

Conference Report

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Nordes 2015: Design Ecologies

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The sixth biannual Nordes (Nordic Design Research) Conference was held 7 to 10 June 2015 at Konstfack in Stockholm, Sweden. The intriguing theme, *Design ecologies: challenging anthropocentrism in the design of sustainable futures*, along with an impressive keynote line-up, attracted a surprising number of scholars from around the globe.

A call for an ecological perspective is based on the increasing awareness of the astonishing complexity of the natural and artificial environments and our inability to predict the impact of our actions within those environments. The aim of the event was to a large extent to interrogate the paradoxical position of design: simultaneously ‘an emblem of unsustainability ... [by] accelerating material throughput’ and an important driver of change towards greater sustainability and wellbeing. This meant grappling with design, as both creative and destructive force, both solution and problem. In questioning the role of design amidst increasing ecological devastation, designers need to position themselves firmly as both critics and creators. However, as became clear throughout the conference, the tension between a mature critical awareness and the creative optimism needed to bring about constructive change can prove difficult to manage.

One of the key conference questions raised was: ‘how do we in design, and beyond, move from the kind of ego-system we seem to be so trapped in towards the kind of eco-system everyone and everything can gain from?’ As a starting point, designers must look towards other disciplines to help them understand as many perspectives as possible. It is thus fitting that the first keynote, *Building resilience in the anthropocene*, by Line Gordon (Stockholm Resilience Centre) presented an outside

perspective. As an expert in Systems Ecology, with a focus on water management and smallholder agriculture, Gordon presented a brief but insightful overview of our age of 'great acceleration', wherein everything is impacted by humans at an exponential pace. Despite the terrifying potential of accelerated destruction, Gordon showed some encouraging examples of resilience, such as the restoration of land in the Sahel desert, through concerted human effort. Gordon presented a set of practical principles for greater 'resilience', or a means for coping with the tensions between persistence and change. Gordon's message was an optimistic one, showing how humans are indeed capable of reforming and restoring ecosystems.

In the poignant second keynote on *Fashion ecologies*, Kate Fletcher (London College of Fashion), presented her insights into increasing garment longevity, in response to the destructive force of fast fashion. Fletcher suggested that while reducing the ecological footprint per garment is a noble pursuit, this essentially amounts to 'doing the wrong thing, righter'. Regardless of how sustainable production technologies become, the real problem lies in the vast quantity of fast fashion being consumed and too easily discarded. Since fashion consumption is rooted in the construction of identity and meaning, Fletcher seeks to develop a greater understanding of what people value about their clothing; not just what they wear, but *how* they wear. She shared various delightful anecdotes of people, encountered during her research, who have developed particularly sentimental attachments to their garments. When people develop such strong connections they would go to great lengths to mend and alter precious pieces. Fletcher proposes that the only real solution to the fashion crisis entails a dramatic shift in consumption attitudes, but this needs to be supported by design action. As long as the fashion system operates with a mechanistic emphasis on greater efficiency and profit, garments will remain devoid of meaning. There are no easy solutions, but Fletcher believes it starts with attaching a different set of values to what people wear.

The third keynote, by Alison J Clarke (University of Applied Arts Vienna), titled *Buckminster Fuller's reindeer abattoir and other designs for the real world*, presented a fascinating glimpse into R Buckminster Fuller and Victor Papanek's involvement in Nordic design projects during the Cold War era. By exposing some of the shifting perceptions surrounding their involvement over a period of time, Clarke illustrated how we have developed de-contextualised, oversimplified personas of these larger-than-life figures. Clarke's presentation clearly highlighted the need for more theoretically rigorous investigations of prominent figures in design history, especially those we draw from so generously in informing current discourse.

Mugendi M'Rithaa (Cape Peninsula University of Technology), the fourth keynote

speaker, approached the question of design ecologies from a uniquely African perspective. M'Rithaa started by correcting some misconceptions regarding Africa's social, political, and environmental situation. By structuring his presentation along a series of African proverbs, he illustrated how there is much to learn from traditional African values. For instance, as a response to the widespread loss of community, which goes hand-in-hand with anti-ecological thinking, he quoted the proverb: 'If you want to run fast, run alone; if you want to run far, run together'. Throughout his presentation, M'Rithaa showed how African material culture is inherently 'close to the earth', making Africa 'sustainable by default'. However, in light of rapid industrial development, the biggest future challenge is to keep Africa sustainable, by design.

John Wood (Goldsmiths, University of London) presented the enlightening and highly entertaining keynote, *Designing beyond names, codes, forms and signs*. He, like others, started off by reiterating the fundamentally problematic design culture that merely produces 'new shapes' or 'gadgets', reinforcing destructive industries and lifestyles. Through 'metadesign' practices, Wood believes design practice can be redesigned to initiate a complete paradigm shift. A major part of metadesign, and the focus of his presentation, is (re)linguaging, the conscious adaptation of metaphors which structure language and thought. In such a way, (re)linguaging provides opportunities to reframe ideas, initiate attitude change and by extension, affect human behaviour. Design discourse is rooted primarily in the 'mechanistic' language of classical science, with an emphasis on predicting and controlling outcomes. Wood thus suggested that, through metadesign, we can shift our attitudes linguistically towards a more mature acknowledgement of the complexity and unpredictability of design actions within larger systems. As an example, Wood referred to the current conception of the manicured and chemically treated lawn as aesthetic status symbol, which is of course highly problematic from an ecological perspective. He suggested that we could, through deliberate discursive practice, adjust our aesthetic preferences and return to value the original meaning of a lawn, as an area for diverse communal use. As a parting thought, Wood suggests that through language, we can make the unthinkable thinkable, and from there, even make the unthinkable possible.

In addition to the keynotes, full and exploratory papers, the conference included a one-day doctoral consortium, an exhibition of creative work, and numerous workshops. All activities, including meals, were carefully planned extensions of the theme, providing additional opportunities for discussion and critical reflection. For instance, at Jenny Markstedt's 'Meat and talk' lunch event, conference goers were issued a red, yellow, or green receipt based on the ecological footprint of their meal

selections. Also, the carefully considered conference identity and visual application, for which Konstfack students were responsible, received an enthusiastic applause. An organic-geometric stencil typeface, signifying natural-artificial symbiosis, was applied in a variety of hand-printed conference products. The clever re-using of materials, such as cut-out pieces of the laser-cut signage, minimised waste and echoed the conference theme of sustainability. However, Cameron Tonkinwise offered a counter-perspective via a tweet: 'Applause for presentation of handmade-ness of conference materials #nordes2015, because ... ?'

Tonkinwise (School of Design, Carnegie Mellon University) further perfected his role as sceptic in presenting the final keynote and reflections on the conference. His talk, *Design for cosmopolitan localism in the era of xenophobia* was a powerfully discomfoting, meta-critique of the conference format and theme. He pointed out how, despite decades of sustainable design, sustainability is at its lowest, and that we are all complicit as 'climate-change deniers'. Travelling from all over the world to attend a conference, without producing tangible solutions, displays a severe lack of urgency with regard to the anthropocene crisis. Tonkinwise further takes issue with the 'enemy in our own house'; when design researchers treat conference papers like 'minimum viable products'. His major point of critique was thus how 'innovation in academic conference formats is pathetic, given what a special condition it is'. This last statement was shared through a number of tweets, indicating a broader consensus that the extraordinarily privileged circumstances of the conference should be matched with a higher level of accountability.

After his critique of the conference format, Tonkinwise proceeded to highlight how the most pressing problems in the socio-political ecosystem – human inequality, anti-immigration and xenophobia – have remained unaddressed. While developed nations create increasingly comfortable and aesthetic material environments, the ethical questions surrounding the systematic exclusion of others remain largely unanswered. Tonkinwise's admonishments came as a surprise, especially in light of the overwhelming praise the conference received throughout. However, his willingness to present this unpopular angle, was perceived by some as a self-sacrifice for the sake of deeper critical reflection; as a necessary anti-climax of sorts. This sobering talk aptly illustrated the need to deflate the design ego, if we are to work with greater urgency towards a more sustainable future.