



## The Everyday as Locus of Sustainment

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## EDITORIAL

# The Everyday as Locus of Sustainment

**Anne-Marie Willis**

The papers in this double issue cut across several themes we've signalled in calls-for papers: specifically, the built environment, sustainment and the design/future relation. But what links them most substantially is a concern with the everyday as a locus of sustainment. The four papers variously describe, explore and contest how practices of everyday life can either contribute to or undermine sustain-ability.

A product or service-based economy? Mass public transport or less-polluting automobiles? High or low density cities? Sustainable design projects for students or lives disposed towards sustainment?

Which options are the more sustainable? Where does design agency lie?

Where should actions be directed to most effectively counter the pervasive unsustainability that structures our lives?

These are the kind of questions explored by this selection of papers.

**Carleton Christensen** brings a new perspective to the now familiar idea that services have lower impacts

than products, and that therefore designers should be striving to create service solutions to substitute for individually owned products. He contests the kind of economic rationalist analyses that wants to claim that there is little difference between the impacts of products and services. He does this by laying bare the limited conceptualisation of rationality that underlies the 'business case' and then goes on to reveal a more complex understanding of rationality that inhabits an everyday 'commonsense' understanding that asserts, for example, that a power-tool hire service would generate less impacts than everyone owning their own electric drills, etc. His paper very effectively brings philosophical understandings to issues usually presented in rather reductive empirical ways. In doing this he reclaims a space for ethical action in everyday life.

Where sustainment as a life project is implicit in Christensen's argument, it is foregrounded in what **Philippe d'Anjou** writes about the design student as locus of sustainability. Using Sartre's idea of existential project, he makes important connections between the design projects that are part of the everyday life of a student, and the student's fundamental life project – their chosen way of being and acting in the world. Inserting the question of sustainability, understood existentially, between these two kinds of 'projects' is the responsibility of the design instructor, and when sustainability is 'freely chosen', there is the potential for a radical reconfiguration of the student's life project. This resonates with what Tony Fry has recently been exploring as 'redirective practice'.<sup>1</sup>

Both of these papers imply that sustainment is an informed, freely chosen decision to impose limits on the consuming or designing self. This idea also subtends the paper by **Sukanta Biswas**, which argues that 'freedom of choice' of urban mobility options includes not just considerations of personal convenience, but also the freedom to choose sustainable transport services in the knowledge that one's transport usage collectively contributes, positively or negatively, to the condition of the urban, and the larger environment.

His study shows how Kolkata's (formerly Calcutta) multi-layered public transport system is both a product of, and contributes to the liveliness and public safety of this densely settled city of over 13 million inhabitants. Mixed-use localities, widely available public transport, streets that are safe to walk at night – these are some of Kolkata's characteristics. They are also some of the things advocated by many planners and urban designers to make western cities more sustainable. Car ownership is still low in Kolkata, with only 12 percent of its population having access to a private motor vehicle (meaning that the percentage of actual car ownership is even much lower). Sukanta Biswas warns that car-friendly government policies, such as reducing sales tax on cars, could push this percentage up dramatically and undermine

the desirable and sustainable characteristics of this multi-layered metropolis from which the west could learn so much.

The Indian city that contrasts most starkly with bustling Kolkata is the planned city of Chandigarh, with its monumental buildings and vast empty plazas at its centre. Designed by Le Corbusier, it was the product of a European modernist sensibility that perceived crowds and congestion as urban evils to be eliminated by the creation of generous spaces to facilitate the circulation of light and air. In their paper, **Michael Chapman and Steffen Lehmann** characterise Chandigarh as a city designed to resist congestion and the crowd, and assess how it has developed over its more than fifty year life. They examine congestion and movement as contradictory generative forces of urban form; the notion of movement as an antidote to congestion; and room-to-move as a reaction to overcrowding. They discuss the crowd as an urban phenomenon that has been alternately: feared as dangerous; reviled as alienating; or embraced as democratic and sociable. They see a certain irony in the transition from Rem Koolhaas's polemic in favour of congestion, *Delirious New York* (1994) and his more recent turn to vast, empty urban space in his CCTV tower complex in Beijing. Their paper opens up the possibility of a more nuanced debate on urban form and sustainment – one that goes beyond the tired figures of 'sprawl versus density' in the mindset of so many planners.

The good news is that all of these debates will be continuing and developing during 2008. For example, **Carleton Christensen's** paper has prompted a response from **Will McNeill** which has turned into a dialogue that we'll feature in the next issue.

And don't forget to keep an eye on our other project, Design Philosophy Politics – [www.designphilosophypolitics.com](http://www.designphilosophypolitics.com)

*Anne-Marie Willis*

## Note

1. See 'Redirective Practice: an Elaboration' *Design Philosophy Papers* 1/2007 and 'Redirective Practice in Action: Boonah Two' *Design Philosophy Papers* 2/2007.