# Hot Debate: Lights Out: Reply to Aidan Davison

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## LETTER

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**Tony Fry is the main contributing editor to *Design Philosophy Papers*.**

I thank Aidan Davison for his critical reading of my essay on hyperurbanism in his 'Street Lights at the End of the Universe'.

It is always salutary to confront one's intentions viewed through the eyes of someone else. Of course, one rarely ever manages to say what exactly one would have liked to have said and in a manner totally transparent to the reader one has in mind. This limitation is both an enduring frustration of writing and a challenge that keeps one doing it.

I gratefully take many of Aidan Davison's comment as useful contributions furthering an important debate and my own thinking of hyperurbanism. Without abusing the privilege that this reply affords, certainly by embarking on a lengthy point-by-point defence and revision of what I have said, there are just a few remarks I would like to make.

First, I want to deal with the urban, urbocentrism, hyperurbanism relation. I have claimed that urbocentrism is being displaced the more aggressive condition of

hyperurbanism. I said, the "existing concentrations combined with a newly invigorated and massively increased proliferation of the power of the urban beyond the space of the city". What I believe this indicates is a view of the urban as always exceeding any notion of spatial containment. The hyperurban is therefore just a way of addressing an aggressive and multi-dimensional amplification of this situation. Having made an initial qualification, the later remark "… that the power of the urban can no longer be regarded as contained within the space of the city" is, rhetorically, my attempt to deal with what is still a common perception whereby the urban and the city are conflated.

Second, I am criticised for using "such leaky ideas as management and value". What I actually said was 'managing' which I take to be a wider and less damaged term than management. As for my calling up of new 'value', maybe I would have been better off using a term like 'recoding'. However, we are ever trapped between trying to breathe life back into terminal language/ideas and setting out to bring into being and nurture the newborn.

My third point is a larger one and goes to 'the political'. But it also touches on the previous points insofar as the line between evocative and emotive language is always subject to being differentially drawn. Obviously one writes in the hope of determining where the line falls – if one takes risks then one also has to accept failures. Of course what cannot be calculated is the degree to which one is misunderstood – of which, in the case in point, there are a few examples (such as my reference to "the sheltered workshop of one's immediate pragmatic or deflectory preoccupations, etc", which was a general statement, not a targeted criticism of the kind of "experiments" Davison cited).

Of course, misunderstanding also arrives out of differences of understanding from what superficially appears to be common language. Here the use of 'design' is a very pertinent example. My use of design is theoretically underpinned by instrumental and ontological perspectives. Design is a continually transformative circling of the designed, designing and the designer (as human agent or performative 'thing'). It certainly cannot be reduced to a prefigurative embodiment – "designs", which to a significant extent is what Davison has done, with the result that a good deal of what I argued did not stand on a simplistic determinism as characterised.

I am unequivocal that hyperurbanism does transcend the "social, economic and cultural differences between urban dwellers". It is as much a defining condition for rich penthouse dwellers as for the homeless living on the street – more broadly, as I argued, there is no other locus of human being. In this context saying "The only Others of hyperurbanism are silent or silenced – these are fading positions without classifiable identity" means that Others either no longer exist or are now powerless and fragmentary individuals

or collectives within worlds that have all been infected by the hyperurban (and its interlocutors – capitalism and technology). It is chastening to acknowledge that while the forces of modernity/ globalism have not made the world modern, and globally unified, they have destroyed the viability and integrity of the pre-modern (not least by the imposition of 'identity').

What I am saying on politics adds up to accepting that 'a politics of overcoming' is no longer possible to seriously contemplate (whether it ever was, is another matter). However, a politics of: managing in the fragments; qualitative survival with dignity by the dispossessed; and of ontological designing that learns how to transform the relation of 'our being designers and the designed'. The latter, while recognising that 'sustainable technologies and architecture' can make a modest contribution to sustainment, the main game is 'remaking' by design how 'the worlds that now exist' are perceived, occupied, engaged, and then either culturally and materially unmade or retrofitted so that they ontologically design viable futuring.

Realistically, it is no good reaching back to mostly weakening forms of proto-political action that have demonstratively failed so many times over several decades. Such activities can clearly have a social value; as such they perhaps provide place to escape from what Davison insightfully calls the 'anaesthetic freedom' that 'masks' the omnipresent pain-ridden quality of an everyday life of labouring to consume. However, no matter how unpalatable, it is historically evident that these activities lack the imagination, grit and solidarity essential to squarely look at the true horror of the unsustainable, not be defeated by what is seen, and then act with an ambition in keeping with the scale of the challenge. Moreover, the mixed bag of activities of community action and 'experimentation', that Davison mentions, often merge with a condition that Christopher Lasch called the 'minimal self' – a condition in which whatever the activity, time and effort invested, and often notwithstanding appearances, exists therapeutically and to keep the pain of living in the world at bay. Hanging onto the kind of transformative 'experiments' towards radical change cited thus can have a certain value at largely an individual and/or family level, but, it is counter-productive to offer them up as figures of hope in the face the horror that is the unsustainable.

If fatalism, romantic diversion and misplaced hope are rejected, as they are, is there any other option but to confront the seemingly impossible without illusions, with courage and in the knowledge that history is littered instances of impossibilities attained?