

Sustainability in an Imaginary World

Historically speaking, the challenge of sustainability has been viewed as one of proving the world real. Solutions to environmental problems come from science, providing the indispensable factual basis for telling people what to do. Despite success with tractable, reducible environmental issues (e.g. acid rain) this approach is proving far less successful with complex challenges where multiple factors interact strongly with sociocultural and political systems. The gap between our efforts and their intended results is palpable.

This project proposes a different track. We begin with a view of sustainability as an essentially contested concept, like truth or justice, giving rise to the idea of sustainability as an emergent property of negotiations amongst interested parties about what kind of world we want to live in, what we refer to as procedural sustainability. This view places emphasis on the imagination, as sustainability can no longer rely on determining the right path to a single sustainable future. Rather it relies on how well we explore and imaginatively inhabit multiple possible futures. This implies a significant shift in worldview: instead of a world made of objects whose reality can be established in absolute terms, we must contend with dynamic and contingent cultural forms which shape the ways such facts are constituted, expressed and interpreted. This may be precisely why persistent efforts to prove the world real offer declining traction in pursuit of sustainability. Engaging with the world as an imaginary place may be an essential alternative.

Our hope is to develop approaches to sustainability engagement which shift away from efforts to make people face some brute reality of their worlds and towards enchanting them with the openness of the world as an imaginary place. We aim to do so by combining two fields of sustainability engagement: scenario analysis and the arts, both of which have much to offer-and gain-from such a transition.

Scenario analysis evolved as an alternative to predictive forecasting techniques, introducing us to the idea of multiple incommensurable baseline futures. Using narrative and visualization in an imaginary world, we propose to extend the inherent storytelling possibilities of the scenario form. While the arts have been courted by sustainability as a means to elevate environmental issues into public concern, this amounts to a pedantic task of converting facts into values. Shifting sustainability's concern from facts to possibilities returns an epistemic quality to the creative inquiry of artistic practices.

Freed of the urgency to prove the world real, both fields might take advantage of an explicitly fictional stance, their capacity to make things up, inviting audiences to relate to sustainability in a similar fashion, an enchanting, imaginative exercise characterized by possibility, potentiality, play, beauty and agency.

Our goal is to create an interactive experience that is aesthetically driven, that prioritizes the capacity of the arts to engage, provoke and destabilize through its expressive powers, yet at the same time, draws audiences into an interactive, collaborative engagement with elements of future-making and sustainability. Building on a rich history of participatory sustainability research and recent work in multi-channel participatory engagement, while drawing upon the capacity of the BC Hydro Theatre (UBC) along with the team's artistic and technical expertise, we will collaboratively design, implement and evaluate an immersive, multi-media experience. Combining the conceptual framework (the world as imaginary) with our prototypical efforts could lead to widely applicable approaches and methods for engaging citizens on sustainability issues in new and fruitful ways.