

**Design and the theology of sustainability – Seminar talk**  
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“There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them.”

This is the very famous quotation from the introduction of Victor Papanek’s book “Design for the real world” published in 1971 (Papanek), the canonical expression of a somewhat pessimistic outlook on design.

It is a dangerous thing to invent and make new things real, to go from dreams and plans to actually doing things, making things.

We have always been looking around worrying about what is going on, what people are doing, how people behave. It seems inherent to us as humans that we are constantly searching for the next coming disaster. But at the same time, we look for solutions, there must be better ways of living. That’s the foundation for ideology and religion. But, also for science and engineering.

Where does art and design come into the picture? One thing that is true is that art and design surrounds us in our daily life everywhere. We do want to live in houses, if we are lucky we can go to a restaurant and eat a really good dinner, we read books, look at films, sit on chairs, drive cars, go by bike, play games, we wear clothes, we live in cities and so on. This is what art and design is all about, making all these things actual things and not just potential things, from wishing and dreaming to defining and making. In consequence we bring about change, as John Chris Jones emphasizes, we redefine our world and our ways of living.

Here is the dilemma, we look for solutions to problems we see and we want to bring about change. But the new things we introduce also introduce possible new problems and the prospect of yet another disaster waiting to be discovered later on. Change is potentially dangerous and yet we always strive for development and change.

In the long series of actual and possible disasters during the history of the earth and our human history we find things such as meteors hitting the planet and drastically changing conditions for life, various pandemic diseases, overpopulation, environmental devastation, the prospect of an all-out nuclear war, today’s climate emergency and the

ongoing corona pandemic. Some of these things are, or were, very real and others we worry about as a future threat, imminent or not.

To meet all these challenges, we introduce programs for development and change governed by central programmatic concepts that are there to direct thinking and policy making. "Sustainability" is such a "leitwort" which now is inscribed in our Higher Education Act stating that

"In the course of their operations, higher education institutions shall promote sustainable development to assure for present and future generations a sound and healthy environment, economic and social welfare, and justice." (UHR)

So, what does it mean "sustainable development"? What does "sustainability" mean? In the Bruntland report from 1987 (Bruntland) we read the following

"Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development does imply limits - not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities.

In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development; and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations." (Bruntland report 1987)

There are two main, rather different, ways to understand this:

- (i) A "secular", mundane, interpretation goes along the lines that we should take care, try to do things in a smarter way. Not waste things, overspend and empty resources without considering what will happen next, to take on the challenges of change in a thoughtful manner caring for coming generations, for our planet and its inhabitants, humans and animals alike.
- (ii) A literal interpretation will have its foundation in reading "without compromising" and "in harmony" in an absolute manner. Sustainability refers here to the indefinite continuation of a defined behavior.

The first interpretation is a *reasonable* one, the one that makes sense in our everyday life. The second one is, of course, a sort of higher order nonsense.

Our planet will change no matter what we will do, the sun will say good bye sometime in the future making the prospect of our earth as we know it today but a dream. A

sustainable way of living is in this sense just a dream, beyond the destiny of life as we know it.

Here we find the roots of religion, our human angst, our unwillingness to accept that everything that has to do with us and our planet is finite. Sustainability is here a *dogmatic* concept.

The typical human arrogant way of reasoning about climate change, climate emergency as if we are in total control is an example of this. There is a clear difference between talking about this in absolute terms and definite solutions and in terms of carefulness and thoughtful ways of living.

In theology “dogmatics” concerns the interpretations of religious dogmas, i.e. the interpretation of principles of religious faith.

The literal understanding of sustainability relates to faith, to principles of belief that entails or defines certain ways of living. In certain sense, this is an *optimistic* line of thinking in contrast to the more *pessimistic* way of seeing things, where we accept that with respect to the end result it doesn't matter very much what we do. This pessimistic outlook can lead to a careful way of handling things, but also to a careless and happy-go-lucky way of living.

So what does design for sustainability mean? What is sustainable design?

With respect to the first interpretation of sustainability there is in design a strong focus on technical matters, i.e. the choice of materials, production and distribution technology and so on. Choice of materials, as well as production technology, certainly have impact on expressions, but somehow mostly in an indirect way. There is no intrinsic theology of expression here. No clear design ideology.

In some sense it is business as usual. We certainly make changes, but not in any fundamental way with respect to design, i.e. with respect to form thinking and expressional ideas.

In contrast, design relating to the second dogmatic interpretation of sustainability is all about ideology, the expression of faith. A design program is here a theology of sustainability.

Acts of faith are central here. In designing we express ways of living, sustainable ways of living. To explain the canons of this in terms of a design program is what a theology of sustainability is all about.

A design program is a declaration of what and how to design. It could be everything from planning the construction and building systems of rails for high speed trains and large wind farms to restaurant cuisine and fashion brands.

What we do in implementing a design program is that we express ideas on how to do certain things, such as ideas about public transport and electricity production, food and garments. We redefine and offer reinterpretations of certain concepts by design and thereby introduce change in a very direct manner.

A design program can of course be based on scientific findings, on indisputable facts, but it is in itself not about propositions and truth. It is definitional matters, so to speak the opposite to stating propositions and facts.

A research program tells us what to focus on and how. They form the foundations for systematic research and are in themselves research results often built on important guiding examples. A design program can in a similar way be a research result. It introduces a foundation for design and often builds on suggestive experimental examples.

A central point here is that a design program cannot be directly derived from scientific facts. We need to turn propositional knowledge into definitional expressions. This is essentially what makes design difficult, this mysterious turn. From stating facts to expressing definitions.

Organic farming is a canonical example of a theology of sustainability. An ecovillage program is another such example.

Both these examples concerns expressing sustainable ways of living in a deep sense. This does not mean that they are based on out of the blue dreams. It is expressions of faith, the founding programs, whether it is explicit or implicit, explains the dogmas. The design itself gives an interpretation, it shows what it could mean in concreto.

From a rational point of view we could object that although the given program contains lots of care, it does not give us a solution to sustainability as a problem. Not only that, strictly speaking, there are no solutions, but also that the program introduce new problems. But this does only show that there is a lack of faith in our arguments. We simply do not believe.

So here are two very different ways of introducing change. On one hand design as solutions to a given problems and on the other hand design as expressing ways of living as dogmas. In both cases we introduce new problems, as we always somehow do by changing things. But there is a difference here as a matter of principle.

With respect to organic farming as dogma, we could say that this is no solution since we cannot feed an ever growing, world population this way. An answer to this is that it is a complete misunderstanding. The program is all about expressing ways of living, not about solving the problem of how to feed an ever growing world population. At a first glance this may sound cynical. And yes, it is perhaps problematic in a larger context. But in terms of expressing beliefs, dogmas, it makes sense.

From a dogmatic perspective we could argue that the electric car as an essential solution to problems of climate change is just business as usual. We see a problem and try to solve it by design, introducing tons of new problems without any founding deep beliefs in changing our ways of living.

This distinction is overall true, although we find lots of borderline cases. From a rational and pragmatic perspective design for sustainability is really business as usual. True, we try to take care with respect to materials, production, logistics and so on, but form thinking and expressional ideas are not affected in any deeper sense. The dogmatic perspective on the other hand has deep impact on the very design in itself.

What does all this mean for design education? Business as usual means that we continue to update ourselves and our students with respect to what happens in the development of new materials, new means of production and distribution as well as new ways of design management thinking. We also look back and revisit traditional handicraft and various forms of so called "natural" materials. Along with this we continue to develop our skills in form and expression.

Sustainable design, or design for sustainability, here means that we take care in relation to resources, economic and social issues. But if there is no aesthetics of sustainability, there is for designers no difference.

The more dogmatic perspective that search for change of living ask for change in aesthetics. There is a call for the design of new ways of living, for expressing acts of faith, the tools of ways of sustainable living.

Which of these perspectives is the radical one? Perhaps the most radical approach would be to take Papanek's proclamation seriously and just be slow and very, very careful in adding new problems, taking into account that all inventions are potentially dangerous. At the same time, we know that this is not going to work. Just because it is very boring.

In design education we could of course not teach the aesthetics of sustainability in the form of a specific way of living, to spell out a very specific theology of sustainability. That would be to turn education into some sort of sectarian prison. So, teaching must focus on what it might mean in general terms to design for ways of living based on faith, to design

for acts of faith. Where for example farming is not just rational matters, but also very much acts of faith, and so on.

Must we ourselves be believers to be able to design for faith, to express theology in a deeper sense? In my view, of course not. I don't know if J. S. Bach was a religious man in some more honest way, but it is for certain that his series of church cantatas express theology in a most deep sense (Martinssen). If you have the opportunity, please go to the small village Klippan in Skåne and have a look at the St Petri church designed by Sigurd Lewerentz (Flora et.al.).

I don't know if he was a deeply religious man, but the church is, among architects, one of the worlds most admired modern churches for its way of expressing sermons and acts of faith.

A very central theme in design education is design aesthetics, that is principles of form and expression in acts of designing, the logics of expression. So, aesthetics of sustainability must have its focus on principles of expressing ways of living.

In textile and fashion design education that means we have two interconnected tracks:

- (i) Textile and garment techniques and technology, understanding of textile materials and textile treatment technology, and skills in textile and garment construction techniques.
- (ii) Understanding of principles of, and skills in, expressing ways of living based on faith as this can be done in garments and textiles.

The first of these tracks is what we often associate with design for sustainability, a careful rational way of handling materials and treatment technology in the design of textiles and garments making sure that the ecological footprints are as light as possible. This is mainly a matter of technology and does not impact design aesthetics in any deeper sense, but textile technology is at the same time the technological foundation of textile and fashion design.

Principles of design aesthetics is about form thinking and means of expression. So in the second case these principles concerns form and expression of ways of living. These are things that certainly are very present both in fashion and textile design. How we dress and how we furnish our homes is all about expressing the way we live, or want to live, our lives, true or not.

Expressing ways of living in fashion/clothing design goes far beyond designing a single collection and the idea of style, although there of course are connections. It is a much deeper issue. It also goes beyond the design of symbols, although there are connections also here.

So, if it is not this and not that, what is it all about? In explaining any given design, we look for reasons why, why the design has been made in this or that particular way. Expressing ways of living this means we look for the principles defining a given way of living. For sustainability as a way of living this is the theology that explains the principles of sustainability as faith.

In design training this means we train ourselves to map out examples, real or fictitious, of theologies we trace all our design decisions back to. In my view, this is what the design aesthetics of sustainability is all about. It might seem strange, as if we somehow turn our back at sustainability as a problem and design challenge and do something else. Yes, we do something else, taking sustainability seriously as a design challenge is a change from business as usual to something else.

In design education we must train students to care and to take care in the forming and expressing of new things. To dwell on notions such as “sustainability” and “sustainable development” does not really add very much.

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