



Opening Lines on Unsustainability

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EDITORIAL

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Opening Lines

This is the first issue of DPP and a starting point from which to develop.

Broadly, the whole Design Philosophy Papers project is about getting more people to think deeply about design as a world-shaping force, be stopped in their tracks by this recognition and then to participate in developing more informed design thinking and action.

The main project elements are the online journal appearing six times a year and an annual collection of selected and commissioned essays in print plus a CD of the all the journal issues of the year. Other elements will be added as the project gains momentum.

The journal has distinct sections: The Papers are its core – one or two substantial papers, along with an introduction, will be published in each issue. The Sustainment is a regular column by Tony Fry that aims to take a leap beyond the exhausted rhetoric of ‘sustainability’ (it’s already prompted a response from William McNeill, which will appear in the next issue). Hot

Debate presents polemical discussion on ideas and practices of design. It's a space where we invite readers' contributions. A Reviews section for books and journals on design philosophy, design history, design theory, philosophy of technology, architectural theory, cultural theory will be developed (our reviews editor will welcome suggestions from readers and publishers). Notice Board will also be a reader-developed space to announce forthcoming events, new publications, conferences, calls for papers and research projects. This will not be the usual website fare of endless list of links, but instead a brief, selective list of annotated items just relevant to the DPP project.

Looking Forwards

To give a sense of DPP's concerns and directions, here are some themes of forthcoming issues:

The attraction and recoil of beauty – Why has an interest in beauty been rekindled? What can and cannot be recovered? While beauty may impose itself on design, it also needs to be asked 'what does beauty (and ideas about it) design?'

Technology as environment – What is the significance of switching from a concept like 'the technosphere' to the idea of technology as environment? This issue of DPP will address questions of control, limits and the proposition that while technology is constantly on hand and taken-for-granted, it is still utterly strange.

Mediage – Work by several thinkers will be drawn on to consider design as a triadic presence: as a thing-in-itself (object, image, etc), as mediation (between its moment of creation and the future it links to) and as a thing-in-place (how it constitutes a milieu).

Design-time – What would it mean to bring together the idea of 'design life' (designing things for a specific duration) with philosophical understandings of time? How can design both bring time and take it away? How can it extend or diminish human futures?

Design's other – The discourse of design is almost totally Eurocentric, particularly its objects of engagement. When it does move beyond familiar territory it imposes ideas of design as if they were universal. Yet there are understandings, histories and practices of design outside this universalist construct, for example the architecture, craft, gardens and civil works of African, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures. How can this other design and designing be made visible and engaged without being measured against Eurocentric norms?

We invite proposals for papers addressing these themes.

The Papers

In this issue we juxtapose two papers, one by Ezio Manzini and the other by Augustin Berque, that present different takes on the pressing, yet still rarely examined issue of the relation between design and unsustainability.¹ To date the rhetoric of sustainability has proliferated, offering little more than catch phrases and techno-principles like ‘less materials and energy intensity’, ‘design for disassembly’, ‘use of recycled materials’ and the like. Sustainable design is often assumed to be little more than an amalgam of these approaches. Yet something else more fundamental needs to happen before such instrumental solutions could even begin to be effective. And this is that the nexus between design and unsustainability be creatively thought-through and broken. This never seems to occur to the instrumental advocates of ‘sustainable design’.

Ezio Manzini is critical of decontextualised ecodesign solutions like ‘eco-efficiency’ and ‘dematerialisation’. His paper grapples with the problem of how design, which historically has been a driver of over-consumption, can be turned into an agency for fuelling desires for less and for ‘sustainable well-being’. He outlines how he and his colleagues are using Design Oriented Scenarios as a strategy for envisaging more sustainable relations between human beings and designed materiality. To provide a context for the scenarios Manzini identifies some of the major structural symptoms of the contemporary condition of unsustainability, which he names as: the rebound effect; the decline of common goods; the disappearance of contemplative time and the proliferation of remedial goods.

Augustin Berque’s paper also discusses a symptom of the unsustainable, which is historically long-established and has a cross-cultural tendency. He focuses on urban dwellers who to seek escape from the city to an imagined, idealised rural setting, in which they continue their urban modes of living, often with greater impacts than if they had stayed in the city. Like Manzini, Berque is reporting on research in progress. He is working towards an historical account, spanning Eastern and Western cultures, of the evolution of the ideas and practices of what he names as ‘disurbanity’.

For Manzini, the human subject is posed, perhaps problematically, as a creature seeking to maximise happiness, (albeit recast as ‘well-being’) – that same creature posited by classical economic theorists which has reproduced without mutation through allied fields such as ‘consumption studies’. For Berque on the other hand, the human subject is not contained or singular, “but opens out into a common milieu, the nature of which is eco-techno-symbolic”. Behind this simple phrase unfolds a depth of thinking, drawing on eastern and western philosophers, in which categories like individual, body, mind, object and world

lose their coherence and certainty, and a very different understanding of the nature of human being and milieu comes into view (milieu is an idea which Berque has developed elsewhere in his writings on the *ecumene*). In the context of contemporary cultural commentary in which complexity is shunned and all thinking is becoming instrumentalised, Berque's approach may appear overly complicated. The opposite is true. As the condition of unsustainability proliferates (often, as Manzini argues, as the unintended outcome of mainstream sustainable design strategies like eco-efficiency) the need for a more adequate understanding of the nature of human-being-in-the-world becomes ever more urgent. As Tony Fry has argued, it is we who are the crisis of unsustainability.²

Anne-Marie Willis

Notes

1. An exception is Tony Fry *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999.
2. Ibid.