

Altruism as Design Methodology

David Stairs

Design must disengage itself from consumer culture ... and participate in projects for the welfare of humankind both inside and outside the market economy.

Victor Margolin

*The Politics of the Artificial*¹

Suppose that the altruists also have a tendency to cooperate with one another in a way that ultimately benefits each altruist at the expense of non-altruists. Cliques and communes may require personal sacrifice, but if they are bonded by possession of one inherited trait, the trait can evolve as the groups triumph over otherwise comparable units of non-cooperating groups.

E. O. Wilson

*Sociobiology*²

The Argument

Over the last decade, there has been a tentative loosening of the stranglehold corporate models exert upon the design profession. In successive waves, designers and design theorists have embraced social and environmental causes with the growing awareness of slightly guilty affluent urbanites hoping to participate in a counter-cultural revolution.

For design writers, perhaps no better barometer of this growing awareness exists than Victor Margolin's *The Politics of the Artificial*. Published by the University of Chicago in 2002, Professor Margolin's book is a compilation of journal essays that appeared in print in the nineties. Addressing everything from design education to eco-feminism and sustainability, Margolin's book is a "what's what" of evolving design mores at the century's end. But politically correct appearances can be deceiving. While Margolin laments the way the "rhetoric of idealism is at odds with the reality of daily practice," and admits "The world's design needs are evident, but the plan for reinventing the design profession is not,"³ he stops short of providing a full-bodied prescription for the needed paradigm shift.

I'd like to suggest that, contrary to Margolin's cautious optimism, the design profession is being reinvented even as you read this, and in ways so antithetical to conventional design practice as to signal a sea of change in the way design is practiced. I propose to frame this change in terms of one of humanity's oldest collective instincts: mutual support, or altruism.

1 Victor Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 99.

2 E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 54.

3 Victor Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial*, 102.

Transcending Transcendentalism

Victor Margolin is not alone in his call for systemic reform. Among postmodern anthropologists and sociologists, the awareness of the need for change dates further back. In 1979, Mary Douglas already was talking about having “selected against them (the poor) in the constituting of our consumption rituals” in *The World of Goods*,⁴ and Daniel Miller’s 1986 investigation of consumption cogently differentiates “segmentary, holistic, communal tribal society” from “fragmented, hierarchical, individualistic” industrial capitalistic societies.⁵

Margolin has read both Douglas and Miller. In his call to “look at economic and social development from a global perspective, and address the gross inequities of consumption between people in the industrialized countries and those in the developing world,”⁶ he is ahead of many other design theoreticians. But just as putting a “wage peace” sign in one’s front yard is not quite as daring as doing volunteer work in a Palestinian refugee camp, Margolin, in his most creative solutions, takes a rather timid approach to addressing the problems at hand.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, that nineteenth century paragon of the transcendentalist movement, lived and wrote during the first industrial revolution. His idealist championing of *a priori* metaphysical knowledge of life over materialism (paralleled by the romantic movement in poetry, and followed by Morris’s Arts & Crafts initiative in design) was undoubtedly, in part, a response to the expanding industrialization of his world.

In December 1841, Emerson delivered an oration at the Masonic Temple in Boston that came to be known as “The Transcendentalist.” While crediting Kant with inventing the term transcendental, Emerson said, “Nature is transcendental, exists primarily, necessarily, ever works and advances, yet takes no thought for the morrow.”⁷ Having established the “otherness” of nature, he had to admit that no man was a pure transcendentalist: “... we have yet no man who has leaned entirely on his character, and eaten angels’ food; who, trusting to his sentiments, found life made of miracles; who, working for universal aims, found himself fed, he knew not how”⁸ But the presentation, in staying true to its theme, roundly criticized the material mind at the expense of the ideal:

The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture.⁹

It should be noted that, in an era of so-called “manifest destiny,” when westward expansion was redefining the American psyche, Emerson, always with a finger on the American pulse, was revising

4 Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic Books: 1979), 205.

5 Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

6 Victor Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial*, 102.

7 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* Vol. I. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 206.

8 *Ibid.*, 206.

9 *Ibid.*, 201.

or would soon revise his earlier beliefs on a number of key issues, including abolition, and perhaps more important, on the world of nature as it related to industrial society.

Margolin, Emerson's latter-day successor on this particular theme, leaves little doubt about his feelings. He is "terrified" of "the specter of instrumental reason" set loose on nature. His disgust for postmodernist proponents of such appalling futures is palpable and, I believe, justified.¹⁰ But while I agree with Margolin's argument for a view of design "... that does not attempt to completely replace the natural, but moves instead to complement it" I do not hold with his call for a re-enchantment of design. Again and again in his book's central essay, Margolin proposes spirituality as an anodyne, "A meta-narrative of spirituality can help designers resist technorhetoric that sanctions the continuous colonization of the natural."¹¹ Spirituality, in Margolin's metaphor, is another term for environmental justice, and while spirituality might enhance society's general well-being, so too could simple charity or, for the sake of my thesis, social altruism.

As suggested above, by 1844, Emerson was sounding a different tune. In an address now known as "The Young American" given in February of that year to the Mercantile Library Association of Boston, he said:

It is easy to see that we of the existing generation are conspiring with a beneficence, which, in its working for coming generations, sacrifices the passing one, which infatuates the most selfish men to act against their private interest for the public welfare. We build railroads, we know not for what or for whom; but one thing is very certain, that we who build them will receive the very smallest share of benefit therefrom.¹²

Emerson's turnabout is significant. Well before the Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851, this great "idealist" was extolling the benefits of industrial progress, even unto "... the extension to the utmost of the commercial system" He hadn't lost sight of the need for "moral causes" or of the benefits of altruism, as the preceding passage indicates, but his idealism had clearly been tempered with a strong dose of pragmatism.

Margolin, on the other hand, sounds more like the middle-years Morris, when he was still at war with mechanization. Social problems, such as crime and poverty, stem from complex preceding causes, such as overpopulation and resource depletion, and can't be corrected by well-intentioned nostrums. While the social evils of the first industrial era may have found small redress in the fluctuating commentaries of Emerson, today's problems are 150 years more mature. Fortunately, so too are the solutions.

10 See my essay, "Biophilia and Technophilia: Reexamining the Nature/Culture Split in Design Theory," *Design Issues* XIII: 3 (Autumn 1997).

11 Victor Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial*, 119.

12 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Collected Works*, 232.

Economics Re-envisioned

The 1990s will long be remembered as a decade of accomplishment not for scientific discovery, in spite of the Human Genome Project, but for humankind's relocation of social mores. The re-enchantment of everything takes a distant back row seat to an expanded awareness of the environment, the ascendance of diversity (both cultural and biological), and the recognition of the critical significance of sustainability to both organisms and living systems.

Classical economics generally had little to say about the social and environmental costs of capitalism. The birth and expansion of monetarism did not take time to factor the negative growth indices for pollution or corporate annexation. With the Soviet Union's collapse in the Cold War, proponents of globalization appeared to have gained an unobstructed inside track to world domination. And yet, even the staid, objectivist discipline of economics, the "dismal science," felt the groundswell of change during the '90s.

Years before the general 1999 confrontation with the WTO in Seattle, economist and development theoretician David Korten began writing about the need for fiscal sanity. Schooled in traditional economics, and preened for a career in business, Korten took a thirty-year detour into the developing world and was deeply moved by what he found there. Convinced that the capitalist system itself was the problem rather than the solution, he finally left development work in 1992 and devoted his considerable talents to helping create models of sustainable change for the future.

A vocal critic of financial globalization and the artificial consolidation of wealth, Dr. Korten equates capitalism with cancer. He advocates what he calls "people-centered development," the effort to attain sustainable improvements in the quality of life for individuals and communities. His rallying cry is especially pertinent for designers who, as often as not, act as handmaidens to the corporate bottom line, which Korten sees as anathema to a healthy world. He writes:

They (capitalist institutions) eliminate regulations that protect the human and environmental interest, remove economic borders to place themselves beyond the reach of the state, deny consumers access to essential information, seek to monopolize beneficial technologies, and use mergers, acquisitions, strategic alliances, and other anti-competitive practices to undermine the market's ability to self-organize.¹³

Korten does not mince words in his proposals for democratic and economic reform. Targeting advertising as an example, he is strongly critical of both school and political advertising. Rather than allow corporate tax breaks for advertising, Korten suggests "... it (advertising) should not be deductible as an expense and should be taxed at a rate of at least fifty percent."¹⁴ This would have a profound effect

13 David C. Korten, *The Post-Corporate World* (West Hartford/San Francisco: Kumarian Press/Berrett-Koehler, 1999), 62.

14 David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hartford/San Francisco: Kumarian Press/Berrett-Koehler, 1995), 311.

on those tens of thousands of design professionals worldwide who earn their livings directly as corporate employees or indirectly as advertising subcontractors.

Korten's calls for ending corporate subsidies and reforming the Bretton-Woods institutions are no longer wild outsider proposals.¹⁵ And his idea to discourage short-term international monetary speculation by levying a small tax on all financial transactions is inspired. But Korten does not tear down without proposing an alternative: "A globalized economic system has an inherent bias in favor of the large, the global, the competitive, the resource extractive, and the short-term. Our challenge is to create a global system that is biased toward the small, the local, the cooperative, the resource-conserving, and the long-term"¹⁶

In other words, think globally and design locally.

Altruism and Individualism

Nigel Whiteley spent considerable time in *Design for Society* comparing the evils of consumer-led design with a perceived need for socially-conscious design. "The materialism of consumer-led design testifies to private affluence on a substantial scale Thus individualism rather than individuality pervades our consumerist society With individualism, society is no greater than the sum of its individualistic parts, and so consumer-led design offers us no social vision—no vision of society."¹⁷

Actually, in an economic system that reinforces selfishness, social vision is an oxymoron. Yet, it hasn't always been this way. America was founded on individual rights resulting in collective good. David Korten reminds us, "Some claim the American Revolution was as much a revolution against the crown corporations as against the crown itself The few corporate charters issued (in the early days of the Republic) generally were for a limited duration to serve a carefully delineated public purpose, such as constructing a canal system."¹⁸

Korten would trace our loss of innocence to the apotheosis of for-profit corporations. But this is too simplistic. In his thesis on altruism, philosopher James R. Ozinga defines an important dichotomy. "Altruism is behavior benefiting someone else at some cost to oneself, while selfishness is behavior that benefits oneself at some cost to others."¹⁹ Thinkers, and more recently sociologists and neuroscientists, have been attempting to understand the mechanisms underpinning altruism for centuries.

Ecologist Garrett Hardin qualifies the two aspects of the matter. About altruism he reflects, "For a social animal, merely observing the pleasure of others is a reward. Measuring psychological gains against material losses certainly is a difficult problem, but millions of years of evolution have selected us to do just that."²⁰ There seems to be empirical evidence supporting this contention. We know altruism exists not only among human populations, but also

15 Similar entreaties have been made in print by William Greider, Walden Bello, and others.

16 David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World*, 270.

17 Nigel Whiteley, *Design for Society* (London: Reaktion Books, 1993), 41.

18 David C. Korten, *The Post-Corporate World*, 76.

19 James Ozinga, *Altruism* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 9.

20 Garrett Hardin, *The Limits of Altruism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), 15.

among other species of higher mammals such as wolves, which act in concert to protect and defend the young of the pack.

Food sharing and suicide in defense of the hive are basic instincts of social insects. Peter Kropotkin famously argued that "... sociability is the greatest advantage in the struggle for life."²¹ Both Hardin and Ozinga suggest the deep genetic underpinnings of altruistic behavior. At one point, Ozinga even refers to altruism as "natural law."

While Peter Singer considers that Kropotkin's anarchism compromised his understanding of Darwin, allowing for generations of social-Darwinist misinterpretation, even Singer, a self-described utilitarian, chips in a good word for cooperation:

Tests of our ability to make inferences show that although we are not adept at formal logic, we are particularly good at recognizing social contracts, and especially, the cheats who break them. This readiness to cooperate is a true universal among humans (and not only among humans—it applies to other long-lived intelligent social animals too).²²

Materialism (and here we mean largesse based upon excess consumption) is inherently self-destructive. A little further on, Hardin suggests a possible social brake on self-indulgence: "Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."²³ He goes so far as to criticize John Rawl's monumental *Theory of Justice* for its failure to address the future with what Hardin calls "intergenerational justice," current levels of environmental abuse being considered one of humankind's great injustices to our progeny.

Certainly, as recognition of the extent to which we have despoiled the commons has collectively dawned upon us, many have made personal attempts to correct their behavior. It's not easy. The current international financial system, as self-defeating and cynically anti-life as anything we've ever devised, is deeply rooted. And yet, a growing clamor of criticism of corporate libertarianism suggests that altruism may be more than just nostalgia for lost paradise.

Entrepreneurial Altruism

In *The Politics of the Artificial* Victor Margolin comes enticingly near to identifying some of the "new forms of practice" both he and Whiteley seek. In describing Kenji Ekuan's "Design for the World" concept, Margolin writes, "His call for a new purpose is significant and forms part of an emerging dialogue among some designers. However, the terms of this dialogue are not yet well enough defined to lead to viable strategies of practice."²⁴ Again, Margolin walks right up to the threshold only to draw back. His call for a "new spirituality" in design would carry a good deal more weight if it framed the discussion for the exercise in civics as it actually is.

21 Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), 50.

22 Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 46–47.

23 Garrett Hardin, *The Limits of Altruism*, 38.

24 Victor Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial*, 98.

In fairness to Margolin, things are moving rather fast, making prediction a perilous art. What may have seemed “undefined” five years ago (a number of Margolin’s essays date from or predate this period) is today much more clearly delineated. As a result, where Margolin sees a vaguely defined dialogue, others are actively involved in a worldwide conversation leading to clear alternatives to traditional practice.²⁵

According to Korten, “The depth and seriousness of the massive dysfunctions of global corporations ... have only recently gained prominence in the public mind. Already, new initiatives are emerging that draw attention to the need for serious structural mechanisms to hold corporations accountable to the public interest.”²⁶ A good example in design is Ekuan’s organization, Design for the World (www.designfortheworld.org). It was formally incorporated in 1998 as a collaboration of ICOGRADA, ICSID, and IFI, with the support of the Barcelona Design Center. Whether questioning where graphic design fits in the global fight against AIDS, refashioning refugee camps as sustainable settlements, or promoting GUI-based computers for the illiterate, Design for the World functions as a nexus for change and exchange in the true spirit of high social altruism.

Another exemplar is Design for Social Impact (www.dfsi.org). Founded in Philadelphia in 1996 by Ennis Carter, DFSI, which now employs a dozen designers, promotes communication design as a form of social activism. Touting a client list ranging from the Clean Air Council to the World Wildlife Fund, DFSI attempts to provide design support to public interest organizations at below market cost.

Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr’s Architecture for Humanity (www.architectureforhumanity.org) has had great success sponsoring design competitions for refugee housing and mobile health clinics on the Internet. Following the tsunami of 2004, AfH has been designated by the government of Sri Lanka as the rebuild agency for the village of Kirinda, and they are also at work with NGOs in Pottuvil, Sri Lanka; Banda Aceh, Indonesia and in Tamil Nadu, India.

Both the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada (www.sgdc.org) and ICOGRADA (www.icograda.org) are dedicated to doing more than merely designing for profit. In fact, the ICOGRADA Code of Professional Conduct emphasizes that a designer’s responsibilities to the community are prior to and above his/her client. A finer instance of “... measuring psychological gains against material losses” would be hard to find.

Whether one observes venerable organizations such as the AIGA (www.aiga.org), which featured prophets of sustainability Fritjof Capra and David Orr at its 2003 national convention, or recent phenomena, such as Sappi Fine Papers’s “Ideas That Matter” program (www.sappi.com/itm), it seems everyone’s getting into the act. The original legal purpose of corporations was in the public interest, a purpose corrupted by both kings and mercantilists, who

25 In an excellent paper delivered at Archeworks, Chicago in October 2003, Margolin moves much nearer to an embrace of the contemporary design-philanthropy scene, especially with his remarks regarding the rise of civil society as it relates to social action, and his “social agenda for designers.” (Personal correspondence with Victor Margolin, November, 2003.)

26 David C. Korten, *The Post-Capitalist World*, 203.

discovered in the legal fiction of corporations a means to nearly risk-free accumulation of vast sums of money. It is poetic justice that the Internet has become a breeding ground for the socially grounded types of organizations Adam Smith foresaw in *Wealth of Nations*. The late-twentieth century explosion in “dot orgs” online, in almost inverse proportion to the collapse of “dot coms,” suggests that the kinder, gentler *fin de siècle* angst of the ‘90s was not completely in vain.

Altruism as Design Methodology

The preceding section, listing a number of organizations often expressly dedicated to design altruism, may seem like a “tempest in a teacup” when compared to the ocean of for-profit design. “Are you really describing altruism as a methodology, or merely as a principle?” I have been asked. My experience tells me, and the preceding examples confirm, that altruism is more a physical condition than a mere ideal. E. O. Wilson describes altruism’s evolution by natural selection as the central theoretical problem of sociobiology. He believes kinship is the plausible reason for its spread in a population—the shared genes of two organisms of common descent having an increased contribution to the next generation as a result of an altruistic act.²⁷

In my endeavors to reconcile design with philanthropy, I have employed many of the same methods discovered by other organizations to practice design in an altruistic manner. Through Designers Without Borders, my partners and I dispense equipment, software, and advice, based on a belief that people less fortunate deserve access to microcomputers and networking technology. By working with African secondary schools and universities to develop curriculum, we expand design pedagogy. By assisting nonprofits such as The National Committee of Women Living With AIDS in Uganda (www.designerswithoutborders.org/nacwola.html) with their print promotions, we attempt to improve the viability of these organizations in the very competitive world donor market. Through Website authoring and hosting, we increase the profiles and accessibility of worthy but under-resourced institutions including The Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts of Makerere University (www.makerere.ac.ug/sifa). All of this activity addresses problem solving from a social perspective, with an eye to the effectiveness of design as an agent of development.

We do not do this work using a competitive model; there is more of Ghandi than Gates about us. Conceived while on a Fulbright to Uganda, DWB enjoys a tenuous existence as a 501(c)(3) educational and charitable foundation, dependant upon grants, donations, and lots of imagination. While it may not seem like an intelligent way to get ahead in the world, and might not be possible at all outside academia, we regularly meet designers, often young, who

27 E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 276.

are ready to abandon their corporate careers and move overseas to carry on similar volunteer work.

We have been described as “design ambassadors.”²⁸ While there is always something diplomatic about international assistance, we are no more statesmen and stateswomen than the other organizations described above. To our academic partners, we provide equipment, tutelage, and curricular development free of charge. We ask only that they guarantee a secure space for donated computers, and a staff member willing to learn and carry on in our absence. This is sustainability in a fiscal and academic sense, something required by large foundations. When we enter into an agreement with a foreign NGO, we ask for a small retainer (\$100US), which later is applied to the costs of printing or domain registering. Although we donate our time, we also attempt to further minimize client expense, a hallmark of careful applied design. Unfortunately, sometimes even these modest requirements can exclude worthy organizations, but they are our one concession to the need for a professional contract.

Such activities are localized. Our field operations presently are limited to Uganda, but in a wired world this is already changing as we advise and consult students world wide on issues ranging from design for development to African vernacular. In the past, we have worked with members of the U.S. diplomatic corps, especially the Public Affairs Officers at U.S. embassies. Our mission is not tied to that of the State Department, nor are we encumbered by the philosophy of exchanging development aid for democratic values. In many parts of the world, this does not work well. But we have found that an approach which binds ideologically-neutral respect to selective-within-limits assistance usually is rewarded with a mutually gratifying cultural exchange.

It is our sincere hope this will continue.

Conclusion

Life prevails; this much we know.

Neither the faded specter of forced Soviet collectivism, nor the senescent aspect of ruthless American individualism, will outlast life. Altruism already is providing a sought-after alternative to strictly for-profit design practice. Having long existed as a fringe benefit of the market economy, nonprofit corporations truly have come of age. Realizing the enlightenment definition of what corporate legal entities originally were meant to be, nonprofits have assumed the role of social antidote to the rapaciousness of their distinctly unneighborly counterparts, shareholder-driven for-profit corporations.

That stakeholder-driven nonprofits should appear in great numbers at this moment to counteract the scandals and depredations wracking shareholder for-profits is more than just a matter of fortuitous timing. David Kortzen sees it as part of the “emergence of a planetary consciousness,” one that “mindfully” chooses life over

28 *HOWDesign*, April 2002: 180–185.

money. E. O. Wilson points out that it is man's ability to share that even makes an economy possible. "... money ... is a quantification of reciprocal altruism."²⁹

But, while it may be "in the genes," consciously selecting altruism is not easy. As Korten points out, in a corporate libertarian-dominated system, altruism is not considered good business. "We must not kid ourselves. Social responsibility is inefficient in a global free market, and the market will not long abide those who do not avail of the opportunity to shed the inefficient."³⁰ And yet, designers *are* rising to the occasion, developing socially active nonprofits at an unprecedented rate. This is good. Richard Dawkins, who contends that altruism itself is merely a form of a gene-selfish survival strategy, goes on to say, "If there is a human moral to be drawn, it is that we must *teach* our children altruism, for we cannot expect it to be part of their biological nature."³¹ Perhaps one day design firms will automatically donate a percentage of their net profit to social causes, the for-profit agenda being seen as not only anachronistic, but downright antisocial.

Toward the end of his book, James Ozinga opines, "It could be argued that our culture is sterile because we have substituted the power of knowledge for the wealth of life."³² To the extent that we both over produce and over consume, I have to agree with him: in a sense, our culture is sterile. But it also is ethically and creatively fecund. That we are powerful in knowledge is an obvious truth. But we are also naïve. When we mistakenly substitute power for life, we need to be chastised but also forgiven, for this is the worst sort of callowness.

Still, I'd like to think that, in our tireless quest for knowledge, in our insatiable efforts to consolidate wealth, fame, and power; we have uncovered a few abiding truths. Among these, one holds that altruism is as good a choice for evolutionary success as selfishness.

We have only to apply it mindfully to rediscover the lost world of our heart's desire.

29 E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 3.

30 David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World*, 237.

31 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 96.

32 James Ozinga, *Altruism*, 28.