Counter-Histories of Sustainability

Panayiota Pyla

Every socio-political movement needs a history, even if you have to invent one. Panayiota Pyla drafts some possible (pre)histories of sustainability and compares them with current developments. She warns for simple historical legitimizations and proposes to constantly interrogate and contest emerging strategies.

Because sustainability as an ethical imperative is widely elevated to the top of the architectural agenda, the objectives of this new ‘cause’ (as well as the meanings of the term itself) become even more multivalent. To the technically minded the emphasis on sustainability means that architects need to completely reconceptualize their profession’s priorities in order to emphasize energy efficient green technologies and ultimately forge new partnerships with natural scientists and engineers. Many new books have recently appeared offering tangible architectural design lessons and their warnings about buildings as top consumers of energy are both frightening and convincing.1

To those who emphasize the sociopolitical over the techno-scientific dimensions of architecture, sustainability has a definition which encompasses larger social processes (e.g., recycling policies, land-use patterns, heritage management, etc.) that effect stakeholders, social groups, urban dynamics and regional politics just as much as they influence environmental transformations. Many architectural departments and development organizations are in tune with this way of thinking and with various degrees of sophistication seek ways to integrate social, cultural and economic concerns within a definition of environmental sustainability.

To the more cynical, on the other hand, architectural fascination with this new concept has yet another significance: whether focused on social or techno-scientific issues, the concept of sustainability gave architecture a new purpose. According to this point of view, sustainability emerged not a moment too soon, just in time to give architecture a new purpose, just when the profession’s search for meaning (e.g., historicist trends of the late 20th c.) or the egocentrism of the signature designer (e.g., the legacy of modernism) had led to dead ends. Truly diverse practices – from William McDonough’s innovations with new materials to Kenneth Yeang’s embrace of high technologies and James Cutler’s polemic about buildings’ ecological footprints – were signals that new types of environmental consciousness was shaping important new worldviews in architecture.

As the meanings and goals of sustainability are debated by architects and academics – because the planet’s problems are real and architecture has its share of responsibility – we must also remember a lesson from the history of architecture: a great cause is not enough! However noble, heroic models have pitfalls. The recent history of modernism vividly shows some of these: housing projects that quickly turned the dream of social emancipation into the nightmare of segregation; urban renewal projects that bulldozed the cultural intricacies of peoples and places; and many new cities, colonial and postcolonial, which advanced paternalistic agendas in the name of modernization. All of these remind us that good intentions, however noble, can be misinterpreted, misused or altogether derailed.

Even as there are increasingly alarming signs that justify architecture’s focus on sustainability (from ozone holes to vanishing frogs and children’s agonizing pleas at United Nations meetings!), architects also need to be vigilantly aware of possible pitfalls in the strategies developed in the name of the new, ‘just’ cause. This essay argues that an important key to developing this kind of vigilance is a nuanced understanding of history, because such an understanding offers the critical tools to help architects detect the blind spots, anticipate
the drawbacks or discern the subtexts of emerging strategies. Below is a sketch of some key ideas drawn from critical reflections on the recent past. The goal here is not to offer a systematic overview of history’s lessons about sustainability, but to highlight some reminders that seem relevant today.

1. Techno-scientific managerialism is not apolitical
The ecological movements of the 1960s that emerged as scientific research revealed problems within the natural world can teach a great deal about the pitfalls of strategies which assumed an unsophisticated view of politics in their zeal to address an emergency. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) is perhaps the best representative of that era’s ecological emergency. It exposed the excesses of industrial agriculture and called for the recovery of the balanced interdependence of humans and nature. Alarming in its prophecy of a spring without birds, the book infiltrated public sentiment and became the bible of the modern environmental movement. Yet the subtextual emphasis on quasi-mystical conceptions of an age-old balance that needed to be preserved presumed that the safeguarding of the ecological balance was a task for scientists and managers. This helped cast an apolitical aura over the urgency for the earth’s protection and brushed aside questions of power and inequality, social relationships and priorities that go into regulatory practices, institutional arrangements and other types of environmental policies.

A similar ecological urgency infiltrated architectural culture as well and this is evident in, for example, Buckminster Fuller’s *Whole Earth Catalogue* which emphasized the fear of an ecological crisis as well as in C.A. Doxiadis’s *Ecology and Ekistics* (1975) which attempted to map out the relationships between built structures and the global ecosystem. Such calls seemed noble at a time when the memory of the atomic bomb was still vivid and when space photos of a tiny earth from space created a new consciousness of its fragility. However these positions were also premised on a notion of a fragile earth that needed the careful management of its resources. Problems in the location of resources and imbalances in technological and economic power or in international trade that shaped decisions of how that fragile ecological balance was to be preserved on a global scale were treated as though they are merely technical, uncontested and beyond political debate. Furthermore, arguments such as those advanced by Doxiadis in *Ecology and Ekistics* that conflated the notion of the earth’s balance with that of the balance between human needs and natural resources reinforced the confinement of nature to a resource for human use and appropriation as well as the notion of nature as an object of supra-political expert control. The configuration of built settlements and the appropriation of natural resources were automatically transferred to a realm of technocratic management. This type of thinking permeates many current strategies towards sustainability too, as we will see below.

2. The valorization of low-tech vernacular traditions is not apolitical
Vernacular architecture may be an old theme in the history of modern architecture, but now it is often revived in the name of the new cause of sustainability. The work of architects who contemplated local knowledge systems and low-technologies of building is no longer being framed so much in terms of modernist debates on local vs. global, or professionalism vs. craft, or vanguardism vs. grass-roots tactics. Now the seminal work of the likes of Bernard Rudofsky, Sibyl Moholy Nagy or Hassan Fathy acquires new meaning – as precursors of sustainable strategies.

Let us take Fathy, for example, whose name appears quite often among the ranks of sustainability’s proto-experts. The attention paid to Fathy seems logical given that his long career was primarily devoted to reviving old traditions of building with mud bricks and local knowledge systems of passive cooling with wind catchers, indoor courtyards, etc. The iconic example of Fathy’s work is the model village of New Gourna in Upper Egypt, built in the mid 1940s. The project is a particularly interesting example of a precursor of sustainability, because it goes well beyond technical questions of material choices and energy efficiency, preferring to be interpreted as a well-rounded version of sustainability because it combines technical strategies with socioeconomic strategies. For example, the use of mud brick not only minimized the embodied energy and facilitated passive cooling in the buildings, it also dramatically minimized the construction costs, nurtured the collaboration between craftsmen and architects and aspired to revive peasants’ pride in their local heritage.

However the reality on the ground tells a different story as the local peasants for whom the model housing was designed opposed its construction and for years refused to move in to the new village. The reasons vary and they have to do with multiple disconnects between the state which funded the project, the architect who designed it, and the users, namely the Gourni peasants. First, the peasants resented a state-sponsored project designed to uproot them from their old homes for the sake of planned and sanitary housing. Second, Fathy may have thought that his reinterpretations of internal courtyards or mud brick domes would revive an ‘Egyptian architectural tradition,’ but his gestures imposed a homogenizing conception of culture/tradition that did not in fact exist. For instance, the Gourni rejected the architect’s choice of Nubian mud-brick domes in residential architecture because in their own region (culturally distinct from Nubia) they associated domes with only the most sacred of spaces: tombs and mosques. In other words, Fathy’s zeal to exalt ‘tradition’ separated it from everyday realities and led him to nostalgia. This story is a powerful allegory for the present. Before exalting projects such as New Gourna for their ecological/economic/social sustainability, we should be mindful of the immense complexities of socio-cultural politics.

3. Always Beware of Metanarratives
Soon after the ecological doomsday scenarios of the 1970s which exposed the hubris of the post-WWII drive for economic growth, there were many types of anti-growth movements in many realms of practice which challenged the ethic of growth and development and often echoed the romanticism of various ‘return to nature’ movements. In architecture this sometimes found expression in experimental projects with found objects (tires, glass bottles, or straw and mud), solar houses, etc., which often also advanced alternative lifestyles (with Drop City being perhaps the most famous example). However anti-growth activism was soon
overpowered by another line of thinking that aspired to revise rather than reject the production ethic of the industrialized world by forging connections between environment and development. This approach was initially advanced by a series of the United Nations meetings in the 1970s – notably the UN conference on the Environment in 1972 and the UN conference on Human Settlements in 1976. These conferences had a great impact on architectural culture at large and on architects like Fathy, Fuller and Doshiadis. As their critics have suggested, the approach advanced at these conferences was rooted in the managerial outlook of development institutions during the 1950s and 60s. The idea of a marriage between environment and development was further advanced by the influential 1986 report ‘Our Common Future’ (often known as the Brundtland report) and was embraced by international institutions and governmental organizations. Current practices that seek partnerships with industry to develop materials or new thermal control technologies can be seen as a continuation of this kind of thinking. Similarly, the emphasis on eco-tourism and eco-development shares similar premises. The very term ‘sustainability’ makes evident the connections to the logic of the Brundtland report on sustainable development.

To simply lament current experiments (eco-development projects, the innovation of high-tech materials or the emergence of international green consulting companies) as little more than the co-option of environmental consciousness by capital-motivated interests would come dangerously close to the romanticism evidenced by some movements of the last century. It may be useful to watch for the reduction of sustainability to a gesture of political correctness (for example, how much rhetoric has appropriated the term either as a mere marketing tool or in order to legitimize its grip on global resources). But the crucial question here is not whether money and the environment might be in opposite camps. This may be a false dilemma given that, as David Harvey puts it, ‘the circulation of money is a prime ecological variable, and the continued circulation of money is essential if the material qualities of the environment are to be maintained.’ Perhaps the key issue here is to be vigilantly aware that as a concept and as a practice sustainability is constantly running the danger of turning into a totalitarian doctrine that subsumes critical thinking. Wolfgang Sachs made a general comment about current trends with exactly this warning: ‘As governments, business and international agencies raise the banner of global ecology, environmentalism changes its face. In part, ecology — understood as the philosophy of a social movement — is about to transform itself from a knowledge of opposition to a knowledge of domination...’

Adopting this warning to the terms of the architectural debate could mean that sustainability should not become a totalizing concept that subsumes crucial design questions about the social, the cultural, the political, the aesthetic and the physical, which, incidentally, are not unambiguous categories. Maybe it is good that sustainability does not have a fixed or coherent definition. Maybe it should never have one! Because if the technical questions of energy efficiency or the technocratic questions of efficient resource use or even the questions of socioeconomic management end up constituting the definition of sustainability in architecture, this will threaten to reduce design to a series of small decisions (on materials, energy or feasibility) that will ultimately have less to do with design and more with management or with political correctness.

To reflect on the prehistory of sustainability is not to find ‘precedents’ of practices that give us tips for the present. Rather these reflections aim to mobilize critical perspectives on the shifting definitions of the term and on the practices that are advanced in its name so as to guard against absolutism. Can architects have partnerships with techno-scientific fields without subsuming design to managerialism and anti-intellectual postures? Can ecological problems be debated in architectural circles without resorting to eco-determinism? Can architects embrace an ethical imperative without resorting to moralistic prescriptions or grand metanarratives? Maybe, but to walk between these fine lines it is important for both the profession and academia to constantly interrogate and contest emerging strategies.

After Zero

Originally a wacko, hippy-esque ideology, 'sustainability' – aka 'eco-friendly' or 'green' – has now become globally accepted. But as what – an environmental urgency, a political issue, a technical problem, a historic destiny, a new world order? And what are the consequences of this acceptance? The sustainability consensus is dangerous since the concept has no political content and can be used for any cause. Carbon neutrality and zero emissions are like magic formulas, cover-ups for complicated ethical questions about the inequalities in our societies.

Yet striving for zeros or hiding in neutrality does not lead to a better life in a more desirable house in a superior city for everyone. After Zero is not about design inspired by the fear of tsunamis or Katrinas. VOLUME proposes an understanding of our society beyond zero.

To kick off we discuss two perspectives: sustainability in a post-capitalist city and the potential of urban agriculture.

**Content**

- Editorial Arjen Oosterman 2
- Sustainable is Good, Sustainable Luxury is Better Christophe Catsaros 4
- Beyond Zero John E. Fernández 6
- Next Nature Koert van Mensvoort 13, 17, 41, 55, 97, 115
- Counter-Histories of Sustainability Panayota Pyla 14
- The Enterprising Civil Engineer Interview with Adriaan Geuze 18
- Destroyed Japanese Welfare Tokyo Genso 24
- Get the Balance Right! Ronald Sean Wall 26
- The Complex History of Sustainability Amir Djalali with Piet Vollaard 33
- Censorship Today Slavoj Žižek 42
- Afterculture Scott Hocking 44, 50
- Down from the Stand Stefano Boeri 56
- Food not Bombs Monica Nougens 59
- Population Thinking in an Age of Bio-Politics Peter Trummer 68
- Yes We Can... Up to a Point Interview with John Roberts 72
- Back to the Future: the Edo Biosphere Thomas Daniell 76
- Pig Story Christien Meindertsma 80
- Oil Story Harriet Russell 84
- Prison Break in a Ruined Tower Gianluigi Ricuperati 88

**Post-Capitalist City**

- Tagging Cloud Clare Butcher and Joost Janmaat 92
- Detroit Unreal Estate Agency Andrew Herscher 94
- Glossarial Comments on the Post-Capitalist City Mireille Roddier 98
- Survival Strategies and Community Building in Post-Capitalism Marjetica Potrč 100
- Investing in the Quality of Live Interview with Peter Blom 112
- Aesthetics of Catastrophe Aric Mayer 116
- Disruptive Innovation Interview with Dorothea Seebode 120
- Untying Cradle to Cradle Aetzel Griffioen 122
- DIY 2.0 Interview with Sherry Lassister 126

**Urban Agriculture**

- Cultured and Landscaped Urban Agriculture Debra Solomon 132
- Metropolitan Agriculture and Global Food Problems Steef Buiks 138
- Continuous Productive Urban Landscape Katrin Bohn and Andre Viljoen 140
- Food and the Randstad Metropolis Van Bergen Kolpa Architects 146
- Loisaida Gardens Michela Pasquali 150
- Sustainability in Practice Erika Jacobs Lord 154
- Vanitas, Venice Biennale 2008 Michael Stanton 160
- Colophon 168

**Extra**

- Green Architecture Guide Andrea Brennen and Zachary Lamb 168
- The Markemeer Territorial Agency