The Voice of Sustainment: An Introduction

Tony Fry

The Voice of Sustainment
An Introduction

Tony Fry

Tony Fry is a designer and design theorist, co-founder of the EcoDesign Foundation, formerly Associate Director National Key Centre of Design Quality, University of Sydney. He has had five major books published, held academic positions at universities in the UK, USA, Asia, Australia. He has been working on design philosophy since the 1970s and specifically on and the relation between design, unsustainability and sustainment for the last decade, this is seen especially in his book *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999).

This column is a space in which to explore adventurous ideas – in the frame of a single organising proposition – 'the Sustainment.' What this is, and how it differs from 'sustainability' will be considered in a moment. However, what it means to explore an adventurous idea needs to be explained.

Over recent years certain kinds of constrained radical thought have been given approval by 'the mainstream establishment'. Designated initially by Edward DeBono as 'lateral thinking', it is now frequently referred to more plurally – 'thinking outside the box,' 'coming from left field,' 'unlocking the creative drive' and even 'reawakening a recognition of spiritual values'. Such thought is, however, always treated as supplemental to the mainstream. It is something to go to and from and always available to appropriate if deemed expedient. Anything extreme is simply ignored. The invitation made here to be adventurous is not so constrained. Ideas will be presented that are heterodoxical and contrary to the contemporary prejudice toward critical theory. They will fly in the face of two dominant traits of contemporary culture – the containment

of spaces of transgression (e.g., to the sexual) and heightened levels of self-censorship in 'liberal democratic society'.

Notwithstanding a seeming close proximity of terms, the rhetoric of sustainability has little in common with the idea of 'the Sustainment'.

In essence, (a concern with) sustainability has been constituted as a discourse within the realm of technology. There are two aspects of this. First, sustainability is deemed as an outcome of the application of technologies created to offset scientifically and technically defined forms of system dysfunction (i.e., technologies with high negative environmental impacts). Second, and more significantly, it operates as a metaphysic that installs a techno-functionalist way of viewing the world. This limited discourse of sustainability interpellates subjects and institutions and reduces problems of the unsustainable to a breakdown of biophysical system(s).

The concern with sustainability is clearly not the consequence of a new disposition, but is firmly lodged in a Baconian Enlightenment paradigm that constitutes nature as technology's other. Clearly changes have occurred over the passage of time, although they are not as profound as one might first think. For example, the early Enlightenment talked unabashedly of the domination of nature. Current sensibilities could be thought to be in contrast to such a sentiment. Contemporary informed positions (a nexus between late and post Enlightenment) now project and treat nature as a sphere of technocratic management (e.g., 'natural resource management,' 'sustainable agricultural technologies,' and 'environmental management systems'). However, it can be argued that what has actually occurred is little more than a shift from overt to benign violence. Hunting-out the totality of a species, the rampant felling of native forests and land clearing by ball and chain on a vast scale have been replaced (still only partly) by the chemical control of 'weeds and pests,' laboratory-based genetic modification of plants and now animals – yet the biodiversity of the global ecosystem continues to reduce. Sustainability as a metaphysic thus rests on the more extensive and fundamental condition of technology as metaphysics.

Understanding technology as metaphysics although not new philosophically has never really been able to gain a foothold in society at large. The more technology has proliferated, fused with information and structured the activities of everyday occupational and domestic life, the more it has become naturalised. Following this, has been a continual reduction in levels of anxiety about it. While technology has become a naturalised environment and created accompanying dependencies, there has been a persistent view that it is still under human direction and control. Moreover, theoretically informed critical positions towards technology are universally becoming rarer and rarer.

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that while there has been some very insightful work over recent decades the most concentrated moment of critical concern with technology was in, and between, the First and Second World Wars. In part this was because the mechanisation of war subordinated human beings to technological exposure and direction on an unprecedented scale. One of the key mechanisms was universal time – for the first time ever, large numbers of people from varied cultures and geographies had to act under the regulation of a single time. Action and inaction, were thus chronologically measured and the wrist watch arrived as a mass produced commodity. It was out of these conditions that information started to displace reliance upon direct experience and observation (which often encountered, and saw nothing but, chaos). The data of the range finder, the coordinate in the bomb aimer's sights, the target dot on the radar screen, the audio information from the echo of the sonar are a few examples of instrumentation mediating the relation between the combatants. Such instrumental mechanisms of abstraction rendered the human target invisible as a being. Thereafter 'it' appeared as data and as minimal symbolic representations.

While war always remains a bloody mess, the processes of its abstraction enabled the number of its victims, its suffering and terror to extend well beyond the battlefield – this for strategic advantage. The mechanisation of war and the abstraction of killing have meant the horror of the battlefield has become indivisible from the slaughter of non-combatants, women and children. Terror and war have always travelled in each others company, however, technology has dramatically escalated the scale of acts of inhumanity. The terrorist is not just the abject other but the normative being-at-war.

Interestingly the critics of technology in the 1920s, 30s and 40s came from both left and right, popular culture and rigorous philosophy. For example, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer cite The Rockefeller Foundation Review of 1943 in their seminal collection of essays, Dialectic of Enlightenment (which they wrote during the Second World War) – "The supreme question which confronts our generation today – the question to which all other problems are merely corollaries – is whether technology can be brought under control… Nobody can be sure of the formula by which this end can be achieved … We must draw on all the resources to which access can be had…" However, this 'supreme question' did not constitute a major public debate.

With the enormous expansion in volume and reach of technology into material and mental life the issue is even more pressing, however it has largely been forgotten. What has persisted though is a notion that somehow we humans are, or can be, in control of technology. This widely held view is illusory. It fails to grasp that the distinction between us and technology

has effectively broken down – for example, as knowledge, communication and information it resides as much in our space as it does in its own.

The situation in which humanity finds itself has not arrived accidentally but was inscribed in the knowledge it created and embraced – imperceptibly a shift occurred in the exercise of human agency whereby it moved from designing a metaphysics to being designed by metaphysics (as the technosphere). What is occurring in education is one instance of this, for it has become as much an induction into operational and metaphysical domains of technology as into a culture of learning. So let's be clear – humans are no more separate from, and in command of, technology than they are from nature. In fact, the technology/nature distinction is no more viable than the technology/human separation.

Although such assertions on technology beg considerable qualification, this is beyond the intent of this essay. Rather outlining the issues serves to establish a background for our main focus.

For some time now I have been thinking and starting to write about 'The Sustainment.' Reiterating: the essence of the idea is quite different from that of sustainability, with its attachment to a biocentric model of ecological function. Thus 'the Sustainment' is posed against functionalist and ever more linguistically evacuated uses of the concept of sustainability. Notwithstanding the insights and efforts of some, increasingly one sees and hears sustainability evoked as if its meaning were self-evident (the 'triple bottom line' phenomena has clearly added to the gestural use of the term).

What exactly is demonstrated to be sustainable, and so needs to be sustained, is generally is not specifically addressed. As I point out ad nauseam, this means that so often what gets sustained is the unsustainable (notwithstanding good intentions of a whole range of environmental actors). In the mainstream, action posed as resistance to the unsustainable is frequently exploited and managed by the creation of niche market products (homes, energy, cars, food). Underpinning almost every mainstream action is an absolute attachment to economic growth – it is not only a fundamental objective of both governments and corporations (while, at the same time, co-existing with expressed commitments to advancing sustainability) but it remains the principle means by which these entities believe the future is secured – hence the oxymoron of 'sustainable development'.

The condition of sustainment is unattainable within the kind of economic models we (as individuals, families, organisations and 'advanced' nations) operate with. Claiming this does not imply adopting the utopian and now demonstrably flawed proposition of overthrowing capitalism, or simplistically imposing limits to growth. However, it does suggest that with rigour and creative energy a process of transformation from a quantity to a quality-based economy can be pursued. Clearly this is not

attainable as merely a technical exercise. It requires a very considerable intellectual enterprise opening a way to a massive cultural change – not least in the ways in which the 'natural' and fabricated worlds are valued (or not valued) and occupied.

None of this is to say that a quality based economy can, of itself, determine 'the Sustainment.' So while it demands a larger agenda, the quality-based economy can be posed and perceived as a practical pathway by economically driven constituencies.

The larger agenda requires a far more futural and conceptually ambitious embracing of the idea of 'the Sustainment.' In terms of scale, creative endeavour and intellectual weight in some respects it equates with the Renaissance. The Renaissance, it should be remembered, was an assemblage constituted by, and formative of, a diverse and uncoordinated range of disciplines, scientific and artistic practices, as well as modes of experience. All of this activity centred on, and partly realised, the idea of rebirthing a culture against the backdrop of the dark ages.

The inventive power of the Renaissance was not based on the erroneous notion of creativity forming something out of nothing but rather of a process of remaking from the cultural materiality of the past. The past was taken as a source of inspiration, standards, useful knowledge, raw material and a resource to explore, question and innovate with. While much can be said about such a proposition the key comment to make, and grasp in the context of our discussion, is that 'if one is to value the future then one must equally value and understand the past' (a very different notion from a historicist model of historical reproduction). This not least because we travel towards the past as much as away from it, including in very material ways – as, for instance, architecture evidences. Thus the material and cultural consequences of the actions of architects, as well as engineers and builders, can take a long time to unfold. We all, in large part, live with/in, and are inculcated by, a world that predates us.

Of course the Renaissance was a retrospective classification of a complex and plural historical moment. In contrast, 'the Sustainment', is presented as prefigurative, it aims to form the moment rather than name it once it exists. Again we can look to a past example, one with a proximity to the Renaissance: that of the Enlightenment. As a prefigurative project and as a theoretical exercise, it embraced many philosophical and political positions and contradictions. Yet in the differences there was a common aim of establishing the victory of reason that itself inducted difference and contradiction.

The Enlightenment was a prefigurative project driven by a profound dissatisfaction with 'the state of the world' and the nature and state of knowledge about it. Its ambition was to establish a naturalised mode of thought and inquiry (reason) against the

unreason of the mythic. In so doing two modes of inquiry emerged (the Arts and Science) as a division of knowledge of philosophy. What it failed to do was to recognise the value of the embedded wisdom, carried by traditions and narratives, among much it took to be purely ignorance and superstition. Equally, it overlooked reason itself becoming mythic and an article of faith. In this respect reason failed to sufficiently develop reflective knowledge, thus for all the rhetoric of learning and the vast enterprise of the historical faculty, Enlightenment thinkers failed to sufficiently learn from others and the past. This is verified by the constantly repeated errors evident in the history of Eurocentrism. Of course many sub-projects, tensions and conflicts occurred within the remit of the metaphysical trajectory of reason – not least the displacement of the arts by science and the reduction of thought to calculation.

However, the main point to emphasise is that the Enlightenment existed as a promoted idea prior to becoming a generalised cultural condition of knowledge. So it is, for example, that we find key Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant posing and answering the question 'What is Enlightenment?' He did this within the milieu of a group of German Enlightenment thinkers (the Society of the Friends of Truth – a gathering of kindred spirits who had adopted the motto "Dare to know" from Ars poetica by the Roman Lyric poet Horace). For Kant, daring to know became daring to reason, with reason coming to be viewed as a power of human emancipation (freeing a being from the tutelage of the will of others).

While a massive amount has been written on the success and failure of the Enlightenment, not least in relation to the hollow victory of reason now manifest in the hegemony of technology, our aim is simply to assert the historical precedent of the transformitory potential of a collectively explored enormously bold positive idea, and the need for such an idea (including a re-birthing of learning) now. The Sustainment (a still nascent idea) is offered-up as this idea in immanence. Obviously there are many ramifications of embracing it, two immediately come to mind. The first is abstract, and goes to the importance of 'the idea' of 'an idea.'

Without revisiting well trammelled philosophical argument, let's use Kant again as a pointer. In common with thinkers before and after, he forcefully pointed out in his Critique of Pure Reason that "we know nothing more than our own mode of perceiving …". Thus, we construct what an object is in through, via an idea, rather than an object being something that is itself self-evident. All experience, all feeling, is refracted through mind and thus subjected to interpretatively designated meaning by those ideas and values taken into ownership by our culture and selves. So understood, ideas are not just consciously brought to the world to know it, but the world we know arrives through the embodied ideas we inhabit.

Moving 'the Sustainment' from an underdeveloped and still unspoken propositional idea to one which is explored, debated

and eventually embodied is what we shall be working towards through this column. In so doing the hope is to establish its integrity. One of the first ambitions is to constitute it as a way of perceiving both a intellectual and practical a project that is rationally and emotionally felt to be needed.

Clearly this ambition cannot be realised by it being reduced (like sustainability) to instrumental action (sustainable architecture, engineering, agriculture etc). Rather it has to become fundamental cultural content through critical inquiry, argument, literary and visual creative projection and value-transformed lifeworlds. In everyday terms this means making such action elemental to lives. It has to be created and explored as part of our conversations and dreams. It has to be given sufficient educational substance so it is able to displace so much that is learnt in error (it's sobering to realise that we are unsustainable not just because we have become attached to environmentally harmful habits but because we have been educated to be so, especially in terms of professional practices). Again history provides a certain confirmation of what unfolds from ambition on a grand scale. The acquisition and mobilisation of reason, and the search for truth, arrived as a simply stated objective yet its pursuit (notwithstanding its eventual non-realisation) created not only a massive philosophical enterprise but the institution of the modern university and much else.

Futurally, 'the Sustainment' has to exceed the weight of the Enlightenment, and we have to find the boldness to speak, and work to realise, this ambition.

Much more than just being a pursuit of mind, 'the Sustainment' has to become a work, directed by the idea, available for whomsoever is willing to labour in its service. However, what is made cannot sustain if it is predicated on singularity, on a mono-form. 'The Sustainment' demands difference (of forms, cultures, lifestyles, etc) resting upon a commonality of consequences. So, for instance, one can assert the imperative of living ethically, but this does not have to be prescriptive of just one particular way of living.

What is to be made? This is a question to travel with, but provisionally one can say: a thinking, a seeing, a valuing, organisation(s)/institutions, relations, paths, things, pleasures, the yet-to-be, and a conservation of the future. In sum 'what is to be made' is 'an age' (and a being in that age). What has to be created is that which sustain and that needs (beyond utility) to be sustained along with the means to destroy the unsustainable.

In all honesty one cannot pose a challenge of such a magnitude with a great deal of confidence – courage will have to suffice. Although philosophical, practical, political, cultural, communicative problems overwhelm there is a great deal to gain and little to lose (in part, because so much has already been lost culturally and environmentally). Personally, I am of an age where the risk

of ridicule, or damage to a career and reputation, count for little – my die is cast and what is most valued cannot be taken away. A residual fear does have to be admitted to, the fear of one's words being taken to be merely the rantings of an eccentric.

Although announcing the project of 'the Sustainment' via a major global event, big names and extensive media coverage would undoubtedly give it a great deal of profile this is not going to happen. Besides a lack of means to do this, the survival of the idea requires a more considered exercise and the creation of a thoughtful and diverse constituency to give it substance and agency. The present task, the task of this column, is to break any bond of ownership of the idea (just as no single thinker owned the Enlightenment) and to sufficiently elaborate the richness, vast scope and timeliness of the idea. The approach cannot simply be programmatic.

In the next four editions of DPP four topics will be explored. The first poses a question – 'Why philosophy?' This looks back at an old question (What is Philosophy?) recasting it in the face of pressing material and immaterial problems of the deepening unsustainability of not just what we do but also what we are/have become. Next will be a presentation of an argument on 'the dialectic of sustainment', a notion raised by 'Why Philosophy?'. The crucial issue here will be how to deal with the question of essential and ethical destruction in the light of humanity's history as destroyer, the refusal of complexity and the desire for solutions. Topic three is the problem of 'confronting the impossible' which will be posed around questions of limits and perception. A little more prosaically, the fourth topic will be 'sketches of quality based economy (prefigured by a new design geometry)'.