
Opening Extract from...

43 Principles of Home

Enjoying Life in the 21st Century

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Introduction

This book is something of a manifesto for how we can live. It's a manifesto for a way of living that, in comparison with life of the last 60 years, could be slower, more enjoyable, gentler and altogether less taxing on the resources of this planet. It calls for a new appreciation of the magical human effort and energy that go into designing and making everything around us, from a spoon to a car, from a house to a city, from a dam to a cathedral. It calls for a re-evaluation of materials and fuel energy, and it calls for a culture in which we share much more of what we have in order that we don't squander it.

I think we have lost touch with the made world. We have forgotten how difficult and time consuming it is to make something; how hard it is to make an elegant table out of a tree or a spoon out of metals dug out of the ground and refined. Our sensibilities to craftsmanship have been eroded by high-quality machine manufacturing; our tactile sense has been debased by a plethora of artificial materials pretending to be something that they are not. Our attention, meanwhile, has been diverted by the virtual built worlds that exist inside screens. The landscapes of gaming and avatar worlds, for instance, are not complicated by the inconvenient messiness of the real world. In them, stuff, narratives, buildings and people are both perfect and disposable. Need some money to beat your friends in Super Mario? You can earn that in 15 seconds simply by jumping over a log. Need more ammo to blow people up? Press button B.

The real world is not perfect and it's not disposable. In the real world, things and people age and decompose. The real, tangible world is much harder to make, more difficult to maintain and unpleasant to recycle. Which may explain why so many people seek solace in virtual worlds, even if it's just by watching a soap opera on TV.

My Big Point is that I find the real world, which man has shaped, layered and renewed over thousands of years, more exciting and energizing – despite its grime – than any 3-D movie effect. Watching the Brooklyn Bridge explode in a computer-animated sequence may be awesome, but it is never as awe-inspiring as standing underneath the real thing and wondering how men managed to make it. Awesome is loud but awe is quiet.

I'm aware that my manifesto is motivated by a passionate love for places, buildings and things, not as objects that I want for myself to keep but as examples of human brilliance and creativity, the experience of which I want to share. I'm also frustrated, having worked as a designer and maker, by how little craftsmanship and the sweat of labour are appreciated nowadays. How we all assume that everything around us is made by machines and computers, whereas the truth is that your dinner plate was probably made by just three people in Portugal who spent four months of their lives producing a range for a high-street retailer; and your mobile phone was assembled by one person over a morning of their life.

So I'm writing out of a passionate love for the built environment and a quiet anger over how it is passed over in pursuit of temporary diversions and virtual pleasures when it can offer some of the greatest pleasures of all. The result goes something along the lines of *What do we want?* A much better appreciation of the things around us so that we can cherish them, live a more sustainable life and enjoy a richer relationship with our world. *When do we want it?* Quite soon, please, and quickly. But not too quickly, because it's all meant to be about lingering to enjoy the moment, isn't it?

After the Slow Food movement, maybe it's time for the Slow Living movement. That sounds dull, doesn't it? In fact, 'slow' is the wrong word. It should be the Take Your Time movement (which is really what the Slow Food movement should be called). Take your time to appreciate what's around you, to explore your environment, to savour experiences and to develop relationships with the objects around you – be they a car, a vase or a town – as examples of human brilliance and human energy. In fact I do have a name for this softer, richer, more fulfilling experience. I call it New Materialism. Sometimes I call it Contextual Materialism, which sounds even more pretentious. In truth it contributes to a wider set of values that the charity BioRegional calls One Planet Living, which sounds far more approachable.

You'll have noticed that in the paragraph above I slipped in that slippery word 'sustainable'. It doesn't occur too often in this book because it's a term already over-used, so tried on by so many people, institutions and companies that it's stretched and gone all loose and floppy. Sustainability is now a big baggy sack in which people throw all kinds of old ideas, hot air and dodgy activities in order to be able to greenwash their products and feel good. Politicians speak of sustainable economic growth (this is not necessarily ecologically or socially beneficial), which is not the same thing as growing an economy sustainably. Oil companies talk of sustainable oil exploration. My dictionary tells me that sustainable means 'tenable' or 'able to be maintained at a certain rate or level'; also 'conserving an ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources' but also 'able to be upheld or defended' (nice one for the oil industry there).

I try not to use the S word too often, despite the fact that this book's big theme is how we implement the culture change that is going to be necessary over the next 40 years, in order that a global population of what will be nine billion people (currently around seven) can still be sustained by this planet's resources.

As long ago as 1998, commentators and academics were criticizing the overuse of 'sustainability' as a catch-all term for the durability of environmental, business, economic and social policies. Peter Marcuse, a planning professor at Columbia University, has pointed out that separate applications of the word to housing, planning, the environment and our use of resources can contradict each other: what is sustainable in the layout and organization of a community in a city may not be environmentally defensible, for example. Recycling our beer cans and working at home more will not deal with the problems of the over-exploitation of the planet's resources and climate change:

The long run entails conflict and controversy, issues of power and the redistribution of wealth. The frequent calls for 'us' to recognize 'our' responsibility for the environment avoids the real questions of responsibility, the real causes of pollution and degradation. The slogan of 'sustainability' hides rather than reveals that unpleasant fact.

We should rescue sustainability as an honourable, indeed critically important, goal for environmental policy by confining its use only to where it is appropriate, recognizing its limitations and avoiding the temptation to take it over as an easy way out of facing the conflicts that beset us. [1]

This is hard-hitting stuff. It pulls no punches. But it helps, because it pulls out from under the cover-all word the different ideas and problems that we face, and the appalling way in which they are confused. Every newspaper I read interchanges the terms 'climate change', 'global warming' and 'sustainability' with a lack of thought bordering on abandon. We currently face big challenges and some big conflicts in a great range of areas, some of which are linked and some of which are not, and all of which, it seems, are down to the very large number of human beings on the planet all running to get a slice of the action and the pie: climate change as a result of carbon emissions; carbon dioxide-induced acidification of the seas; fair trade; deforestation of the planet's 'green lungs'; deforestation and the associated species loss; use of petrochemicals in fertilizers and biocides; food security; redistribution of wealth; availability of fresh water; empowerment of communities in the Third World; waste; a living wage; aerial and ground pollution; depletion of mineral resources; consumerism; ozone depletion at high altitude; ozone excess in cities at ground level; and Quite a Lot More.

But if there is one definition that explains sustainability properly, a definition that we should take seriously, it is that of the Brundtland Report of 1987, which describes sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.[2]

I'll stick with that. Even Professor Marcuse sticks with that. Because this definition itself pulls no punches; it simply sets out what is required. You will notice that it does so with no reference to polar bears or pandas. It puts the survival of the human species at its very centre. The Brundtland definition is based entirely around the issue of resources and environmental stability. It is robust enough to defy any 21st-century attempts to kidnap the word for the unscrupulous use of industry and policy makers. And that's because it is flexible and prescient enough to accommodate change.

1 Peter Marcuse, *Environment and Urbanization*, vol. 10, no. 2, October 1998

2 *Our Common Future*, OUP, 1987

The global shortage of clean drinking water was on the agenda in 1987, but today water is set to overtake oil in value on the world's markets as a tradable commodity. The Brundtland definition, interestingly, still holds and in fact sets up a new resonant demand for water to be returned to humanity as a freely available resource. The importance and speed of climate change and the related issue of carbon emissions could only have been glimpsed in 1987, but Brundtland sets the stage for the fight against global warming by taking the long-term view and calling for a stable environment.

By comparison, studies such as the Stern report[3] frame out many environmental issues, such as pollution, high-altitude ozone depletion, heavy metal infiltration of the food chain, water use and availability and food production, and instead focus intently on the one issue of climate change and its economic effects. They seize on the Big Story beloved of Al Gore, the only issue we apparently should focus on: our carbon footprint. We're told we should stop gazing at our navel and look at the sole of our very big carbon shoe.

I hope it's already clear that this book takes on more than the issues surrounding climate change; it points, I hope, to a wider culture change that could put value above status and story above sexiness. It suggests how we can fight current, exploitative, consumer behaviour – the way we shop indiscriminately for shiny goods made in Third World sweatshops – with a call for informed, ethical consumerism.

This book doesn't deal with the fiscal or legal measures that will get us to a new 'sustainable' world, wherever that is. It suggests ways we can change ourselves that can make large differences. It doesn't beleaguer you with carbon calculators; it doesn't list fishing quotas or promote campaigns to save polar bears. You can join WWF or Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace, or subscribe to treehugger.com, if you want up-to-the-minute accounts of campaigns and government initiatives. My job here is to persuade you of something you might have overlooked: that your relationships with your possessions, your home and your street are the starting point for a new, more interesting way of experiencing the world and that the end result of that can be a significant reduction in your individual environmental impact.

It can mean more choice and more interesting choice as well. Let me give you an example, a real hot potato of an example. My company, Hab, is a development business. We build homes in partnership with housing associations – the organizations who provide social housing – and we try to make our developments as ecological, enjoyable and socially progressive as possible. Hab stands for Happiness, Architecture, Beauty. It does not stand for Hummers, Audis and BMWs; which means, in pursuit of a way of life that is resource meagre and low carbon, we encourage residents to reduce their car use. We only provide one and a half parking spaces for each dwelling, which doesn't go down well with a lot of people. But in exchange for the one privation of one liberty – the right to park an unlimited number of vehicles wherever they want – residents get appealing alternatives including a car club and an intranet advising them of offers to share car journeys. The choice is limited in one way and enlarged in another. The emphasis is shifted from the personal and acquisitive to the communal and shared. That's what I mean by New Materialism (or One Planet Living, if you like; I don't mind): offering more choice, set in a different framework of choice.

3 Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, HM Treasury, 2006

That framework is composed of the ecological, environmental and social goals that many organizations and people are now working towards, from the social workers of Dharavi in India to the government of California, from the directors of Ecotricity in the UK to housing cooperatives the world over. You can figure out your own goals by reading a couple of books, the newspapers, the odd website and then getting confused. Or you can look at the framework developed by BioRegional and WWF: One Planet Living.

This framework comprises 10 goals, which reach far beyond governments' focus on carbon dioxide emissions, extend into every part of our lives and are based on an analysis of how we consume the world's resources. They're also very easy to understand: put simply, we have only one planet to support us, yet if everyone on the globe consumed as much and as fast as we do in the West, we'd need three planets to support us. Three planets of aluminium, forests, fish and fuel. But we have only one. There is no Planet B.

In the spirit of Brundtland, One Planet Living sets zero carbon as an objective and the great challenge of reducing our consumption of raw materials as another. It identifies waste, transport and food as problems. And it places mankind at the centre of its approach as not just the enemy of the environment but also part of that environment. We are not simply the problem; we ourselves are the victims. It is our species' happy survival that is at stake. So we also need to be the solution. Through technological advance, science, culture change and inventiveness, human energy might just solve the environmental and population problems we face.

Here are the One Planet Living objectives:

1. Zero carbon
Making buildings more energy efficient and delivering all energy with renewable technologies.

2. Zero waste
Reducing waste, reusing where possible, and ultimately sending zero waste to landfill.

3. Sustainable transport
Encouraging low carbon modes of transport to reduce emissions, reducing the need to travel.

4. Sustainable materials
Using sustainable products that have a low embodied energy.

5. Local and sustainable food
Choosing low impact, local, seasonal and organic diets and reducing food waste.

6. Sustainable water
Using water more efficiently in buildings and in the products we buy; tackling local flooding and water course pollution.

7. Natural habitats and wildlife
Protecting and expanding old habitats and creating new space for wildlife.

All as you would expect really. (You have to forgive the repetition of the word 'sustainable'. BioRegional's words, not mine.) Except the list then goes on to talk about aspects of our lives that are much more qualitative and which introduce a human element as well.

8. Cultural heritage
Reviving local identity and wisdom; support for, and participation in, the arts.

9. Equity, fair trade and local economy
Inclusive, empowering workplaces with equitable pay; support for local communities and fair trade.

And, almost my favourite:

10. Health and happiness
Encouraging active, sociable, meaningful lives to promote good health and well being.[4]

One Planet Living takes 10 areas of our lives where we can creatively change what we do and where those decisions aren't necessarily restrictive but offer opportunities for an increase in the quality of our lives. If you're put off by the idea of change, I can reassure you that change means incorporating affordable, meaningful strategies into your life, strategies like deciding to buy food seasonally, growing your own, cutting down on your travel, retrofitting your home to be more comfortable and better insulated. The kinds of changes that can be made even more easily if you live in a sustainable and ecological development – like those that my company, Hab, is building. This book, among other things, explores those strategies. This book puts human beings at the centre.

A few years ago, I wrote a preamble to the *Little Book of One Planet Living*, by Paul King and Pooran Desai,[5] in which I wrote:

> *If, like me, you despair of ever rising from the shallow mire of materialism, stop reading your credit card bills and instead read this enjoyable book… a rallying cry for the reintroduction of some ideas that we haven't cherished for decades, perhaps centuries. Ideas like respect and value for how we treat the material world around us, both man-made and natural. Which is why, among the guidelines about how to save water with aerated taps or reduce your holiday carbon footprint, there are also sections about buying Fairtrade goods and buying local or regional produce. Things you can do that go beyond the basic eco-mantra of 'reduce, reuse and recycle' and which are part of a wider ethical position that respects not just the planet and its ecosystems but human energy and human systems too. These ideas aren't radical; they haven't got greasy unwashed hair. They're just sensible and thoughtful and expedient. And in practice they can make our lives more rewarding and satisfying. More civilized.*

4 www.bioregional.com/our-vision/one-planet-living/

5 Paul King and Pooran Desai, *The Little Book of One Planet Living,* Alastair Sawday, 2006

It was that volume that started me off on the journey to write this one. I hope my book will help you value the material world in a different, fuller way. I hope that as you read it, you'll begin to wonder where it was made, who by and how much paper, ink, solvent, glue, machine maintenance, shipping, packaging, handling and energy it took to make it; how much time, effort and care were spent by the dozens of people who were involved with it. And I hope that, as well as awakening your curiosity, it will give you the tools for minimizing our detrimental impact on the environment and on other human beings: the tools of wasting less (or wasting nothing), saving fuel energy, exploiting what we have to hand, respecting craftsmanship, reusing the resources and made things that we already have, and sharing them more.

This book is a collection of four stories, narratives that are part fictional and part autobiographical. Each forms the spine to the four parts of the book and from each spring a number of smaller, more factual chapters. Threading throughout the entire book are the 43 Principles of Home, memorable ideas which I've collected or formulated over the past thirty years, drawing inspiration from the best of Le Corbusier, Vitruvius, William Morris and Homer Simpson. First though, here's a little test.

Q: Which is the most eco-friendly car in this list?

A Toyota Prius	The Innocent Smoothie van
A 1937 Alfa Romeo tourer	An Aston Martin DB9
A Ferrari	A Range Rover
A 37-year-old Bond 875 (my first car)	

You might plump for the Prius as the angel of the pack and the Range Rover as the devil.

Let me ask you another question: if you had the money, would you commission a small firm of English cabinet-makers to make you a bespoke, crafted piece of furniture? Or buy a cheap copy from the Far East? Well, the more ethical solution has to be the former: it's a local transaction, it involves much less shipping, it creates relationships between the makers and the owner. The automotive equivalent is buying an Aston Martin over a Toyota Prius.

Surely this is rubbish. The Prius emits 145 grams of carbon per kilometre while the Aston emits nearly 500. But even these figures are meaningless. Who is the biggest environmental sinner? The man who drives his Prius 20 miles to and from work each day? Or the man who travels 50 miles on the train? Or the man who owns an Aston Martin and walks across his yard to his office and drives his car at weekends only? It's probably the Prius driver.

This is just an exercise to point out that whatever you think of executive SUVs, hybrid cars and GT sports cars, calculating the environmental impact of these vehicles is very complex and ultimately dependent much more on how we use our vehicles than how big their engines are or where they were built.

So here's another little test.

Q: Which do you think is the most environmentally friendly house?

1. A 500-year-old farmhouse, built from local materials – any stones that were just turned up out of the field – and oak trees from the farm in which it sits, with stone floors laid on the earth and thick walls with a high thermal mass. Albeit the place is listed and hasn't got double glazing.

2. A house built by Ben Law in the forest in Sussex, entirely from the forest in Sussex. Ben cut 10,000 shingles from his own coppiced chestnut trees. The frame is coppiced chestnut and the oak cladding, straw-bale insulation and ash window frames are all from his woods and cut and assembled by him. This place does have double glazing, and it's off grid, has its own water supply and is heated by Ben's own wood thinnings from his sustainable forestry business, making charcoal and hurdles.

3. A three-bedroom family home in Scotland. It has super-insulated walls, it's airtight, it has a state-of-the-art Panelvent timber panel construction sitting on a concrete plinth for high thermal mass, it's triple-glazed and it comes with a heat recovery system.

So which is greenier than green? Well, it has to be Ben's, of course. Maybe followed by the Scottish timber box. With the farmhouse a poor third, maybe. Which, it turns out, has no oil-fired range, has 10 inches of loft insulation and is heated with a biomass boiler.

Again, it's down to use. You can construct a super-insulated, resource-meagre dwelling, turn the heating up and then open all the windows. Or live in a freezing mansion with no heating and one bath a week. There is no such thing as an eco-home, just as there's no such thing as an eco-car. It's our use of these things that determines not how environmentally friendly they are but how environmentally friendly we are.