Book review

Design Realities: Creativity, Nature and the Human Spirit
By Stuart Walker
London: Routledge, 2019, 342 pp.
Paperback ISBN 9781138580206. £24.99

When I first browsed through the book, the post-punk song 'This is Not a Love Song' popped all the way from the 80s back into my head. Minutes after, I caught myself happily muttering 'this is-not a-design book' to the same tune. First impressions already did the trick! Intended for artists and designers, *Design Realities* focuses on the creative process, pushing the comfort zone by taking a distinctly non-theoretical approach to the subject. Rather than launching into entangled, academic, limiting definitions or meanings of creativity, the author chooses to lead by example by indeed, daring to do things differently – and the work embodies what this implies, risks and all.

Stuart Walker is a leading figure in Design for Sustainability. He focuses on aesthetics, meaning, and practice-based research that explores and expresses human values and notions of spirituality. As with all of his writings, including his two previous books *Designing Sustainability* (2014) and *Design for Life* (2017), this work stands firmly rooted in his longstanding worldview, and is equally comprehensive and thoughtful. This time, however, Walker departs from the expected, expanding reflection into the intrinsic and inseparable connection between the creative activity and what drives it: the human condition.

Whilst there are many books written on creativity, Walker argues that their 'specialization tends to preclude consideration and therefore understanding of the wider issues, dilemmas and questions that our creative activities can, and in my view, should be addressing.' Without the pretence of other philosophical approaches to the subject, he brings home the fact that although 'the creative process can embrace virtually anything', the endeavour is not aimless, 'but to be relevant, it must speak to the times.' Within that frame, the author sets the stage to discuss purpose, meaning, traditions and the spiritual values embedded in them.

Thought-provoking, this book presents the best of Walker in a wholly new arrangement. From critique and personal reflection to enquiry, he explores a wide range of topics in the form of essays, poetry, photo studies and longer discourses which are seamlessly combined to communicate in a language that creatives relate to, but also make it highly accessible for all. Walker argues that 'this variety of forms and styles seems appropriate for a book on creativity and the human spirit because it permits imaginative evocation as well as logical discussion' and is 'suitable for tackling ideas that do not necessarily warrant prolonged arguments or elaborate treatments.' Walker identifies key truths we live by – or die for – which somehow bind it all together. The result is a sparkling miscellany that offers an insight into the creative process, and the creative's mindset and concerns with the world. Each piece is bound to remind us of how concepts are created and recreated in our minds, which sometimes remain stuck in beliefs that no longer serve us. Words and concepts such as

'craft 'n kitsch', 'repair', 'economy', 'design rhapsody' are deconstructed, not just for the purpose of critique, but used as a catapult to reach new understandings.

There are 100 chapters in the book, structured in three parts:

Part I, *Reality*, looks at the current state of the world and as Walker puts it, 'is an unembellished and somewhat unrelenting recognition of our present state, which is becoming increasingly untenable.' Comprising 32 chapters, the book opens with 'As It Is' (Ch1), an essay that describes our tendency to categorise, classify, order and structure our concept of reality in order to grasp complexity and exert control, but Walker argues that 'such artificial separations push us towards understandings of reality that are false and prejudicial.' A playful photographic essay here explores the concept of 'property' by capturing the many ways in which we draw boundaries between the public and the private. The poem 'Damage' (Ch30) depicts a sentiment of grief for a reality – or truth – we often struggle to accept: that the point we have reached is 'irrevocable'. The last chapter 'Seeing' (Ch31), discusses Caravaggio's work as a vivid example of how it feels to 'be castigated' by contemporaries for not adhering to the principles of that age, but celebrated 300 years later – it is the way we see things that gives value to what we do.

Beyond describing the joys and pains of being humans in a broken world, Walker calls for creatives to develop a critical mind, embark on self-exploration and questioning, and stand for principles rather than solutions. He challenges our obsession with usefulness and function, pointing out that most of our creations serve a paradigm of thought, and that despite our good intentions, we are unconsciously contributing to its perpetuation.

Part II, *Another Reality*, discusses 'things that our modern society tends to devalue or ignore, but which are essential for a more fulfilling, balanced way of life' through 42 chapters. Opening with 'How Should We Live?' (Ch32) Walker takes us through 'philosophers and sages [who] have wrestled with the question of how we should live and what kind of life is capable of bringing us some degree of happiness and contentment.' From the Bible to Henry David Thoreau, we are presented with a range of examples that, at their core, advise us less on what we should do and more on what we should stay away from. He remarks that modern society tends to dismiss such views as 'too romantic or impractical' thereby limiting our agency, whereas on the other hand, the digital technologies we create place high demand on our attention, 'and in so doing, hinder reflection, discernment and our ability to, as Thoreau put it, "live deliberately."'

I found Chapter 63, 'Commonality and Originality', especially insightful and revealing. This includes a framework (in visual form) for understanding the interdependent relationship between the two concepts, illustrating in detail how the common themes and preoccupations that bind us together as one humanity, as well as the differences that make up for richness of diversity are both fundamental to the creative activity. Most of the other chapters here focus on exploring the consequences of a secularised society, and Walker delves into the impact that disassociating spiritual dimensions has on our ability to fulfil basic human needs of belonging, transcendence and interdependence. Part II ends with 'Another Reality' (Ch73), which Walker opens with a call to arms by citing from 'Great Spirits' a Keats' sonnet – an acknowledgment to those who stand for values different from

mainstream society. In this essay, he reminds us of the power of myth and its connection to language and creativity, and how mythical thinking draws on intuitive apprehensions and the human imagination as an essential way of knowing and 'understanding ourselves in relation to others and the world.' The chapter includes some practical design directions based on mythical thinking for developing new foundations of practice: bigger-than-self understandings and values; longer-term perspectives and intergenerational horizons; notions of a good and meaningful life; intrinsic or 'inner' motivations and rewards.

In Part III, *A Future Reality,* Walker reinforces the limitations of instrumental reason, and with an emphasis on wisdom throughout, he offers us a constructive direction and ideas for recovering, restoring and reinterpreting the purpose of the creative activity with a more holistic and positive outlook. He first argues for 'a wisdom economy […] that pays far greater attention to social equity and egalitarianism' and reminds us that under a new paradigm, creativity – or innovation – is not the production of newness, but a meaning- and sense- making activity to connect with ourselves and with one another (Ch74). Finally, in 'Progressive Design Praxis' (Ch100), Walker offers a much-welcomed critical view of the underlying values and unchallenged assumptions in the field of design for the environment. He poses that it 'lacks any higher vision of virtue or significance' – I can think of circular economy type models as such an example – and that 'much of the problem […] has to do with the values that have been fostered within the profession, which are closely tied to the values of consumer society in general.' He then presents us with a pragmatic framework which summarises the thesis of this work, calling attention to meaning-making aspects currently overlooked in the process of design and innovation, such as self-transcendence values, learning from tradition, and aiming for virtue.

All in all, this a refreshing, sensitive, and strikingly original book which offers everyone something to ponder, discuss, contest and build upon. A prime example of material for creative thinkers and enquiring minds, it inevitably provokes the reader to reflect on their agency, be it as a designer, or anyone concerned with creative practices. The book is designed so it can be read in any order, and the variety of formats and content makes it an ideal pool of inspiration for seminars, lectures or to spark critical reflection in learning or professional environments.

What this book does best is bringing together for the first time some very useful foundational concepts for creative practice in a society that holds holistic well-being as a priority. In the era of 'future thinking', 'smart cities' and 'ecosystem design', I wonder how many scholars have set out to consider and reflect on the makeup and characteristics of the 'cultural software' – the historical, ideological and philosophical assumptions – that drives them. Without a doubt, what Walker has produced here is a non-instrumental comprehensive compendium of reflections, directions and premises to build upon, which is well-suited to that purpose.

If in parts Walker risks playing a familiar romantic tone of other musings on creativity – that which heralds it as the remedy for our humanity's misfortunes, present or future – this is counterbalanced with a good dose of practical realism. In this, the book stands far from naivety, and clearly signals to a generation of creatives raising the flags of sustainability and social justice, that it is necessary to first embrace our brokenness and vulnerability in order

to give birth to hope, for world-changing starts at home. Certainly, his impressive display of honesty, openness and humility is commendable. Whether by sharing deeply personal, intimate and individual experiences or discussing the widest problematics common to humanity as a whole, the journey attends primarily to the inner story, rather than an external chronology of realities – that of the inseparable and ever-unfolding thinking–creating–being. Yet, one cannot avoid recognising that it is Walker's trajectory and erudition that afford him the licence to leap into such freeform to bring spirituality and design together, and triumph. As obvious as Walker masters it, it would be daunting for anyone of lesser stature to attempt the task.

In all honesty, *Design Realities* is not an easy book to review, and to honour Walker's approach, I wanted to take my time to take it all in. I started by bringing it with me everywhere I escaped to unplug, so it has become my favourite travel companion. It has had a great effect in helping me enter 'slow mode', and creating the much-needed headspace for relaxation, perspective and self-reflection. If it is true that we humans develop appreciation by contrast: night–day, good–bad, beautiful–ugly, inside–outside, after a thorough read, I feel hopeful that as a sustainability professional, I can indeed create new realities not only by bringing forth ideas to 'green the world', but most importantly, by tending to my inner garden – pruning and planting to bring about constant renewal of spirit, mind and soul within myself.

Biography
Dr Laura Santamaria is Deputy Associate Dean for Enterprise at Loughborough University London, and director of the Design and Culture Program. Her research focuses on critical, meaning-making aspects of innovation, and design for social change. Laura has an extensive background in design practice, having held roles in new product development, design management, marketing, brand and communications strategy within the UK corporate and non-profit sectors since 1993. She is co-founder of *Sublime* magazine, a publication dedicated to promoting sustainable lifestyles and entrepreneurship since 2006; and Chair of the Fair Energy campaign.