



## Design History Futures – Part 2

Karin Jaschke

To cite this article: Karin Jaschke (2009) Design History Futures – Part 2, Design Philosophy Papers, 7:3, 137-143

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871309X13968682695154>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 10



View related articles [↗](#)

## EDITORIAL

# Design History Futures – Part 2

**Karin Jaschke**

**Karin Jaschke teaches  
Architectural History and  
Theory at the School of  
Art and Design,  
University of Brighton, UK.  
She is a member of the  
Editorial Advisory Board  
of *Design Philosophy Papers*.**

In October we published five papers on this theme. Those presented here continue the exploration of ‘design history futures’, this time with more of a focus on the built environment, landscape and structure – ranging from physical infrastructure to structures of thought and power. The papers are introduced by Karin Jaschke below.

For the sake of continuity, here is a list of last issue’s papers:

A.M. Willis Editorial introduction

Peter A. Hall True cost button-pushing: re-writing industrial design in America

Tara Andrews Design & consume to Utopia: where industrial design went wrong

Carolyn Barnes & Simon Jackson Robin Boyd, Expo ’70 & defuturing

Beverly Grindstaff Origins of unsustainable luxury: becoming ‘slaves to objects’

Anne Massey & Paul Micklethwaite Unsustainability: towards  
a new design history with reference to British Utility

What is the relation of architectural history to design practice and the culture and politics of design? As Anne-Marie Willis finds in her introduction to the first part of the 'Design History Futures' issue of *Design Philosophy Papers*, not all is well with design history: there is a lack of shared agendas and so broad an array of themes and subjects that debate has become difficult. This is as evident in architecture as it is in design. The Society of Architectural Historians' Annual Meeting for 2009 had panels and papers ranging from African Urbanism to American Campus Architecture. This year's annual conference of the UK based Architectural Humanities Research Association had an open and deliberately ambiguous theme, Field/work, which attracted a correspondingly broad mix of contributions while the 2008 conference attempted to assemble thematically related papers on the subject of 'agency' in relation to the environmental question but was only moderately successful. Strangely, this heterogeneity goes together with a rather homogeneous set of tried and tested historical methods and theoretical frameworks. At Field/work, one Twitterer noted, 'fieldwork AHRA: theorising for the sake of theorising – we need a purpose to affect the FIELD of working – otherwise no point of theorising'. Historians write with reference to their own predicament and, as things stand, this predicament will be heavily inflected by issues of sustainability for a long time to come: the looming environmental crisis and the social and political upheaval that may well ensue from it. Why then is there such little evident energy in design and architecture history writing, in conferences, publications and debates, to address this? This is puzzling at the very least.

At a simple level, the environmental question is obviously a cultural one and as such a matter of concern for the humanities, including the history of design and architecture. More importantly, the environmental crisis arguably coincides (whether by chance or by some inner logic) with the realisation that a paradigm shift is in order: a change in modes of thinking, in seeing and being in the world, which has been variably described as relational, networked, non-dualistic, systemic, or indeed ecological. Writers such as David Harvey, Nigel Thrift, Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold, and others have in the past two decades developed ideas and practices which begin to outline such a model (and in some cases include trenchant critique of capitalism, especially in its neo-liberal embodiment). Interestingly, in a list of honorary 'members' of actor-network-theory by Latour, environmental historians figure prominently, amongst them William Cronon, whose economic urban-environmental history of Chicago and its hinterland marks an early milestone in a kind of history writing the implications and possibilities of which are yet to be acknowledged

by design historians. Environmental history is concerned with the relationship between natural environments and human society and at its best embraces the notion that the 'natural world' and 'humanity' are not separate entities but enfolded within one another; or, as Latour maintains, this is not about reconciling subject and object (city and country, culture and nature, the humanities and natural sciences), it is about disregarding such dualism altogether.

The environmental thinker and activist Aldo Leopold claimed in the late 1940s that the history of humanity needed to be rewritten from an ecological point of view. By the late 1960s and '70s a body of environmental histories began to emerge, underpinned by the first wave of widespread concern for the environment. We are now part of a second wave of acute environmental concern, one that is bound to be more intense and sustained than the first, and in conjunction with this, ecological perspectives (both environmental and systemic) are being explored in history and geography, literary studies, psychology, anthropology, art criticism, and other disciplines. Design history and architectural history, this double DPP issue argues, need to take heed of this broader shift in the humanities, but also, take it further.

Firstly, there is the realisation that the designed human environment cannot be described solely as a product of economic and social relations, and/or as cultural or artistic expression, but is made up of objects and relationships whose conception, production, and use are part and parcel of broader ecological systems, including that named as the natural environment. Art and architecture historians have long been interested in the perception of nature as expressed in architectural, garden and landscape design. This interest is open to a shift from the techno-symbolic towards the ecological: towards a perspective that accounts for complex material relations but also for 'the role of capital in the production of urban [and other] space' and 'questions of social power', as the geographer and historian Matthew Gandy claims. On another level, long familiar subjects, staples of architectural history, are being revisited and re-examined from new viewpoints. Architectural historian John Farmer and more recently Peder Anker (a science historian) have cast new light on the history of modern architecture by examining affinities between ecological, environmental and biological themes. Such revisions of modern historiographies also include the identification of new subject matters, thus opening up and transforming the canon of design and architectural history. All of this implies that modes of enquiry and historical methods too are open to change. Despite this being a familiar call, the issue of multidisciplinary seems to be key to new forms of design and architectural history writing. Equally new forms of engagement, including possible shifts from desk- and archival studies to interactive, physically engaging, experimental site work, both observing and productive, may be in place, perhaps along the lines of post-processual archaeological

and material culture studies (see for example Michael Shanks's work) and, differently but related, the 'site writing' of the historian and theorist Jane Rendell.

Calling for a wholly new framework for thinking and doing design history may be a big ask, but a distinct shift and fast evolution of new perspectives, methods, and knowledge are needed if design and architecture history is to remain relevant to design and architecture practice as they will increasingly need to deal with the consequences of the unsustainable into this century and beyond. Different modes of thought are needed, not least in the face of such debates as the recent American East Coast debate on so-called 'post-criticality', which proposed an architecture of 'efficacy, innovation, and realism' in place of the over-theorised, conceptual approach of the 'critical' architecture of the 1980s and '90s' (see William Saunders). Alas, it is highly unlikely (both theoretically and in view of the design work associated with post-criticality) that the 'new pragmatism' will be able to do anything but reproduce and reinforce the values, structures, and dynamics of that neo-liberal capitalist reality that it seeks to engage, despite its claims to work towards 'performance' and sustainability.

On the other hand, design is being noted in other disciplines as a form of thought and practice that is 'naturally' disposed towards ecological modes of enquiry and practice. Design has the potential to inform a broader ecological discourse because it is capable of imagining and constructing alternative worlds and historical narratives can inform the exploration of the ecological condition of design. A starting point for a paradigm shift could even be as simple as stopping thinking about design (or architectural) history and instead about 'the history of unsustainability as designed'.

The papers in Part 2 of Design History Futures are coming from vastly different angles to the subject matter but are all focused on beginning to set out markers in a field that is as yet rather empty. **Daniel Barber's** paper proposes to rethink architectural history as part of a broader reconceptualisation of modernity as 'environmentality', drawing on Foucault's late writings and his concept of governmentality. This leads to new, alternative lineages and constellations within architectural history (a more fundamental shift than simply identifying 'green precedents') and a perspective that is at once political and ecological insofar as it addresses flows of matter and capital, physical and economic structures. "... 'environmentality' has emerged as a site of interconnection between the critical and global analyses of policy and in environmental science and the political productivity of cultural practices." As an "historical analytic for architecture" the concept of 'environmentality' allows for a review of architecture's deeply technological disposition, "this time with an emphasis on its imbrication with processes of environmental management and the development of environmental-scientific knowledge." Barber's

Foucauldian approach leads him to unearth three exemplary moments in modern architectural history where the environmental paradigm can be shown 'at work'.

Extending Daniel Barber's Foucauldian approach to thinking architecture's transformation from symbolic expression of power to means of environmental control and ordering, **Mark Jackson's** paper considers design's implication in new forms of governmentality and micro-power that emerged in the eighteenth century. Foucault's 'archaeological' and 'genealogical' explorations expanded and reconfigured how the historical is understood, providing a distinctive way of comprehending the nature of modernity and how 'everything' is historically constituted, from the categories we use to think; to what counts as knowledge and the effects of how it is deployed; to how we understand ourselves as modern subjects at both the most mundane and most intimate levels. Jackson shows connections between Foucault's expanded approach to the historical and Heidegger's concern with historicity and historicity as connected to temporality and 'a history of being'. Taking what could crudely be termed as these 'meta-perspectives' of Foucault and Heidegger and bringing them to design history and sustainability, a very different set of problematics emerge than approaching them as if they had their own, sealed-off histories. The implication of Jackson's paper is that a properly historical consideration of design would take us well beyond what is conventionally thought of as 'the designed' and that the genealogy of design "as a complex of practices" is inseparable from the rise of instrumental rationality and its crises. Likewise, for an historical understanding of sustainability and 'sustainability design'.

**John Calvelli's** paper too is concerned with fundamental historiographical questions, though from an educational point of view. The central motif and motive for his claim to "redesign design history" is that history in the current circumstances must be an "imaginative history" and as such contribute to constituting alternative futures. History has agency and needs to direct this towards design practice, starting with design education. Calvelli uses Bateson's notion of an 'ecology of bad ideas' to describe the consequences of the historical drifting apart of the fine arts and production (technology, materiality, utility) which he sees as being at the source of contemporary unsustainable design practice. The problem is not primarily one of "environmental crisis; rather it is ... the foreclosure of our ability to understand relationality" and consequentially to envisage anything but a 'defutured' future. From a graphic design perspective, this is evident in "the image world we create, forming for us the screen around which we live our lives." History has the potential to reconstitute the ability to think relationally (ecologically) and to image a future beyond the unsustainable.

**Jill Sinclair's** paper, by contrast, is not so much historiographical as historical and critical. She revisits historical and contemporary views of landscape design to show that the relationship of landscape design to sustainability is more complex and fraught with difficulties than many historians and landscape designers make out. There are examples of design practices that actively seek to work within ecological systems rather than against them, including “regenerative development of industrial sites, eco-revelatory design, guidance on environmentally friendly landscape practices” but this does not extend to conservation and preservation projects where the desire to maintain historical sites outweighs the sustainability concern. Against this, Sinclair holds up the prospect of landscape designers, in collaboration with other disciplines, to assist “in the management of inevitable change.” Landscape designers should conceive of such change and evolution as a potentially positive and culturally valuable process, an argument which incidentally is easily transferrable to architectural conservation issues.

**Dena Fam** and her co-authors address subject matter and modes of design and production – and by implication modes of historical understanding – that go beyond the confines of conventional and canonical design histories. Their paper can be regarded as an example of the shift mentioned above in that it is an historical enquiry into a particular instance of unsustainability-as-designed. The subject is Sydney's sewerage system. The paper shows that this is not simply a technological system but must be understood in its intricate social, political, economic, and environmental conditionality, a complex that has grown historically and incrementally into a “stable system of practice.” Any attempt at changing the outdated but stable arrangement successfully (a necessity in the face of present environmental challenges to Sydney's water supply) depends on understanding this historical and systemic condition, and not seeking to impose a one-dimensional technological solution. Fam and her co-authors demonstrate the importance of historical analysis to contemporary design challenges, and as part of this, the need for adopting a systemic and ecological viewpoint.

Karin Jaschke  
December 2009

## References

- William S. Saunders (ed.), *The New Architectural Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- J. Donald Hughes, *What Is Environmental History?*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.
- Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003.

- Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Annie Merrill Ingram et al. (eds.), *Coming Into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2007.
- David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and Geography of Difference*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996.
- John Farmer, *The Green Shift: Changing Attitudes in Architecture to the Natural World*, Oxford: Oxford Architectural Press, 1999.
- Peder Anker, *From Bauhaus to Ecohouse: A History of Ecological Design*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010 (forthcoming).
- Michael Shanks, <http://presence.stanford.edu/> (11.12.09).
- Jane Rendell, *Site Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2010 (forthcoming).