

Dr Keith Russell
Design, Communication and IT
University of Newcastle
NSW 2308
keith.russell@newcastle.edu.au

The Existential Delights of the Designer: Towards a Notion of Works

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In the notion of design is hidden the notion of designer, just as inside the notion of the created world there is the notion of a creator. Designers tell stories of what they design, how they design, why they design and what it is to design. Along with their personal and existential stories, many designers offer explicit accounts of what it is to work (undertake socially significant tasks) and what it is to produce works (socially and possibly spiritually significant outcomes). These stories, from designers, offer general accounts of the uses of designing as a human project; they also offer insights into the larger possible significance of design as a social activity for an evolving society. As Ettore Sottsass asks: “And what else?”

Neither I nor the others [as children] considered ourselves designers, artists, craftsmen, or engineers for the public, and even less in any way distinguished from the public: we were not looking for consumers or observers, nor did we seek any approval or disapproval beyond that we all found in ourselves. Whatever we did was rewarded by the very act of doing it, by the desire to do it; and anything that was done was, after all, part of one extraordinary sphere only: life. Design was life itself: it was the day from dawn to dusk, it was the night-time vigil, the awareness of the world that surrounded us, of its matter, lights, distances, weights, resistances, fragility, use and consumption, birth and death. And what else? (Sottsass, 1973, p. 284)

Just as the world is everywhere already within an ecology of self and the world, so the objects of design are already everywhere within an

economy of self and the makings of self. For Sottsass: “design was life itself”. There is an immediate charm in this child-like view of the world. Action and its reward are found together: there is no sublimation of desire; no putting off or interruption of making; no suspension of the imagination to leave some kind of disquieting remainder. All activity is accounted for as part of “one extraordinary sphere only: life”. This sense of a garden of actions or paradise of desires cannot, of course, last. The children who just do stuff grow into adults who make things and the making of adults is typically a fragmented and alienating activity.

Now everything seems to have changed - everything.
The things that I make (alone or with companions) seem to have changed, as well as the way of doing them, because - farewell o Blue Planet, farewell melodic season, farewell o stones, dust, leaves, ponds and dragonflies, farewell o torrid days, with dead dogs lying by the roadside, with shadows in the wood looming like prehistoric dragons; farewell o Planet. For now the things that I do I seem to do sitting in an air-conditioned bunker of damp artificial light - sitting at this table of white rolled section, sitting in this chair of silver plastic, the commander of a spaceship travelling at thousands of kilometers an hour, as I sit crushed against this chair, motionless in the sky. (Sottsass, p. 285)

Sitting in an air-conditioned bunker does offer the adult the opportunity for reflection. The rhetorical space that Sottsass allows himself is part of his own design practice, it is not some extra bit added on. As an adult he not only dreams of the past but he brings the dreams of his past into the present of his work. Re-presented, through memory, with his own ways of making as a child, he is able to offer to himself a corrective or restorative critique. The cost of such restoration may well be the giving up of his social role as artists and designer.

I'd like to break down this strange mechanism that I've become involved in. I'd like to break it down for my own sake and for the sake of the others, for myself and along with the others. I'd like it if I didn't have to take on the role of the artist only because that way they pay me and I'd like it if it never even occurred to them that someone is an artist and so he has to be paid for it. I'd like it if either all of us or none of us were artists, just as we were when we made drawings, boats, ships, windmills, cableways and spy-glasses. I'd like to think that in some way I could recover the happiness of my youth: the

happiness in which "design" or art - so called art - was life itself, and in which life was art - by which I mean creativeness, the knowledge of being part of this Planet and of the living history of the people around us.
(Sottsass, p. 285)

The sad yearnings in the musings of Sottsass are typical of his melancholic disposition and indicative of a general moral indirection in the larger world of design and innocence of the complexity of personal experiences on the part of designers. The project to recover "the happiness of youth" seems doomed from the start. The tired artist makes grand transcendent gestures beyond his individuality to "life itself", and beyond life itself, as something intrinsic or personal, to "this Planet" and "living history". One suspects that Sottsass is making an invitation to his fellow designers to also take up this project. One also suspects that he wishes to involve the general reader in this larger undertaking or journey. We are being invited into the emotion of going home.

The Planet Sottsass wishes to feel part of seems, to some, to offer a solution to this existential sadness. Papanek, for example, offers various pathways "home" to some kind of regulated knowing and living within the constraints of a Green Imperative (1995). Tony Fry also offers larger visions of ways that we might be in the world and be able to sustain this being in the world through a deliberate act of "defuturing" (1999). John Chris Jones offers ways that we might re-find our humanity (1991, 2000). But before looking at these, we need to further explore the experience of being at one with action that Sottsass describes. We need to find, for our discussion, a kind of empty ground or ground zero. Marlowe, the hero, in Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, talks about the existential satisfactions of the journey:

It was a great comfort to turn from that chap to my influential friend, the battered, twisted, ruined, tin-pot steamboat. I clambered on board. She rang under my feet like an empty Huntley and Palmer biscuit-tin kicked along a gutter; she was nothing so solid in make, and rather less pretty in shape, but I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her. No influential friend would have served me better. She had given me a chance to come out a bit - to find out what I could do. No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work - no man does - but I like what is in the work - the chance to find yourself. Your own reality - for yourself, not for others - what no other man can ever know. They can

only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means. (Conrad, 1995. pp.51–52)

Kicking a can is a kind of aesthetic experience that has its pleasure. The empty Huntley and Palmer biscuit-tin is already, in 1889 (the time of Conrad's story), a description of the design world of waste and hollowed-out objects that we have about us now. What combines these two features (vacant object and vagrant human action) is the self-exploration of work. For Marlowe, what is in work is "the chance to find yourself". In this primary sense, all work can have its existential delight. But to get to this point of delight, we have to deal with the unwanted effort and we have to forgo the object of our work. Marlowe's pleasure is in the emptiness of his effort. In this sense, Marlowe is only able to open up a space for himself on condition that he rule out the larger world of society and men and very definitely, the planet with or with a capital "p". When he moves out beyond the simplicity of his tin boat he is confronted with the enormity of the heart of darkness.

Conrad's bleak vision of modern society and the life of the individual seems to most of us to be a denial of the private spaces and times that we all inhabit. We are not part of some ugly colonial project to occupy, pillage and destroy foreign lands. We see ourselves within a much smaller orbit and within a "natural" scope. For many of us, life wasn't meant to be difficult; nor was it meant to be easy: life was always meant to be whatever it was found to be. The ideology of work was something we took at the knee of our fathers as they bemoaned the necessity of "working for the man". Along with the ancients, we were often moved to ask: "What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?" (KJV, Eccl:3:9). Somehow it never seemed right that one needed to labour this way. After all, there were times, as for Conrad's hero and Sottsass as a child, when effort was its own immediate reward. As the sun set on our backyard gardening, we felt: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (KJV, Eccl:3:1:). Following the seasons, one might have hoped to maintain a steady practice that held purpose. So what went wrong; or, rather, what keeps going wrong in our working world equations?

Long before Hegel and Marx, the source of alienation-through-work was codified by the Preacher: "Better *is* an handful *with* quietness, than both the hands full *with* travail and vexation of spirit" (KJV, Eccl:4:6). For most of us, both our hands are now "full with travail" if not actually "vexation of spirit". Work is Caesar's business and any sense of seasonality or clear purpose is lost in the fog of a calendar that follows an atomic clock. We have become the Sottsass adult and the occasional Marlowe. In searching for ways to transcend this world of work and vexed adults we might seek refuge in a domestic world that has retained

a logic or sense of itself that allows us respite, even only in the evenings. We need seek no ideology to justify being at home. But, this home that we would return to is already occupied, if not by the larger ghosts of Conrad's nightmare, then by the smaller daemons of our own designing.

We live the disjuncture between the comfort of the notion of home, and its violence. Modern cultures treat home metaphorically, as the fabricated womb, the place of care, restoration and shelter. It is viewed as a retreat, safe from the vagaries of the world. Home has emerged as that place into which the idea of private space is publicly projected, and wherein individuality is moulded (albeit with the help of mass produced cultural commodities). Home is affirmed as a space, an almost sacred space, in which a secret life and true persona can blossom. (Fry, 1999, p. 107)

Of course this view of our home is not something that most of us care to see. The difficulty in Fry's critique is that we do not wish to be informed that our individuality has been "moulded" by "mass produced cultural commodities". We (Anglo-Australians) would like to wander down the backyard, should we have one, and contemplate our broad beans as our fathers did before us. Here, to be honest to our own experiences, we know alienation in the drudgery of effort, but we also know the exhilaration of purpose in work, and, occasionally, we know the enlarging sense that what we are doing arises from outside our immediate concerns and seems to point to a journey, a way of knowing, or destination that only emerges because of the work that is being undertaken. In his poem, "Homo Suburbensis", the Australian poet Bruce Dawe celebrates the sense of doing that exceeds vanity within the moments of contemplation:

One constant in a world of variables
- a man alone in the evening in his patch of vegetables,
and all the things he takes down with him there.
(Dawe, 1988, p.117)

Isolating a particular time and place, the suburban gardener is able to establish quietness amidst the unquestioned purpose of his vegetable garden. The "things he takes down with him there" are able to be worked on, within the seasonal and daily round of an every-day world. Such gardening work is not normally seen as work. The gardener elects to establish his garden; he selects his crops; he experiments with soils and dungs; he engages in the full cycle of natural events. His garden has been established outside of himself as an external correlative for the

internal work that he does, down the backyard, on "the things that he takes down with him there". The benefits that arise from such work come back into the household in the form of food for the table and in the form of a kind of stillness that active contemplation promotes. Doing his vegetable business, he is also about his spiritual business. Such work would seem good. Here would seem to be an adult vision of Sottsass' child.

The sense of wealth that comes from this common activity is again seen in the work of another Australian poet, Les Murray. In his poem, "The Broad Bean Sermon", Murray offers his sunset vision of integrated labour:

Going out to pick beans with the sun high as fence-tops,
you find
Plenty, and fetch them. An hour or a cloud later
You find shirtfulls more. . . .
(Murray, 1976, p. 120)

The "shirtfulls more" has a splendid ring to it. The work, of itself, seems to be producing more of the benefit that it promises as the work progresses: more and more beans appear to the eye as the eye begins to engage in the activity. By giving himself over to the picking of beans, the bean picker becomes one with his work. This loss of self into work leads to a loss of a sense of time, especially abstract time: now it is "a cloud later". That is, immediate sensory experience has brought attention back to the movement of the day. And then there are more beans!

In the case of Bruce Dawe's gardener, it would seem that the purpose of the activity is to re-find the self through thinking things over. Contemplation in this model is a mild restorative or tonic. In the Les Murray poem, the self is lost and refound through falling into the swing of picking beans. The suburban gardener, in Dawe's poem, may be seen to hold onto the self through his work. That is, as the man in his garden he is an habitual figure, using habitual behaviour to reinforce patterns, mull over old disputes and reanimate old battles long lost. There is no real need to draw such negative conclusions in the case of Dawe's poem. The point here is the way in which the psychological event is described. In the Dawe poem, the balance is between things to think over and the gardening. The world stays very much as it was even if there is a general heightening of sensory experience, much as there is in relaxation at the beach. By way of contrast, there is a very definite sense of ecstasy in the Murray poem; the bean picker stands outside of himself in an external dimension that matches his desire and provides an enlarged sense of the self. In the case of the Murray poem we can see

open up a sacred time and place and a kind of domestic sacrament: the gardener gets to offer-up his products to his family.

The sacred space might even allow for cottage industries and productions that extend out to allow for villages. John Chris Jones talks of one such design world of work in “from the book of a village”:

I never saw much of the press on which were made the pages of the Borth Review, for I didn't need to. I could, like any writer, publisher or typographer, specify from afar the type, the size and the number of pages, the size of margins, the sizes and positions of the illustrations, and get as estimate of cost, and so calculate how many would have to be sold to recover the cost, just as any designer can, using abstract rules and mechanical drawings to represent the critical features of any mechanical process, which he or she may visit seldom, perhaps never. All this I found I could teach myself in a matter of hours or days studying books on typography and one brief visit to the printing works, plus listening to what the printer had to say . . . and then I could design the magazine in every detail: texts, titles, layouts, even the advertisements, I did them all. (Jones, 2000, p. 181)

Doing everything would seem to sustain the delights, but even in this world of the village, the intentions of the designer would seem open to the defeat of his own product: making the magazine, even as an example of designing rather than design, ends up with its own object as an object:

And why did the new methods become fixed? Become objects? My guess, . . . my feeling, my impression, my thought about this, is that, though we saw the need to change the processes of designing we did not see the need to change its aims. We retained the concept of “product” as the outcome of designing. We did not see that we were accepting only a part of the challenge which we took up: the challenge to transform the idea of progress, which presumes a specific goal, into the idea of process, which does not. This transformation is I now realise, a main event of the twentieth century, though it may have started earlier. A change which is happening in many areas of life, not only in design. (Jones, 1991, p. 159)

Here we seem to have re-constituted the project of designing in an alignment with the existential delights of designing. The goal has been subsumed within the activity such that all we need do is look for tasks that have about them this sacred quality and we will be recovered: we need to plant broad beans. This search for a sacred activity is part of Papanek's Green world. Through an analysis of various cultural ritual makings, Papanek institutes his own sacred game. Take a look at his kite-making exercises with students. Here we see the desired collapsing of the human and social questions into a mediating and self-disclosing practice. In this event even the puzzles of science are taken up and made good:

The dragon festivals in Japan, and the fighting kites of Thailand and China are world famous. The kites, some of them twice the height of a man, are carefully developed and designed, beautifully painted, and often last only a few minutes. For years I have set this project for my students – to build a kite with an extra function, such as carrying a small self-designed camera that would take aerial photographs of the student, or launching a second kite from inside once it had reached altitude. The students lavished great care on the quality and appearance of these tetrahedral, tailless kites, designed and made to exist for one afternoon at most.

The underwriting experience of ground zero is to be found in the theme itself: impermanence. Whereas Conrad's hero Marlowe had a useless old boat to toy around with, Papanek's students have a Zen-like activity that describes the air and time and transient social relations:

The joy of impermanence held these young men and women in its grip. And something else. There was always an underlying sense of great optimism – at times far from justified – when it was time to fly their designs. What made flying a kite such a joyful experience was the simple principle of Occam's razor built into the exercise: the kite would fly, or not. With their imagination, labour, talent and joy they might touch the sky – or remain grounded. Their faith in being able to overcome gravity and aerodynamics was touching. Sometimes an unusually heavy kite would appear, obviously never destined to fly. Nonetheless the student might spend the afternoon tirelessly running back and forth on the field, the kite making deep furrows in the ground, its proud designer oblivious of its "ploughing behaviour". This is not said to mock, rather to celebrate the students' unlimited pleasure in the joy of the activity, more

engaged than in the routine design of bathroom scales or a toaster. (Papanek, 1995, p.146)

Here “unlimited pleasure in the joy of the activity” would seem to be an available pleasure for the designer, a pleasure that is sustainable or at least repeatable. But it is not fun-day kites that the world wants of designers. We can all make kites, poorly or well. We can all play at being in the world. As Fry points out: “Even when we are well prepared and practised we ever catch ourselves out being drawn into that which we are encountering” (1999, p. 60). We can, like Marlowe, all too easily, occupy our minds with trivia while war rages around us. Indeed, the excitement of the kite-making only serves to illustrate how the pleasure in our work is working us: this is a kind of repressive de-sublimation to use Marcuse’s terms. But, even breaking ourselves off from this being drawn in aesthetically or sensorially, serves to keep us circumscribed within Sottsass’ melancholy.

So much of what is being attempted here [in defuturing] goes to the ambition of de-familiarising the familiar in order for it to become reviewable. This means being forced to work with what seduces, but we have to transform our disposition towards it. In this respect, learning is an ability to mobilise a disposition alienated from, but interested in, what it encounters. Certainly to learn defuturing is to acquire agency: it is to learn to destroy one designing, making and dwelling, in order to create some thing other (sustain-ability). (Fry, 1999, p. 60)

Fry here describes the agonistics of the modern designer. We may have our various outs and we may have our various pleasures. Contemplation may be optional, but seduction is unavoidable. We may find solace in the melancholy; we may find consolidation in the memory; we may take a weak inspiration from our own yearning. But, in the end designing is not sacred and it will not be a kind of broad bean harvesting. What we can do, is take instruction from our own states of mind; we can establish a phenomenology of designing that accounts for us being human and that accounts for designing and that accounts for the worlds of such being and doing.

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Biographical Note: Keith Russell is a Design and Communication philosopher. He has been a regular contributor to the International Design Education wo4rld since 1998. Currently he lectures in Design and Communication at the University of Newcastle, Australia.