

The Good City: Design for Sustainability

Abstract Today, we are faced with many problems to which designers can contribute solutions. Action can take place at three levels: the micro level, that of individual action; the meso level is the level of groups where the individual may still have some influence; and the macro level includes governments, international organizations, and large companies. At the outer limits of the meso level is the city, which is still potentially capable of adopting coherent policies for change. There are many good ideas about urban design although it is rare to find a city that has integrated a large number of them into a holistic system. What is called for is a systemic approach to these initiatives that will form the basis of a new theory of sustainable urban planning. Such a theory would take into account the following factors as well as others: 1) producing and distributing food; 2) recycling soft and hard waste; 3) providing shelter and eliminating homelessness; 4) microlending and stimulating cooperative businesses; and 5) providing alternative energy.

Keywords

Sustainable urban planning
Holistic system design
Meso level design

Received July 7, 2015

Accepted July 20, 2015

Published September 16, 2015

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The peer review process is the responsibility of Tongji University and Tongji University Press.

<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/she-ji-the-journal-of-design-economics-and-innovation>

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2015.07.001>



Introduction

Design is undergoing a momentous change. Where designers were once known for creating the visual appearance of products, whether coffee pots or posters, today they are becoming recognized for their work on the design of services, organizations (including government agencies), and even social networks. Specializations such as interaction design, experience design, social design, and design for sustainability did not exist a few years ago. The older projects of designing artifacts have not disappeared but the recognition that design can be so much more is growing. The work of designers has even extended to cities, not as city planners or architects but as coordinators of projects to improve urban life.

Facing the Future

Today, we are faced with many problems to which designers can contribute solutions. In fact, designers are key to thinking about the future and how design might impact the problems we face not only today but also in the future. To imagine a future that is different from the present is to risk that the future we seek to bring about will be better than what we have. However, this is not an arbitrary process. We usually draw our ideas of the future from what we like best about the present. Of course, this suggests that everyone has his or her own preferred future but we know that a scenario of competing and even clashing futures is not possible. There are certainly numerous factors beyond anyone's personal desires that play an important role in the kind of future we should be seeking. First is the natural factor of climate change; then the social behavioral factors of resource consumption and waste elimination, and finally the social values factor of justice for everyone.

In 1972, the Club of Rome published *The Limits to Growth*, a study based on MIT computer models that simulated the relations between the earth's resources and the human population.¹ As a forecasting tool, *Limits to Growth* argued that the continued consumption of resources at the current rate was unsustainable. Its call for new sustainable environmental and social policies was continued in subsequent studies – the World Commission on Environment and Development's *Our Common Future*, a report directed by Norway's former Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, and *Agenda 21: The Earth Summit Strategy to Save Our Planet*. Both originated within the United Nations system, the latter in conjunction with the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.² That conference was followed 20 years later by Rio+20, which produced its own set of documents, notably *The Future We Want*, which called for change.³

We can already see evidence that our consumption habits are severely affecting the climate and resulting in an increasing number of natural disasters. To respond to each of these disasters is a major effort that demands excessive human and material resources. Should they continue to increase there is a risk that we will be overwhelmed by them and will not be able to successfully respond when they occur. Therefore we have to drastically change the way we live, particularly the way we obtain and use energy. The more carbon dioxide we pump into the atmosphere from gas-powered vehicles, the more we contribute to an unhealthy and ultimately dangerous atmosphere. The more we consume resources excessively, the less there are that remain for successive generations. And the more waste and garbage we generate, the more we use up available land for it to be dumped and, as a result, the more we contaminate the soil. This is not to mention dumping chemical and toxic waste in our rivers and oceans, and overfishing our waters to deplete them of food for the future. I could continue with more descriptions of reckless behavior but clearly it is not necessary. Finally is the issue of social justice and the way resources are distributed. The disparity between those who are wealthy and those who are

1 Donella H. Meadows, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

2 World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Daniel Sitarz, ed. *Agenda 21: The Earth Summit Strategy to Save Our Planet* (Boulder, Colo.: Earth Press, 1994).

3 *The Future We Want*, accessed July 1, 2015, http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/rio20_outcome_document_complete.pdf.

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