

AECB Conference 2012

Chair's Introduction

Welcome to the AECB's annual conference for 2012. As chair of the Association I would like to wish you all a very warm welcome to what I hope will be a particularly exciting and challenging two days. This is our 19th annual conference, and by my reckoning I have been to 15 of those. But whether you have been to more, or whether this is your first I want to welcome you to what I am confident will be a highly rewarding event for all of us.

The title of our conference this year - 'never mind the green wash' – does, I think, neatly sum up what the AECB is all about. Why? Because judging from the column inches, exhibitions, conferences, sustainability indicators and so on, we could be forgiven for thinking that the problem was cracked. But we know its not. We know – or at least all of our best intelligence says - that as a species we are rushing headlong and blind towards potential disaster. 'Greenwash' for me is all about not facing up to the reality of the environmental challenges for our species. We know these challenges are enormous. We know that they can lead us to despair. But if we don't face up to this, and truly accept where we are, then we will not be able to move forward and act as effectively as we can. And without clear sighted and

effective action, we can easily slip into the token actions which we can characterise as ‘greenwash’.

It is part of the ‘human condition’ to tread a line somewhere between optimism and pessimism, between hope and despair, and I was very interested to read recently that research is indicating that we have a hard wired psychological inclination towards optimism. That in the face of the many challenges life throws at us, and of course ultimately the fact that we are all mortal, we seem to be hard wired with a slight bias towards optimism. And it was argued that without this, it might be impossible for our species, with its unique self-consciousness, to have developed as it has.

For me, the AECB is pre-eminently about hope and about action. Not blind hope or pointless action, but hope and action firmly rooted in a clear understanding and acceptance of where we are; of the challenges we face. This conference is about hope and about action. Its about people who believe that we can hope and we can act, and that acting in the most effective ways we can is an imperative for us all.

Nearly two years ago, at our 2010 annual conference held at the Centre for Alternative Technology, George Monbiot seemed to touch a real nerve. His bleak prognosis certainly received a very mixed reception. It was well argued and pretty compelling, but certainly not easy to take at an emotional level. Along with many others, George’s analyses have not become any

more optimistic since, and I think there is no reason that they would. Similarly, the title of Professor Clive Hamilton's book, 'Requiem for a Species', slightly gives the game away, although the book itself is a lot more complex than the title may suggest. However, to quote: "Sometimes facing up to the truth is just too hard. When the facts are distressing it is easier to reframe or ignore them. Around the world only a few have truly faced up to the facts about global warming. Apart from the 'climate sceptics' most people do not disbelieve what the climate scientist have been saying about the calamities expected to befall us. But accepting intellectually is not the same as accepting emotionally the possibility that the world as we know it is heading for a horrible end. Its the same with our own deaths; we all accept that we will die, but it is only when death is imminent that we confront the true meaning of our own mortality."

So how do we live with all of this? Do we just curl up and despair. Well, Hamilton goes on to conclude his book as follows. "Despair, accept, act. These are the three stages we must pass through. Despair is a natural human response to the new reality we face and to resist it is to deny the truth.Emerging from despair means accepting the situation and resuming our equanimity; but if we go no further we risk becoming mired in passivity and fatalism. Only by acting, and acting ethically, can we redeem our humanity."

Or to bring the same message closer to home, for those who don't know him, Nick Grant is a long standing AECB board member, and Technical Director of the Passivhaus Trust, and recently in a sustainability blog he said this – and before I quote, I had better just say sorry to him! Anyway, he said:

“So do we give up? I’m an optimistic pessimist. As individuals we are all going to die anyway and as a species we will soon have been an insignificant blip compared with the dinosaurs. But that doesn’t stop most of us getting up in the morning. It’s my nature to try and fix things so I’ll do my bit to help make buildings work better with significantly less resources.

This is part of the human condition: to be able to know where we are heading and yet to carry on as if what we do matters. I’m heartened to see others excited by the challenge of doing the same. Tackling any big problem needs an obsessive attention to detail but we also need the harshest critics to shake us when we lose the bigger picture or are wasting our short lives heading down blind alleys.”

This conference, and in fact the AECB as a whole, is all about that third step into action. Its about being the harshest of critics with each other, and pre-eminently, about not heading down blind alleys. We can of course be confident that we won’t all agree exactly where the blind alleys are. However, the challenge is not to reach complete agreement, but rather to

keep our critical faculties sharp and to remain open minded and open hearted in our approach to acting as effectively as we can. And certainly, that's what is so special about the AECB. Together we have an enormous wealth of knowledge and experience in our field, coupled with a striking level of open mindedness.

So, what about blind alleys? I would say we humans seem remarkably good at continually deluding ourselves – personally and politically – about the effect of our actions. Just thinking about the Rio Conference just finished for example, I can probably do no better than quote George Monbiot:

“This paragraph from the declaration sums up the problem for me:

“We recognize that the planet Earth and its ecosystems are our home.....
We are convinced that in order to achieve a just balance among the economic, social and environment needs of present and future generations, it is necessary to promote harmony with nature.”

It sounds lovely, doesn't it? It could be illustrated with rainbows and psychedelic unicorns and stuck on the door of your toilet.....

The declaration is remarkable for its absence of figures, dates and targets. It is as stuffed with meaningless platitudes as an advertisement for payday loans, but without the necessary menace. There is nothing to work with here, no programme, no sense of urgency or call for concrete action beyond the inadequate measures already agreed in previous flaccid

declarations. Its tone and contents would be better suited to a retirement homily than a response to a complex of escalating global crises.”

So, no lessening of the bleakness there then!

The AECB is not about blind alleys, nor about deluding ourselves. So we can all take an opinion on measures like the Green Deal, Zero Carbon, or the Code for Sustainable Homes. We won’t all agree on exactly where the blind alleys are, I guess, but I am worried sometimes at how often I am reminded of the Hans Christian Anderson’s wonderful tale of the Emporer’s new clothes, which I am sure is familiar to all of you!

So, hopefully leaving aside blind alleys and self delusion, wherever we see them, what have we all been doing? What has the AECB been doing on your behalf? That’s what I want to focus on now.

Lets say, first of all, then that the AECB is not all about energy. There has been concern from members that a huge amount of our efforts have been focussed on energy in buildings. The Board would make no apology for this: some years ago it was clear that many of us were skilful in the use of natural and low impact building methods and materials, but we did not understand how to effectively reduce the energy use of buildings. The work the AECB has done in the last decade initially through the Carbonlite programme and more recently through developing understanding of Passivhaus has I think changed the approach of many in the Association,

and more widely within the UK industry. However, it is a good time to be open minded about our focus both as individuals and as an organisation. As Mark Lynas's recent book, *The God Species*, reminds us, there are more planetary boundaries than climate change – nine key ones in fact – which are pressing in their imminent effect on our species and on the biosphere as a whole. Many would also argue that we need to consider more widely the nature of our existence as a species: what it means to be human morally and spiritually and what is the nature of our wider responsibility.

So tonight's debate: 'Sustainability is about more than just energy' should kick off this line of thinking, but I hope it won't stop there. We have a range of workshops over the next 2 days which I hope will challenge, stimulate debate, or maybe even infuriate.

Clearly however, energy and carbon emissions will remain for all of us pretty central to much of what we do. And this must remain so with the AECB. We must be hugely proud that the AECB has been responsible for establishing the Passivhaus Trust. Just as a reminder for any not familiar with this story, the AECB has been one of the leading agencies introducing and supporting Passivhaus in the UK over the last few years. Nearly two years ago, the Passivhaus Trust was launched by the AECB, and although now run independently of our organisation, it remains legally a subsidiary company to the AECB, subject to the AECB's democratic process. Passivhaus clearly has a significant part to play in ensuring our buildings –

both new build and retrofit – become more energy efficient. So I think we can be very proud that it is the AECB which has had the foresight to establish a body, without commercial interests, to ensure its correct implementation and development in the UK.

The AECB has been active in other aspects of energy policy. I just want to remind you about the AECB document, ‘Less is More’, which I assume most of you are aware of, but at 200 odd pages many may not have read! I would encourage you to read the Executive Summary, since the paper sets out a radical alternative to other current proposals for UK energy policy. Or, if you want to get a clearer picture of what the paper would really mean in practical terms, go along to the workshop tomorrow afternoon with David Olivier and Andy Simmonds.

Having established the Passivhaus Trust, and developed Less is More, the AECB has now turned its attention to retrofit. In energy terms, the enormous current building stock is a far greater challenge than new build. Clearly, the Passivhaus methodology, along with the understanding it brings, will have a role in retrofit. Retrofit will also need to be considered in the context of the sort of approach outlined in Less is More, at local, regional and national levels. However we look at it, retrofit is going to need to be pretty radical to in any way be able to approach the sort of energy reduction targets which are universally accepted to be needed. For some, the Green Deal may be seen as a first step down this road, for others it may be one of the blind alleys I referred to earlier. We did in fact invite

the Green Deal team from DECC to be represented at this conference, but sadly our invitation was declined. However, whatever you think of the Green Deal, there is clearly a need for more radical approaches to the retrofit problem. I think this is one of the next big challenges for the AECB building on its work on Passivhaus and energy policy. It is a challenge which Andy Simmonds, together with the Board and others within the AECB, are just beginning to explore. So, if you have a particular interest in this area, please keep an eye out for future announcements, or of course talk to Andy during the conference.

I've talked about the AECB being about action, and I've talked about shared experience and open mindedness. All of this, however, is rooted in an organisation which in my experience is really quite special. Anyone who was at Ecobuild, and sported one of Geoff Stow's wonderful 'Never mind the Greenwash' badges will probably know this. And out of interest how many people are wearing one today? But of course it goes a lot deeper. Its about the history of our organisation, about the commitment of many of our members and about the culture of open ness and sharing which we have engendered between us. All of which is a way of introducing our Annual General Meeting tomorrow morning. While the AGM is both brief and pretty low key, it is an important part of the democratic life of our organisation. So, please if you can, do come along tomorrow morning and support the core functioning of the organisation you value.

I have talked about hope and about action as the touchstones of our organisation. This conference has a fantastic line up reflecting both of these, which I hope will both stimulate and challenge. But of course beyond the workshops, debates and activities, what is also here is an unsurpassed wealth of knowledge, experience and wisdom. We can all learn from each other, and I hope we all do with the creativity, open mindedness and commitment which has always distinguished the AECB and its membership.

Thankyou

Chris Herring, June 2012