JANE WITHERS

Water Manifesto

Jiri Geller:
Like a Million Dollars (2009)

LONDON – It goes without saying that water is life; it feeds earth's ecosystem, flows through our cities, our homes and our bodies. It's essential to existence and a portal to our dreams. And yet largely through the way we use and abuse this precious resource, we face a global water crisis. What can design do?

RESPECT & (RE)CONNECT

The first step towards a sustainable hydrological future is no more complicated than respect. Arguably that's what we've forgotten. In Waters of Forgetfulness philosopher Ivan Illich describes how since water came on tap, we take it for granted as this clean, clear and limitless stuff that is piped invisibly into our lives and used to flush waste out. We can no longer afford that luxury.

1% WATER

Although 70% of earth's surface is water, just 3% percent is fresh water and less than 1% of is readily available to us (the rest is in deep aquifers or ancient ice). Use it wisely.

DRIER & THIRSTIER

From the drying out of the Colorado River to decaying Lake Chad or rusting ships in a barren Aral Sea – these powerful images of the changing water environment are all primarily caused by our over-utilization of fresh surface water. With a world population of over 7 billion and growing fast, in just 20 years demand for water could be 40 percent higher than it is today, and by 2050 it's probable half the world's population will face severe water shortages. Wherever we are in the world, we need to be more aware of our water consumption.

Water is H2O, hydrogen two parts, oxygen one, but there is also a third thing that makes it water and nobody knows what it is.

—D.H. Lawrence

HOW MUCH WATER DO YOU EAT?

No, that isn't a typo. It takes about 3000 L of water to produce our daily food ration, about 1000 times what we need for drinking. In northern Europe we are relatively fortunate in our water resources, but a significant part of the food and products we consume originate in areas with limited water resources.

The water footprint is a new but increasingly important tool for understanding our water consumption and using water responsibly and sustainably. Armed with the right information, we can begin to understand the global flows of water in food production and choose the rice, meat, vegetable or tea that has a relatively low water footprint, or that has its footprint in a region of the world that doesn't have high water scarcity. As agriculture is by far the largest slice of the global water footprint, what we choose to eat really can make a difference.

THE FUTURE IS DRY...

So what can design do? So many of the ways we use and abuse water today are no longer appropriate for a water-stressed future: a drier planet requires the imagination of designers to challenge paradigms and come up with new ways to use water, not just more frugally and responsibly, but also more imaginatively and more pleasurably.

SO WHAT MIGHT A DRIER HOME LOOK LIKE?

Over 70 years ago Buckminster fuller, seer of sustainable design, prototyped a house without mains supplies, where water was delivered daily in bottles along with the milk and used sparingly. Bucky's homemakers would use a Fog Gun to take hot water vapour showers that require only a cup of water. Crazy to use precious drinking water to flush the loo? Bucky specified a waterless toilet that packaged our waste for composting. "Nature designed humans to separate urine and excrement", he observed. "Both are valuable chemistry and should be collected and compacted for further use."

FLUID MEMORY: IS THE PAST THE FUTURE?

So many of the habits, rituals and practices that were common water sense to our ancestors make sense for us. Why wouldn't we capture rainwater? Or steam sociably in the communal sauna or Turkish baths rather than in the gluttonous extravagance of the over-scaled bath or power shower? Can we combine ancient water management principles and the latest green technologies to shape a more sustainable future?

SACRED WATERS

From the floods that washed Noah's Ark onto Mount Ararat to aquatic divinities and monsters, every culture has its mythologies and rituals around water. Historically, these tales of draught and flood, scarcity and excess acted as warnings teaching respect for water as a destructive as well as a nurturing force. But now that we have drained water of meaning, we are surprised by Hurricane Katrina or the Japanese tsunami, famine in Kenya or drought warnings in London. Perhaps designers should weave watery tales back into our culture?

Perhaps tapping into ritual and mythology can help protect natural water resources and our hydrological future?

I CAME HERE FOR THE WATERS...

We value other natural resources – coal and pearls, oil, gold and gas – so why not water? Water has always been accorded a metaphysical and spiritual dimension, a dual nature as a life-giving material substance, a religious and spiritual force and a wellspring of the imagination. Historically, waters were celebrated for their magical properties and miraculous powers and as the source of the creative imagination. Springs were sites of worship and their sacred waters used sparingly for the common good. We should venerate and take pleasure in our natural waters.

We treat water as if it's limitless, worthless and wonderless: it's time to change. ✖

The writer is a design consultant and curator based in London. She requested that her fee be donate to WWF Finland.

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