

Who Will Design the Future From Owl Creek Bridge?

A gift for Magda McHale
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This is no metaphor: Nature is dead.

Nature, in the sense of forms and processes uninfluenced by human activities, does not exist any longer on Spaceship Earth (that is not a metaphor). While some substantial portions of the biosphere are less impacted by human activities than others (and by this understanding, "more natural" than others), every nanosecond, every nanometer of the planet becomes less and less "natural" and more and more "artificial."

This is not hyperbole: If we don't all--or some significant and influential portion of us--learn how to, and assume the responsibility for, designing the 21st Century--and not just some small portion of it, such as shopping malls, downtowns, or Greater Metropolitan Districts--there will be no 22nd Century. Or, at least when a tree falls in some residual scrawny forest in the 22nd Century, no human will be there to hear it.

This is no metaphor: We are all aborigines in a new world.

That is to say, our obligation towards future generations--towards designing, creating, and maintaining a viable 22nd Century and beyond--greatly exceeds our demonstrated ability to fulfill that obligation. Our obligation towards future generations seems to exceed our intellectual, creative, and (most of all) moral capabilities to fulfill it.

So (to speak metaphorically for a moment) we had better start designing and building the boards, and acquiring the strength and the skills, so that we can try to surf the onrushing tsunamis of change, because they are coming, whether we are ready or not.

The following is not a metaphor:

One hundred years ago, or so, Ambrose Bierce wrote a short story called "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." At least two films have been made from it. The one I know is a black and white, largely silent, 29 minute movie produced in France in 1962. The novel is a favorite of American high school English teachers, and the film is a favorite of art buffs everywhere.

I am sure you have read the book, seen the film, or both.

The first few sentences of the novel (depicted in the film with only "natural" sounds and no narration) are as follows:

"A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water 20 ft below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the sleepers supporting the metals of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners--two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant.... At a short remove upon some temporary platform was an officer in the uniform of his rank, armed. He was a captain. A sentinel [stood] at each end of the bridge.... It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the centre of the bridge...."

Bierce goes on to describe (and the film to depict) the preparatory actions of the executioners and the thoughts of the condemned man--his vivid recollection in his mind's eye of his wife and children, who he will never see again--the sounds of early morning--birds, the rushing stream, the rustle of the soldiers around him--the act, in the defense of the Confederacy, which, when discovered, resulted in his capture, and now his imminent execution by these Federal army personnel on Owl Creek Bridge, not very far away from his own home and family--and again their faces flood his memory. Suddenly, the Federal soldier standing opposite him steps off the plank, and the prisoner starts to plunge to his death by hanging.

My own fall into the future was initially largely inspired by the compelling metaphors illuminated by John and Magda McHale, Buckminster Fuller, David Greene and the other Archigram architects, Marshall McLuhan, Theilhard de Chardin, Margaret Mead, the early Robert Theobald, Yoneji Masuda, Eric Jantsch, and many more.

I was once a bright-eyed techno-optimist, convinced that anyone anywhere in the world with eyes to see and ears to hear would realize the world was in the very rapid process of moving from an oppressive, labor-intensive, military welfare-dependent, environmentally-destructive, sexist, racist industrial society into what I fancied might be called "A Transformational Society" (stressing, thus, its primary quality of continuous, substantial, challenging, exhilarating, and unpredictable change and novelty). A Transformational Society would be characterized by a "bare maximum" of cybernetically-produced abundance, with minimal energy and material input, and no waste, and with a universal sense of "enoughness" and sufficiency; by esthetically-focused lifestyles of voluntary simplicity and not of greed and empty opulence; by full unemployment, and not by meaningless wage slavery; by peace, justice, and equity; by humor, irony and absurdity; by tolerable levels of conflict and enjoyable levels of uncertainty; above all, by politics instead of economics--and "all watched over by machines of loving grace."

But a funny thing happened on the way to the future.

Massive numbers of people became "future shocked"--homesick for the good old days. Afraid of change; craving and believing they had found the "fundamentals" (especially in economics) which gave them the "blessed assurance" they sought. Afraid of the future--even (especially?) their own children, and eager to steal massively from the future in order to satisfy their

greed in the present. Violence-loving ("solving" every personal and social problem by declaring "war" on it). Cranky, self-centered, humorless.

Those few people at the top of industrial society encouraged and abated those feelings of fear and greed and, in the 1980s, and by virtue of their control of the mass media and re-ignited Cold War hysteria, prevented the articulation and achievement of a Transformational future in order to retain their positions of power and privilege.

Meanwhile, at Owl Creek Bridge, the man was plunging to his death, the noose around his neck, the water of the creek rushing up to devour him as he fell.

And then something miraculous happened. The rope broke, and he was not hanged. Instead, he discovered that he was underwater and sinking fast. His hands and feet were bound by rope, and he struggled to free himself. The noose around his neck was, fortunately, keeping water out--and air in--and now he realized he was beginning to float back up towards the surface. He could see the patch of light above him getting bigger as he rose. The water loosened the cords around his arms and legs and soon he was able to propel himself more swiftly upward. Then, to quote Bierce "He felt his head emerge; his eyes were blinded by the sunlight; his chest expanded convulsively, and with a supreme and crowning agony, his lungs engulfed a great draught of air, which instantly he expelled in a shriek!"

He became acutely aware of the fact that he was alive, and that life was swarming all around him (at this point in the film, a single male voice, accompanied by a guitar, sings triumphantly but at the same time plaintively: "A living man! A living man! I want to be living man! And all the world, it moves around him. He walks along. He turns around. I see each tree. I hear each thing. I hear each bug upon each leaf. The buzzing flies, the splashing fish, they move around this living man. A living man. A living Man. I want to be a living man!")

As Bierce puts it in his account:

"He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf--saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass. The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream, the beating of the dragon-flies' wings, the strokes of the water spiders' legs, like oars which had lifted their boat--all these made audible music. A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water."

Then the soldiers on the shore spot him, and they begin to shoot at him. He dives underwater again, and swims downstream. He is exhausted, but he continues to swim towards his freedom. Soon he comes upon dangerous rapids, and approaches a set of small waterfalls. While they move him rapidly out of gunshot, he is fearful he will be dashed to pieces upon the rocks.

Finally he reaches calm water, and crawls upon the bank towards one side. He instantly falls asleep.

The 1980s, led by the United States, experienced on a global scale the most extravagant and unprecedented spectacle of waste, greed and theft of the future the world has ever seen. While the 90s are a era of privation and oppression for growing numbers of humanity, the reminders of the 80s loom all around us in the landscapes and buildings of what must have been the most grotesque and distorted period of architecture and construction in history--rivalled in its ugliness, giantism, and worship of brutal strength and manipulative power only by the architecture of Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin.

Nothing makes me less confident about our ability to design the 21st century than the lurking monuments to empty wealth and greed which blight all urban landscapes worldwide today. If this is the best schools of architecture and urban design can do, then there must be no role for them in designing the future.

I would, instead, turn to the builders of and dwellers in slums and squatter communities who embody and respond to the true needs of the present and the future by providing the best they can of housing and services for the world's burgeoning poor.

Until schools of architecture and urban design just say "No!" to more shopping malls and to more downtown urban concentration, and begin to help the growing billions of the world--including the homeless in the cities all around them--obtain the shelter and services they need and deserve, I suggest we insist that whoever it is that will design the 21st Century, it should not be the builders of the 20th.

Booming cannon fire awakens our hero, sleeping on the river bank. They have spotted him. A shell splashes dangerously close in the water besides him. He leaps to his feet and begins to run, and to run, and to run. He runs all day, and as it begins to turn dark, he continues to run, though at a much slower pace. He runs all night. Sometimes he runs in his sleep. And then, towards dawn, he suddenly realizes where he is! He is on his own land, his own plantation. He begins to run faster, and faster, and faster.

Now he can see the roof of his house above the weeping willow trees, and as he stumbles forward, he catches a glimpse of his children, and then of his wife, running, smiling, laughing, radiantly happy towards him. He thrusts his arms out towards her, and she her arms towards him. They lunge forward to embrace.

"As he is about to clasp her, he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon--then all is darkness and silence.

"...His body, with a broken neck, swings gently from side to side between the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge."

Since the Second World War, and especially for the last decade and a half, America has been in free fall, wrapped in delirious dreams of glory, opulence, and military grander.

More recently, a Newt has slithered from the waves, offering us a vision of the future which mixes elements of the Transformational Society with

elements from the most profoundly Future Shocked, thus appealing at the same time to the best and most free and to the meanest and most base in each of us.

In the most radical ideologically-driven social experiment since Lenin exited the Finland Station and painted the Russians Red, Newt is swiftly shredding the tattered remnants of the old liberal industrial state and leaving us all to fend for ourselves.

Pretty exciting, unpredictable, and transformational, isn't it, Dator? Well, yes, but not quite what I had in mind. Oh, we have the technology, don't we Magda? The marvelous tools for love and freedom which John told us were coming. But where is the social transformation? Why have we plainly gone from bad to worse as humans while the rehumanizing technology yearns to let us be?

Instead, global population booms, the global economy bifurcates into the few rich and the billions poor, global temperature and the oceans rise, and humanity is at the end of its tether.

So, if the bough breaks and the baby should fall, I hope we each have our boards well waxed and ready to ride because surf's up, and that is no metaphor.