



TO SPEED OR NOT TO SPEED?

DesignIntelligence®
MEDIA
October 2024



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DeeDee Birch poses a single consequential question: What is the case for slowing down?

If there's anything capitalism and the climate have in common, it is a sense of urgency. We're all told they are both, in equal but opposing ways, subject to wither and die as time passes unless we actively participate in their management. We're told the failure of either will result in the end of life as we know it. While climate change remains the most significant and unanswered question of our time, our global economy has grown rapidly and infinitely. We are urgent in all the ways that do not matter.

One of the few phenomena to force economic activity to a halt was the COVID-19 pandemic. While lockdowns and isolation efforts carried mental, physical and emotional repercussions, they were an example of people coming before profit. More critically, the global response to COVID-19 was an example of global governments collectively, cooperatively and urgently mitigating the impacts of a fatal threat.

For decades, global cooperative efforts to solve the climate crisis have lacked the urgency that defined the pandemic response. Why hasn't the climate crisis received the same response and attention? For starters, the direct relationship between cause and effect helped mobilize meaningful widespread efforts to contain the virus. It spread, and people became sick. People died. Self-isolation resulted in fewer COVID-19 cases, and the visibility of our successes and failures to protect people fueled our response throughout the crisis. By contrast,

the climate crisis is decentralized, multifaceted, volatile, unpredictable and deeply intersectional. None of these dimensions foster swift, unified action.

Currently, we measure the climate crisis via time and scale, but these measurement units most often relate the scale of solutions to how much time we have left before life on Earth is no longer viable. Applying scale and time to the climate crisis in this way invites tired debates about individual action versus systemic change as the clock runs out. (The answer, by the way, is both. We need every ounce of change from both top down and bottom up. Positioning individual change as being in conflict with systemic changes creates a false dichotomy.)

Instead, perhaps we should think about time as a solution. Historically, human perception of time has created a major barrier to sustainability efforts. We consistently prioritize short-term consequences over long-term risks because short-term concerns such as food, shelter and potential predators have determined survival throughout evolution.¹ Our ancient brains make it difficult to comprehend and safeguard our planet's natural resources for generations to come.

Moreover, our capitalist economy moves fast. Our lives are defined by market forces, and the market operates in the present. Food prices, housing costs, inflation and unemployment rates all fluctuate daily and dictate the experience of our everyday lives. When it comes to the climate crisis, psychologist and Norwegian politician Per Espen Stoknes explains, "Psychological distancing means that the human brain tends to see climate change as something abstract, invisible, slow moving, and far away in terms of both space and time."²

For many of us, the climate crisis feels much like what journalist and environmental activist George Monbiot describes:

To most people, who are not economists or politicians or journalists, the state of the living planet features as a real but remote concern, dimly perceived through the gauze of daily life. Something to worry about, certainly, once the mortgage has been paid and the kids have left for school and we have worked out what the hell to do about our pensions. Probably the best time would be never. But right now it is all too complicated, and it can't be that much of an issue anyway, if no one is stopping us from buying that bigger car we fancy, or eating the fish those people say are almost extinct, or washing our hair with stuff made from palm oil.³

Our evolutionary biology and broad societal dynamics built around immediacy force climate concerns into the backseat. The plasticity of our perception of time has clearly worked against sustained, engaged climate crisis action, but it does not have to. Meaningful climate action may be as much a function of temporal rhythms as it is of scale.

Questions Abound

In the face of an urgent climate crisis, is there a case to be made for slowing down?

Is doing less the most powerful form of action available to us?

And what does that mean for those of us designing and constructing the built environment?

Slow Research Lab founder Carolyn Strauss and researcher Ana Paula Pais describe the idea of slow as "a different tempo, conjuring up a sense of spaciousness and possibility, and a richer, deeper experience of life."⁴ Like most sustainability concepts, slow contains a cultural component. It's an idea that depends on individual and systemic change. In a practical sense, slowing down means decelerating the rate of our economic activity: our manufacturing, consumption, building and waste streams.

Nine Boundaries

Even though we live in an economic system that preaches and practices infinite growth, humanity must acknowledge and contend with planetary boundaries. The nine boundaries, first coined by Johan Rockström in 2009 and later quantified by scientists in 2023, are atmospheric aerosol loading, biogeochemical flows (phosphorous and nitrogen), biosphere integrity (biodiversity and the productivity of ecosystems), climate change, freshwater change, land-system change, novel entities, ocean acidification and stratospheric ozone depletion.⁵ These processes regulate the planet and determine the planet's carrying capacity, which refers to how much human life Earth can reasonably support.

Yet our economic system does not assign values to the planet's natural resources, nor do we have a way to account for them in our current capitalist system. As Monbiot phrases it: "Our impacts on the biosphere – the frail membrane in which life occurs, which envelops the dead rock of planet Earth – are treated as externalities. The living world exists outside the realm of market exchange, and therefore outside the models. Or it is reduced to just another component of the consumer

economy. In his work, Monbiot aptly quotes neoliberal economist Milton Friedman when he notes, “Ecological values can find their natural space in the market, like any other consumer demand.’ The awkward fact that all human life would immediately end without it is someone else’s problem.”⁶ While I’m not suggesting that we abolish capitalism as a whole, we must learn how to effectively live in and leverage this system without deteriorating the planet and the millions of lives that depend on the planet’s resources.

The architecture and construction industries must navigate finite resources in a capitalist context more than many other industries. At first, slowing down may feel like an absurd idea. After all, the global population is rising, which means there will be more people to house, feed and employ. Yet frantically trying to meet the needs of a growing population in our immediate future through the use of our extractive, linear economy degrades the living conditions of people inhabiting and working in proximity to toxic manufacturing facilities and landfills. Even more critically, it compromises planetary boundaries we cannot repair. We’ve crossed six out of nine planetary boundaries already. In the case of biosphere integrity, the genetic biodiversity we’ve eliminated through environmental destruction can never be recreated. What’s gone is gone forever, and it is paramount that we preserve whatever is left.

Slowing Down

So, what would slowing down afford us?

How does it solve our climate problem?

And how do we slow down while living in a system that constantly fosters feelings of urgency and scarcity mentality?

Slowing down allows for additional ways of organizing our society and planetary resources, principally for the rise of the commons. The commons is neither the state nor the market but a resource shared and managed by a community. It’s an idea that has a long history in pre-industrialized human societies and is one that can be applied to cultural resources (such as language, craft and information) as well as natural resources (such as land, water, minerals and forests). More importantly, it emphasizes the aspects of our biology that are underutilized in today’s capitalism: cooperation and reciprocity.

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Whether taken as an abstract concept or a tangible roadmap for the revision of our resource management, the concept of the commons is centered in the idea that the resource in question cannot be sold or owned by an individual, and it is predicated on all community members having access. Compelling instances of the commons are already visible. Monbiot cites free software (Linux operating systems), Wikipedia, housing and energy cooperatives, and crowd-funded, community-run taxi services as examples.⁷ In other words, multiple economies already exist outside of our capitalist system, and they present opportunities to move away from extraction and exploitation and toward greater cooperation through community. The word economy refers only to the “careful management of available resources” – it is not limited to our specific brand of capitalism. The commons embraces expansionism through slowing down.

Slowing down also allows for a more expansive definition of what constitutes a resource. Literature scholar Timothy Hampton promotes cheerfulness as a resource and sees it as “a technique, a kind of practice of selfhood that is always available. It is modest, limited, often ephemeral. But it also works on us and on our relationship with others.”⁸ In this sense, cheerfulness can improve our capacity to participate in the commons. Much like cheerfulness, intentionally altering the pace of our lives also fosters play, an activity that comes with more leisure time and less stress. Perhaps paradoxically, we need play to solve the climate crisis. Some of the most successful interventions are rooted in and derived from play. Consider the hedonistic sustainability movement spearheaded by Bjarke Ingels.

Inversely, slowing down allows for grief, which will be a tangible by-product of solving the climate crisis. The Global North has become accustomed to consuming more than our fair share of resources and rebalancing the scales will mean substantial changes to our daily lives. Writer Yassmin Abdel-Magied describes this feeling of grief poignantly when she reflects on her lifelong love affair with classic cars amid a transition to electric vehicles: “There will come a day where young people will have never been in a petro-fuelled vehicle. Indeed, such a day is already on its way, arriving soon, Lady Earth crying out for it. I welcome it, with open arms and tears running down my face. My fingernails will stay clean; my heart unstirred. My love is old-fashioned, deadly, life-saving, defunct. The revolution has arrived. Here’s to all the cars I’ve loved before.”⁹

Whether we employ grief, cheerfulness, play or the practice of the commons, the implications and suggestions for the built environment underlie all these ideas. Architecture influences human behavior and the ways in which we act out community. It has the capacity to create spaces for multiple truths, for people to play and grieve and support one another. The built environment has the power to revitalize cultural commons, particularly on the local scale. As artist and curator Jeanne van Heeswijk stresses, “The creative practitioner has an important role in re-imagining spaces and scenarios for living together. It is clear that we need better spaces and scenarios for living together ... However, it is not simply about building them, but how we can collectively create and care for them.”¹⁰

How can these ideas inform the places we create? How can they help groups of people find and live shared values, life-affirming activities and experiences? And in terms of how architects and designers run their practices, are there moments, hours or even days in which we can divest from the market realities of our work to engage in the commons? To grow and strengthen economies of craft, knowledge or care?

In 1966, Dutch architect Louis Le Roy created an experimental architectural project called Eco-Cathedral, in which he worked at the intersection of nature, buildings and community by creating a structure without formal plans only with reclaimed building materials over the course of decades.¹¹ The project had no purpose and was never developed into a finished structure. Le Roy was interested in economics, and his protégé, Julian Raxworthy, a landscape architect and professor, stressed that, “Counterintuitively, the Eco-Cathedral is all about economics, and therefore about labor and productivity. As a proud Huguenot, Louis believed in hard work and the potential of the human body to make things. As such, he was critical of mechanization and the monetization of labor that amplify capabilities, and rates of exchange that skew the value of time, both of which he felt distance people from what their bodies are capable of.”¹² His project was maintained by volunteers for decades. Le Roy created a local cultural commons, strengthened the human-nature connection, and brought at least one aspect of his architectural practice distinctly outside the capitalist economy by slowing down. He fostered an economy of labor that reflected human capabilities alone and shifted the rhythms of people’s lives in a way that helped them recognize the relationships we share with nature and one another.

Coda

On one last, practical and counterintuitive note, slowing down might even be a worthwhile financial investment. Many of the sustainability solutions widely discussed today, such as closed-loop manufacturing and the circular economy, present deep logistic challenges. Perhaps reducing the rate of economic activity will give those running businesses enough time to solve some of those challenges.

Instead of answering to the relentless urgency of the climate crisis and the bottom line, let this serve as an invitation to slow down, even if just briefly. To open schedules, to practice resource sharing, to invite play and cheerfulness into our professional lives – if only so that we can make a difference – and see how it feels.

¹ S. Pahl, S. Sheppard, C. Boomsma, and C. Groves, "Perceptions of Time in Relation to Climate Change," *WIREs Climate Change* 5 (2014): 375–388. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.272>.

² Per Epsen Stoknes, "Overcoming Climate Apathy," *The Climate Book* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024), 337.

³ George Monbiot, *Out of The Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2017), 115.

⁴ Ana Paula Pais, Carolyn Strauss, *Slow Reader: A Resource for Design Thinking and Practice*, (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 9.

⁵ "Planetary Boundaries," Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>.

⁶ Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage*, 113–14.

⁷ Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage*, 94.

⁸ Timothy Hampton, "The History of Cheerfulness," *The Monocle Companion: Fifty Essays for a Brighter Future* (London: Monocle, 2023), 61.

⁹ Yassmin Abdel-Magied, "To All The Cars I've Loved," *The Monocle Companion: Fifty Essays for a Brighter Future* (London: Monocle, 2023), 44–45.

¹⁰ Jeanne van Heeswijk, "Preparing for The Not Yet," *Slow Reader* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 49.

¹¹ Henk van Es, "Eco-kathedral (Eco-Cathedral)," Spaces Archives, <https://www.spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/louis-le-roy-ecokathedral-eco-cathedral/>.

¹² Julian Raxworthy, "Building A Wilderness with Louis Le Roy," *Slow Reader* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 101.

DeeDee Birch is a regular contributor to DesignIntelligence on scientific and environmental issues.