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To cite this article: Philippe d'Anjou (2007) The Existential Self as Locus of Sustainability in Design, Design Philosophy Papers, 5:3, 119-128

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871307X13966292017559>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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# The Existential Self as Locus of Sustainability in Design

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Perhaps the only way to apprehend the problematic of sustainability and what is really at stake regarding it, is via a theory of the agency of design; and the student in the situation of design learning in the context of the design studio represents a crucial agency.<sup>1</sup>

The studio is of primary importance because it represents a core pedagogical paradigm of design education.<sup>2</sup> It is indeed where professional designers are formed, where the individual *becomes* a designer. The stance from which sustainability is comprehended stems from addressing the relationship between design and sustainability in a different way than is usually envisioned. Instead of apprehending sustainability as a sort of ‘utensil’ – to be used when needed and most of the time as a technological add-on – that is ‘applied’ to a design project, it is the other way round.

The question of sustainability becomes not what sustainability can do for design but rather what design can do for sustainability.<sup>3</sup> Also, the designer is to be

considered as a conscious self that defines the self and his/her being-in-the-world through the design project and the act of design, and not as a problem-solving agent aiming only at the making of artefacts. There lies the main point of interest concerning the relationship between sustainability, design, and the designer. The means and the end are reversed. Instead of sustainability (the means) serving design (the end), it is design (the means) benefiting sustainability (the end). This stance changes everything when we address the issue of sustainability in design education as well as in design practice and design research.

Indeed, from this standpoint, sustainability is not anymore something exterior to the design act and consciousness of the student-designer in the act and learning of design. It is instead an attitude that discloses the self, others, and the world through the design of artefactual oriented projects such as buildings, cities, systems, objects, etc.

In that sense, sustainability can become a conscious and freely chosen attitude that takes place within the dialectical process between the *existential project* and the *design project* of the student in design. That attitude consists of being a being that chooses being so there can be *sustainment* through design and the act of design, and as such is the cornerstone of the problematic of sustainability in design education, and therefore in design practice and research. It is thus in the dialectical situation that takes place between the project of defining the self (the existential project) and the design project, that sustainability in these terms might be approached.

The theoretical frame proposed is based on a consideration of Sartre's distinct but interrelated theories of freedom, project and responsibility. According to Sartre, the self is never determined and it is not a static essence that fixes once and for all the identity of the person. The self is rather a continuous project grounded in our being-in-the-world as embodied freedom in situation, i.e., in the ways we concretely engage realities or the world – things, people, time – through choices and actions. The ways we engage realities constitute the existential projects. The individual transcends facticity due to consciousness that can change continuously the relation of the individual with the world. Thus, all human experience and action may be discussed in terms of existential projects of the individual, i.e., a being with consciousness that creates the self by pursuing the fulfillment of lacks that consciousness generates.

It thus appears that the issue of sustainability as an issue of the self in the act of design in design education would benefit from considering the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre as encountered in his ontology.<sup>4</sup> Based on this, a theoretical frame for comprehending the phenomenon and issue of sustainability in design in relation to design learning is proposed through the Sartrean ontology. This effort leads to appreciate Sartrean views from which we can acknowledge valuable insights that can both inform and

enlighten our understanding of the existential relationship between sustainability, self, and design.

Approaching the study of design in design education in relation to the issue of sustainability through a Sartrean perspective is relevant and timely. On the one hand, many aspects of Sartre's philosophy provide a framework that is meaningful and useful for design concerns in general, and design in relation to sustainability in particular. On the other hand, the continuous debate regarding sustainability in design cannot find an in-depth and fresh epistemological renewal if it is not addressed from an existential ground where the self is at the center of the phenomenon in terms of its existential relation to the self itself and to the other, through the envisioning and making of the built world, i.e., the *design project*. Sartre's ontology offers such an opportunity.

To figure this out, it is important to look to the structure that constitutes the person or the self.

Sartre offers a comprehensive theory of the person in which individual responsibility is a constant underlying reality. He writes that man "carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. We are taking the word responsibility in its ordinary sense as consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or object. In this sense the responsibility of the for-itself is overwhelming since he is the one by whom it happens that *there is a world*."<sup>5</sup>

Sartre's theory of responsibility rests upon his existential ontology, in which reality is made of two types of being, *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. Being-in-itself is the world without consciousness whereas Being-for-itself is human consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Because consciousness is always consciousness of something, the two types of being are, for Sartre, inextricably related. From this, Sartre provides his ontological proof: the fact that consciousness is always consciousness of something means that consciousness is supported by a trans-phenomenal being (being-for-itself), which is not itself.<sup>7</sup> Also, consciousness creates distinctions within the otherwise undifferentiated non-conscious world (being-in-itself). Consciousness organizes the world in terms of instrumental complexes or means-end relationships that are an expression of its overall goal or *project*.<sup>8</sup>

Sartre claims that without human consciousness there would be no world but only an undifferentiated plentitude of being-in-itself, thus human consciousness is individually and collectively responsible for the state of the world.<sup>9</sup> What we know as the world is the conglomerate of human projects. Human consciousness causes the world to be as it is, and so it is entirely responsible for the world, in both its material and immaterial forms.

Thus, Sartre's conception of a person is primarily concerned with the moral problems involved in human action.<sup>10</sup> At the root of Sartre's analysis is the conviction that persons are morally

responsible agents. Sartre rejects the view that persons are reducible to material objects obeying deterministic laws, as well as the view that a person is essentially an immaterial subject distinct from the body.

Sartre's concept of intentionality is central to his notion of a person since it explains why conscious phenomena are irreducible to physical phenomena and why consciousness is not an independent thing or substance. By intentionality, Sartre means that consciousness, unlike physical objects, is a relation or reference to objects beyond it, even when these objects do not exist. What is distinctive about the intentionality of consciousness is that only human consciousness can imagine possible alternative purposes and choose between them.<sup>11</sup> Intentionality of consciousness is the center from which persons intend the world. We have here the very situation of the student as consciousness and the design project as object of the student's consciousness. The student intends a non-existing artefactual reality and carries out its outcome through a series of design choices and actions. In doing so, the student intends the world.

It is relevant here to situate the issue of the existential project in the context of the question of sustainability in design education. Indeed, the design project in the disciplines of design represents the pedagogical paradigm of design education.<sup>12</sup> The students in such education are put in a design learning sequence through the development of a series of projects that are related to artefactual environments such as buildings, cities, objects, etc. In general, the project-oriented design pedagogy in design education takes place within a studio setting where the students are assigned a series of project problems that they have to conceptualize and materialize in an analogical representation of built forms that respond to some program problem that manifests the lack of something.

Although this is a very basic description of the learning situation in design education, it summarizes the reality of design education and design learning in most of the design discipline programs worldwide. In order for students to materialize through models and graphics the idea of a built environment, i.e., an artefactual oriented project, they must go through steps of design learning, in dialogue with an instructor, that refer to choosing and acting towards an end, i.e., the artefact proposal.<sup>13</sup> Hence a dialectical process is initiated between the student and the design project through design action and reflection. Thus the students engage the world through the envisioning and making of an artefact that arises from the envisioning of its lack, through which they (seek to) transform the world. We can consider at this point, from a Sartrean perspective, that the students are individuals that define themselves and the world by means of design choices and actions. And the design project is the anchor of these choices and actions. As such, the design project is *per se* an existential project where

the student defines the self. The design project is a lack that the student engages with in a certain manner, therefore it becomes the object of his/her consciousness toward which choices and actions are undertaken and it establishes a situation. It is a situation that the student creates so he/she can define the self and there can be being-in-the-world.

Indeed, for Sartre, humans create themselves through actions that are freely chosen and that are embodied in a set of existential projects. For Sartre, “man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is.”<sup>14</sup> This is why it can be said that in design education the student creates him/herself through the design projects that he/she carries out as these are the result of intentional design choices and actions. At the moment of engaging with it, the design project, for the student, is an existential project.

But Sartre adds that all projects (existential projects) of an individual are circumscribed within what he calls a *fundamental project* or an original choice of being. For instance, in the case of the student in design education, the project of engaging with a design project in studio can be seen as the most immediate project to carry out an activity. This project is inspired by a larger project such as graduating with a degree in a specific design discipline. This project in turn is motivated by a more basic project such as becoming a design professional, which is motivated by the project of being socially part of a certain category of people. The series of projects, each time more encompassing, ends with a project that is not contained by a more basic project. This ultimate project discloses the person’s fundamental project and it has no justification *per se*, it faces the contingency of human existence. The fundamental project is defined as the general predisposition that has been chosen towards one’s way of being in the world and of making the world be.

The fundamental project consists in a *desire for being*; it is the project of providing the individual with being.<sup>15</sup> Hence “all the trivial expectations of the real, all these commonplace, everyday values, derive their meaning from an original projection of myself which stands as my choice of myself in the world ... the unique and original project which constitutes my being.”<sup>16</sup>

The fundamental project is distinguished from the particular projects of different individuals whose projects derive from the fundamental project. That way of being in the world, through choices and actions, is a habitual or, as Sartre would put it, a ‘pre-reflective’ attitude underlying all subsequent projects and actions. This means that the fundamental project structures, in an invisible manner, the everyday life of the individual in terms of choices, thoughts, and actions. It directs as a blueprint the individual in the reality of the world consisting of both objects (the

artefactual) and other humans (the free subjects or projects). It is the fundamental project of the student that determines his/her design choices and actions in a design project.

Thus, for instance, the resolution of a design project will be clearly different whether the student operates within a fundamental project based on hedonism or on philanthropy. The fundamental project that drives the way the individual engages the world through actions and choices represents the key dimension of being. It is where it is possible to intervene in order to reinvent the being of the self and therefore the way we act and choose.

Sartre asserts that humans are free to change or modify their fundamental project as long as we go from a pre-reflective to a reflective mode of consciousness and way of being in the world. Indeed the pre-reflective mode keeps us from being aware of how we carry on our fundamental project and all projects related to it. In that sense, it becomes almost impossible for the individual to transform his/her fundamental project. It requires a 'radical conversion' as Sartre puts it. Here rests the importance of studio project exercises and design pedagogy in regard to the dialectic that takes place between the design instructor and the students. For the design instructor is key in providing the student in the design learning process, through reflective design choices and actions, with the insights and opportunity of radical conversion where sustainability can be considered as a freely chosen option of a fundamental project. In that sense, the student in design would continuously freely choose sustainability so as to be authentic in the choice of the self. This is a very important issue in regard to the ethical stance in Sartrean terms.

By addressing the concept of project through a Sartrean lens we can comprehend the student as a self in relation to the experience of design action in design education. Considering the Sartrean notion of project that refers to the grounding from which the individual chooses and acts and therefore creates him/herself, the self can be seized as the organic totality of the projects that the individual is.<sup>17</sup> Also, the fundamental project of the individual, which is his/her way that he/she has chosen to exist in the world, represents an anchor from which the individual organizes the world, defines the meaning of the self within its relationship to the world and to the other human beings. The student in design is therefore a self that defines itself, in the exercise and choice of a design project, through its design choices and actions that are projects manifesting the fundamental project. The design project is in that very sense the engagement of the student, as a self in the making, with the world and the others. The experience that the design project is for the student may be considered as the dialectic that Sartre identifies between self and world, between the student's fundamental project as signifier and the world as signified.<sup>18</sup> There lies the threshold of significance

in regard to the problematic of sustainability in design education. For any change to the student's fundamental project, such as the choice of sustainment, would lead to the redefinition of the self and the world in a reciprocal manner.

Whereas any change that is deliberately brought to the fundamental project of the student has to come from an inner conversion, the change that can be brought on by sustainability would involve a radical modification from an external source. This source is the design instructor. Let's see what is involved in that change of the student's fundamental project if it is to happen. In this regard it has to do with the issue of what is at stake and its value. The key question is: "I could have done otherwise, but at what price?"<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the person's project determines the existential value of the action. Also, the more encompassing an existential project is in relation to other projects, the higher the cost for changing or altering that level of project. Such a change would ask for changes to all levels of the encompassed or inner projects. In the situation that is considered here, i.e., design learning in design education, it would be costlier for a student to give up a studio course than to change the way he/she engages a design problem.

The highest existential cost is one that relates to any modification or transformation imposed on the fundamental project of the student. This refers to what Sartre calls a 'global change' since such a change involves changing the student's whole being-in-the-world. In the case of sustainability, the existential cost of radically altering the student's fundamental project can be very important because it involves the global change in question and, more importantly, it is a 'price' that the student may not want to pay. In considering sustainability as fundamental project, the student's fundamental project would be disrupted in some respects, such as his/her professional project, i.e., his/her chosen professional being-in-the-world would be definitely modified; hence all of the other levels of projects like the student's relation to others, the student's capacity to get future commissions, etc., would be equally affected. Ultimately, what is truly transformed is the student's relation to himself as a for-itself – the person in the becoming of being. This in turn affects the student's being-for-others and the other's being-for-him/her.

In summary, sustainability involves a radical alteration of a student's fundamental project from outside, a change that disrupts directly the student's professional being-in-the-world. Sartre's idea of consciousness, in which self and world form a unity that is defined by a chosen fundamental project, allows us to understand sustainability as the breaking of this unity, rooted in the design project exercise, and therefore the redefining of the student's fundamental project. The role of the design instructor consequently would be to bring up sustainability within the dialectic between the



existential project and the design project of the student – where the student is constantly defining the self, the world, and the relationship between the two – in order to bring out sustainability as a freely and continuously chosen fundamental project. In this way, being freely and reflectively chosen, we ensure that the choice of sustainability be authentic and therefore ethical in Sartrean terms.

As Sartre points out, by choosing, the person commits not only him/herself, but the whole of humanity.<sup>20</sup> Although there are no a priori values for Sartre, the agent's choice creates values in the same way as the artist does in the aesthetic realm. The values thus created by a proper exercise of the designer's freedom have a universal dimension, in that any other human being could make sense of them were he/she to be placed in his/her situation. There is therefore a universality that is expressed in particular forms in each of the existential projects, which definitely include the design projects of the designer's fundamental project.

### Notes

1. Although, in this paper, only the individual as designer is considered as agency, it should be understood that the agency in design is both the person acting as designer and the designed; both are involved ontologically in the designing of the world. For a more detailed study of that issue see the insightful paper by Anne-Marie Willis in which she presents and develops the concept of *Ontological Designing*. See Willis, A.-M., *Ontological Designing*, *Design Philosophy Papers* no. 2, 2006.
2. The context of the design studio in education is probably the most relevant locus for an enquiry regarding the dialectical reality between the existential project and the artefactual project, and the problem of the articulation of sustainability from the standpoint of the student as self-reflectively and consciously involved through the act of design in that dialectic. Indeed, the studio pedagogy is grounded in what Donald Schon calls *reflection in action* and it offers, upstream in the education of the professional, an ideal moment to have the student reach beyond the immediate apprehension of what it means to be a designer that engages a project that will transform the self and the others. For a more detailed account of the notion of *reflection in action* see Schon, D. A., *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Burlington, Ashgate Publishing, 1995.
3. See Willis, A.M., 'The Limits of Sustainable Architecture', paper delivered at *Shaping the Sustainable Millennium*, Queensland University of Technology, July 2000. The works by Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry argue for a radical conceptualization of design in regard to sustainability. Design is conceptualized from being an activity of designing structures and buildings to one

- of designing what they call *sustainments*, i.e., environments with the ability to sustain that which needs to be sustained. This is the notion of sustainability adopted in the paper I present here. See this notion of sustainability, *sustainment*, developed and exposed in the works of A.-M. Willis and Tony Fry published in several issues of *Design Philosophy Papers*. See particularly Fry, T. 'The Voice of Sustainment: Design Ethics' *Design Philosophy Papers*, no. 2, 2004. See also Fry, T., *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999; and Fry, T., 'A Total Rewriting of the Past, Present and Future of Design' Chicago Lecture, February, 2001.
4. The seminal work of Jean-Paul Sartre regarding ontology is *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Another of his work's, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, addresses some ethical implications of his ontology.
  5. Sartre, J-P., *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956, p. 553.
  6. *Ibid.* pp. 73–105.
  7. *Ibid.* p. lxi.
  8. *Ibid.* pp. 171–180, 433–553.
  9. *Ibid.* pp. 433–600.
  10. Many scholars argue that the whole philosophy of Sartre is concerned with the ethical dimension of the human being. Sartre himself tends to assert that ethics is a major concern in his work. This is the perspective adopted in this paper. Two interesting studies on that issue are: Anderson, T. C., *Sartre's Two Ethics*, Chicago, Open Court, 1993; and Marchand, J., *Introduction à la lecture de Jean-Paul Sartre*, Montréal, Liber, 2005.
  11. Morris, P., *Sartre's Concept of a Person: An Analytic Approach*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975, p. 27.
  12. The concept of project has been recognized as an epistemological paradigm in architecture and in design disciplines in general. See Boutinet, J.-P. *Psychologie des conduites à projet*. Paris, PUF, Que sais-je, 1993; LeMoigne, J.-L., *Recherche scientifique en architecture?, La recherche architecturale: un bilan international*, (ouvrage coll.) Marseille, Parenthèses, 1986, 97–102; and Prost, R. (dir.), *Concevoir, Inventer, créer: réflexions sur les pratiques*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1995.
  13. See Schon, D. A., *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Burlington, and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1990.

14. Sartre, J.-P. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Trans. Philip Mairet, New York, Haskell House, 1948, p. 41.
15. Sartre, J.-P., *Being and Nothingness*, p. 565.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 454.
18. Sartre, J.-P., *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.
19. Sartre, J.-P., *Being and Nothingness*, p. 454.
20. Sartre expresses this very clearly in *Being and Nothingness*, p. 553, and in *Existentialism is a Humanism* where he writes: "And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men." (p. 29); and, "I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man." (p. 30).