

# DRAFT

September 2009

## Course Proposal

*"My thoughts are guiding my hand, and my hand reveals the value of the thought."* [Mies van der Rohe]

"Truth is a river that is always splitting up into arms that reunite. Islanded between the arms, the inhabitants argue for a lifetime as to which is the main river." [Cyril Connolly]

"We must not be afraid of dreaming the impossible if we want the seemingly impossible to become a reality." [Vaclav Havel]

# Sustainability and Utopias

ID 365 (1 credit elective)

IDMU – Interior Design, Marylhurst University

Jeff Hartnett

[hartnett@marylhurst.edu](mailto:hartnett@marylhurst.edu)

503 636-8141 x3378 or 503 621-6561

Mayer Building, Room 106

## Course Outline

class dates (2 hours each):

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| ___, Meeting One   | intro to class/syllabus/ assignments/readings/questions; watch "The Story of Stuff"         |
| ___, Meeting Two   | Plato Reading – presentation & discussion; Writing Assignment – Draft 1 – "The Good Life"   |
| ___, Meeting Three | Schmidt Reading – presentation & discussion; Writing Assignment – Draft 2 – "The Good Life" |
| ___, Meeting Four  | Carey Reading – presentation & discussion; Writing Assignment – Draft 3 – "The Good Life"   |
| ___, Meeting Five  | draft Writing Assignment – turn-in & presentation-to-class                                  |
| ___, Meeting Six   | final Writing Assignment & "The Good Life" – turn-in & presentation-to-class                |
|                    | Course Reflection & online course/instructor evaluations                                    |



### Rationale for offering of this new/proposed course:

A local provocateur posed the following question: "In terms of 'sustainability', what are we trying to **sustain**, and what are we trying to **change**?" . . .

The introductory quote by Havel above refers to the need to "dream the impossible"; this pointedly describes the act of formulating one's personal version of **utopia**. An underlying premise of this course is that a "sustainable world" will not be possible if acted out through the lens – the perspective and values -- of technology. Discussions about sustainability are virtually always prefaced with an intimidating list of "facts-to- elicit-fear" about our world; however, **it is demonstrably difficult to motivate human beings through fear. What is much more effective at motivating people to create changes in their lives – and so their world -- is positive motivation, a positive vision of what life could and should be – a utopia.**

The utopian visions of those involved with the (intellectual) "issue" and the (economic) "field" of sustainability are typically unspoken, even unrealized and thus unconscious, and **yet they without doubt are key to creating the values that ultimately guide actions.**

Values held by people create a set of assumptions -- about "the way the world works", about human beings and their various relationships to that physical world, and about conceptions of "the good life" (for which sustainability is simply the **means to achieve** that desired life).

Encouraging the conscious thinking about the topic of utopia will lead to questions about those assumptions and bring them into consciousness, and thus **the topic of utopia has to become a significant part of anyone's initial conversation about sustainability** – the premise of this course is that it is not peripheral, or "extra", or simply academic, but instead it is central and essential.

And what we know and will need to know, in terms of the actual methods used and to be used to make the world more sustainable, more an environment allowing that "good life" to be realized, will always be a **moving target**; therefore, it is only logical to assume that learning these methods will necessarily involve **life-long learning**. Thus, the main goal of any educational institutional offering of instruction on the topic of sustainability is, at least initially, to specifically create the **strong motivation for such needed life-long learning**; i.e. the adoption of values and ethical frameworks that will lead to a more sustainable world will thus become *assumed*, even "natural" (vs. a "struggle" or a "sacrifice" based on anticipated fears about our future).

We will **NOT** be able to achieve sustainability (simply) through rationality, science/engineering/technology, standards, materialism, capitalism, or a digital basis for conceiving, communicating, or producing building design proposals and artifacts. We cannot just "create better" – through having profit-motivated capitalism adapt sustainable strategies -- our way out of this situation without first creating new shared values. Considering the issue of utopias in their relationship with the issue of sustainability should be very useful in brain-storming about our personal and societal versions of "the good life", requiring us to "write it down". To put it in Pena's terminology, **it's like programming necessarily coming before design.**

### Reading Resources:

- excerpts from *The Faber Book of Utopias*, John Carey, editor [two required; two of student's choice related to sustainability; two of student's choice related to personal interest]
- excerpts from *Positive Ecology: Sustainability and the "Good Life"*, Gerald Schmidt
- Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" [Wikipedia entry, plus its links]
- [video] "The Story of Stuff" [[www.thestoryofstuff.com](http://www.thestoryofstuff.com)]
- [optional/highly recommended] *World Made by Hand: a Novel*, James Howard Kunstler
- [optional/recommended] *The Long Emergency*, James Howard Kunstler

### Learning Outcomes

- To critique the current "frame" or "lens" within which the issue of sustainability is currently conceived.
- To construct a clear operational ethical framework within which to think about the issue of "sustainability", and its role in contemporary design, by reading about, discussing, and reflecting upon *utopias*.
- To practice "active listening" and "active reading".

### Assessment/Evaluation

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|--|-----|
| • Summaries of Reading (evidence of "active reading")          | 20% |
| • Course Lecture Notes (evidence of "active listening")        | 20% |
| • "The Good Life" [mostly in-class 4-stage writing assignment] | 20% |
| • Writing Assignment   | 40% |

### Description of Writing Assignment:

[adopted from Professor Jim Dator of the Department of Political Science of the University of Hawai'i; *Visions of Desirable Societies*, Eleanora Masini, editor]

In as few number of pages as possible, clearly and concisely *describe the best, possible, real society that you can imagine for the area in which you live, one that may be possible to be realized to some degree within your lifetime.*

In so doing, describe in particular the following:

- **State the critical goals of your preferred/ideal society** – what behaviors and conditions and way-of-life do you want to facilitate? **Why?** What do you want to discourage and/or prevent? **Why?**
- **Operationalize that set of goals.** – **how do you accomplish those stated goals?** Make sure to include **clear definitions** of important terms.
- **Devise needed alternative institutions and specific methods that will help you to achieve your set of goals.**
- **Explore if the different goals within your set of goals are mutually supportive and/or at-odds with each other.** Again, pay close attention to **definitions**. If there is **conflict** between/among goals, how may your goals, institutions, and/or methods be modified so that, operationally, they are *less* incompatible; i.e. the resulting dynamic tension must somehow be recognized and managed/minimized.
- **Since you are presumably "designing" a world that is not the world of today, what are you doing in your design to assure that it will stay as you want it to be, and thus not permit it to evolve in undesirable ways?** Note that this does not imply that a stable world is preferred; you may prefer one in constant/considerable flux. But how, then, can you prevent that world from stabilizing in undesired ways?
- **How will you be able to monitor the evolving future of your desired world, to test to see if it is moving "in the right direction" in terms of your vision?**

## Teaching Philosophy & Methodology

The **seminar** format of this course will require students to be **responsible** for **actively reading** before class all required materials, and also to be **responsible** for **actively listening** and participating in **student-initiated discussion-and-debate during class**. Your instructor will act primarily as a **moderator/facilitator**. It is hoped that the Writing Assignment will spur serious thought about *the relationship between the issue of sustainability and the future practice of interior design by each individual student*.

## About the Instructor

### Jeff Hartnett

- B.S. in Architecture, University of Virginia (teaching assistant)
- (M.Arch candidate) Graduate School of Design, Harvard University
- M. Arch, University of Texas at Austin (design studio graduate assistant)  
full-time Teaching Experience (1986-present):
- University of Arkansas; Jilin Institute of Architecture & Civil Engineering; Shenzhen University; University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Cal Poly San Luis Obispo [studio]; Portland State University, Marylhurst University

## Retention of Student Work

The University reserves the right to photograph, use, display, or reproduce for University publications work produced by students enrolled in its coursework. The Interior Design Program further reserves the right to retain selected exemplary student work in its archives for display during periodic accreditation visits. The work will be available to students from the archives and will be returned to the student after the required accreditation site visit.

Students are to retain all coursework until the end of the term and grades are finalized. Student work not archived can be picked up within TWO WEEKS after the end of the term through the Art Department Office. All work left in studios should be removed within THREE WEEKS after the end of the term. Unless prior arrangements are made, projects left after this time may be discarded because of lack of storage space. The University is not responsible for loss of or damage to student work.

## Marylhurst Writing Standards

[insert here]

Note: *this document is subject to change*; please inform your instructor as soon as possible if you have a question, comment, or conflict.

The “**main messages**” of the **three main reading resources** are described below:

The following is the basic story of **Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”**, as taken from *Wikipedia*:

### Inside the cave

**Socrates** begins by describing a scenario in which what people take to be real would in fact be an illusion. He asks **Glaucou**n to imagine a **cave** inhabited by prisoners who have been chained and held immobile since childhood: not only are their arms and legs held in place, but their heads are also fixed, compelled to gaze at a wall in front of them. Behind the prisoners is an enormous **fire**, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised **walkway**, along which people walk carrying things on their heads “including figures of men and animals made of wood, stone and other materials” The prisoners can only watch the shadows cast by the men, not knowing they are shadows. There are also echoes off the wall from the noise produced from the walkway. Socrates asks if it is not reasonable that the prisoners would take the shadows to be **real** things and the echoes to be real sounds, not just reflections of **reality**, since they are all they had ever seen or heard. Wouldn't they praise as clever whoever could best guess which shadow would come next, as someone who understood the nature of the world? And wouldn't the whole of their society depend on the shadows on the wall?

### Release from the cave

Socrates next introduces something new to this scenario. Suppose that a prisoner is freed and permitted to stand up. If someone were to show him the things that had cast the shadows, he would not recognize them for what they were and could not name them; he would believe the shadows on the wall to be more real than what he sees. Suppose further, Socrates says, that the man was compelled to look at the fire: wouldn't he be struck blind and try to turn his gaze back toward the shadows, as toward what he can see clearly and hold to be real? What if someone forcibly dragged such a man upward, out of the cave: wouldn't the man be angry at the one doing this to him? And if dragged all the way out into the sunlight, wouldn't he be distressed and unable to see "even one of the things now said to be true", viz. the shadows on the wall? **After some time on the surface, however, Socrates suggests that the freed prisoner would acclimate.** He would see more and more things around him, until he could look upon the Sun. He would understand that the Sun is the "source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing"

### Return to the cave

Socrates next asks Glaucon to consider the condition of this man. Wouldn't he remember his first home, what passed for wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners, and consider himself happy and them pitiable? And wouldn't he disdain whatever honors, praises, and prizes were awarded there to the ones who guessed best which shadows followed which? Moreover, were he to return there, wouldn't he be rather bad at their game, no longer being accustomed to the darkness? "Wouldn't it be said of him that he went up and came back with his eyes corrupted, and that it's not even worth trying to go up? And if they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up, wouldn't they kill him?" [my emphases]

The following is an excerpt from the Introduction to Carey's *The Faber Book of Utopias*, published in 1999:

*Utopia* means nowhere or no-place. It is often taken to mean *good place*, through confusion of its first syllable with the Greek *eu* . . . As a result of this mix-up, another word *dystopia* has been invented, to mean *bad place* . . . **To count as a utopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of desire. To count as a dystopia, it must be an expression of fear.** As well as being a book of nowheres, then, this is a collection of humanity's desires and fears as recorded over the past two thousand years and more. Because they grow from desire and fear, utopias cry out for our sympathy and attention, however impractical or unlikely they may appear. Anyone who is capable of love must at some time have wanted the world to be a better place, for we all want our loved ones to live free of suffering, injustice, and heartbreak. **Those who construct utopias build on that universal human longing. What they build may, however, carry within it its own potential for crushing or limiting human life. This is the dilemma that confronts all utopian projects.** They aim at a new world, but must destroy the old. **Their imaginative excitement comes from the recognition that everything inside our heads, and much outside, are human constructs and can be changed. But how and what to change is endlessly controversial. For this reason the utopia is the most divisive of literary forms** . . . To some, "utopian" means "hopelessly impractical". Others insist that without the capacity to formulate utopias human progress would be inconceivable . . . Whereas most utopias reform the world, some reform the self . . . An ultimate conflict in utopian ideals is between human-centered systems and systems that diminish or obliterate mankind . . . these extremes are represented by the physicist John Freeman Dyson [1923-present] and the naturalist Richard Jefferies [1848-87, author of *After London*] . . . Dyson envisages mankind spreading throughout the solar system, and perhaps eventually filling the galaxy with himself and his inventions . . . Jefferies, on the other hand, imagines man largely dying out and the world returning to wild and beautiful greenness . . . To the green camp, the space-invader lobby seem puerile, arrogant, and ridiculously unaware of the ultimate, inevitable death of our species. To the space-invaders, the greens seem defeatist and backward. Confrontation between the two sides tends to end in blank incomprehension. **At its sharpest the division is between those who assume man's God-given superiority, and those who see him as a blemish on the face of**

**the earth.** As the planet grows more overcrowded, and other species become extinct, this conflict can only intensify. **If utopias are any indication, it promises to be one of the formative antagonisms of the twenty-first century . . . Utopia is where we store our hopes for happiness. Before starting this anthology, readers might like to jot down their personal utopia. Then they will be able to compare it with the dreams of humankind.** [my emphases] [see **Writing Assignment**]

The following is from the back cover of *Positive Ecology: Sustainability and the "Good Life"*, published in 2005:

While newspapers and other popular media tend to focus on the **negative** aspects of environmental change, this volume examines an alternative notion of **"positive ecology"**. It provides an original and previously undervalued approach to sustainability, and suggests that work towards sustainability is not only a necessity for our children's future, but necessary, sensible, and meaningful in the present. [my emphases]

And the following is from the first pages of *Positive Ecology: Sustainability and the "Good Life"*:

In trying to set the stage for the play of human existence, **basic assumptions** people hold about the world immediately come into play. **Such world views are usually taken from traditional sources and learning during childhood.** Even though they can include time scales quite outside of daily human experience . . . life is generally spent acting on **time frames, scales of space, and levels of complexity** more immediately meaningful to us. Furthermore, the stage on which human life unfolds, which is the Earth and most importantly its biosphere, is commonly considered a **mere backdrop** to humanity – somewhat important, but less and less defining of human existence, not least because it was rather static. As it turns out . . . however, far from being the static stage the term "nature" commonly evokes, it is a dynamic field of mutual interaction of organisms among themselves, as well as of and with the physical elements of the Earth system . . . The human species turns out to be a rather recent and very unusual addition: **Instead of being physically adapted to the habitats it occupies, its – that is: our – strategy is to use cognition to actively devise cultures (understandings of the world, strategies, technologies) that facilitate survival, instead . . . as beings that have evolved in this world, mainly faced with problems at specific scales of time, space, and complexity, we human beings are attuned to thinking in certain scales, and amenable to react to certain elements of nature with delight or fright . . .** The changes in sheer numbers of human beings and in technological capability are now an influence on evolutionary-ecological processes and even on global biogeochemical cycles that would have been – and sometimes apparently still are – considered natural immutable conditions rather than processes prone to change and interdependent. **This shift in relations presents humanity with problems of scale that used to have little meaning. Therefore, evolutionary and ecological perspectives, and education about them, play a major role, but so do culturally salient motives and motivations . . .** there were "three pillars" of sustainability, i.e. the ecological, social, and economic spheres, that had to be addressed. Actually, this particular approach usually is neither "radical" nor wide enough: radical because it is necessary to start "at the roots", which are primarily the ecological and the concrete human aspects (which tends to take center stage to economic considerations), and wider because changes in economics and technology as well as consumption and other normal, daily behavior – management of natural resources as well as ourselves – will be necessary to truly achieve a transformation to sustainability. [my emphases]

Finally, the following is taken from the back cover of James Howard Kunstler's book, *World Made by Hand: a Novel*, a fictional account of a post-apocalypse, now-pre-industrial future America – a book of fiction -- that is highly recommended.

"An impassioned and invigorating take whose ultimate message is one of hope, not despair". [San Francisco Chronicle]

The electricity has flickered out. **The automobile age is over.** In Union Grove, a little town in upstate New York, life is hard and close to the bone. James Howard Kunstler, celebrated social

critic and author of the best-selling *The Long Emergency*, takes an imaginative leap into the future with *World Made by Hand*. This is the story of Robert Earle and this fellow townspeople, and what happens to them one summer in a country that has changed profoundly. A powerful tale of love, loss, violence, and desperation, *World Made by Hand* is also lyrical and tender, **a surprising story of a new America struggling to be born.** [my emphases]

