

of supply. Today's proponents of sustainable development borrow from their intellectual, policy, and design predecessors but then affix an insistence that no design will be sustainable if it does not recognise the complex interrelationship of the physical and the cultural.

What then is sustainability? As is often the case when a concept is widely embraced, there seem to be a great number of definitions. Robert Thayer, for example, defines it as "a characteristic of a process or state that can be maintained indefinitely".<sup>3</sup> A group of student visitors to Habitat II in Istanbul link sustainability to a site and indicate that it occurs "where a designed area is wholly suitable to its location, cultural background, inhabitants, and users".<sup>4</sup> Pressing onward, Lyndon declares that a sustainable design is not only appropriate today but one that "can support continued use and evolution".<sup>5</sup> The most widely accepted definition seems to be the one coined in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development. Drawing on the adage that we don't inherit land from our ancestors but borrow it from our children, the commission declared that sustainable development "meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs".<sup>6</sup> John Tillman Lyle declares this perspective a "revolutionary notion" because it means "living on the interest yielded by our natural systems rather than the capital"<sup>7</sup> Revolutionary or not, the definition depicts sustainability as egalitarian because it states an allegiance to the future and implies a parity among the world's peoples.

Why should we or anyone else care? Because, announce the advocates of sustainability, we have responsibilities to others and we are living at the end of an age. These are the "declining and decadent years of the industrial era".<sup>8</sup> The world's populations are growing, resources are depleting, and both natural and vernacular environments are degrading. Affluence, warns Peter Calthorpe, creates "a sense of entitlement" and security where none is warranted. Sustainability is a "profound necessity" for most people, he cautions, and it will soon be

come one for the middle classes as they experience a decline in wealth.<sup>9</sup> Sustainability is not, however, merely an abstract virtue nor simply a brake on decline. It will deliver important benefits. The frugality of a sustainable future, promises Calthorpe, will bring “a more profound sense of community and potentially a finer life”.<sup>10</sup>

In refutation of these claims, critics ask how, by definition and in practice, does one attend to the continual redefinition and revaluation of resources. Today’s resource can become tomorrow’s liability even as yesterday’s waste becomes today’s valued commodity. This criticism recalls a similar problem encountered during the Progressive Era’s pursuit of sustained yields and hints at the difficulty of finding a demonstrable solution. Other critics argue that the use and full replenishment of resources without polluting the environment is “an impossible goal” in a developing, urbanising, consumer-driven, capitalist world.<sup>11</sup> Sustainable development, some charge, is an oxymoron since the first term is based on changelessness and the second on change. Finally, the most cynical denounce sustainability as merely the latest formula used by élites to maintain growth that benefits them while avoiding or finessing intractables.

Regardless of where one comes down on the issue of sustainability, it has provided a necessary focal point for discussion and debate in the chaotic arena of global change. No matter whether one is a theorist, designer or critic, sustainability forces one and all to attend to a number of fundamental questions. Among them are: what is nature and the proper human relationship to it? What is a society? Is it necessarily linked to the landscape it currently occupies or is that connection merely contingent? How does one develop a sustainable landscape design that takes into account the local, traditional, social organisation? Are the costs and benefits of sustainability to be distributed within a society? At what temporal and spatial scale is a given landscape design deemed sustainable? How does a sustainable design take into account dynamic technologies, ecologies, and social orders?