



The Ziggurat stretches up into the Dubai skyline, a gigantic city in the shape of a pyramid. At a total of 2.3 square kilometres, the structure is vast – able to contain one million residents within its reinforced glass walls. Transport within the Ziggurat is via a networked public system that runs both horizontally and vertically, carrying people to all the reaches of the tightly contained city. Facial recognition technology functions as a city wide security device, so no one need fear losing their keys. Above all, the Ziggurat is designed as a carbon neutral super structure: an eco pyramid that is capable of operating entirely off the grid, using wind, steam turbines and other natural sources of power. Both public and private spaces function as agricultural opportunities, and residents can be comfortable in the knowledge that they are living in the sustainable city of the future.

These are the claims made by Timelinks, a Dubai based environmental design company, which first presented the design of Ziggurat at an international development event in 2008. It attracted immediate news attention, with networks broadcasting the images of the pyramid structure set amongst digitally generated landscapes of rolling green hills and golden desert sands (Salmi). Timelinks patented the design and relevant technologies for the project and has applied for EU funding of its technical development.

This city does not yet exist, and may never exist. But it acts as a focal point for many of the narratives, politico economic priorities and transcultural forces that intersect in the broad framework of environmentalism. As a term, environmentalism is flexible enough to be applied in an array of different – and sometimes contradictory – contexts. It can be used as a discourse of

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*on fear, lifestyle politics  
and subjectivity***

fear, hope, control, desire, nostalgia and revolt. When environmental questions are posed within the context of threat, they also invoke issues of security, risk and necessity. It is in this frame that environmental politics can appear to operate as a unifying political imperative – this is what *must* be done to preserve lives, to preserve the planet, to preserve animals, plants, and all non human others. When deployed in this way, environmentalism is bound within other politics, other trajectories.

The Dubai Ziggurat, even as a blueprint, crystallizes a particular understanding of environmentalism: one that includes ideas about what makes a community, how people should be housed, and what scale is required to meet both

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economic and environmental demands. As a conception of a city, it belongs within a longer tradition of “arcology” – a portmanteau term which combines “architecture” with “ecology,” referring to designs that contain an entire city within a single, massive structure. The architect Paolo Soleri developed the arcology concept in the 1960s as a strategy for overcoming urban sprawl and conserving land and resources, as well as bringing communities closer together. Soleri saw these as utopian structures, but ones that were necessitated by impending ecological collapse.

It seems fitting that a hyperstructure has been mooted by designers living in Dubai, one of the globe’s most environmentally unsustainable cities, in a year of housing market collapse in many parts of the world, with thousands facing home repossession and bankruptcy, while fears continue to grow about global warming. The allure of an all in one solution such as the Ziggurat is clear. It offers high density mass housing, generates its own energy, offers a tailored lifestyle in a contained space with built in public transport. Several of the design elements could have been drawn directly from progressive research papers on city making. But it must be asked who this city is for. Who will live there, and whose idea of environmental sustainability is being served?

A shiny superstructure could act as a green “gated community,” aimed at the wealthy and offering an escape from the uncertainties of water restrictions, petrol prices and the threat of resource related crime. But on the other hand, given the labour policies within the United Arab Emirates (harnessed by local and international companies alike), the Ziggurat could be employed as a state based solution for the thousands of guest workers working in the labour intensive construction and service industries. It could be a neoliberal fantasy city, where profits are made from a million desk workers who will pay to live in apartments where they drink their own recycled sewage and aspire to live in more prestigious estates. Any of these uses are possible, all the while operating within the eco rhetoric of the designers. But critiques can and should be made of the uses of environmentalism, along with a recognition that these uses are rarely singular.

They come within the nexus of the political, the economic and the cultural.

To my mind, the Ziggurat powerfully encapsulates many of the questions that need to be asked about how perceptions of environmentalism are created, and from which epistemological models they draw. My aim here is to observe the ways in which environmental politics are mobilized, and how they reference and contain other political frames (economic, military, governmental). In particular, I am interested in how environmental epistemologies place human beings in relation to a habitat (most commonly in an inside/outside binary), and the ramifications of that positioning. This is not an exercise in proffering “solutions” towards a better vision of sustainability. Rather, I am suggesting that the dominant Western models of human subjectivity are limiting the potential of environmentalism to transform our relationship to the changing eco systems around us.

## eco-politics of emergency

In 2008, a small but illuminating debate occurred in the USA. It played out in the pages of the literary journal *n + 1*, purportedly as a forum on how environmentalism operates as an ideology, and, in particular, whether it constitutes a politics of fear. The question was posed: does environmentalism give the left the same totalizing political agenda that the war on terror gave the right?

Alex Gourevitch sent a provocative statement to the editors of *n + 1*. In it, he outlined how those on the left had become deeply uncomfortable with the anti democratic consequences of the hard power of the war on terror, as a militarily driven attempt to take control of resource rich parts of the developing world. But in its stead, the left had taken up a “soft power” politics of fear in the form of environmentalism. Gourevitch argues that “the belief that a threat to human life, especially one as global and as overwhelming as eco apocalypse, can transcend normal politics and create a sense of unique moral purpose is the *differentia specifica* of the politics of fear” (Gourevitch et al. 21).

Al Gore is offered as an example of how environmentalism can be cast as a complete and unified cause. In one well publicized article, Gore shares a series of dire warnings of ecological collapse, then petitions readers to rise up together and put aside all political differences. “This crisis is bringing us an opportunity to experience what few generations in history ever have the privilege of knowing: a generational mission,” he continues, “the thrill of being forced by circumstances to put aside the pettiness and conflict that so often stifle the restless human need for transcendence; the opportunity to rise” (Gore). And it is here that Gourevitch’s point seems well made. On the face of it, Gore is taking a pedagogical role, teaching the population about an emerging threat and the need to combat it. But his argument seems to go beyond a politics of shared purpose to something more messianic: a desire to eclipse the everyday contests of ideas and values to reach a single note of accord.

Gore’s phrase “forced by circumstance” seems to echo the language used to justify pre-emptive military actions. It is this evocation of emergency, overriding any different perspectives, which becomes a kind of anti-politics – suspending political choice or deliberation. Citizens must abandon themselves to larger institutions, as only then can they be protected against widespread destruction. Gourevitch is informed by Giorgio Agamben, in that this kind of environmental politics of emergency goes beyond a limited state of exception, to a perpetual crisis (Agamben). The management of such a crisis is maintained by the mechanism of a generalized, government-administered paradigm of security. Herein lies the critical problem for the left in championing a fear-driven environmentalism. Ultimately it relies on a security framework that, in Gourevitch’s view, will debilitate and constrain politics, not reinvigorate political imagination and social change.

It is a confronting perspective, certainly to those of us who believe there is a clear and present danger if we do not radically change our relationship to the environment. The editorial board of *n+1* disagreed strongly with the arguments, but felt them to be compelling enough to require a response, in the form of

detailed rebuttals from three of their members. Notably, each admitted a certain level of concern with the environmentalism, down to the word itself: “a gloomy, marginal term, with a breeze of irrelevance whistling through the bureaucratic archways of its *ns* and *ms*” (Gourevitch et al. 25). But most refused the charge that the left was seeking a totalizing framework.

There was one exception. Mark Greif was the only editor to admit the appeal of a left-driven politics of emergency. His response is remarkable for its honesty and the claim that one politics of fear can somehow be superior to another:

Ecological catastrophe *does* inspire fantasies on the left of a state of emergency . . . But the left retains, in its inner character, goals of liberation and safeguards against violence which the right does not. Thus, tyrannical though it can sound, one has to say that there may be advantages for all humanity, and fewer risks to human life, from a left emergency: from “our” emergency rather than theirs, from “our” security rather than theirs. (Gourevitch et al. 31)

What are the risks of this kind of left emergency? Even if one entertains Greif’s position that it could be preferable as a security paradigm, it would still impose a strict hierarchy of meaning with a dominant political frame. It would possess all the flaws of a top-down model, with a set of scientific and technical experts delivering instructions to an undifferentiated audience. It would be reliant on the motivating forces of fear and self-interest, and much would depend on the kinds of environmental ideologies that held precedence. What would be the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be considered environmentally sustainable, and who would decide?

Christoph Spehr has critiqued the discourse of sustainability as a problematic extension of neoliberalism, one which has sought to capture the environmental movement. In his view, sustainability is a strategy for “trimming down” or “cleansing” industrial capitalism while “making it more effective without touching the nature-destroying core of its program” (Spehr). In short, Spehr argues that minor reductions in

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pollution and resources depletion will do nothing to alter the power structures and social relations which resulted in the ongoing exploitation of the environment. Sustainability then becomes code for maintaining the status quo. In the context of an anti politics of emergency, there is a risk that people lose the power to determine what sustainability means, and what precisely should be sustained.

The Ziggurat is one example of these “cleansed” products of capitalism; operating within the kind of environmentalism that bolsters rather than challenges current systems of capital and social power. It maintains the understanding of nature as a resource to draw from (though it may be air and water rather than coal and oil) while furthering the separation, or “outsideness,” from the environment itself. The pyramid city does not promise an ethical engagement with its surrounding environs, merely less engagement. It also functions as an emergency architecture: as with Soleri’s arcology, it is a sanctuary for a human civilization that imagines its future as fighting against an increasingly hostile habitat.

Further, while it may seem embedded in the cultural specifics of Dubai, it reflects similar design imperatives in the USA, evidenced in “green” gated residential settlements. In *Hijacking Sustainability*, Adrian Parr mounts a critique of gated communities that could be applied to Dubai’s mooted pyramid:

The spatial distinction [between inside and outside] is maintained as a temporal moral order, one that is invoked between the past (good and untainted), present (confused and disorderly), and future (simply foreboding). The episteme at work throughout these distinctions is an exercise of spatial power, and it is informed and shaped by the cultural dominant operating in the twenty-first century: the militarization of life. (Parr 55)

The Ziggurat is both a militarized and privatized vision of sustainability, one which Parr would locate firmly within national security imperatives. This logic fits alongside the USA’s own ambitions in the Gulf and the broader desires to “rebuild” in ways that cite gated

“secure” suburbs: isolationist spaces that wish to negate both the cultural and ecological specifics of a territory, while remaining loyal to central tenets of neoliberalism.

## eco-politics of lifestyle

At present, much of the discourse about the environment and behavioural change is targeted at the individual. There have been major public service campaigns to encourage recycling, reduce power and water consumption in the home, and limit unnecessary private travel. Events such as Earth Hour, which asks city residents to turn off all their lights for one hour, have been successful precisely because they ask for discrete, relatively untroubling modifications on the part of consumers and businesses. The message is to consume just a little less, rather than conducting a more radical questioning of modes of consumption in themselves.

The emphasis on personal responsibility in eco politics is isomorphic with the broader concern with the individual that emerged in the late modern period. Neoliberalism has further narrowed down the idea of responsibility to the level of the single individual human, with ethical action becoming increasingly coextensive with self interest. Of course, such a focus is convenient for a rationalized state, one that does not intend to place any meaningful restrictions on carbon pollution or other environmentally damaging business practices. By stressing the need for individuals to modify their everyday lives, larger ecological concerns are devolved into a kind of self maintenance routine, where each person simply has to eat locally grown food, recycle their plastics, use energy efficient light globes, and purchase carbon offset credits.

For some, this kind of individual approach is enough. Greif argues that the global warming campaigns provide a good example of the kind of “care of self as care of planet around self” model (Gourevitch et al. 32). In his view, environmental politics is already oriented in this direction: an ecological problem is spotted by activists, who begin a grassroots campaign, which alerts the media, who then interview experts that range from scientists to lifestyle consultants offering

“tips” to householders. Then the wheels of business grind out a new set of products that can further lighten the load (and the conscience) of the healthy, environment friendly individual. Greif proposes the following thought experiment: what if environmental campaigns resembled less the war on terror than anti smoking campaigns? Rather than a top down politics of fear, there would be “the slight paternalism of slow changes of public habit, rather than vigorous public argument” (ibid.).

This alternative also seems fraught. Anchoring responsibility for real change at the level of the individual is a failure of scale. Smoking is an activity that commences with individual choice, and while it also has supra individual externality effects borne by passive smokers, the public health system, and so on, it is appropriate that anti smoking campaigns revolve around changing personal habits. But the kinds of ecological challenges that will emerge over the next century are complex, interlinked and transnational. While it may be necessary that individuals modify their styles of living, this is not sufficient to deal with unpredictable temperatures and rising water levels, mass migration, new vectors of disease and poverty, and ongoing animal and plant extinctions. The individual simply cannot address these problems in isolation. They are collective challenges.

This is the hard limitation of late modern individualism. It has profoundly dislocated and atomized people, and cut off possibilities for shared action and communal responses. What remains is grand scale marketing of nature as a supplement to “personal ethical living,” with patented bio products that can emulate the dietary and medical functions of rapidly diminishing plant and animal populations. Epistemological models of environmentalism as security emergency and as self care share a similar problem: they do not go far enough. They keep intact the essentialism of the individual, and remain always already anthropocentric. Such a view impairs a broader environmental project, and prevents a necessary reconceptualization of the relationship of the human to the biosphere.

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## towards a post-individualist subjectivity

Two models of environmental thought have been evoked here: one where humans face an eschatological crisis and must respond with an anti politics of emergency, the other where humans individually conduct a lifestyle makeover and modify their consumption patterns. Neither approach threatens the placement of human life at the top of a planetary hierarchy. They do not challenge the concept of human subjectivity as sovereign, autonomous and contained. While some radical environmental politics have sought a more substantial shift in ways of being, they have been susceptible to being captured by commodity logics and repackaged into more palatable forms. In this way, sustainability can become just another method of maintaining human control of the environment, where engagement with the outside world is premised on meeting human needs first – even if those needs contribute to further ecological deterioration.

A more thoroughgoing transformation of subjectivity is needed if the inherent limitations of these forms of environmentalism are to be overcome. A subjectivity that does not end with the individual subject, but expands to include the eco system in which it lives. An environmental politics based on a more generous concept of subjectivity could move beyond the atomized “I” of liberal individualism to a collaborative, sustainable “we.” “We are in this together,” writes Rosi Braidotti, but she suggests that this phrase can take on a wider significance than just human collective action:

What *this* refers to is the cartography as a cluster of interconnected problems that touches the structure of subjectivity and the very possibility of the future as a sustainable option. “We” are in *this* together, in fact, enlarges the sense of collectively bound subjectivity to nonhuman agents, from our genetic neighbours the animals, to the earth as a bio-sphere as a whole. (“Affirming the Affirmative”)

Braidotti offers a non anthropocentric concept of “we” that is broadened out to an entire

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shared habitat. She admits that this is a difficult shift in perspective, but argues that it is a necessary “re grounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environments s/he inhabits” (ibid.).

This expansion of subjectivity does two things at once: it decentres the human subject, while reinforcing its position *within* a thriving eco system, being *in* it together. Living “within” in this context means being co constituted by an environment, such that it is part of us, and as it changes so must we change. It is not a relationship of sentiment. It is a recognition of imbricated futures. This differs from Greif’s model of “care of self as care of planet around self,” as the self is no longer the centre of the process. The immediate environment is not a resource to draw upon, or a threat to be neutralized, or an invalid requiring care and sympathy. Rather, both self and environment participate in a non unitary subjectivity, in an entwined relationship between the human and the eco sphere.

There is a double meaning to this sense of living within: both living within the bounds of what a system can generate while continuing to flourish, and remaining immersed and directly embedded in that system. But this experience of living within is not necessarily comfortable, and it may become less so for many people. The emerging “climate ghettos” in parts of India, the UK, Australia, the Pacific Islands and elsewhere reveal how areas that are directly affected by climate change may need to be abandoned by human inhabitants – for them, at least, these spaces can no longer be lived within.

As communities around the world face collapsing local environments and risk losing access to natural amenities, responses to the changing environment will be highly localized. Exceptions emerge when inhabitants have sufficient financial resources and political influence to resist the limits of a system, as in the case of the relatively wealthy village of Kilnsea in the UK, which successfully lobbied to replace ageing sea walls despite being ordered to evacuate by the authorities (Nicolson). But rising sea levels and a rapidly disappearing coastline will make

attempts to resist the changing environment increasingly difficult to justify, and an affordance of only the wealthiest areas and nations. Further, climate ghettos are already forcing a new understanding that the health of the immediate environment has direct effects on the social, economic and cultural future of its inhabitants. Barriers against environmental change are temporary at best – as Hurricane Katrina showed with force. With a shift in subjectivity comes a greater acceptance of our position within these elaborate ecological systems.

One could ask of the Ziggurat: how does it configure subjectivity? It may offer innovative systems of resource efficiency and energy generation. But it is literally and metaphorically cut off from the outside world, not integrated with its surrounding environment so much as establishing an entirely different, competing eco system of its own. It seems designed to actively deny any concept of subjectivity that would radiate beyond its own glass walls. The Ziggurat can function within a politics of emergency, a logic of militarism that defines the external world as a threat, and erects defences against the environment at large. Similarly, the inhabitants of the city might be satisfied that their personal ecological footprint is minimized. But what it does not offer is a deeper understanding of the human subject as situated within a complex and developing ecological network, as just one of its many nodes. That, it seems to me, is an important epistemological project that awaits us.



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