

Design for Sustainability

[Ezio Manzini is an Italian design strategist, one of the world's leading experts on sustainable design, author of numerous design books, professor of Industrial Design at Milan Polytechnic, and founder of the DESIS (Design for Social Innovation towards Sustainability) network of university-based design labs. His work over the past 30 years in sustainability and social innovation has coalesced around four watch words : small, local, open and connected. Recently Sarah Brooks spoke with him. Excerpts :]

Q: What's most interesting to you right now?

A: Right now, what's most interesting me is what we can do to catalyze the most abundant resources we have on the planet, which are our human capabilities. This is, if you want, my motto and it is also a very deep philosophical issue. If we consider that we have a very small heavily populated planet, to move to sustainability we have to make best use of all the resources we have.

We can look to the people of the planet in two ways. We can see 7 billion people on the planet today or 9 billion people tomorrow as the biggest threat and the biggest problem, because we are a little planet. But given that those 7 billion people are you, me, my friends and the people we know, we see them not as problems but as people with capabilities, intelligent operators. So the planet is very rich with potential intelligent operators. What does it mean to enable all the potentialities of so many intelligent people? The system can help in catalyzing the best, or catalyzing the worst. Or in making people more stupid than normally they are. I think this is a very big challenge. This is the biggest challenge with the most potential. Collectivity can help.

There is, in my view, a new model of organizing society and the production and consumption and whatever. When I use the words small, open, local and connected, this is my way of telling the story. People can tell it in another way, but the result is similar. Of course it's a metaphor: having small entities that when connected, become bigger entities. It's evident that it comes very strongly from the network. But once it appears, it's not only related to what you can do, strictly speaking, in the network and technologies. It's a way to imagine the way in which the social services are delivered in society and the way in which we can imagine economies that are at the same time rooted in a place and partially self-sufficient but connected to the others and open to the others. This is a very interesting relationship between being local, being related to a certain context and at the same time being open and connected, not provincial or one closed community that risks being against the others. This is an idea that is clear and strong if you talk about the arena where people are dealing with networks, open source and peer to peer. But it can become a very general metaphor, and embed itself in some realities to become a powerful way to organize a sustainable society.

Having dealt with sustainability for the past 30 years, I have had to reframe several times my way of discussing the problem. A lot of sustainability topics were simple to discuss in a naive way 30 years ago because nobody, us included, had concrete ideas on how a sustainable society would have been. Now, luckily, a lot of experiences have been done and good ideas have spread. As a researcher I look for ways to propose a topic in a relatively new way that can help the process to move faster, or find a better direction. Today, for instance, my way to deal with sustainability has shifted toward social innovation.

For me, dealing with the needed sustainable changes that are mainly cultural and behavior change, the pivotal moment has been when I moved from saying "What can I do to help people change behavior?" toward the discovery that a lot of people (even if they aren't yet so visible) had already changed, and in a good way, their behaviors. And that therefore, the right question is: "What can I do to trigger and support these new way of thinking and doing? How can I use my design knowledge and tools to empower these grass-roots social innovations?"
□□□

[source : countercurrent.org]