

Sustainability by Design – John Ehrenfeld

According to Ehrenfeld, to be truly sustainable is to flourish. In order to flourish, we need to change our general mindset. The mantra of sustainable development is doomed to fail, since it only addresses unsustainability, but doesn't really lead us to a path of sustainability. We need to redesign our consumption habits, behavior models and our general way of life.

Ehrenfeld refers to philosopher and psychologist Erich Fromm's notion which is that “we have moved from a “**Being**” mode of life to a “**having**” mode of life”. Ehrenfeld finds that technology has shaped our way of being, and that we are trapped in our daily habits, in the reality that we take for granted, and in the system that is not on a sustainable base. He addresses several problem areas of humanity; our addiction to consuming, our tendency to put ourselves first, our inability to grasp wicked problems, and how we are living in an “**objective reality**” that takes us away from authenticity. Ehrenfeld emphasizes the lack of **systems thinking**. We are waiting for technological fixes to solve all of our problems. Another problem is fixes that fail, reacting incorrectly to the feedback loops or missing the root cause.

Ehrenfeld highlights the importance of **design** in the transition towards a more sustainable world. By design people can change how we interact with each other and the nature, how we can include everyone in the design process and achieve a system change. One way to create change by design that he demonstrates is **presencing**; creating interruptions that force the actor to make a decision or become more aware of it. The book also introduces other ways to influence the world by design such as **participatory design** and **institutional design**.

The book was released in 2008, but Ehrenfeld had been working on it for 20 years, as an MIT researcher in the fields of environmental sciences and economics. He wanted to provide a view of an alternative future for the future generations. Written to a Western audience from the point of view of an American consumer, the book targets the general public, concerned of addictive consumerism and its end results. Taking an individualistic focus, the book sheds light on how individuals can make a difference and sustainability can be achieved by changing general consumption habits.

Ehrenfeld succeeds in drawing the reader's attention to the bigger picture, the unsustainable ideologies behind the modern industrial way of life, the myth of man's separation from nature and the design possibilities to transform and transgress those ideologies. The writing draws from many disciplines and sources from systems thinking to Eastern philosophy, but at times Ehrenfeld trips on this holistic approach. At times argumentation remains too abstract or lacks scientific basis being based merely on Ehrenfeld's own opinions. One reason for this negligence might be the authors' position: being a white aged academic belonging to a western elite might reduce the need for justification.

Strengths	Weaknesses
· Good philosophical ideas, eg. human should see itself as part of the environment and not separate from it like a god	· Sometimes too abstract arguments
· How philosophical issues could be solved by design, eg. designing an environment that would nudge into environmental behavior or designing technology that would help us evolve culturally	· Argumentation was often based on only few references or was entirely written on authors intuition as he stated
· A wide, holistic perspective on design	· Writer had a relatively narrow view on norms (only church and governments had weight in norm formation)
· The author dove deep into what it is to be human and where are the roots of our society's pressing issues (roots: anthropogenic world view, being vs. having, technocentrism, objectivity vs. rationality, cartesian thinking, need for systemic thinking issues siloed, no shared vision for humanity)	· Not really new solutions