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EDITORIAL

Inefficient Sustainability

Anne-Marie Willis and Cameron Tonkinwise

Welcome to another issue of *Design Philosophy Papers*. This time we're questioning efficiency – something commonly regarded as 'a good thing', especially by designers and advocates of sustainable design. The basic principle of efficiency is to achieve the same, or better, outcomes by using less resources, less effort, less time. Seems to make sense? Not according to the contributors to this issue, who were all participants in the first *New School Sustainability Design Philosophy Symposium* convened by Cameron Tonkinwise in November 2008 at Parsons The New School for Design, New York. Here is his introduction, followed by some further words on the papers themselves.

Inefficient Sustainability: Revaluing Excess

The symposium, entitled *Inefficient Sustainability: Revaluing Excess*, involved discussions structured around a series of position papers with designated respondents by Clive Dilnot, Tony Fry, Jamer Hunt, Allan Stoekl and Cameron Tonkinwise. Other participants in the discussion were Orit Halpern, Benjamin Lee, Joel Towers, McKenzie

Wark and Susan Yelavich. The papers published here were written following the event.

Pragmatically, this event was prompted by the availability in New York City of Tony Fry, whose *Design Futuring* had just been published, and Allan Stoekl, whose *Bataille's Peak* had come out a year earlier. This provided an opportunity to further the project of bringing thorough philosophical critique to the practice of sustainable design, a project central to the work of the EcoDesign Foundation throughout the '90s and *Design Philosophy Papers* throughout the '00s. The symposium signaled the beginning of the New School's attempted contribution to this project.

The invitation to the designated respondents comprised the following statement and citations:

Awareness of the unsustainability of developed nations' ways of life is proving insufficient to prompt change to those ways of life, particularly ones that require sacrifices to habituated levels of comfort and convenience. Improvements in the efficiencies of the devices, infrastructures and built environments that make possible those ways of life are quickly re-expended by rebounding consumption practices. If we are not to resign our fate to the hope of magical breakthrough technologies, we must begin to reconceive our situation, problematizing received notions of pleasure (comfort and convenience) and productivity (efficiency). This discussion aims to begin to develop a vocabulary for sustainable societies no longer centered on efficiency, or even sufficiency, but rather ones that take heed of humans-as-excessive.

To this end, please consider the following:

1

"In architecture, one response to the Energy Crisis claim has been the paradigm of conservation. In this paradigm, the aim of the good is to do less bad. While conservation is well intended, it is a thermodynamically pessimistic paradigm and ultimately a futile pursuit. By focusing on reduction rather than production, conservation conditions architects to work on the wrong problem. It diverts architects from a more optimistic approach grounded in the surplus and excess described by Bataille. In contrast to the conservation paradigm, the aim for architects should shift from using less energy toward the means of capturing, channelling, and producing energy available in the milieu of a project."

Keil Moe 'Compelling yet Unreliable Theories of Sustainability'
Journal of Architectural Education Vol.60 No.4, 2007.

2

"A future, renewable energy society – one based on the glorious expenditure of unrefinable energy and not its obsessive

and impossible conservation – means a muscle-based, human-powered, but literally postmodern (and not premodern) understanding of energy as infinite *force* and profoundly limited available *resource*. Thus we consider an ecological future not of Man or God but of the body and recalcitrant energy – not quantifiable, not refinable or concentrated in ways that allow for maximal inefficiency in the consumption of resources. Instead we posit an energy that traverses the body in ritual, in sacrifice, in its human-powered and unpredictable movement through the city.

Allan Stoekl *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion and Postsustainability* University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

3

In response to a thread on the Fostering Sustainable Behavior discussion list concerning the comparative ecological impact of different ways of mowing lawns, which had become quite thoroughly quantitative, Neil Chura proposed:

“Buy a push-mower you can afford; pick a warm afternoon and cut as much lawn as you can mow, or reasonably want to mow; then, plan to remove all the lawn that did not get cut and replace it with appropriate perennials or edibles.” [Feb 18, 2008]

Cameron Tonkinwise
April 2009

Further Words on Efficiency and Excess

The assumption that sustainability equals less has become widely believed – we need to use less energy, less resources; produce less greenhouse gases, less waste, and so on. Some sustainability advocates argue that the reductions needed can only happen if we (affluent populations) learn to consume less; others say no, we can maintain high consumption lifestyles, we just need to change how we do it – by using smarter technologies, less polluting manufacturing processes, clean energy, closed loop recycling and so on.

But what if the assumptions common to these positions – reduction, ‘less is more’ and efficiency are wrong? What if human beings are, at the core, excessive beings, driven always to use and accumulate more than bare necessities? Has there ever been a culture on earth that did not partake of ritual, ceremony, ornamentation, feasting, song, dance, performance – all excessive practices, despite functionalist anthropological explanations: ceremonies to ensure a bountiful harvest; or magic and incantations to ward off sickness.

For Georges Bataille, excess was not just a feature culture, but the very condition of the natural world, with its fecundity and seemingly limitless diversity of life forms. Bataille is a seminal figure in thinking against economism. He opposed the moral and money economies of acquisition and production, what he termed the

‘restricted economy’ that ignores, while it takes from, and impacts upon, the larger economy. The basis of this larger ‘general economy’ is solar energy, the source of life (“the radiation of the sun which dispenses energy – wealth – without any return”). Bataille insists:

.... there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life.¹

Rational explanations arrived a long time later – function, system, evolution, economy, efficiency – these are all concepts back loaded onto the messy exuberance of life and culture: the biophysical-given and the human-made and their interdependence.

The idea of efficiency is defined by, and against, its opposite: waste. Immediately we have a problem – which is the way in which the word ‘waste’ has been stretched so far to cover so many meanings. It has become a taut, thin fabric trying, pointlessly, to cover a vast territory of extremes. First, there is waste as a failure to utilise: wasting resources, time, money, opportunities, lives. Here, to waste is posited as a bad action performed upon a good object. Then there is the reverse: waste as refuse, trash, rubbish, something we are well rid of – a good action performed on a bad object. Designating that which we discard as ‘waste’ suggests that we are wasting our waste, that we should really be making use of it. Here is the closed loop of productivist thinking that forbids useless expenditure of any kind.

Working their way out of this closed loop, the writers of the papers turn their attention to this ‘useless expenditure’.

Alan Stoekl has problems with the naturalistic functionalism of William McDonough’s version of sustainability – a model of a waste-less productivity (closed-loop total efficiency) that fails to understand how the activity of wasting has been constitutive of who we are as human beings. Via Bataille, Marcel Mauss and others including Agnes Varda (who made a film on gleaning), he goes on to explore what might seem like a contradiction: waste as a gift.

Taking off from Stoekl’s book *Bataille’s Peak: Energy, Religion and Postsustainability* **Jamer Hunt** discusses parallels between Bataille’s economy of excess and the models of production proposed by advocates of ‘natural capitalism’ and ‘cradle-to-cradle’. He indicates the transgressive nature of Bataille’s project and thus its radical difference from the work of McDonough, Lovins, et al. Bataille knew too well the capacity for instrumental rationality – that which he sought to overturn – to appropriate and incorporate its opposite and he thus sought practices beyond philosophical writing. Hunt asks whether design, implicated as it is in excess, could not be such “a different kind of machine for thinking”.

Tony Fry argues that efficiency and excess are not opposites: within capital logic efficiency *serves* excess. ‘Eco-efficiency’ and other derivative ‘slogan-solutions’ demonstrate the *insufficiency* of the sustainability discourse. His paper enumerates further deficiencies such as: reactive pragmatism; biocentric and technocentric thinking; and the ethnocentrism of the western perspective on sustainability which so often fails to notice that “the ‘enjoyment’ of excess within any currently existing form of economy rests upon maintaining the lack and inequality of others.” Against this critique he offers different starting points for thinking sustainability (or sustainment, as he prefers): facing up to unsustainability as vast, pervasive and structural (‘what we are’ and ‘what we do’) without being defeated; asking fundamental questions about what actually should be sustained; and developing a ‘politics of things’ that folds into a politics of design in the recognition that currently existing forms of democratic politics are incapable of delivering conditions of sustainment.

Cameron Tonkinwise presents a reading of Allan Stoekl’s *Bataille’s Peak*, indicating exactly how it presents a more nuanced way of thinking towards sustainability than crude anti-consumerism or ‘voluntary simplicity’ style environmentalism. Sustainability can never be pursued. These are issues that go to the heart of what we believe human being to be – in essence. All exhortations that ‘we’ must change in the face of peak oil, climate change, etc, always carry with them notions of what it is to be human – and unfortunately when such exhortations are unaware of this, they are likely to be promoting a diminished humanity. The closed loop of productivist thinking morphs into a treadmill, perhaps an animal-powered treadmill.

Much thanks must go to Cameron Tonkinwise and the New School for making the publication of these papers possible. This marks a welcome extension of DPP’s activity – publishing contributions from a wider range of disciplines and practices by drawing strategically on the networks of our editorial board and supporters. Further issues will be guest edited this year. ‘Design History Futures’ (editors: Karin Jaasche, Paul Denison and Tara Andrews) promises to be diverse and provocative and may extend over two issues. ‘Sacred Design Now’, after having being on the drawing board for some time, will soon be coming to realisation with Samar Akkach as guest editor.

Anne-Marie Willis
April 2009

Note

1. Georges Bataille *The Accused Share: An Essay on the General Economy Consumption* (trans. Robert Hurley) New York: Zone Books 1988 (originally published in France, 1967).