

The needs of sustainability

The more the sustainability movement continues down its current path, the less likely we are to ever achieve a more sustainable future. That is because the development of energy-conserving methods and materials does little to counter 'the upward spiral of needs', in which the luxuries of one generation become the necessities of the next. Stretching out our material and energy reserves simply allows people to continue to acquire and dispose of goods at rates unprecedented in human history, simply postponing the inevitable collapse in our rate of consumption. To achieve a more sustainable future, we need to start talking not just about energy-conserving techniques, but about need itself.

Since most unsustainable behaviour gets written into the initial problem statements in projects, we need to challenge programme requirements, distinguishing between need and desire, looking at what isn't said more than what is, seeking synergies not immediately apparent. We also need to focus less on intentions, and more on the consequences of design decisions: what impact, for example, does a particular move have on the natural and human ecology of a place? At the same time, we need to be more self-critical of our values. The medical profession has its Hippocratic Oath, and we might well embrace our own version of doing no harm: of doing the most with the least impact, of repairing rather than replacing wherever possible, of learning to do without when necessary. Likewise, we need to examine how technology, instead of being morally neutral, actually expands needs and exterminates self-reliance.

In terms of practice, we need to get out in front of the building process and begin to rewrite the rules and redesign the processes that now generate so much unsustainable development. We also need to see as one of our central tasks talking clients out of what they think they need, which, like preventive medicine, actually increases the amount of work. And we need to recognize the remarkable crudeness of our technology and begin to develop materials and methods that use local, 'low-tech' resources in elegant and efficient new ways.

Sustainability, in other words, forces us to re-evaluate everything we do with a broader public purpose in mind – and with the sustainability of our discipline and profession at stake.

THE EDITORS

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