The Naked Truth
Metaphors of Space, Complexity and Communication

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Introduction[1]

In Mike Leigh's film *Naked* the character played by David Thewlis, when asked the question: how did you get here then? answers:

> There was this little dot, right? And the dot went bang, and the bang expanded. Energy formed into matter, matter cooled, matter lived: the amoeba, the fish; the fish, the fowl; the fowl, the froggy; the froggy, the mammal; the mammal, the monkey; the monkey, the man. Amo, amas, amat quid pro quo memento mori ad infinitum. Sprinkle on a little bit of grated cheese and leave under the grill until Doomsday...[2]

It seems that the relentless process of life, from the moment that 'matter lived' in our tiny corner of the universe, has had the power to sustain itself as a hot spot in an otherwise entropy-stricken creation.

If life has the answers, why are we asking the question?

Well, things are getting a little too hot for comfort. In global terms the human drive, it seems, is for more life, faster life, and we have become fearful of where the process of accelerating things may be leading us.

In this paper what I wish to explore is the question of sustainability as a viable goal in that realm of human activity broadly labelled 'design'. I will put forward the argument that the peculiarly human activity of designing is one that has led us to accelerate the process of change in our locality; that this accelerated process of change is an attempt to enhance the intensity and meaningfulness of life; and that this generates an increasingly complex spatio-temporal environment organised by communicative constructs and actions. In design, therefore, the idea of sustainability is not primarily about physical realities: it is about humanity. The question I ask is, is sustainability a viable goal in design?

Design

There is no universally accepted definition of 'design' and I do not intend to imply one here: I accept a constellation of more or less incommensurable notions of design, that is, I tend toward a pluralist and pragmatic stance. At one extreme the notion of optimisation of technical possibilities and the activity of a professional elite has its place and at the other extreme so does the notion of reflexive adaptive behaviour of all humans engaged in transforming the conditions of existence.[3] The only definitions of design that cause me significant unease are ones that imply an objective quality or process in

'nature'. Design it seems to me is a defining human trait, one dependent for its meaning on a distinctively human way of perceiving, acting and communicating in the world. When we speak of the design of a leaf or a bird or a coastline we simply project the limitations of a particular way of perceiving the world through a particular way of communicating. In design discourse the perception, the language and the construction we put upon the world are all peculiarly our own. We cannot, therefore, argue the existence of God from design.[4]

Spatiality

In constructing a world through design discourse we invoke concepts of space and time that are not at all straightforward, 'Space' has come to mean many different things. Each of the terms 'physical space', 'social space', 'linguistic space' and 'virtual space' refers not to a singular conception of space but rather to a category of conceptions, a spatiality. And if one of them involves a metaphorical usage of the qualifying term then so do they all.

Physical space has multiplied its meanings according to our expanded modes of perception. The scale and speed of action available to our senses has become dependent upon the electronic as well as physical means we engage to extend ourselves. We have entered the sub-microscopic world with the aid of the electron microscope and, at the other end of the scale, the cosmic world with the aid of radio telescopes and the like. However, models and images of physical spatial realities do not remain attached to their machine mediators and that is the problem. Magnified or reduced in scale they are made compatible with the capabilities of the naked eye: projected into the realm of bodily reality they are made universally available to the inhabitant. Between our bodies is a space whose measure is no longer simply one of human scale. Simultaneously, a 'relativity' has been invoked that invalidates simple recourse to absolute ideas of distance and ratio. What Virilio has termed the 'lost dimension' is reconstructed in a subjective moment which has been complexified by our fusion with the mechanical and electronic aids to perception (Virilio, 1991).

Social space is opposed to these conceptions of an increasingly dehumanised and ambiguous physical space; Cartesianism self-destructs. A multidimensional realm of possibilities emerges embracing new geographies at one end of the range and exotic psycho-social realities at the other. The measure of social relations resides somewhere between renditions of power, knowledge, wealth, mobility and skill and those of instinct, emotion, sexuality, ideology and language (Hofstede, 1991; Bourdieu, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991; Freud;[5] and Jung, 1926). We have multiplied the spaces in which we situate ourselves in order to cope with the de-differentiation of the monolithic narrative of modernity. The 'end of Man', as it was conceived in modernity's most imperialistic and chauvinistic moments, has dissolved into a shimmering mirage: 'all that is solid melts into air' (Berman, 1982).[6] What remains is an infinitely re-differentiable matrix that moves from chaos to simplicity to complexity to chaos, ad infinitum. Social spatiality variously constructed in the cultural, economic, and collective-unconscious spheres of life is, in reality, a constellation of incommensurable, contingently useful models. None has any absolute claim to

validity; all are currently necessary for survival; most succumb to a mutual accommodation but resolutely resist synthesis (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Linguistic space embodies the possibility of meaning and communication (Eco, 1979). In the former it differentiates itself from other spatialities; meaning has no extension in the physical sense and neither is it delineated in terms of the social. In the latter it identifies itself with both the physical and the social; in the concept of intelligence processes of perception and language are intimately connected. Intelligent thought, intelligent being, implies the embodiment of knowledge which is in one and the same moment a search for and a projection of order, pattern, meaning (Velmans, 1995). Any focus on the structures and dynamics of language immediately displays its dependence on the structures and dynamics of being in the world. There may be no necessary correspondence between signifier and signified; semiosis is an abstract reflexive process of arbitrary relations in which every instance of meaning constructs and is constructed by every other (Eco, 1979; Saussure).[7] However, and this is the humanistic core that linguistic space declaims, without perceptual integrity there can be no speech (Habermas, 1987). The communicative act is irreducible: it is in one and the same moment the realization of a pure play of *différance* [8] and the mediation of physical and social imperatives. Intentions remain irrecoverable; we must proceed on the basis of our best presumptions and prejudices towards always renegotiable meanings. The idea of linguistic space is to construct the possibility of subject relations out of what appears to be physically impossible, the conflation of absences entailed in the use/creation of language.

Virtual spaces are of two sorts. Cyberspace, a specific idea of virtual space, has been used to accommodate the invisible and the immaterial aspects of a new collectivity – the sphere of information created since the signifiers of inscribed and vocalised language have been electronically digitised and embedded as software and data in computers that talk to each other. Spaces outside of the psycho-social realm of human relations, which are available to us only through the mediating apparatus of the computer terminal and its associated audiovisual output and input devices, have been created and daily multiply their exotic dimensionalities (Jones, 1995). Other ideas of virtual space reflect the paranoiac aspect of perceptual illusions. Perspectival space, mirror space, stereophonic space, cinematic and televisual space, and holographic space each accommodate perceivable virtual presences that we must learn to distinguish from those that are 'actual'. Virtual spaces multiply and interact, and fill the world with potentially useful, entertaining and dangerous diversions.

The spatialities in which we exist accommodate our physical and social relations and the perceptible and imperceptible processes of mediation with which we sustain our individualities and our collectivities. When we talk of 'design' every one of these spatialities is invoked. Consider the 4 P's of design: Product, Programme, Process and Philosophy. Product, the designed object, is a physical documentary entity that contributes to material culture. The design programme is an archetypal socially constructed reality. The design process is an information flow mediated by documentary and electronic means. Design philosophy, or more properly its ideology, is a discourse that shapes and is shaped by social relations. These four facets span the human condition.

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Complexity

The creation and control of very large socio-technical systems has been the focus of a great deal of organisational theory and practical systems consultancy. Such systems and the procedures used to develop and manage them are immensely complicated. However, in the company of systems consultants and the theorists that support their endeavours, I don't like to talk of them as complex. The particular approaches taken by orthodox theorists and practitioners normally deal only with a system's intricacy in a mechanistic or functional sense which, given sufficient computing power, it is assumed will succumb to rational manipulation and control. They do not normally deal with the kind of complexity that requires a simultaneous attention to technical, social, psychological, aesthetic, political and ethical difficulty. That is a kind of complexity worth distinguishing with the term. It goes beyond mere complicatedness, and the hope of success in applying elaborate reductive procedures, to true complexity and the need to engage the whole being and to embrace the breadth of human competence – skill, intellect, intuition, emotion and memory.

Communicativity

If we see designing as a problem-solving activity, it is a truism to say that every design solution creates at least two new design problems. Although the design problems created in a particular time and place may be amalgamated with those created in other times and places, the net result of such a positivistically framed design process is an inevitable escalation in design activity. The consequences of this are the multiplication of industrial and cultural products, the production of expanding networks of interdependency and, therefore, communicativity within systems and environments, the generation of increasing risk of catastrophe, the disruption of more and more robust dynamic systems and their responsive, adaptive capabilities, and, by artificial means, the acceleration of life itself.

According to Rorty (1989) what matters is that we keep the conversation going; as long as we keep alive the contingency and negotiability of our values and beliefs we create the spaces in which to accommodate each other both literally and metaphorically. He is quite clear in insisting that synthesis is an unrealistic goal now that all of the universalising narratives of modernity – science, history, metaphysics – are subject to a dis-organizing, dis-integrating reflexivity. Our mentors, he advises, should be the novelists and the ethnographers who 'specialize in thick description of the private and idiosyncratic' (94). 'Solidarity', he goes on to say, 'has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it' (ibid). The point holds true whether the language to which we refer is verbal, gestural or material. The production of a material culture, in particular, places the designer in the company of the novelist and the ethnographer insofar as they each operate from a socially embedded position on what is particular and peculiar to a practical social situation. Such a designer specialises in visualising and devising realisable

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possibilities for change that successfully accommodate and mediate our differences.

Rorty's plea for the continuous negotiation of mutual accommodation points to a new model for design; design must become reflexive. If, in the wake of the industrial revolution, design developed with modernism an idea of progress, a belief in the human ability to change things for the better, it is now called upon to change itself for the better (Jones, 1991; Mitchell, 1993).[9]

Conclusion

Put together the existing fragmentation of design as it is understood and practised, the diverse and incommensurable notions of the spaces in which we must operate, and the irreversible processes that industrialism and the design that it grew up with, have set in motion, and we must conclude that sustainability is not a viable goal in design or rather that this kind of design is not sustainable. The neglect of complexity is the only risk we take. Such neglect is the denial of life, an affront to humanity and to nature, and will doom us to oblivion before our time. The conclusion drawn by Thewlis' character in *Naked* is a pessimistic one:

> You can't make an omelette without cracking a few eggs and humanity is just a cracked egg and the omelette ... stinks!

I don't agree. I have some faith in what we are doing here. We are redesigning designing and therefore redefining ourselves. So, when you reach the next century and you are asked the question: how did you get here then? Answer:

> There was this cracked egg, right? And the egg ...hatched.

Notes

1. This paper was presented at the *Sustainability Conference*, Hull School of Architecture, Humberside University, January 1996. It has been subject to minor reformatting here.
2. *Naked*, written and directed by Mike Leigh (Channel Four Films, 1993).
3. J. C. Jones has summarised the breadth of these definitions in several places, most succinctly in the introduction to *Design Methods* (1984) and in the preface to his collection *Essays in Design* (1984).
4. The argument by or from design essentially states that the fact of perceivable order and pattern and beauty in the world is in itself evidence for an intelligent and all powerful creator, a God.
5. Bocock (1983) contains a concise account of the dimensions of the social theory of Freud.
6. The irony of course is that the phrase was employed by Karl Marx at the height of modernity's grip on the imagination and the revolutionary spirit, the moment of the Communist Manifesto (Berman, 1982, 21).
7. Culler (1976) presents the key ideas of the *cours*.
8. '...*différance*, [is] a neologism that Derrida coined in order to suggest how meaning is at once "differential" and "deferred", the product of a restless play within language that cannot be fixed or pinned down for the purposes of conceptual definition' (Norris, 1987, 15). By lifting the word out of its original context one separates it from the particular task in which Derrida was engaged – a long and careful account of the radical structuralist critique of Husserl's phenomenology – and thereby does it violence, the more so because of the reflexive nature of the concept which insists on its contestability and always deferred meaning.

9   J. C. Jones (1991) shows how a concern with the design of life, of ways of living, as a personal project reflects on the potential of the design process to be radically redesigned as a matter of course in any situation demanding change. Mitchell revives Jones' central theme applying it to the wider field of environmental design. A focus on designing human experiences and knowledges necessarily includes in its scope the experience and knowledge of designing (hence *Designing Designing* and *Refining Designing*) and the process results in more holistically conceived and more effective environments and products.

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