

After a short but passionate romance with sustainable development, I have left her for the far more genuine sustainability. I owe much to John Ehrenfeld and his new book *Sustainability by Design*. Heidegger distinguished theology from philosophy by revealing how faith, in the form of revelation, took the choice out of living, while philosophy was entirely about responsibility for one's own existence. Similarly, Ehrenfeld reveals the inhumanity in consumer society, even in its manifestations within sustainable development.

The text subtly distinguishes between a forced, albeit enticing form of consumer control, and a more subversive and disciplined form of consumer education. The *Cradle to Cradle* phenomenon, while based on exceptional systems thinking, suggests in its very title how little its authors think of the consumers it would effect. Is it the cradle of product conception? Rather, I believe they are referring to a nation of infants, a credit dependent horde of children who will never change *their* ways, and so it is *us* (mindful individuals? commercially successful individuals?) who must fit our production model to the public's habit. Ehrenfeld, I can only assume, is as disgusted as I am by such a low opinion of people, or if not that, then at least such a one-sided view of *possibility*.

In part, Ehrenfeld's text is an interdisciplinary, condensed review of the last hundred years of existential thought. For an industrial ecologist such as Ehrenfeld to so thoroughly base his design for sustainability on the work of philosophers and sociologists is, if nothing else, evidence of his distrust of the work of those within sustainable development per se. Indeed, Ehrenfeld has ridden a sustainable development feedback loop clear to the origin of the term.

This is a sustainability text that is dedicated to people, not the structures of people, not their things or their money or even their communities or governments, but the people. Why is there a need, within such a global discipline, for such a local focus? "To create sustainability," Ehrenfeld begins, "we must first adopt new meanings for the words we use to tell our stories" (xix). Yet we must be clear here. We need not redefine the structure, but only the

parts. This is not a matter for a mere deconstructionist, and we cannot start from scratch.

I have often wondered over the attractiveness of working toward sustainability primarily in Third World situations. There is the factor of compassion, which might even be defined as the desire for justice in the world. There is the assumption that creating new infrastructure is a more successful approach in situations that are lacking existing infrastructure. This I would call the appeal of *tabula rasa*. Accordingly, one of the dangers of sustainable development becoming a Third World instrument is that attempts to employ Third World sustainable strategies in First World societies will tend toward failure. Second, with *tabula rasa* thinking, we begin as a society to manifest a collapse, a crises situation, in a sense preparing for the worst, so we might then start over. Ehrenfeld, rather astutely, addresses this problem. His approach is elegant. “Sustainability rests on the possibility that the system of the present will maintain its structural integrity while the details change” (113).

Just as we are asking more of the world, through population, through increased resource use, etc., so too is the world now asking more of us. We must begin to think in more complex, dynamic ways, so that change and adaptation are built more intentionally into our systems. It is here that we see the applicability of Ehrenfeld’s pioneering work in Industrial Ecology. Yet, for most of the book, Ehrenfeld puts his industrial ecologist’s coat to the side and instead focuses within the realm of philosophy and sociology. His focus on philosophy is clearly in respect to the conceptual nature of philosophy as a discipline. Sustainability requires not only that we redefine such terms as profit, growth and progress, but more to the point, we must look directly at Being, at the process of human existence, and how we might shape our understanding of Being toward the cultivation of a sustainable world.

Such an ambitious philosophical agenda, both in Ehrenfeld’s book and within sustainable development, is a strength and a weakness. Despite however lucidly one re-defines the terms of the movement, the accessibility of the text will be limited by the abstract and complex thinking that comes with a truly

philosophical discourse. As Deleuze and Guattari have explored in *What is Philosophy* (1994), “There are no simple concepts... All concepts are related to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges” (16). Consider, despite the many pages he devotes to conceptual design, Ehrenfeld never arrives at such a succinct expression for the dynamic non-temporal interplay of problems and solutions within conceptual thought.

However, it is through the developed philosophical concepts employed by Ehrenfeld and potentially by the movement as a whole, that sustainable design concepts are liberated: “I begin with a new and distinctive definition of sustainability: *the possibility that human and other life will flourish on the planet forever*” (6). Forever is a big hiccup in most discourse. Ehrenfeld pulls it off here, but not because he believes passionately in his idea, though clearly he does. For those who read closely, this concept of forever is fortified in readings of Heidegger and then again in the implicit connection between Heidegger and the philosophy of Bergson. When Ehrenfeld dreams of forever, he is perhaps dreaming more as Heidegger had, realizing the traditional concept of eternity is lost in the grasp of true Being. “Time can no longer be thought of on the basis of eternity, but on the contrary, eternity must be thought of on the basis of time” (*Heidegger and Time* 5). Ehrenfeld’s design processes are bound to a notion of Being that denies a static present. “Nevertheless, the present is not; rather, it is pure becoming, always outside itself” (*Bergsonism* 55). Consider the complicated irony of this concept of time: by releasing conventional “tick-tock” notions and embracing the timelessness of the present, wherein *forever* becomes a possibility, wherein we begin to empower individuals with a heightened sense of being, wherein the consumer model becomes less appealing, wherein sustainability begins to form, wherein *forever* becomes a possibility. Without at least the last hundred years of philosophical discourse on the human experience, which for Ehrenfeld culminates with Heidegger’s *Dasein* (exemplary existence), there would still be a more fortified Aristotelian and Augustinian paradigm

disabling his design. In other words, rather than designing, he would be merely musing.

When we look at the history of consumer society, even if we go back only so far as the 1970s, when French theory and *re-defining* and *de-constructing* first landed in the United States, we find some of the beginnings of modern industrial ecology and sustainable development, but also witness the meaning and process of Being lost in reified abstractions. "...that curious form of passive rebellion without object, most often solitary (through piercing or idleness rather than through mobilization), a refusal of the social order that is less political than silent and anomic" (*French Theory* 59).

A dynamic Being, such as Ehrenfeld suggests, does not juxtapose people and the environment as two interacting entities or actors, or even as actors and non-actors. Where many are pulled toward either the ecocentric or the egocentric, a dynamic Being conceives of unity, emersion, and perception, so there is less distinction between the organism and the organism's environment, and greater emphasis on the integration and symbiosis of the two. It is not poetics or mysticism that inspires Ehrenfeld to brand his design the Tao of Sustainability. Indeed, much of our grasp of sustainability depends on whether we take a simplistic or complex understanding of the Tao and its Yin-Yang model. The dynamic line that rides the Yin-Yang is not a distinction of forms, but a place of integration. The Tao is not a form of dualistic thinking. It is a model for transcendence from dualistic thinking.

Yet sustainability must not be entirely abstract. There must be pragmatism. Many of the products, tools, and technologies already employed in the world have their own coded messages. Might we, as Ehrenfeld suggests, inspire more products with coded messages, "scripts," that will cause "presencing?" In what other ways might we further inspire integration between the individual and the environment? These are questions for sustainable development.

As we develop the concept of participatory design, as we increase the dynamic aspect of institutional management, creating a greater level of self-

referencing so that the design is in communication with the environment and the participants in such a way that refinement is an on-going process, we must constantly ask ourselves how else we might inspire the integration of individuals and their environment. These questions, and this determination to inspire integration and awareness, may be the breath that keeps sustainability in the realm of the possible.

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