

Cvetka Požar

Alternative Theories and Practices in Sustainable Design

The second book in the Architecture Museum of Ljubljana Book Series continues the conceptual focus on the theory of architecture and design. In 2008, after the successful lecture series “Architectural Epicentres” and the publication of the book *Architectural Epicentres: Inventing Architecture, Intervening in Reality* (edited by Petra Čeferin and Cvetka Požar), we pursued our plan of thematic lecture series at the Architecture Museum with six talks in the area of design theory, which were organised in collaboration with the Pekinpah Association. The concept of the series, entitled “Sustainable Alternatives in Design: It’s High Time We Start Losing Time”, was developed by Barbara Predan and highlighted the very timely topic of sustainable development and sustainable design. The aim of the series was to find some “third way” in dealing with the gap between practice and theory. As Predan wrote in the concept statement, this third way is offered by Alain Badiou, who suggests that “the current discrepancy between theory and practice is merely an emancipatory stage that promises a new state of affairs and, consequently, creates a rift in consciousness”. Thus the theme of the lecture series, as well as the theme of the present book, is the search for the underlying premises of a new state of affairs, a new politics of collective emancipation in this field, a politics Predan also calls “a sustainable ethics of design”.

The speakers who kindly accepted our invitation attempted to explain and present possibilities for sustainable development and design that do not follow the market logic in which success is measured by the number of products sold; on the contrary, they discussed examples of new ways of working and coexisting that avoid the logic of capital and represent an alternative to the existing model. What is more, some of these approaches offer solutions that world leaders – provided they are sufficiently aware of the urgent environmental issues – should immediately consider. And if in this series we also searched for connections be-

tween theory and practice, it was here perhaps that the split between the two, and the strength (or failure) of progressive theory, revealed itself. For progressive theory has been unable to find, in practice, suitable interlocutors who could actively bring it to reality. The lectures, and the essays in this book, offer the reader a wide range of knowledge about approaches, actions and research in sustainable development and design in today's world, and this too was our aim.

8 Dieter Rams, who for many years was the chief designer at Braun GmbH, is famous for his supremely designed consumer products; at the first lecture, he presented his ten recommendations for good design. These principles, infused with universality, are especially relevant in today's consumer-oriented society and can certainly serve as an important touchstone in the search for a third way. In his essay, Rams underscores the thesis that designers create the artificial reality of things and therefore design has a profound social responsibility in this regard; the issue is not merely about the individual and how one lives with products, but rather, he says, it is much more important that the community be able to survive with the things it creates. The continued existence of society and the planet, threatened by ecological consequences that are increasingly felt by all of us, demands the radical measures called for not only by Rams, with his motto "Less but better", but also by the other contributors to this book.

Close to the modernist principle of simple yet high-quality, functional and aesthetic solutions is Per Mollerup's thesis about simplicity in design, a simplicity that relies on tradition and can lead to sustainable development. Jonathan Chapman looks at the concrete problems of excessive production and consumption, which are a significant factor in environmental change, since rapid consumption and unsustainable products create waste that pollutes the environment. Because there is still too little being done in this area to alleviate or radically alter the situation, he believes that if sustainable design intends to enrich the world, it must be an expansive, not a reductive, paradigm. Ezio Manzini stresses that the transition toward a sustainable society and sustainable ways of living involves an extensive process of social education. He cites examples of what the individual can do in organised communities, which are, as he himself defines them, "working prototypes of sustainable ways of living". For him, social innovation is the fundamental principle of such actions. He sees the possibility of these civil innovations achieving success wherever rapid and deep changes take place; this makes it possible for creative communities to operate with flexibility through an exchange of ideas and experiences.

Victor Margolin, who brought the lecture series to a close, notes, “Design today requires us to think about our system of values,”¹ a point that underscores the question of ethics in design. As he says, a product is not well designed if we know that it was made by an exploited worker; in this way “awareness is created of what the values are in design”.² As Margolin notes, we live in an age when the need for a culture of sustainability has never been more obvious, since climate change can be felt by everyone, and this makes the need for radical change all the more pressing.

Clive Dilnot approaches this last point analytically: he puts forth the complex thesis that sustainability is the most important historical project of the twenty-first century. At the same time, however, he sees a problem in the use of the word “sustainable”: because of its ubiquity, the force of the word has undoubtedly been diluted and as such it is useful only for marketing purposes – which is contrary to the true meaning of “sustainability”. Dilnot carefully analyses the meaning of the concept “sustainable” in relation to “un-sustainability”, since, as he says, understanding this structure will lead to solutions to the problems; he situates the role of design in the same context. He believes that the prevailing relations in the capitalist system – the only dominant paradigm today – “have to be dramatically reversed to allow a space for sustainability to occur”.³ He also emphasises that it is crucial here to consider the period we live in, since the tendency for accumulation, which drives capitalism, is too quickly generating consequences that can only guarantee destruction.

The essays in this book will, we are sure, open a much-needed discourse in Slovenia on the significance and work of sustainable development and design for a new future. In her introduction, Barbara Predan underscores the importance of two thinkers and creators, John Ruskin and Adolf Loos, who through their work made crucial and landmark contributions to the advancement of design and architecture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She takes their work as a point of departure for thinking about a way to revolutionise design today. Rejecting consensus, she stresses the necessity of a radical break, urged also by the other essays in this book, and ponders what the

¹ Jela Krečič, “Tudi finančni sistem je lahko slabo oblikovanje”, *Delo in dom*, 16, no. 39, (8 October 2008), 22.

² *Ibid.*

³ Clive Dilnot, “Sustainability as a Project of History,” in the present book, 82n39.

“event” is in design today – the event that would make this radical break possible and redirect development toward a better and sustainable society.

Despite the many unresolved issues, doubts about the role of sustainable development and design and the overuse of the concept of sustainability, and even despite the optimism that permeates this topic and that can be felt too in some of the essays in this book, the common point of these discussions is based on the realisation that design can be part of positive change, that it can contribute crucially toward a new and better future. And here lies the important contribution of the lecture series and, especially, of the book we have succeeded in publishing.

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