

# Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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**Stuart Walker [s.walker@lancaster.ac.uk]**  
Professor and Co-Director, Imaginationlancaster, Lancaster University

**Craig Badke [cbadke@telusplanet.net]**  
PhD Student, Faculty of Environmental Design, University of Calgary

## BEING HERE

### attitude, place, and design for sustainability

#### Abstract

This paper explores the shift in understandings that must necessarily prefigure any lasting shift towards sustainable behaviours. The focus is on a shift from *having*, which is implicit in the term 'consumer society', to *being*, a term that suggests a quite different and potentially more sustainable relationship with the physical environment.

One of the authors lives a short drive from the town of Banff in the heart of Canada's first national park, the other lives a short drive from Keswick, in the center of the English Lake District National Park. Both places are areas of outstanding natural beauty. A walk down the main street of Banff townsite reveals a busy shopping thoroughfare; almost every other store is an "outdoor gear" retailer selling apparel, hiking boots, skis, mountain bikes, canoes and climbing tackle. There are a host of outlets offering whitewater rafting experiences, trail riding, glacier trips and heli-skiing. The highstreet of Keswick in the UK offers a surprisingly similar array of shops, selling the same clothes, boots and packs, along with cross-country biking, boat tours, climbing excursions and GPS training days. Both places have annual mountain film festivals that screen movies of people engaging in extreme activities in the natural environment. Hence, the 'great outdoors' is a major focus of both towns and it is the basis of their economies. However, it is also the case that the entire emphasis of both is "consumeristic" – it is about *having* – having the right stuff and having the right experience. This emphasis is in accord with contemporary capitalist societies - its helps create wealth and jobs. Despite the fact that both towns are in the heart of major national parks, it is an emphasis that is also highly destructive to the environment and fundamentally at odds with sustainability.

This paper asks, "What does it mean *to be* in the environment, rather than *to have* an experience in the environment; an experience that is, in turn, dependent on *having* the right gear. *Having* such experiences means that the environment is appreciated primarily for its instrumental value, for its ability to provide us with an exhilarating view, or mountain bike ride or ski route.

How might a different understanding, one in which the emphasis shifts from primarily *having* to a more balanced understanding that includes *being*, begin to change our relationship with the world and what might it imply for changing our approaches to wealth creation and ensuring human wellbeing? In turn, what does it imply for what we design and how we design?

This paper is about design for sustainability, not national parks. However, the example of our experiences and expectations in relation to national parks is symptomatic of our wider attitudes and

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consumerist behaviours. When we find ourselves on a hiking trail, or a ski slope, or a mountain bike trail we are there to satisfy our personal desire for a fulfilling or exhilarating experience. In this case we are not *being* we are *doing, using, or consuming*; we are there *to have* an experience. We walk along a trail in our “gear”, made by North Face or Columbia (the label *is* important) until we arrive at a viewing spot where we are invited via a sign or a thoughtfully placed park bench to appreciate “the view”, little realizing, perhaps, that the notion of “the view” is itself a Modern construct, a product of how we relate to the natural world, where we see it as something to be viewed, as an aesthetic object.

An Albertan rancher or an English farmer with his sheep dog have very different connections to their respective environments, to the weather, the land, to their animals, their community, and even their tools, than the average office worker focussed on a computer screen for much of the working day. To *be* in our environment means to *be* in our *daily* environment. While we cannot, nor necessarily would we wish to, go back to some more ‘natural’ state of living within the environment, our contemporary use of natural places as recreational areas and weekend playgrounds, which serve as *an escape* from the city, perhaps indicates that we see our places of living and working as environments to be *escaped from* because they fail to provide the kind of nourishment, on a day to day basis, that we need and seek.

While there are many efficiencies associated with globalized capitalism and production, it has in many ways led to an increasing sameness around the world; the mass-produced, global ‘having’ experience tending to wash away differences and the particular-ness of place. Sustainability emphasises the local, not only for instrumental benefit such as creating local jobs or reducing transportation, but also because there is a qualitative difference of cultural and aesthetic diversity, connection and appropriateness. Design for the local emphasises ‘fit’ and ‘aptness’, as seen in the vernacular architecture of Pueblo homes in New Mexico, the stone cottages of rural England, or the circular yurt structures still used by nomadic tribes in Afghanistan. Such design is born of intimate knowledge developed in response to the particularities of place, material, function, and culture. Design for the local encourages stewardship, responsibility, connection, and meaning, where our problems are not ‘*out there*’ in the world, externalized and easily objectifiable, but *here*, local, accountable, tangible, vested.

From their different perspectives, Wolff, a designer and Ratzinger, a theologian have both written about getting things in the right order. Essentially, they say, if one gets things in the right order, in terms of priorities and values, then everything else will fall into place accordingly. In other words, a change in our attitudes and understandings must prefigure a change in behaviours. Today, it seems clear that we must consider and change our current attitudes to and understandings about the environment if we are to effect any significant and lasting shift towards sustainable behaviours.

Historically, a change in understanding occurs when conventions no longer seem to work for people. We have seen such changes in the past. For example, the Medieval hierarchical understandings of society, with little mobility between societal ranks, slowly transformed into the Modern understanding through new philosophical and scientific developments. This transformation was based on reason and scientific discovery and took perhaps 3 – 4 centuries to fully inculcate a notion of meritocracy, rather than aristocracy. These developments led to the Industrial Revolution, the Modern age, our notions of continual advancement and the concept of ‘progress’. Since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially since the 1960s the assumptions and understandings of Modernism have been increasingly called into question. Postmodernism, represents a transition in thinking, it is a time of dis-ease and uncertainty where traditions and conventions are constantly challenged but have yet to establish a clear set of alternatives. In this, an important catalyst of change is the, now obvious, environmental destruction our behaviours are causing, as well as our increased awareness of gross social disparities and injustices. As such our understandings, ways of living, assumptions and expectations have been thrown into disarray. They no longer seem to ‘work’ for us and it is up to all of us to strive towards the development of new kinds of relationships with both the world and each other. As discussed, such a shift has precedents, it is possible – but it is also a long and arduous task. However, if our current ways of living are truly unsustainable then, actually, we have little choice but to change.

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This paper:

- Considers what it means to *be* in a particular place. As a significant theory component of a current research programme, the project looks at how seeking answers to this question might affect our responses to design, material culture, consumerism and sustainability.
- Outlines the research project and a methodology that aims to examine these notions through focus groups and design workshops. An integrated program of design inquiry and theory development is proposed to develop design models exploring increased localization and design for post-life adaptability, both of which require a more active and involved relationship with our objects and places of being than our current consumer model asks of us.
- Explores these notions philosophically and visually through comparative photographic essays and visualizations and draws conclusions about localization, the necessary attitudinal shifts implied by sustainability and the potential implications for design and adoption of such ideas.

## References

Wolff, M, (ca.1989) *You are a Towel*, Addison Design, London  
Ratzinger, J. (2007) *Jesus of Nazareth*, Doubleday, New York