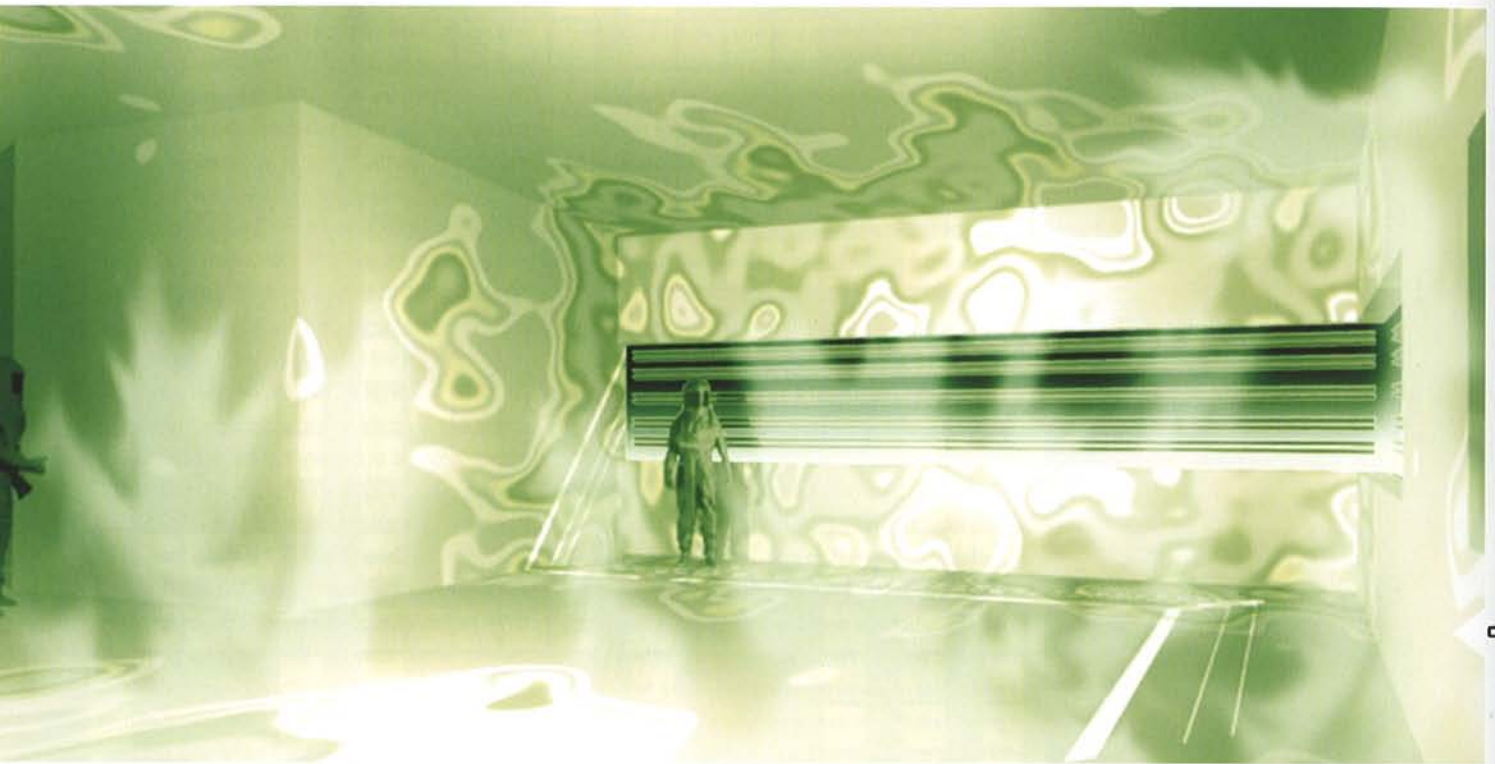




FATAL DISTRACTION: CARBON CREDITS, GREEN BUILDING AND THE BUSINESS OF SUSTAINABILITY



"The very concept of sustainability has been colonised by big capital and turned into another huge marketing operation to guarantee the reproduction of corporate profits. The idea of sustainable design is locked into this paradigm, where solutions are constrained to areas where big business can make money, almost exclusively limited to technical fixes in the form of photovoltaic cells, solar energy hot water systems, double-glazing panels, light rail systems and recycling materials of value. Unfortunately there is no technical fix to the problems we now confront in designing cities, which are primarily about sustainable value systems in the face of enormous problems of equity and environment worldwide."

– Alexander Cuthbert¹

THE sustainability industry is currently generating a lot of activity, yet much of that activity constitutes little more than 'white noise' in my view. Importantly then, the views of Alexander Cuthbert and others widen the debate and provide a wake-up call to those who have made the practice of sustainable architecture an elite pursuit. The following polemic argues that contrary views must be registered and addressed if our industry is to remain relevant. Without these checks, the sustainability industry as it is currently constructed and practised may well become the most significant constraint on the successful resolution of the environmental problems we now face.

This thesis can be exemplified in a recent criticism I received from a 'sustainability expert' during a public lecture in Sydney. The critique (as it was relayed to me) was that I had the temerity to be giving a lecture about sustainability issues when I had no qualification in regard to its praxis. This slander from the sustainability elite is a defensive response, typical of those who have their well-protected

text

Gerard Reinmuth

images

Courtesy Terroir

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'expertise' threatened or questioned by an outsider. The fact that free speech cannot be taken for granted in this domain is of particular concern, not least because it hints at the tendencies of those in the industry to take critique of the industry as 'anti-environment'. As Cuthbert notes, those who have invested heavily in making a business of sustainability have much to lose should we stop buying their products or commissioning their services.

Armed with the tools of political-economic theory, the expanded passage from which Cuthbert's quote has been taken is an eloquent critique of the sustainability industry and in particular the corruption of it by capital. My argument relates more directly to the practice of architecture, where in this age of green tools, green products and green consultancies, the view is rarely put that the problem of a sustainable future (one in which humanity might have the opportunity to participate) is not essentially technological, but instead is centred in human desire. To this end, architecture should be more than mere armature for the paraphernalia of the sustainability industry, but should contribute to the production of critical work that fosters our desire to live poetically and more sustainably on the earth. This is a vastly different project to the technocratic one currently constraining genuine problem solving and suffocating creative production.

Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is an exemplar of the poetic approach. By juxtaposing images of glacial formations in 'before and after' format, the true impact of climate change was registered by a population largely sceptical of the issue. Similarly, technical data were graphically displayed to maximum effect, which created a desire in those who watched the film to arrest the current trend. The impact was immense. Within a single month in 2006, awareness of global warming was increased incalculably. This in turn further increased the fizz of activity in the construction industry, as everyone rushed to get accredited, rated, certified or even endorsed by big Al himself.

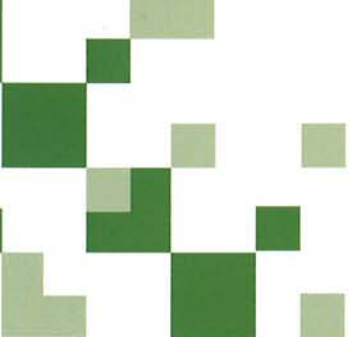
Of course, much of this activity would appear to constitute little more than the proverbial fiddling while Rome burns. Our current predicament has been forecast for some time, a fact illustrated by works such as Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*, published in 1989 and which forecast global warming. By the time McKibben introduced his 1999 edition,

he noted that seven of the 10 hottest years on record had occurred, but society remained paralysed, and greenhouse gas production had substantially increased.

Gore's 'compare and contrast' technique is in the tradition of wilderness campaigns, such as the seminal Gordon-below-Franklin Dam debate of the early 1980s. This battle is a major touchstone for our practice and, indeed, it was formative for an entire Tasmanian generation. We were introduced to a form of politics based on clear conceptual and ethical frameworks (as opposed to detailed debates about data), the communication of which was enhanced through the power of images. A cornerstone of this campaign was the way in which the arguments of Bob Brown and others were reinforced by a single image in particular – Peter Dombrovskis' *Rock Island Bend*, which harnessed compassion from a global audience for the plight of the river. While the Gordon-below-Franklin Dam was stopped, the response to the Gore film has been characterised by more consumption – more consumption of solar panels, light bulbs, showerheads, fashion, food; more consumption of anything with a 'green' endorsement.

Green consumers have been encouraged to operate in blissful ignorance of the contradictions of their actions – such that in architectural practice we are regularly asked to ensure projects are 'sustainable' yet these requests are rarely accompanied by lifestyle changes beyond the consumption of more appropriate technology. This practice serves only to perpetuate consumption of this technology as the key image of sustainable outcomes. Many readers will have been faced with this hypocrisy, one so beautifully illustrated by Timothy Hill at the 2006 RAIA Conference in the form of a remotely located 'sustainable' house accessed by a Porsche Cayenne.

The problem we face is that this rationale – save the world by commissioning a new eco-home – exemplifies the current state of our consumer culture, a culture predicated on the belief that personal betterment can be achieved via consumption. Disturbingly, this trend has been encouraged by many of the eco-practitioners within our profession, perhaps because they too remain blissfully unaware of the critical flaws in their position, busy as they are surfing the heady wave of liquidity that accompanies the distribution of ESD advice.



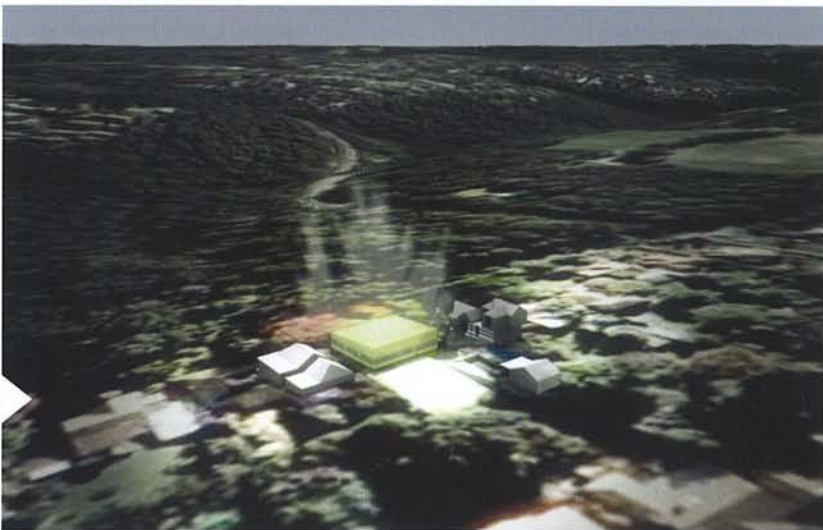
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sustainability practice

This paradoxical focus on consumption as our saviour has contributed to the emergence of two mechanisms by which sustainability practice is often measured. The first is the idea that we can make a profound difference via compliance with green tools; the second is the idea that where politically incorrect consumption occurs, we can absolve our sins by purchasing carbon credits. While both mechanisms are based on a genuine attempt to ease pressure on the environment, the pressure of consumption is far greater. Exemplar projects (six-star buildings and the like) lead the charge to consumption (for more six-star buildings) rather than act as critical beachheads in the debate. Carbon credits reinforce the very market responsible for our ills rather than reconfigure it.

Sustainability tools are at the core of the idea that we can indulge in sustainable practice, supported by accreditations and benchmarks designed to measure our performance. The tools certainly have a positive role to play as part of the solution, as they can achieve specific results in terms of the various forms of recurrent consumption in particular. In their current conceptual form, however, the tools do not address consumption with the aggression required to make substantive change within the time-frames suggested by climate change analysts. Disturbingly, the accreditations that result reinforce the idea that sustainable development is not an oxymoron.

Ceridwin Owen was gracious in the way she addressed this issue in last year's *AR100* Special Edition, suggesting that the exclusions, generalisation and simplifications that arise within the standardised framework offered by these tools have resulted in "questions over their effectiveness" in procuring a sustainable built environment. Beyond this ineffectiveness, these tools have acted as an intellectual anaesthetic, convincing a society that measurable improvement has been achieved, when at best they result in landmark projects that aspire to a better world, but do little to achieve it.

We are often faced in practice with the very dilemma Owen describes. For example, we have had a project fail the thermal performance criteria of a statutorily required tool (BASIX) because we have retained an existing building of some heritage and cultural value – not to mention all the embodied energy benefits. So, while we could have demolished the house, built new and passed, were we to make some sustainable decisions about heritage, community and townscape we would have failed, because of the form of existing window openings. It was only through the cooperative approach of those who administered the tool's deployment in New South Wales that the project passed at all.