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# Ezio Manzini Interviewed on Scenarios for Sustainability

## Anne-Marie Willis and Ezio Manzini

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In the first issue of *Design Philosophy Papers* (DPP) we published ‘Scenarios of Sustainable Wellbeing’, a paper by Ezio Manzini that argued for the need to create images of wellbeing in opposition to the unsustainable product-based ones that dominate. A year later, in March 2004, Ezio visited Australia at the invitation of Team D/E/S, the publishers of DPP, to act as a mentor for scenario work being developed here under the banner of ‘Queensland Design Futures’. These activities, as well as the publication of *Sustainable Everyday: Scenarios of Urban Life* by Manzini and his collaborator Francois Jegou, have stimulated ongoing dialogue on the nature of unsustainability, the value of scenarios and the difficult challenges of attempting to generate affirmative future scenarios that go against the grain.<sup>1</sup>

*Sustainable Everyday* (which was also an exhibition at the Triennale di Milano) presents a large number of proposals from 15 design workshops conducted in 10 countries that all fed into a ‘reference scenario’ for a sustainable city. The proposals deal with questions of how to reduce the impacts, and improve the sustainability, of

urban living, with many solutions being posed in terms of services or structures of co-operation. Examples include:

- ‘the extended home’ where many domestic functions (laundry, grocery shopping, food preparation) become externally provided services, reducing the amount of energy and resource-consuming ‘equipped domestic space’ per person;
- on-demand personal transport, reducing the need for individual car ownership;
- equipment/tool sharing and maintenance centres
- energy management services
- time-shared, multi-function work and social spaces
- systems of enablement for localised organic food production and distribution

Taken individually, the solutions are not claimed as particularly new or original. But placed together, in the context of the imperative of sustainability, they are valuable as starting points for active consideration of how domestic life and its supporting urban infrastructure could be turned around from being a generator of unsustainability to a means of sustainment. The proposals and scenarios invite counter-proposals and counter scenarios.

In the following interview, Anne-Marie Willis poses questions to Ezio Manzini, based particularly upon the theoretical and methodological basis of the scenario work undertaken and documented in *Sustainable Everyday*.

**AMW: What first motivated you and your colleagues to take-up a scenario approach for dealing with the question of sustainable futures?**

**EM:** Our main interest in dealing with scenario building is that it is a useful activity to encourage *social conversations about the future* and to increase the probability that some of the ideas they spread may influence what will be “tomorrow’s present”, i.e. the future. From this perspective, what scenarios do is to generate visions *for* the future (rather than *of* the future): visions of the-world-as-it-could-be; a possible world, which would become probable if we wanted it and acted accordingly.

But the present success of scenarios is not only about wider discussion for the future. There are also some more immediate, and often business-oriented, motivations related to the way in which decisions are to be taken. In general terms, we can say that the usefulness of scenarios in decision-making grows with the turbulence of the contest, the complexity of the system operated on, and the number of actors involved (or to be involved). In fact:

- the greater the number of elements in the system, the more interdependent those elements are and the more uncertain

and faster the changes in the context, the more difficult it becomes to produce, intuitively, a model of the reality we are referring to and working on.

- the greater the number of actors who have to take part in the decision making/design process (and the more complex the system and the reference context), the more difficult it is to lay the ground, the “platform for interaction”, on which that process can effectively take place.

When these conditions arise, scenario-building not only allows us to overcome the limits of intuition and more simplistic model making, but also puts us in a better position to choose with awareness and argue our options through in a participatory planning process.

**AMW: What existing scenario methods did you draw on?**

**EM:** The kind of scenario varies according to its motivation – there are different scenarios for different goals. We (François Jegou and I) have introduced the following terminology for the ones that, in our view, are the most important:

*Policy-orienting Scenario (POS):* this is the vision of a context as it might appear in the presence of certain (economic, social and cultural) dynamics, and/or should certain (economic, social and cultural) policies be implemented. It supports decision making in the face of complex and/or participatory institutional or industrial options. Usually, several sets of POS present themselves, corresponding to the various policies that could be enacted.

*Design-orienting scenario (DOS):* this is a (motivated and many-faceted) vision of a context as it might appear in the presence of certain (economic, social and cultural) dynamics and if carefully defined *design choices* were enacted. It is a support tool used in design activities where different actors take part in the strategic orientation of choices. Usually various sets of DOS present themselves, corresponding to different design options. This methodology can also be used in relation to both individual and whole community behaviour. In this case the “projects” that the DOS refer to are individual *life projects* or processes of *social innovation* arising out of a combination of various such individual projects.

Obviously, as designers, we are more interested in the Design Orienting Scenarios.

**AMW: How has the method that you have developed different from the others? Or, how are design-oriented scenarios different from other kinds of scenarios?**

**EM:** The building of *design orientating scenarios* is to all intents and purposes a design activity (where this is not true for the Policy Orienting Scenarios). In fact, as for any project, the visions

and proposals produced in the process of building these kind of scenarios must be plausible (socially), feasible (technically) and tenable (both in motivation and implication). Here, the main difference from normal design activity is that these proposals are generated not to be realised, but to encourage discussion between the various social actors as to what to do, how to do it, and why.

*More precisely, the DOS has three fundamental components: a vision, a motivation, and some proposals – these constitute the scenario architecture:*

*Vision:* this is the most specific component of a scenario. It answers the basic question: “*What would the world be like if.....?*”, and it does so by telling a story and/or sketching a picture of what things would be like if a set sequence of events were to take place.

*Motivation:* this is the component of the scenario that justifies its existence and confers its meaning. It answers the question: “*Why is this scenario meaningful?*”, and it does so by explaining rationally what we wanted to do in building it, what the premises were, what surrounding conditions have been adopted and finally how the various alternative propositions will be assessed (i.e. by what criteria and instruments).

*Practicability:* this is the component which adds depth and consistency to the vision. It answers the questions, “*What are the various facets of the overall vision? What does it consist of? How can we make it happen?....*”. Different kinds of scenarios give rise to different kinds of proposals, which have in common the capacity to bring about the scenario they anticipate.

**AMW: The scenarios presented in your book and exhibition at the Triennale di Milano ‘Sustainable Everyday: Scenarios of Urban Life’ were generated by 15 design workshops held at design schools in various parts of the world – Italy, France, Finland, USA, Canada, Brazil, Hong Kong, China, Japan, India and Korea. To what extent were the participants in these workshops briefed before generating their scenario ideas?**

**EM:** The design workshops in the 15 design schools have to be considered as exercises of concept generation and not, strictly speaking, a scenario building exercise. In our case, the real scenario building exercise has been done, in a second phase, using the workshop results, and the locally collected real cases, as building materials.

**AMW: Were participants given a set of ‘sustainability criteria’ for judging their proposals? For example, was the ‘Sustainable Solutions’ section of the book their brief?**

**EM:** Before starting a workshop, the participants had been briefed and the set of sustainability criteria was given. This briefing was

not very long and complicated. In fact, at the beginning of each workshop there was a brain-storming section where many different ideas were generated. The variety of these ideas gave the possibility to discuss them and to better focalise what could be (and what could not be) considered 'promising' from the perspective of sustainability.

**AMW: Has there been further consequences from the 15 workshops? You state that the scenarios were not created in order to “go into production” but to encourage discussion between social actors about the form of the future and how they might shape it. The success of the visions and proposals was to be measured “by their capacity to channel people’s imagination, expectations and consequently their behaviour”. So, looking back on the project, how would you rate its success now? For example, have some of the participants changed the direction of their designing and/or their way of life as a result of their involvement in the process?**

**EM:** This is difficult to say. I can observe that there are several schools where the workshop had been held, that now show a deeper interest in design for sustainability, with a special focus on sustainable solutions. But it is difficult to say how much of this interest depends on the workshop that we did together or if it is simply the result of the fact that these ideas are, in any case, spreading world-wide. Of course, I would like to think that our initiative has played a positive role in this wider process ... but it is not up to me to say how much this is true.

I have to add that, of course, in any case, this kind of consideration cannot be generalised: in some schools the proposed themes were very clear from the beginning and the idea of focusing on services and solutions (more than on products and/or communication and/or interiors) was quite obvious, and others where it wasn't like that, and where the idea of designing solutions was brand new.

**AMW: In *Sustainable Everyday*, you and your co-author, Francois Jegou, argue that fundamental change is necessary in order to move towards sustainability – the term you use is “systemic discontinuity” (pp. 36–7) Yet you also argue that “change must come about due to positive choice rather than disastrous events or authoritarian imposition” (p. 45). Isn't this a contradiction?**

**EM:** We have to refer to how complex systems evolve. And to when and how the system structures change, i.e. systemic discontinuities take place. The radical changes in the overall system form, i.e. large systemic discontinuities, happen when the system is stressed by a high number of local radical changes, or local systemic discontinuities. Large discontinuities cannot be

foreseen precisely (i.e. there is no deterministic link between local discontinuities and large ones) but they cannot happen without the existence of the condition of stress that I mentioned before, i.e. without the accumulation of local discontinuities.

Coming to your question, in my view, to make large systemic discontinuities more probable, as concerned citizens, we have to promote different kinds of possible local discontinuities (i.e. the local radical changes that may take places in the context of the existing wider system). In particular, as designers, what we can do is to facilitate the local discontinuities that, just now, for different reasons, somebody can generate with a “positive choice”, in the framework of new ways of thinking and doing (for example, adopting, just now, new ideas about well-being and how to get it).

**AMW: Following on from this, how can “positive choice” occur quickly enough and with sufficient critical mass of people, to avoid the worst consequences of the continuation of the current condition of unsustainability?**

**EM:** The transition towards sustainability is a social learning process. The positive choices that we can facilitate and/or promote permit the generation of new knowledge and experiences. When and how all this will (hopefully) spread and become the major trend depends on different factors, many of them beyond our possible influence as designer and as citizens.

**AMW: And what about the millions or billions who have very little, or no, freedom to choose?**

**EM:** This question is difficult and could have different answers. One possible answer is: we cannot solve all the problems as designers. A second one could be: lets give the good examples of where this possibility of choice exists (and hope in the power of the good examples).

A third, more complex, answer is: everybody has some freedom of choice and, in contemporary society, even the billions of poor are exposed to the same ideas as the rich. The worst ideas, but also, eventually the ones that might bring different, more promising ways of regarding wellbeing and the ways to get it (this can happen, for instance, in relation to the demand of natural food or the possibility of developing sustainable tourism schemes).

I would like to add that this flow of good ideas could happen – and effectively it is happening – also in the other direction – from the poorest to the richest, given that sometimes the extreme conditions in which poor communities are living push them to use in a creative way the resources that they have, and to invent solutions that can be interesting even for the richer ones (or at least, for the poor segments of the rich societies). An example is the diffusion of initiatives similar to the Bangladesh micro-credit schemes or, to

quote an Italian example, assisted auto-construction to give the possibility of an immigrant building their own house by themselves in Italy – using an auto-construction scheme that had been developed in Africa.

**AMW: When elaborating this “systemic discontinuity” you speak of “ ... questioning the entire economic and socio-cultural complex on which existing production, use and consumption are based.” Then you say that this systemic discontinuity “is already beginning to take place” (p. 37). Isn’t this a contradiction?**

**EM:** In my view the contradiction, or better the possibility of contradictions, is in the complexity of the present world. Complex as it is, present society comprehends a variety of different sub-systems.

I will try to better explain this concept. Observing society as a whole and in all its contradictoriness, we can see that alongside numerous unfortunately extremely worrying tendencies, signals are also emerging that indicate different and far more promising developments. Signals, still weak, but all the same stating clearly that another way of being and doing is possible. Signals that, to quote the slogan of many contemporary movements, show that “another world is under construction”.

Looking at society carefully and selectively in this way, what we can see are people and communities who act outside dominant thought and behaviour patterns. *Creative communities* that when faced with a result to achieve, organise themselves in such a way as to achieve what they want directly themselves. Groups of people who re-organise the way they live in their home (as in the co-housing movement) and their neighbourhood (bringing it to life, creating the conditions for children to go to school on foot, fostering mobility on foot or by bike). Communities that set up new participatory social services for the elderly and for parents (the young and the elderly living together and micro-nurseries set up and managed by enterprising mothers) and that set up new food networks fostering producers of organic items, and the quality and typical characteristics of their products (as in the experience of Slow Food, solidarity purchasing and fair trade groups). The list of promising cases could continue.

What do these examples tell us? They tell us that, already today, it is possible to do things differently and consider one’s own work, one’s own time and one’s own system of social relationships in a different light. They tell us that the learning process towards environmental and social sustainability is beginning to build up a body of experience and knowledge. They tell us that there is an inversion of tendency from the disabling processes of the past (and sadly still dominant today). The cases we are talking about here are the result of the enterprise and ability of certain people – creative



communities – who have known how to think in a new way and put different forms of organisation into action.

However interesting the promising cases and creative communities may be, they are as yet only minority phenomena. We can ask ourselves what possibility they may have of spreading; what chance there is for them to achieve the scale effectively required by sustainability issues. The future is open and this legitimate question obviously has no definite answer.

**AMW: Aren't nearly all "promising solutions" still firmly lodged within the current system? Put another way, capitalism does not seek to eliminate crisis, it depends upon it. In this sense, and notwithstanding the rhetoric of 'sustainable development', is not 'sustainability' is an anathema to capitalism?**

**EM:** Personally, I am not so interested in discussing the future of capitalism. I am more interested in observing the rise of new ideas, and of new ways of thinking and doing. I don't know how capitalism will change facing these ideas and if they will grow as I hope. And, by the way, I think that it is impossible to foresee it!

In other words, I think that these cases are not just a flash in the pan but represent the beginning of a new story. Even if we don't know exactly how this story will go on.

Sceptics will certainly point out the size discrepancy between big business, big finance, the great world military system and a solidarity purchasing group, a mutual help network, the adoption of a tree by part of a class or a family, an association of senior citizens committed to fostering green neighbourhood areas, a group of children adventuring to school on foot .... However, these phenomena, small and weak as they seem, represent the seed of a plant that if properly cultivated, could grow and prosper. Obviously, we cannot know if this will really happen and that the seeds will find the ground and proper nutrients for growth, but we do know that their future also depends on us.

What must we do then, to cultivate these seeds? To move out of the metaphor: how can we amplify these signals, as promising as they are weak? The answer to these questions is twofold. On the one hand we must facilitate the spread of each of the promising cases by promoting specific solutions able to render them more socially and environmentally accessible and effective. On the other, we must foster a favourable context in more general terms. A context in which it is more probable that promising cases like these may appear and having once appeared may stand time, and spread beyond the specific conditions of the context where they were born.

**AMW: In seeking to provide more sustainable forms of the wellbeing that people seek when they buy and use products,**

**you and advocate “starting from results” (p. 53), i.e. focussing on the result obtained via a product, rather than the product itself. Clearly, this approach makes sense in some situations, for example, a service that provides thermal comfort to households rather than a company that just manufactures and sells air conditioning units. But beyond these basic ‘functional requirements’, don’t people actually have more complex investments in their material possessions? For example, a car is never just a means of transport, a cooker not just a means of making a meal – it seems your strategy ignores the psycho-social-emotional-aesthetic-symbolic investments people have in material things. So, for example, to make ‘low impact cars desirable to the masses’ requires not just technical, economic and even aesthetic arguments to be won but the displacement of ‘car culture’ and all that props it up (lifestyle, motor sport, media, clubs, products etc). Can you comment on this?**

**EM:** Here, in my view, there is a misunderstanding of what the expression ‘starting from results’ could mean.

For me, this statement simply says that, given a certain result, there are several different strategies – different combinations of products, services and personal involvement – that could permit to get it. And that, considering all these possible strategies, it is possible to choose which one, in a given condition, appears to be the most interesting. A choice that, as in every choice of this kind – different motivations play a role, from the most rational to the most emotional. In other words, there is no reasons to think that these strategies have to be driven by functional and/or economical evaluations more than by emotional ones.

I would like to add that the emotional side will have to play an important role in the redefinition of our ways of living. Probably a role that will be most effective than the strictly rational-economic one.

In fact, we know that in the transition towards sustainability what is required by everybody is not only a little incremental improvement on what the normal model of life proposes. What is required is a change in model. A radical change that, if it has to take place, asks for a drastic re-orientation of the idea of well-being. It requires us to go so far as to consider positive ways of being and doing that in the currently dominant model are seen as indifferent or even negative. Is this change possible? It is possible if we adopt a viewpoint where what has been said is lived, not as an obligation, but as a new, positive way of living and doing. And in my view design is a major player in building this new way of looking at things. In re-discovering the pleasure of moving on foot, of eating local fruits and vegetables, of feeling the cycle of the seasons, of caring for things and places, of chatting with neighbours, of taking an active part in the life of the neighbourhood, of gazing at the sunset.....

**AMW: While you made a choice to focus on urban living, it could be said that the scenarios are rather urbocentric. For example, focusing on food preparation – but not food production. Or customisation of end products – but not the production of raw materials and components.**

**EM:** You are right! I think that this is a limit of our first set of proposal (the ones presented in the Sustainable Everyday book and exhibition). The next one will be nearer to what you are proposing. Or at least, I hope so.

### **Note**

1. Click on the following links for further information:
  - Ezio Manzini ‘Scenarios of Sustainable Wellbeing’ *Design Philosophy Papers* 1/2003 (full text of paper)
  - Ezio Manzini & Francois Jegou *Sustainable Everyday: Scenarios of Urban Life* Milan: Edizioni Ambiente, September 2003 (review)
  - Queensland Design Futures (website archive of the project).