Marilia Riul

Ingrid Moura Wanderley

Maria Cecilia Loschiavo
dos Santos

*i*nterview with stuart walker

Introduction:

Stuart Walker (Figure 1) is Professor of Design for Sustainability and Co-Director of the Imagination Lancaster research center at Lancaster University, UK. He is also Visiting Professor of Sustainable Design at Kingston University, UK, Adjunct Professor at Ontario College of Art University, Toronto and Emeritus Professor, University of Calgary, Canada. He is an expert in practice-based research in design for sustainability. He has developed a unique form of academic design practice in which he generates propositional objects in a manner that is integrated with, informed by and informing of theory. His work particularly addresses the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of a post-consumerist philosophical outlook, which he regards as a necessary next stage for the economically developed nations if they are to emerge from the environmentally disastrous modes currently being pursued. These growth-based modes are leading, increasingly, to a deep existential malaise. His research papers have been published and presented internationally and his conceptual designs have been exhibited at the Design Museum, London, across Canada and in Italy. His books include: Sustainable by Design: Explorations in Theory and Practice, 2006; The Spirit of Design: objects, environment and meaning, 2011; The Handbook of Design for Sustainability (with Jacques Giard), 2013; and Designing Sustainability: making radical changes in a material world, 2014.

He was interviewed in his second visit to Brazil to attend the Conference and Workshop "Design and the national policy of solid waste: dialogues on sustainability", held in the Sustainability Laboratory (Lassu) at the University of São Paulo (USP) in 2013, an activity of the research project sponsored by CNPq: Product design, sustainability and national policy on solid waste, coordinated by Professor Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos. Through the suggested questions, Professor Stuart Walker built a severe critique of our social system of mass production and reminded us that values really matter to our journey.

(s.walker@lancaster.ac.uk)

Figure 1: Stuart Walker.
Source: Ingrid Moura Wanderley.

Marilia Riul / Ingrid Moura Wanderley: If you were from another planet, what impression would you have about humanity just for our material culture?

Stuart Walker: Well, I think that if I was a visitor from another planet and I saw how we were… I have flown around the world and when I am coming into major cities anywhere in the world and the plane comes down below the cloud level and we can see what's going on, we're always very, very busy.

We see the cars speeding along the highways, packed highways. We see lots of trains, buildings, lots of natural ground being dug up and being cleared for building or for roads or for factories…

We see lots and lots of buildings and as we are coming closer into the city, those buildings go vertical and they go very high and it's like a sort of colonies of people inhabiting the planet and it's getting bigger and bigger and bigger…

We are constantly intruding into the natural environment and we're living in a way where we are very demanding on the natural resources. We've created a material culture which is driven not by human needs or even human wants, reasonable human wants. It's driven by economic growth, people wanting and companies and shareholders wanting to get rich and that has created a very damaging economic system.

We have created a culture that is environmentally damaging and resource intensive; it's really taking far too much. It's a system which relies on the production of waste and over-production. So it's not sensible, it's not efficient. We talk about efficiency all the time, in making our system much more efficient, but our production system is based on over-production and waste. It is anything but efficient.

So it's a kind of madness that we have created, which is unsustainable and although we see the damage it is doing both to the environment and in society, we don't seem to know how to get out of it. And that's very worrying because the longer it goes on, as resources become scarcer, clean water or food becomes scarcer, people will have to live and this could lead to conflict.

Plato said thousands of years ago in *The Republic*, you know Plato's *Republic*, centuries ago, millennia ago, about how we *should* live, what sort of city should we live in and it was a city, according to Socrates, based on sufficiency. But then you go to next question, why we don't want to live like that? We want to live in luxury like we live now and he identified living in luxury as the basis - the luxurious city - as being the basis of a world in conflict because in order to supply that luxury we have to take more and more and more. So all the people will never agree to have less and eventually they will be in conflict. Now, interestingly, that's exactly what has been highlighted this year at Davos. It was said that we have to change the system because of environmental effects and because of the social justice. They said if we don't, it could lead to conflict.

And I was reading a book about the history of the development in Asia and the current condition and the author of that book also said that this inequity will lead to conflict if we don't change our ways. So, there's environmental devastation but people will need to live, and if they can't get enough because a few have it all, then it doesn't look good for the future. We need to change the way we do the things.

013

M. R. /I. M. W.: In your opinion what are the foundational ethical values of a meaningful and sustainable culture?

S. W.: Well, it is the age old question… "how should we live"?
What makes a good life? Unfortunately the way we have decided in current society what makes a good life is to have more stuff. But, interestingly, when people are put in a very stressful situation and have to consider their values and what really matters to them, it is not the model of their car, or the model of their phone, or the value of their suit, you know, the latest suit or whatever - it's family, loved ones and friends. That's what really makes a good life-living with the support group of family, friends and loved ones and having a sense of meaning and purpose in one's life, with sufficient material goods to be able to live and maybe not just your basic needs. A little bit above basic needs - reasonable wants - but not excessive wants and certainly not this constant need to consume, consume, consume, building products to last just a short time.

So we have to replace this emphasis on consuming. We are encouraged to buy more and be dissatisfied. The consuming society, as I said, is a society of discontent and it creates discontent and dissatisfaction because that is what it lives on. If you aren't dissatisfied with what you've got you wouldn't want to buy anything and so the whole point of marketing is to make you feel dissatisfied. Well, if you're constantly being made to feel dissatisfied and discontented with your life, that is not a formula for a happy life because you are always feeling discontented.

In this process we are destroying the planet and creating enormous social injustice. These are not the ways for a sustainable or meaningful life. We have to come back to some pretty basic human values about spiritual wellbeing, about family and friends and feeling part of a community living in the ''WE'' community, not in the ''I'' individualistic society of consumer capitalism because consumer capitalism concentrates on the ''I'', the ''ME'', ''ME'', ''ME'' society.

You know, conservative free market politicians like Margaret Thatcher said there's no such thing as society. There are just individuals. Well, that fits straight in to the individualistic capitalist system, where people are atomized. So instead of going, as a neighborhood, to the local cinema and seeing a movie together, talking and coming out and bumping into friends in a communal way - maybe going for coffee with those friends after - we all have our own individual entertainment centers in our own homes, where we watch the films alone or with another person. So we have to buy the equipment, which next year will be out of date. We have to buy the video cassette and then the DVD and then the blue ray and then the HD screen. It is never ending… How good does a film need to be in a home production center and why can't we go to the cinema and watch this as a community.

So it's always about that atomizing and individualization of society rather than the coming together as a community. But it is the community, the friends of community and loved ones, which make a meaning of life, not buying stuff.

M. R. /I. M. W.: Is it possible to list basic practical guidelines to conceive meaningful and sustainable artifacts?

S. W.: Well, I don't think we can have a sort of cookbook guidelines to their design because every design needs to be assessed on its own terms, and

particularly, if we're talking about localization and sustainability - and localization is a big part of sustainability, maybe not a 100% local, but much more towards the local than we've seen with a globalized mass production - where tailoring the designs to context, to local geography, climatic conditions, local people's needs, cultural expressions, and they differ from place to place.

What you can have, I think, is not necessarily cookbook rules on how to deal with that, but you can have general principles and a set of ideas of what you are trying to achieve or what we should be bearing in mind - like the value of localization. Maybe to do certain things and making judgments about where use of mass produced components make sense for standardization. If we use off-the-shelf mass produced products, we can reuse them more easily than if they are specifically designed for a particular product and then at the end of that product's life we can´t use that part anymore.

Taking into consideration more, much more than the modernist Form-Follows-Function formula, where we were just looking at every kind of utilitarian aspect, very practical aspects, we have to bring in the social context and the personal meaning context and maybe push the economic means to the background a little bit more. We have not to make it the priority for everything as the main driver, because if you make the economic priority the main driver then environmental issues, social issues, and spiritual issues - which are things that really matter - they will all get pushed back to the background.

We have seen that in modernity and in contemporary society, where all those things are pushed to the background and people say we can't afford to look after the environmental issues because the price will be increased. We can't afford to deal with social issues. We go for the cheapest label and exploit the environment and people because that's what makes it more competitive. We use that language when the economics is the soul driver of the enterprise. We have to bring to the fore other things and that means a different economic model. It's very challenging to change that, but that's, I think, an inevitable consequence. We need a different economic model.

M. R. /I. M. W.: Can you explain the role of Personal Meaning in design for sustainability?

S. W.: Well, this idea of personal meaning combines the idea of spiritual development of the individual, the spiritual sense of wellbeing combined with what I called substantive values. So, personal ethics, matters of personal conscience and so on.

I introduced that into the *quadruple bottom line of sustainability* in order to start making sustainability and design for sustainability relate to the individual person and make it relevant to them, rather than saying sustainability is a big societal issue, a big environmental issue, a big economics issue, where I play no part. That has to make sense to me as an individual and that's why I decided ''personal meaning'' must comes into it and this means doing the right thing - examining one's conscience and doing the right thing and making that a reference point rather than thinking it is ''OK'' not to consider those things. It is not OK, not to consider those things. We should be considering those things.

M. R. /I. M. W.: I believe that one of the most harmful practices of design is related to the creation of superfluous artifacts. How can designers deal with the dilemma of superfluous market?

015

Pós, Rev. Programa Pós-Grad. Arquit. Urban. FAUUSP. São Paulo, v. 24, n. 43, p. 12–20, 2017

S. W.: Well, they can't do it alone. Designers can make a contribution, I think, and particularly in more academic experimental design by showing a different path through manifesting different kinds of objects. We can show a different path, but the questions of superfluity and excess production and the way we look at product development today is "what new thing can we produce in order to make money"? It doesn't really matter what it really is, if it can be new and we can market it in the right way then we can make money.

So we have a product which could be a very advanced product and last a long time, but if you produce that product it will make a little bit of money and then we have to come up with a completely new product. So what the companies do: they deliberately launch a sort of a first model, which doesn't have all the features they could include - low resolution, low battery life, limited numbers of features - and they release that, then six months later they put it in a bit more. So people want the next one and 6 months they put out the next one.

We see that all the time and this is the way that we create dissatisfaction, because you have just bought that one, but somebody else has got this one, so you buy this one and then there's another one. So it is constantly creating dissatisfaction which is the drive for consumption. The purpose is to drive consumption, and we [designers] drive consumption because that's the way the western capitalist system creates wealth for the shareholders. Because they stimulate the market through so called ''innovation'' to encourage people to consume, to spend their money so that the companies make more money – so the driver is economic growth.

So its the economic priority, and the way you drive that is through consumerism, and when you drive it in the consumer society, there's always a lot of waste because when you release the new model, the older one is thrown away and increasingly we've moved to a disposable culture. My grandfather used to use a cut-throat razor and he used to sharpen it. So one razor would last a very long time and he sharpened it and then he shaved. Then we had a disposable blade and then we had the disposable razor. So you throw the whole thing away. And you buy six razors in a pack and you use them and throw the whole thing away.

That kind of culture has moved towards everything - an electric drill you buy for example, if something goes wrong, you throw it away and you replace it. It is cheaper to replace it. You just throw it away. And the mobile phone, you don't get it repaired, you throw them away. The laptop computers...they're expensive objects, you know. All these things are very expensive.

So that's the problem: the driver is the economic system. That's the prime motivator for this culture of excess and superfluous products. The way to address that is to bring other values to the front and put the economic driver to the back because there's more to life than just growing the size of your bank account. Yes, we have to have money. I'm not saying we do not have to have money. But what we are doing is creating enormous economic inequities. While some people have millions and millions, and billions of dollars, and a lot of people have none or very, very little, that is unethical.

M. R. /I. M. W.: Do you think industrial design is perceived by the entrepreneurs as just a tool to increase profit?

S. W.: Yes. I think very often that's all industrial design has been for a long time. It's used very often as an arm of marketing to create a shiny beautiful perfect seductive surface to a product to entice people to buy it. It is used as fashionable clothing for products and this is what Victor Papanek railed against in 1971, which is a long time ago and we are still doing it. So yes, very emphatically, yes.

M. R. /I. M. W.: How do you think durable artifacts affect the market and economical sustainability?

S. W.: Well, if you buy a long-lasting product which you are satisfied with, then you're no longer contributing to the economy so it is regarded as a bad thing. But if you buy a beautiful object, which last a long time and you can hand on to your children or your grandchildren, I mean, in theory it should be a good thing. If you find it beautiful because it was beautifully made and then it can be a heritage item which is passed on from generation to generation it should and it could be a very good thing.

But that means if we have that kind of material culture, we need to still find ways of creating good work and creating wealth. Ways of creating wealth and so people can have a means of sustaining themselves in a way which are far less energy and resource intensive and so that's why a lot of work has moved towards service design and development of services.

But, again, a lot of that can be related to localization because if we are doing recreation activities at the local level, we may be paying a fee to be a member of a sports club or to go and see a live theater from a local troop or a concert from a local musician, then we are paying for something which is regarded of value, but it's not a material artifact - we are consuming entertainment or are using a sports facility, but it's not so materially intensive.

If we go to the cinema rather than have our own entertainment system and buying entertainment technology, that's all the DVDs, and you own the films and so on -that's a change. But if you go to a cinema, yes, it's more restrictive because the cinema shows the film at a certain time and you have to turn up and it might not be convenient to you but - that's a part of the relationship you have with community. It's not all about you, it's about community and so by participating in that you pay, you are creating jobs, you are getting a service and you are sharing with the community, you are meeting other people and you may go for a coffee afterwards with friends and you socialize. So it's far less consumptive than everybody in their own home having their own big screen TV, their own DVDs watching it alone. That's not community building and it's very, very consumptive. Particularly when you think of all those artifacts which allow you to do that; they could be changed every year or 2 years as the new technologies are pressed upon us.

So we can still create wealth through services. If we don't have the big screen TVs and amplifiers we go to the cinema. If we don't have our own gym, we go to a local gym. A lot of houses particularly in North America, which is very wealthy, have their own gym, and their own swimming pool, and their own entertainment room and everything individualized. But if we don't have all that stuff and we share as a community, we do not need such big homes. We could very comfortably living in smaller homes, which need less material to make and less energy to heat. So there's this multiple savings and there's less

maintenance, there's less cleaning in a smaller home because you don't need so many room that the excess of consumerism creates. There are a lot of people living in North American homes and suburbs in huge houses with double garages and they can't get their cars in the garages because they're full of stuff. That's very, very common. They can't move for all the stuff.

M. R. /I. M. W.: What is your opinion about mass products aesthetics and why these products have the same appearance, look like the same?

S. W.: The propaganda, the marketing of the consuming society, it's all about individual choice. But when you go to the store, you find that all the products are more or less the same and the only difference is the brand, but they are all pretty much same, and if you look at, you know, the different phones, mobile phones that are available, everybody is copying everybody else. They all look exactly the same. The only difference is the label or brand and the same with cars. They all look pretty much the same. Everybody produces the same kind of model and the only way you can tell the difference from an Audi, a BMW, a Volkswagen and whatever else is through the label on the back of it. You couldn't identify it otherwise.

They're all competing with one another on the same terms and there's no real consumer choice in that sense. You are identified as a particular area in a consumer market, and targeted. That sort of car is for you and you're in target. And that's what you can have. And you could have the one with that label or that label or that label…but they're pretty much all the same. So there's not really a lot of choice.

Whereas in localized production and traditional communities, they were very, very different. When we used to travel, we would experience different, very, very different cultures with different foods, different forms of dress, different kinds of furniture, and different types of homes. Now, when you travel around the world, everybody dresses in Levi's, in Nikes and Adidas. Everybody carries an Apple or a Samsung phone. They drive the same kind of car and they have the same appliances in their houses. So pretty much the same and so a lot of the fascination and wonder of global travel has kind of disappeared because everybody is living more or less the same, with the same stuff. And so if you consider going shopping to buy a souvenir to take home from a trip, there's no difference. So, travel it's not so rich because that diversity, and that adaptation to local culture and cultural expression through clothing, through furniture and artifacts, has disappeared. And that's a great shame because it was a very rich diversity, which has disappeared in just a few years.

M. R. /I. M. W.: You have related vernacular design and its property of localization to sustainability. Can you tell us what vernacular design is and what is the role of the localization aspect to sustainable design?

S. W.: Traditionally, vernacular design was associated with rather isolated cultures and people were separated from one another. They built up their own particular kind of material culture to suit their own needs from local materials and they created distinctiveness.

For example, in England, a traditional architect I would say is a vernacular architect. In the Cotswolds, in the south of England, the houses have a particular look because of ther honey colored stone - because they are made

018

of local stone. They have a certain kind of look to them, which is peculiar to that area. If you go to Yorkshire there's a different type of stone, a little bit different design. So that's vernacular. If you go to Lake District, the local stone is slate, which is very different. It looks very different. So the different houses were expressive of the local conditions and the designs would change to suit the local stone, to what you could do with that stone and the local needs and it is a very distinctive kind of architecture.

Now we use mass produced materials and they put the same kinds of houses all over the places and there's no local character to the houses. It's the same everywhere in a new housing estate and so there's a loss of that diversity. There's a loss of vernacular design but very often you find it throughout the world.

When you build with local materials to suit local needs you create a vernacular design, and there's a fit with the place, a very good "fitting in" to the local environment, which is a product of the way that things are built. And a lot of these vernacular designs evolved over thousands and thousands of years and people were able to live in accord with the local environmental conditions in the way they lived, in the way they built, in their housing types and so on. When we move away from that we see those kinds of sustainable ways of living breaking down very, very quickly and I saw that. I used to live in the Middle East and I saw that happen very, very quickly.

People have been living on the coast in the Middle East for thousands of years in the same kind of way they used to live since the biblical times and they use their irrigation system, which is mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy, which is 500 BC or something. It's a very, very old way of living - where they made local houses out of local palm trees fronds, the local fishing boats were made of palm tree fronds - and there was a balance. There was a very delicate balance when people were living in harmony with their environment, making their artifacts out of local materials and growing food, raising animals. There was a very delicate balance and that all broke down with the intervention of western technology very, very quickly and it was destroyed, it is very sad to see.

But of course you can understand why people moved to this more modern way of living - it's more comfortable. And you can understand why people chose to do that - it's very attractive. But it's not sustainable.

There are no easy answers here but I think localization in a modern context is probably not that. It is not going back to that pre-modern way of living. I think that it would be counterproductive. It's not going back, but it is recognizing that those traditional ways of living brought something, which was important when we rejected all that with the dawn of modernity. We lost something that was very, very valuable and we can still learn from that for today.

And so when we do things at local level, when we employ people at the local level and we pay them a living wage to create artifacts from local materials that is reflected in the price of the artifact. If that's taken into consideration - local supply of material taking from the local environment, created or turned into artifacts of value through human skills, which people then buy - then the true cost of that is automatically included in the price of the artifact. Because if you are paying for the local environmental care, if you are paying a living wage to the manufactures of the artifact, the true cost is automatically

included in the price of the artifact - environmental degradation and human exploitation are part of the production, which today aren't in the price of mass-produced products.

So localization can help. If there's a local manufacturer who is destroying the local environment and we are living in the local environment, then we will be very aware of it and something would be done because we don't want to live next to this destruction. And maybe those manufacturers have to change what they do. And if we are aware of where these artifacts come from, they're more meaningful to us -if we're aware of the skills that go into it, the history behind it, what it means and therefore we pay the true cost of it.

Localization and true costs reflected in the price of the artifact would help include sustainable aspects in the production system and the prices of the artifact would have to be higher because of the true costs. But that would mean that we would have to value those artifacts more because we cannot afford to throw them out and replace them on a regular basis, because they're expensive. This would encourage us to look after them and reduce our overall consumption. So it's that kind of a process where localization can help to change and demonstrate a different way forward.

It is worth recognizing that we can learn from the traditional if we change our thinking and start to value what was in those traditional systems and if we can reinterpret that for today and reinforce some of those values. We could potentially live in a much more environmental friendly way without all this consumption of energy and so on, which we are so dependent on today.

Marilia Riul
Pesquisadora independente.
CV: http://lattes.cnpq.br/6091869348536473
mriul@yahoo.com.br

Ingrid Moura Wanderley
Professora visitante da Universidade Federal de Campina Grande. Campina Grande, PB.
CV: http://lattes.cnpq.br/6157340213400778
ingridmw@uol.com.br

Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos
Professora titular em design da Universidade de São Paulo. São Paulo, SP.
CV: http://lattes.cnpq.br/9875100117374731
closchia@usp.br