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EDITORIAL

Urbocentrism

Anne-Marie Willis

In initial discussions for this issue, we conceived of ‘urbocentrism’ as a condition analgous to ethnocentrism, but as our thinking and the contributions to the issue evolved, urbocentrism came to mean much more.

But first to backtrack.

Ethnocentrism can be defined as the overlaying of the norms and explanatory frameworks of one’s own culture to whatever is encountered, including cultures of others, even though they may occupy very different lifeworlds and world views. Ethnocentrism defines blindness to cultural difference, but it is not evoked on the erroneous assumption that cultural difference, once recognised can be transcended, but rather and more modestly, that one might act differently once aware that the meanings of values and actions in ‘my world’ do not necessarily correspond to ‘your world’.

As the urban has become a transportable model of a lifeworld and mobile worldview with an ever-extending global reach, is it in fact too late to talk about ‘urbocentrism’? As a condition which increasingly overarches all other differences (ethnic, religious, occupation, income, etc) does the urban have any ‘other’? Is it possible to name something once it becomes totality?

Does naming urbocentrism carry with it the assumption of its overcoming? That is what some of those invited to contribute to this issue thought. They would argue that it is futile, even counter-productive, to name urbocentrism as a problem, given the all-encompassing reach of the urban. **Augustin Berque** read our call-for-papers as a failure to acknowledge the urban reality of the present society, and that our “indictment of urbocentrism” carried with it the danger of perpetuating a powerful, longstanding myth that has operated in both East and West, in which “people think they can escape the urban reality of the society they belong to”.¹

But to name urbocentrism as an issue or problem doesn’t necessarily imply that there is, or must be, some uncorrupted space, place, or way of life beyond the urban. By making the analogy with ethnocentrism, we are calling up how this was defined in Issue 6, as “the common tendency across cultures of approaching the unknown in terms of the known”, but also as a “structural condition of limit – the impossibility of ever being able to entirely mentally step outside one’s own culture”, and that “while ethnocentrism can never be entirely overcome, it can be brought into view and its consequences exposed, and henceforth responsibility can be taken for it”.² So, the same goes for urbocentrism.

This said, the difficulty of thinking the urban now shouldn’t be under-estimated, and each of the authors in this issue, be it in different ways, is trying to find an opening into this complexity rather than establish a definitive position.

When urbocentrism, as perspectival view, gets bonded to technological and economic power, it takes on the character of an unstoppable force. Hence, in his opening essay, **Tony Fry** found himself migrating from ‘urbocentrism’ to ‘hyperurbanism’ as the territory of exploration.

Hyperurbanism marks the end of the city and the beginning of urbanity as a general condition. This is not the urbanity of contained concentrations of people, nor of the ideal of the *Polis* – self-governing concentrations of people. The contemporary urban is dispersed, fragmented and manifested in both intense and weak forms. Its arrival marks the end of a spatial model of the city as a meaningful category of analysis.

In his paper, **Tony Fry**, on the one hand draws attention to the appetites of city dwellers for raw materials, foodstuffs, water and energy, which are dangerously out-stripping the capacities of rural hinterlands everywhere, and exacerbating ecological dysfunction (seen, for example, in his account of the fatal spiral of urban ‘heat islanding’, driving the uptake of air-conditioning, which then hastens global warming and prompts further use of air-conditioning ... and so on). On the other hand, he acknowledges and explores the urban as a mobile geography, figure of desire and aspiration of ‘everywhere’. Here, he consciously

adopts a position of viewing the city from the fading elsewhere of that-which-is-not-yet-fully-urban(ised).

Aidan Davison, with an interest in exploring the idea of the ‘suburban city’, was invited to read and respond to Fry’s paper. He does this by both extending Fry’s analysis, while departing from his conclusions.

In contrast to Fry, whose rural origins were displaced by the onward march of wealthy suburbanites (a fact he doesn’t mention), Davidson, a self-confessed child of the suburbs, provides an insightful summary of the interplay of the ‘techno-economic’ forces and cultural desires that have produced the suburban city. He describes how it has been driven forward by its non-realisation – utopia always just out of reach – ever-extending its spatial and psycho-social frontier and participating in the unfolding teleology of defuturing.

Davison is critical of urban/suburban hyper-consumerism, but is not willing to endorse the intellectual tradition (which had a long run amongst Australian cultural elites of the 20th century) of dumping on suburban culture, designating it as a cultural wasteland: a place of fast food, passive bodies, dumb fashion and dulled minds. For him, the suburban is more nuanced, and he asserts the importance of attempts, however hesitant, to counter fully packaged, commodified ways of life, arguing that Tony Fry (and myself, in other jointly written pieces) take too dim a view of such ‘experiments’. This in turn is taken issue with, in Tony Fry’s reply in ‘Hot Debate’.

For both Aidan Davison and **Augustin Berque**, there is a fatal continuity, despite variations, of urban longings for imagined rural havens (Berque calls it ‘disurbanity’³) that have propelled suburban typeforms of city-country across time and vast spaces. For Berque, literary culture partakes of the construction of worlds and a sense of place within worlds.

Berque’s paper focuses on an early 20th century Japanese novel, by Satô Haruo, that expresses urban yearnings for an elusive rural ‘other’. He traces fragments and echoes of earlier texts, that indicate a longstanding anti-urban thread woven through Japanese and Chinese literary culture, that stretches back to at least the twelfth century. The protagonist of the Satô Haruo novel (which is quasi-autobiographical), once located in his desired rural retreat, experiences a creeping sense of misplacement and inauthenticity. Berque reprises, “no less inauthentic is our present way of life, in which the longing for the country and for nature results in urbanising the former and disrupting the latter”. He advocates that we embrace “the urban reality of our civilization” and that “enhancing the social overhead capital of the city is the clue to sustainability”. This leads him to endorse the claim that compact cities are more sustainable. This is a significant point on which he differs from **Fry** and **Davison**, who both suggest that there are major problems with such spatially defined/population density measures

of sustainability (see especially Davison's endnote no 46). This is something that myself and Fry have also argued elsewhere.⁴

Davison draws attention to the growth of the 'exurban' population in USA and Australia, while **Berque** refers to the 'periurban', a term familiar to geographers and ecologists who study the impacts of urbanisation on adjacent areas, which still have the appearance of farmland or forest, but are changing in frequently invisible ways. 'Exurban' and 'periurban' are not terms used by real estate agents selling 'rural acreages', created from the subdivision of larger, previously productive, farms, to jaded exurbanites. The exurban territories are not yet suburbs, yet they are becoming the locus of urban lifestyles, in terms of the inhabitants' occupations (non-farming) and modes of consumption (e.g., longer drives to supermarkets, etc).

One of the developments feeding the desires that are driving exurbanisation is agritourism, with its carefully managed presentations of small-scale, picturesque farming (vineyards, orchards, olive groves, lavender farms, etc), fuelling visitors' desires to permanently flee the city and replicate what they perceive as a more peaceful lifestyle. The irony is, that that many such small farms derive a greater proportion of their income from tourism than from their agricultural production; and for the more commercially cute, the farming activity is no more than window-dressing to sell 'value-added produce' (jars and bottles of this and that) which frequently has been grown and processed somewhere else. One only has to live for a short time in such a region to tweek what is going on, but for many urban day-trippers, the appearances of 'authenticity' are seductively deceptive. This stage-set agriculture is a long way from the actualities of commercial farming, as Tony Fry describes it.

However, agritourism does not totally define the 'neo-rural': there are farmers, both old and new, in the periurban spaces and beyond, who are investing in new crops, new forms of distribution and more sustainable farming practices – and thus resisting the conversion of good quality farming land into residential estates. Such initiatives are not a disavowal of the urban, but potentially and actually connected to it via more progressive purchasers within the expanding market for organic food, and growing urban support for the idea of seasonal diets and 'low food miles'. The point of these comments, is to emphasise that whether we are talking about lifestyle choices or about where critical intellectual and design work should be directed, there is no longer a choice – city or country, urban or rural – each enfolds the other, and as Davison argues, always has. It is only urbocentrism that sees city lights and green fields as belonging to separate worlds.

Due to a moderately controversial issue that readers of the PhD Design List will be aware of, Ken Friedman has resigned from the Editorial Advisory Board. I would like to thank

Ken for his constructive contributions since the inception of *Design Philosophy Papers*.

At the same time, I am pleased to announce that Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos, Associate Professor (Design) in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning of the University of São Paulo is joining the Editorial Advisory Board. A major area of her research concerns cultures of homelessness in large cities like São Paulo, Los Angeles and Tokyo, this encompassing issues of informal habitat, spontaneous design, the cultural and economic practices of salvage and recycling, and, as she puts it, “the meaning for society of construction of the home on the street, and the streets as home”. Almost as a supplement to this current issue, we will be working jointly to edit an issue in 2005 on expanded understandings of homelessness and the unhomely.

Anne-Marie Willis
December 2004

Notes

1. Personal communication, February 2004.
2. This understanding of ethnocentrism is based on the work of Pierre Clastres; see his ‘Of Ethnocide’ in *Archeology of Violence* New York: Semiotext(e), 1994. It is worth repeating what was said before: “Ethnocentrism comes into operation when one culture encounters another. Clastres makes the point that the self-nominations of most peoples have been ethnocentric (the Guarani Indians call themselves Ava, which means ‘men’, the Waika, Yanomami which means ‘people’, the Eskimos, Inuit, which means ‘men’, and by implication, all others encountered as *other than* ‘people’). When one culture is confronted with a culture not like its own, having only its own world view available, it can only make sense of the other in terms of itself, ‘on its own terms’. This is the inescapable condition of human knowing. However there is world of difference between knowing this about knowing and not knowing it. At the heart of ethnocentrism is an act of translation that doesn’t even know its is happening.”
3. Which he defined and explored in ‘The Idea of Disurbanity’ *Design Philosophy Papers: Collection One* Team D/E/S Publications, 2004, originally published in *Design Philosophy Papers*, #1/2003
4. See Anne-Marie Willis ‘Design in the Shadow of Impact Population’ *People and Place* vol 8, no 3, 2000 (available www.teamdes.com.au/pdf_files/Design%20Impact%20Pop.pdf) and Anne-Marie Willis & Tony Fry ‘Sydney (Un)Ltd’ *People and Place* vol 9, no 2, 2001 (available www.teamdes.com.au/pdf_files/Sydney%20UnLtd.pdf)