Sustainability is a *Cultural* Problem

by **Wilfried Wang**

ENVIRONMENTAL PROPHETS come in four types: the *hysterics*, who warn of the apocalypse, the *assuagers*, who adhere to hope, the *disclaimers*, who see no dire threat, and the *fatalists*, who see the future as steady, unavoidable, irreversible decline.

The first three types, the hysterics, the assuagers, and the disclaimers, dominate current discourse. Their views make for more effective hype for whatever public media share their political allegiances. The view of the fatalists is least palatable to society in general and the media in particular, which are thriving on a mix of fear and hope. In the absence of the fatalists, all kinds of compromises are considered able to promote sustainability, from the Kyoto Protocol to emissions trading to Smart Growth. Yet even their proponents admit that these measures cannot stop, let alone reverse, global climate change.

The reason for this is as plain as it is simple. The change in global climate is not caused by financial or technological factors alone and will not be solved just through financial or technological solutions. Global climate change re-sults from the realities of Western, post-industrialist, capitalist culture. It is embedded in unsustainable lifestyles.

These lifestyles have a long history. They have a broad physical manifestation evident in suburban sprawl with its attendant commercial distribution mechanisms such as shopping malls and strips, leaving a trail of blight between ghost-town downtown and home. They have made agriculture an agro-pharmacological industry with its attendant fast food outlets and obese consumers, depleted water tables, and unsettled farming communities. They have changed the dominant mode of transportation from the mid-sized urban automobile to the SUV truck, which offers drivers four-wheeled paramilitary performance from an urbane interior.

These lifestyles have their origin in western suburban socio-culture. From the Palladian villas that provided a new church-sanctioned habitat for the city evacuees of Venice, to the 19th-century garden cities of Britain and the European continent, and finally to its greatest triumph, the faux-urbanity of New Urbanism, suburban socio-cul-

ture has consumed more territory, and left greater ecological and cultural footprints on the Earth than any traditional city. A simple comparison of topographical maps over the last century will reveal this.

All this and more is the legacy of the dominant lifestyles. These lifestyles have gathered a momentum that is difficult to reverse or even decelerate. The metaphor of a supertanker can be summoned, with an important difference: it has not a single but a million engines, each contributing to the resultant

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course. The "cultural footprint" of this socio-cultural lifestyle, its system of values, is constituted by its historical roots, the physical territory it occupies and its diffusion through the media.

While an "ecological footprint" is the area of the Earth's surface needed to sustain a phenomenon, the *cultural footprint* has different dimensions in time and space. The territory of the lifestyle-supporting value system of a particular socio-cultural entity may be significantly smaller than the territorial extension of its media diffusion. Thus, for instance, SUVs are used in a relatively restricted part of the globe, while their mediation through television and lifestyle magazines by far exceeds this domain. In the case of buildings, skyscrapers, for instance, tend to be culturally acceptable in certain settlement contexts, but the territory in which they are admired far exceeds these. The specific cultural conditions that ensure a skyscraper's realization may be defined by zoning regulations, building codes, and neighbors' rights, but the larger realm of its sympathetic audience is cultivated by, among others, newspaper articles, television programs, advertising photography, coffee-table books, and

professional journals.

The idea of a tall building has existed since architecture's beginnings and came to fruition in the Gothic era with the race towards the tallest nave and spire, and again in the United States during the early 20th century. Developing countries like Malaysia and China have now entered the global competition for the tallest building, indifferent to the building type's ecological footprint and vying for the longest time holding the height record. The cultural footprint of a building of this kind then by far exceeds its ecological footprint. It is unlikely that rational argument will ever deter clients and architects from pursuing goals like the tallest buildings, goals that are deeply lodged in mental landscapes and reinforced by various media over decades or centuries.

Similar forms of competition exist in other areas of architectural discourse. Buildings, regardless of morphological type, are being used by clients and architects to compete for top visual status. The photogenic effect left by buildings on the profession's and public's memories is another source of rivalry that seeks to expand the phenomenon's territorial presence beyond its ecological footprint. The ideal building's cultural footprint, in this perspective, establishes a visual hegemony worldwide.

To talk about the need to reduce the ecological footprint of buildings without considering the motivations behind building is like treating a disease's symptoms without understanding its causes. In order to reduce ecological footprints, equivalent reductions in cultural footprints are needed, although realistically it is hard to expect they can be achieved.

A reduction in the cultural foot-

print of buildings would encompass four aesthetic principles:

1. Architecture should serve the difficult task of providing for the long-term inhabitation of space instead of serving the media's insatiable appetite for images.

2. An architecture for the enduring use of space is the background to the life contained therein; it should not be a spectacular foreground.

3. Architecture's aesthetic life expectancy should be as long as its material and physical life expectancy.

4. An architecture consciously designed as a background to life will follow the compositional principles of material abstraction,[1] principles that can be seen in the architectures by the southern Swedish School of Lund (Sigurd Lewerentz, Klas Anshelm, Bengt Edman, Bernt Nyberg, Erik & Ture Ahlsén, and Peter Celsing), in the work of the Austrian architect Hermann Czech, and in that of the Swiss architects Diener & Diener, Meili & Peter, and Gigon & Guyer.

For the cultural footprint to be transferred from one state of a building to another, that is, for the ideal of the flexible reuse to be realized, our approach to architectural history requires a comprehensive overhaul. Orthodox architectural historiography is focused on buildings as they first came into being and more often than not as freestanding, that is to say decontextualized objects. The inclusion of a building in the canon is based on its status as a new object. How or whether this building has been successful in controlling change, adaptation, renovation, use by others, addition, or conversion is not a concern of most historiographic research.

This represents a misconception of architectural culture that is consistent with the treatment of architecture as fashion, as a phenomenon for consumption. In many European countries today, however, the majority of commissions are for renovations of existing building stock. Among architects, these commissions do not enjoy the same status as freestanding new

buildings. They are regarded as bread-and-butter commissions, enough to keep the office going, but not worthy of serious design ambition. Until these commissions are taken as seriously by architects and clients as new building, the existing stock will be more threatened than cherished.

Coupled with these aesthetic principles are five material principles for a sustainable architecture:

1. Build less. Frei Otto wrote: "To build in a sustainable way means not to build at all."[2] The replacement of existing built fabric cannot be the long-term goal of any society.

2. Everything built have as long a life expectancy as possible.

3. Reuse and recycling of material should be maximized.

4. Non-recyclable materials should be not be used in buildings.

5. Anything that is built should be retained, sustained, and maintained.

There are eight consequences of these aesthetic and material principles for our lifestyles:

1. Products that are bought should be selected for maximum durability, even if this initially involves a higher price.

2. Products should be thought of as expensive. Only if this is true will we be prepared to look after them.

3. We should not purchase things unless we must. We should wait and save.

4. Products should be made so that their maintenance is possible without unreasonable effort or specialist knowledge.

5. The production and purchase of objects should also be based on the minimization of their transport.

6. As many substances and materials as possible should be recycled. Harmful materials should be removed from these cycles at the expense of their original producers.

7. Contrary to the widespread belief that ecological solutions can be put in place only on an international level, the radical restart has to begin with every one of us. We have to lead by examples that engage the public. We cannot wait for or put trust in institutions.

8. Post-industrialized countries need to drastically reduce their consumption. As long as they do not do this, they have no right to demand of other, less developed countries that they should forego desires for a Western, suburban lifestyle.

"Du mußt dein Leben ändern." "You must change your life," wrote R. M. Rilke in his great poem, "Archaic Torso of Apollo." We must change our lives, but do we have the ability to do so?

Imagine Brazil, South Africa, India, and China multiplying their current low car-ownership, increasing their per capita domestic floor area, and raising their water and energy consumption to the same level as those of Western Europe and North America. Why should ancient forests be maintained anywhere if these have long been removed in Europe? What, then, are equitable, fair ways to achieve sustainable lifestyles worldwide?

Despite the existence of many sustainability programs globally and locally, it is not possible to detect a significant change in the mindset of architects. As long as the cultural footprint of buildings loom larger than their "green" technological advances, reductions in resource consumption will be marginalized by media hype and the finely tuned desire for spectacle.

Like a firework, the current cultural footprint of a building concentrates many resources to produce a brief moment of awe before it hits the ground as detritus. This is contemporary architectural culture: a momentary wasteful sparkle and boom. Must the profession prove that the fatalists are right?

Notes

1. I provide a broader definition in "Architecture as Material Abstraction," in *Matter and Mind in Architecture* (Helsinki: Building Information Ltd., 2000), 42-53.

2. Frei Otto, *Schriften und Reden, 1951–1983* (Braunschweig: Vieweg Verlag, 1984).

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