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# Street Lights at the End of the Universe (Navigating Sub-Urban Space)

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What should I do in Rome? I am no good at lying.  
Juvenal 110CE<sup>1</sup>

## **After Geography**

What a help it would be if good, apparently sober words like urban and rural, society and environment, culture and nature, technology and ecology, made sense of the chimerical space in which we now (must) find ourselves. How confusing it is that their apparently once-stable referents are dissolving in floods of technological possibility. How frustrating it is that such signs are no longer simply unreliable but often positively mischievous.

“How predictable”, Bruno Latour might conceivably respond, as he tries again to get us to see that the language of pure categories is at one with the production of hybrid entities in modern technoscience.<sup>2</sup> How can we not be disoriented in the midst of this paradoxical state of affairs? Technology produces a patchwork, ever-shifting reality unintelligible within the traditions of thought that make it

possible. Modern intellectual blueprints are unable to orient us to the ‘pluriverse’ built at their direction. Yet this disorientation may turn out to be liberating, suggests Latour, if our overworked desire for reliable maps gives way to wholehearted participation in the ontological drama of technology.<sup>3</sup> As he tells it, this is an unfolding drama of new foldings of time, space and agents that is unavoidably experimental. A drama lacking any over-arching design. A drama available to understanding, therefore, only to the extent thinking is able to follow actors in their relational singularity and to follow patterns of agency in their fluid transgressions.

Tony Fry also bears witness to the inability of Cartesian categories to locate us within the everyday novelty – that familiar strangeness – of late-modern worlds. He provides, however, a different explanation for this disorientation to that of Latour, arriving at a less sanguine conclusion.<sup>4</sup> For Fry does identify an overarching design, a universal patterning of untruth, a gravity of unsustainability, at work beneath the self-accelerating momentum of technology.<sup>5</sup> This is work of design long ago transferred from philosophers to engineers to artefacts themselves. This is ontological work that makes real the inability to sustain the real.<sup>6</sup> And, so Fry argues in *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism*, this is work now maintained, coordinated and extended by a very particular form of technological environment; that of ‘the urban’.<sup>7</sup>

Fry asks us to consider that the megamachinery we call the city, machinery soon to house the majority of the human population, is the centre of gravity now prescribing the conventional trajectories of human thought and human production.<sup>8</sup> Although physically finite, the urban, conceived in this way, has the potential of infinite reach. It spans the universe of possibility. “Nothing obstructs this emergent phenomenon,” for, ontologically, there is only the urban:

The representational claim of an Other, in which the urban trades, is founded on a series of imaginary romanticised subjects and lingering mirages like ‘the picturesque’, ‘rustic landscape’, ‘nature’ and ‘the environment’ – all of which are urban-authored projections.<sup>9</sup>

So claims Fry. It is a proposition well made in *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism* and one well worth taking seriously – especially so for ‘sustainability’ advocates borne of highly urbanised societies, of which I am one. I aim to do so in what follows. Specifically, I engage with Fry’s account of the urban as a way of navigating in unfamiliar ways the suburban habitats with which many of us consider ourselves familiar.

### **Polis Eclipses Cosmos?**

Cosmopolis, metropolis and technopolis have become one. We are accustomed to thinking of the cosmopolis as the ideal and the metropolis as the real side of this triad, oblivious to

the technopolis, to the decisive and subversive base of this arrangement.

Albert Borgmann<sup>10</sup>

It is well understood across the social sciences that contemporary flows of people, resources, policies, information, ideas, stories, images and beliefs are orchestrated from within a network of 'world' or 'global' cities and, furthermore, that this is not a recent phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> Athens, Rome, Constantinople, Amsterdam, Paris, London and New York, to pick some obvious examples, have all enjoyed periods as hubs of expansive urbocentric patterns of power and accumulation spun out of the 'West' over the last two and a half millennia. Urbocentric patterns spun from out of the 'East' of course reach considerably further back and overlap with those of the West in ways complex and poorly understood.<sup>12</sup> By enabling spectacular confluences of power and, more fundamentally, by expanding the field of social possibility, many cities have played their part in the gestation of technology as a planetary phenomenon.<sup>13</sup>

Fry, however, seeks to move beyond conventional analysis of global capitalism that would simply map new webs of exchange laid upon those of previous Empires out of a network of world cities. He suggests that urbocentrism is being "displaced by the emergent even more aggressive condition of hyperurbanism [,] ... a newly invigorated and massively increased proliferation of the power of the urban beyond the space of the city." In Fry's view, this proliferation ensures that the urban is not only "no longer bonded to the fabric of the city" but is launched on a trajectory that sees it destined to bound the human universe.<sup>14</sup>

One can question here whether urban power was ever as tightly bonded to the fabric of the city as Fry's use of the idea of hyperurbanism might imply. As William Cronon has well-demonstrated with the case of Chicago and its Western frontiers, modern cities (and presumably many pre-modern cities) have from the beginning developed in complex relation with hinterlands that have been much more extensive across a range of inter-linked spatial scales than conventionally assumed.<sup>15</sup> Urban industrialism developed in step with the technologisation of agriculture, fishing, forestry, mining, transport, communications and finance that harnessed ever-greater portions of the earth to the commands of the imperial city. Further, such material flows of urbocentric power are thoroughly entangled with semiotic flows of urbocentric power in processes of global ordering ever more spatially indiscrete. While few urban studies scholars may share the ontological cast of Fry's argument, many have observed with him the pervasiveness of urban power in 'non-urban' space.<sup>16</sup>

With the proviso that it be understood not simply as an "idea," but as a composite of ideas, practices and yearnings co-evolving

in historical worlds, the urban has indeed become a powerful designer of “psychologies, cultural dispositions and life-worlds that are *beyond* its visible boundaries.”<sup>17</sup> While I remain unsure about the extent to which hyperurbanism names a distinctly new phase in the growth of late-modern urbocentric power, I agree with Fry that the dominant design of power he so resonantly calls rational ‘defuturing’ finds its paradigmatic embodiment in the late-modern hegemony of the city.<sup>18</sup> The unsustaining *status quo* objectified in discourse and practice and now inscribing its hallmark on all ecological and cultural phenomena, including ecomodernist phenomena such as ‘sustainable development’, is unquestionably urbocentric.<sup>19</sup> The trinity of cosmopolis, metropolis and technopolis, to adopt the lexicon suggested by Albert Borgmann, extend each other in the performance of a dream of transcendence in which every particle of earth and sky is available to be mobilised as mere means in a quest for human-perfected reality.<sup>20</sup> Cosmopolis, the technological ideal of the city, reaches outwards to subsume thought. Metropolis, the technological form of the city, reaches outwards to subsume practice. Technopolis, the technological ontology of the city, reaches outwards to subsume reality.

In these conditions it is inevitable that contemporary discourse about the city’s cultural-natural Others – ‘Eden’, ‘Arcadia’, ‘tribe’, ‘farm’, ‘village’, ‘frontier’, ‘bush’, ‘wilderness’ and the rest – is, as Fry observes, thoroughly urbocentric in its heritage and intent. The non-urban land/sea/skyscapes to which such discourse gestures serve urban desire above and before all else. The relationship of urbocentric power to the non-urban objects of its affection conforms to Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno’s description of the “indefatigable self-destructiveness” of technological enlightenment wherein humanity pays “for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power.”<sup>21</sup>

Now that the entire earth has been fed into the blades of the technospheric blender we should not be surprised that simulacra of the ‘natural’ reproduce almost uncontrollably, colonising every social habitat and growing almost translucent with the intensity of the semiotics of purity they are required to conduct.<sup>22</sup> Consider, for instance, Yi-Fu Tuan’s observation in *Topophilia* that, as a “state of mind, true wilderness exists only in the great sprawling cities.”<sup>23</sup> Tuan is referring here most particularly to the cities of North America and, without doubt, urbanisation has been an especially paradoxical phenomenon in the English-speaking world. The question of whether it is thereby a more unsustainable phenomenon than in other modern urban cultures, as could be inferred from Augustin Berque’s *The Idea of Disurbanity*, is one I touch on in concluding.<sup>24</sup> First, however, I narrate something of the Anglocentric history of the modern suburb. This account is necessarily schematic, and the suburb only one of several sites of comprehensive analysis of urbocentrism that ought to be

explored. It nonetheless establishes a revealing point of focus for this discussion by bringing into view something of the historical ambivalence and contradiction lodged within the power of the urban to design the present.

### Sub-Urban Worlds

Over the last two and a half centuries, the Old and especially the New lands of the English-speaking 'world' have been the setting for an unprecedented form, not to mention an unprecedented scale, of city. Unfortunately, the novelty of this urban form has been conveyed poorly through the grafting of the pejorative medieval word 'suburban' onto a profoundly new social reality.<sup>25</sup> This adjective now clumsily conveys a heavy and ill-fitted burden of aesthetic, moral and political meaning. Such meaning confounds any simple distinction between ideals and practices; it exists in a complex relation to the noun 'suburb' that, in turn, is required to encompass a growing socio-economic and physical diversity of landscapes.<sup>26</sup> To limit at least some scope for semantic confusion, I introduce the figure of the 'suburban city.' This device, while imperfect, resists simplistic distinctions between ideals and practices, and between suburb and city, and draws attention to what is unprecedented about the urban form that has gained fullest expression in the frontiers of North America and Australasia.

The suburban city has been produced out the dialectical play of techno-economic urbocentrism and anti-urban cultural desire.<sup>27</sup> The former was generated predominantly through the trajectories of (mercantile, industrial and now corporate) capitalism, (bureaucratic and military) imperialism, (Enlightenment) rationalism and (institutionalised) nationalism. The latter grew out of pragmatic, political, religious and aesthetic disquiet about the growth of the centripetal forces of the modern city.

Four interrelated 19<sup>th</sup> century manifestations of anti-urbanism were particularly important in establishing the design solution that is the suburban city.<sup>28</sup>

First, and in the context of appalling urban environmental crises arising from early-industrialisation (not to mention memories of pre-modern urban crises of fire, famine and plague), emerging *sanitarian* doctrines of public health juxtaposed the health-giving qualities of the country with the miasmas of the city. In such discourse, the suburb inevitably took on the form of a "safe-haven from the dirt and disease of the city's over-crowded courts and alleys."<sup>29</sup>

Second, the weakening authority of *class structures* based on birthright saw the vigorous social mixing produced in industrial cities generate increasing political tension. In the social pressures that resulted, the mechanism of physical segregation offered by the suburb quickly became important in the emergence of new capitalist patterns of social stratification.

Third, some *Protestant* traditions, and especially evangelicalism, participated in the upheavals of political secularisation by representing the chaste ‘Home’ as the spiritual centre of modern life. Drawing upon biblical stories of urban evil, Protestant morality imbued women, children and rustic life with Edenic innocence vulnerable to corruption by the venal city. Men, lacking this spiritual innocence and its attendant fallibility, were free to pursue moral advance through material improvement in the service of God’s dominion. Beginning in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, more and more of England’s swelling (male) population of urban merchants began to draw from the power the city afforded them to build a ‘suburban Eden’ in which to receive daily spiritual replenishment (administered by their wives) and ‘protect’ the virtue of their families (the line between protection and imprisonment being, let us not forget, wafer thin).<sup>30</sup>

Fourth, *romanticism* renewed classical pastoral themes in light of modern technological excess, while at the same time reinforcing the Cartesian axiom that (masculine) culture and (feminine) nature – city and country – occupied mutually exclusive orders of reality. The aesthetic of the picturesque that informed romanticism idealised passive enjoyment of natural scenery. The ideal of nature-as-view in turn required that landscapes be styled, often via intensive technological intervention, as rounded, flowing, soft and (ironically) free of the obvious intrusions of technology or city. Placed alongside urbocentric imperatives, aesthetic yearning for “the look of nature”<sup>31</sup> impelled experiments in the marriage of city and country that helped found the suburban city.

Despite Marxist critique and traditions of resistance such as Luddism, 19<sup>th</sup> century expressions of anti-urbanism coming from those social groups most oppressed by the dangers and excesses of the city was largely unable to restrict the growth of urbocentric power.<sup>32</sup> More disturbingly, the anti-modern animus and resultant anti-urban energies of the suburban experiments of the middle classes – the chief architects and chief benefactors of the industrial growth of urban power – greatly stimulated it. *The Communist Manifesto* left us in no doubt that it was the bourgeoisie who “put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations” by subjecting “the country to the rule of the towns,” in the process creating “enormous cities.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, points out Robert Fishman, Marx and Engels overlooked the already then visible signs that in “suburbia the conquering bourgeoisie has chosen to re-create an invented version of the ‘feudal, patriarchal, idyllic’ village environment it was destroying.”<sup>34</sup>

From the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century villa retreats of the bourgeoisie to the garden city movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to the ‘technoburbs’ of the present, an ever greater diversity of social groups have sought to share in the urbocentric power of the technological order while living beyond its reach, and close

to 'God', 'Nature', 'body', 'family' and 'community' in suburban Eden.<sup>35</sup> From its beginnings, the dispassionate modern public realm grew alongside the sentimental modern private realm. In effect providing a pressure-release valve, suburban ideals/practices not only failed to resist the advance of instrumental rationality, they helped chart safe passage for it through precisely those socio-cultural spaces from which such resistance was most likely.

Fishman has suggested that suburban history be read as a phase of "transition between two decentralised eras: the pre-industrial rural era and the post-industrial information society."<sup>36</sup> While instructive, this insight needs to be understood in the context of the simultaneous concentration of power within the technological city and the projection of this power in ways that subordinate the wider earth to the appetites of the technological city.<sup>37</sup> It is within the dialectic of destruction and simulation, of alienation and yearning, of centripetal control and centrifugal desire, that urbcentric power has grown and continues to gather force. To paraphrase Herbert Marcuse, its totalitarian capacities rest with the soporific logic of comfortable unfreedom that permits, indeed, facilitates the illusion but not the practice of dissent.<sup>38</sup>

As a corrective to the excesses of modernisation, then, suburbanisation has always been partially self-defeating. It has intensified precisely those repellant social forces from which it was designed to provide escape. It is with the rise of "the suburban-industrial complex" in the shadows of a military-industrial complex grown vast by the World Wars, however, that this defeat threatens completion.<sup>39</sup> Through the post-war boom, the enframing of suburban practices by modern technology was greatly extended while suburban ideals became ever more tangled within dreams of technological transcendence. Earlier quasi-rural suburban traditions of resilience, sufficiency, independence and localism, traditions particularly strong in Australian suburbs, were undermined.<sup>40</sup>

The private home was claimed, first and foremost, as a site of consumption and not of production. Television claimed Home's hearth. Cars claimed public space. Electricity claimed the work of the body. 'Gods' lined up alongside a growing multitude of 'consumer choices'. At the same time, industry, services and employment decentralised, re-inventing suburbs as spaces of public production and the suburban city as decentred or multicentred and capable of being smeared over an ever-greater range. From organochlorine residues in backyard sandpits to denuded landscapes where engines sing louder than any bird to garden plants that 'invade' the bush to weather patterns that threaten violent retribution, the imagined benign nature of suburbia has seemed in recent decades to grow unreliable, even malevolent. Many subdivisions on the edge of the self-homogenising city last just long enough for the children within them to develop lasting affection for their local



forest, creek or swamp and to be traumatised by the arrival of the next wave of bulldozers.

The fall from suburban Eden is an important element in the post-war processes through which wilderness shed its older connotations of risk, decay and disorder to become virginal, sacrosanct and bordered in the environmental imagination of many 'children of the suburban city'. As such, cities have become less able to provide their promised mechanism of escape from the risks of technology; wilderness has grown in power as an imaginative and physical mechanism of escape.

A neo-suburban bargain is being made with technologies such as the camera, television, airplane, helicopter and the car that promise escape from the technological order into 'the wild': especially the car. For even as it crushes life out of the suburban city, the car promises to place wilderness, which is to say, road's end – postwar wilderness preservation movements being organised, after all, more by the desire to keep cars out of nature than they have by ecological criteria<sup>41</sup> – within easy weekend reach. Take, for example, the postwar literature of environmental philosophy that has been dominated by the inhabitants of suburban cities. This literature has been preoccupied with the moral claims of 'wild' nature. The city rarely makes an appearance, and then mostly as a source of examples of environmental disvalue. Corresponding with the argument above, the several recent efforts to overcome this 'blind spot' and to articulate an urban environmental ethics have thus far been intensely anti-suburban.<sup>42</sup>

Understanding the paradox at work within urbocentric power we can begin make sense of the anaesthetic freedoms that promise to relieve beneficiaries of the defuturing *status quo* from the awareness, but not from the pathology, of their pain. Within any number of rubrics, such as environmentalism, localism, holism, (Old and New Age) spiritualism and post-materialism, they (we) are free to give expression to longing for Edenic refuge. Within the pre-determinations of real-estate markets, there are many ways in which to evacuate the post-war suburb. We can head (whether in chic four-wheel drives or rustic Combi vans) for the holiday homes, hobby farms, bush blocks, eco-villages, sea-change hamlets and 'rurubs' (rural subdivisions of 'downshifters', retirees and those whose poverty forced them to flee the city) that make up the new suburban frontiers we still myopically call 'the country'.

Or we can evacuate the banality of the post-war suburb in the other direction, establishing gated vertical communities in the cosmopolitan core(s) of the city. Yet even here the demands for capacious private space, appliance-saturation, ephemeral and physical modes of escape (to virtual/bodily refuge in the wild/rural/primitive) and expansive views over and beyond the city – views available at the vertical fringes of the city, fringes that, like their

horizontal counterparts, never cease growing – resonate with suburban ambivalence toward the city.<sup>43</sup> Truly, where and what on the earth does not now carry a burden of suburban need?

### **Navigating the Sub-Urban Earth**

What, then, might constitute an authentic response to the incessant growth and global reach of urbocentric power? Is such authenticity in fact possible any longer? Does the dialectical composition of this power prefigure the possibility of its transformation? Can we, to put it in the terms outlined above, rehabilitate suburban cities as agents of the craft of sustenance?

Confronted with the difficulty of opening thinking to these questions, we might be tempted to follow the lead of many urban sustainability professionals and reduce the history of urbocentric design to the bludgeoning, non-dialectical force of technological determinism. To do so, however, we must be prepared to translate our political, moral and ontological discomfit into the technobabble of social engineering in which sustainability begins and ends with the ecoefficient blueprint and its requisite techniques of secure-ability. We might then be asked to place our faith, as do so many of these professionals, in conveniently linear and quantifiable design goals such as urban consolidation, mixed land-use planning, green zoning, public transport planning and the rest.<sup>44</sup> In so doing we reap the benefit of finding conveniently objectifiable scapegoats for our late-modern dis-ease, suburban sprawl chief amongst them. We can embrace, without qualms, the illusion that the technology of new-urbanism or new-ruralism holds within it, once again, Utopia. And we can share unblushingly in laments on suburban life such as this from Robert Riddell in his recent *Sustainable Urban Planning*:

Given a plot-house-car lifestyle structure as dominant, plot-holding, home-owning, appliance-operating and car-running concerns take over suburban lives, pattern their consumption and condition their thinking. The living-consuming-thinking pattern which has evolved is defined by child needs (pap food), child pleasure (low-gratification television), and child consumerism (plaything cars and dinky houses).<sup>45</sup>

Yet, despite empathising with much of the critique that informs this literature, and not wishing to reject out of hand its design strategies, I cannot collude in such patronising dismissals of the complex cultural designs embodied in suburban cities over more than two centuries and within which I and my family and friends have played out most of our lives. I am unable to reconcile the task of casting (and then overriding?) the interests of the great majority of my own (Australian) political community as

immature with my understanding of ‘sustainability’ as a process of actively democratic cultural change. Nor, for that matter, can I reconcile it with the fine-textures of everyday experience. More broadly, the adjective ‘suburban’ is generally understood in this critique too narrowly to shed light on the paradigmatic status of defuturing; dynamics that manifest in farmland, apartment complexes, eco-tourist lodges, urban villages and the forest protest camps of environmentalists as much as they do in the suburban metropolis.

Ecomodernist agendas will almost certainly produce some welcome improvements in urban ecological efficiencies as they seek to sustain urbocentric power. Inevitably, however, empirical debate will, indeed, has already begun to, complicate simplistic claims that would correlate rising urban population densities with resource-use efficiencies, reduced ecological impacts and socio-economic equalities. In the process, it will leave attempts to design the ‘sustainable city’ more disoriented than ever.<sup>46</sup>

I thus return to stand with Fry in affirming that the possibility of our present is not the determination of sustainable design but rather its prefiguration through undesigning the regime of unsustainability. I find it hard, however, to see how and where such prefiguration is to be made manifest if we follow Fry in concluding that the power of ‘the urban’ to define all Others means that,

any ‘organic’ attachment to any authentic ground, any actual referent, has been broken....

Once the being of the world and the world of beings became a ‘standing reserve’ there was no turning back – the mirror was shattered. All we can see is a simulacrum of what once was, and its fragments. There is no choice but to manage the fragments, give them new value and care for them, as they are all we have left.<sup>47</sup>

Leaving aside Fry’s choice of such leaky ideas as ‘management’ and ‘value’ as vessels with which to hold the modest possibility of caring for un-earthed fragments of truth, I do not see the tragic endangering of authenticity in late-modern worlds as resulting from any ordained inevitability. The past, present and future of late-modern worlds are, of course, shaped by the designs carried forward in technology and language that move through them. Designs that, in the process, inflect and are inflected by cultural, ecological and cosmological possibility in ways never fully predictable. But such power of designation does not come from any political dimension beyond historically constituted worlds. And in these necessarily, continually reconstituted worlds, the designs of humans are thoroughly enmeshed with the designs arising from out of their more-than-human reality.<sup>48</sup>

One does not need to invoke “the being of the world” to conclude with Fry that “hyperurbanism may well now be a ‘fact of life’.”<sup>49</sup> More to the point, his conviction that late-modern humanity has irrevocably broken away from its originating ground seems at odds with the conventional, almost electoral, cast of his call to his readers to respond to the fact of ‘hyperurbanism’ with “critical and constructive engagement” in establishing “a politics able to create political will to confront the hard questions and tough problems that are not being confronted.”<sup>50</sup> How, after all, is “political will and muscle at all levels of government and in every domain of cultural politics” to be generated out of the assumption that urbocentric power “transcends social, economic and cultural differences between urban dwellers”?<sup>51</sup> Equally, while the ‘Others’ of modern technology are undeniably oppressed and damaged, I am not ready to declare them all “silent or silenced ... fading positions without classifiable identity.”<sup>52</sup> Surely, within these differences and transgressive identities, these “shadow lines,” are to be found the fissures, convolutions and cavities in urbocentric power within which the prefiguration of the craft of sustenance is possible?<sup>53</sup>

Fry is committed to dialectical analysis of the possibility of ‘the Sustainment’ wherein “Sustainment means nothing without grasping its unbreakable bond to unsustainment, which is its very ground.”<sup>54</sup> He introduces the ecological-technological trajectories of urban heat islanding and climate change to underscore the vulnerability that shadows the monolithic, defuturing city as a result of its disregard for “the biophysical integrity of the standing reserve.”<sup>55</sup> Yet he seems reluctant to conclude, as I want to do, that urbocentric power necessarily increases the possibility of its (sustainable) subversion as it increases the likelihood its (unsustainable) hegemony. Fry does help us to understand that creation and destruction cannot be unbound. Nonetheless, his representation of an “epochal shift that ‘the Sustainment’ names” as the simultaneous creation of that which sustains and the “destruction of that which destroys” is incomplete.<sup>56</sup> Sustainability and unsustainability cannot be unbound and, thus, the creation of that which sustains cannot be finally separated – secured by design as safe – from the creation of that which destroys. Conversely, the destruction of that which destroys cannot be finally separated from the destruction of that which creates.

In the end, the inclination toward reification and homogenisation inherent in the characterisation of “the normative agency of the urban”<sup>57</sup> masks too much that is equivocal, ambivalent and ironical in late-modern lifeworlds. But are we, then, to indulge in the playful celebration of late-modern urban subjectivities and performativities currently so evident within the poststructuralist discourses of cultural studies, cultural geography, sociology and

philosophy?<sup>58</sup> Shall we pursue a Latourian disaggregation of meta-agencies such as ‘the urban’ so as to narrate the radical openness of our pluriverse? Shall we conclude with Donna Haraway that the body-heat of the canine companion warming our body can also warm and lift our self-understanding from its present anchorage in anthropocentric humanism? Perhaps – and the work of these two scholars does offers fine examples of politically serious epistemological play – but not through what Anne-Marie Willis rightly observes as the easy, all-too-easy, “failure of nerve” that takes “individualised subjective experiences” to occupy the same order of cultural possibility as “the discursive practice of instrumentalism,” inappropriately pitting an “ontology of consuming against one of designing.”<sup>59</sup> It is easy for poststructuralist scholars to ignore the world-building and world-revealing structures encoded within technological practice. It is easy to remain unreflective about the possibility that theory has become simply another dimension of consumer choice, as it is to ignore the ways in which practice orients theory. It is easy, finally, to compose sophisticated and impressive simulacra, but simulacra nonetheless, of alternative social realities.

Yet to under-emphasise the possibilities that remain open to us for negotiating, with deliberate care, the extreme design power of late-modern technology is also unhelpful. While partially, perhaps even substantially, true, it is far from absolutely true that, in the suburban city, rain is or must be encountered as a nuisance or that clothing is or must be encountered in the eddies of fashion, to echo two of Fry’s examples. To assert as do Willis and Fry that “the culture of suburbia has extinguished the desire for more self-reliant lifestyles” is to stretch perceptive critique towards exaggeration.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, diverse suburban worlds are united, as are diverse cosmopolitan and provincial worlds, in their late-modern subordination to the order of rational defuturing. But the differences between them are not thus extinguished, including the different possibilities they present for nurturing new practices of self-reliance, conviviality and solidarity. Equally, the subordination of diverse suburban ecologies is profound but not absolute. What Willis and Fry see as “landscaped environmental wastelands” in the suburbs may hold within them unseen, because unlooked for, evidence of unprecedented and unheralded examples of more-than-human resilience and design.<sup>61</sup> Their readers could be forgiven for thinking that Willis and Fry assume that the technological order has achieved its explicit, one-dimensional (non-dialectical and therefore unattainable) goal of absolute control and predictability. Such an assumption has about it the air of self-fulfilling prophecy. This may explain why Willis and Fry seem to underplay the significance of the many experiments in sustainable living now underway in suburban cities as “the voluntary actions of a handful of well-meaning aberrant individuals.”<sup>62</sup>

To view the effervescent ‘water-wise’ posters prepared by 6 year olds at my local suburban primary school or to see the pleasure with which the parents of these children welcomed the unexpected rain that soaked them and, thankfully, the seedlings of ‘local’ species they were planting in public land, is to see the fragile beginnings of a transition that needs careful tending. Urbocentrism names an immense concentration of ontological and technological power whose central logic is to retain and increase its power. Experiments in its subversion must for some time yet be, necessarily, precarious, tentative, endangered and scattered. But they are not thereby necessarily trivial. On the contrary, the very ubiquity of the technological order that endangers them can on occasion throw them into the sharpest relief, allowing new significance to flow into features of social life previously experienced as insignificant or unremarkable.

A home-grown meal, the deliberate absence of a ubiquitous device, a now-rare bird nesting in a grassy suburban back yard, an act of unrestrained economic generosity: all set their wider world vibrating with the possibility of renegotiation. These occasions are typically fleeting and the possibilities they hint at demand courageous, deliberate and sustained political effort if they are to be kept open, let alone widened. Yet there are a great many such efforts, such experimental designs in the experience of sustenance, currently underway. Experiments with which I am familiar in Australia’s suburban cities – to render a potentially long list idiosyncratically short – include those of permaculture/organic agriculture; urban ecological rehabilitation; home-birthing/dying; integrated physical and mental health practices; community housing, parenting and schooling; place-bound architecture and art; and local-scale technologies, economies and democracies. Although routinely flawed and misshapen by urbocentric power, these manifestations of counter-modern imagination do not deserve to be dismissed as the “pragmatic or deflectory preoccupations” of the “sheltered workshop.”<sup>63</sup> This is not to deny that they must struggle continuously to free themselves from the dualism of ‘public’ and ‘private’ action in the limited forms of community associations, non-profit businesses, local governance, voluntary service, and the rest. All are at least partly claimed by the pervasive logic of anaesthetic freedom that masks our shared pain at our inability to design our shared world with the proliferation of choice about how to consume it. All are permanently imperilled. All have the capacity to, and often do, only further reinforce what they seek to undermine. Often they just fail on their own terms and are lost.

But such difficulty and struggle are also precisely what enables these and other experiments with our placement in an urbocentric universe to bring its boundaries into view. It is the fact that many seek out uncomfortable freedoms in an order of

comfortable unfreedoms that gives such attempts the potentiality of truth as they find ways to transcribe fragments of the forever-elloquent reality that lies obscured beyond the streetlights of technological control.

### Notes

1. Juvenal (Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis) *The Satires of Juvenal* trans. R. Humphries, Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1958, Satire III, 35.
2. Bruno Latour *We Have Never Been Modern* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
3. See Latour, 'Morality and Technology: The End of the Means' trans. C. Venn *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19, nos 5–6 2002, 247–260, 255. For a definition of 'pluriverse' see the glossary of his *Politics of Nature: How to bring the sciences into democracy* Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2004.
4. Tony Fry's polite disappointment with Latour's *Politics of Nature* in *Design Philosophy Papers* #02/2004 is instructive as to the extent of this difference.
5. Fry takes up the challenge articulated by postwar Martin Heidegger. Heidegger named this patterning metaphysics. In his genealogy of Western truthlessness, metaphysics, the ontological will-to-explain gaining early expression with Plato, draws language and technology into its orbit, denying them their authentic role in the witness of reality and setting them to the task of wrapping humanity in worlds built of mirrors. See Heidegger *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* trans. and ed. W. Lovitt New York: Harper & Row, 1977 & *The Principle of Reason* trans. R. Lilly Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.
6. I draw here upon the explanation of "ontological design" provided by Fry's collaborator Anne-Marie Willis in 'Ontological Designing' paper presented to *Design Cultures: Conference of the European Academy of Design* Sheffield Hallam University, 1999, available [www.teamdes.com.au/pdf\\_files/Ontolog%20Design.pdf](http://www.teamdes.com.au/pdf_files/Ontolog%20Design.pdf). There is nothing unprecedented about such transfer of design agency fluidly in time and space between human and non-human entities including technologies. To be human is to be formed within and through conceived, gestated and birthed by historical worlds that are themselves thoroughly designed by cultural, ecological and cosmological realities and, simultaneously, are thoroughly un/re/designing of these realities. To be human is to enter into these dynamics of ontological design with consciousness, intentionality and will. In modern technology, however, humanity slips into unconsciousness, participating in ontological design without self-awareness or memory of its willful intentions.

7. Tony Fry 'From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism' *Design Philosophy Papers* this issue. Page numbers from a hard-copy draft August, 2004.
8. See Lewis Mumford's history of the megamachine those vast, tightly coordinated, single-minded human collectives resulting from the engineering of social relations from its ancient forms in the East to its re-incarnation in modern Europe in *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* Volume I & *The Pentagon of Power* Volume II London: Secker & Warburg, 1967, 1970. Mumford observes that while the ancient city "favoured the many-tongued human dialogue against the tongue-tying monologue" of the megamachine, the modern city becomes the archetype of megamachine. *Technics and Human Development*, 231.
9. Fry *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism*, 4.
10. Albert Borgmann 'Cosmopolitanism and Provincialism: On Heidegger's errors and insights' *Philosophy Today* 36, no. 2 1992: 131–145, 139.
11. Manuel Castells *The Information Age – Economy, Society and Culture: The Rise of the Network Society* Volume I, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000; Peter Hall *Cities in Civilization: Culture, innovation, and urban order* London: Phoenix, 1998; Mumford *The Myth of the Machine*, Vols I & II.
12. The epistemologies and technologies of the Occident and those of the Orient have long inflected each other. See Augustin Berque, 'The Idea of Disurbanity' *Design Philosophy Papers: Collection One* e. A-M Willis Ravensbourne, Australia: Team D/E/S Publications, 2004, 22–32, originally published in *Design Philosophy Papers*, #1/2003.
13. I do not wish to imply here that there is anything like a unitary, directional or transcultural 'evolution' of technology that finds its apotheosis in globalised capitalism. While I accept that technology emerges out of the ecological conditions of human being, and thus that human technology is at some point continuous with the technological capacities of many other beings, I do not accept – as many historians of technology are inclined to do: see George Basalla, *The Evolution of Technology* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 – that there are 'laws' of technological development that transcend cultural specificities.
14. Fry *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism*, 1, 5.
15. William Cronon *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* New York & London: W.W.Norton & Company, 1991.
16. In *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism* Fry observes overlap between his notion of hyperurbanism and Castell's influential analysis of 'network society'. He claims that Castell restricts the agency of urban flows to information technologies thereby failing to properly observe the emerging



hyperurban order. I find, however, Castell's description of an 'information technology paradigm' adequate to encompass the material-semiotic flows Fry wishes to include in his notion of the hyperurban. Furthermore, Castells does recognise that "the space of flows and timeless time," the space of 'the urban', does fracture, subordinate and relocate "the multiple space of places," the space of the lifeworld, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 509. Similarly, recent sociological and geographical analysis provides support for the notion of a 'meta-urban ecology'. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, for instance, observe "the city has no completeness, no centre, no fixed parts. Instead it is an amalgam of often disjointed processes and social heterogeneity, a place of near and far connections, a concatenation of rhythms; always edging in new directions". *Cities: Reimagining the urban* Cambridge: Polity, 2002, 8. For recent examples of research by urban geographers analysing second-tier i.e., non-'world' cities and rural areas in the context of the global reach of urbocentric power see Eugene McCann, 'Urban Political Economy Beyond the 'Global City'' *Urban Studies* 41, no. 12 2004: 2315–2333 & Eric Thompson, 'Rural Villages as Socially Urban Spaces in Malaysia' *Urban Studies* 41, no. 12 2004: 2357–2376.

17. Fry *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism*, 1
18. Fry 'The Sustainment and its Dialectic' *Design Philosophy Papers: Collection One* ed. A-M Willis Ravensbourne, Australia, Team D/E/S Publications, 2004, 33–45, 44. Originally published as 'The Voice of Sustainment' & 'The Dialectic of Sustainment' *Design Philosophy Papers*, #1 & 5/2003.
19. A claim developed in Aidan Davison *Technology and the Contested Meanings of Sustainability* Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 11–89.
20. For example, David Noble *The Religion of Technology* Middlesex: Penguin, 1996 & Albert Borgmann *Holding on to Reality: the nature of information at the turn of the millennium* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
21. Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming New York: Continuum, 1972, xi, 9.
22. I discuss this paradox in 'Rapt in Technology' *Design Philosophy Papers: Collection One* ed A-M Willis Ravensbourne, Australia: Team D/E/S Publications, 2004, 48–56, originally published in *Design Philosophy Papers* #4/2003.
23. Yi-Fu Tuan *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* Englewood Cliffs, CA: Prentice-Hall, 1974, 112.
24. Berque suggests that historical predicates from both 'East' and 'West' "have converged into the paradigm of the American

- suburb. These predicates make our world. They motivate modern disurbanity.” *The Idea of Disurbanity*, 25.
25. *Ibid.*, 6. Contemporary anti-suburbanism, including that of environmentalists, is firmly but often unreflectively lodged with traditions of anti-suburbanism, especially those deriving from aesthetic critique, almost as old as that of modern suburbs themselves. Alan Gilbert, ‘The Roots of Anti-Suburbanism in Australia’ in S. L. Goldberg and F. B. Smith eds *Australian Cultural History* Cambridge & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 33–49; Brett Hawkins and Stephen Percy ‘On Anti-Suburban Orthodoxy’ *Social Science Quarterly*, 72, no. 3 1991, 478–490.
  26. Such landscapes, often although not always predominated by detached housing, may lie beyond urban centres or may indeed be alternatives to such centres. Either way, they are integral to the functioning of the urban whole. While suburbs continue to be criticised on the basis of the separation of home and work they institute, contemporary suburbs are now the dominant sites of production and employment in many cities. The demographic complexity of American suburbs is evident in Bruce Katz, B. and Robert Lang *Redefining Urban and Suburban America: Evidence from census 2000* Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003. For discussion of the Australian case see Bill Randolph ‘The changing Australian City: an overview and research agenda’ & ‘Renewing the Middle City: planning for stressed suburbs’ *Urban Frontiers Program*, Issues Papers No. 16, Dec. 2003 & No. 15, Feb. 2004, University of Western Sydney.
  27. Two of the best studies of the co-evolution of urbanisation and anti-urbanism, rationalism and romanticism, in English literature are Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the pastoral ideal in America* London, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press and Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* London: Chatto & Windus, 1973. Good histories of suburbia can be found in Graeme Davison *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978; Fishman *Bourgeois Utopias*; Kenneth Jackson *Crabgrass Frontier: the subUrbanisation of the United States* New York & Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985 & Dolores Hayden *Building Suburbia: Green fields and urban growth 1820-2000* New York: Pantheon Books, 2003.
  28. This schema is an elaboration of that provided by Graeme Davison in ‘Australia – the First Suburban Nation’ *Journal of Urban History*, 22, no. 1 1995: 40–74 & ‘The Great Australian Sprawl’ *Historic Environment*, 13, no. 1 1997, 10–17. See also Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*.
  29. Graeme Davison *The Great Australian Sprawl*, 12.

30. In addition to the histories cited ff. 29, see Lenore Davidoff, Jean L'Esperance and Howard Newby 'Landscape with Figures: home and community in English society' in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley eds *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976, 139–175.
31. Berque *The Idea of Disurbanity*, 25
32. Many of Britain's large number of rural dispossessed, crammed into the urban slums of its early-industrialism, became the voluntary and involuntary settlers of the New Worlds. In these new environments, a great many of the working class embraced and transformed the suburban experiments of the bourgeoisie as their own as they combated urban imperatives with their own experience of urban injustice and their lost rural origins. For the Australian case see Davison, *Australia – the first suburban nation*. For that of North America see Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*.
33. Karl Marx and Friederich Engels *The Communist Manifesto* trans. S. Moore, intro. A. J. P. Taylor Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967[1888], 82, 84.
34. Fishman *Bourgeois Utopias*, 71.
35. Technoburb is Fishman's term. The influence of picturesque ideals of nature in suburban design can be found, for instance, in the publications and designs of landscape gardener John Claudius Loudon of the mid-1800s, and the influential town planning philosophy of Ebenezer Howard, founder of the garden city movement during the late 1800s and early-1900s. Davidoff et al *Landscape with Figures*; Fishman *Bourgeois Utopias*.
36. Robert Fishman *Bourgeois Utopias: The rise and fall of suburbia* New York: Basic Books, 1987, 207.
37. Fishman *Bourgeois Utopias*, 207.
38. Herbert Marcuse *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964.
39. Adam Rome offers an excellent description of the suburban-industrial complex in *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: suburban sprawl and the rise of American environmentalism* Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Samuel Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: environmental politics in the United States, 1955-1985* Cambridge, New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1987 documents the role of the loss of suburban innocence in the formation of postwar environmental politics.
40. Patrick Mullins 'Theoretical Perspectives on Australian Urbanisation: I. Material components in the reproduction of Australian labour power' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 17, no.1 1981, 65–76. This is not to suggest that Australian and North American suburbs weren't vast and

- pervaded by centralised technosystems well before the coming of the car. The first Australian suburban boom, for example, took place during the 1880s and saw, by its end, Sydney and Melbourne's populations of 400 and 473 thousand spread over 96 and 164 thousand acres, respectively. Davison *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne*; John McCarty 'Australian Capital Cities in the Nineteenth Century' in C. B. Schedvin and J. W. McCarty eds *Urbanisation in Australia: The nineteenth century* Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1974, 9–39.
41. See Paul Sutter *Driven Wild: How the fight against automobiles launched the modern wilderness movement* Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2002.
  42. For example, Andrew Light's 'The Urban Blind Spot in Environmental Ethics' *Environmental Politics*, 10, no. 1 2001: 7–35 and 'Urban Environmental Citizenship' *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 34 no. 1 2001: 44–63. See also Gunn 'Rethinking Communities: Environmental Ethics in an Urbanised World' *Environmental Ethics*, 20, no. 4 1998: 341–60; Roger King 'Towards an Ethics of the Domesticated Environment' *Philosophy and Geography*, 6, no. 1 2003: 3–14. A welcome, if overly tentative, attempt to draw attention to the anti-suburbanism inherent in this literature can be found in Robert Kirkman's 'Reasons to Dwell on if not necessarily in the Suburbs' *Environmental Ethics*, 26, no. 2 2004: 77–95.
  43. For the Australian context see Ian Burnley and Patrick Murphy *Sea Change: Movement from Metropolitan to Arcadian Australia* Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004 & Bernard Salt *The Big Shift: Welcome to the third Australian culture* Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2001. The 'exurban' population has been the fastest growing in the USA for some time and is soon set to exceed that of 'urban', 'suburban' and 'rural' areas. See Katz and Lang *Redefining Urban and Suburban America*.
  44. For example, Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck *Suburban Nation: The rise of sprawl and the decline of the American dream* New York: North Point Press, 2000; Robert Riddell *Sustainable Urban Planning: tipping the balance* Malden, MA, Oxford, Melbourne: Blackwell, 2004.
  45. Riddell *Sustainable Urban Planning*, 195.
  46. For an overview of this debate see Mike Jenks, Elizabeth Burton and Katie Williams eds. *The Compact City: A sustainable urban form?* London: E & FN Spon, 1996. For more recent and specific debate see Elizabeth Burton, 'The Compact City: just or just compact? A preliminary analysis' *Urban Studies*, 37, no. 11 2000, 1969–2001 & Patrick Troy, Darren Holloway, Stephen Pullen and Raymond Bunker 'Embodied and Operational Energy Consumption in the City' *Urban Policy and Research*, 21, no.1 2003, 9–44.
  47. Fry *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism*, 2.

48. I am grateful here to Anne-Marie Willis for helping me avoid any unwitting representation of the ontological significance of design as the exclusive faculty of humanity.
49. Fry *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism*, 2, 14.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 8, 3.
52. Ibid., 3. I worry, for instance, that this claim might unwittingly advances the forces of neo-colonisation that continue to actively silence most recently through the bureaucratic deployment of genetic testing the many Aboriginal voices of my island home, Tasmania, because official narratives insist that the authentic full-blood native no longer exists.
53. Steve Kinnane's *Shadow Lines* Fremantle, Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2003 provides a powerful description of these transgressive identities in his biography of his indigenous/European family that moves fluidly from the now drowned indigenous country under Lake Argyle to the metropolis of Perth.
54. Fry *The Sustainment and its Dialectic*, 39.
55. Fry *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism*, 14.
56. Fry *The Sustainment and its Dialectic*, 40, 41.
57. Fry *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism*, 5.
58. I have in mind here the emerging discourse of 'culture natures' of which prominent recent examples, in addition to Latour's *Politics of Nature*, include Donna Haraway *The Companion Species Manifesto: dogs, people and significant otherness* Chicago, ILL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003; Stephan Harrison, Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift eds *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of nature and culture* London: Reaktion Books, 2004; Bronislaw Szerszynski, Wallace Heim and Claire Waterton eds *Nature Performed: Environment, culture and performance* Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell/The Sociological Review, 2003.
59. Anne-Marie Willis 'Chimeral Cities: book review' *Design Philosophy Papers* #4/2003. I do not, however, by any means consider that all 'culture nature' theorists, and especially those cited above, in 58, display this failure of nerve, although this must be the topic for another forum.
60. Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry 'Better Homes and Gardens' *Australian Financial Review: Review*, 19 December, 2003.
61. Ibid. Tim Low is one of the first Australian biologists to take this idea seriously and to document examples of wild ecological processes inside the technological citadel, in such spaces as sewerage works and contaminated sites. *The New Nature: Winners and losers in wild Australia* Camberwell, Vic: Penguin Books Australia, 2002.
62. Ibid.
63. Fry *From Urbocentrism to Hyperurbanism*, 14.