



Rio+20 - United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development - Audio

Discovering Ecological Habits of Mind

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My name is Emma Dewberry and I lecture in Design Ecology at the Open University in the UK. I'm interested in design thinking, processes and outcomes and the relationship of these to the ecological context. In this short podcast I'm going to discuss the need to find different ways of reanimating our thinking for the long view – and particularly how design may help redefine the nature of production and consumption.

It is interesting to note that one of the themes under discussion at the Rio+20 summit is sustainable consumption and production governance. Author and Executive Director of the Centre for Environment and Development, Uchita de Zoysa, presents a briefing paper on sustainable consumption and production governance. In this he says that despite identifying 20 years ago at the first Rio summit on Environment and Development that “the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production...”, and despite the term sustainable consumption and production and its governance being widely discussed 10 years ago at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, very little strategic and policy level intervention has happened in the intervening period. What de Zoysa proposes for this summit is the need to reform institutional approaches through adopting a sustainable consumption and production governance framework that promotes equitable consumption, a focus on sufficiency instead of efficiency and a growth system that ensures social equity, ecological balance and economic sufficiency.

So what has all this to do with design? At the core of sustainable production and consumption are issues of resource flows and interconnected systems. Design thinking and outcomes populates both production and consumption camps through designing what is produced and in encouraging the aspirations of different lifestyles and choices. Issues of flow and interconnectivity need to be centrally discussed by those that design the world in which we inhabit. It is this artificial environment that surrounds us – from buildings and roads to kettles and t-shirts - all are designed and all consume resources endlessly until the objects are discarded. Changing the visions of those who create, produce and consume these lifestyles and their props offers opportunities to challenge patterns of resource throughput and to foster new ways of thinking for the long view. This is an agenda of transition and transformation from the ground up.

As our world becomes increasingly dominated by living in urban environments – predictions suggest two thirds of the world population will live in cities by 2030 - we need to build understanding of how to develop real and deep connections to Nature and how to [re]define it, see it and nurture it as opposed to just 'manage it'. For example wouldn't it be great if designers can influence for the better people's perceptions of their ecology, of Nature and the context of their environment? Design and designing have great potential to respond to this call to create a new sustainable literacy in the 21st century.

Integral to this transition is the creation of different journeys of development that promote a connected view of the environment and our limits – but also, and importantly, highlight emerging opportunities where perhaps more radical, sustainable activities can evolve. This can be viewed as developing a practice of what industrial ecologist John Ehrenfeld terms, creating sustainability –

Creating sustainability starkly contrasts to the emphasis placed today on reducing unsustainability or in other words, making what exists a bit more energy efficient, or less polluting for example. It's much easier for people to embrace a 'reducing unsustainability paradigm' because it encourages us to be certain about things and to quantify our improvements – measure what we know we can measure in terms of inputs and outputs, and say categorically that things have improved in a specific context. Importantly though, what these activities don't do is respond to issues of uncertainty - where we need to be adaptable and flexible to change. The existing paradigm doesn't deeply question why we produce the amount we do for example or explain why an outdated model of economic growth is used as a yardstick to gauge effective progress, or define what impacts transfer across systems of systems when a change happens in one place because of the vast interconnections and interdependencies that we can only know a small number of. A creating sustainability approach will however begin to explore these difficult issues.

Today we like to be able to say what the right answer is; which direction is best. The uncomfortable truth is that real intelligence is an acceptance that not knowing is a place from where new learning can begin and different activities can emerge. In design we teach the benefit of not knowing and in being open to explore and create new possibilities. Designing ways of seeing our interdependencies with Nature will create different habits of mind for the long view; this requires [re]animating our responses to unsustainability today, and specifically, challenging the ways in which we use up our material and energy resources.