



Futures Forum: Session Review- 15/05/08

This document details highlights on the forum and includes summaries of speaker's presentations..

Chair- Prof. John Beddington - UK Government Chief Scientific Advisor.

John Wood - Professor of Design, Goldsmiths - University of London.

John's wide ranging presentation looked at the rationale behind envisioning the Future. 'It depends,' he said, 'on how we deal with complexity at different levels.' He called for a more auspicious, collective mode of reasoning for the 21st century.

Using the example of the American dream and its associated aspirations and fetish sing of consumer goods, Wood said that such a model was still extremely powerful in conveying a sense of desire and a lifestyle of choice. It still had its very overt appeal, but that we needed an equivalent or modified model that put sustainability at its core. The focus should be towards the 'Eco' rather than the 'Bio' and that in Buckminster Fuller there is already a precedent for utilising the natural environment. For Fuller, 'Nature was the synergy of synergies.'

John challenged Professor James Lovelock's announcements that, 'because climate change is now unstoppable, we can abandon our remedial strategies.' Lovelock, reasoned that we might as well 'enjoy life while we can' (Guardian, 1-3-08). So according to such principles we can carry on regardless of any consequences, with only a 'miracle' saving us from what would appear to be an inevitable 'Armageddon.' But what if he has miscalculated? What if he was simply wrong?

John argued that such a pessimistic stand was a self fulfilling prophecy because it encouraged consumers to hide their heads in the sand and legitimised their actions. Consumers are encouraged to make choices on existing things rather than speculate around those things that don't yet exist. John pointed out that we started the new millennium with no vision, just pragmatism. How can we re-establish attainable 'Utopias' without the fascist overtones? What is needed is a more 'imaginative, affirmative, contingent and outcome-centred form of political reasoning.'

To illustrate his thinking on a solution, John introduced his belief that we ought to seek solutions on a matrix. On this would be on two lines: One- between the thinkable and the unthinkable and the other between the impossible and the possible. In terms of solutions, John suggested that we concentrate our thinking on the cross-cut, the unthinkable, but possible. More people ought to be thinking creatively, they should be thinking the unthinkable and dreaming again. Once something (impossible) has happened once, it can happen again. In a decentralised economy and society, there are few drivers for dreams. There is no single vision and there exists in its place huge complexity. Design has the potential to dissolve complexity and unite.

In a bold statement of optimism, John encouraged the audience to take on Adam Smith's economic emphasis of 'Win-win.' Sustainability at the moment appears embedded in 'lose-win.' In order to embrace a positive we are encouraged to give up something. This negative has to be introduced to the process of design.

For example: "What is the Carbon Footprint of rain?" When it rains, people drive to the shops. Therefore rain is a net contributor to carbon production. This relationship encourages

considering alternatives such as a walking bus or weather proofing. The design process needs to invent new languages, question accepted wisdom and identify positive synergies in the process. This thinking ought to be 'built in.'

John finished on a rousing note that 'Mathematically speaking, miracles are not impossible, just improbable.' Cultivating the right conditions for them needs a more optimistic and opportunistic level of involvement by everyone.

Nicola Gillen - *Director of Strategy, DEGW.*

Nicola introduced how as a working practice DEGW involves and promotes designing for the future. At the heart of this was a series of tools that promoted better communication and encouraged collaboration. She pointed out that communication was crucial to what they did and their business.

Communication encourages an inclusive approach to design that integrated different needs and perspectives. It matters to the built environment because buildings have an extremely long shelf life. An architect is part of a process whose legacy will be there in 30-40 years time. Therefore architects and designers need to make defensible choices at each stage of what they do. A single project is full of stakeholders; Commercial backers, Planners, Investors, Architects and user groups. Each one of these groups will have a particular focus for the project and will try to guide it as they see appropriate. The challenge is acting together and encouraging a consultative approach that fostered participation and creatively informed the outcome.

Nicola led the audience through a series of tools that DEGW have used that puts the process on a par with the end product. They each attempt to balance the dual needs of business with that for quality architectural space. Drivers behind a vision for a project can be local and global, revolutionary or reactionary, risk taking or tried and tested. In order that those in the process can visualise what could be, DEGW introduced a series of straightforward emotionally responsive cards. Each card shows an image designed to capture an atmosphere or sense of place and space in a playful manner. Through eye catching imagery and making people choose their preference they have already mapped out aspirations for a project.

Through examples in Aurora and Utrecht, Nicola mapped out how increasing and varied levels of objective spatial analysis had informed further project content. It's only once evidence about a place has been gathered that participants could develop their thinking. There was a strong commitment towards challenging a client's accepted thinking rather than making any assumptions. There are various ways of gathering this. There are informal ways, things most people know through experience, but this should be partnered with less immediately obvious factors. E.g.: Tenure, land use, lifestyle, socio-economic profiling, location and environmental conditions. Architects, therefore, must assume the role of researcher in their own project development.

The process of collaboration and consultation in design should be able to pick up on our established thinking, some of which we have developed from a very early stage, some of which we use daily with little or no thought and matched to that of broader analysis.

Reinier de Graaf - *Partner and Director, OMA & AMO.*

In his second presentation of the afternoon, Reinier spoke broadly on the importance of forward thinking as a basis for how practices position themselves to embrace emerging opportunities. Much of what this involves means taking a look at what is happening and guessing what logically this might point towards. Using the work of OMA, he used Dubai as the example as to how the profession, in the west, might position itself to embrace global economic shifts and new patterns of urban development.

Reinier opened his talk by pointing to the perennial importance of money as the key driver. In the case of what is going on in the middle-east this has never been so explicit. Architects now work with clients who have huge amounts to spend in areas once considered peripheral to the study of world cities. The whole notion of the 'Metropolis' in the 21st century was now firmly

set to become a 3rd world concept. By 2015, or all the 'western' cities only Tokyo will be in the top league of cities in terms of size.

In an illustration of the global shift, Renier used the example of OMA's client base to show that the accepted dominance of the USA was under threat in the architectural profession. As far as OMA were concerned the West's dominance was already diminishing as work from the Middle East, India and China now counted for the majority of large scale commissions – it is a changing landscape with a very mixed set of working practices in a mixture of, 'democracies, pseudo democracies, and dictatorships.' Practices with a global reach would have to get used to this.

As far as economics were concerned, non-democracies perform better and are the most numerous sites of new building works in the world. In anticipation of an inevitable slow down in oil revenues the Middle East is building a new economy based on new building 'as it were.' Dubai is an orchestrated, frenzied construction site, a deliberate explosion of territory, with agreed plots sold to a small group close to leading political figures. The outcome is a series of 'mutually competing theme parks that create a monotony of the exceptional.'

Dubai is making an assertion on the global stage. Such developments are likely to impact upon us as well. The state is helping create a Neo-Mediterranean landscape with neo-Islamic architecture and a society that will demand (and need) a vast amount of resources to sustain it in its desert location. It will create an affluent consumer society that will further switch where resources are sold to- making it a strategically important place in a global economy.

Reinier closed his presentation remarking on the amazing pace of change in these countries and the secretive politics masterminding them. The financing of these projects has long been sourced from native wealth, as the knowledge economy expands and the need for the importing of skills becomes unnecessary, what role will 'Western' service providers have in these developments? The challenge for professionals in Europe and elsewhere will be to identify how they can be a part of this economy and develop ways into which they can seek collaboration and partnerships.

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