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The Pro-duct of Planning

The condition that gets called the ecological crisis, and those elements of 'it' that get defined as concomitant environmental problems, are de facto historical effects. This is to say that our present circumstances have resulted from a historically formed and replicated way of thinking and acting. The character of this thinking and acting treated the 'natural world' as an instrument at the disposal of human beings: it was anthropocentric. To acquire successful sustainable strategies means to acquire another way of thinking and acting, this implies another kind of theory, science, technology and practice. What often now stands for 'solutions' is, in actuality, just an extension of myopic instrumentalism – waste management which depends upon, and so inscribes, existing trends; water treatment which supports present use patterns; cleaner production which goes on producing ecologically inappropriate products – such a list of examples can be both developed and extended.

How can a new disposition towards planning be articulated? Is there anything new to say? What can be new anyway?

These questions sit within a context, which is the search for, and attempt to construct, a viable contemporary practical philosophy. The gaps between practice and philosophy will never be what they seem. The other of the one is always near, even when the rhetoric appears to have forgotten this closeness.

HOLDING PLANNING AT BAY

Essentially, nothing is new. Everything is remade. This is to say that we, and every other force that brings some thing into being, makes with what is to hand, be it matter or immaterial. No claim to originality is made here. However, and in the spirit of Walter Benjamin's ninth thesis on 'the angel of history' we have moved from a perception of history as 'a chain of events' to that of the angel – 'he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet'.¹ For all the fictions of futurology, we travel like the angel of history, 'propelled by the storm our backs towards the future'. It is now out of the detritus, that sediment of narratives and thoughts we call history, or theory, or knowledge, that a series of fragments is brought together and offered up. Our task, our challenge, our imperative is not to remake the same, that is, the same as those same errors that we go on making, as 'free thinking subjects' and carriers of a tradition of thinking. Let's call the substance of the cited error 'the human led ecological crisis', a crisis that arrives at that very moment when the means taken as the means of our self produced sustainment become recognised as the means of eventual destruction. The city can be called upon to illuminate the point.

Consider what is familiar. The city can pivot, can turn. It can be, it is, that place in which the complex social and material ecology function together to support human life. Equally, out of its 'auto-destruction' (note the play in this word) of these ecologies it can become the very place in which this life is placed in most danger. The pathology of the city, its metabolic processes, the

¹ Walter Benjamin 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History' ix, *Illuminations* London: Fontana 1973, pp259-60.

organic metaphor of its function, all fold into, and out of, it being anthropocentrically inscribed as a place of life and death. Enough.

The pace, the rhetoric, that seeks to resist 'the same' – in this case the accepted, the normal, the proper and continually reproduced way of thinking, talking and writing – can only work as a punctum, an interruption, displacement and enablement if a more comfortable language in which to think is also allowed into its shadow. Put more simply, a strange, challenging and disruptive address to the familiar only gains power if it is connected by a language and thinking that is already embraced.

THE EASY WORDS OF AN OUTSIDER ARRIVE

Appearing to have already forgotten what has just been said, consider this statement:- 'In the main, planning manifests, in word and deed, an intellectual stasis. It seems trapped in the afterlife of the hegemony of the modernist stamping in which it was formed. Meanwhile, from this agency, an illusory identification and action arrives. Not seeing the relational matrix of what is called 'the ecological crisis', the crisis gathered by the city is a claim made to a managed path towards solutions. Committees are formed, publications and policy are written, projects are started.'

Now to unpick this compressed generalisation, but without rehearsing a protracted historical account.

The notion of the mobilisation of Platonic order, as historically directive of the form of the city, is not planning configured as a professional practice. The discourse of planning, as it is directive of planning practice, did not arrive until the modern States were constituted and became implicated in the management of constructed environmental, civic, social and economic functions (this is to say that the mindset, professional practice, theory and language of planning were formed in a framing in which the project of political, economic and cultural modernity were all unified as functional instruments for the functioning of the city of modernity). While modernity, in large part, arrived out of the attempt to form a world by the application of structured thought (the Greek tradition) planning, as an institutional practice, both extended this thinking while equally folding into the arrival of a modernist ground of applied reason (science). To call up planning, to evoke it in a postmodern idiom, to strive to reinvent it, always reaches back into its ground of becoming. The finding of a new form in an existing ground will not happen, not least because language of its self naming can but recall itself. The problem here then is not one of form or practice but the taken-for-granted ground upon which they stand. For planning to remake itself in another way, to act in another way, to speak in another way, it has to find another name and another ground upon which to draw, speak and fabricate.

A brief sweep of the methodological impasse

Mostly planners plan and architects design in a condition of constrained thought. This condition is part of their historicity (that unremembered and untold history that is lived and in so doing inscribes itself upon one's nature). It is out of this process of becoming a professional that a dominant foundation of thinking, seeing structure and form arrives. With the arrival of the planner's status as professionalised subject came the problem of the 'master view' of a modernist authority. From the contemporary perspectives of postmodernism, ecological crisis and the decentred organisation the modernist mind set is redundant. It is bonded to a past in that it thinks 'the modern' and its methods as the sole instruments for the realisation of a present. Modernist thought blocks the way to the future by the very way the future is conceived and positioned.

What the professionally moulded modernist mindset actually delivers is a problem of direction linked to a problem of perception. It sees the future as the past, moreover it sees with an exclusive institutional confinement which disavows all that the institution designates as outside the discipline. From such a view one could say that the 'the professional' is kept on a path which insures the return of error, by a conformity to values and practices that makes all seemingly different actions an enactment of the same. Thus the institution equally cannot recreate, it has to conserve the same – thereby the door to fundamental reform remains closed.

More than institutional stasis there also arrives an undoing, one which could be called 'a deep structure of conjunctural and social ecological disunification'. What this compressed cluster of words can be made to mean first requires calling up Jean Luc Nancy's notion of the 'inoperative community'. Put at its briefest, Nancy forcefully argues that now, for everyone, that which we call community has ceased to function as community, not least because the economy of the system of meaning and belief (mythology) that a community inhabits and grounds itself upon has (been) 'destroyed'.² Refusing to call up the evacuated explanatory power of modernity, one can say that the destructive forces flowed from, and to, metropolitan time and speed (the ever faster fluid dynamics of the exchange of people, materials, goods, services, knowledges, institutions, labour, money, signs and values – all in an unrestrained space of multi-directional and multi-formed growth). For all of us, everything from everywhere now arrives and departs. In the unevenly developed, neocolonialist, forming, deforming, dividing and un-natural nature of the 'now city', order is impossible, change is assured, authority can only be coercion and coherence dwells solely in the local.

Planning is always undone. The more planning tries to do the more it undoes itself.

Metaphysically, in this epoch we, as and in difference, confront that which has always been so with a new terror and a new freedom. For those who question, certainty, truth, and reality all figure in an abyss of our own making. Worlds are made out of ways of thinking. 'Our' way of thinking is thinking that arrived and departed with the coming of this thinking. It is no mere play of language to say that order always stands upon disorder, reason upon the irrational, or that disorder stands upon order, the irrational upon the rational. Order, disorder, reason, the irrational are all historically manufactured romantic fabrications that never were, or could ever be, fully secured. The point of all this is to clearly acknowledge the foundation of planning as an institutionalised convention, rather than as a rationally grounded practice.

Thinking planning in-difference is a pressing task if the error of planning is to be faced and displaced. Let's take the instance of cultural pluralism. It is accommodated into the plan, as a consensual solution, as mixed form and style, as a multicultural richness of voices – but cultural difference will not be so managed. Contrary to planned appearances temporal and spatial convergence does not arrive, which is to say that while we may seem to exist in the same time and place as others there is in fact no actual proximity. The registers of self placement that form the cartography of a culture do not draw one map, direction or movement but many. These maps do not compliment each other; rather than any one place being one, it is multiple. Increasingly as culture flows ever faster, as human settlement patterns get more and more disarticulated from geography, planning fails as a path to establish a hegemony of space. Chaos reasserts itself as that inoperability which now becomes a functioning dysfunctional foundation, nature, future. Aware of both loss and opportunity, we, in-difference, make, and remake, where, and with what, we can. 'We' cannot find

² Jean-Luc Nancy *The Inoperative Community* Peter Connor ed. and trans., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, pp1 - 41.

ourselves as one - no community appears. For 'us', 'here' and 'there' are neither the same nor different.

Metaphysical problems do not stay in metaphysical space. Thinking strays.

For instance: the functioning of the dysfunction of planning converges with the destiny of metabolic failure. Such failure, as hyped and concealed, is most marked in the growth of urban dislocation, fracturing and displacement as these are all projected as urban 'development'. More than this, the organic metaphors of thinking the city also obstruct a recognition of system breakdown and the registration of the city as a primary location of an ecological impasse.³ It follows that other ways of seeing and thinking the city are urgently needed.

For instance: planning stands before and is over-determined by the unplanned. We could call this the ecological crisis, but equally we could call it our hapless self undoing, our unknowing in doing what we do. We and crisis are of one circle, one (re)turning. Unless we address this unplanable historicity, the directional given, all options are negated. From within, from without and from another of our creation (the being of simulated beings) life, all life, stands under erasure. Damage limitation may be the only option. Sustainment, unless made to be what it pretends to mean, can mean, in the long run, no more than delay. Remembering the pointless appeal to community, eternity is not ours, the length of life, as a living on, is in the power of (the) living.⁴

Damage limitation by design: a micro ecological approach

The ideas about to be presented at hand should not be misread as naive utopianism. They are certainly not in the lineage of radical planning.⁵

The argument to be put forward in fact implies a critique of premodernist, modernist, neomodernist and postmodernist utopianism. The idea of an utopia is present at the birth, maturity and fall of modernity. It unites desire and anticipated pleasure for that which is thought of as better and then projects it towards the future. This projection often returns – utopian dream turns to nightmare. At worst, freedoms are restricted and life is curtailed in the name of the utopian means striving for their end; at best utopian idealism undercuts 'real' potentialities. The future as it was contemplated in the classical tradition was not predicated on an evolutionary dynamic. This modality of utopia (which arrived prior to the arrival of the term) rode on and employed a naturalism (a condition of nature as a permanent good life) as the proper order of things.⁶

³ At this point one can read where one is reading and also read, to take one example, the city as it appears and disappears in Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* London: Vintage, 1992

⁴ These issues are dealt with at length in Tony Fry *Remakings: Ecology, Design, Philosophy* Sydney: Envirobook, 1994.

⁵ Peter Kropotkin *Fields, Factories, Farms, Workshops Tomorrow* London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1974 - an text predicated upon an 'ideal' planning solution.

⁶ Plato's Republic, for instance, presents an ideal social plan in which knowledge and 'the idea' are the natural ground of standard, order, judgement. Plato's notion of the realisation of pure form of the ideal was based on a view of knowledge derived from, and employed to arrive at, confirmation of the unity of the good. The good, as the highest order of the 'Intelligible World' equates with the Sun, the highest order of the 'Visible World'. The arrival at the good then was an end point, a total system of perfect function of realised nature. Utopia (as Arcadia – the Golden Age) was living this condition of the unchanging perfect form of the good.

The concept utopia was first coined by Sir Thomas More - the title of his book of 1516. He invented the word by combining elements of two Greek words - eutopus (good place) and outopus (no place) - thus utopia is a good place that is no place, or put another way an exemplary spatial fiction. More posited a faith in the power of fiction as the mechanism that can capture and inspire imaginations. It, in his words 'smears the truth with honey.' Rather than present a program, plan, policy which can deliver a future utopian fiction the utopia presents a world in which the ideal is the actuality, or is already realised. More's fiction of the future pronounces its modernity, and modernity itself, through the voice of reason - reason is that which is empowered to direct the material form and social conditions of the future of the future. Echoing Platonism, More's exposition, in common with multitude of other utopias, adopts the ideal city as one of the major means to present his conditions for an ideal future. In this observation we have utopianism as almost intrinsic to the architectonics of architectural thinking. This mode of thought clearly resonates well beyond architectural planning profession. Utopian thinking, ancient and modern, shares another premise of determinations - this is that human perfectibility is possible in perfect conditions. Francis Bacon, in *New Atlantis* took the trajectory of More's utopia one step further and propelled it into modernity by adding an over-riding faith in science as the agency that would deliver the ideal future in which nature would be commanded. In the shift from More's thinking to Bacons, there is a move from utopia as a genre of ideologically employed fiction to utopianism as a foundational premise of modern Western scientific and technocratic thought. This utopianism has spoken with various voices: - 'progress', 'order', 'development' and modernisation. Utopianism, so understood, became part of the mind set of Western culture.

An other way acting now

A corrosive idea is on offer. It presents a structural deconstruction – it takes the material form of an idea, identifies its conceptual foundation and then returns it to its ground to make it otherwise. Iron, water, rust, trace elements - the same elements appear in a difference, and thereby return to their own undoing and remaking. Holding onto the theme of a double movement, a deforming formative idea will be unfolded. The move going on here is one from 'the who', that design the city, to 'the what'.

The action of the idea centres on an inhuman effect, by which is meant the effect of systems and objects as they operate within an ecological function. This function cannot be taken, irrespective of the appearances, as a sign of nature or of restored community (structure), or human effect.

The idea, the form, is carried by a word – 'pro-duct'.

Pro-duct refuses the end point of product. Pro-duct is a beginning. Pro (forward) duct (link, connection), the idea starts out as the prospect of creating a forward link idea. It is able to be unfolded as the process of pragmatic communality, a means of remaking, an intervention of a regeneration in co-operation.

At this point a characterisation of ecodesign is needed.

While exemplary objects and methods can be, and are created, to objectify and advance ecodesign, fundamentally it has to be able to be seen as a way of thinking about designing and the designed. Ecodesign is actually a disposition, a comportment towards changing direction translated into action. Designing and the designed are never the final resting place of the decisionism of design - the designed always goes on designing the conditions in which we find ourselves. A great deal of utopian thought, of course, recognised designed determinism. What it failed to do is acknowledge that design has determinate omnipresent consequences in everyday circumstances. In other words,

everything designed determines what is designed. Thus to posit one form – large or small, building, chair, city or car – as a determinate was to move from the designer to the designed as if this relation was not mediated and transformed by the agency of everything to be found in the context of the act of designing and the environment of the designed. To put this observation into the frame of planning: the planned is always replanned by the environment that planning seeks to plan. Agency thus can never be just human or spirit.

It follows that it is not possible for humans to fully design or manage the(ir) environment. Ecodesign embraces the exercise of design as a general everyday practice of human thought and action, the remaking of design as an organised multi-professional practice, as well as dealing with taking into account design as the designing inhuman deposit of human agency. Ecodesign confronts the ongoing destructive power and effect of the creations of design, and in doing this has to undercut and destroy the current design ethos. Ecodesign is the future of design, if there is to be any future. The 'eco' prefix is thus just a transitional designation of design(ing) for a difference of direction. It certainly should not be taken as a design practice that delivers 'greened products' to add to the breadth of choice for the consumer.

The pro-duct is an ecodesign idea, action, theory and agency of design transformation while also being the prospect of a *what* that designs, rather than a *who* that plans. A projection of what a pro-duct could be and could do can be given.

The pro-duct could be made to 'work a play' between sign and function. It could fuse aesthetic style qualities, care and craft of construction, pleasure in use, materials environmental cost, energy uptake to produce and use, lifespan and environmental use effect.

The pro-duct could arrive out of the context of locally made materials, be they, for instance, plantation crops or recycled new materials compounds. Selection of these materials of course, would be on the basis of an assessment of their environmental impact, availability, renewability, materials recoverability and so on.

The pro-duct could be designed to be manufactured to high ecologically accountable standards based on clean energy uptake, good waste management, and good pollution control. The design of the work and the workplace clearly has a big impact on the ecology of the worker. The disposition of the workplace to other lifespaces - homes, shops, etc, is also not only a functional issue but an ecological one.

Pro-ducts need to be subordinated to ecological imperatives in other ways – the design of the plant which would produce it (including the design of buildings, production engineering, health and safety etc.) and the design of the delivery system of the pro-duct to its market - the design of advertising, packaging and all the other mediations of its perception.

But more than all these pragmatics, the pro-duct could also become the symbolic carrier, a transportable ethical form, of that which unites material and social relations within vital biological and social ecology. The pro-duct thus can be made to project not just what it is but how it came to be and why, but also a statement and a means of care. The modest object that acts, that has been named pro-duct, hereby becomes a true idol.

What all this adds up to is a reconfiguration of local economic development, by viewing the built relation between a product, production, human resources, materials resources and general and specific environmental problems as a coherent, manageable and practical intervention. This

reconfiguration is equally applicable to a greenfield or a dysfunctional urban site. Mixed development has here been brought much further back, has been anchored far more to a catalytic force – the directional force of a strategically selected artefact, production process, distribution system, market, life style. It lets the product do the pro-ducting. It lets the pro-duct become the critical factor to design that thereafter acts as the main agency that drives planning management. Controls here become inseparably environmentally and economically driven. In terms of elements of the pro-duct idea nothing is new (but nothing ever is - we all live by appropriation), but the connections are not the same, the mix is remixed to deliver the remade (which is ever what the new is).

Be it for the manufacture of natural gas conversion kits for family cars, ecotourism holidays or unbleached natural cotton clothing *it is the environmental ordering of the effects of the elements of the production of a pro-duct* (the nature of the workforce, the material needs, the building forms, the finance structures and so on) *that structures the plan.*

What all this means is the creation of an other ground for using and directing the workplace, the workforce and the product of work.

It means the development of practices and objects of ecological sustainment by economic mechanisms.

It means that the functional ground for the inoperative community is built around itself by itself, with partners (no, this is not a small time self build mind set at work here). If the pro-duct has legs, it means that the entire development model has to be acknowledged for what it is: mostly an outmoded, economically misguided, ecologically damaging, socially misdirected and ethical undefensible way of continually masking chaotic capitalism as rational ordering via the playmaking of planning. 'Developers' are needed as reactive pro-ducers, which is to say that the concept and practice of 'development' itself needs to be on the drawing board.

The redesign of 'development' is itself but one element of an economic restructuring, driven by ecological imperatives that will occur in the next few decades. This restructuring will be, by the design of a perceived necessity, more profound than any other event in the history of capitalism. The very 'nature' of economy, exchange and value are all up for reinvention. The ecological reconfiguration of the economic can only happen by planning, by design, but, as it has been sought to be shown, not the planning and design we know. While there is an increasing sense of the unsustainability of the status quo, a hazy recognition of the condition to aim for, and an even more uncertain understanding of how to get from 'here' to 'there', what is certain is the move has to happen and that it has started.

Once one becomes attuned to the coming culture of change, constantly witnessing the ongoing practice and utterances of 'normal' planning and design is strange indeed. One usually approaches the strange with caution, but what is clearly in need of far greater recognition is that it is the familiar that now threatens.