

If you were to visit Toronto at the moment (July 2022) and avail yourself of Toronto Transit, you couldn't help but notice that advertisements for IKEA are plastered over subway walls. This marketing blitz is due to the opening of Canada's first urban IKEA store on 25 May. The premises, on the corner of a busy downtown intersection, dictated the absence of the usual ginormous parking lot. Instead, the store aims to attract the students and office workers who inhabit nearby condos and have disposable income for the sofas (to be delivered), bookshelves (delivered), tchotchkes, and cinnamon buns sold under the blue and yellow logo.

Coincidentally IKEA has another new venture, *Us & Our Planet*,<sup>1</sup> a coffee table (or should I say LISTERBY<sup>2</sup>) book that professes to address the company's commitment to sustainability. It begins with a 'Foreword' by the sons of IKEA's founder, Ingvar Kamprad. Peter, Mathias and Jonas quote from their father's *The Testament of a Furniture Dealer*,<sup>3</sup> which laid down Ingvar's values in establishing his business. One value is "waste of resources is one of the greatest diseases of mankind."<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, the brothers intend "doing everything in our power to meet the needs of people today, without compromising the needs of future generations. It means optimism and action, and leading by example, which is why sustainability is at the top of our agenda."<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note, when you look at *The Testament of a Furniture Dealer*, that Ingvar Kamprad didn't mean resources defined as "the collective means possessed by a country or region for its own support, enrichment, or defence."<sup>6</sup> In other words, sustainability. He meant money and time.<sup>7</sup> It is also noteworthy that whereas the brothers Kamprad say that "togetherness"<sup>8</sup> is an IKEA value—as in let's work on sustainability together—their father's togetherness was primarily the IKEA community of employees who were admonished to strive together for the company's success. Similar to togetherness is democracy. Ingvar Kamprad definitely believed in "democratisation"<sup>9</sup> with this proviso, "Let me add, to avoid any misunderstanding that this does not mean that we take a position on questions of equality – such as salary issues."<sup>10</sup> So it is unlikely that IKEA's sustainability agenda would tackle poverty in the countries where its goods are made and/or marketed.

### Greenwashing

Greenwashing, a word that evolved in the late twentieth century from the noun 'whitewash', is defined as "misleading publicity or propaganda disseminated by an organization, etc., so as to present an environmentally responsible public image."<sup>11</sup> IKEA, a company that has "stores in more than sixty countries around the world"<sup>12</sup> feels it would benefit from projecting itself as environmentally responsible. Yet Toronto's current subway advertising signage and the construction waste predicated by a retrofit of an existing building into a 66,000 square-foot retail space will all go to landfill. This is not environmentally responsible, given that the metropolitan Toronto area already has four IKEA stores. Neither is the transportation, pollution and packaging perpetrated by obtaining and selling globally-sourced goods. As for democratization, this store does not accept cash thereby excluding all those who, for various reasons, including concern about algorithmic governance, prefer or have no other choice than to use cash.

Why pick on IKEA? IKEA is not unique in being part of the green economy whereby band-aid solutions proliferate to address the climate crisis: e.g. carbon off-sets, hybrid vehicles, energy-efficient lightbulbs, stainless steel straws, precast concrete, recycled paper, LEED certification, cloth grocery bags, reusable water bottles, solar-powered lawnmowers. Capitalist entrepreneurship, generally, has had a field day in profiting from the impacts of climate change. But what does the Center for Art in Wood (CAW) have to do with the green economy and IKEA?

IKEA is a furniture and wood product purveyor. The CAW is dedicated to promoting wood and those who use wood as a creative medium. Yes, there is a difference between mass-produced wood fixtures manufactured by

poorly-paid labor in the Global South, and hand-made timber products created by craftspeople in the West and sold in galleries. And there is plenty of justification for preferring the latter: care about procurement of materials; support of local makers; reduced transport costs; emotional investment in crafted artefacts. But when it comes to the nitty-gritty, craftspeople and IKEA make and sell 'stuff.' And we know that what happens to most stuff is a serious problem.

Moving from stuff to process, *Us & Our Planet* includes profiles of twelve individuals or families who have been deemed Icons by IKEA for their sustainable approaches to time, space, food, rest, play and togetherness. A young climate activist, a restaurateur, an athlete and a tailor in countries like Bali, Borneo, Nigeria and Mexico demonstrate environmentally-conscious ways of living. The juxtaposition of the mega retail giant with people whose lifestyle choices have been made in modest and ethical ways on a day-to-day basis is the antithesis of the reality of the process of guardianship of the planet.

As for process at the CAW, one of its significant programs is the Windgate Wood Arts Residency Program (WWARP), formerly known as the International Turning Exchange (ITE). In 1995 when the ITE began, the event was devoted exclusively to woodturning. Then in 1999, when the ITE was dubbed "A Maturing Tradition", the first furniture maker, David Rogers, summed up his experience:

I spent one week living and working with five other woodworkers whose work evolves from the lathe. Though I came to the group with a different set of interests in my content and processes, I found when we evaluated the aesthetics of a finished or in-process work the vocabulary was essentially the same. This was the common ground where the exchange of ideas, perceptions and interpretations took place... Sometimes there is more insight gained when we look outside our respective fields of study rather than always looking to ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

Rogers raises two points about the event and process: the benefit of interdisciplinary exchange, and the ITE's collaborative sharing. The ITE is now open to turners, furniture makers, carvers and sculptors. And, without exception, the residency program is lauded for bringing makers together, not so much to make stuff, but to share, ruminate on, explore and develop ideas by living and working in a dedicated space for a concentrated period of time. Human contact and community are experiences worth preserving.

IKEA is a blatant contributor to the green economy. In order that the CAW is seen to be different than IKEA, it behooves its overseers to ensure that everything that comes out of its mouths, computers and site is consciously responsible and devoid of greenwashing. Sustain-ability should be at the forefront of future planning. The mantra 'is this sustain-able?' should suffuse every decision and activity.

### **Sustain-ability**

Sustain-ability is not a typo. As an alternative to sustainability, it is critical. The insertion of a hyphen into sustainable makes a huge difference because it now means 'able to be sustained'. Rather than blithely adopting products and practices that have been greenwashed and carrying on as if these measures are sufficient to avert disaster, 'sustain-able' asks the question: can this be sustained over time, economically, environmentally, socially, globally? The small connecting link between sustain and able was inserted by Professor Tony Fry, a design philosopher, educator and critic whose career has been devoted to delineating the design profession's complicity in—and ability to change—the state of the world.

In 1999, Fry published *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing*.<sup>14</sup> He had difficulty finding a publisher because, at the time, no-one was willing to take on his unorthodox views. The book was reissued in 2020 as *Defuturing: A New Design Philosophy*,<sup>15</sup> an indication that Fry's beliefs had not only retained their

importance but that their current context made them much more relevant. The book is not light reading but its key points warrant shouting from the rooftops!

Fry asserts that the root cause of our current situation, particularly in the West, is anthropocentrism: the belief that humankind is the essential element on Earth. The consequence is that: “the history of humanity tells us that we are a world-ending animal.”<sup>16</sup> Fry contends that American productivism, which spread throughout the globe, saw resources as ripe for the taking, a human-centric disposition that led to defuturing.<sup>17</sup> Phenomena like capitalism, the global economy, outsourcing, planned obsolescence, mass production, and technological progress all contribute to defuturing. Fry believes that instead of being the “unwitting tool[s] of unsustainability,”<sup>18</sup> we must collectively instigate the sustain-able in order that future generations survive.

Sustain-ability is not a new concept. Aristotle coined the word *phronésis*, meaning “action, theory and practice function[ing] together with foresight.”<sup>19</sup> Like Indigenous populations, the ancient Greeks understood what was necessary to maintain the planet. Colonization, globalization and enchantment with ‘the new’ are not compatible with *phronésis* or sustain-ability.

### **Futuring WWARP**

The ITE for 2022, apart from being the reappearance of the event after a hiatus of two years due to COVID-19, faced a significant challenge: the closure of craft curriculum at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia which formerly housed studio facilities and accommodation for residents. The ongoing pandemic as well as airline and American Visa issues dictated that international residents could not attend. Thus, the 2022 roster, consisting of three Philadelphians and three North Americans, with the latter housed in an Airbnb,<sup>20</sup> meant that the camaraderie that formerly built up during the two-month stay did not develop to the degree it could in the past. The substitution of workshop facilities at NextFab in South Kensington was not entirely satisfactory either due to the size of the bench space allocated to residents and the need to run interference with NextFab’s casual users. Clearly, administrators did their best to accommodate the 2022 session under testy circumstances.

The existence of a facility close to the CAW that will provide the same functions as formerly supplied by the University of the Arts is unlikely. In summary, the ITE will never again be as it was prior to 2020. Undoubtedly the summer residency is a major program in the CAW’s annual calendar and its successful twenty-five-year history proves its merit. Yet the pandemic has raised concerns about travel and cohabitation logistics: the expectation that the world will return to ‘normal’ any time soon to alleviate these issues is naïve. In addition, the two-year hiatus saw an increase in severe weather—floods, forest fires, abnormally high temperatures—and the advent of new viral strains. The ethics of ongoing travel, when its environmental costs are blatantly obvious, make a single site residency questionable. In these circumstances and using the benchmark of sustainability, the elephant in the room is this:

*Can the ITE/WWARP be sustain-ably perpetuated?*

Over and over again, as mentioned previously, twenty-five years of the ITE reiterate that it is not what is made that is important. It is how. In 1995, Mark Sfirri spoke to the residents. He stated that they:

had the advantage of proximity, living together and being able to share thoughts whenever the need [arose]. He suggested that the artists look at their individual strengths so that the collaboration would draw from each.... Mark said collaboration should produce growth in the artists involved. “If you go away, and don’t do any work that you did together, you haven’t grown.”<sup>21</sup>

Mark hit the nail on the head (with a multi-axis-turned baseball bat!). So in considering the ITE's future, maintenance of proximity, sharing, collaboration of individual strengths and growth should be paramount. But where to go from there?

A Pro and Con chart might be worthwhile:

Pro

prestigious residency for woodworking  
period of dedication to or development of a project  
recognition of craft as a sustain-able practice  
promotion of hand-making  
exchange of ideas and techniques  
opportunity for early career and BIPOC makers  
networking  
exposure to Philadelphia area arts and culture  
drawing public attention to the CAW  
woodwork, as a craft, is sustain-able

Con

lack of suitable woodworking facility  
lack of collective accommodation  
ongoing pandemic-related restrictions  
negative climate impact of travel  
inflation of costs for CAW and residents  
minimal attraction of non-White attendees  
manufactured products are cheaper  
elimination of woodworking education

As I create this list, to which more points could be added, a picture comes to mind.



In recent years the design process has changed from top down to bottom up. Designers attuned to sustainability seek valuable insight from those who will use and be affected by the design. In consultation with those users, many, many solutions are proposed, ranging from pie-in-the-sky to small practicalities. These fill hundreds of post-it notes, frequently-erased whiteboards and rolls of newsprint paper that are invested with time, energy, listening, diverse voices, and commitment. The problem doesn't have a predetermined solution—in this instance, the assumption that the WWARP will go forward. All participants agree to respect and honor opinions and suggestions in order that the most sustain-able solution prevails. Perhaps the process involves a survey, brain-storming sessions, committees and reports; it might require another hiatus until an appropriate answer is achieved.<sup>22</sup> Regardless, the woodworking community dedicates itself to seeking an informed solution ... which may be no solution. Unless and until this design process and design thinking are undertaken, the Center for Art in Wood is not walking the talk of sustain-ability.

The good news is that the CAW's *raison d'être* is craft: a sustain-able practice. As I point out in the 'Introduction' to my book, *Craft is Political*, craft represents "eschewing quantity for quality; care about making and being; emphasis on community; valuing labour; ethical use of resources; slow production; perpetuation of traditions; emotionally durable design; knowledge of materials and tools; repair and retrofit skills."<sup>23</sup> Craft's

care is about self and others plus, importantly, the physical environment. With the stewardship of craft as a starting point, the goal of sustain-ability for the ITE *will* be achieved.

## Conclusion

Returning to the 'Foreword' of *Us & Our Planet*, the brothers Kamprad can't be faulted for this statement: "Ingvar's *Testament* demonstrates that there is great power in writing things down. To change the world, good ideas must be nurtured and magnified to reach as many people as possible."<sup>24</sup> Notions of writing things down, nurturing and magnifying are exactly right. The Center for Art in Wood's task, as it considers the future of the ITE, is to think and write about the possibilities, foster input from a wide sample of its constituents and transform and boost its past programs appropriately for the next decade.<sup>25</sup> In order that the Center be seen as a center, this crossroads must be treated with care, an ethos of which craft is fully capable.

---

<sup>1</sup> Maisie Skidmore, ed., *Us & Our Planet, This Is How We Live* (London: Phaidon Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> The name of an IKEA coffee table.

<sup>3</sup> Ingvar Kamprad, *The Testament of a Furniture Maker* (IKEA, 1976). <https://ikeamuseum.com/en/digital/the-story-of-ikea/the-testament-of-a-furniture-dealer/>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* ('4. Reaching good results with small means,' no pag.).

<sup>5</sup> Skidmore, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Oxford English Dictionary.

<sup>7</sup> "Wasting resources is a mortal sin at IKEA. It is not all that difficult to set targets if you do not have to count the cost. Any designer can design a desk that will cost 5,000 kronor. But only the most highly skilled can design a good functional desk that will cost 100 kronor. Expensive solutions to any problem are usually the work of mediocrity." (Kamprad, *The Testament of a Furniture Maker*, '4. Reaching good results with small means,' no pag.)

<sup>8</sup> Skidmore, 7.

<sup>9</sup> "We know that we can be a beneficial influence on practically all markets. We know that in the future we will be able to make a valuable contribution to the process of democratisation outside our own homeland too. We know that larger production runs give us new advantages on our home ground, as well as more markets to spread our risks over. That is why it is our duty to expand." (Kamprad, *The Testament of a Furniture Maker*, 'To create a better everyday life for the many people,' no pag.)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> Oxford English Dictionary.

<sup>12</sup> Skidmore, 7.

<sup>13</sup> David Rogers quoted in Terry Martin, "1999 ITE – A Maturing Tradition," *Turning Points*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer 1999), 14-21, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Tony Fry, *Defuturing: A New Design Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 174.

<sup>17</sup> Defuturing: perpetuating circumstances that deny the future.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> An understandable stop-gap choice but should be avoided in future as this type of investment property results in gentrification of downtown neighborhoods and ignores the dire need for affordable housing in the same areas.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Judson Randall, "Collaboration: Opening New Pathways," *Turning Points*, Vol.8, No. 3 (Fall 1995), 3-8, 4.

<sup>22</sup> I was saddened to learn that residents for WWARP 2023 and 2024 have already been chosen. Sustain-ability is agonizingly slow to be adopted.

<sup>23</sup> D Wood, *Craft is Political* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Skidmore, 7.

<sup>25</sup> The Clay Studio's move to South Kensington and its advance consultation with the neighborhood offer an excellent example.