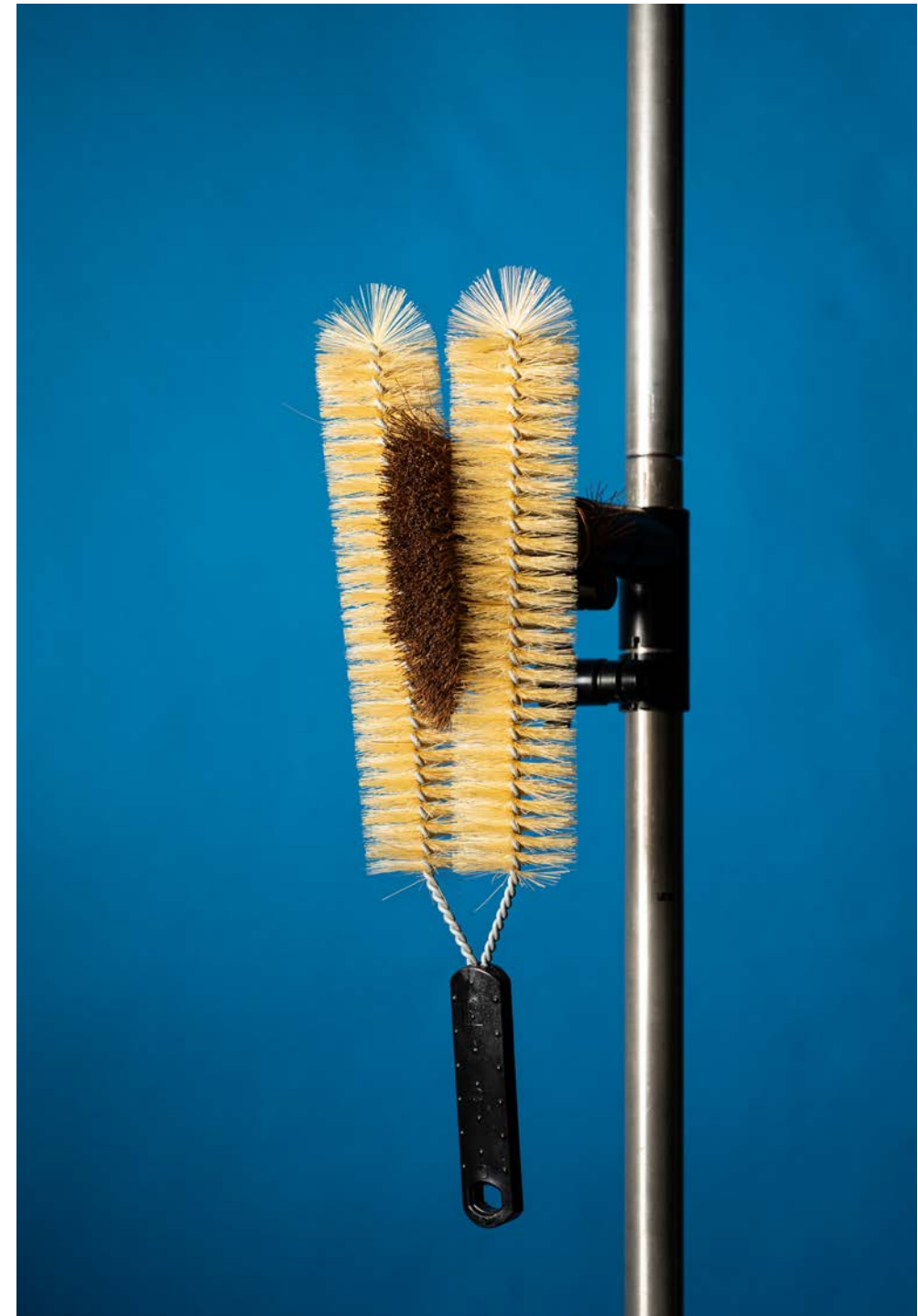


2 Drawing on Victor Papanek and Herbert A. Simon, the term »designers« is used to refer to all people who shape their environment—regardless of formal design training. Papanek stresses that everyone designs in daily life, while Simon defines design as intentional action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones (Papanek, 1985; Simon, 1985).

Finally, chapter 06, »Narrating Brooms,« presents five product designs developed during the 2025/26 winter semester by students in the Product Design program as part of the »Narratives of Sustainability« seminar at the Folkwang University of the Arts in collaboration with the industry partner Nölle Profi Brush Bürsten- & Pinseltechnik e. K.. The previously developed theoretical perspectives, as well as the Sustainable Narrative Canvas, served as accompanying input material—both in the seminar itself and as part of a keynote presentation in the context of the SBYD startup initiative »Sustainable Entrepreneurship for Designers«. They also structured the design phase, provided a framework for interim critiques, and served as an analytical framework for reflecting on design decisions. In this sense, the works can be read as prototypical arguments: They address the previously raised questions through concrete design proposals and illustrate how narrative shifts can be translated into material configurations.

DESIGN INEVITABLY DESIGNS THE FUTURE—IMPLICITLY AND EXPLICITLY.  
DELIBERATELY REFLECTING ON NARRATIVES MEANS UNDERSTANDING  
DESIGN DECISIONS AS IMPACTFUL ASSERTIONS THAT SHAPE DAILY ROUTINES  
AND FEED INTO BROADER CULTURAL NARRATIVES.

This zine aims to illuminate these stories—and to reframe them as a powerful design space where sustainable production and consumption patterns are negotiated, disseminated, and structurally embedded.



# NARRATIVES: WHAT THEY ARE AND WHY THEY MATTER (AND TELL)

It feels like a genuine fan culture has developed around »narratives«. Narratives seem to be everywhere—in politics as well as in our private lives. Many things, it seems, have suddenly become »narrative«. We read about the »narrative brain,« the »narrative self,« »narrative practices,« »narrative organizations,« »narrative economies,« and even the »narrative age«.

The origin of the term can be traced back to the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. In his landmark study »La Condition Postmoderne,« he examined »grand narratives« (grands récits) and coined the term »meta-narratives« to describe them. These refer to overarching narrative structures that legitimize knowledge and cultural practices, explain how the world functions and why things happen the way they do. They provide a broader framework of meaning, uniting smaller stories to make sense of history, society, and human agency. In doing so, meta-narratives shape how we view past, present, and future. They determine how a society interprets pivotal events and decisions, claiming universal validity and steering a collective sense of direction.

However—at least according to Lyotard's analysis—these meta-narratives faded away by the end of the twentieth century. The loss of these meta-narratives, Lyotard claims, led to skepticism toward power and universal consensus, and to the end of a collective sense of meaning and a single shared direction for humanity. Instead, small, parallel micro-narratives have increasingly taken their place and continue to do so, competing for authoritative status.

At the product level, this postmodern shift can be understood as a break with a single, universal design language. A dominant Modernist design canon has been replaced by a multitude of coexisting systems of style and meaning.

PRODUCTS NO LONGER SPEAK ON BEHALF OF A GRAND NARRATIVE OF PROGRESS; INSTEAD, THEY ARTICULATE FRAGMENTED, SITUATIONAL MICRO-NARRATIVES WHICH QUOTE, SAMPLE, IRONIZE AND REINTERPRET MEANING. DESIGN THUS FUNCTIONS LESS AS A CARRIER OF A SINGULAR VISION OF THE FUTURE AND MORE AS A MEDIUM FOR PLURALISTIC PROPOSITIONS OF MEANING.

When people talk about »narratives« in the media and in everyday discourse today, they are often no longer referring to those comprehensive frameworks of meaning that explain or justify a society or historical period (Oxford University Press, 2026). The term has lost some of its grandeur. Its scope has narrowed, and its application has become more commonplace. It is therefore hardly surprising that dictionary definitions reflect this zeitgeist, defining a narrative simply as a »[connecting] meaningful story or account« (Cornelsen Verlag GmbH, 2026)—no less, but certainly no more.



# NARRATIVES AT BRAND AND PRODUCT LEVEL

Narratives have become omnipresent in today's business world—or are at least heavily advocated: in management (Loebbert, 2003), public relations (Schach, 2015), or brand strategy (Neder, 2017), to name just a few applications. Under the buzzword »brand storytelling«, <sup>3</sup> companies craft deliberate, strategic stories designed to achieve corporate and brand objectives. These represent condensed propositions of meaning within consumer culture—endowing brands with meaning, fostering identification, and providing orientation for action.



<sup>3</sup> Synonyms include terms such as »brand narrative«, »narrative brand management«, and »brandtelling«.

TWO QUESTIONS SEEM ALMOST INEVITABLE AT THIS POINT: WHY DO PRODUCTS NEED STORIES? WHY DO COMPANIES NOT SIMPLY STICK TO THE FACTS?

Stories generally reach the brain's processing center more easily than mere facts. They organize information into familiar patterns and create context. For example, neuroscientific studies show that when people engage with narrations, specific memory processes are activated that go beyond the mere processing of individual facts: When reading or listening to coherent stories, recipients construct what are known as »situation models«—coherent mental representations of characters, plots, temporal sequences, and spatial contexts that contribute to greater activation of specific networks in the brain and create a stronger memory (Yarkoni et al., 2008). Experiments in communication psychology also suggest that narrative messages are processed more effectively than non-narrative information formats (e.g., tables, factual lists). This »processing fluency« is a key mechanism explaining why stories are not only easier to understand but also more persuasive (Bullock et al., 2021).

Furthermore, they convey complex content vividly and concisely—a distinct advantage in an age where attention is scarce and information overwhelming. Human decision-making processes are rarely purely rational: We simplify, rely on familiar mental frameworks, and seek clarity (Kahneman et al., 2021). Narratives directly cater to this need.

MOREOVER, STORIES FORGE CONNECTION. THEY OFFER POINTS OF IDENTIFICATION—WITH A BRAND, AN ORGANISATION, OR CHARACTERS WITHIN THE NARRATION. THIS EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE INVOLVEMENT HEIGHTENS ENGAGEMENT AND INCREASES RECEPTIVITY TO THE MESSAGE.

In marketing, narratives serve as targeted tools of persuasion (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024). The aim is to capture attention, shape attitudes, guide thoughts, and

ultimately alter behavior. This can manifest in specific product choices, positive brand perception, word-of-mouth recommendations, or increased purchase intent. At the product level, this implies that products are more than functional objects. They carry meanings that can be framed narratively. Design, provenance, or scenarios of use can be woven into a coherent storyline that determines how a product is perceived, evaluated, and chosen.

## THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Compelling stories usually follow a recognizable pattern. Among the multitude of possible narrative patterns—from comedy to tragedy—the Hero's Journey is one of the most prominent, if not the oldest (Le Guin, 1988), models. Codified in its modern form by Joseph Campbell and distilled by Christopher Vogler into 12 stages, it maps a protagonist's evolution from ordinary individual to heroic figure (Moesslang, 2021).

In short, the journey begins in the »ordinary world«, where the prospective hero is, at the outset, an ordinary person with no special abilities or heroic deeds. A catalyst event then presents the person with a challenge. At first, the person reacts with »refusal«—doubt, fear, or uncertainty prevents them from embarking on the adventure. At this point, they encounter a »mentor figure« who provides knowledge, tools, or encouragement and supports them in setting out on their journey. Then, the phase of challenges begins: Trials, conflicts, and a pivotal low point culminate in a decisive confrontation. After passing the test, the hero gains a new resource or insight (»elixir«). With this, the hero returns to the familiar world, is recognized, and has the freedom to consciously (re)shape their life.



This pattern generates tension, growth, and identification. However, it is complex, and not every story—especially not every brand or product story—needs to go through all 12 stages in their entirety. In brand and product contexts, a simplified basic pattern is often sufficient.

AT SPACE FOR NARRATIVES, WE REFER TO THIS AS THE »MICRO HERO'S JOURNEY,« FOR WHICH FOUR ELEMENTS ARE ENOUGH TO CREATE A CLEAR AND EFFECTIVE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE.

## Protagonist

### PROTAGONIST:

At the story's core is an individual or group for whom the brand and its products offer genuine value. The narrative opens from their perspective.



Fig. 1: Nike, »Find Your Greatness« (Jogger), 2012.

A prominent example is Nike, with its »Find Your Greatness« campaign. The protagonists are those whom no one believes in—or those who doubt themselves. The »Oh, no!« lies in the struggle against inner resistance, against complacency, or against external skepticism. The brand—Nike—takes on the role of a mentor: It provides products that symbolize and enable performance and perseverance. The »Oh, yeah!« comes in the moment of overcoming oneself—in achieving a goal, in the feeling of strength and self-efficacy. This »Oh, yeah!« was only possible with the support of Nike and its products—and that is exactly how Nike gains meaning.

## Oh, no!

### THE PROBLEM:

Something frustrates, hinders, or challenges the protagonist. This could be a concrete obstacle, a perceived shortcoming, an unfulfilled desire, or an internal conflict. This problem creates tension and makes the narrative relatable.

## Mentor

### THE BRAND:

Here, the brand enters the story—not as the hero, but as the guiding force. Through its products, it offers a solution, removes obstacles, enables progress, or adds tangible value.

## Oh, yeah!

### THE TRANSFORMATION:

In the end, there is a positive change. With the help of the brand and its products, the protagonist can finally do what was previously impossible. The problem is solved or becomes manageable. The benefit for the protagonist becomes clear: They become more capable, more self-confident, more successful, or happier.



Fig. 2: Patagonia, »Don't Buy This Jacket«, 2011.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

The hero's journey can also be found in (more) sustainable brands. For example, the fashion brand Patagonia places consumers at the center of its narrative who want to get involved in environmental and climate protection or live a more sustainable life, but who simultaneously face challenges such as overconsumption, information overload, or limited options for action. For these protagonists, the »Oh, no!« moment arises when they are confronted with environmental problems, overconsumption, or the seemingly unattainable desire to consume more sustainably—for example, in the campaign »Don't Buy This Jacket,« which encourages people to pause and reflect critically before making a purchase. Patagonia acts as a mentor by providing knowledge, services, and products that enable active participation and make responsibility tangible—for example, through the Worn Wear® program, which allows used Patagonia gear to be traded in and purchased. The »Oh, yeah!« moment arises when consumers, empowered by the brand's support, are able to make sustainable (or more sustainable) decisions and thereby achieve a positive impact—whether for the environment, the community, or their own sense of agency.

# NARRATIVES IN ECONOMIC MODELS

Stories at the brand and product level are always part of a larger economic narrative. They have an impact not only because of their concrete vividness, but also because they fit into this overarching logic and thereby create meaning. Despite Lyotard's diagnosis of the collapse of grand meta-narratives, overarching narratives continue to exist and structure economic thinking and actions. Economic narratives define which strategies are considered worthwhile, which goals appear desirable, and which developments are interpreted as progress. They act as master frameworks offering orientation far beyond individual product or brand stories.

## WHAT ARE ECONOMIC MODELS?

### 1. INSTITUTIONS

What role does the government play?  
To what extent does it intervene? What is the relationship between the government and the market?

### 2. ACTORS

What responsibilities and freedoms  
(including freedom of choice) do businesses, households,  
or civil society have?

### 3. COORDINATION

How are decisions made—through markets,  
hierarchies, or networks?

### 4. DISTRIBUTION

How are income, wealth, and risks distributed?

In simple terms, an economic model describes how an economy functions. It is not just about markets and prices, but also about institutions, organisations, and underlying rules governing economic activity. The goal is not to capture every nuance of reality, but to clarify key dynamics.

Economic systems provide a coherent architecture of goals, design principles, and strategies that govern activity across all economic subsystems: production, innovation, labor and social policy, financial systems, and state governance instruments.

This carries an inherent normative dimension. An economic model always embeds assumptions—whether explicit or implicit—about what is considered efficient, fair, or desirable, alongside an underlying view of human nature. In many societies, a dominant logic of growth continues to shape economic thinking to this day—whether within the mainstream capitalist narrative or in counter-narratives that critique the system. Goals such as growth, increased efficiency, and productivity gains are often viewed as unquestioned benchmarks, but stand in tension with other goals such as social justice and environmental sustainability. These conflicting goals cannot be resolved through purely economic means; rather, they must be negotiated at the political and societal levels.

ECONOMIC MODELS ARE THEREFORE ALSO MODELS OF POLITICAL ORDER: THEY SHAPE POWER RELATIONS, ISSUES OF DISTRIBUTION, AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

Against this backdrop, economic models regularly face disruption—whether from financial crises, digitalisation, or geopolitical tensions. Such crises reignite the debate over whether incremental tweaks suffice or if a systemic paradigm shift is required. In the course of these discussions, alternative, sustainability-oriented economic models are gaining increasing importance.

## SUSTAINABILITY-ORIENTED ECONOMIC MODELS

The impulse to align economic activity with long-term ecological and social goals gained momentum in the 1970s. A pivotal milestone was the publication of the book *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). In it, the so-called Club of Rome warned of the environmental limits to unlimited population and economic growth and called for integrated approaches to the economy and the environment. The book sparked the first discussions about »ecological economics« and resource-efficient production models, which laid the groundwork for thinking about sustainability-oriented economic models. These are generally not fully developed versions of classical economic models. Rather, they can be understood as approaches that integrate ecological, social, and economic dimensions into economic practices (triple bottom line), address transformation, responsibility, and planetary boundaries, and view investment as a means of building resilience and securing the future.

Rather than emerging as new »grand narratives,« they operate as competing micro-narratives vying for discourse dominance including the Circular Economy, Performance Economy, Donut Economy, Economy for the Common Good, and Post-Growth Economy. These approaches share several foundational premises:



### INTEGRATION OF ECOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES

Economic activity is anchored within planetary boundaries.



### REDEFINING VALUE

Success is measured not solely by GDP or profit, but by social and environmental metrics.



### DECOUPLING PROMISE

Many models aim to decouple economic output from resource consumption – via circular loops, service-dominant systems, or shared usage.



### FUTURE ORIENTATION

They articulate explicit visions of the future, offering meaningful direction for systemic transformation.

These shared principles, however, should not obscure substantial differences and conflicting underlying assumptions.

For instance, regarding economic growth, concepts like the Circular Economy or Performance Economy often advocate for qualitatively different—yet still ongoing—growth. Conversely, the Post-Growth Economy fundamentally challenges growth as an objective, advocating instead for sufficiency and reduced material throughput.

Similarly, regenerative or circular frameworks often rely heavily on technological innovation (advanced materials, digital platforms). Frugal innovation or degrowth movements, by contrast, stress simplicity, reparability, and low-tech solutions. This creates a tension between high-tech optimization and cultural austerity. Regarding market structures, sharing models or performance approaches seek to transform existing markets. Frameworks like the Economy for the Common Good or regional co-operative models push for structural shifts in ownership and decision-making, directly shaping their political feasibility.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN PROCESSES

At first glance, the concepts of sustainability-oriented economic models may seem quite abstract when it comes to design and innovation processes. However, these concepts offer productive anchor points. They allow us to formulate guiding questions that can serve as heuristic tools, for example:



Which social relationships can a product strengthen?



How can qualitative value be created without increasing resource throughput?



How can utility rather than ownership be placed at the center of design?



How does design navigate between ecological ceilings and social foundations?



How can materials be kept within technical or biological loops?

Such guiding principles broaden the scope of design. They raise awareness for service life, reparability, resource use, social integration, and regional value creation. Yet the simplicity of these models presents a double-edged sword: while offering direction, they risk oversimplification or ideological rigidity. For instance, dogmatically conceptualising the Circular Economy as a perfectly closed loop can foster unrealistic solutions that prove ecologically counterproductive. Likewise, sustainability models that retain a growth imperative risk overlooking systemic trade-offs (such as rebound effects or externalised environmental costs). In this regard, a critical distance is always necessary. Economic models should not serve as dogma or ideals in the design process, but rather as a framework for reflection. A product focused exclusively on circularity may neglect other dimensions of sustainability; a radically sufficiency-oriented approach may overlook social or economic realities. Economic models can therefore serve as a strategic framework for design processes. They expand the question »How do we design?« to include the preceding question: »Within what economic space of possibilities do we want to design?« Consequently, design shifts from a purely formal or functional challenge to an intentional positioning within competing economic narratives.

## THE NATURE OF BROOMS

Crumbs, grit, gravel, dust, sand, leaves. The broom gathers what has scattered, giving direction to dispersion. Its tufts of bristles sweep across the surface, drawing lines through the chaos, gathering, condensing, and clearing. The closer you examine it—its origins, manufacturing methods, contexts of use, and related product categories—the more clearly a structure emerges that extends far beyond this seemingly unremarkable everyday object. The German Duden dictionary defines a broom as »a device for sweeping, made of bundled plastic bristles, animal hair, twigs, or similar materials, and equipped with a handle or shaft.« A matter-of-fact description—and yet it already hints at a diversity of materials and uses.

There is little statistical evidence on how many brooms can be found in the average household. Anecdotally, however, one thing seems clear: There is always at least one. Despite newer, technologically advanced variations of the product, the broom remains a fundamental part of everyday life. In 2017, stable to slightly rising sales were forecast for the broom and brush manufacturing industry (Statista & Eurostat, 2017). Yet, many brooms are fading into the background, both physically and symbolically. The »broom closet« or the »broom cupboard,«—dark, cramped spaces—suggests that the broom is not a prestigious object.

SO LET US BRING THE BROOM INTO THE DAYLIGHT AND TRY TO  
DISCUSS WHY IT IS AS INVISIBLE AS IT IS ESSENTIAL.

The invention of the broom cannot be precisely dated. It is believed that bundles of twigs were being used to clean fire pits as far back as the Stone Age. In 1797, it was presumably the U.S. farmer Levi Dickenson who greatly improved the broom's efficiency by using sorghum (Loudon, 1831). Sorghum (Fig. 3), also known as broomcorn, belongs to the grass family; its structure is similar to that of corn. Since sorghum is still known today by some racially charged terms, its use as broom material dates back to the era of U.S. slavery, and the cited source is likely to be historically biased, this history of innovation should at least be viewed critically from a postcolonial perspective. Was it Dickenson who, in 1797, made a broom using sorghum fibers, or did he simply attach his name to an already existing practice?



Fig. 3: Sorghum



Fig. 4: A flat-bound broom

Another useful modification of the broom is attributed to the Shakers: Around 1830, they introduced the flat-bound broom (Fig. 4), expanding the sweeping surface while introducing a new aesthetic visibility—the broom hung openly on the wall as part of an orderly interior aesthetic (Sprigg, 1975).

By contrast, in the landmark Frankfurt Kitchen, the broom retreats behind the door of the broom cupboard. Kept within arm's reach yet hidden from view—deemed unhygienic, perhaps—it was designed into functional invisibility.

THIS REVEALS A PIVOTAL NARRATIVE MOVEMENT IN PRODUCT DESIGN: VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY STRUCTURE MEANING. THE DISPLAYED BROOM TELLS OF ORDER AS A VIRTUE; THE HIDDEN BROOM SPEAKS OF ORDER AS DOMESTIC CARE WORK TO BE KEPT OUT OF SIGHT.

The broom's cultural trajectory takes surprising flights of fancy. One theory explaining why brooms are considered the witches' mode of travel today suggests that herbalists made hallucinogenic ointments and used broomsticks to apply them to mucous membranes. The resulting sensation of detachment from one's own body was described as a flying experience (Harner, 1979). Thus, the ground-cleaning tool becomes a vehicle for the thrill of flight—a line of association that extends from witch lore to the sport of Quidditch and the invention of the

Nimbus 2000 in the Harry Potter stories. Yet literature also frames the broom as a counter-narrative to spectacle: in Michael Ende's *Momo*, the street sweeper Beppo embodies patience and mindfulness—and the broom represents an instrument of quiet resilience over frenzy. A broad spectrum of meaning spans the gap between ecstasy and routine.

But how does the broom hold its ground against technological innovations that also aim to keep breadcrumbs, gravel, dust, sand, and leaves under control? A key argument lies in the diversification of the product landscape. Products are rarely completely replaced: they coexist. In the home, the broom competes with the vacuum cleaner—from upright vacuums to stick vacuums to robot vacuums—as well as with squeegees and mops, which, however, primarily address a different category of dirt. The broom remains competitive: It operates quietly, requires neither a power outlet nor a battery, and needs no filter changes or dust bags. No tangled hose can throw it off course. It is lightweight, ready for immediate use, and independent of any infrastructure.

However, there are drawbacks. Improper sweeping stirs up dust and can be harmful to health in the long term. In a professional context, sweeping is subject to formal and informal rules. On construction sites or in workshops, sweeping too vigorously is quickly reprimanded—finesse is required. Technically, distinctions are made, for example, between pulling and pushing motions, two movements that generate different dust dynamics. Here it becomes clear that the broom is not only an object but also structures movement—it imprints choreographies on the body and generates implicit knowledge of how to act.



Fig. 5: An improvised hand brush

In public spaces, another rival emerges: the leaf blower. Here, turbulence is not mitigated but staged with noise and power; the thrust of air is part of the product. By comparison, the broom appears almost stoic. It may be overshadowed in the broad variety of cleaning tools, but its niche applications are numerous. Sweeping sand into the joints of freshly laid pavers, for example, remains a job best suited for a broom.

The environmental perspective is equally telling. A key metric for assessing environmental impact is MIPS—the Material Input Per Service Unit. It measures material expenditure against functional output—in this case, the area swept. Compared to motorized devices, the broom's material and energy input is negligible as it is powered solely by human muscle (Ritthoff et al., 2002). Consumables like filters are nonexistent, and repairs are minimal. Proper storage is essential—ideally hanging, so that the bristles retain their springiness.

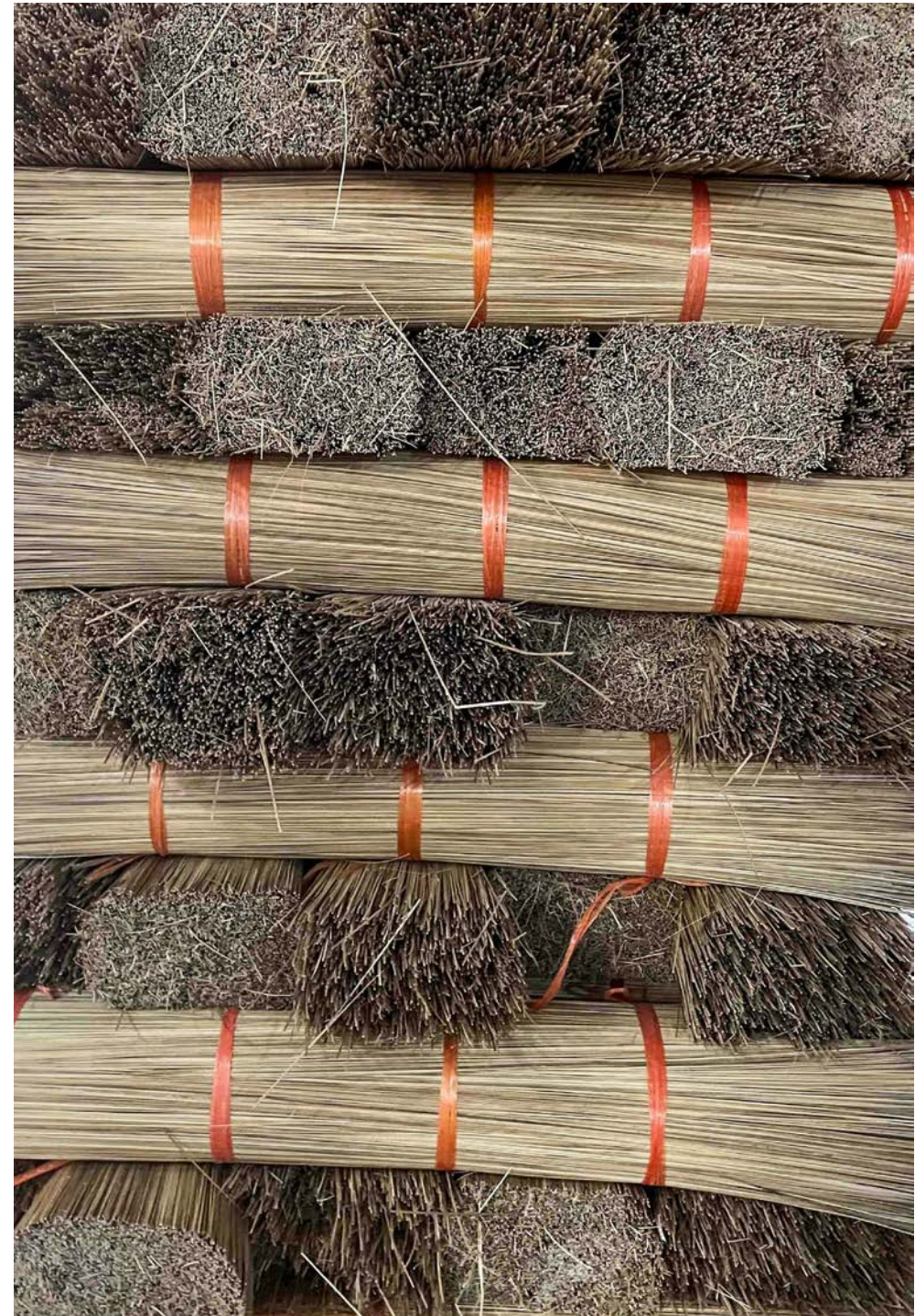


Fig. 6: Various cleaning tools

A look at the wide variety of brooms reveals a unique »poetics of materials«. Bristles are not only colorful but also diverse: animal hair, natural plant fibers, and synthetic blends with antistatic properties. From stiff bristles for coarse dirt to soft fibers for fine dust, a world of varying elasticities, resilience, and binding techniques unfolds. It is noteworthy that, alongside industrial manufacturing processes, traditional artisanal methods of production continue to exist. With modest resources, one can make a broom by hand—a relic and, at the same time, evidence of a craft that has become rarer but has not (yet) disappeared entirely.

HERE, THE NARRATIVE COMES FULL CIRCLE: THE BROOM IS A TOOL THAT BRINGS TOGETHER STORIES OF MATERIALITY, THE BODY, ORDER, AND INVISIBLE LABOR. WITH A BROOM, ONE ORGANIZES TIME, SPACE, AND EVEN MEANING: WHEN TO SWEEP, WHERE TO SWEEP, AND WHAT IS EVEN CONSIDERED DIRT. THIS SHOWS THAT PRODUCTS ARE NOT ONLY USEFUL BUT ALSO SHAPE OUR THINKING AND BEHAVIOR.

There is much more to be said; the stories of the broom are manifold. Consider this merely a first stroke across a canvas waiting to be cleared.



# HOW TO CANVAS

The Sustainable Narrative Canvas makes it possible to systematically link sustainability and narratives and to purposefully integrate the narrative dimension into the product design process. It helps designers consciously link different narrative threads to the product-service system they are developing. The goal is not only to optimize product-service systems functionally, but also to reflect on, help shape, and clearly communicate their underlying structures of meaning.

DIVERSITY MANIFESTS NOT ONLY IN PEOPLE AND OBJECTS, BUT IN THE NARRATIVES CONNECTING THEM. PRODUCTS ARE ALWAYS EMBEDDED IN STORIES ABOUT THEIR USE, RESPONSIBILITY, VALUE, OR FUTURE.

These stories can also be framed and shaped in various ways within the context of sustainable development. The Sustainable Narrative Canvas invites us to actively explore these possibilities and harness them creatively.

The Sustainable Narrative Canvas guides users through the development of sustainability-related product narratives in a total of twelve steps. The individual reflection and work steps are structured to combine analytical clarification, strategic positioning, and conceptual translation. Ultimately, the key findings converge in a concise overview.

The students in the »Narratives of Sustainability« course also used this Sustainable Narrative Canvas when designing their projects. Their projects are presented on the following pages.

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# NARRATING BROOMS

The following projects were developed as part of the »Narratives of Sustainability« seminar. The students used the Sustainable Narrative Canvas as a basis for questioning existing assumptions and developing new product narratives and designs from them. Their work serves as examples and illustrates how the broom as a product can be narrated and conceived differently, both verbally and formally. This brings to light questions regarding sustainability that go far beyond the use of sustainable materials. The designs place a particular focus on the dimension of social sustainability, with the students exploring the act of sweeping and cleaning as work that often takes place in the background and does not always receive the recognition it deserves.

However diverse the individual designs may be, the students approach a related question from different angles: How can we make it visible that sweeping is a form of care work which often seems to be taken for granted in everyday life and can be unevenly distributed? They situate this question in various contexts: in private daily life, at a restaurant table, in shared conversation and in the hallway of a flat. In each case, they translate the question into their own design proposals. By questioning existing assumptions and developing alternative narratives, the designs also open up new perspectives on possible actions and situations.

Sustainability is not treated as an abstract criterion here, but is explored through concrete designs: as a question of how attention, responsibility and appreciation for everyday forms of care and communal living can be addressed through design.



# TISCHCARE

FRIDA KLUG



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

TischCare enables a small form of participation in a place where it is otherwise rarely present: right at the restaurant table. A hand brush integrated beneath the tabletop and a waste disposal facility are provided for guests who wish to clear crumbs or small bits of rubbish from their table themselves. This is not a request to tidy up and does not replace the work of the waiting staff. Rather, TischCare offers a voluntary option—a small gesture that helps to highlight the fact that looking after a shared space is a task that is usually carried out by someone else.

## PROTAGONIST

After a long day, it is not always possible to keep track of every little detail. A napkin, a few crumbs or a receipt are left on the table—not out of indifference, but because clearing them away is naturally assumed to be the waiting staff's responsibility. The table is left as it is, the thoughts already on the next appointment. The situation reflects less a lack of consideration than a well-rehearsed routine: Someone is bound to take responsibility for this kind of care work.

## OH NO!

After a meal, the division of roles is usually implicitly clear: Customers leave and the staff clear up. Anyone wishing to help would first need to know whether this is actually welcome, and would usually not have the necessary equipment to hand. The usual solution is therefore also the simplest. Not every instance of not getting involved reflects a lack of interest—sometimes there is simply no opportunity to act differently.

## MENTOR

TischCare does not tell you how to behave. Rather, its design offers a course of action: The broom is within easy reach, its function is clear, and the bin is right next to it. This is where the product's affordance lies. It creates a concrete opportunity without turning it into an obligation. The decision remains with the guests—and it is precisely this voluntary nature that distinguishes the offer from a demand.

## OH YEAH!

A quick gesture is all it takes: sweeping up crumbs, leaving the table tidy again. The action is small, its immediate result visible. It is precisely here that the sense of self-efficacy lies. At the same time, it allows us to realise that this everyday work usually takes place in the background and is carried out by others. TischCare does not make care work the main focus of a restaurant visit—but perhaps it makes it something that is noticed for a moment.

# TISCHCARE

## ANALYSIS

Many forms of care work go largely unnoticed, precisely because they are carried out so reliably. A clean table is taken for granted; yet the person who clears it after a meal often remains unseen. Such routines also shape the way we deal with the traces we leave behind. TischCare takes this everyday situation as its starting point and asks whether design can create opportunities for participation without turning a voluntary gesture into a new obligation.

## LINK TO SUSTAINABILITY

TischCare views sustainability primarily as a matter of how we interact socially in shared spaces. The product enables people to participate voluntarily in looking after these spaces, thereby highlighting work whose results are usually taken for granted. Sustainability here does not lie in demanding that everyone tidy up more, but in the opportunity to be more conscious of responsibility and care work in everyday life and to take on such tasks oneself as the situation requires.

## VISION

The vision does not begin with a major change in behaviour, but with a small opportunity. Clearing the table yourself after a meal can show that even one's immediate sphere of influence can be shaped. Perhaps it will remain just this one moment. Perhaps it will also raise awareness of the many small tasks that others take on as a matter of course in everyday life. TischCare therefore sees change as an offer: visible, concrete and voluntary.



# COBRA

YAMUNA RÖSCH



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Cobra gives a cleaning tool that is usually hidden away a permanent place in the living space. The sweeping set is stored on a wall bracket, which also serves as a shelf, and thus remains visible and within easy reach. In terms of design, the object straddles the line between a tool and a piece of furniture. This means you do not have to go looking for a cleaning implement when dealing with minor messes—Cobra is already right where everyday life takes place.

## PROTAGONIST

The protagonist deliberately designs their limited living space and aims to combine functionality, order and aesthetics. Everyday objects do not necessarily have to be hidden away, but can form part of the space if they are designed and positioned appropriately. At the same time, everyday tasks should be carried out with as few unnecessary journeys or interruptions as possible.

## OH NO!

A few crumbs or bits of dirt on the floor can be cleared away in no time—provided the cleaning equipment is within easy reach. If, on the other hand, the cleaning kit is tucked away in the broom cupboard or behind a cupboard door, this simple task becomes an extra trip. Many cleaning tools are hidden away precisely because they are not designed to be part of the living space. This creates an avoidable delay between the dirt appearing and it being cleaned up.

## MENTOR

Cobra creates an immediate opportunity to take action. Thanks to its prominent placement and constant availability, there is no need to go looking for the broom set. The design does not dictate who should do the cleaning, but makes the tool accessible to everyone in the household. This does not automatically change the way cleaning tasks are shared, but it does lower the practical barrier for getting involved.

## OH YEAH!

Sweeping up a few crumbs, clearing the floor, returning the tools to their place—the task is quick and the result is immediately visible. Cobra makes precisely these little moments easily accessible. Cleaning does not have to turn into a major chore before it gets done. The sweeping set remains in plain sight in the room, and the task can become a small, self-contained and thoroughly satisfying part of everyday life.

# COBRA

## ANALYSIS

Cleaning kits are designed for use, but are often stored out of sight in everyday life. This separation has practical consequences: The tools are not where they are needed. Particularly when it comes to minor messes, the extra effort involved in fetching them can mean that the cleaning is put off until later. Cobra addresses this disconnect between living space, accessibility and use.

## LINK TO SUSTAINABILITY

Cobra's approach to sustainability lies primarily in the product's long-term usability. The product can be dismantled using screw connections; individual components can be repaired or replaced when worn. The design and construction are intended to ensure that the sweeping set does not need to be completely replaced any time soon. As Cobra is also conceived as a visible feature of the living space, this everyday object is integrated not only functionally but also permanently into daily life.

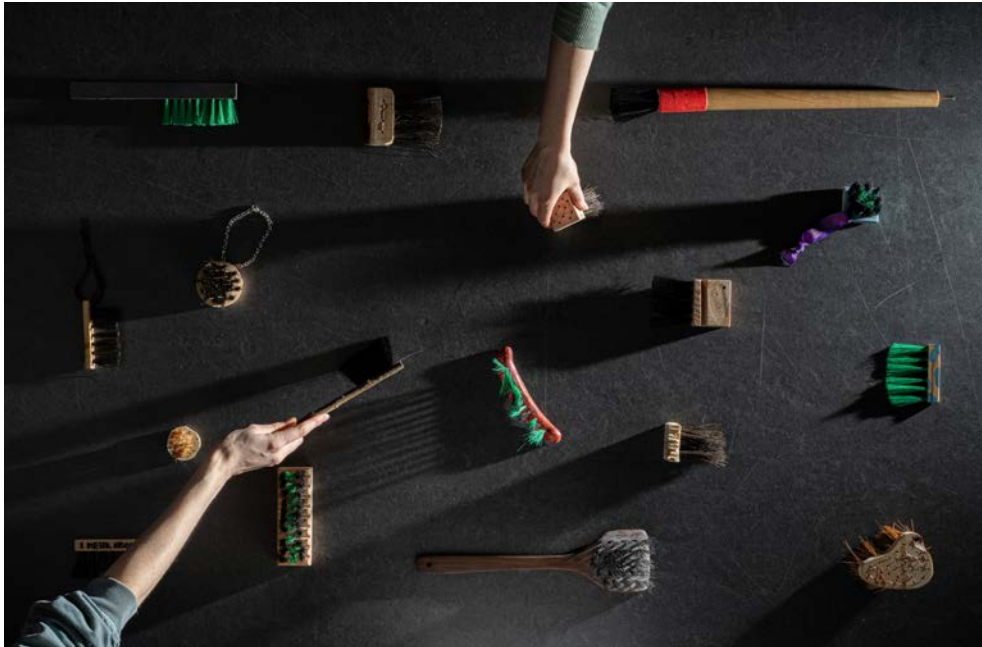
## VISION

The vision is a daily life in which looking after your home does not have to wait until tasks have piled up. Small tasks can be carried out straight away because the right tools are visible and within easy reach. This means that sweeping does not become something out of the ordinary, but rather a natural part of everyday life—quick, practical and without having to make a detour to the broom cupboard.



# MIND THE SWEEP

ANNA HELLMUTH



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Mind the Sweep brings people together through the shared activity of making brooms. While participants learn a craft and produce their own functional object, the activity creates space for discussions about work and how it is perceived in society. Care work, in particular, serves as a point of reference: It is essential, yet often remains largely invisible. The craft activity becomes a shared occasion to engage in conversation about such issues—in a relaxed atmosphere and without the discussion necessarily having to be the main focus from the outset.

## PROTAGONIST

The participants bring a variety of experiences to the project. Some are already engaged with issues of care work and social roles while others are mainly interested in the craft itself. It is precisely these different starting points that form part of the project. Working together creates a concrete situation in which dialogue can take place, without everyone having to share the same concerns or directly address their personal experiences.

## OH NO!

In everyday life, one task often follows another. Time for activities whose value is not immediately measured in terms of performance or efficiency is not something that can be taken for granted. Manual work, in particular, can foster a different kind of attention: One must engage fully with the materials, the movements and the shared process. In this way, space for exchange and reflection arises not alongside the activity, but from it.

## MENTOR

The craft itself acts as a mediator. Anyone who makes a broom learns not only through explanation, but also through the materials and the movements involved: How much force does the process require? How do the fibres behave? What happens if a step goes wrong? The process makes knowledge directly tangible. In the end, what remains is an object in which one's own experience is made visible and which can carry that experience forward into everyday life.

## OH YEAH!

In a group, it becomes clear that not everyone masters the same step straight away. Some try things out, others lend a hand; sometimes it works, and sometimes it takes a second try. It is precisely this shared learning experience that can foster a sense of connection. The moment when materials and manual labor come together to create a working broom can also shift one's perception of one's own abilities: Perhaps I am capable of more than I previously thought.

# MIND THE SWEEP

## ANALYSIS

Care work makes a significant contribution to everyday life and shared living situations, yet it is not always recognised or valued to the same extent as other forms of work. Its outcomes are often taken for granted, whilst the activities themselves remain in the background. Mind the Sweep does not create a space for theoretical discussion, but rather a concrete opportunity for exchange: While making a broom together, questions about the visibility, value and social recognition of work can be raised.

## LINK TO SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability here does not stem solely from the material the broom is made of. It also lies in the passing on of knowledge and in the experience of being able to make and understand things for oneself. The workshop combines a mindful approach to reusing materials with social learning and exchange. The product is both an outcome and a memento—yet, more important than the individual broom is the process through which knowledge, experiences and perspectives are shared.

## VISION

The vision is of places where people come together to share knowledge in a practical way and to create things together. Craft provides the occasion; exchange can arise from this. In this way, experiences of care work, questions of social recognition and craft-based knowledge can all find a place alongside one another. What begins as a single workshop could develop into a recurring practice in which making things together also facilitates shared reflection.



# TABLE RITUAL

ARBA SHABANAJ



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Table Ritual brings an act that is usually out of sight back to the table. The dustpan and hand brush are not fetched from a broom cupboard only after the meal, but are present as a designed part of the table setting. If crumbs are swept up during the meal, this can lead to a casual shared interaction. What might otherwise simply become a matter of tidying up after the meal thus remains part of the social moment.

## PROTAGONIST

For the protagonists, the dining table is a place for being together. That is precisely why getting involved is not always easy: You want to help, but you do not want to take a task off someone's hands or impose yourself on them. This tension between a willingness to help and politeness characterises many small, everyday situations. Table Ritual is aimed at people who do not wish to do away with such routines altogether, but who would like to try out new ways of participating together.

## OH NO!

A few crumbs on the table are no big deal while eating together. However, if the right utensil is fetched only after everyone has got up, a different phase begins: Now it is time to tidy up. Table Ritual asks whether this separation is necessary. Casually sweeping up while still sitting together could be a small shared interaction rather than a task that falls to only one person afterwards.

## MENTOR

Table Ritual creates an opportunity without the need to make a request. Because the object is clearly visible on the table and has been designed as part of the setting, its potential use is immediately apparent. Reaching for it can be done casually, without anyone having to ask for permission or assign a task. It is in this affordance that the product's mediating function lies: It invites participation, but leaves it up to those present to choose whether to accept it or not.

## OH YEAH!

When care becomes part of a shared moment, it can take on a different character. A small action such as sweeping up crumbs need not appear as an act of assistance, but can take place casually amidst other interactions. Through repetition, this could develop into a familiar practice in which participation becomes natural; roles or responsibilities do not have to be renegotiated every time.

# TABLE RITUAL

## ANALYSIS

In everyday life, dustpans and hand brushes usually vanish to those places where cleaning tools are kept: in cupboards, storerooms or broom closets. As a result, the act of cleaning also disappears from the visible social context. Cleaning is something that is done afterwards, not while social life is happening. Table Ritual challenges this order and asks what happens when a cleaning tool is not hidden away, but is deliberately made part of the shared space.

## LINK TO SUSTAINABILITY

Table Ritual combines the physical durability of a product with the question of how it acquires meaning in everyday life. The materials and construction are designed for long-term use. At the same time, the project highlights the act of care and opens up possibilities for shared use. Sustainability thus lies not solely in the object itself, but in the interplay between material, recurring practice and the social context in which the object is used.

## VISION

The vision is a culture of everyday life in which care does not begin only once the shared activity has ended. Small acts can already form part of being together and take place jointly, without having to be assigned as a task each time. Table Ritual sees design as a way of framing such situations differently and thereby offering new forms of shared participation.



# BROOMS AND LOOSE ENDS

At the end of this zine, there is no definitive statement about the broom. Quite the opposite. In fact: the longer one engages with it, the clearer it becomes just how much can be gleaned from a seemingly simple object. The broom leads from materials and craftsmanship, via the body and movement, to questions of order, labour, value and social visibility. What begins as a product story thus becomes a story about the meanings we ascribe to things—and about the meanings that things themselves help to create.

The projects presented here take up this perspective. They do not retell the story of the broom by giving it a different form or superimpose an additional narrative. Instead, they alter the situations, relationships and actions in which it is embedded. The broom becomes a catalyst for conversation, an object of collaborative work, a visible part of everyday life, or a starting point for reflecting on those forms of care work that often seem to be taken for granted.

Perhaps this is also where the key insight lies: Sustainable design does not begin with the question of what a product is made of or how long it lasts. It begins just as much with the question of what notions of value, responsibility and a good life are associated with it. Narratives are not merely an afterthought to the design process. They structure what we consider desirable—and thus also what we design.

Design does not merely change the things around us. It can also change what we pay attention to, what we take for granted, and which relationships between people, things and their actions become visible. Perhaps this is precisely where the potential of the broom as a narrating object lies: in directing our gaze towards the everyday, towards invisible labour, and towards the stories that are distilled into products. There is still much to sweep up.



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## IMAGES

Fig. 1: Patagonia. (25 November, 2011). *Don't buy this jacket* [Advertisement]. The New York Times.

Fig. 2: Nike. (2012). *Find your greatness: Jogger* [Advertisement].

Fig. 3: 南北 猫. (2025). *Field with red Sorghum* [Photograph]. Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/de/fotos/feld-mit-reifen-roten-sorghumpflanzen-tnmVtjNjV-E>

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