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Home Eco-Nomy

Dwelling, Destruction and Design

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Oikos was originally designated by the Greeks to mean home, household and habitation. *Oikos* was then linked to *logos* and *nomos* (the word of the law) to become ecology.¹ If we add the associated term for proper/properness/property (*oikeios*²) we now have the formulation: ‘the law of living properly in the world as home’. We will be arguing that this is not, at least in the developed and developing world, how we live.

If living in alignment with the ecological is any measure, and if *oikos* is a critical measure, then we can say that at an essential level we are living unlawfully. Some of us know this, some of us feel it, but large numbers of people still don’t know or do not care. However, in terms of ‘acting in the world’ it is not as if, at a fundamental level, we can actually choose how to live. The reality is we are thrown into a condition of worldly structural unsustainability – it is elemental to the environment of our being. This means living among ‘the madness of things’ and with the contradiction of consumption without consuming. Reflect for a moment on just how much ‘stuff’ most of us have gathered around ourselves to support the normality which is our unsustainable way of life. We have wardrobes full

of clothes; furniture and furnishings; books, toys, cars, numerous electrical and electronic goods; gardening equipment, sports gear, the material fabric of houses and apartments, and so on. As an animal arisen out of animality does not this unchecked level of material acquisition seem strange, bizarre, mad, extreme? Can this huge disjuncture between what we actually need (materially, socially and psychologically) to sustain ourselves in a condition of wellbeing *and* what we actually *think* we need (and therefore acquire) continue?

We do not choose to live in the midst of the ‘madness of things’. As said, we are born into it. This condition of normality is maintained and extended by the ‘semiosphere’ of the market place as the (inter)face of the cultural economy. This domain of images, messages and cultural practices is where, and in so many ways, we are interpellated to become what we are. Such a semiotic environment strives to engender desires for the promises offered by commodities – yet frequently the pleasure, meaning and security promised is illusory. Within this semiotic environment we learn how to act, what to desire, how to dream – and, in large part, how to become unsustainable as a mode of ‘being-in-the-world’. Living in the sign-world of an economy centred on excess, where a material fabric of commodification has run out of control, learning to be otherwise is no easy task.

Part of our problem is that (economic) consumption does not consume (biophysically) very much at all. The economy in which consumption is operative is ecologically dislocated. Its ever increasing globalization drives the dynamic of consumerist economic development, and delivers the very antithesis of the well-being it is projected to deliver.

In this context the home is not the haven of security we take it to be. Yes, it is that place where what Christopher Lasch called ‘the minimal self’ can retreat for comfort and shelter in the storm of modern life.³ But the nemesis of this ‘being at home’ – the materiality of unsustainability – grows closer. ‘Home’ here is not reducible to just a place – i.e., a house or apartment. Before going further, we need to relate home to economics, but we also need to expand that category to that of *exchange*.

Oikos and the General Economy

Economy and does not completely equate with economics, and in fact the nature of fundamental exchange is at odds with the character of the capitalist economic system. To understand this we have to return to the ecological.

Bio-physical ecologies function by exchange at the most basic level of bio-chemical processes aided by the power of the sun: taking matter through cycles of formation, transformation and decomposition. At every stage of the cyclic process of something coming into or out of being there is an exchange between elements.

Georges Bataille named this process ‘the general economy’ He also pointed out that the development of economic systems by human beings –culminating in hegemonic capitalism – has created a ‘restricted economy’ (i.e., a system that is disarticulated from the general economy).⁴

This restrictive economy was initiated many millennia ago, probably at the very beginning of agricultural societies. The availability of a surplus made the exchange of goods possible. The economic benefits that could be gained from exchange of this excess came to be recognised and likely prompted the intent to produce, store and trade a surplus. This exchange practice obviously became widespread and normative, and it established a condition of economic dislocation that allowed the restrictive economy to flourish and come to dominate human conduct. This was equally underpinned by anthropocentrism – i.e., self/human-centred interests which directed the act of exchange without reflecting upon the consequence upon life in general.

The Home in the Restrictive Economy

Over a vast expanse of economic time (the time of all economic systems) the home became a primary site of expenditure within the restrictive economy. First, it became a point of reception for the arrival, use and using up of goods and services; second, it became the location of the production of goods (‘cottage industries’); and third, it became a location of servicing and supporting labour power. Finally, the home was established as a primary zone of ‘consumption’ and continual material destruction.

Income started to be expended to acquire and accumulate an increasing number of goods for the home. Some of these goods, combined with what Karl Marx’s called ‘unproductive labour’ (returned to productive labour by feminist theory)⁵ were employed to support and service ‘labour power’. Take the example of a coal miner in Europe in the nineteenth century. Goods were purchased: a stove, a kettle, a tin bath, soap, a skillet and food. Action was taken: the miner’s wife heats the water, fills the bath, washes the miner’s back, cooks his meal. His very ability to work was significantly enabled via these goods and expenditure of labour. The labour of his wife enabled his labour (hence her productivity was indivisible from his). Of course, the miner’s wife may have also worked at home (for example, as a seamstress, or spinning, making matches, or a host of other cottage industry activities).

As capitalism and technology developed, the home became increasingly within the remit of the restrictive economy. This can be seen with the rise of home economics and domestic technologies.⁶ Christine Frederick, for instance, applied the scientific management methods of Frederick Winslow Taylor to the management of the home and domestic labour.⁷ The home as a commodity sphere expanded with the introduction of domestic technologies

(like carpet sweepers followed by vacuum cleaners; clothes boilers and mangles followed by washing machines; kitchen ranges followed by gas and electric stoves). These were claimed as labour saving, but this was contradictory. Such products, and all the electrical goods that came along after them (fridges, electric kettles, food mixers, juicers, microwaves, etc.) required an increase in the family wage. And, along with the purchase of other household durable goods on credit, they generated debt. These trends combined with the extension of the home interior as a key site for the acquisition and display of an increasing number of decorative and commodities and treatments. Thus the home became an ever more semiotically charged space. Decoration, technologies, functional and non-utility artefacts all fused as the sign-world of domestic modernity.

To acquire and display this modern designed and designing way of life more and more women moved into the workforce. Initially these were single women employed in office and administrative positions to service the increased commerce generated by the output of mass production and promotion of goods by mass communication print media. This gave rise to greater fashion awareness and a willingness of women to spend their income on fashion items to meet the dress standards demanded by workplaces and a social life linked to burgeoning entertainment industry. The growth in fashion conscious consumers in turn led to an increase in manufacturers of fashion goods – they simply recognised the large future potential for profit.

The rising demand for fashion items such as clothing, footwear and cosmetics (cosmetics were associated with prostitution and only became socially acceptable in the 1920s) led to an increase in retail space. Furthermore, with continual infiltration of the media into women's everyday life, in particular women's magazines, and thereafter the huge impact of film, 'consumers' became even more aware of, and captivated by, fashion trends. Outward appearance and attractiveness came to be recognised by almost all women of all classes as having a direct correlation to their identity, and their economic and social success. Beauty was no longer the domain of the naturally endowed or privileged, but was marketed to all women who had the means to buy those commodities that purported to bring it. Indivisibly, the fashion and cosmetic industry of the twentieth century thrived on the media's preoccupation with physical appearance and idealised female bodies.

Beyond the rise in the power of mass fashion, more and more families began to develop a desire for household goods, modern appliances, automobiles, and better housing – such things became the means to realise a lifestyle, an identity and to express success via 'conspicuous consumption'. This drew more married women into the workforce to help meet the cost of these new 'needs'.

Obviously this process has not stopped – in one direction in the ‘developed world’ the explosion and turnover of goods directed at the home has constantly increased, especially as the size of homes has grown. In the other direction, for the ‘developing world’, the home increasingly becomes a place for the growth of ‘consumption’ based on an unsustainable model drawn from developed nations. These forces of unsustainability combine to ever increase the disjuncture between the general and the restrictive economy. In so doing they add to the case for another kind of economic system – one that is just and far more sustain-able.

Home, Exchange and Destruction

While the home is mostly seen and felt as a centre of security, shelter, personal regeneration and nurture it is also a site of destruction ‘... after the battlefield, the home is in the front line of destruction.’⁸

Material destruction triggered in the home is not merely after the utility of goods is exhausted but equally the erasure their sign value.⁹ ‘Consumption’ (assisted by the power of the sign) drives production and economic growth. Historically, it was the social order that gave objects their importance, but increasingly, objects came to give persons social status. Beyond this, people become objects of sign value. For millennia, body ornaments and then fashion, were used by individuals and social groups to indicate status, gender, class, wealth, etc. Fashion, as a non-verbal communication of meaning and identity, has a longstanding relation to the power of individuals and groups. Men and women in the corporate business world, for example, ‘power dress’ as a sign of authority, success and position. The type of clothing a person wears is of course also a sign of their ‘culture of association’, sub-culture, taste, self image and so on.

Like fashion, the interior of a home became an outward expression of status and culture, a projection of taste or the lack of it, and the declaration or illusion of wealth.

The home can be seen as the end of the line of the supply chain. Its destructiveness is measurable not least by the volume of material it deposits into the waste stream and landfill. Yet consumption has not been realised: many materials will not biodegrade; numerous products are as they ever were materially, except they no longer function; significant numbers of materials that could be recycled are not because no recycling infrastructure exists to do so. And then there are those products containing toxic materials that leach into the soil and find their way into the water table, creeks, rivers or the ocean. Yet the home remains ‘clean’ – destruction is sent to the wasteland elsewhere.

Home and the Nature of Dwelling

So far ‘home’ has been addressed as if it were simply a place, but it is not. We need to go to the idea of *dwelling* to reconfigure how

the home can be thought and positioned. We humans dwell in our inner selves – and this condition is indivisible from how we live and act in the world. At the same time, the ‘external’ world is the home of our ‘home’.¹⁰ This complexity of dwelling, as our thinking directs what we build, and as what we build directs our thinking in our being-in-the-world is the focus of Martin Heidegger’s seminal essay ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’.¹¹

In this geometry, home embraces ‘the world’; the inner sanctum to which we retreat; and the locus of our domestic life. Unsustainability is our enacted disjuncture between these locations (of our being). As such it is the failure to recognise the ‘law of the home’, housekeeping, *oikos*. The implication is that we have to learn how to rethink home and its economy as it becomes eco-nomy. Sustain-ability thus starts in our inner life.

Re-Designing the Home (Ontologically)

What does ‘the’ home do?

As we have argued ‘a home’ is not a passive or neutral space. Increasingly it has become a designed environment that designs. But we then ask – how does it design? Our answer is far more than at the materialistically determinist level that haunts so much domestic architecture. Of course spaces, their functions and domestic technologies do instrumentally design what can be done in a home, but our concern is more fundamentally ontological. As Mark Wigley put it: ‘we build a home and a home builds us’.¹²

This comment ruptures the binary cliché: nature vs nurture. The key point is that a home constitutes an ontologically designing environment which has profound consequences for the formation of our ontology. Here home is not a mere place, large or small material space with a given aesthetic, filled with things, but rather a complex intersection of the *exchange* of objects, signs, information, social interaction and the designing power of the ongoing and combined agency of all these ‘things’. So, rather than being seen as a container, home is transit station through which pass the material and the immaterial, the organic and the inorganic, ideas and knowledge. In this milieu, subjects are formed and/or deformed with particular characteristics. The worker, the husband, the father, the wife, the mother, the consumer, the carer, the cared for, and so on, are the ‘we’ who prefiguratively build a home (as the idea of home goes ahead of us) and who, in turn, are built by it (as its form ontologically designs our mode of dwelling).

Always far more than simply a house or apartment, *the design milieu of the home itself is the life of the home as lived*. This living is expressed through a designing engagement with a ‘being of beings’ and a ‘being with object-things’ in contexts like domestic work, playing games, learning skills and ‘homework’, ‘home entertainment’, pleasure, the giving and receiving of care. While the ontological designing of the home (its self-building/building

of the self) is often self-affirming, the reverse is also the case. Dysfunction in myriad forms: nihilistic values, anti-social conduct and unsustainable material practices, is the other, and frequent, companion of, nurture. Dysfunction is as much a force of designing as all other design agencies, as the home builds our 'being and our being at home in the world'.

The home is a complex place of exchange in which bio-physical, psychic and fiscal economies collide. We are a node of the general economy, a site of the collision, and a representative of the restrictive economy as we serve it and as it serves us.

If all this sounds contradictory it is because it is. Creation and destruction cohabit in all economic practice. There can be no sustainment without knowing this and finding our path through the contradictions of our economic life at, and beyond, 'the home'.

Home in the Age of Unsettlement

The world (as home) is made increasingly unhomely as destructive material outputs of the (modern) home impinge on the world's general economy. The disjuncture between the restrictive and the general economy is accelerating the unsustainable. 'Environmental impacts', as we represent them, are but one kind of visible symptom of this situation. The home, as place, as we have been arguing is centrally implicated in the disjuncture and consequent impacts. As the impacts of the unsustainable proliferate in the form of varied human-induced disaster events (from climate change 'extreme' events to related crises in food production and resource stress prompting large movements of populations and potential conflict) people everywhere will be ever more unsettled.

Unsettlement is a condition of mind and place; it destabilises the relations between the home, inner life, dwelling and world. As such, the way we live, the way we are, will change. Insecurity can but grow, which means that creating ways to positively respond to this situation becomes ever more important.

We, wherever and whoever we are, need to start thinking about how to create a new home (a new kind of dwelling and a new kind of living) as well as seeking a resolution of economic disjuncture. This can only happen by design, but for design to respond it has to be changed.¹³ The starting point is learning how to redirect design so it may be redirecive.¹⁴

Conclusion: The End of Choice

We can no longer be free to take without constraint and consume without limit.

Notes

1. The Greek noun *nomos* derived from the verb 'nemein' – to take, to seize. *Nomos*, as it shifted from meaning 'custom' to 'law', marked the move from the seizing of land to the claim

- of legal ownership (property rights). See Carl Schmitt *Land and Sea* (trans. Simona Draghici) Washington DC: Plutarch Press, 1977, pp. 37–38.
2. Wigley *The Architecture of Deconstruction* p. 102.
 3. Christopher Lasch *The Minimal Self* New York: Norton, 1984, see especially pp. 60–99.
 4. Ibid., see also Jean-Joseph Goux, 'General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism' *Yale French Studies* 'On Bataille', no. 78, 1990.
 5. See Ann Ferguson, 'Women as a New Revolutionary Class' in *Between Labour and Capital* (ed. Pat Walker) Brighton; Harvester Press, 1979, pp. 279–312.
 6. See Ruth Schwartz Cowan *More Work for Mothers* New York: Basic Books, 1983, pp. 201–209.
 7. F.W. Taylor developed his theory and practice of scientific management while working in the steel industry in the USA during the 1890s (his work became the basis of ergonomics and time and motion studies). His most influential books were *Shop Management* (1903) and *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). The application of Taylorism to the home was exemplified by the writing of Christine Frederick especially her *Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1915.
 8. Tony Fry *A New Design Philosophy* Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999, p. 107.
 9. The key text that established the significance of the power of the sign was Jean Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* St Louis: Telos Press, 1981.
 10. On the relation between 'our home' and the world as home see Tony Fry, 'Homelessness – A Philosophical Architecture' *Design Philosophy Papers Collection Three* (ed. Anne-Marie Willis) Ravensbourne: Team D/E/S, 2007, pp. 19–28.
 11. Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking' in *Poetry Language Thought* (trans. Albert Hofstadter) New York: Harper and Row, 1975.
 12. Wigley *The Architecture of Deconstruction* p. 111.
 13. See Tony Fry *Design Futuring* Oxford: Berg, 2009.
 14. Ibid.