



The Pleasure Principle

Nurturing
sustainable lifestyles

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What is the most important issue facing sustainability right now? Reducing the cost of green technologies? Devising more effective ways of harnessing energy from renewable resources? Arresting deforestation? The answer is none of these, rather, it concerns changing people's everyday behaviour and moving the entire population towards more sustainable lifestyles. Since the Earth Summit in 1992 there has been a clear understanding that sustainability has to be addressed at a local level, and that only through collective action will we arrest the damage currently being inflicted on the planet. Few people would refute this view or even deny their own personal responsibility, but what individuals know to be right and what they choose to do are often two different things. Why is this?

Part of the answer may be that sustainability is perceived to be about abstinence and frugality. Its technical language uses terms such as zero, neutral, low and passive, and the entire concept entails using less, recycling more or just making do. As a result it is largely unappealing to the majority of people who live in a capitalist world predicated upon consumer culture. Every day we are assailed by marketing messages, on television, in magazines, and within our urban environments. All urge us to want more, use more, and demand more, because - after all - we're worth it. The market may be growing for green products, but when the final decision comes down to exercising restraint and feeling virtuous, or alternatively feeding our base desires, it is hardly surprising which is usually the winner.

The Slow philosophy promotes living life more locally and deriving pleasure from social interaction

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There is no clearer indication of this than in our choice of cars. During the last decade there have been huge advances in automobile technology that have resulted in greatly increased fuel efficiency and reduced emissions. But over the same period the demand for off-road vehicles from city dwellers has exploded, even though high profile campaigns have highlighted the fact that they cause more road deaths, waste precious natural resources and create greater pollution. The problem is that like all other consumer products, cars carry brand values that by association confer social status on the purchaser and increase self-esteem. Since off-road vehicles are just 'way cool', their sales figures illustrate perfectly what happens when consumers actually choose between the virtuous and the desirable, for whilst over 100,000 four-wheel drives were sold in the UK in 2004, the top selling hybrid fuel vehicle managed just 8,500 across the whole of Europe.

So how might we go about making sustainable lifestyle choices more desirable?

Slow Food and Slow Cities

We might begin with a seemingly unlikely source, the Slow Food movement, which began in Italy in 1986 as a direct response to the arrival of McDonalds in the heart of Rome, one of the world's great culinary centres. In a gesture of defiance, the charismatic food critic Carlo Petrini set out a manifesto stating that what we eat should be cultivated, cooked and consumed at a relaxed pace. As such, Slow Food is everything that fast food is not. It is about organic farming and artisanal production. It is about shopping locally for fresh seasonal ingredients and using traditional recipes handed down through the generations. It is also about conviviality and taking time to cook and dine with friends and family. In short, it is a sustainable microcosm with social, economic and environmental benefits, and yet at no point in the Slow Food literature is this foregrounded. From small beginnings the movement now has 78,000 members in 50 countries, and runs its own University of Gastronomic Sciences. But there is one reason, and one reason alone for its success – it's all about pleasure.

In 1999, the Slow Cities movement emerged out of the Slow Food initiative and extended the concept into the built environment. To date, thirty towns have signed up to its principles, which include increasing green spaces and pedestrian zones, reducing traffic, encouraging local markets and fostering hospitality and neighbourliness. As a philosophy of life, the Slow movement is concerned with increasing human interaction, and cultivating within people the desire to lead a more locally-based life, in which they derive pleasure from the creative activities and friendships they share with others. This would seem to be an ideal basis from which to construct a truly sustainable lifestyle.

Enhancing everyday life

If this concept were to be developed to the next level, then what we would really need are Slow Homes - places in which we are able to lead creative and socially active lives away from sites of excessive consumption. It is quite remarkable that despite massive changes in our society, today's homes still resemble those of our parents - only smaller. Since the 1970s in the UK we have managed to create a surfeit of prosaic, boxy and largely inflexible houses organised into lifeless estates,

We rarely question the psychological impact of these environments, nor consider the ways in which they constrain our everyday lives, or inhibit our ability to socialise. Who today has room for a large Christmas meal, birthday parties, creative activities, or even just a sleep over?

The design of a Slow Home would start by taking into account what people are really demanding of their domestic space today; more flexible space for entertaining, dedicated areas for homeworking and study, gaming dens for teenagers, and a way to put up guests. If we were to spend more time in these environments they would need to be more stimulating, with a varied spatial character, and might have a more considered use of materials and colour.

Adaptability would be a key issue, permitting us to remain in the same place despite changing life circumstances such as having a new baby, nursing an infirm relative or developing a new business opportunity. Staying put is an important issue in the broader context of sustainability, as moving home disrupts community ties and local friendships, and inevitably leads to consumption as owners seek to stamp their own identity onto a new property.

The Slow Home would, of course, be designed with environmental sustainability as a core principle – but this would not be expressed in the design aesthetic. This is an important issue challenging current thinking about how best to promote more sustainable lifestyles. Residential developments that focus attention on technological solutions and then use this as a design aesthetic will only ever attract the virtuous few - those who would choose a hybrid car over the sport utility vehicle.

However, because these pioneering communities represent such a small minority of the total population, whatever their level of personal sacrifice or commitment to sustainability, such efforts will always be dwarfed by behaviour of the majority, who understand the issues, but choose other options.

If we are to succeed in making even small changes in the behaviour of the majority and set them on the path to a more sustainable lifestyle, we need an approach that engages with them in a different way. At JTP we are already looking at ways that we can nurture local life, put pleasure at the heart of our thinking, and work towards making staying in, the new going out.

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