SUSTAINABILITY IS DEAD: ARCHITECTURE AS (RE)GENERATOR

PROPOSAL FOR A SYMPOSIUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE BY RICHARD GRAVES, AIA, DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE BUILDING RESEARCH AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

Sustainability is dead or at the very least meaningless after the term has been co-opted by the branding and green-washing of corporations and governments and as the technological pursuit as typified by green building programs and other reductive approaches. As Ray Cole states: “green design is directed at reducing degenerative impacts… this is insufficient for an ecologically sustainable future and is an insufficient aspiration to motivate design professionals and their clients.” The world is in constant flux and change. Complex systems are continually in a process of adapting to influences and priorities. Unfortunately, much of the work and theory has been incremental fine-tuning of architecture and fails to inspire design and innovation.

Design relies on humanity’s ability to not only be rational and technical, but also to be intuitive, to recognize patterns, to construct ideas that have emotional and experiential meaning as well as function. Given the realities of our time, architecture requires much more than fine-tuning. A complete overhaul is required to redesign our way of building and making to contribute to the web of life.

The worlds we inhabit – natural, social, and technological have real limits and fragility. The euro-centered world that has dominated the culture of the last two hundred years is in the process of coming apart, perhaps to be replaced by new and better stories or perhaps not. Natural systems that humanity has lived within have been altered beyond return to a pristine state, but hopefully not beyond restoration. We are living on an Earth 2.0, where all bets are off. Socio-ecological systems are unstable and fractured. Since the 1970s, humanity has been in ecological overshoot with annual demand on resources exceeding what Earth can regenerate each year. It now takes the Earth one year and six months to regenerate what we use in a year. We maintain this overshoot by liquidating the Earth’s resources. Overshoot is a vastly underestimated threat to human well-being and the health of the planet, and one that is not adequately addressed.

How do we envision a new role for design? In a world that is increasingly digital, global and devoid of connections to place, people and the natural world? How do architects consider an integral design process merging the designed world or “technosphere” with the life support system or “ecosphere” of the planet? How do we meet human needs, create delight and inspiration while enhancing the potential of natural and social systems? Can buildings be analogs for living systems? How do we create architecture in a complex world that is in an inherent state of flow and flux?

This symposium will explore design and architecture as a means to conceive and shape complex systems at the intersection of natural process and culture, where form follows flow.

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1 Cole, Ray. Understanding regenerative design: Challenging the orthodoxy of current green building practice. REMNetwork.org
“…. I think that humans have a taste for things that not only show that they have been through a process of evolution, but which also show they are still a part of one. They are not dead yet.”
Brian Eno, quoted in Stewart Brand’s How Buildings Learn

From Design for Life: The Architecture of Sim Van Der Ryn

Key Questions:

• How can regenerative design inform the architectural practice of the future? What are the relevant techniques and processes?
• Is there an evolution of environmentalism ready for integration into architecture? Can architecture enhance natural processes and ecological systems?
• How do buildings participate in the production, transformation and evolution of ecosystems at various scales?
• How do we account for the benefits and impacts of architecture on living systems?
Draft Schedule:

Thursday, October 27

4:00pm  Opening Reception
5:30pm  Keynote: Lance Hosey, FAIA: “Bridging the Gap between Good Design and Green Design”
7:00pm  Dinner with speakers and faculty

Friday, October 28

8:00am  Morning Reception and Registration: Coffee
9:00am  Opening Keynote: Richard Graves, AIA: “Regenerating Architecture”
10:00am Break
10:30am Setting the Context for the Future of Architecture. Perspectives on the place of architecture in a complex world.
    • Jessica Hellman, Director of the Institute on the Environment, University of Minnesota
    • Julia Kane Africa, Center for Health and the Global Environment at the Harvard School of Public Health
11:30am Lunch
12:30pm Theory, Practice and Research. Exploring the future of sustainable design and the implications for architecture. (3-4 from the list below)
    • Kiel Moe, AIA Associate Professor, Harvard University
    • Dr. William Braham, FAIA, Professor, University of Pennsylvania
    • Forrest Meggers, Assistant Professor, Princeton University
    • Dr. Raymond Cole, Professor, University of British Columbia
1:15pm Break
1:30pm Connecting Design and Regeneration. Lessons from practice panel discussion with: (5 from the list below)
    • Tom Kubala, RA, Kabala Washatko
    • Julie Snow, FAIA, Snow-Krelisch
    • Bob Harris, FAIA, Lake Flato
    • Marc L’Italien, FAIA, HGA
    • James Timberlake, FAIA, Kieran Timberlake
3:30pm Closing Discussion: All Speakers