

## **Designed Away Your Dreams**

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# DESIGNED AWAY DREAMS

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Sitting here in my study, as in every room in our modest sized, century-old Queensland farm workers cottage, I am surrounded by things. It is starting to feel strange, as if something has happened. It has, 'the world is out of joint'. It's not just that having all this stuff no longer seems quite right, although there are a lot of things I would find hard to get rid of (and a lot it would be easy to dump). Rather it's that I, and increasingly others, have a growing sense that the still increasing acquisitiveness of especially affluent human beings cannot last, at least not in its present form. For me, this sense has arrived from three directions: knowledge of future-shaping global factors; local experience of 'the revenge of nature'; and reflection upon the notion of 'kronophobia' – the fear of time coupled with the illusion of permanence. Has all this anything to do with design? Yes, absolutely.

As I will set out to show, there is now a recoil against 'things' which is starting to deliver a totally different design agenda in which the key words of an emergent practice are elimination, adaptation and redirection. It's not a matter of design salvationism (not least as directed toward the planet – which will be around long after we as a species have gone) but simply learning how to cope by design with what, for many, will

be dramatic change. The situation to be coped with has actually already started to arrive, but as kronophobes we are mostly unable to see it.

Unless we shrink utopias to a scale at which they lack any politico-social significance, I have no doubt that utopianism is behind us and that an age of unsettlement is arriving. The changes that can be expected will exceed anything experienced in the past ten thousand years. Just looking around me, I'm certain that what we will be designing is not what I am now looking at.

## PAST DESIGNERS OF THE PRESENT

'Past designers of the present' are those designers of today who are still designing according to a model of design practice and a conception of design objects grounded in continuing the materiality of structural unsustainability. At its most basic, this centres on the perpetual designing and production of object-things. The performative (including environmental) nature of object-things is not the issue, rather the primary objective should become elimination and reduction. There are vast numbers of objects-things that, in their harmfulness and gratuitousness, simply have to be eliminated or redirected. Will this have an enormous economic impact? Of course. Put absolutely bluntly we have no future without this impact. What we call our economy could just as easily be called our unsustainability machine. Sustainable development is a lie, a self-deception, a ship of fools. Sustainable design, as I now hear myself saying for what feels like a million times, almost totally sustains the unsustainable.

We have to understand that problems created in the past are thrown into the future, and as such, arrive in the continual present. This configuration is exactly what is occurring with climate change. Emissions of today constitute the future form of the atmosphere while the consequences of past emissions arrive to act upon the constant 'now'.

The production of object-things currently defines the activity of almost all designers in all design disciplines (including many who believe they are practicing sustainable design). The digital economy is not exempt — it not only rides on the back of productivity but is also the latest moment in the acceleration of productivism.

There will be no significant change of direction without the realisation that the way we design, make and use, mostly results in defuturing. As 'finite beings on a finite planet' our defuturing is effectively a negation of time. How we are, what we do, how we live is taking the species' future away. The anthropocentric trope of sustainable development being

about not harming 'future generations', besides being myopic (it just does not evoke an eternity), does nevertheless register fundamental conditions of relational interdependencies.

## FUTURE DESIGNERS

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Such designers are obviously not designing the future. Rather they design that which futures. Futuring equals making time.

Designing futurally means having a very different perception of what design is and of design practice — way beyond how design is presented via the design disciplines: history, theory, the economics, the media and the culture at large. The gap between how design appears and the actuality of design is gigantic. We exist in a 'world-within-the-world' that is designed — a totality within 'the world' that is not a system, that is mostly designed by anonymous 'designers'. This complexity is turned away from in favour of diversions. Design history is a case in point: just consider the difference between the sum of the content of the literature of design history (which is not vast) and the actual manifestations of past and present environmental, economic socio-cultural and existential transformative agency of design globally.

Designing futurally does not refuse the complexity of design. It deals with it not by trying to comprehend the totality but by acknowledging it in a situated sense in all it does. The means to do this comes with the concept 'relationality'. What it ensures is that whatever is engaged is never contained. The design object of address always bleeds beyond itself. It is never constituted in or by just one place or time, nor is it without directional designing agency. As should be evident, designing futurally is not object-thing focussed, but process centred. It is not mostly about the new but more about redirecting what already is.

## THE CHOICE IS YOURS

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All designers have a choice, though many do not yet recognise this, or that they have to go looking for it. What is the choice?

The answer is that they can cease to be 'service providers', working in a situation where the most significant design decisions have been made long before they 'come on the scene'. The alternative is to find means to initiate and finance projects of their own creation. There is not just one path to this end. Whatever the path is not without risk or

the need for the expenditure of major effort, all laced with a lot of determination. Obviously one such path is entrepreneurial and goes seeking venture capital; another is to bring project proposals to not-for-profit organisations and NGOs; and a third is to go searching for grants from government and the private sector. The mantra for the adventurous, smart, and courageous designer with imagination is 'go looking for defuturing problems and you will find a successful project.' Of course in order to succeed you have to be willing to fail and learn from failure.

## WHAT IS ALTERING THE SITUATION IN WHICH DESIGNERS FIND THEMSELVES?

The general answer to this question is the slow but sure arrival of recognition that at the very core of the unsustainable is us. What 'we' bring into being animates the process of unsustainability (the process we call defuturing). This happens because we have been inculcated for so long into being unsustainable. The designed world we live in designs us as such. Being unsustainable has become elemental to our ontology. Instruction, seduction, education and desire are all part of the mix that underpins our 'education in error'. This condition is structural and we can neither moralise or engineer ourselves out of it. Rather, what we are, and what makes us what we are, have to become objects of redirection. Beyond just this general understanding of defuturing unsustainability (a big enough step!) we also have to confront what the forces of defuturing have created: the emergent conjuncture in which we find ourselves. This can be named as unsettlement.

## UNSETTLEMENT

Unsettlement names a moment in human existence that recognises an ending without any clear sense of what is beginning. Along with this goes a certain feeling of foreboding that what will arrive will be unwelcome. This is both a product of signs of change and how they have been interpreted.

Change here spans the impacts of the unceasing speed of production that goes back to our prehistoric becoming as makers. The pace of production has never slowed from this moment; in fact it has constantly accelerated. Evidence of this is seen as resources are depleted, environmental damages increase, biodiversity diminishes, and

the climate changes aided by anthropogenic inputs, and hyper-consumption spins out of control globally (in the name of increased standards of living). Reason has served madness.

An interpretative confrontation with this situation shifts unsettlement from being thought of as a 'state of the world' to a condition of mind (a psychology). Traumatic events — (un)natural disasters, conflicts, economic and social collapse — prompts the move from the one to the other. Unsettlement fundamentally shifts the ground of design, not least by exposing how pathetically misplaced object-thing-based design 'solutions' are.

Two very different but equally connected responses to this situation are now going to be rehearsed.

## TECHNO-NOMADS

A sub-culture is emerging that is communicating something greater than the ideas that brought it into being. It is summed up by the title and content of the book *Share or Die* (Harris 2012). This book reflects some of the imperatives and contradictions of attempting to live in a technologically-enabled way that reduces material impacts. It manifests the positive efforts of a nomadic sub-culture aiming to 'live with less' and share more, but at the same time, is based on a naive faith in technology as the means towards this.

Generally the level of reduction is defined by the lifestyle of the young, single and mobile – a favoured target is to get down to 60 items. Now obviously, this is not a prospect for a family. However, it would be interesting to discover how many object-things say four families would need if a culture of sharing between them was formed. The obvious perspective on technology is that the electronic storage of books, music and data of all types is 'object thing' eliminating. The joys and perils of doing this were made very evident by a program broadcast by the BBC (Danzico 2010). To illustrate: 'Mr Kelly Sutton is the founder of CultofLess.com, a website which has helped him sell or give away his possessions — apart from his laptop, an iPad, an Amazon Kindle, two external hard drives, a 'few' articles of clothing and bed sheets for a mattress that was left in his newly rented apartment'. He said:

*I think cutting down on physical commodities in general might be a trend of my generation — cutting down on physical commodities that can be replaced by digital counterparts will be a fact. It's always nice to have a personal sense of home, but that aside — the internet has replaced my need for an address.*

And then there are the views of Chris Yurista who 'feels his digital possessions can now live on indefinitely with little maintenance'. He took to the 'streets with a backpack full of

designer clothing, a laptop, an external hard drive, a small piano keyboard and a bicycle – an armful of goods that totals over \$3,000 (£1,890) in value. He says:

*I don't feel a void living the way I'm living because I've figured out a way to use digital technology to my advantage... Things like records snap and wear down over time. It's upsetting. MP3s don't.*

Such a way of life turns on the availability of friends willing to provide a bed or a couch for the night, plus an external hard drive. But here is the rub: lose by accident or theft your hard drive and you lose the main prop of your life.

Such a sub-culture is symptomatic of an anti-consumerist disposition of a strand of young people in many parts of the world and echoes the feelings of a wider segment of not just the young who recognise the 'madness of things'. In actuality it flows into a far wider and more significant nascent position on nomadism.

## THE URMADIC

For tens of thousands of years nomadism was the key to the survival of our species. As the climate changed, people still needed food, so they moved. As the human population grew, and with it, the size of cities, risk increases. The risks come from different kinds of climate change impacts (including extreme weather and conflicts) and from 'natural' disasters (very simply, the more people the more people at risk). As is starting to be acknowledged, a new mode of earthy habitation, based on a radical adaptation to change, is likely to arrive over coming decades.

The urmadic (urban nomadism) is one way this mode is starting to be thought. What it implies is that we humans cannot stay as we are, nor can we return to what we were. One way to go forward, while acknowledge the dominance of urban culture, is to start to conceptualise a city than can move. This does not presume this will be the only way of life, it does presume remaining or new cities will be dramatically different than those that currently exist. In all cases, living with less has to be, and will be, the norm.

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