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# Dead Institution Walking

## The University, Crisis, Design and Remaking (Hot Debate)

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Ken Friedman has very usefully opened up an important topic for consideration, but what follows will only tangentially engage his account, because it will proceed from quite a different starting point. Unabashed, this essay is an invitation into thinking university education, including design education, otherwise. As such it aims to go beyond what Bill Readings called 'dwelling in the ruins' of the institution.<sup>2</sup> It strives to start thinking how to acquire sufficient intellectual resources and materials from the rubble of the ruins to start building a new structure. Metaphorically, it is also willing to acknowledge that some unsafe structures will also require careful demolition – this again so materials can be recovered.

### **A Trace of the Crisis of the University: A Brief Account**

The idea that university education is in a state of crisis has been around for a long time. The condition is evoked in language that extends from the restrained to the

hysterical. More significantly, the nature of this crisis is by no means consensual.

The seeds of crisis were sown in the very formation of the modern university as we know it. Crisis as destiny arrived out of the dashed hopes of German Romantics in the form of the idea of the university promoted by von Humboldt, Scheiermacher, Fichte and Schelling. Their dream was to unify the institution by a single philosophical foundation that bonded culture, knowledge and science as 'an ideal life-form'. Friedrich Nietzsche condemned German higher education as so characterised, and as underscored by *Bildung* defined by him as "directing taste *against* the exception for the good of the mediocre".<sup>3</sup> As the 19th century unfolded idealism was displaced by pragmatism, as the institution was appropriated by the practical agenda of American culture and economy. In retrospect it is clear that at this moment the instrumentalisation of knowledge was put on a globalising path and began to converge with technological hegemony. By the 1920s it was beginning to become apparent to insightful thinkers that calculation was in the saddle and that metaphysics was *en route* to fuse with technology.

In Europe, notwithstanding the horror of the First World War, attachment to the humanist project lingered. For instance, the concept of the university as a community of kindred spirits in search of enlightenment found expression in Karl Jaspers' attempts to breath life back into the old idea (via his book *The Idea of The University* of 1923). However, it was the concern with technology, notwithstanding criticism coming from thinkers of the left and right, that was to set the tenor of the institution's 'development'. It was perhaps Martin Heidegger who articulated the most rigorous critique of this institutional trajectory, not least in his infamous Rectorial Address of 1933.<sup>4</sup> His tainted politics unfortunately obscured the significance of his attempt wgtto position and redirect the threatened university – which he viewed as potentially a theoretically informed and critical mediation between technology becoming knowledge (its turn to metaphysics) and the conditions of existence of the (German) people.

The pre-war idealism of modernists and the modern movement in architecture and design (as it straddled political ideologies and embraced technology) evaporated in the ovens of the holocaust and in the suffering of the camps of the gulag. While memories have faded, and many who experienced the events have now passed away, 'humanity' has still not recovered from this tumultuous moment, nor its genocidal reoccurrences in Africa and Central Europe – it never will. It is against this backdrop that we view the shrunken utopias and narrow pragmatism of the post-war world.

The collectivist dream that historical materialists and other radicals across the globe shared in the 1930s was displaced by the everyday individuated reality of burgeoning consumerism – the

upwardly mobile classes were classes of amnesia. From suburbia to the Berlin Wall, repressive regimes and old elites, along with their values, were overwhelmed not by revolution but by the promises offered by an exploding world of goods and cultural commodities. It is against this backdrop that we can consider the conservative backlash by liberal education to popular culture that built-up from 1950s to the 70s and beyond – a backlash that found its belated symbolic expression in Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987. At the core of this reactionary position is a lament for the loss of the centred, privileged and cultivated subject of the university as a result of the institution opening its doors to 'others' and indignation at the university losing its position of cultural authority as the influence of mass communication media and other expressive forms of popular culture, proliferated. Notwithstanding the momentary political recoil against the status quo by 'counter-culture' movements in 1968, the drift of events was towards a fragmentation of the humanities, decline of the initial intellectual project of the modern university and the ascent of a functional, technocentric and managerial model of the institution which has continued unabated.

A substantial public critique of the modern university, based upon neither attacking the dominant model of its old or new intuitional forms, but a critique based on exposing the degeneration of knowledge to entertainment and the colonising of mind by technology, has just not forcefully arrived – especially at the moment when it was most needed.

The intellectual fragmentation of the university was characterised by Lyotard as the postmodern condition of the breakdown of meta-narratives. It should be remembered that his widely discussed analysis, *The Postmodern Condition*, published first in French in 1979, had the sub-title *A Report on Knowledge* and was the product of a commission from the Conseil des Universities of the government of Quebec.<sup>5</sup> Lyotard was reporting on the modern university, the university of reason, at the very moment it was reaching its terminus. The fact that universities continue to proliferate and student numbers grow does not contradict this assertion. As economic rationalism, globalisation, neo-techno-determinism and managerialism all became the entrenched underpinnings of the dominant world order, the culture of learning and scholarship upon which the Enlightenment tradition was built has become eroded by the arrival of instrumental higher education to teach an ever growing array of professional practices (a development that is acknowledged by Ken Friedman's paper, but not viewed as problematic). Effectively, universities have become training institutions and centres of commercially biased research and development. One has only to monitor the 'situations vacant' columns of the educational press for a while to see just how

significant has been the restructuring of academic employment towards the 'high-end' servicing of the corporate sector and government.

The condition of crisis made apparent by Lyotard was predicated on an overview. It was predated and complimented by a foundational excavation of knowledge that has equally exposed crisis manifest by the loss of status and authority of the master discourses of the university. This is unambiguously clear in core humanities areas like the classics, philosophy, theology, history, literature, geography, but equally evident in the establishment of a firm positivistic grip over soft science disciplines that had a 'qualitative' dimension, like linguistics, anthropology, archaeology, sociology and psychology. The 'foundational excavation of knowledge' referred to grew out of nihilism, became designated as deconstruction and has had Jacques Derrida as its most enduring champion – *Of Grammatology*, published in France in 1967, marking the most significant shift of thinking beyond initial philosophical precursors (most noticeably Martin Heidegger's notion of *destruktion*). For all the attempts to dismiss the agency of deconstruction by its detractors, it has exposed the unquestioned constructivist foundations of thinking upon which the university has stood. In doing this it has revealed the historical nature of the crisis of the university. While we can but agree with Leibnitz's dictum that 'nothing is without reason' (thus all that is non-reason depends on reference to reason as ground) we can also agree that reason arrives through the fabricated and inducted – it is a created and learnt mode of thought. Its origin is thus embedded in a particular historicity rather than being an inherent facticity.

In the company of post-structuralism, the crisis that deconstruction aggravated resulted not from a rigorous questioning of the foundations of thought but rather from a fundamental institutional refusal to question the basis of its thinking. Effectively the university turned away from thinking in its most essential and critical form.

It is possible to replay variants of accounts of the terminal crisis of the university via various voices. We can, for instance register Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the 'devaluation' of academic qualifications, the 'downclassing' of academics and the administrative masking of educational dysfunction by the advancement of operational structures.

Equally, we can acknowledge the contribution of Bill Readings to not only making the ruins of the university more visible but also his proposals on how to live and work in these ruins.<sup>6</sup> However, none of the available critiques go to what we believe to be the essence of the crisis of the university.

### **A Pressing Confrontation**

While seeing crisis as structurally present in the future of the university one also has to understand that the modern university

was itself a product of crisis. In appropriating reason to advance learning by the theological enterprise that shaped the 'first university', unwittingly, unsettling forces were embraced. Effectively what had been recruited was the secular project from which the modern university then emerged.

Many scholars would have felt a sense of loss in the move from the old small institution to the new, growing modern form. Likewise, loss is one to the defining qualities of the present crisis of the institution. This is experienced in many ways, as a sense of loss of: the value of philosophical, historical and literary knowledge and scholarship; the hopes of a community of critical inquiry; trail-blazing heroic thinkers; or of the celebratory sharing of seminal texts within cultures of reading. The experiences of these defining characteristics of the life of the university now remain only as shadows of their former being.

Loss has not occurred accidentally, rather it has been the product of managed withdrawals that arrived as 'restructuring' at the hands of management consultants.

In this setting one can debate how poorly academics have performed in defending their cultural and economic space, as well as the nature of their institutions. Likewise, after the 'destructuring' that is 'restructuring', one can question the ability of most academics to discover how to work 'in the ruins', as this depends upon learning how to read, negotiate and exploit the current contradictions of the institution. Dominantly, 'resistance' has been economic in character and centred on funding issues. This has overlooked the marginalisation of non-instrumental knowledge; the establishment of politically compliant cultures by designing-in micro acts of conformity via administrative proceduralism; and the institutional toleration of ineffectual theoretical and cultural avant-gardism.

In short, the next coming of university, its third incarnation, is not going to come from the managerial regimes directing the current institution in crisis, or from those cadres of compliant academics who have traded down the idea of tenure as a position of intellectual free expression to it becoming job security by another name. Rather, the re-created university will come from 'outsiders' and that handful of proactive dissident educators who have not been neutered by time-serving, or by the reduction of university education to the status of technocratic training or just another supermarket commodity to be plucked from the shelf. This extremely small community of re-creation has a future bonded to the identification and engagement with that which is most critical.

### **A Crisis that Is Critical**

The hegemony of technology is implicated in the critical core of the crisis of the university.

Technology now stands for an absolute crisis for non-calculative thought (the essence of thinking) and for complete negation of ethical agency (an agency which presumes the human has decisive power). Such has been the material and immaterial proliferation of technology and its transformation of the biophysical environment, that it broken free from anchorage in the artificial and become naturalised in worlds of mind and matter (as has been explored in Issues 3 and 4 of *Design Philosophy Papers* – Ed.). Effectively, technology has become embedded in, and indivisible from, 'nature' – conversely 'nature' now is no longer just the domain of the natural. Many thinkers of technology, working from varied theories of knowledge, have recognised this situation, for instance, in recent years, Bill McKibben and William Leiss. However this realisation was prefigured many decades ago, for instance, by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* first published almost 60 years ago.<sup>7</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer made clear that the overcoming and absorption of nature by technology has not been an accidental aberration but rather an inscriptive consequence of the Enlightenment. Here, not only did they echo other thinkers of their age, like Heidegger, but established a viewpoint that spanned the full ranges of political ideologies from left to right.

Currently a dominant disabling contradiction between humans and technology still exists.

On the one hand an anthropocentric disposition, manifested as self-centring myopia, continues to rule human being. On the other hand, the actual directive agency of humans (especially to direct the technological nature and environmental conditions in which they live and work) constantly diminishes. Notwithstanding this situation, the belief in, and rhetoric of, technology as a tool under human direction persists.

Rather than making this contradiction apparent and interrogating it, universities have been incorporated within its hegemonic order(ing). So the very institutions that were once assumed to exist to supposedly conserve, nurture and extend thinking have themselves fallen victim to technology as an imperial metaphysic. Universities obviously still produce knowledge, but increasingly it is kinds of knowledge that overwhelm a propensity to exercise thinking – thought is constrained and in large part what is essential to think has been forgotten. Thus, the abilities of a self to comprehend its (fractured) being, the (difference of the) being of others and the being of the worlds of dwelling constantly diminishes. In contrast, the ability to operationally function in the maintenance and extension of projected, and frequently incommensurate, worlds increases.

Of course one of the major problems in discussing technology is the absolute plurality of the way it is now understood. At one pole, an old electro-mechanical model of artifice and artefacts still endures. At the other extreme technology has become a general

category that enfolds an understanding of almost every human and non-human activity. What we can be certain of is that the forms of technology now bridge both mind and inorganic/organic matter; technology is something that we do not merely use but are immersed in; and, it is not an object that we just simply observe as being active in the world but rather is a means by which the world we know arrives to hand for, and before, us. In claiming technology's hegemony what is asserted is not just its naturalisation in our being-in-the-world but its inescapable power as naturalised force of being (hence the ability to equate it with nature). One of the most influential essays that transformed how technology has been thought has been Martin Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology'.<sup>8</sup> While much has been written on this essay, it begs continual reappraisal. However, for our purposes here only a few remarks are warranted.

Contextually, it should be acknowledged that Heidegger's thinking on technology arrived out a critical, especially German, radical and reactionary culture in the 1930s that was concerned with technology's form and fate.<sup>9</sup> At this time and place it was dominantly viewed by 'reactionary modernists' as something to embrace as a means, but something in the end from which to recoil. Two of Heidegger's observations are especially relevant. The first is that there is a danger with technology – not with its phenomenal forms but with its essence as a directional designing (in respect of this Heidegger uses a term translated as 'destining' and 'bringing forth' – understandable here as the agency of what technology brings into being). The second observation goes to where the impositional force of technology holds sway, and on this Heidegger makes a crucial and oft cited qualification (quoting the poet Holderlin):<sup>10</sup>

But where danger is, grows  
The saving power also.

Again, the meaning of these lines has become contingent on the unfolding of the technological event. Certainly we can see that in the technological world of our existence (our technonature) salvation fuses with dependence. We put our lives in the 'hands' of technology many times a day, and we are saved from destruction by it. Yet the hegemonic nature of technology also takes away what it gives – it threatens our very being. We are long past the moment Heidegger writes of when he says: "The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control". We can bin the gismo but the technological infrastructure in which we now dwell is an embedded system that is out of reach and mostly unseen. All we encounter are its nodes, be they screens, sockets, appliances, taps, pumps, sounds, messages, products, foods, aircraft, chemicals, clothes and so on. The ability



to 'save' is thus not available via mastery of an object of control. It is now not a matter of 'saving from' but 'saving in'. What this means is that technology has to be resisted not because of some faint neo-Luddite hope of it being overthrown but rather because this is the only way our difference can be secured. Undoubted humanity is at a crossroads: some will follow the path to being completely technologically instructed, while some others will strive to remain and rebuild with the matter deposited by the memory of humanity.

For all of us now the danger is as much behind and alongside as it is before us as our future.

One of the most overt registrations of the danger of our giving over to technology is our compliance with the normalised systematic destruction of natural resources. We 'know' this process of continual appropriation is fraught, but go along with it so long as our immediate 'needs' are met. So while the onslaught of technology continues apace, human agency and responsibility for what it brings into being, with our assistance, ever decreases. The fact that salvation is posited with 'it', is the definitive statement of an absence of understanding.

### **The Criticality of Criticality and the University**

It is now possible to place the crisis of the university in a far more substantial condition of criticality. It is hard for us to grasp that the condition of unsustainability arrives in large part because we have been taught, formally and informally, how to be and make the unsustainable.<sup>11</sup> Even learning how to be 'sustainable' folds back into 'sustaining the unsustainable'. The way almost all natural environments are managed and used; the way built environments and products are designed, made and used; what is valorised, valued and devalued; what is wasted, our diet and lifestyles; the things we dream of having; how energy is manufactured and used; farming methods – almost the totality of the learnt actions of industrialised human life extenuates unsustainability. Certainly one cannot assume that electronic technologies significantly lessen the impacts of human action – they are commodity consumptive and generative, they proliferate infrastructure, add to the volume of intractable waste, serve the creation of wealth and thus generally add to environmental impacts associated with the disposal of income. Moreover, for every one person on the planet dematerialising their lifeworld there are multitudes striving to acquire the means to improve their basic material condition. Here then is the context in which to view the 'Knowledge Economy' and 'Information Age' that Ken Freedman (in this issue of DPP) asserts as the key challenge for education in general and design education in particular.

To advocate that the university simply meet the demands of the status quo, be it for the 'knowledge economy' or any other neo-capitalist techno-form, is to fail to recognise the overwhelming

imperative of the present and future. This imperative is the creation of a sustaining ability, and its pursuit implies a massive project of remaking how worlds are perceived, made and occupied. For this to happen, a third incarnation of the university – the university of sustainment – has to arrive and overcome the current afterlife of the modern university.

### **Confronting Imperatives**

Imperatives do not necessarily assert themselves. Often theory is required to reveal them. Put simply, given the right knowledge, we learn to recognise imperatives. Conversely, one of the ways that ‘learning in error’ can be defined is by an inability to recognise imperatives of criticality.

The imperative to confront the unsustainable and to advance the ability to sustain within a culture of sustainment (as this culture embraces every dimension of human existence) still languishes in obscurity. This imperative implies a fundamental realignment of how, in every aspect, human beings act in and upon all of their worlds. Current action taken in the name of sustainability totally fails to register the enormous seismic shift that needs to occur in how worlds are formulated and occupied. To establish the condition of ‘sustainment-in-process’ is not a matter of adding to, or reforming, the status quo. It is not a series of action qualified with an eco prefix. Rather, it refers to and requires a complete transformation of how ‘all and everything’ is seen, coded and engaged.

This action of course includes the remaking of the university and the transformation of how all areas of design are thought and practiced.

‘The Sustainment’ tries to speak the conceptual gathering of such a mammoth task – rhetorically, it begs to be viewed as equal to those historical ages, like the Enlightenment, that have redirected human destiny. How this project is elaborated, given a dynamic and collectivised invites consideration by thinkers of all cultures and persuasions. Certainly it is a project beyond ownership in which ‘commonality in difference’ can be constituted.

The starting place in trying to think the next incarnation of the university is to ask ‘what has to be learnt’? In this question the word ‘has’ carries the full weight of the imperative to sustain.<sup>12</sup>

There are six immediately evident organising pathways each of which bisect the world as it is constituted as global, national, regional, rural, urban, local and individual. The notion of *pathways* counters the degeneration of thinking futures to utopianism, for every pathway opens up a major agenda of institutional recreation. Pathways so envisioned take us from where we are to where we need to be. Here is a very provisional listing:

- Undertaking the critical enterprise of learning what is unsustainable which, by definition, is also an exploration

of that concealment which is anthropocentrism. Likewise it also leads to a process of causal inquiry. This enterprise can be brought to every domain of knowledge, as well as every professional and commercial practice. It transcends disciplines.

- Determining how to eliminate the unsustainable. This involves discovering exactly what needs to be eliminated by processes of erasure, devaluation or by being translated into a dematerialised form. Such a practice of elimination recognises that learning depends on forgetting (clearing) as well as remembering – what is forgotten is critical and demands designation.<sup>13</sup>
- Deciding what to remake, which in some instances implies rematerialisation of much of our artefactual worlds. This can also mean effecting a perceptual transformation through which utility, symbolic functions and uses are radically changed.
- Learning to be otherwise by reconstructing that thinking that tells us what we are and what we desire; and then what is ethical, just and vital to value within a referential system of judgement based on sustainment.
- Learning what is required to be newly created (and at what cost in terms of what this creation destroys).
- Learning what to conserve materially and symbolically, while also striving to selectively recover and critically appraise what has been forgotten via archival traces.<sup>14</sup> What is needed to be learnt is thus as much in our past as it is in our future.

None of the above is presented without full acknowledgement of just how overwhelming is the task of transformation.

However, a first and essential step is taken in imagining how things could be otherwise. Hereafter, building a will and path to change, as well as setting out to realise it, is a work that defines a life.

Currently, pathways are blocked by pluralism – the ruling educational ideology of balanced content.

Clearly there is a plurality in the ways that the ability to sustain can be sought, yet the singularity of the agenda cannot be refused. Of course pluralism is not totally plural. Pluralists fail to acknowledge that freedom is never predicated on the plural, on the infinite, but rather on limit, finitude and on the exclusion of what it is not.

Sustainment is diversity in the service of the singular.

Historically, modern societies exercise their freedoms under the limit of the law. The implication is that now, freedom cannot be without the imposition of sustaining ability (which in turn throws up major problems for democratic politics). Challenging the pluralist model of education might be thought to raise issues of academic freedom, however, we do well to remind ourselves that its cornerstone, tenure, has degenerated into job security. Taking a

stand for an idea is now almost treated as a sign of an unbalanced mind. How freedom is viewed in the academy is linked to how utopianism is considered. Put at its baldest, humanist rhetoric and enlightenment models of the intellectual live on notwithstanding the dominance of instrumentalism and techno-culture.

The institutional designing power of the taken-for-granted modes of thought of economics also obstructs the thinking of sustainment.

Georges Bataille showed how our current thinking and practices of exchange were circumscribed (a condition he named as ‘the ‘restricted economy’) and in need of reframing more widely – within the aegis of the ‘general economy’. While his thinking is a helpful in starting to re-conceptualise the contemporary geometry of exchange, it is still not really adequate to the task.<sup>15</sup> For all the theoretical elaboration that poststructuralism has layered onto Bataille, his thinking it is too heavily marked by binary functionalist models of exchange. Ways to think exchange relations that structurally support sustainment rather than negate it, have to be created along with a shift from a quantity to a quality model of wealth production. Likewise, redistributive justice begs to be seen not just as a socio-economic issue, but as a precondition for a sustain-able mode of exchange. Poverty is as unsustainable as supra-wasteful wealth.

### **Design and Designing Re-placed**

Dominantly, the way design is taught and practiced instrumentally folds into the restricted economy. Design education centres on the production a designing subject, behaviouralist, functionalist epistemologies and methodologies as well as an enduring valorisation of expressive individualism. This restricts a fundamental ontological education in what design is and does; the development of transformative understandings of design in a geography of power, knowledge and ethics; as well as understandings of the nature of designed unsustainment, unsustainability, sustain-ability and enacted responsibility that ruptures a relation to ‘sustaining the unsustainable.’ What has to be privileged in design education as it is projected here is designing against defuturing worlds and towards those worlds that sustainment asserts that need to be. While the production/induction of designers for service industry ontologies will no doubt continue unabated, a culture of design leadership by example is vital to seed, nurture and support.

Design history, design theory, design research and design studies have all had ambitions to become acknowledged (sub) disciplines, usually within a subordinate position to design, architecture or engineering education. But unequivocally, design thinkers have failed, especially during the period in which design was inducted into the university, to make the case that would have established the designed and designing as a

major domain of inquiry of 'beings', 'beings-in-the-world' and the 'being-of-the-(made)world. Anthropologically, historically, economically, archaeologically, sociologically, philosophically and materially the ontological agency of design in the formation and deformation of subjects, in combination with the onward designing of designed objects, has gone by almost totally unaddressed.

Moreover, there has been a major failure to demonstrate just how important design is to the intellectual community at large, as well as to established and proto-designers. The failure of design education/educators mirrors the failure and the error of modern thought and its institution – it has been preoccupied with questions of 'how'; it has given undue attention to aesthetically canonical forms and fads while overlooking the significance of the anonymous and, above all, it has neglected to ask basic questions of 'why'. The more design education has become directed towards providing a professional training for unreconstructed industry, the more it has failed its pedagogic responsibility to extend the minds, vision and responsibility of critical subjects with economically transferable skills and knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Put starkly, many university design departments recruit smart students and then intellectually short change them, as well as the society and the economies in which they eventually professionally operate. While not suggesting that the education of designers is not a worthy undertaking, the implication of what has been argued is that the sum of design education to date has been a history of *educational* failure and lost opportunities. The enterprise has demonstrably been unable to liberate design inquiry from its restricted domain – in order to reveal its enormous importance in the directional refiguration of beings and being.

The failure to create a critical culture of design can be sheeted back not just to the professional design community but to the crisis of the university itself – like much else, design arrived in the university for managerial, administrative and economic reasons. Pedagogical and philosophical questions, connections and implications were just not considered. What design is and does were taken as givens understood by the 'experts'. Certainly neither the design community nor the university have substantially confronted the directional force of design in imposing and negating futures.<sup>17</sup> More than this, because design is itself such an underdeveloped intellectual sphere, design educators are a rag-bag of sometimes out-of-touch doers or intellectual refugees who stumbled into the area. While there are duds, there are of course also insightful, knowledgeable, hardworking and dedicated teachers among the ranks of design educators, but this is no way to constitute and perpetuate the kind of intellectual and practically engaged community of design educators that the demands of the future dictate.

Certainly postgraduate design education begs a coherent and critical framework. Certainly design thinking needs boosting and

certainly a whole new range of design practices need to be brought into being.

Design thinking can explore the *designing* of the concealment that is anthropocentrism (the cultural construction of the human). The starting point of this thinking is the recognition that design is so often a history and practice of disclosure *and* concealment. In so many ways ‘things’ are made to hide by design.

More prosaically, designers need to learn how to ‘eliminate by design’ – as a conceptually developed, rigorous and economic extension of their practice. This not least because, for instance, so many existing products, systems, services and materials that negate futures have to be vanquished. Likewise the material and symbolic remaking of built forms, objects and images in the service of sustaining ability is a massive exercise – it is an activity that not only has specific purchase for designers but one that also invites participation by many within the re-created university.

Additionally, many of the dominant ideas of design need to be erased, such as the mantra that design is a ‘problem solving’ activity. Of course, design can be, and is, deployed to solve problems, but equally many ‘solutions’ cause problems, as evidenced by so much of contemporary society being unsustainable by design. Importantly, much more time and effort needs to be invested in making design a rigorous ‘problem defining’ activity – within a system of reference of sustainment. This in turn means overthrowing that kind of thinking that posits ‘the product’ as the end point of the design process. In fact, ‘the design process’ (as mobilised by the designer) begs to be subordinated to a more fundamental understanding of ‘design in process’ (which means not just recognising that whatever is designed and brought into existence goes on designing but equally recognising that there is a vital need to be re-educated by this knowledge, including the way it transforms our understanding of ethics. It is no longer sufficient to delimit ethics to political discourse, normative values of personal conduct and codes of professional conduct. Rather, ethics need to be materially grounded in assessable performative consequences of designed and made material and immaterial commodities. As such ethics becomes indivisible for the ability to sustain both materially and culturally.

Learning to be a *designer of the otherwise*, that is a designer with foresight, designing ethically towards sustainment, is still a void into which content has to be driven – all of this means recreating what it means to be a designer. This learning directly links to having to learn what is required to be newly created – specifically in terms of *things* that ‘thing’ (design in their being) otherwise.

Conversely, there is also a pressing need to learn how to conserve, materially and symbolically, things that already exist that sustain. As well as mastering technical issues, this means understanding how design can influence the variability of the

nature of things in time by the way they are inserted in regimes of meaning historically associated with the values of sustainment. This, for example, connects to inscribing expressions of care in making and use, delivering beauty in form and function liberated from ephemeral fashion and supporting the depositing of ‘the designed’ into sustainment regimes of meaning with articulating narratives (this on the basis that things *do not* speak for themselves).

### Conclusion

The remaking of the university, to displace the university in error and to open into the age of ‘The Sustainment’ cannot happen without design itself being remade – for the institution has to be designed otherwise. This, in turn, means that the ‘design process’ has to become viewable as an element of ‘design in process’, as design itself becomes a manifestation of ethical action towards sustainment. For this to happen the hermeneutic capability of design(ing) has to be dramatically increased – to understand and define design problems and to comprehend the consequences of what design brings into existence, requires an interpretative capability of a community of inquirers constituted by a wider constituency than just designers.

Clearly, all the opinions above beg engagement by the reader’s own experience. For all the immodesty of the bold proposals made, all that this essay strives to be is a statement of initial (if imperfect) thinking. Thinking here evokes not an occasional activity, but rather, as Heidegger instructs, a mode of dwelling philosophically.<sup>18</sup> In the crisis of the university as sketched, nothing is more in danger, and in need of urgent conservation, than thinking.

### Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche *The Will To Power* (trans Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale), New York: Vantage, 1968, para 452, 247–48.
2. Bill Readings *The University in Ruins* Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press, 1997.
3. *Ibid*, 912.
4. A concern with the ontological designing power of technology was evident in *Being and Time* published in 1926, but was inserted into the public domain by his *Rektoratsrede* 1933 – Martin Heidegger ‘The Self-Assertion of the German University’ translation by William S. Lewis in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 1993, 29–39.
5. Jean-Francois Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (trans Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi) Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

6. Bill Readings *The University in Ruins* Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press, 1997, 166–179.
7. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (trans John Cumming) *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* London: Verso, 1972 (first edition published 1944).
8. Martin Heidegger *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (trans William Lovitt) New York: Harper & Rowe, 1977.
9. See the excellent study of this moment by Jeffery Herf *Reactionary Modernism* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
10. Heidegger *The Question Concerning Technology* 28.
11. To again reaffirm – the university ‘here’ has become a place of error. Error is a quality of the human (‘to err is to be human’). To be human is to be amid the mis-guided, the lost and amongst the chaos of the uncertain. Error is (on) the horizon of each human being. The loss of the ability to recognise error is but one mark of the failure and the loss of the human. The project that founded the university, its enfolding, secularisation and undoing, resonated with the sounds of the seduction of reason telling itself it could win a victory over error. To error is to err, to roam, lose one’s way, stray, to misjudge, fail, blunder. On this topic see Mark C. Taylor *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
12. Recognising that universities and education in general need fundamental epistemological and cultural restructuring in order to make a new culture of learning is something that an increasing number of thinkers are pointing out. See for example C.A. Bowers *The Culture of Denial: Why the Environmental Movement Needs a Strategy for Reforming Universities and Public Schools* New York: State University of New York Press, 1997.
13. See Niklas Luhmann in *Social Systems* (trans John Bednarz Jr) Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, 244.
14. Besides the likes of ancient or abandoned technologies, knowledges, crafts, materials, rituals, philosophies, sciences and relations to natural and built environments, the history of the university is itself reviewable. For instance, Wilhelm von Humboldt, in putting forward his theory of *bildung* stated “The ultimate task of our existence: to give as great as possible a **content** [added emphasis] to the concept of humanity in our person, both during our lifetime and beyond it”. Circumstances, as the imperative of sustaining ability indicates, means that the giving of content changes according to need and thus so does the nature of what it means to be human. The quotation is cited by Niklas Luhmann in *Social System*, 464.
15. See Georges Bataille ‘The Meaning of General Economy’ in *The Accursed Share* (trans Robert Hurley) New York: Zone Books, 1988, 19–26.



16. These remarks are not made lightly. They are a reflection on my own design education, employment as a designer, several decades of teaching in design schools in the UK, USA, Australia and Hong Kong, considerable experience as an examiner and postgraduate supervisor plus many years of work as a design consultant.
17. This confrontation was a key element of Tony Fry *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999.
18. Martin Heidegger *What Is Called Thinking* (trans J. Glenn Gray) New York: Harper & Rowe, 1968.