



## Building Dwelling Futures

Anne-Marie Willis

To cite this article: Anne-Marie Willis (2007) Building Dwelling Futures, Design Philosophy Papers, 5:2, 39-45

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871307X13966292017270>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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



Article views: 9



View related articles [↗](#)

## EDITORIAL

# Building Dwelling Futures

**Anne-Marie Willis**

It's up and running – **Design Philosophy Politics** – our new ezine. This is where we present shorter, more hard-edged and grounded articles on design, the unsustainable and sustainment. Or, put another way – the politics of the materiality and immateriality of everyday life.

The launch issue considers laundromats, plastic chairs, a steel garden, and an unsustainable living room. It explains why we need 'the political' rather than politics and interviews the noted Islamic thinker, activist and writer Ziauddin Sardar on what's wrong with human rights and what lies beyond difference. Read it here: [www.designphilosophypolitics.com](http://www.designphilosophypolitics.com). We also have a permanent link to it on the DPPapers home page.

### **Building Dwelling Futures**

There has been a very good response to our call for papers on this theme, so we have decided to extend it over two issues. This issue introduces the theme with a small number of papers, exemplifying different aspects.

'Building dwelling futures' could be read literally as constructing places to live for the future, but we want

to evoke more than that. The title, as many will recognise, refers to Heidegger's oft-cited essay, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', which inverts the building and dwelling relation: building isn't just functional – simply the constructing of dwelling places – rather building makes dwelling. How we build, thus will we dwell.<sup>1</sup>

We wish to evoke dwelling both in its limited sense, that is, of inhabiting places, and in the larger, more fundamental sense of modes of 'being here'. Dwelling encompasses how we occupy space, make places for ourselves and how, from the planet's given resources, we construct our worlds and our mode of being. This distinction is important: 'planet' here stands for that which is given, while 'world' is what we appropriate from the given - making sense of it through language and making places for ourselves, including building places to dwell.

I might ask you, "have you got an answer to that problem yet?" and you might reply, "I'm dwelling on it", which is to suggest: getting to know it, being with it, getting comfortable with it. Dwelling suggests being at home with, familiarity. And that's the problem. We are at home in our condition of unsustainability, we are comfortable with it. It's what's familiar.

Modern ways of dwelling have been formed in an environment of evermore intensively designed spaces, technologies, services, products. Living outside of these constructed support systems – what Tony Fry has called the naturalised artificial<sup>2</sup> – becomes increasingly difficult to imagine or actually do. The comforts we enjoy, or if we're poor, that we aspire to enjoy – well-furnished and well-serviced houses, power and water on tap, car and air travel – all arrive at an enormous environmental cost.

Whole populations in the west, and increasingly elsewhere, are locked into dependence upon infrastructure, technologies and commodities that relentlessly drive demand for limited natural resources while generating greenhouse gases to levels that are changing the planet's climate system. Increasingly losses outweigh gains.

That human actions, especially over of the last two centuries, are largely responsible for the era of climatic uncertainty we are now entering, is now widely recognised by scientists, government, industry and the general public. The juggernaut of industrial production that's been on the road for the last two centuries is now pulling more and more of the world's population into an unsustainable future. It's not just energy or certain products, but the whole commodity overloaded package that is impacting on the atmosphere, climate, other species and ourselves. This situation raises major ethical questions. Clearly, the well-off can't go on sustaining their way of life while repressing the desires and need for the world's poor for an improved quality of life. Yet dominantly, sustainability is not being conceptualised globally, as it should be, ethically speaking, i.e., in terms of redistributive justice.

Because of how we've dwelt in the recent past and how we're dwelling now, the future of human dwelling, as well as the continued existence of many non-human life forms is under threat. So the crucial question is 'How should we dwell now, in order for there to be a future?' This circles back to the question of 'how should we build?' and thus 'how should we design?'

All kinds of designers contribute to the proliferation of unsustainability as they design products, promotion, services, software, furnishing, interiors, clothing, fashion, cars, buildings, urban fabric, infrastructure and much more.

There is a growing gap between the coming problems of human habitation in an era of changing climate and the practices available to deal with them – i.e., planning and architecture. These are essentially service professions that design according to agendas set by business and by governments, which largely act to facilitate the interests of capital. Both planning and architecture are prefigurative practices, but most frequently they are brought into play only after major decisions have been made. At the same time, planning and architecture are bearing the weight of what passes for sustainability initiatives – environmental assessment; green rating schemes for buildings and the like.

Planning and architecture, in their current forms, simply do not have sufficient agency for the fundamental directional changes that are needed. Nor will that deep change come from client groups, i.e. business and government, which are acting to sustain the current system of structural unsustainability. This is why **Tony Fry** argues for a new kind of action – 'redirective practice', which while selectively taking elements from current design practice, posits the creation of sustainment as its driving rationale, as opposed to 'sustainability' as an add-on to status quo architecture and planning. His essay 'Redirective Practice in Action: the Boonah Two Project' written in collaboration with **Jim Gall**, presents an example of how working on a design competition was taken up as a professional development opportunity to initiate redirective practice.

Planning is a dominantly instrumental activity, always located within specific power structures whether local, regional or national. It has never developed its own body of theory, but has always pragmatically borrowed according to circumstances. As Peter Hall commented in his historical survey of the profession, there had been theory *in* planning, but no theory *of* planning, and when it did develop, in the latter half of the twentieth century, it scattered in multiple directions, with a growing divide between the academy and practice.<sup>3</sup> For a long time, Manuel Castells has observed the ineffectuality of city planners who continue to produce plans after fundamental decisions have already been made by more powerful interests. He reconceived planners as social regulators who produce not functional plans, but symbolic objects of negotiation.<sup>4</sup>

Architecture has also fragmented. Since the waning of the universalist ideals of modernism, and the rise of corporate power, architecture has progressively abandoned a social agenda. Notwithstanding small, committed groups like Architecture for Humanity, architectural ambitions are increasingly in the direction of a disarticulated aesthetics, acted out in regimes of theming and branding.<sup>5</sup> The architect as mega-stylist is also possibly a response to the way in which the structure and functionality of buildings of even moderate complexity are now largely designed by multi-specialist teams of engineers and heavy inputs of software.

Given the constraints of both professions – their weak agency within structures of power; their tendency toward technical or formal solutions – is it possible for planning and architecture to contribute to the coming problems associated with climate change and continued population growth? What are the problems we would expect that architecture and planning could address?

One of the effects of climate change is that extreme events like hurricanes, floods and forest fires are becoming more frequent and more intense in many places. In central Asia and many parts of Africa, such as Darfur, unprecedented droughts have prompted massive population movements that become headlines when they materialise as civil wars and refugee crises – which is how these events appear in public discourse, rather than as the fallout of climate change. This will become harder to ignore, especially as urban areas around the world come under increasing pressure from growing numbers of environmental refugees.

A major problem to address is that of building new cities and extending existing ones to accommodate the rapidly urbanising global population. The United Nations is predicting that from 2020 seventy-five percent of world population growth will occur in cities and regions of developing nations, where there is little or no planning.<sup>6</sup> Here is the territory of informal settlements, as discussed in Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*.<sup>7</sup> Planning and architecture are just not on the scene in such places. Ironically, the reverse is emerging to be the case, with some planners and architects beginning to look to shanty towns, favellas and the like, for ideas on more sustainable ways of living. In their critical re-appraisal of New Urbanism in Florida, **Philippe D'Anjou and Glenn Weiss**, give consideration to shanty towns, finding that on many criteria they better exemplify the ideals of New Urbanism than the developments built in its name. Many shanty towns demonstrate what some planners and urban designers in wealthy regions try to achieve: walking, rather than car-dominated cities; mixed use urban fabric rather than functional separation by zoning; integration of food production into urban areas to reduce the greenhouse gas impacts of 'food miles'.

Informal settlements are not quite the same as shanty towns. They are self-built settlements that have grown organically, without official permission or planning, and as a consequence, without

services. The familiar shanty town image of vast accretions of shacks built from scavenged materials is only one type of informal settlement. Many are a combination of squatters and people who have bought cheap agricultural land and just gone ahead and built on it without seeking permission. Some build larger than they need and rent out to others. Take, for example, the Manshiet Nasser district of Cairo, which is an informal settlement comprised of brick apartment buildings housing hundred of thousands of people.<sup>8</sup> (Take a look at this photo: [http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2007/02/28/world/20070301\\_CAIRO\\_slideshow\\_2.html](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2007/02/28/world/20070301_CAIRO_slideshow_2.html)).

New Urbanism emerged in the mid 1980s in the USA. It attempted to design against the way in which the car had transformed the mid twentieth century city into an expanded urban field dominated by commuting lifestyles. New Urbanists extol more densely populated 'walking cities' with an intermingling of residences, shops and workplaces. However, this is not necessarily how new urbanism has been realised on the ground. Beginning with a discussion the 'artefactual project' versus the 'human project' in architecture, **Philippe D'Anjou and Glenn Weiss** go on to uncover the implicit ethical project of New Urbanism, demonstrating its unexamined assumptions and questioning its model of what constitutes a good life. Their focus is on New Urbanist 'branded' developments that have actually been built and how New Urbanist rhetoric has become influential in mainstream planning.

It is worth noting, nevertheless, that New Urbanism is an unstable, contested category. More recent versions reveal much more radical responses to unsustainability than those of 1980s New Urbanists. [LandscapeArchitecture.org](http://LandscapeArchitecture.org) and [NewUrbanism.org](http://NewUrbanism.org) advocate measures such as: an immediate and permanent moratorium on all new major road construction, airport construction or expansion; and banning new coal fired or nuclear power generating plants. They also support "the rapid construction of massive new solar and wind power generating capacity all across America, from large-scale installations to smaller neighbourhood and roof-top units" and "the rapid installation of major organic farms at the edge of every city and town across America."<sup>9</sup>

In her paper 'Topography of Vacancy' **Kim Steele** introduces an urban problem that is the obverse of overcrowded informal settlements. In Phoenix, Arizona there is too much space – a network of gaping holes in the urban fabric, making this sprawling city stretch even further. Steele describes how this arose, what problems it is posing, and leaves open what the solutions might be – there is a possibility that this is soon to be the subject of a design competition.

This snapshot of Phoenix links, again by contrast, to a region dealt with in the last two papers – South East Queensland, Australia. My paper looks at this region as an example of the

'peri-urban' as an emergent form of settlement not yet recognised as such because planners are locked into the idea of regions being either urban or rural.

Phoenix might be a desert city, yet its water supply is assured for the next fifty years or more.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, water supply is now estimated in months in municipal dams in sub-tropical South East Queensland, with the average level of dams currently at 17 percent.

**Tony Fry and Jim Gall's** paper presents a model for how an existing town (Boonah) could be designed over time to accommodate an influx of environmental refugees and be reconfigured as a self-sustaining region. They outline the thinking that informed their entry for 'Building a Sustainable World: Life in the Balance', a recent international design competition organised by the California Chapter of the Royal Institute of British Architects, for which their entry gained second place. One of the points they emphasised is the importance of local food production for developing a sustainable community. In fact urban agriculture, practiced by the informal settlers of many of the world's poorest cities, is now being promoted and encouraged as a model of sustainment in wealthy cities such as Chicago. Perhaps this too, could be explored as a productive way of filling in the blank spaces of Phoenix.

Anne-Marie Willis

## Notes

1. Martin Heidegger *Poetry Language Thought* (trans. Albert Hofstadter), New York: Harper & Rowe, 1971. The seven essays in this collection were written in various versions at various times between 1935 and 1954. 'Building Dwelling Thinking' and 'The Thing' were first written as lectures in 1951-52. 'Building Dwelling Thinking' in *Poetry Language Thought*, op cit., p. 146.
2. Tony Fry *Remakings: Ecology, Design, Philosophy*, Sydney: Envirobook, 1994.
3. Peter Hall *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). See chapter 'The City of Theory'.
4. Manuel Castells, 'The Social Function of Urban Planning' in *City, Class and Power* Macmillan: London, 1978, p. 71. In his celebrated study of the French growth centre of Dunkirk in 1971-3 he concluded: "If planning has a weak technical function, and if it nevertheless continues to grow despite this, it is because it has in fact a precise social function which is very closely linked to the social and political interests underlying urban power relations". Another example: Peter Hall cites M. Gottdiener's study of planning in Long Island in which he concluded that "the decisions made by the politicians,

speculators and housing developers lead to the same land use patterns as would result from no planning or zoning” which lead him to ask what is it that planners do? His answer, says Hall was that “they produce plans: ‘The planning process, as it is usually practised in society, makes planners advisory bystanders to decisions that are being carried out elsewhere – by political leaders and private businessmen’”. Hall *op cit* p. 296–7, citing Gottdiener *Planned Sprawl: Private and Public Interests in Suburbia* Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977.

5. A recent registration of this is *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy* by Anna Klingmann (MIT Press, 2007). A media release for the book describes the author as a principal of a New York based “agency for architecture and brand building” and claims, without equivocation, “soon whole cities will be built on the model of IMAX theaters.”
6. Un-Habitat *The Challenge of the Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003* London 2003, 3.
7. Mike Davis ‘Planet of Slums: urban involution and the informal proletariat’ *New Left Review* No 26, 2004. It has since been published as a book.
8. Three quarters of Cairo’s population of 15 million live in such informal settlements, mostly ignored by government. These are places where residents have to improvise their own electricity, sewerage, water and other services. Cairo has been described as “... a collection of villages, a ruralised metropolis where people live by their wits and devices, cut off from the authorities ...” Michael Slackman ‘Cairo Journal: In In a Mighty Arab Hub, the Poor Are Left to Their Fate’ *New York Times* 1 March 2007.
9. See <http://www.landscapearchitecture.org/> and <http://www.newurbanism.org/>.
10. Kim Steele provided this information: “Central Arizona Project (CAP) transports water from the Colorado River via a 336 mile canal. Salt River Project (SRP) manages a series of canals that wind throughout the Phoenix metro area carrying water provided by the Salt and Verde rivers (these canals follow the historic Hohokam Indian irrigation canals) a small amount is collected from wells and other groundwater. Surprisingly, Phoenix does not have any watering restrictions. There are certain best practices for water management that are used throughout the valley that cut down on excessive water use and treated waste water is used on parks, etc. Other cities in the state (Tucson, for example) are in dire shape when it comes to water but Phoenix has stored enough water to offset any shortages for 50–100 years.”