

UNDOING THE RELATION: Image, Sustainability and Architecture

by Anne-Marie Willis with Tony Fry

How to image sustainability? Does asking this question assume a certain progressive architectural position? Certainly 'imaging sustainability' rolls easily enough off the tongue, yet so much is assumed in this seemingly innocent phrase. In actuality, 'imaging sustainability' is only possible within a representational model of knowledge which assumes:

- That there is an actual pre-existent condition, 'sustainability'
- That this pre-existent sustainability is available to be represented
- That once represented it will be seen for what it is
- That 'representation' is itself not an enduring theoretical problematic

We would wish to contest these assumptions. In so doing we will hardly be adding anything to a debate that has been going on for some two thousand years. For the problematic of 'imaging sustainability' is platonic idealism incarnate, echoing other classical pairings such as essence and appearance, content and form. However, what we hope will be new is to bring the perennial question of the relation between 'the seen' and 'the known' to the issue of sustainability and to architecture. These are big questions, the aspiration is only to open up a space for their asking.

Asking questions about 'imaging sustainability'

Of course it could be counter argued that the project of imaging sustainability is not necessarily idealist, this by saying it could just as well be embarked upon with a distinctively postmodern sensibility that knows there is no truth behind appearances, but which is aware that this does not diminish their seduction, and thus seeks pragmatically to image what it desires or even to create desire by what it images. But such a strategy remains locked within the logic of the image — the tradition of ocularcentrism (the privileging of sight as the means to knowledge) and this, as we will argue is in fact a problem for the desired condition of sustainability. We will also argue that architecture's relation to the image is equally problematic.

There is a common claim that architects think predominantly in terms of images. One of the reasons that sustainability appears as an *image* problem is that imaging is thoroughly ingrained in almost every aspect of architectural practice: from the concept sketches of a proposed project, to the detailed drawings which instrumentally prefigure the arrival of a built form, to the circulation of carefully composed photographic images of completed projects, which in turn prompt further imaginings, image-making and more building. And then there is the way in which architectural design is becoming increasingly enfolded within electronic imaging technologies, with CAD systems imposing particular geometries of calculative visualisation and the sheer memory capacity of systems facilitating a menu-selecting, cut and paste, drag and drop approach to designing. All of this is part of a longer history of the construction of architectural visibility extending from renaissance perspectivalism to architectural photography, which has itself been constitutive of the culture of the image. It is this history of architectonic ways of seeing within which 'sustainability' is attempting to be accommodated — problematically, we would argue.

Send in the spin doctors

But let's stay for a moment within the logic of the image and consider another dimension of 'imaging sustainability'. A prompt for such a project could be the perception that sustainability has an 'image problem',

which is to say that the iconic forms that have come to signify 'sustainability' are deficient, that better ones are needed. This proposition also rests upon a faith in the agency of the image which assumes that sustainability is available to be represented, and further, that it will be known if it is seen.

One version of this faith in appearances goes along the lines of 'if only we could make an image of sustainability, maybe it could be achieved materially'. The assumption is that images are needed to inspire and mobilise people towards creating different kinds of futures. This impulse to sign-driven change is utopian. Utopianism projects the apparently new into an imagined blank future space, stepping over but not seeing the accretions of past and present. History appears as the image of a time line or of a time machine travelling unimpeded through space. Such images of time and history have no 'real' basis, they are sheer imaginative constructions that become commonsense and commonplace through unthought reiteration. Desire projects utopias, desire leaps over the detritus of the present into an imagined shining, perfect and static future. The word 'vision' often appears coupled with 'future'.

To pose sustainability as a strategy of 'imaging' is to forget that we never see only what is in front of our eyes, that we project what we already know onto what we see and that much remains invisible, not because it is unavailable to our eyesight, but because of partial and differential knowledges which limit the extent to which we can make sense of what is before us. Learning to see the unsustainability of what is now (and to see it in ways that connect detail with the panoramic view and which are alert to the persistence and mutations of the past in the present) is a more urgent task than constructing utopian visions which in fact conceal the need for learning to see. Without such seeing there can be no recognition and engagement with the condition of causality and thus no proposal of substantial solutions. This imperative to understand the extent and complexity of unsustainability is becoming obscured by the creeping arrival of a mood that labels the speakers of unsustainability as 'doomsayers' and which leaps impatiently to embrace 'solutions' on the basis of their feel-good factor rather than their adequacy to the problem. This simplistic sensibility characterises a great number of the attempts to 'image sustainability'.

And on first appearances it *does* seem that sustainability has an image problem. You don't have to look too far to find plenty of examples of naïve and uninspired images of 'sustainable cities', 'sustainable houses' and so on. In fact the problem is that too frequently imaging strategies are leapt upon as if they had agency on their own. Cliches abound, from the promotion of low-tech supposedly autonomous houses to official planning 'visions' illustrated by cartoon parodies of the familiar such as conventional houses still on large blocks with 'sustainable add-ons', like solar panels, rainwater tanks and compost bins. Then there is the misguided assumption that buildings fully integrated into natural settings and made of natural materials, equal sustainability. While such examples clearly don't encompass all that goes under the banner of sustainable architecture, they do circulate as extremely problematic signs of sustainability, making the whole idea unappealing to many architects. Counter to this, in more recent years, and emanating from the more informed sectors of the building services industry, is the image of high tech sustainability, such as naturally ventilated multi-storey office buildings.

Even within its own terms, the project of seeking forms of architectural expression for sustainability poses problems. If sustainability is defined in an extremely reductive way — as certain technologies for instance — one is faced with the dilemma of invisible building services, concealed water conservation devices, pv arrays that are out of sight, certified timbers that do not declare themselves as such, etc. Then there are the even harder-to-communicate sustainable absences: the absence of air conditioning, the absence of volatile organic compounds in paints, or, more significantly, the extension that wasn't built, the new furniture that wasn't purchased and other things that have been crucially refused or left out. The frustrated desire to find modes of expressing that which isn't there is a testimony to the dominance of image-driven architecture, which at a deeper level is a more significant problem for sustainability than the questions of architectural expression.

We are arguing that it is inappropriate to view what may be claimed to be 'sustainable architecture' merely in terms of an 'image problem' that can be solved with a different set of signs and symbols or a new aesthetic. Inadequate images of 'sustainable architecture' are mere surface phenomena, symptoms of far more substantial problems, which go to and move across vast, inter-related domains, pointing to: the inherent limitations of image culture; a vastly underdeveloped understanding of sustainability; and architecture's relation to the image.

A vastly underdeveloped understanding of sustainability

While it is possible to cast many examples of 'what gets offered up as 'ecologically sustainable modes of building' within the traditions of architecture, it is only over the last decade that sustainability has been presented to architects as a really pressing issue. This has in large part been driven by increasing recognition of environmental crisis and formal commitments by governments to Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) defined in terms of inter-generational equity and the maintenance of biodiversity, followed up with programs for protecting natural environments, pursuing energy efficiency, waste reduction, cleaner air and waterways. This recent history is well known, what is less apparent however is that these historical developments have occurred within the context of an ever expanding culture of the image, environmental crisis itself being both a problem for, and a product of, representation. It is a problem because of the unrepresentability of concepts such as global warming, which get presented by default via the televisual focus on symptoms which thereafter get treated as the problems to be solved.

The environmental agenda has made its way into the building industry through measures such as ESD requirements for public sector construction projects (the Sydney 2000 Olympics being the most prominent Australian example), new standards and design tools for more energy efficient buildings and increasing numbers of local government authorities applying environmental criteria as part of the Development Application process. A new awareness has also been registered by the building materials industry with increasing numbers of products marketed in terms of their claimed environmental benefits, some of these being an opportunistic recoding of already existent features, others representing more significant contributions to resource conservation and pollution reduction.

Mainstream 'add-on sustainability'

Reporting on actions taken might sound like pretty good progress over a decade, and from a certain perspective it is. But it would be a mistake to think that if these kind of developments keep on expanding we will eventually arrive at an end state of 'sustainability'. The limitations of these developments over the last decade need to be clearly understood in order to make a leap beyond the current situation which could be characterised as 'add-on sustainability', which is in fact not sustainable.

Let's look at some of the problems. First of all, ESD as an idea has moved from an ill-defined political aspiration to journalistic rhetoric and then to instrumental 'solutions', all of this much too fast. There is an inherent contradiction in butting up 'development' with 'ecological sustainability' that cannot be simply pushed aside, given that two centuries of pursuing unrestrained global economic development is the reason that today there is a crisis of ecological sustainability. Several years ago, in recognition of this situation, we at the EcoDesign Foundation reversed the terms to DES (developing ecological sustainment) to indicate the appropriate order of priorities, i.e., development as the means towards sustainment, not development as an end in itself. Nowadays, it is more common to talk of sustainability than ESD, but along with that has come an expediently deployed ambiguity which conflates economic and ecological sustainability (such as when the forestry industry talks about sustainable yield, meaning continuity of harvestable trees rather than the ongoing health and viability of extant forest ecosystems).

Second, and linked to the first point, mainstream, oxymoronic 'add-on sustainability' recognises that human impacts on the biophysical environment need to be reduced, but not at the price of reduced standards of living. A commitment is declared to 'balancing economic, ecological and social needs', but never questioning their fundamental bases nor facing up to inherent contradictions. The latest version of this is so-called 'corporate sustainability' which advocates a 'triple bottom line' i.e., striving for positive financial, social and environmental outcomes. The flawed thinking here is the positing of equivalence between the three factors and especially of granting financial value the status of a value in its own right, forgetting that it is only ever a measure and a means. As Karl Marx argued long ago, money is simply a means to comparatively measure things which are intrinsically incomparable, and the nature of the commodity (i.e., anything that has a price) ultimately presents a mystery of constantly deferred value (a mystery that only further deepens today as commodities dematerialise, currencies float and value is created and destroyed in the hyper-reality of global finance markets).

It almost seems as if the enormity of the unsustainable is occasionally glimpsed by decision-makers and that they realise the extent to which the imperative of sustainability demands changes to everything — economies, lifestyles, values. This moment of 'insight' causes them to turn away in horror and to repress the unsustainable, preferring to contain sustainability to the odd policy or program here and there, rather than it becoming the

foundational principle of *all* policy. But maybe this is being too generous, maybe timidity and compromise are so ingrained that such revelatory moments are impossible — the timidity that commits itself to the already compromised position of ‘balancing economic, ecological and social needs’ *as they are currently understood*.

‘Add-on sustainability’ takes current economic structures and aspirations as given, as that to be accommodated. It refuses to face the possibility that current economic directions are structurally part of the problem of unsustainability. As suggested, most actions currently claimed as sustainable are either ameliorations of previous unsustainable practices or modifications of current unsustainable practices redesigned to be less impacting. The unsustainable character of normality looms large, it occupies the horizon of possibilities, colonising imaginations and obscuring what needs to emerge. In all, the actual challenge to confront, with all of its horrors and potentialities, goes by unspoken. This challenge *does* involve a reduction of standards of living for the world’s well-off and improvement for the poor (both excess and poverty are generative of unsustainability). At the same time it means the making of a ‘quality based economy’ — a major project before us.

What then is sustainability?

Sustainability is not an endpoint that can be defined or imaged, rather it is (a) process.

Thus we prefer to talk about *sustain-ability*: the ability to sustain the things and processes which can in turn sustain. This is deliberately circular and open-ended because that which needs to be sustained is neither fixed nor constant. Sustain-ability is not confined just to the biophysical, thus it can’t be defined reductively as e.g., the protection of biodiversity (when it is, this can lead to ‘solutions’ such as the confinement of threatened species to bounded ‘safe havens’ encircled by unsustainable normality). Sustain-ability is that which overarches the relation between the biophysical, made materiality, the socio-cultural and the symbolic. Sustain-ability thus constitutes the agenda of learning and action for an eternity, it implies that *our* future (and the future of much else) is in our hands, is our responsibility and our absolute imperative to create.

Sustain-ability can be barely yet glimpsed, it is yet to be learnt. And it can only begin to be learnt via a thorough analysis of unsustainability as a deep structural condition that by necessity touches everything — the nature of work, leisure, desires, the spaces we live in and move through, the technologies we use.¹ But it is more than just a question of analysis: we have to develop a sense of the unsustainable, an ability to see, feel, hear, taste and smell it.

Sustain-ability, Sustainments and Architecture

Understanding sustain-ability as process has profound implications for architecture. Over-arched by the imperative of sustain-ability, architecture becomes a means for installing and maintaining process, it no longer ends with an object, product or form. This means shifting the primary focus of design away from the iconic form of the finished product to a concern with the nature of the built as the space of dwelling. It means a reorientation away from aesthetic preoccupation to a focus upon architecture’s ontological character and consequences._

And this means that architecture needs to become an activity of ‘designing sustainments that sustain’ rather than end-point structures and buildings. Moreover, the idea of *sustainments* is put forward in opposition to add-on sustainability (which as argued is the sustaining of the unsustainable). Sustainments are modest and accumulative, situation specific, starting wherever you are and can, in this sense sustainments are many of those things currently designated as features of sustainable architecture — but they are more than this, because they are focused on time and process not just on space and object. Sustainments contribute cumulatively to sustain-ability. They are steps by which to learn and act.

A sustainment might be the adaptation of a currently existing building to a new use instead of building a new one. Or it might be a long term plan to reduce an existing building’s energy uptake over time. Or it might be helping a client to better manage and use the spaces they already have rather than building an extension. But in each case, the course of action is framed by questions about relative impacts and the sustain-ability of use over time.

Architecture as a means of making sustainments is quite different from ‘sustainable architecture’, a term which suggests something that can be defined and recognised, something that has finality, that is fixed. Yet fixity and

¹ These issues are developed in Tony Fry *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* UNSW Press, 1999 in which defuturing is presented as a method for reading the unsustainable in order to be in a position to define solutions.

finality are antithetical to sustain-ability. Many things follow, not least in terms of the role of the architect, relations with clients, services and the redesign of professional practice.

Clearly, there are many obstacles standing in the way of this advocated shift towards an architecture of sustainment. It is easy to put the blame on commercial disincentives, but just as problematic, if not more, are the taken-for-granted notions about the nature of architecture. Here the cultivated and the crass converge and we return to the problem of the image. What we are referring to is the dominant notion of architecture as an aesthetic practice — the object to be viewed, the pre-occupation with the appearance of built forms, with making an authorial aesthetic statement. These are the agendas that drive and animate projects for architects, architectural critics and clients alike. The dazzle of appearances obscures the question of sustain-ability, which if it enters the picture at all, becomes an afterthought, an add-on, reduced to questions of function and frequently relegated to building scientists and engineers to solve.²

Architects as pastrycooks

Architecture cannot become a means of making sustainments while it continues to be driven primarily by aesthetics. Aesthetics here is not being used here to name a branch of philosophy, nor is it being used as a term to indicate an absolute value. The domination of aesthetics we are referring to parallels Heidegger's observation that 'for us moderns ... the beautiful ... is intended for enjoyment and art is a matter for pastrycooks'.³ In this context, what pastry, image and aesthetics have in common is the ability to conceal the nature of substance. Aestheticisation has, and continues to be, a key driver of modern and postmodern cultures. Distinctiveness bestowed by style is elemental to the creation of value in contemporary economies. As the aestheticisation of everyday life has gathered pace over the 20th century, architecture's concern with architectural style (or 'the quality of expressive form' or 'good design') is no longer sufficient claim for its distinctiveness. In fact recent local developments are an example of the conflation of architecture and style-based commodification. The apartment building boom in Sydney and Melbourne evidences this with calculated lifestyle theme-ing of residential developments and elaborate marketing campaigns often featuring name architects. Thus the apartments in the Renzo Piano designed Aurora Place, Sydney, were touted in press advertisements as 'art you can live in' (and were sold from a display space fitted out like an art gallery several hundred metres down the road from the construction site). Equally architecture ever becomes entertainment, fun, play.

Whether an aesthetically driven program is successful and the resulting structure ends up being regarded as being of high quality or whether it is regarded as a kitsch failure is not at issue here. What is at issue is the sacrificing of sustain-ability for appearance (i.e., the aesthetic judgement of how something looks). This is problem irrespective of whether 'good' or 'bad' taste is mobilised. Examples are many: the selection of building orientation according to views rather than solar access; the design of large internal spaces to impress the eye while ignoring the greenhouse costs of heating and cooling; the rejection of solar technologies because of what they look like on a roof; the insistence on an ultra smooth (class 1) concrete finish without consideration of the old growth trees felled to provide a fine grained form face; and, more generally, subordinating structure to surface appearance. The list could go on. An aesthetically neutral building is of course an impossibility, however designing a sustainment *does* mean subordinating aesthetics to sustain-ability. So each of the above examples becomes a prompt to question the particular aesthetic agenda at stake — why not a different roof line, street alignment, surface treatment, configuration of spaces, and so on? The specific design challenge is to create forms and appearances appropriate to what is attempting to be sustained through the larger design process.

The giving of form always implicates aesthetics and symbolic meanings. Nothing that is made or appropriated (which is to say everything, as the intertwining of appropriating and making is the totality of our means of bringing to presence) is ever free of meaning. Everything signifies. So, to posit sustain-ability as primary value is not to disavow signification and fall into a fallacious instrumental functionality. We are well beyond a state of innocence as far as appearances are concerned, as Roland Barthes told us long ago, even pure functionality rapidly becomes the sign of functionality.⁴ So the question of image returns and the issue of meaning and signification is unavoidable for sustain-ability. However, in acknowledging this, it does not necessarily follow that the creation of symbolic forms must be the *raison d'être* of architecture. The imperative of sustain-ability

² We are speaking here of the dominant tendency, which is not to say that there are not some (a very small number) of architects who are seeking to transcend 'add on sustainability'.

³ Martin Heidegger *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (trans Ralph Manheim) New Haven: Yale Uni Press, 1987, p. 131.

⁴ See in particular 'Semantics of the Object' (1964) in Roland Barthes *The Semiotic Challenge* (trans. Richard Howard), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988

demands that architecture be concerned more with the relation between design and modes of being (i.e., the domain of the ontological) than with forms, meanings and appearance. The symbolic falls away in the face of the enormity of the imperative of sustain-ability. This requires gaining a sense of what a building is for and what it does beyond designated functional requirements.

Beyond appearances

Imagining and imaging are often conflated and when they are, other ways of imagining get obscured. One might ask how could a building be imagined *not* in terms of images? One answer to this is that a conscious effort could be made to imagine first and foremost through evoking the other senses. What would it feel like to be inside this building that does not yet have a form — withdrawn from the surrounding environment or connected to it, a strong or weak sense of boundaries? Which is most appropriate given the nature of the site and its environment? What about the spaces within the space? Should they flow freely into one another, allowing unimpeded passage? Or should the differences between zones be made to impinge upon the body as it encounters doors to be opened and thresholds to be crossed? Does this space need to be warmer or cooler than external conditions? What kind of sounds should be excluded from or included in this space? What of the tactile quality of surfaces — hard or soft, springy or resilient to the foot? Smooth or textured, warm or cold to the touch of the hand? And how will such choices affect how the ongoing life of surfaces, the structures that support them and how they are cared for?

The point of the exercise is not to banish visual imagining, but to form a relational projection from what is sensed by *all* the senses and from all that is known. This puts visualising in its place and echoes Plato's dictum, 'we see with our minds not our eyes' and also connects to our earlier comments about the inadequacy of utopian projects of 'imaging sustainability' and why 'an image of sustainability' can never be a self-sufficient communication. The ocularcentric tradition we have inherited privileges sight as the path to truth: 'the evidence of one's eyes', 'seeing is believing', 'I get the picture', 'I see' [meaning I understand], and so on. The visual is everywhere in language as much as images are present materially and immaterially as part of our environments of everyday living.

Of course, it is perfectly possible that the forgoing exercise in prefigurative imagining could simply extend aestheticisation into forms of sensory delectation beyond the visual and produce nothing more than gourmet architecture. But we are suggesting that such an exercise be embarked upon in terms of imaginatively constructing a sense of what a building is for (but not just in a bare functional sense), of what it does and what it could do, of how that which is built will engender process and will be directive (no matter how subtly) of human actions and modes of being.

The questions to bring to this hypothetical exercise of architectural imagining are those such as: 'what is this building to sustain?'; 'is what it is to sustain itself sustainable?' and 'how can it be designed so as to sustain that which is sustainable?'. Getting appropriate answers to such questions means projecting forward to imagine and consider the relation between the life of a building and the lives of those who will spend time in it. It requires thinking of a building performatively instead of as image. This advocated approach is based upon an understanding architecture as ontological in a deep sense. This in turn rests upon a broader assertion of the generally under-rated sense of the significance of the being of things and of 'being' being process not stasis, of the rarely seen but ever present relations between the animate and inanimate and of the extent to which intentionality reverberates through designed materiality, stamping itself on what we might call consciousness or understanding. Put more simply, the proposition is that the nature of what is encountered (in this case the specificities of a building) is determinant of modes of being (in this case human dwelling). Furthermore, much of this occurs subliminally and under nobody's direction. As embodied beings, physically and operationally we are in a condition of ongoing exchange with the materiality of our worlds whether we are aware of it or not.⁵ We are impacting and being impacted upon all the time. The choice for all of us is whether we choose to become attuned or not. The choice for designers is whether the nature of modes of being (the domain of the ontological) is to be what consciously drives the design process or whether they will remain fixated upon the image.

Seeing, thinking, images, senses, all exist in a particular ecology that has material consequences. Gregory Bateson called it an 'ecology of mind'. To this, we at EcoDesign Foundation have added 'the ecology of the image'.

⁵ For further discussion see Anne-Marie Willis, 'Redirective Practice: Ontological Designing' in *Design Cultures: Proceedings*, European Academy of Design, Sheffield Hallam University/University of Salford, 1999.

To design on the basis of appearances is to design a kind of seeing that only pays attention to the look of things. It is a designing that overlooks and which in turn designs overlooking. Here is the basis of the phenomenon of neglectful affluence. What is not seen, what is not brought to presence, that which cannot be made available to sight, that which is regarded by the cultivated eye as unworthy of attention — these powerful induced invisibilities are drivers of unsustainability. There is much for an architecture of sustainment to bring into visibility, but this has little to do with the symbolic imaging of sustain-ability. The challenge for architecture is to subsume seeing to sustain-ability.

To conclude, it is impossible to extract architecture from a whole range of imaging practices, from the instrumentality of plans, projections and models, and beyond this, to the ways in which architecture has come to serve image culture — for example the design of stadia, spectacle, places to view from and be viewed, if not the entire enterprise of public domain design. Then there is the design of buildings and structures destined to become logotypes (such as Renzo Piano's Jean Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre), to say nothing of the merging of architecture and the televisual, such as when the demands of live TV coverage come to dictate building form, lighting, access and so on. An 'architecture of the image' is a concern worthy of critical exploration yet to be embarked upon. But such an exploration would need to take place within the larger context of the ecology of the image and, we would assert, on the basis of the proposition that the culture of the image is not just a problem for architecture, but for sustain-ability more generally.

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