

Reflection, Consciousness, Progress: Creatively Slow Designing the Present

Alastair Fuad-Luke

Pensiero discorrente

I propose that the conjunction for creativity is 'if'. Without 'if' the status quo of the present is maintained. I further posit that 'if' is embedded in a circuit of theory=practice, the two being indistinguishable as Gui Bonsieppe notes, 'theory renders that explicit which is already implicitly in practice as theory'.¹ Bonsieppe further talks about the virtues of design and concludes that:

Design theory as *pensiero discorrente* – as thinking against the grain, as critical thinking – is rooted in the domain of social discourse and thus, in the final instance, in that of politics, where the question is: In what sort of a society do members of that society wish to live?²

So, I believe that creative application of theory and practice is generated when the question 'if' is raised in a politicised context at an individual or a social level.

This context is *materialised* by deployment of human, social, natural, financial and manufactured capitals – the five capitals proposed by Forum for the Future.³ So I posit that:

'if' + the five capitals = creativity

Accepting this premise, it is reasonable to say that creativity has varied over history, as the context has evolved concurrently with the 'five capitals'.

Technocentric Space: Time Compression

At any given point in history the 'ifs' may be different to today, while others may be remarkably consistent. Bringing together the

¹ Bonsieppe, G. 'Design – the Blind Spot of Theory, or, Theory – the Blind Spot of Design', conference paper for a semi-public event at the Jan van Eyk Academy, Maastricht, April 1997.

² Bonsieppe, G., *ibid.*

³ Forum for the Future, available at:

http://www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/aboutus/sdtools_page398.aspx#FCM
(13/04/06).

work of brand consultant Will Murray and the architectural critic Charles Jencks, one can see that the economic foci of our socio-cultural milieu has shifted as has our perception of time (figure 1).

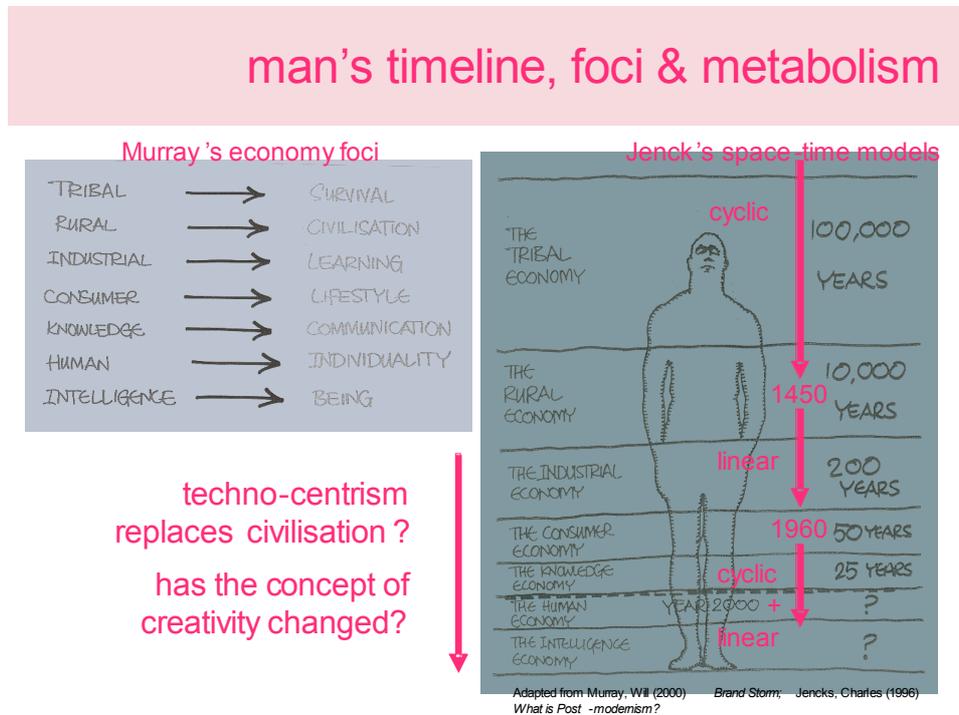


Fig.1 Man's Timeline, foci and metabolism

Murray sees a shift in economic focus from survival in the tribal economy to communication in the information economy.⁴ He suggests that emergent 'human' and 'intelligence' economies will focus on 'individuality' and 'being'. Over mankind's timeline there has been a shortening of lifespan of each typeform of economy since the emergence of the Industrial Revolution. Jencks charts space-time models over a similar timeline and suggests that in 1450 there was a paradigm shift from cyclic to linear space-time models.⁵ Was this the birth of the Western notion of linear progress? In 1960 the cyclic and linear space-time models converged to create the Post-modern fiesta and generate our contemporary sense of 'always on'. Has the rapid replacement of economic foci (and its embedded techno-centrism) provided a continuous shift to the context? There is no doubt that 'if', in combination with new technologies, and a consequent shift in deployment of the five capitals, has accelerated

⁴ Murray, W. *Brand Storm: a Tale of Passion, Betrayal and Revenge*, 2000, London: Financial Times/Prentice Hall.

⁵ Jencks, C. *What is Post-modernism?*, 1996, London: Academy Editions.

actual physical change (e.g. in flow of resources) and the perception of rate of socio-economic change over time.

An Unsustainable Metabolism

The net result of emerging new economies and the continual increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), that doyen measurement of economists, is a wanton use of the world's (finite) resources. For the UK, that translates into a current rate of resource consumption called 'environmental space' equivalent to over: 8 planets of energy (CO²); 8 planets of aluminum; 3 planets of cement; 3½ planets of wood; 1¼ planets of land.⁶ If every citizen lived as UK citizens does the planet cannot sustain such activity. Despite such economic growth, UK citizens' sense of happiness and quality of life has not increased since the 1970s.⁷ During the last thirty years the 'life satisfaction' measurement has neither increased nor declined. This correlates well with the New Economic Foundation's Measure of Domestic Progress (MDP), which is GDP minus the real environmental and social costs.

Since Marinetti proposed the First Futurist Manifesto in 1909, a manifesto worshipping speed and the virtues of modernity, the context in the 'developed' world has been a state of 'always on', 24/7/365, leading to a 24-hour, push-pull, multi-channel, terrestrial & satellite, information & entertainment continuum. I believe it is time to adjust our metabolism to levels that can be sustained for future generations. Sustainable development, 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'⁸ is possibly the big 'IF', and may be one of the biggest challenges to man's creativity to date.

I suggest it is time to press the pause button, to reflect on how we might wish to deploy the five capitals to move towards a collectively recognised state of sustainability. Pausing offers an opportunity for fresh moments of awareness, a new consciousness of one's condition and an assessment of the system(s) on which one depends or with which one enjoys a state of symbiosis or mutuality. The pre-requisite to progress towards a vision of sustainability arguably entails nurturing a re-newed, re-discovered consciousness.

⁶ McLaren, D., S. Bullock and N. Yousuf *Tomorrow's World: Britain's Share in a Sustainable Future*, 1998, London: Earthscan Publications.

⁷ Shah, H. and N. Marks *A Well-being Manifesto for a Flourishing Society*, 2004, London: New Economics Foundation.

⁸ World Commission on Environment & Development (the Brundtland Commission), *Our Common Future*, 1987.

As Bergson points out, 'without consciousness there is never succession, never a before and after – just a lonely cloud of discrete and discontinuous points'.⁹

Slow Activism, Slow Knowledge

Our rush to the cliff of ecological destruction (read climate change; wars over resources – oil, water, minerals; fished-out seas), accelerated by the juggernaut of globalization, and the socio-cultural rucksack of problems it entails (migration, hunger, poverty, social exclusion) has not gone unnoticed. A slow activism has emerged from grass roots organizations particularly over the last decade (figure 2).

slow activism

Expressions of slow activism		
Type	Sub-type	Examples
'Anti'-activists	Anti-globalisation	A diverse coalition of groups
	Anti-car culture	Reclaim the Streets
	Anti-consumerist	Buy Nothing Day, No Shop
Slow positivism	Slow localism	Slow Food, Slow Cities
	Slow environmentalism	The Sloth Club
	Slow design	SLOW, SlowLab
Green or eco - lifestyle	Organic food	Soil Association
	Consumerism	Greenmap, GEN
	Transportation	Sustrans, HPVA
	Eco-tourism	International Ecotourism Society

Fig.2 Slow Activism

These activists fall into three groups – 'anti-activists', 'slow positivists' and 'green/eco-lifestylists'. Each group contests the default metabolism of our current (economic-socio-political) paradigm – the 'anti-activists' disrupt or boycott; the slow positivists seek to promote slowness as a positive force, designing to this effect; and the green/eco-lifestylists suggest adjustments to a way of living. While fitting under the banner of slow activism they also seem to share a way of using knowledge – slow knowledge.

⁹ Bergson, H. *Creative Evolution*, 1960, (trans. Mitchell, A.), London: Macmillan.

The distinction between 'slow knowledge' and 'fast knowledge' is illustrated in figure 3.

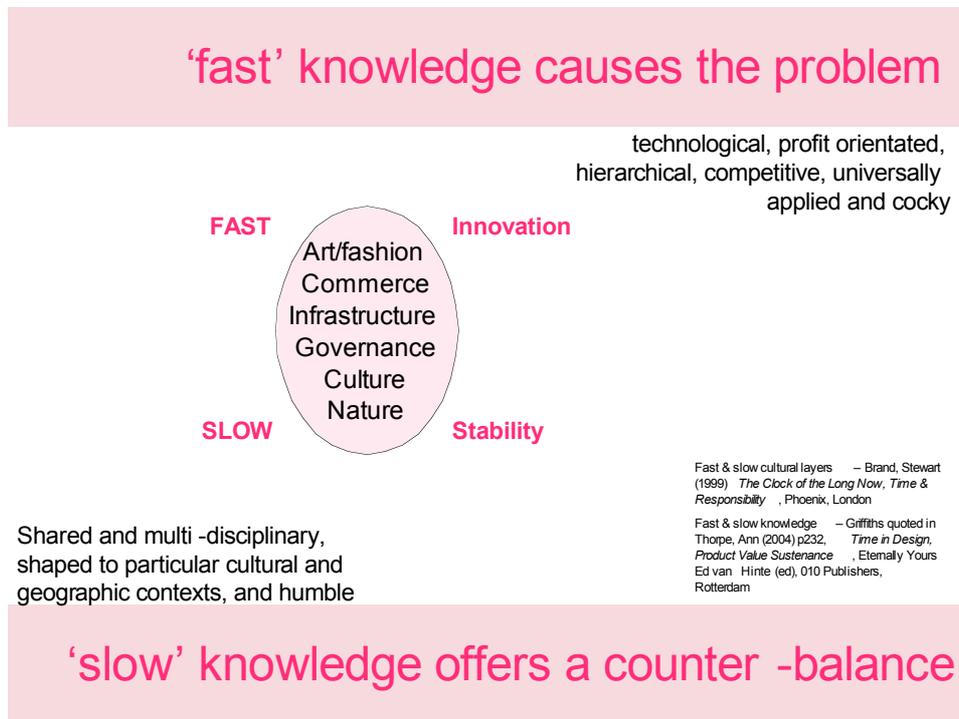


Fig.3 The distinction between 'fast' and 'slow' knowledge

Fast knowledge is technological, profit orientated, hierarchical, competitive, universally applied and cocky¹⁰ – we recognise this is the predominant knowledge of the global economy. It is suited to the fast, dynamic layers of culture, as proposed by Stewart Brand,¹¹ dominated by art/fashion/commerce. Slow knowledge, according to Griffiths, is shared and multi-disciplinary, shaped to particular cultural and geographic contexts, and humble – we recognize this as belonging to communities, societies; it is 'open-source'. It is perhaps more normally associated with the slower layers of culture where the evolution of culture and nature offer (an apparent) stability. Certainly the metabolism of nature is viewed as more leisurely than man.

One of the reasons ecosystems are so resilient is that they aren't doing anything in a hurry. The slower the flow

¹⁰ Griffiths quoted in Thorpe, A. p.232 in Van Hinte, E. (ed.) *Eternally Yours, Time in Design: Product Value Sustenance*, 2004, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.

¹¹ Brand, S. *The Clock of the Long Now, Time & Responsibility*, 1999, London: Phoenix.

rates, the more you can modulate the controls without wild fluctuations.¹²

The Pluralism of Time

To consider metabolism it is necessary to consider how time is perceived. Time is commodified by the dominant political, economic and socio-cultural nexus. In the early machinations of the Industrial Revolution time was quickly viewed as a commodity. Time was, and is, money.

All technology and all economy is fundamentally in one great struggle to combat the scarcity of time.¹³

Despite this commodification of time, there has been a consistent perception of time as a non-linear 'stream'. There are dominant currents – this equates to the dominant paradigm (often political, economic and social), yet side currents, ripples, eddies, deep and slow spaces, upstream flows and aimless whorls provide alternative paradigms (vis-à-vis the avant-garde, fringe organisations and minorities).

The Greeks made a distinction between *chronos* – absolute time (linear, chronological & quantitative) – and *Kairos* – qualitative time (time of opportunity, chance and mis-chance).¹⁴ A more contemporary interpretation might be *accelerated time* – a constantly accelerated rate of living where people do not have enough time, and *quality time* – a contrasting perception comprising moments of rest, meditation and wonder.¹⁵

In fact there is a healthy pluralism in the way time is viewed shifting between cultures, professions and academics (figure 4).

¹² Cooper, W. quoted in Benyus, J. *Biomimicry*, 2002, London: HarperCollins, p.263.

¹³ Smith, A. *The Wealth of Nations: An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (originally published 1776, abridged ed. version, 1993), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, Inc.

¹⁴ Greek philosophy quoted in Thackara, J. *In the Bubble – Designing in a Complex World*, 2005, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p.33.

¹⁵ Acherhuis quoted in Kern, S. *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, 1996.

need pluralistic view of time

'lived time, experienced time' - 'durée'
'real time' – 24/7, always 'on', a 'now' economy. An absence of time for reflection
'residence time' – the time anything spends within a system
'geologic time' – rivers erode, trees 'walk' as climate changes, mountains are born or die
'cultural time' – time is asymmetrical, the past is visible, the future is not
'time is progress' (the 'West')
'time is cyclic' (indigenous peoples)
'cow time' (cycles of milking, Sudan)
'scent time' (time of flowering, India)
'moral time' (think seven generations ahead, N. American Indians)
'Buddhist time' (infinite gratitude to past, infinite service to present, infinite responsibility to future)
'secular time' – represents linear progress
'sacred time' – represents cyclic 'being'

Sources: 'duree' quoted in Thackara, John (2005) *In the Bubble – Designing in a Complex World*, MIT Press, Mass, USA, p38; Thorpe, Ann (2003) *Time & design*, pp214-238 in *Time in Design, Eternally Yours*, 010 Publishers, NL; Walker, Stuart (2004) *Crushed before the Moth: Secular time, sacred time and design*, pp30-322, *Time in Design, Eternally Yours*, 010 Publishers, NL

Fig.4 The pluralistic view of time

Secular and sacred time perspectives are of particular interest in relation to the current sustainable design challenge.¹⁶

Secular time represents LINEAR PROGRESS:

- The present as fleeting moments
- Duration, clocks, schedules, agendas
- Chronological, linear, uni-directional
- Utilitarian
- The body, physical, finite, temporal
- The explicate order, the visible

Sacred time represents CYCLIC 'BEING':

- The present as 'eternally now'
- Eternity is beyond time, eternity is
- Qualitative, philosophical, meta-physical, spiritual
- The cycle of time; Birth, growth, death, decay, birth...
- Physical + Meta-physical
- The soul, infinite, eternal
- The implicate order, the invisible

¹⁶ Walker, S. 'Crushed Before the Moth: Secular time, Sacred Time and Design', in Van Hinte, E. (ed.), op. cit., pp.30-322.

Secular time fits the contemporary view of progress. With secular time the journey is clear, it is forward to tomorrow. The 'white heat of technology', a phrase deployed by the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson in the 1960s, burns ever brighter and faster still. Secular time sits comfortably with fast knowledge. In contrast, sacred time seems a better fit with slow knowledge – a little fuzzy, intuitive and hard to copyright. It circumscribes the present as 'eternally now', something reflected in the sentiments of two creative people, Brian Eno, the eclectic musician and Bruce Goff, an American architect. Eno has an interesting perspective on 'now':

We have the frame we operate in which we call 'now'.
'Now' is all the things that are affecting me. All the things
I can affect in a certain time frame I shall call 'now'.¹⁷

Goff felt that the past has gone, the future has not arrived, but the present is continuously with us. His architecture embraced the principal of a spatial and temporal continuum – he referred to this as 'the continuous present'.¹⁸ It is in this continuous present, the eternal now, that creativity is borne, that 'if' is uttered and the ensuing critical thought or action informs critical action or thought. In the context of sustainable development design, as a creative process, needs to focus on the 'now' rather than pontificate on the next conceptual utopia. Now is where the sustainability challenge is firmly sited.

Rituals of Delay

Perceiving a lack of progress in the adoption of sustainable design thinking or practice into mainstream designing and manufacturing, I actively sought a fresh way of engaging the design community and coined the term 'slow design'.¹⁹ I was stimulated by a number of sources. The first was Anne Cline's wonderful book, *A Hut of One's Own* where she focuses on architecture outside the circle of architecture; shacks, teahouses, follies, casitas and diners which she called simple 'undesigned' places.²⁰ These have a rhythm and purpose beyond the banality of much contemporary architecture. Cline observes that ecological ritual is really about exploring the pleasure of mundane circumstances. The objective of ecological ritual is to prolong time, to slow down the greedy, to turn away

¹⁷ Eno, B. in Van Hinte, E. (ed.), op. cit., p.62-63.

¹⁸ De Long, D.G. in Saliga, P. and M. Woolever (eds.) *The Architecture of Bruce Goff, 1904-82: Design for the Continuous Present*, 1995, Munich: Prestel Verlag.

¹⁹ Fuad-Luke, A. 'Slow Design: A Paradigm for Living Sustainably?' Development by Design, MIT/Shrishti School of Art & Design, Bangalore, Nov 2002.

²⁰ Cline, A. *A Hut of One's Own: Life Outside the Circle of Architecture*, 1998, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

from symbolic ritual towards 'pleasure-over-time' rituals. Cline specifically asked:

What rituals of delay could nourish us? Or have the "virtual realities" of film and television made ever "real time" tedious, and therefore slowed up time unbearable?²¹

Cline quotes the American news commentator Roger Rosenblatt who asks 'How do we regain a world that is *directly lived*?'.²² The implication is that our current state of affairs has created some kind of dis-connection from a wider world.

The second stimulant was from Ezio Manzini, a steadfast contributor to the design and sustainability debate for well over a decade. He stated that 'we have to create some island of slowness'.²³

The third stimulant was the Slow Food and Slow Cities movements in Italy, the former concerned with food as a cultural phenomenon benefiting from its local origins and the latter focusing on reclaiming the streets of Italian cities for pedestrians by implementing car-free days.

This led me to develop my thoughts about 'slow design' and publish a manifesto, 'SLOW', on a web site of the same name (figure 5).²⁴

²¹ Cline, A., *ibid.*

²² Cline, A., *ibid.*

²³ Manzini, E. 'Ideas of Well-being: Beyond the Rebound Effect, Contexts of Life and Regenerative Solutions', pp76-81, in *Sustainable Services & Systems: Transition Toward Sustainability?*, Towards Sustainable Product Design, 6th International Conference, 29-30 October 2001, De Rode Hoed, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Centre for Sustainable Design, Farnham, UK.

²⁴ Fuad-Luke, A. SLOW, available at: <http://www.slowdesign.org/> (March 2003 to present day).

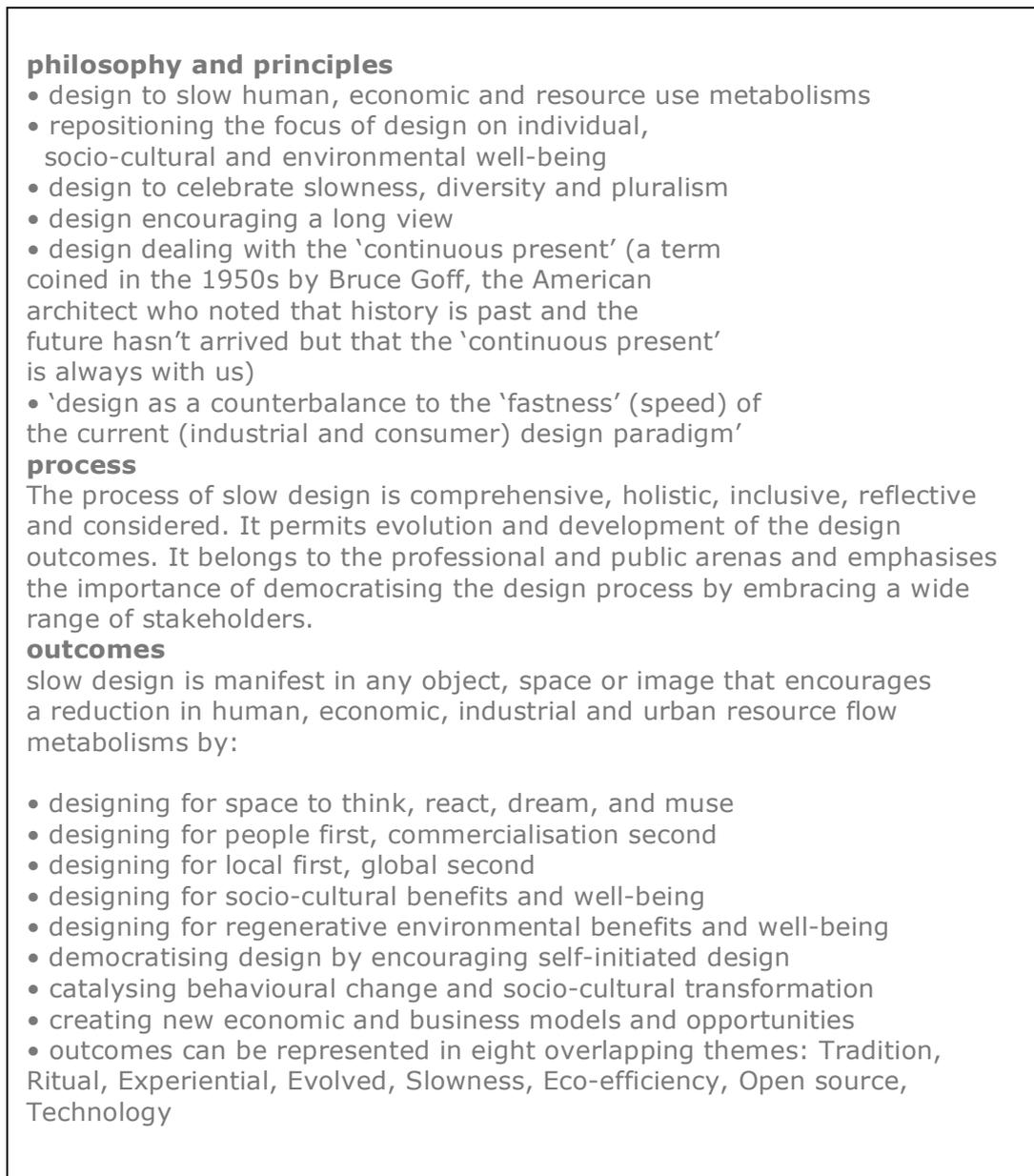


Fig.5 SLOW manifesto published on the SLOW website, 2003

Slow designing the continuous present

Slow design challenges the current design paradigm which is geared predominantly to production and consumption. The focus for slow design is regeneration, a gentler reflective experience of objects, products, places, buildings. The manifesto outlined the principles, process and desired outcomes of slow design. There were four premises for slow design that it:

- acknowledges human well-being relies on the well-being of the earth's ecosystems
- decouples itself from the drivers of existing economic, technological and political thinking in order to deliver a new paradigm
- operates as an antidote to the existing 'fast design' paradigm, to slow down the metabolism of anthropocentric activities
- presents an opportunity to explore 'endurability' - the ability of designed objects, spaces and images to have persistent, long-term socio-cultural relevance by remaining physically, spiritually, mentally and emotionally durable

Eight overlapping themes for outcomes were proposed: Tradition, Ritual, Experiential, Evolved, Slowness, Eco-efficiency, Open source, Technology. Four of these are illustrated in figure 6.

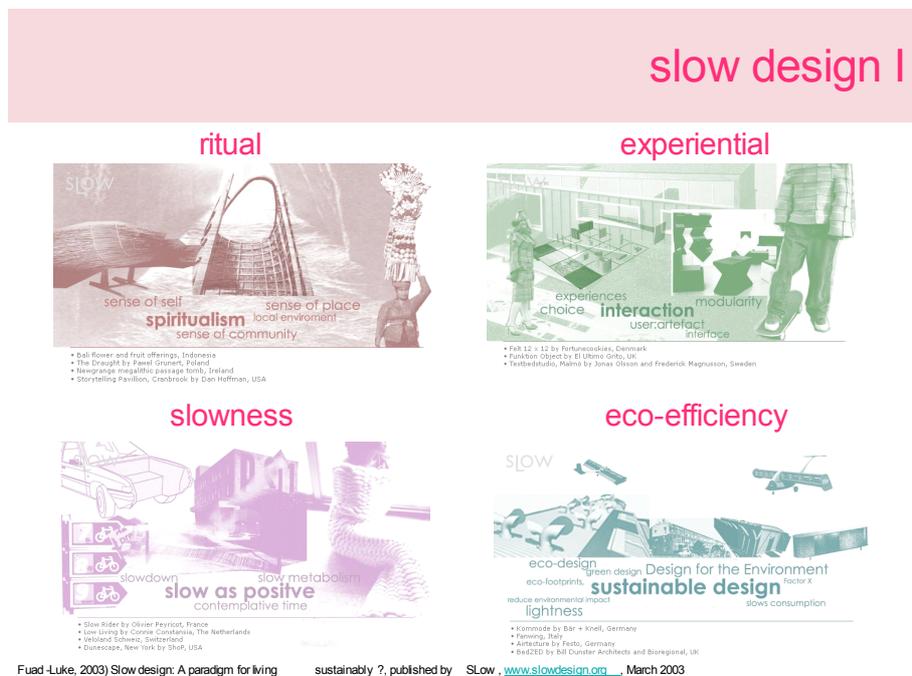
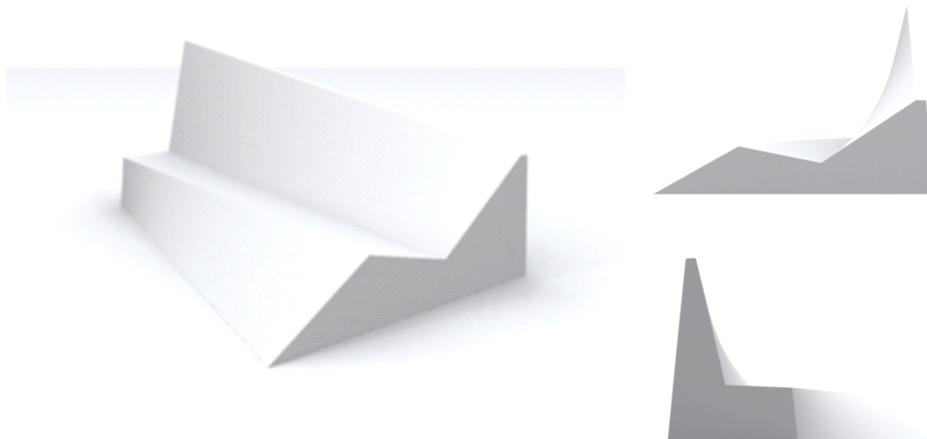


Fig.6 Four outcomes of slow design, 2003

In the 'Slowness' category I proposed a concept design '60 minutes sofa/bench', a metaphor for the time continuum from upright (secular, productive, fast time) to reclined (sacred, intuitive, slow time) (figure 7).

'60 minutes sofa/bench'



...a metaphor for the fast:slow continuum; without fast there is no slow; metabolism is the 'rate of' something ...

Alastair Fuad -Luke, 2003

Fig.7 Concept design, '60 minutes sofa/bench', 2003

Another debate unfurled on the other side of the Atlantic. Carolyn Strauss launched SlowLab²⁵ – a design laboratory for explorations of the positive aspects of slowness. We have collaborated over the last two years and collated a number of project examples that fit the spirit of slow design involving artists, architects, writers, academics, and designers. This allowed us to evolve a different series of themes focused on humanistic dimensions ('slowness/slowing down' remaining a common theme):

- Slowing down – slowing down human metabolisms, less haste
- Towards an [old] new social equity – sharing, a social conviviality
- Interstices/interventions – exploring unseen rhythms and metabolisms
- Renewal/re-think – re-connecting human endeavour with cyclicity and imbuing tasks with pleasure

Consistent to all these themes is the idea that raising awareness, re-connecting people with each other and what is already there, is a

²⁵ SlowLab, available at: <http://www.slowlab.net/> (2004 to present day).

critical task and facilitates engagement with 'slowness' as a positive socio-cultural objective.

Holistic Consciousness

More recently I have engaged with the work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the 18th century poet, novelist, dramatist and scientist who explored different 'ways of knowing' that go beyond the rational, objective scientific methodologies espoused by Galileo, Descartes, Newton and Darwin. His method takes us beyond our common mode of objective perception, where we 'detach' in order to observe, to embrace the realm of actual experience and intuition, to experientially delve into the phenomenon. Goethe's participatory ways of knowing are a symbiosis between objective and subjective ways of knowing. His position was that there is no 'objective truth'.²⁶ Goethe's ideas were contested by the scientific establishment of the day as they seemed to reject the canon of mechanistic, reductionist science which has pre-dominated until today. Goodwin supports the views of Goethe and calls for a 'science of qualities':

Modern science is thus defined as the systematic study of quantities and excludes 'secondary' qualities (experience of colour, odour, texture, beauty of form, etc., which are often referred to as 'qualia').²⁷

He comments that objective truth is reached by inter-subjective consensus between practicing scientists. The subjectivity of this process is not surprising given that our emotions function cognitively and vice versa, as Vihma demonstrated in a newly defined semiotic function for an object, the aesthetic sign function.²⁸ What applies to objects - that our emotive being affects our rational understanding of that object - might also apply to concepts. Emotional attachment to concepts we hold dear can preclude acceptance of alternative concepts, even when presented with intuitive and empirical evidence to the contrary.

There is considerable benefit in being able to move between modes of consciousness in order to stimulate the 'ifs' and the creative

²⁶ Bortoft, H. *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way of Science*, 2004, Edinburgh: Floris Books.

²⁷ Goodwin, B. 'From Control to Participation Via a Science of Qualities', available at: <http://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/articles/college-articles/brian/fromcontrolto.html> (20/04/06).

²⁸ Vihma, S. *Products as Representations: a Semiotic and Aesthetic Survey of Design Products*, 1995, Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press.

process. Generally two contrasting modes are recognised: the analytical (reductionist?) mode of consciousness / intellectual mind / 'I think therefore I am' / object/subject separation / linear cause & effect; and, the holistic mode of consciousness / the intuitive mind / 'I am a living organism, I sense, I am part of a larger whole' / object and subject are one / cause & effect are one. Goethe brought these together in a five step technique for his 'ways of knowing'. The 'implicate order' was revealed as the 'explicate order' was experienced in the two interchangeable modes of consciousness. The five steps are:

1. Form - qualitative perception: Record *first impressions* using words, drawings, symbols, emotional expressions, memories and images – the observer subjectively participates with the object(s)/place to record subjective responses.

2. Form – quantitative measurement: Stand back and observe the form(s), record and measure what is actually present and accumulate facts including sensory knowledge (visual phenomena, smells, tastes, texture and sounds). This is the *exact sense perception*.

3. Dynamic process – Coming into being: Now the dynamics of time are introduced. How did the forms come into being? Living and non-living forms should be observed in order for us to appreciate them in terms of a dynamic process of movement, rhythm and flow. This is the *exact sensorial fantasy/imagination*, as it requires us being able to imagine the dynamic elements of a seemingly static form.

4. Seeing the pattern: In Goethean terms this step is called *seeing in beholding*. It embodies an intuitive revelation of the essential essence of the phenomena/system (living and non-living elements). Here the invisible is rendered visible, the implicate order made visible by the explicate order.

5. Gesturing the future: By a deep understanding accomplished in steps 1 to 4 it is possible to extend the purpose that grows out of the past into a vision for future direction(s).

Trials with this five-step Goethean methodology with post-graduate design students indicate that it generates a tremendous awareness and sensitivity to the perceived design challenge. It moves one away from the bi-polar 'design problem: solution' to a more holistic approach, one that embeds the explicate and implicate order, what one might call a 'sense of place'. The methodology holds well for

'objects' and 'places' and offers a good platform for a more reflexive theory=practice.

This methodology, and the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty, is being used to develop a SlowLab project in Bristol docks called 'Slow Ways of Knowing'. A short walking route around the Cumberland Basin, Isambard Brunel's original swing bridge, the 1960s road swing bridge, and the sea lock to the dock where it meets the tidal River Avon, brings people into contact with two hundred years of history within one place. At four locations words introduced into the fabric of the landscape will be accompanied by instructions to bring about a way of knowing the site and hence to gesture its future. This seems to offer a powerful way of re-catalysing people's awareness of the 'now', to re-engage them in this context and raise appropriate 'ifs' to help re-design 'now'.

End Thoughts

If we genuinely aspire to progress towards more sustainable ways of living and working, we need to focus on 'now' rather than conceptual utopias. This demands that we redefine progress by redefining design and re-directing creativity:

- Creativity needs reclaiming from the default paradigm of 'time is money', the worshiping of speed and techno-centrism or our future is unsustainable
- Creativity requires acknowledgement of pluralistic perceptions of time to permit time for reflection
- Creativity needs to revive faith in 'slow knowledge'
- Creativity needs to find new rhythms and metabolisms
- Creativity needs to embrace both analytical and holistic modes of consciousness
- Creativity needs to embrace 'slow positivism'
- 'Slow design' is a start....slow art, slow architecture, slow ways of living...

'If', 'pensiero discorrente' and 'slowness' offer a powerful reflexive partnership for contemporary creative agencies.